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“She is Still a Child”



**Investigating Child Recruitment Practices by
the Revolutionary Youth in NE Syria**

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April 2024



The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

About the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) strives to prevent impunity, promote redress, and facilitate principled reform. SJAC works to ensure that human rights violations in Syria are comprehensively documented and preserved for use in transitional justice and peace-building. SJAC collects documentation of violations from all available sources, stores it in a secure database, catalogues it according to human rights standards, and analyzes it using legal expertise and big data methodologies. SJAC also supports documenters inside Syria, providing them with resources and technical guidance, and coordinates with other actors working toward similar aims: a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law.

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“She is Still a Child”: Investigating Child Recruitment Practices by the Revolutionary Youth in NE Syria

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Syrian conflict, multiple armed factions have engaged in the recruitment of child soldiers. Groups gathered under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and affiliated organizations are no exception to this trend. This report investigates the recruitment of children by the SDF and its affiliates, highlighting the role played by the Revolutionary Youth Movement of Syria (“Tevgera Ciwanên Şoreşger ên Sûriyê” in Kurdish, and “حركة الشباب الثورية السورية” in Arabic). The Revolutionary Youth Movement of Syria, also known as the Revolutionary Youth, (RY),¹ identifies itself as a socialist (revolutionary) movement aimed at organizing the Syrian youth on the basis of a democratic society and the freedom of women.² The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) has identified a pattern by which the Revolutionary Youth recruits minors—often coercively, while circumventing parents—and transfers them to SDF-affiliated military and security groups like the People’s Protection Units (YPG), Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), or Asayish (the internal security forces).

SJAC is calling on the SDF and its affiliates to release these and other children, and urges the United States, and other allies of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and SDF to pressure AANES and SDF to fulfill their obligations under its own laws as well as international law and honor its agreement(s) with the United Nations.

Research Methodology

Between August 2022 and June 2023, SJAC interviewed twenty-two adult family members, who were primarily parents or legal guardians, of children allegedly recruited in areas under the control of SDF/AANES. These interviews documented twenty-three cases of child recruitment that mainly took place between 2020 and 2023.³ They include the recruitment of 15 girls and eight boys, all under the age of 18, at least ten of whom (nine girls and one boy) were confirmed to be under the age of 15 at the time of recruitment. Of

these documented cases only four children are reported to have returned home, at least two of whom now face psychological challenges.

Every collected testimony concerns one primary incident of child recruitment.⁴ Oftentimes, during the interviews, other incidents of a similar nature were mentioned. The above numbers account for the primary documented cases only and do not include the other similar cases that were mentioned in the testimonies.

PATTERNS OF ABUSE

In addition to other illegal and violent activities, such as the burning of offices of some other Kurdish political parties or intimidating political opponents and journalists,⁵ the RY has been actively involved in recruiting children. The collected testimonies prove that the Revolutionary Youth (RY) is systematically recruiting children under the age of 18, and sometimes younger than 15. The compiled evidence indicates that the documented cases are not isolated incidents, nor were they due to mistakes by RY members or failure to conduct proper age verification. The recruitment of minor children seems to be intentional and actively pursued. The documented cases reveal the following repeated patterns of abuse committed by the RY over several years in various locations across the region of North and East Syria under SDF’s control.

Targeting Children

Civilians in SDF-controlled Northeast Syria face difficult humanitarian conditions and the constant threat of increased conflict. Many families have been internally displaced, and children deal with the physical and psychological effects of years of conflict. The RY maintains a strong presence in the region through public activities and centers or offices in almost every city, town, and village in SDF-controlled territories in Northeast Syria. The group uses this network to target vulnerable children who are going through a sensitive stage in the formation of their personal identity (adolescence) and lure them with the promise of a different lifestyle, independent of their parents.

They often deceive children, convincing them to enroll in educational or vocational courses or even promising job opportunities, while the real purpose is recruitment.

