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Iraq: Armed Groups Using Child Soldiers - Armed Groups Should Immediately Demobilize Children

(Beirut) – Armed groups in [Iraq](#) affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party have recruited boys and girls, Human Rights Watch said today. In two cases the armed groups abducted or seriously abused [children](#) who tried to leave their forces. The groups should urgently demobilize children, investigate abuses, pledge to end child recruitment, and appropriately penalize commanders who fail to do so.

Human Rights Watch documented 29 cases in northern Iraq in which Kurdish and Yezidi children were recruited by two armed groups, the People's Defense Forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel, or HPG) and the Shingal Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingal, or YBŞ). The HPG is the armed wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is known by its initials, the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê). The YBŞ, a militia from the Yezidi religious community, is also affiliated with the PKK.

"The PKK should categorically denounce the recruitment and use of [child soldiers](#), and commanders in affiliated armed groups should know that the recruitment and use of children under age 15 constitute war crimes," said [Zama Coursen-Neff](#), children's rights director at Human Rights Watch. "Boys and girls should be with their families and going to school, not used as means to military ends."

Children under age 15 affiliated with both groups told Human Rights Watch that they have participated in fighting, while others said they had staffed checkpoints or cleaned and prepared weapons. Even if the armed groups do not send children into direct combat, they place them at risk by training them in [areas](#) that [Turkey](#) [has attacked with airstrikes](#) in its conflict with the PKK, such as Iraq's Qandil mountain area.

The recruitment or use of children under 15 is a war crime. Under international law, non-state armed groups like the HPG and YBŞ must not, under any circumstances, recruit children under 18, or use them in hostilities. Recruitment of children by armed groups is prohibited by international law, even if the children "volunteer."

The HPG should investigate and hold accountable those responsible for abducting or otherwise abusing children, and the Iraqi government in Baghdad, which has paid salaries to YBŞ forces, should pressure the group to demobilize all child soldiers, Human Rights Watch said.

The HPG, along with other Kurdish armed groups broadly aligned with the PKK, operates in Turkey, [Syria](#), and Iraq, and is fighting Turkish and non-state armed groups including the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). The PKK-aligned groups have trained and supported the YBŞ, which gained recruits after the HPG helped Yezidis flee ISIS massacres of Yezidi civilians in Sinjar in August 2014.

Human Rights Watch documented nine cases of children used by the HPG; in four cases, the child had left the HPG. The father of a Kurdish boy from the city of Halabja in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq said his son left school at 15 to join the group in early 2016, and that its officials had repeatedly refused to acknowledge the boy's

whereabouts. The father showed Human Rights Watch researchers a video, apparently filmed by the HPG, showing the boy at an unknown location, in uniform with an assault rifle, in which he encouraged others to join the group. "I just want to contact him, just let him call me to say he hasn't been shot," the father said.

Twenty boys and five girls from the Halabja area have joined and remained with PKK-affiliated forces since 2013, and another 38 children joined but returned home, according to the Kurdistan Regional Government's Human Rights Commission office in Halabja.

In Sardashti, a community in the Yezidi region of Sinjar, residents described an incident in February when HPG fighters badly beat a 13-year-old girl in their ranks after she argued with a commander. When the girl, who had a broken leg, tried to escape, the fighters tracked her down and took her back, even after she threatened to jump off the roof, residents said.

A Yezidi boy at the Bersive 1 displaced persons camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, said he was 14 when he joined the group in 2014, and that he fought in Sinjar and in Syria until July 2016. He said he saw "many" other children during his time with the group and recalled that one 16-year-old boy was shot in the leg during fighting in western Sinjar. "There was a rule that if you were under 18 you could not fight," the boy said. "But the fighters don't care about the rules."

In Khanasoor, a town in Sinjar, Human Rights Watch met a 14-year-old girl from Turkey who said she had joined the group in Syria two years ago, and received military training there. She had recently moved to Sinjar and joined the YBŞ "as a fighter," although they had refused to allow her to participate in combat.

Human Rights Watch documented 20 cases of children recruited or used by the YBŞ, including 10 cases in which researchers spoke to the children. In Khanasoor, Human Rights Watch observed the YBŞ using the Ta'meem Boys' Secondary School as a military barracks. Among the uniformed recruits there, four said they were under 18, including one who was 14 and had volunteered two years before, when he was in fifth grade. The recruits said the YBŞ [received salaries from Iraqi authorities](#) in Baghdad that were only supposed to be paid to fighters age 18 and older, but that the group collected and pooled the money and used it to pay children.

