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Compulsory military recruitment in Jazira Region: SDF imposing their authority



Fighter from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in a training camp in eastern Syria - (Reuters)

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“Some think that the homeland is farmland to which they come whenever they wish and leave it whenever they wish. If so, they have to defend this farm,” the head of Jazira Region’s internal affairs body, Kanaan Barakat, said in November 2014, commenting on the “duty of self-defense,” which he had officially announced in the northern and eastern areas of Syria, at the time, in conjunction with the battles that were being carried out by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in the city of Ayn al-Arab (Kobanî), which witnessed large-scale attacks by ISIS at the time.

Under that law, young men at the age of military service were recruited for compulsory service into the ranks of the SDF, the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which imposes through its civil representative (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) its authority on most of al-Hasakah Governorate, large parts of the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqqa, as well as the city of Manbij in the eastern countryside of Aleppo.

Despite the slight amendments that have been brought to the military recruitment law in recent years, this law took its final form on June 23, 2019, when the Autonomous Administration approved a new law consisting of 35 articles, making it a law similar to that of compulsory service of the Syrian regime.

In this investigation, *Enab Baladi* opens the file of SDF’s shift towards taking the form of a regular army through the enactment of laws, examines the extent to which the new military recruitment law

meets international standards, and sheds light on the hierarchy of these forces from combat groups to military councils.

Compulsory conscription under the cover of “duty of self-defense”

The announcement of the military recruitment law, which was passed under the cover of the “duty of self-defense” in 2014, was preceded by arrests of young men between the ages of 18 and 30 in al-Hasakah and Qamishli by the Asayish Forces, the security arm of the YPG, which in turn is the current military pillar of the SDF.

The head of Jazira Region’s internal affairs body, Kanaan Barakat, did not deny at the time that the arrests that were carried out for the purpose of recruitment. He said that this is a somewhat uncivilized way, arguing that the region is in a state of war and that the recruitment law is a necessary measure for the current situation of the region.

Barakat added in a statement to *Bûyerpress* website that the recruitment law “is named the law of the duty of self-defense, which applies to all without exception... This law must be applied especially in these situations and it is aimed at forming a national popular army similar to the national army, in order to protect institutions and installations in Kurdish cities.”

The enactment of the “Self-Defense Duty” Law, passed by the Legislative Council of Jazira Region on July 13, 2014, provided that each family from the citizens of the Region shall provide one of its members for the participation in “the duty of self-defense” for six months. The period was later changed to 9 months, under the amendments approved in January 2016.

In the period that followed the end of its battles in Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) in November 2015, the SDF turned to carrying out larger military operations in northern and eastern Syria. In parallel with this, forced conscription operations continued without distinction of any area, either it is al-Hasakah, Ayn al-Arab, Tell Abyad or Qamishli, including recruitment of children and minors. This has been documented by human rights organizations over the past years, and has been confirmed by the condolences that the YPG were publishing from time to time regarding the death of its members during the battles, including children at the age of 18.

Arrests and recruitments that do not respect the law

Despite the large space allowed by the “Self-Defense Duty” Act to recruit young people living in areas controlled by the YPG, the latter did not comply with the items stipulated by the law. Several cases of arbitrary arrest for recruitment have been documented, despite the education postponement of compulsory service or some young people’s obtention of exemption from military service for medical or other reasons.

In a report published by the Syrians for Truth and Justice Organization in March 2018, it was revealed that the Autonomous Administration had arrested more young people in al-Hasakah Governorate, in conjunction with the military operations against ISIS in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa. Not only that, even some of the workers in the education sector have not been

exempted from these arrests and forced recruitment, although they have an official paper that allows them to postpone military service.

According to many testimonies obtained by the organization, many young people were taken directly to the Autonomous Administration's recruitment camps, although they were exempted from military service for several reasons, including education postponement.

According to a well-informed source about the recruitment operations (requested anonymity for security reasons), the Autonomous Administration's law provides two ways of recruiting young people to compulsory service in the SDF ranks. The first is when the young man voluntarily hands himself over. In this case, he is sent to military centers in Amuda, Qamishli and al-Hasakah.

When a young man is arrested in case of passing over a military roadblock or during raids, he is sent to remote military centers in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, which is considered a "penalty."