One of the RY's most common recruitment methods is to identify school children through cultural activities in their centers. These activities are attractive to many disadvantaged and vulnerable children, particularly those in their early and mid-adolescence. Members of the RY often approach families to persuade them to send their children to participate in the activities and training courses, which the RY provides free of charge. They also try to establish direct contact with the children in the absence of their families, in addition to using other children to recruit their peers, especially in schools.

According to one testimony, the victim's parent indicated that their child's first contact with the RY was when she joined a nursing (vocational) training course that the group organized. After finishing the course, a woman from the RY visited them at home inquiring about the child and whether she would be interested in a job offer. According to the child's mother, "[she/the daughter] seemed afraid of the arrival of this woman," so the mother made it clear to the RY member that she was not welcome. The mother stressed that they were not interested in the offer and that her daughter wished to continue her (regular) school education. The next day the child left home and disappeared.

In another of the documented cases, the child victim was enrolled in Kurdish writing and folk-dance courses at the RY center, and right before the child's disappearance, the younger sibling saw the victim crying with RY members.

According to another testimony, the child went to school as usual one day, but did not return home. When the mother contacted the missing child's school seeking information, according to the mother, she was informed "that there are girls in the school who work for the RY to recruit girls and entice them to join [the group], and that [the school] cannot do anything about it."

These vulnerable children are often lured with the promise of economic stability. One of the victim's parents stated that "by virtue of my contact with the families whose children were kidnapped, I learned from them that [the recruitment] begins with enticing the children with employment and salaries so that the children willingly go to their headquarters." According to their testimony, "one of the children who escaped an SDF center nearly a year ago told us that he entered with a group of children believing that they would employ them and that they would go there daily in the morning and return at five in the evening." In reality, the children were transferred to another location, outside of their hometown, and were forced to undergo military training.

Kidnapping and Concealment:

The targeted children are then secretly taken, often forcibly kidnapped, to unidentified locations outside of their towns and villages, before being moved to mandatory military training camps, where they remain deprived of liberty. Contact with their families is cut off. According to the collected testimonies, the mandatory training courses are at least 6 months and are held in complete secrecy.

For instance, in one of the documented cases, a child was kidnapped after entering one of the RY centers. Under pressure from the family, she was later returned, but she was in a bad psychological condition. According to the child victim's family, the child told them that when she left school, she went to the RY headquarters near their school, but "she was surprised that after they entered the RY's headquarters, a car with tinted windows came and took them away to an unidentified place."

While searching for information about their missing child, one of the interviewed families managed to get in touch with another child survivor who was deceived, kidnapped, and forcefully recruited. According to their testimony, the RY collected him together with other children and transported them by vehicle to a farm outside town, then a large car came and transported them to another location, and there "they were surprised that they

would be forced to undergo military training for a period of not less than six months.”

Subjecting Children to Mandatory Military Training

Disregarding the official age of conscription in Syria and in the SDF-controlled territories, the RY subjects all the recruited (underage) children to at least six months of military training. The justification is that the children provide consent and join the group of their own free will, however, this does not take into account the lack of consent from the children’s parents or legal guardians.

According to the statement of the mother of one of the missing children, when some RY members came to inform her about her daughter’s joining the group, they told her that she did that “of her own free will, and we do not force anyone to do so.” “What free will are you talking about?” the mother replied to them, “[my daughter] is still a child and she might cry if she does not like dinner food, so how can she have a will for [serious] things like this.”

According to the family of another missing child, after consistently approaching the RY and involving tribal leaders, the RY admitted that the child had joined them. To prove that the child was well, the RY sent a video clip of her stating that she refused to return. The family indicated that, in that video clip, “she was wearing a military uniform.”

Denying any Knowledge or Involvement in the Reported Disappearance

In all the documented cases the RY initially denied any knowledge of or connection to the reported child disappearances. When they are confronted with some concrete information or evidence by the victims’ families, they admit to having the children enlisted with them, without giving any further information about the recruited children’s whereabouts or allowing any contact with them. The parents are often told that the children can return only after the completion of the mandatory military training if they wish to do so.