Residents of Khanasoor also said that the HPG had recruited children from the Martyr Khairy school, which teachers said is run by the PKK using a curriculum from Kurdish-controlled parts of northern Syria.

Children suspected of joining PKK-affiliated forces have been arrested and abused by the Asayish security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the official ruling body of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which opposes the PKK. One of the boys at the secondary school being used as a barracks in Khanasoor said that he joined the YBŞ at 15, after the ISIS massacres of Yezidi civilians in Sinjar in August 2014, and that the Asayish arrested and beat him when he went to visit his family at a camp for displaced Yezidis in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. "The first time they arrested me, the Asayish, they held me for five days, they beat me with their hands and said that if I left the camp again, they would arrest my family," he said. Three Yezidi children or their families told Human Rights Watch that Kurdish regional authorities had evicted the families from camps because their children had joined PKK-affiliated forces.

Kurdistan Regional Government authorities should treat children suspected of involvement with the armed groups primarily as victims of abuse, not as criminals, in accordance with international norms on child soldiers set out in the Paris Principles of 1997. The authorities should not penalize the families of suspected child recruits.

The HPG pledged to end recruitment of children under 16 on October 5, 2013, when commanders [signed](#) a "Deed of Commitment" with Geneva Call, an international nongovernmental organization that promotes adherence to the laws of war by armed groups. The group's commanders said it would "make all efforts to ensure that all 16-18 year olds are separated and kept away from combat zones." PKK officials did not respond to a letter from Human Rights Watch asking if the HPG has penalized commanders for violating these internal rules, and other questions including the minimum age of recruitment.

The YBŞ should demobilize any children in their ranks, end all recruitment of children under age 18, and punish recruiters, Human Rights Watch said.

The groups should end the military use of schools, consistent with the HGP's pledge in signing the "Deed of Commitment." Iraq should join the states that have agreed to implement international [guidelines for protecting schools from military use during armed conflict](#).

Human Rights Watch has also documented the recruitment or use of children by Sunni and Shia Arab armed groups [fighting in Iraq](#), including [militias in the battle to retake Mosul](#), and by [armed groups fighting in Syria](#).

"Kurdish and Yezidi communities in Iraq have suffered unbearable horrors from war, but there is simply no excuse for using children to fight even if they are volunteering to join up," Coursen-Neff said. "The PKK should

take immediate steps to root out all child recruitment, refuse to accept child volunteers, and make amends to the families and children who have suffered.”

Recruitment of Children by Kurdish Armed Groups in Iraq

Human Rights Watch visited the town of Halabja and camps for displaced people around Dohuk in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Iraq’s northeastern Sinjar district, in August 2016. Human Rights Watch interviewed 58 people, including 13 children ages 14 to 17, as well as parents, managers of the camps, teachers, local and international nongovernmental organizations, and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities.

Researchers obtained oral informed consent from interviewees, and told them why Human Rights Watch was doing the research and how it would use their accounts, that they did not need to answer any questions they preferred not to answer, and that they could stop the interview at any time.

In most cases, relatives of children who had joined the HPG or the YBŞ asked not to be identified, due to concerns of potential retaliation by those armed groups or in some cases fear of being punished by Kurdistan Regional Government authorities, who oppose the PKK.

Responding to questions from Human Rights Watch, Kurdistan Regional Government officials in Dohuk province said in a November 27 letter that it was “strictly prohibited” to recruit children from camps for displaced people, that the authorities protected the “civilian nature” of the camps, and that if any child recruits were found, they “will be given attention and rehabilitated through specialized centers and special programs.” Several families and children said that Asayish forces had ordered families to leave the camp or threatened to evict them after ascertaining that their children had joined PKK-affiliated forces in Sinjar.

International nongovernmental groups and United Nations agencies support psycho-social services for Yezidi children in displaced persons camps, but none of the former child soldiers or families of children who had joined armed groups who spoke to Human Rights Watch said they had accessed any rehabilitation programs.

Recruitment of Yezidi Children from Camps

Fifteen Yezidi families in Dohuk region camps who had been forced to flee ISIS attacks in Sinjar in August 2014 said that their children had left to join the HPG or the YBŞ in Sinjar.

