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- Local authorities failed to protect minors from enlistment amid total impunity of perpetrators

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Syria: Over 50 Children Recruited in AANES Areas in 2023

*Local authorities failed to protect minors from enlistment amid total impunity
of perpetrators*

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has not yet [fulfilled its promise](#) to end the recruitment and use of children in its areas. Both military and non-military entities licensed by AANES are still keeping dozens of children away from their families. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented over 52 cases of child recruitment in AANES areas throughout 2023. Of these cases, 29 involved minor males, while 23 involved minor females. The majority of cases occurred in Qamishli, with 22 cases reported, followed by Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo with 13 cases, Manbij with 7 cases, Raqqa with 6 cases, and Ayn al-Arab/Kobani with 4 cases.

STJ confirmed that the Revolutionary Youth (RY) (locally referred to as Ciwanên Şoreşger) was responsible for 43 cases while the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and other military groups of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were involved in the remaining cases.

The present report provides fresh accounts that substantiate the ongoing child recruitment operations in AANES areas. It is important to note that we have not disclosed the real names of the children who were recruited or the exact dates and times of their recruitment/kidnapping, in order to protect their safety and that of their families.

Ironically, child recruitment and use persisted despite the action plan signed between the SDF and the United Nations (UN) on 29 June 2019,¹ which led to the establishment of the Child Protection Office in Armed Conflict on 20 October 2020 and the issuance of the [Child Protection Law No. 54/2022](#), which provides to keep children out of armed conflicts.

STJ learned from a local source that the Child Protection Office annexed to the Women's Authority of the AANES replaced the aforementioned independent Office, which was dissolved more than a year ago. Notably, the new Office does not monitor or document child recruitment cases and even refuses to receive complaints from families of recruited children.² All related reports and verifications published by STJ throughout the last three years confirmed that armed groups of the AANES, especially the RY, continued to recruit and use children in 2023.³

In this connection, it is worth recalling that acts of using and recruiting children violate what is stipulated in the preamble of the AANES' former Charter of the Social Contract and if continued it would directly breach the [amended Charter of the Social Contract](#) ratified by the General Council of the AANES on 12 December 2023. Article 55 of the edited Contract states that,⁴ "Children's rights are protected, and the use of violence against them, their employment, exploitation and recruitment is prohibited. This is regulated by law."

¹ A statement issued by the Child Protection Office in Armed Conflict dated 14 December 2020, the Executive Council's website, <https://smne-syria.com/eb/?p=928> (last accessed: 19 December 2023).

² This was verified through a call with an activist from northeastern Syria conducted on 10 December 2023.

³ See for example, "[Syria: 49 Cases of Child Soldier Recruitment Verified in AANES Areas in 2022](#)", 25 January 2023; "[Northeastern Syria: The RY Use of Child Soldiers Continues Unabated](#)", 7 July 2023; "[Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syrian Arab Republic to the 54th regular session of the Human Rights Council](#)", September 2023, paragraph 99 et seq.

⁴ Compared to Article 29 of the previous [Charter of the Social Contract](#) (issued in 2014), which reads: "The Charter guarantees the rights of the child. In particular, children shall not suffer economic exploitation, child labor, torture, or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and shall not be married before attaining the age of majority."

Violating Women and Children's Rights in the Name of Protection

Testimonies collected by STJ confirmed that some institutions of the AANES used the principle of “ensuring the rights of women and children, self-protection, and legitimate defense” contained in the preamble of the AANES’ former Charter of the Social Contract as a pretext to continue recruiting minors in areas under its control. It has been confirmed that certain military organizations, including RY, exploited the vulnerability of women by recruiting them instead of providing them with adequate protection, safeguarding them, and empowering them to access their rights.

STJ statistics show that at least 73 girl children were recruited since the beginning of 2021; one of them was [killed](#) in engagements with Turkish forces in Iraq on 22 May 2022.

The continued recruitment and hiding of minor girls, was confirmed by Ahmed, a farmer from rural Aleppo who has two recruited girls aged 24 and 14. Ahmed said,

“In July 2023, my two daughters left the house and never returned. We contacted a relative who is a leader in the SDF; she denied knowing their whereabouts initially, but three months later, she gave us a picture of them with a message saying that they were fine and in Tall Rifat. Later on, a neighbor told us that he saw the two girls in military fatigues and carrying guns at one of the checkpoints in Tall Rifat.”