When the families of two victims went to the RY center inquiring into the girls’ disappearance, they denied any involvement and started defaming the children and accusing them of being in an affair with some men with whom they probably ran away. “I continued searching for them in other RY centers in [the area],” said the mother of one of the victims, and when “I lost hope of getting any answers, I started threatening them with committing suicide if they don’t tell me what happened to the girls,” she added. Only then one of the RY members told her not to worry and admitted to her that “the girls had joined the Revolutionary Youth of their own free will.”

In another documented case, the victim’s parents stated that the RY center denied any knowledge of the girl’s disappearance, but after several days of relentless visits and inquiry at the RY center, one of the group’s members told them that their daughter was at a military training camp undergoing a training course. In another similar incident, the RY told the victim’s mother that her son was indeed with them and that it was his decision. “They refused to reveal his whereabouts” and told her that she could not see him, as “he is now in a military course, and we cannot tell you more than that.”

According to another victim’s family “they [(RY)] told us that if your daughter does not want to return, we cannot force her, and that after the end of the training course, which lasts for six months, she will become a member of the party and the Revolutionary Youth.”

It is important to note that in most of the documented cases, the families of the kidnapped or disappeared children reported their missing child to some formal AANES-affiliated domestic authorities, including the Military Council and Internal Security Forces, known as the “Asayish.” While denying any involvement in the reported cases, the Asayish members sometimes stated that the matter was out of their hands and that they had no authority over the RY.

Physical and Mental Violence

Some of the interviewed parents indicated that in searching for any information about their missing children, they met with returned children who were previously recruited. According to their testimonies, uncooperative children are abused and mistreated in the training camps. The released child, according to one of the interviewed families, was crying hard and seemed to be in emotional distress. She stated that they were beaten by the (female) trainers to scare and discipline them. Another released child told one of the interviewed families that because of his disobedience and insistence to return home “had been imprisoned for two months and was subjected to [physical] torture during that time.” The family added that since his release the child has been in constant fear and suffering from a bad psychological condition.

Amongst the collected testimonies, the only documented early-release cases were of recruited children who suffered severe psychological harm. According to one of the parents, when their daughter returned home, “she was devastated and frightened, in a very bad psychological condition, and she seemed tired and crying.” They added that “since her kidnapping, she had not eaten anything.”

Silencing Families

When a case of recruitment becomes public, the RY contacts families to silence them either with threats or empty promises.

One of the interviewed mothers stated, “the day after my daughter’s disappearance, I received a phone call from the Revolutionary Youth threatening me and asking me to stop posting on social media.” She added, “They told me that if your daughter has joined the Revolutionary Youth, this does not necessitate all this publication of the news, as she is not the only child who joined the Revolutionary Youth, just as you are not the only mother whose daughter joined the Revolutionary Youth.”

To dissuade the families from further pursuing information about their recruited children, the RY

started intimidating and threatening them. A parent of a recruited child stated that they even tried to kidnap her other child. According to the mother, “a vehicle belonging to “the Party”⁶ approached my little son when he went to the grocery store [...] They said to him: What do you like about this village? What do you think about going with us to your sister? We will give you a car and teach you how to carry [/use] weapons.” The mother added, “my son came back running with a pale face and told me while crying what happened, and honestly I am worried about my other children.”

Another parent of a missing child stated that on the same day the family went to search for their child at all the RY centers/offices, the family appealed to media outlets and published the news; “the Party members came and started intimidating us for that.”

Appealing to the relevant local authorities was not only useless but also entailed some risks. “I went to the Child Protection Bureau more than thirty times hoping to get any information, but the answer always was that the matter is out of their hands” A family member of a kidnapped child stated; “when we insist on them, they send masked people to prevent us from doing so.” The witness added that they had seen protesting family members of kidnapped children being taken by masked persons and transported to security centers.”

The threats and intimidation, which sometimes included physical attacks, against the families of the missing children who went public and reported their cases to news outlets have created a chilling effect on other families. In addition to the immediate threat to the rest of the family, according to an interviewed parent, “appearing in the media or insisting on knowing the whereabouts of my child might make the matter worse, as in most cases [the child] would be removed further away”. They were, therefore, forced to remain silent.