In Sharya camp, relatives of a 15-year-old boy said he left the camp in February 2015 and went to Sinjar, where he phoned to say he had joined the YBŞ, to fight “for revenge” against ISIS. Three months later, he was shot during fighting in the city and evacuated for medical care to Syria, from where he phoned his family twice, they said. He returned to the camp in November 2015, but refused to tell his family about his experiences.

Another Sharya camp resident, 17, said that he and a friend of the same age left the camp together to join the YBŞ in May. The boys were registered at the PKK-run Lalish community center in Khanasoor, a town in Sinjar, where they met four other boys who either said they were under 18 or looked like children. The boy said that the PKK members who registered him looked at his ID card, which stated his date of birth, and did not ask him any questions. He and his friend stayed overnight with relatives in Sinjar, who phoned his immediate family, and a family member came and took both boys back to the camp for displaced people the following day. Human Rights Watch also spoke to the family member, who said he was “very worried that the PKK would have stopped me” if they had known he was taking the boys back to the camp, and that PKK officials later called him to say that if the boys returned to Sinjar they would not be allowed to leave.

Camp residents said another 17-year-old boy left the camp to join the HPG, and has not returned home. The Asayish had arrested his older brother for recruiting camp residents for the HPG and detained him for 50 days, residents said. The prevalence of child recruitment led other residents to suspect that two 13-year-old children who had been missing since August had joined the HPG or the YBŞ during visits to Sinjar.

In the Kabarto camp, a 16-year-old Yezidi girl left to join the HPG in January 2015, after a man the family later suspected was a recruiter visited her family three times, relatives said. The girl called her family soon after arriving in Khanasoor, but had no other contact with them until a relative was able to meet her at a training camp in Karse, Sinjar, in December 2015. The relative described seeing “lots of kids, and two or three who looked about 11 were carrying AK-47s.” The girl told him she had received military training in the Qandil mountains, and that she wanted to return to her family but was afraid to ask her commanders, the relative said. In April 2016, the girl pretended she was ill and asked for a week’s leave to convalesce with her family. When she returned to her family in the camp, Asayish forces required her family sign a pledge to pay a heavy fine if she re-enlisted.

Another resident said Asayish forces had evicted the families of children the HPG recruited from the camp, and that these families then returned to Sinjar.

In Bersive camp 1, the father of a 15-year-old said the boy left to Sinjar in order to join the HPG in July 2015, was with the group for two months, and participated in fighting. The father said he met with PKK officials in Sardashti, on Sinjar mountain, to request the boy's return. The officials said that the boy would be paid a salary and initially refused to say where he was, but four days later brought the boy and allowed him to leave with his father. The boy has refused to speak about his experiences and says he does not want to re-enlist, his father said.

A family in the Bersive camp said that in April 2016, their 16-year-old son left the camp along with two other boys they knew, ages 16 and 15, with a driver who helped recruit them. The family said their son received HPG military training for three months in Sinjar, where he was paid a total of US\$800, before his father was able to bring him back. The Asayish then called the boy for interrogation, detained him for 24 hours, and assaulted him, his family said.

The father of another 16-year-old boy said that in April, he "went to school one morning and disappeared" from the camp to "join the PKK" in Sinjar. The boy had contacted his father from Sinjar and said he had completed military training and was on guard duty in the city and was being paid US\$400 per month, his father said.

One boy said he was 15 when he left the camp to join the HPG in March 2015. He has since returned, and said that he had found phone numbers for recruiters on social media and called them when he reached Snune, a town in Sinjar. HPG fighters took him to Karse for military training for one month, then he worked cleaning weapons and preparing ammunition for two months at a former secondary school in Khanasoor. He said he was paid US\$100 per month and given food, cigarettes, and phone cards. He said he was allowed to leave when he wanted to.

A boy, born in 2000, said he left the camp and joined the HPG in Karse in late 2014. He stayed with the group until July 2016, when he returned to the camp while on leave and was arrested by Peshmerga, the military forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government, on suspicion of being an HPG fighter. The boy said that his initial two months of training included the use of machine guns, assault rifles, and rocket-propelled grenades, and that he fought in Sinjar and several locations in Syria. He saw "many" other children with the armed group, including a 16-year-old boy who was shot in the leg during fighting in Umm al-Dhiban, a town near the Syrian border in Sinjar. "There was a rule that if you were under 18 you could not fight," the boy said. "But the fighters don't care about the rules. When I wanted to go to fight, no one stopped me. They told me not to go to the fighting but didn't stop me."