SDF fighter during a funeral of fighters in eastern Syria – March 2019 (AFP)

Stages of recruitment

The source explained that after the young man hands himself over to the military centers, he is sent to the military medical hospital for a checkup to make sure that he does not have any diseases that may hinder his military work. The next stage, he is sorted according to his situation to one of the three military centers in Tell Beydar in al-Hasakah, "Gharziru" in Rmelan and "Gabka" in Qamishli.

According to the source, the SDF (the YPG their military basis) determine their military session to 4500 fighters, and the session continues for 40 days. The recruit is later given a five-day break in his home before his final exit to the military centers deployed in several northern and eastern areas of Syria.

The sorting is done according to the academic certificates, the capabilities and the works that distinguish each young man. For example, the journalist is sent to SDF media centers while the driver is sent to driving the military vehicles, as he knows the vehicle's mechanism and driving.

The recruitment stages adopted by the SDF are similar to those adopted by the Syrian regime, either in terms of the sessions they organize at the beginning of the young men's dragging up to the sorting process. However, the SDF's recruitment stages are different from those of the regime in terms of duration and monthly vacations that are granted to recruits (25 working days in military centers and five days at home).

According to the source, there are calculations in the sorting of recruits to the military centers. The sorting towards Qamishli, Amuda and al-Hasakah is considered better for young people from that towards Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, in addition to the determination of the military service of some recruits according to an administrative shift until 3 p.m. and the rest of the time at home.

Only amendment of articles: Autonomous Administration adheres to the law

Since its approval in July 2014 to this day, the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria has maintained the "duty of self-defense" law, despite the strong rejection of this law by citizens living in SDF-controlled areas, who have held several demonstrations in rejection of the compulsory recruitment operations, especially that a large segment of young men who had left regime-held areas to flee their compulsory military service, only found themselves facing a compulsory military recruitment similar in its stages and methods to that the Syrian regime imposes.

The Autonomous Administration has made several amendments to the law, the most important of which was that which was approved in January 2016 to cancel the first paragraph of Article 9 providing for an allowance for those living outside the governorate of \$ 1,000 for each visit, until reaching \$ 5,000. This was replaced by a \$ 200 payment by the visitor when he visits Rojava and this is considered as an annual postponement of the "duty of self-defense".

The first paragraph of Article IV was adopted in the 2016 amendment, which extended the period of performance of the "duty of self-defense" from six to nine months. In addition, the third paragraph of Article X, which used to allow, in wartime, the suspension of the education postponement, was abolished, "with the proposal of the defense committee and under the approval of the Legislative Council."

"State law"

On June 23, 2019, the Autonomous Administration amended several articles in the old recruitment law, and approved a new law consisting of 35 articles which content is similar to the recruitment law of the Syrian regime.

In an interview with *Enab Baladi*, Bader Mulla Rashid, a researcher at Omran Center for Strategic Studies, says the imposition of the self-defense law dates back to mid-2014. Since then, the

Autonomous Administration has completed nearly 40 military training sessions for recruits in al-Hasakah Governorate, with different proportions in Afrin and Ayn al-Arab (Kobanî).

The Syrian researcher added that the last law is not considered a new law, but amendments were made to the old law, the most important of which has been updated regarding the distinction between births according to regions. The required births remained the same in Kurdish and northern cities, which are the births of 1986, while in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa regions were identified to births of 1990 and the following years.

Mulla Rashid pointed out that the amendments led to a large objection by the youth category in the northern cities in rejection to the occurred discrimination. Several hashtags have been circulated, calling for the abolition of this item and the standardization of births, namely: “Yes to the standardization of births of self-defense,” “No differentiation,” “No to discrimination,” “No to regionalism,” “Yes to justice,” and “Autonomous Administration for all.”

According to the Syrian researcher, SDF is trying to ease the tension in the Arab regions triggered by imposing self-defense compulsory service on the young people. It can also be considered a factor contributing to paving the way to the return of those who were displaced from these areas, both inside Syria and neighboring countries.



Members to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the vicinity of al-Baghouz east of the Euphrates, 20 March (Reuters)

Reinforcing “Autonomous Administration”

The recent amendments SDF has introduced preceded the end of the ground military operations carried out against ISIS, which caused the organization to lose its last stronghold east of the Euphrates, namely al-Baghouz town.

These amendments coincided with the Kurdish forces adopting a new military structure, which first move was to announce the formation of the military councils in: Tell Abyad, Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), Raqqa, al-Tabqah and Qamishli; in addition to the existing councils in Manbij, al-Bab, Jarabulus, and Deir ez-Zor military council.