Failure to Investigate

As the *de facto* authority that replaced the state's (executive and judicial) functions in Northeast Syria, the AANES administration has the responsibility to protect the most fundamental human rights of the inhabitants in the territory it controls against any violations or abuses. To that end, and in addition to refraining from committing any abuses, the domestic authorities must endeavor to prevent their occurrence. In case of any violation or abuse, the domestic (*de facto*) authorities must diligently conduct genuine investigations, identify the perpetrator(s) if possible, document the case, and preserve the available evidence.

Despite all the reported cases of disappearances and child recruitment on territories over which they exercise control, the domestic authorities in Northeast Syria (SDF/AANES) have failed to take any effective measures to bring such practices to an end. So far, no accountability measure has been taken against the entities or individuals engaged in committing those abuses/violations. The Child Protection Bureau does not provide any help in either the search for the missing children or their release and return. They claim to have no authority to interfere with RY's activities. They sometimes stated that the Bureau could plead with the RY for the children's early release in the very specific case if the child has a (serious) health condition.

A family member of one child, who was under the age of 15 when she was recruited, stated, "we went to the Children's Rights Bureau in [town] to file a report of her disappearance, and the employee told us that they are not a military entity and that the matter is out of their hand and they cannot provide us with any assistance because they have nothing to do with the Revolutionary Youth."

In the same regard, the father of another child victim commented, "as for the Bureau of the Rights of Child, I can say that it has nothing to do with anything and it is just a formality."

Describing the carelessness and negligence of the domestic authorities, one victim's mother complained: "I went to the offices of

the Revolutionary Youth, the Autonomous Administration, and the offices of the Asayish security (security branches) [seeking help], but none of them received us, and I stayed until late at night roaming the streets on a motorcycle with my husband, hoping that we would find any trace of her."

A family member of another recruited child complained, "I went searching for her in all the headquarters in Al-Hasakah, Al-Raqqa, and Al-Tabqa, where I asked in all the headquarters in northeastern Syria, whether in camps or offices for children's rights, women's rights, social affairs, or even the military council, without reaching any conclusion, and everyone told us that they do not have any authority to give any information about her even if she was with them."

It is important to note that SDF leadership has acknowledged and expressed their gratitude for RY's essential role and contribution to SDF's military efforts on several occasions. For instance, at the annual conference of the RY in Al-Raqqa, the SDF Commander, General Mazloun Abdi, praised the RY's participation in the military operations during the liberation of Al-Tabqa and Al-Raqqa cities.⁷ He commended their contribution to the formation of all military and security groups and institutions affiliated with SDF in these cities, such as the Military Council, the Asayish, and the YPJ.⁸

LEGAL ANALYSIS

The documented recruitment practices employed by RY involve abduction, coerced recruitment, and other forms of abuse, constituting clear breaches of AANES's social charter, Syrian domestic laws, and international obligations, including international humanitarian law as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OP-CRC-AC), and the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (WFCL), among others.

Authorities such as AANES and SDF, along with their leadership, are duty-bound to prevent such abuses and protect the rights of children under their jurisdiction. Failure to do so may result in legal liabilities and obligations to remedy the situation effectively.

The Applicable Legal Framework(s)

To establish the legality of the actions described above, it is first essential to identify the applicable legal framework(s). In the absence of the Syrian government, the AANES Administration has assumed most of the state (legislative, judiciary, and executive) functions, in territories over which they have *de facto* control. By asserting such *de facto* authority over territory and the (local) population, the Administration is in a position to effectively influence the population's enjoyment of their most fundamental human rights. By acting like a quasi-state, therefore, the AANES administration has the responsibility to respect the human rights of all individuals under their authority.⁹ To the extent that universally recognized fundamental human rights could be adversely affected, such authorities have the negative responsibility to refrain from committing any abuses of such rights, as well as the positive responsibility to protect against such abuses.