Residents of the camp named five other boys, all born in 2000, whom they knew personally and who had joined the HPG for periods of between 15 days and two months, apparently for military training.

Recruitment and Alleged Abuses against Children in Sinjar

In Sinjar, Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed families, witnesses, or children who described 13 cases in which children had joined the YBŞ or the HPG. A store owner in the town of Snune, in northern Sinjar, said that HPG fighters had recruited his 15-year-old son in Snune in June. The boy's friends told his parents that he was at a training camp in Umm al-Dhiban, but the boy had only called home once to say he had joined the HPG and could not call any more. The boy's relatives said PKK officials told them he would be given a brief leave after 25 days of military training, but they believe this did not happen because he never came home. Two Snune residents also described regularly observing children, some as young as 12 or 13, in HPG uniforms, in some cases armed.

At the Lalish Center in Khanasoor, east of Snune, researchers met a 14-year-old Turkish girl who said she had joined the HPG in Syria two years ago, and received military training there. She had recently moved to Sinjar and joined the YBŞ "as a fighter," although they had refused to allow her to participate in combat, she said. Two women, members of the Yezidi Women's Council, said that it was common for girls to receive weapons training from the HPG.

In Sardashti, a community on Sinjar mountain, three families said their children had joined the HPG. One man said his 16-year-old son and another 16-year-old boy left home to join the group in the spring of 2015. HPG officials in Sardashti told him that the boys had been sent for training to the Qandil area and would return in two months. The man said he had no news of his son since, but that 10 other families had moved to the area from Newroz camp in northern Syria in part because they believed their children were "more likely to be recruited by PKK forces" if they remained in Newroz.

Another family in Sardashti said that in July 2014, a 15-year-old relative joined the YBŞ in Karse. The boy's cousin, age 25, who later returned to Sardashti, said that they volunteered together in Karse, where YBŞ personnel asked their ages and sent them to the village of Tel Kushayr in northern Syria for military training. A 13-year-old boy from Sinjar whom the cousin spoke to there was also being trained, he said. The two cousins returned to Sinjar after ISIS attacked on August 3, 2014, to help fleeing families, then manned a checkpoint in Snune. The 15-year-old boy participated in fighting against ISIS, his cousin said. He was last seen in late

August 2014, leaving Snune in a vehicle with fighters from another PKK-affiliated group operating in northern Syria, the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or People's Protection Units), his relatives said. In response to questions from the family, PKK officials have said at various times that the boy was in Sinjar, Syria, or Turkey.

In August 2016, a 16-year-old girl left her family in Sardashti to join the YBŞ in Shilo, in Sinjar. Her mother was able to bring the girl home shortly after she began her military training by saying that the girl's father was seriously ill and that the family needed the girl's help.

Human Rights Watch visited the Ta'meem Boys' Secondary School in Khanasoor and saw the YBŞ using it as a military barracks. Some of the recruits there were secondary-school-age boys who have been out of school since the August 2014 massacres. Among the six uniformed YBŞ recruits who spoke to Human Rights Watch at the school, four said they were under 18, including one who was 14 and one who had joined when he was 15. The boys said they alternated between periods of military training and instruction from YBŞ members in the Kurdish language, politics, and economics, and periods of fighting. Members of the group said they received weapons from the YPG and salaries from the Iraqi authorities in Baghdad, which were supposed to be paid only to fighters age 18 and older. The YBŞ collected and pooled these salaries, however, and paid US\$200 per month to recruits under 14, and US\$400 for recruits aged 14 to 17, members of the group said.

Using a school for military purposes such as barracks could make the school a target for attack; Turkey has carried out airstrikes against PKK-affiliated forces in Sinjar. In other conflict situations, the presence of soldiers has also led to damage to classrooms or educational equipment, and added delays to school re-openings.

Human Rights Watch interviewed a YBŞ captain, who commanded a company, at his home in Khanasoor. He said that the YBŞ did not allow anyone under 20 to participate in combat, but that at 17, children were eligible for YBŞ training for three years. The YPG imposed 18 as the minimum combat age, he said. The commander's 14-year-old daughter had been receiving military training with the YBŞ for the past year, he said, but it was an exception at that age due to his rank.