Sameera, from Qamishli, explained how RY recruited her 14-year-old daughter through one of her school colleagues in October 2023,

“A school friend of my daughter [named Laila] joined the RY, and after completing a two-month training course, she began [luring] new girls for recruitment. After my daughter went missing, one of her friends told me that Laila had created an Instagram chat group for recruiting girls. My daughter used to sneak my phone after I fell asleep to communicate with Laila. She learned to download and hide the Instagram app so I would not discover it. However, I found out about the hidden app and read their conversations, which revealed many other details.”

Sameera added,

“In the last conversation between my daughter and Laila, the latter wrote, ‘We will be waiting for you between 3 and 6 pm, so please make sure to come.’ Laila asked her to wait at the garden door and to dress appropriately for the meeting. She also told her not to mention that she is the only daughter in the family and to say [in case they refused to enlist her], ‘If you do not accept me joining you, I will kill myself or be homeless on the streets’ and also to claim that I was forcing her into marrying her cousin.”

Sameera went on to say,

“I went to Laila's house and accused her of being responsible for my daughter's disappearance. I demanded that she return my daughter to me. In response, Laila informed the RY, who contacted me and gave me an appointment at their

headquarters in Qamishli. I met a person code-named Rinas. He informed me that my daughter had joined the RY and told them that I had promised to arrange her marriage to her cousin. I clarified to him that my eldest nephew was only seven years old. He then called one of the prominent women named Ronahi, who informed him that the matter of my daughter joining them was settled and that she had chosen her destiny. Afterward, I went to various centers and institutions associated with the AANES, the commando forces headquarters, and the Asayish-affiliated complaints center, but to no avail."

Using children in hostilities

There were instances where families did not have enough information about their daughters being recruited and were unaware of the parties involved. Some of our sources claimed that their daughters were coerced into recruitment. One of the sources, Issa, who lives in the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood, testified to this,

"My youngest daughter is 12 years old in sixth grade. She used to visit a friend's house frequently to play. During her visits, her friend would talk to her about the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, my daughter did not pay much attention to it as she is too young to care about such things. In July 2023, my daughter was kidnapped from her friend's house in a black van. We went to one of the Party's headquarters to ask about her fate; two days later, three members of the Party came to us and told us that my daughter had gone with them based on her wish, that she was fine, and that she wanted to become a fighter. We had completely stopped hearing from her since that time."

For his part, Abdullah, a father of another recruited minor girl said,

"My daughter is 14 years old. She studies in a middle school located between the Ashrafiyye and Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods. In November 2023, she was kidnapped from in front of her school. After 48 hours, three women from one of the AANES' women's organizations came to and told us that our daughter was with them without giving any other details and left without answering our inquiries."

Razana, 15, and Jian, 14, were recruited the same way, according to a testimony from a relative of them in which he explained,

"In October 2023, the two girls went shopping in Qamishli. At about 7 pm [the same day], a woman from the YPJ called us and said that the two girls joined them. We acted immediately to ask about their whereabouts and pressure to return them through our acquaintances. Three days later, we met with three SDF cadres at the military relations headquarters south of Qamishli. I was present at the time with the families of the two girls. The YPJ officials allowed us to meet the girls for 15 minutes, and both showed signs of fear. They stated that they did not want to return and continued to stare at the officials in fear. We attempted to file a complaint against the YPJ in the People's Court. Although they initially allowed us to write one, they later refused to accept it."



STJ indicated consistency in the testimonies of sources regarding the RY's significant role in recruiting children, particularly girls. In parallel with the ongoing recruitment of children by the military units of the AANES, the latter's civil institutions continue to neglect the issue, even in their activities related to children's affairs. The AANES' Women's Authority did not address the issue of using children for military purposes in the recommendations of its [first conference](#) on child protection organized on 5 October 2023 under the slogan "By raising a healthy childhood, we build society and protect the future generation."

Recommendations

STJ renews its calls on the AANES and military groups under it to demonstrate transparency and a full commitment to the agreements they signed with the Geneva Call in 2014 and with the UN in 2019; immediately demobilize child soldiers; reactivate the Child Protection Office in Armed Conflict with ensuring its independence and monitor its functioning in receiving complaints and take punitive measures against those found indulged in child recruitment; respect its own Charter of the Social Contract which stipulated that it is not permissible to recruit children – as mentioned above – as well as its Law No. 54 regarding the protection of children's rights, which defines "child" as "anyone below 18 years of age. It is relevant to recall that international humanitarian law (IHL) (the laws of war) and international human rights law (IHRL) [ban](#) government forces and non-state armed groups from recruiting and using children as fighters and in other support roles. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Syria ratified in 2003, bans non-state armies from recruiting or using children under age 18 in direct hostilities. Conscripting or enlisting children under 15, including for support roles, is a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.



ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.