AANES, SDF, and the RY all have responsibilities to respect the relevant international human rights law (IHRL) rules. This position is based on the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice (ICJ),¹⁰ the Special Court for Sierra Leone

(SCSL),¹¹ the International Criminal Court (ICC),¹² Fact-finding commissions, such as the IIM,¹³ and Human rights treaty monitoring bodies.¹⁴ In the context of an armed conflict, these groups also have strict legal obligations under IHL – that is to refrain from certain prohibited conduct and afford certain protections. The violation of such obligation could constitute war crimes and thereby entail individual criminal responsibility.

Additionally, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) binds itself with a set of rules and principles compiled in a document akin to a constitution, known as the Charter of the Social Contract.¹⁵ According to this Social Contract,¹⁶ all the fundamental rights and freedoms set forth in “the international human rights covenants and treaties constitute an integral part of and complement this contract.”¹⁷ Considering freedom to be the most valuable and utmost precious human right of individuals and groups, the Administration undertakes to guarantee all human rights and values in accordance with the international covenants and treaties.¹⁸ In that regard, according to Article 22 of the Social Contract,¹⁹ the Administration relies on and adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),²⁰ the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),²¹ the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),²² as well as other internationally recognized human rights conventions, considering them binding instruments as part of its Charter.²³

Although the region controlled by the AANES is governed autonomously and independently from the Syrian Government, the Syrian laws stay in force in the region.²⁴ In addition to all the aforementioned international human rights legal instruments as well as the relevant IHL rules, be it treaty or custom, Article 88 of the Social Contract, states that the Syrian criminal and civil legislation remain applicable in all the regions governed by the Autonomous Administration.²⁵

In addition to the pre-existing Syrian laws, the provisions of all international legal instruments that Syria has acceded to and undertaken to respect

have a direct effect domestically over the Syrian territory. In a clear statement of its *opinion juris* Syria has confirmed the direct application of the provisions of all the international conventions it has signed and ratified, giving them “the force of domestic law and precedence over Syrian laws.”²⁶ This position is in line with Syrian domestic law, namely Article 25 of the Syrian Civil Code,²⁷ and Syria’s international treaty law obligation under Article 27 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT),²⁸ to which Syria has been a Party since 1980.²⁹

Within these applicable legal frameworks, in addition to the aforementioned legal instruments, the most significant (international) legal provisions that are relevant to the child recruitment issue at hand are found in the following instruments: The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC);³⁰ The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OP-CRC-AC);³¹ and the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (WFCL).³²

The WFCL prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor including “work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children,”³³ as well as “forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.”³⁴ It also requires taking “immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency.”³⁵ The WFCL has been ratified by 187 states, including Syria since 22 May 2003.³⁶

The (Legal) Definition of a Child

The common misconception is that the minimum age for child recruitment is 15 years in all situations, which is not entirely true. Although the strict (customary) prohibition under IHL is against the recruitment of those under the age of 15,³⁷ this doesn’t mean that IHL gives parties to armed conflicts a free pass for the recruitment of children above the age of 15. The accurate determination of the minimum recruitment age varies per country/

situation and depends on factors such as the legal definition of a “child” for recruitment purposes as indicated in other relevant legal paradigms. The various legal frameworks that are relevant to AANES all define a child as below the age of 18. Under Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Syria is a State Party,³⁸ “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”³⁹ Under Article 46 (2) of the Syrian Civil Code, a child attains majority at the age of 18.⁴⁰

For the purposes of conscription into the armed forces, the Syrian law sets the minimum threshold at 18 years of age, under Article 4 of the Syrian Military Service Law.⁴¹ Similarly, the AANES’s Law on Self-defense Duty in North and East Syria, also clearly identified the age of majority for enlistment into its ranks to be 18.⁴² In that regard, the AANES and the SDF-affiliated People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) have all signed a Deed of Commitment in Geneva undertaking to protect children during armed conflicts,⁴³ and SDF signed an Action Plan to End and Prevent the Recruitment and Use of Children with the UN to prohibit and prevent the use or recruitment of children under the age of 18.⁴⁴ Additionally, in September 2021, the joint presidency of AANES’s Defence Bureau issued an executive order confirming the minimum age of enlistment to be no less than 18.⁴⁵ This decision was further elaborated in multiple statements by the co-chief of AANES’s Defense Bureau.⁴⁶