In the past years, SDF maintained recruitment as an essential part of the military operations it has waged against ISIS, for it needs human power to make progress on the ground. At the present time, the recruitment process is ongoing and a new law has been enacted. However, the war is over now, so one may question the objectives of the Kurdish forces adhering to recruitment and focusing much attention on it.

The Syrian researcher, Mohannad al-Kata'a, said that “making use of his military militias in Syria represented by SDF, and the political interface, namely the Syrian Democratic Council, enabled the PKK to introduce itself as legitimate Syrian forces. The party believes the military achievements in the region, which were supported by the regime at first then the US can become something recognized, especially with the Arab and international parties having an interest in the existence of the Kurdish factor. ”

In an interview with *Enab Baladi*, the Syrian researcher suggested the aforementioned factors prompted the Kurdish forces to continue the forced recruitment program not as a temporary measure but rather as a lasting case of the so-called “autonomous administration”.

The Syrian researcher linked the above mentioned with the conditions set by the “Autonomous Administration” to highlight the strategy of the party aiming to negotiate with the Syrian regime to ensure recognition, on the one hand, and preserve the characteristics of SDF, on the other.

Al-Kata'a also referred to the formation of the military councils aiming to establish 10 new military councils in SDF held areas. According to the Commander-in-Chief of SDF, Mazloum Abdi, the Kurdish forces are working to urge the youths of these areas to run these councils. Al-Kata'a highlighted that these councils were formed two weeks after holding French-Kurdish meetings, which confirmed that France will continue to support the SDF project only if the Arabs were involved politically and militarily.

“In addition to these meetings, the US-Saudi delegation in Deir ez-Zor has recently held meetings with tribal figures and SDF, in order to engage Arab tribes and reassure them about the existence of SDF. This is also meant to reinforce the presence of SDF in the region, enable it to confront any Turkish threat, and deny the Turkish side the opportunity to establish any future relationships in the Arab tribe,” said al-Kata'a.

The researcher at Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Badr Mulla Rashid, does not believe that the amendments to the law of “self-defense” are directly related to the formation of military councils.

He explained that the process of formation of the councils is exclusively related to SDF, including the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the rest of the factions affiliated to SDF. As for compulsory recruitment, it has a section on recruiting for SDF and another for the Office of Self-Defense, for both forces forming SDF (Faction forces and self-defense) have not yet been fully integrated, which can occur at the end of the restructuring of the "Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)".



Fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sit in the bucket of an excavator in the village of Baghouz, Deir Al Zor province, Syria March 20, 2019. Picture taken March 20, 2019. REUTERS/Rodi Said

Opinion Poll

Why are parties to the conflict in Syria seeking recruitment?

Enab Baladi conducted an opinion poll, addressing the following question to followers: Why are parties to the conflict in Syria (the regime and its forces) forcing and promoting compulsory recruitment?

About 54% of the 680 respondents believe recruitment is an attempt to increase the number of fighters, while 46% believe that this strategy is meant to further establish power and influence.

The comments of the participants and the results of the poll were conveying similar ideas, for one of them suggested that the aim behind the parties to the conflict attempt to recruit is "to establish control over Syria through ensuring the largest number of voters in the elections that will take place being part of the political transition plan and the Geneva decision." Mustapha Mustapha agrees with him, saying "they have few soldiers and are working to win votes in the elections."

“Guaranteed by international law”

Compulsory recruitment in armed groups is “legal”

International law sets out several bases and criteria for compulsory service or forced conscription imposed in many countries of the world. However, it does not interfere directly with cases of recruitment except in certain matters, especially those concerning the recruitment of children, which is prohibited by international law and is considered a war crime.

International human rights law does not prohibit mandatory recruitment. Convention No. 29 of the International Labor Organization, adopted by Amnesty International in 1930, requires military service laws to be exempted from the prohibition imposed on compulsory labor.

In his statement to Amnesty, the Executive Director of Caesar Files Group, Ibrahim Qasim said that although international human rights law provided for the absence of coercion, forced or compulsory labor, mandatory military service was not considered an act of such. So there is nothing in international laws to prevent or criminalize compulsory recruitment in the countries that impose it. However, some countries are planning to abolish recruitment; other countries have no such a process, and punish those who fail to perform the service.