The OP-CRC-AC also sets the minimum age of compulsory recruitment into the armed forces of a “state” at 18 years.⁴⁷ Moreover, under Article 4 of the OP-CRC-AC, (non-state) armed groups are differentiated from a state’s armed forces, and regardless of being voluntary or not, these groups are strictly prohibited from recruiting children under the age of 18.⁴⁸ Syria has been a State Party to the OP-CRC-AC since 2003 and upon accession, it declared “that the statutes in force and the legislation applicable to the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Arab Republic do not permit any person under 18 years of age to join

the active armed forces or the reserve bodies or formations and do not permit the enlistment of any person under that age.”⁴⁹

The Classification of Conduct

Child recruitment, particularly by non-state armed groups, is a complex and multifaceted human rights abuse and could constitute a violation of the Law of Armed Conflict. In addition to being categorically prohibited when it involves children under the age of 15, the recruitment activities often entail various other forms of abuse of these children’s most fundamental human rights. These activities include prohibited (criminal) conduct such as abduction/kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, torture, and other forms of inhumane or degrading treatment, to mention a few. Moreover, enlisting children and allocating them to training camps could expose them to conditions that would put their right to life or personal safety (both physical and mental) at imminent risk.

The documented recruitment process by the RY often entailed several problematic aspects. The process starts with establishing direct contact with minors without the presence or knowledge of their parents or legal guardians. Such minors are then taken away in a secretive abduction or kidnapping style. Falling below the legal maturity age, the recruited children lack the legal capacity for consent. In the absence of the child’s capacity to consent, the recruited child’s acceptance of the recruitment offer is irrelevant and could not be considered voluntary. This practice clearly violates the domestic laws enacted by the AANES, the Syrian laws, as well as the international legal rules set forth in the OP-CRC-AC, WFCL, not to mention SDF’s own internal rules and the explicit promises it has made before the United Nation.

RY has often denied any knowledge of or involvement in such activities, as an initial reaction to the inquiries of the missing children’s families. The secretive abduction of these minors, arbitrarily depriving them of their liberty by holding them in captivity-like conditions, and hiding their fate

or whereabouts from their families, could also qualify as enforced disappearances. Enforced disappearance is an internationally condemned (criminal) conduct with a customary prohibition that entails individual criminal responsibility.⁵⁰ For instance, depending on the context, systematicity, or scale, the perpetuation of such acts, could qualify as a crime against humanity.⁵¹

Another important aspect regarding missing children is the failure of AANES/SDF, as the *de facto* authority, to fulfill their due diligence responsibilities towards the local population. It is the relevant authority’s due diligence responsibility to search for, investigate, or take measures to protect any person under its jurisdiction or in territories over which they exercise control. Upon receiving information about the possible violation of an individual’s right, the said authorities have the duty to act. The authorities in question are also required to provide effective remedies and take measures to facilitate the reporting and documentation of potential violations. AANES/SDF have reportedly failed to do so. The negligent and dismissive attitude of the local authorities toward the missing children’s reporting is a clear form of power abuse. Such negligent responses to such claims also unreasonably shift the burden of proof and searching on the victim’s families and further risk the life and well-being of those missing children. Despite claiming authority and capacity, AANES’s failure to take any effective measures could be perceived as another (strong) indication of its complicity or the existence of a pattern or policy.

The local authorities’ direct or indirect involvement in the recruitment of children, their lack of action to prevent or punish the perpetrators, or even their failure to protect the child victims, would constitute a clear abuse of Article 24 (1) of the ICCPR;⁵² Articles 1 and 3(a) and (d) of the WFCL;⁵³ and Articles 2, 3, 4, 6(3) and 7 of the OP-CRC-AC.⁵⁴ Moreover, and in the very first place, they constitute a violation of the Administration’s own laws.

Most of the released children have reportedly suffered severe mental harm, and some of the testimonies indicated a few cases of physical “torture”. Physical and mental ill-treatment of any person, let alone of underage children, is prohibited and criminally sanctioned in every (domestic/international) legal system, especially if qualified as torture.

Some of these activities could also constitute a violation of AANES/SDF obligations under IHL. Given the ongoing hostilities in the region and SDF’s involvement in multiple armed conflicts, holding the recruited children in (or in proximity to) military units or training camps, even if not deployed in hostilities, could expose them to military targeting.

The cases in which the recruited/enlisted children were under the age of 15, which has a clear nexus to the ongoing armed conflict(s) to which SDF is a party, would constitute a violation of an IHL rule that is of customary nature.⁵⁵ Violation of such customary IHL prohibition is considered a war crime and entails individual criminal responsibility. For instance, under Article 8 of the 1998 Rome Statute of the ICC, it is considered a war crime to conscript or enlist children under the age of 15 into the armed forces during non-international armed conflicts (NIACs),⁵⁶ as well as International Armed Conflicts (IACs).⁵⁷ Such (criminal) responsibility is not limited to the direct perpetrators of the RY or SDF group members but would also implicate their leadership, under superior or command responsibility.

The Attribution of Conduct

The RY is a well-organized group with a strong presence and (public) activities across Northeast Syria. They are capable of, and they are, depriving one of the most vulnerable categories of individuals, i.e. children, of their most fundamental human rights. The RY is, therefore, directly responsible, as a group and as individuals, for such human rights abuses.

While SDF has denied involvement in child recruitment or any association with the RY, the

activities on the ground and all the publicly available information as well as the collected testimonies indicate otherwise. The RY is recognized and affiliated with the *de facto* domestic authorities in Northeast Syria – the AANES, SDC, and SDF. The RY’s Foundational Document clarifies the group’s relation to the domestic (political) authorities,⁵⁸ namely the Syrian Democratic Youth Council (SDYC) (in Arabic “مجلس شباب سوريا الديمقراطية”) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) (in Arabic “الإدارة الذاتية لشمال وشرق سوريا”).⁵⁹ In that regard, the Foundational Document states that

[t]he Syrian Revolutionary Youth Movement takes its place in the Syrian Democratic Youth Council, of its free will. This movement plays the role of a national example and as an ideological and philosophical force within the Syrian Democratic Youth Council. The Revolutionary Youth Movement submits its reports to the Syrian Democratic Youth Council. And it [(the RY)] is responsible to the Council.⁶⁰

The SDYC was established in 2015 and was initially known as the Youth Bureau.⁶¹ SDYC (or the Youth Bureau) is an integral part of the institutional structure of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC),⁶² which “is the reference and political umbrella for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces.”⁶³

The Foundational Document of the RY concludes with defining the group’s position within the AANES and its participatory relation “through elections in the form of youth committees.”⁶⁴

As for its activities on the ground, the RY has maintained a strong public network with regular activities across the North and East Syria region controlled by the AANES and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Senior political and military leaders of local Administration and SDF have regularly participated in the RY’s conferences and other public activities on multiple occasions, demonstrating the strong ties between the group and the AANES and SDF beyond mere tolerance or recognition.⁶⁵ For instance, the Commander of

SDF forces, General Mazloum Abdi (“Mazlûm Ebdî”) has participated in and delivered speeches at several RY events in multiple locations that are under SDF’s *de facto* control.⁶⁶

Although they have continuously condemned child recruitment and have undertaken to respect the prohibition against such conduct, the collected testimonies indicated that some of the recruited children have ended up at SDF military camps. As a *de facto* authority in the region, AANES and SDF have failed to comply with their own laws in the first place and did not take any effective measures in that regard.

As outsourcing illegal activities to other entities does not eliminate the incurred responsibility, SDF’s explicit or tacit agreement or acquiescence with the RY’s wrongful conduct could also implicate SDF and its command structure in the incurred responsibility. Moreover, denial of (direct/indirect) involvement in the commission of illegal conduct is insufficient to absolve SDF from its responsibilities.