“What applies to governments does to armed groups too in accordance with International Humanitarian Law and Customary International Humanitarian Law, under Additional Protocol II to the four Geneva Conventions,” Qasim said.

Under the law recently imposed by SDF, it will be subject to the consequences of coercive recruitment, such as the recruitment of children.

Forced recruitment should have some fundamental criteria and must be “implemented in a legal, non-arbitrary or discriminatory manner”.

“Conscientious objection is a right”

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights considers forced conscription to be a violation of the right to personal liberty, human dignity and freedom of movement. The American Convention on Human Rights secure this right, describing the process of taking young people by surprise in the streets as forced recruitment, which legality cannot be challenged.

The United Nations also considers individuals rejection of forced recruitment (conscientious objection) as a right derived from the interpretation of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

The “conscientious objector” is the person claiming the right to refuse to perform military service under the pretext of freedom of thought, conscience or religion.

According to Qasim, conscientious may be partial, in the course of compulsory service or certain operations or situations.

He pointed out that one of the United Nations' resolutions calls upon Member States to grant asylum or safe passage to persons forced to leave their country for conscientious objection to participation in the implementation of apartheid by serving in the armed forces or the police.

In its second paragraph, Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union acknowledges the right not to participate in wars in accordance with the domestic laws governing this right. Article 12 of the Ibero-American Youth Convention states that young people have the right to conscientious objection to military service.

No Conscientious Objection for SDF

The draft law on recruitment of the SDF, read by *Enab Baladi*, does not contain clauses on an exemption from service, as it is the case with the draft law of recruitment, which does not recognize the right to conscientious objection to service. However, it allows those who do not wish to perform military service to pay a certain amount of money, according to one of the concluding observations mentioned in the report sent by the Syrian government to the former Human Rights Committee, according to Ibrahim Qasim.

The countries which do not recognize conscientious objection to military service, are not allowed to practice certain forms of punishment, particularly life imprisonment or execution, according to resolution 77 (1998) of the Commission on Human Rights.

“Abolition of the recruitment of children” introduced by the new law

In August 2018, Human Rights Watch accused the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) of recruiting children, including girls, in order to fight, noting that among the recruited children were kids displaced with their families to the camps controlled by YPG forces forming the backbone of Syria's democratic forces.

According to the Human Rights Watch report, there are 224 cases of child recruitment by the YPG and their female units in 2017 only; that is five times more than 2016.

The organization called on the units to immediately demobilize children and stop recruiting them, including the ones belonging to families in displaced camps they control.

These human rights calls have been accompanied by several criticisms of the “coercion” of recruiting children under the age of 18, which is prohibited by international law. All conscription, including forced labor, of persons under the age of 15 is prohibited by international treaty law. The 1977 International Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Convention on the Rights

of the Child are considered a war crime under article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The new law issued by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) on compulsory military service for the SDF's fighters complies with these international calls. Thus, Article 1 of Act 1 states that "the duty of self-defense is compulsory for males from autonomous administration, who have completed 18."

In September, the SDF issued a formal decision to prevent the military recruitment of children in response to Human Rights Watch's report.

The resolution, published by the SDF on its official website, strictly prohibits the recruitment of children, under 18, in the army in accordance with the rules of internal procedures of the faction, and under international laws which ban arming and implicating children in armed conflicts.

Additional pledges: Is it enough?

Recently, the issue of minors' military recruitment has come to the fore again with the United Nations signing an action plan with the SDF to end and prevent integrating children into the faction's ranks.

A UN statement, issued at the beginning of July, stated that the plan of action includes the demobilization and separation of boys and girls currently recruited and the prevention of involving minors into the military recruitment campaigns.

The plan was signed on behalf of the SDF by commander-in-chief, Maj. Gen. Mazloun Abdi, and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva.

The SDF is the first armed faction to sign such agreement, in addition to recognizing the recruitment of minors among its military ranks, through [the presence of its leaders at the United Nations headquarters](#), headed by General Abdi, and Redur Khalil, the former spokesman of the People's Protection Units (YPG).

Bassam al-Ahmad, executive director of Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), indicated that the agreement could help reduce the number of SDF's minor soldiers in the short term; however, the accord would not immediately end all recruitment cases.

Al-Ahmad told *Enab Baladi*: "We are talking about thousands of fighters. They need a roadmap, a time plan and a practical strategy to integrate the terms of the agreement within their internal systems to ensure its implementation."