As for criminal responsibility, in addition to direct or indirect commission of prohibited conduct, sometimes omission or inaction could also entail (criminal) responsibility. Despite their knowledge of the acts, and regardless of their direct involvement in their commission, the AANES/SDC/SDF and the respective leadership could be found responsible also by omission. Therefore, the AANES/SDC/SDF shares the responsibility for RY’s human rights abuses or IHL violations; accordingly, AANES/SDC/SDF must act immediately and take meaningful and effective measures to end and prevent such abuses or violations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These interviews show clear patterns by which the SDF and its affiliates recruit children. Members or associates of the Revolutionary Youth take possession of minors, sometimes following a period of cultivation and often with a clear element of coercion. These children are then moved to local sites controlled by the Revolutionary Youth, and onward to training camps. Parents searching for their children report that the Revolutionary Youth and other SDF-affiliated organizations deny having these children in their possession and employ threats and harassment when parents inquire too frequently, protest publicly, or take their stories to the media. Authorities, including the former Children Protection Office created to prevent child recruitment, claimed to have little information about children held by other SDF affiliates and little capacity to secure their release. While these organizations may act relatively autonomously from one another, they also seem to coordinate in recruiting and training minors, as they do in other fields of activity. They likewise seem to coordinate with one another in stonewalling and intimidating parents searching for their missing children.

RY is not a secret organization, but a rather well-established entity that has an active role within the organizational structure of the NES Administration with an active presence across the SDF-controlled region. The group’s members, offices, and training camps are known to the public as well as the domestic authorities. The group’s conferences and activities are often attended and endorsed by high-ranking SDF/AANES officials.

RY’s acts are attributable to SDF/AANES and could implicate the AANES and SDF, if they do not take the appropriate measures genuinely.

As of the time of publication, the minors discussed in this report have not been recovered by their parents. In light of this, as well as the SDF’s standing agreements with the United Nations and the tenets of international humanitarian law and human rights, the SDF, and its affiliates should:

- Immediately cease all child recruitment activities and take all measures in its power to prevent any child recruitment activity by its (*de jure* or *de facto*) agents, or by any other entity in the territories it controls;
- End all coercive recruitment measures, and follow a strict age verification policy during any recruitment process;
- Meanwhile, establish lines of communication between children and their parents, and ensure that parents are aware of their location;
- Ensure that all children under the age of 18 are safely returned to their parents;
- Provide immediate medical and psychological support for the child victims who suffered harm;
- Take every claim/report of a missing child seriously and diligently take the appropriate action;
- Designate an official entity for safe reporting of abuse/violation cases and provide effective remedies;
- Open genuine investigation into any illegal child recruitment activities;

The United States and other allies of the SDF must recognize that it bears some responsibility for the illegal practices of its military ally in the region and use its influence with the SDF to ensure that the above steps are taken. In the absence of immediate and concrete action by the RY and the SDF, the United States and the EU should consider sanctioning the RY for its role in child recruitment.

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3 Of these 23 documented cases, 2 cases took place in 2016; 1 in 2017; 2 in 2020; 2 in 2021; 12 cases in 2022; and 4 cases in 2023)

4 Except for one interview that accounted for two primary incidents, as the interviewed person was also a relative and authorized by the legal guardian of another child to give a testimony on their behalf.

5 See for instance: Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), 'Northeast Syria: The Revolutionary Youth Attacks Headquarters of the Kurdish National Council and a Border Crossing', 19 January 2022. <<https://stj-sy.org/en/northeast-syria-the-revolutionary-youth-attacks-headquarters-of-the-kurdish-national-council-and-a-border-crossing/>>; STJ, 'Northeastern Syria: The Revolutionary Youth Attacks Journalists and Protestors', 21 October 2022. <<https://stj-sy.org/en/northeastern-syria-the-revolutionary-youth-attacks-journalists-and-protestors-2/>>; and INT <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/intsyria/posts/3161056334220457/>>

6 The term "party" does not exclusively refer to the PYD - it has been used by the interviewed individuals making reference to those who are affiliated with the administration in general including the RY.

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12 ICC, The Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda, ICC-01/04-02/06, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para 993.

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