He pointed out that the signing of the agreement is only the first step, which is supposed to be followed by many other necessary steps, which should include the immediate demobilization of all children within these forces and ensure accountability of individuals and leaders involved in those recruitment operations.

According to al-Ahmad, the signing of this agreement may be an incentive for other military groups in Syria to engage in such commitment, especially since signing agreements with official bodies such as the United Nations gives a kind of legitimacy and recognition and moral support for these factions.



Relatives of an SDF fighter holding his photo at his funeral in Manbij, east of Aleppo – 2019 (AFP)

The structure of SDF: Groups, regiments, then military councils

The YPG is the military wing of the SDF, which was officially formed in October 2015. The establishment of the faction was announced in an official statement, which described the newly formed armed group as “a unified national military force for all Syrians, Arabs, Kurds, and other factions.”

Before the formation of the SDF, during the reign of ISIS over large areas in the north and east of Syria, the YPG was fighting in the form of small combat groups, such as the first establishment of the Free Syrian Army’s factions, and it was present in the battles of the city Kobani, and allied with several armed formations within the framework of a cooperation to serve mutual interests, i.e. to repel ISIS’s attack on the city.

The YPG openly appeared in July 2012, more than a year after the start of the Syrian revolution, and then turned into a de facto military faction. Afterward, the faction began its military activity in al-Hasakah, Aleppo and Raqqa and established checkpoints and barriers.

The YPG lacked military organization until the period following the ISIS attack of on Kobani, to move to a new stage radically different from the previous phase. By then, the formation needed

larger organizational procedures and hierarchical structures to accommodate the size of battles on the ground.

The stage in which the YPG entered an organizational level with the formation of the SDF, which was announced after the United States' declaration about its intention to provide weapons to a selected group of armed forces to fight ISIS.

The announcement statement indicated that the SDF will include the Syrian Arab Alliance, the Army of Revolutionaries, the Euphrates Volcano, Al-Sanadid Forces, the Al-Jazira Brigade, the Syriac Military Council, and the YPG as well as the Women's Protection Units.

The names which were announced in the formation of the SDF are military factions that managed, by virtue of their military nature, to control the situation on ground, i.e. to fight on more than one front and axis in the military operations launched against ISIS.

The dissident spokesman of the SDF, Talal Sallou, stated that the faction had approximately 50,000 fighters, more than 70 percent of whom were YPK and YPG elements.

As for the Turkmen component in the SDF, Sallou explained: "The SDF was a small faction led by me, in the village of Hammam al-Turkmen. It had about 65 fighters. There was a proposal by the PKK administration, especially by Shaheen Gilo (Farhad Abdi Shahin), that the SDF need to be led by one symbolic personality". Thus, the Syriac Military Council has currently about 50 members. As for the Arab members, Sallou pointed out that a large number of Arab factions are involved in the operations; however, their military contribution has not been significant recently.

In May 2017, after the launching of large-scale military operation by the SDF, the faction announced the formation of military regiments in its areas of control. The Joint Chairman of the Provincial Defense and autonomous administration, Rezan Gilo, stated in May 2017 that "the aim of the formation of the military regiments of the Self-Defense Forces is to build a military force at a high level of training and discipline, to defend the gains achieved in Rojava thanks to the sacrifices of thousands of martyrs."

When the first military regiment was announced on 9 May, 2017, Gilo noted that "the members of the military regiments will receive military and intellectual training sessions to provide them with sufficient expertise", considering that "these forces are organized under the democratic autonomous administration."

The conditions for joining the regiments determined that the fighter should be healthy and aged between 18 and 40. Hence, the period of service is 23 months. Those who are selected to join the forces are exempted from the self-defense duty, along with other regulations. The fighters are granted health insurance and a monthly amount of \$200.

There has been no development in the hierarchy of the SDF after the formation of the regiments and following the announcement of the establishment of the military councils. Thus, the military councils were announced in a remarkable manner after the defeat of ISIS and visits by Arab and foreign officials to regions in the north and east of Syria.

The SDF indicated in the military councils' formation statement that the councils were aimed to reorganize its forces and the military formations in the region. It also aimed to unify all the military and security forces under the umbrella of the military council, which will "strengthen the fight against terrorism and the institutionalization of the military factions through re-activating their representation in the Council."



SDF fighters in their colleague's funeral, who has been killed in the countryside of Deir Ez-Zor – April, 2019 (AFP)

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