At the YBŞ training camp in Karse, Human Rights Watch observed that a number of uniformed recruits appeared to be under 18, including two not observed carrying weapons, who looked to be 15 at most. A YBŞ commander said his forces accepted children who wished to enlist for a 45-day training course, but prohibited children from carrying weapons. Iraqi authorities in Baghdad provided salaries to those 18 and over of US\$400 per month, beginning in September 2015, he said.

Iraq does not have armed forces stationed in Sinjar, and is [militarily aligned](#) with the YBŞ and other militias it supports there. Iraq had stopped paying the YBŞ salaries by November, after reaching an agreement with KRG authorities, according to one [news report](#).

HPG Fighters' Abduction and Abuse of Children

Five Khanasoor residents described in detail the abduction by the HPG in January of a 9-year-old girl, whom they knew personally, at Martyr Khairy primary school. Before learning of the abduction, Human Rights Watch researchers had visited the school, which teachers there said is operated by the PKK. Teachers said the children enrolled there were ages 6 to 13, and that the curriculum had been developed in Rojava, the Kurdish name for Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria.

When the child was abducted, two women in uniform took her from the school to a checkpoint at the entrance to Khanasoor, where they kept her for several hours, but surrendered her when a group of men from her family arrived at the checkpoint brandishing weapons and demanded her return, residents said. They said the girl's family stopped sending her to school and that they saw HPG fighters visiting the girl's family repeatedly to ask them to re-enroll her. Families pulled at least 15 children out of the school as a result of the abduction and some said they hoped to move to Berek or Snune if federal public schools re-opened available there.

Khanasoor residents expressed concern that teachers encouraged students at the school to join PKK-affiliated forces. One man said that the HPG had recruited his 14-year-old nephew after he received "PKK ideology" classes at the school.

In a separate incident, in February, HPG fighters in Sardashti assaulted and seriously wounded a 13-year-old girl who had been recruited and was trying to escape, threatened residents who tried to help her, and refused to allow her to return to her family, witnesses said. A witness said the girl was found at around 3 p.m. one afternoon in February with a broken leg, limping along in a ditch on the side of the road near a YBŞ checkpoint near Karse. The girl said that HPG fighters had beaten her. Two women, armed and in uniform, were following the girl and warned residents not to take her away. The residents took the girl to Snune hospital, where nurses bandaged her leg but could not set the bone.

Residents said the girl said that she had joined the HPG one month earlier, but had argued with a commander, whom she described as a woman who spoke Arabic and insisted the girl conform to PKK ideology. The commander ordered her fighters to beat the girl and they did so twice. The girl fled later that day. One resident

took her to his home, where eight HPG fighters arrived at 8 p.m. and called the girl's brother by phone. A resident also spoke with the brother, who lived in a displaced persons' camp and who told the resident to allow the fighters to take her, out of fear of reprisals if he refused. The girl climbed onto the roof and threatened to jump but residents prevented her from jumping, and the fighters took her back. Human Rights Watch was unable to contact the girl's brother, but the multiple, consistent accounts of severe abuse are cause for a criminal investigation.

Recruitment of Children from Halabja

Two nongovernmental organizations described an increase in child recruitment by the HPG from Chamchamal and Halabja, in the eastern Kurdistan region, in 2016. In addition, the official Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s Human Rights Commission office in Halabja described cases of 20 boys and five girls from the area who had joined and remained with PKK-affiliated forces since 2013, and said another 38 children had joined but then returned home. The children often had difficulty re-enrolling in school after missing classes for long periods, commission staff said.

A lawyer in Halabja said he knew of cases in which KRG authorities questioned children who had joined PKK-affiliated forces and returned, but did not criminally prosecute the children. The lawyer and several families said that in some cases, KRG authorities have required the child's father to sign a pledge that the child would not rejoin the groups, on pain of a large fine and imprisonment.

A 16-year-old boy left Halabja in early 2016 and joined the HPG in Qandil, his family said, but local HPG forces have refused to allow them to contact him. Human Rights Watch viewed a video of the boy, in uniform with an assault rifle from an unknown location, speaking in praise of the PKK's ideology and of the need to fight for its goals.

A young man from Halabja said he dropped out of 11th grade at 18, and left Halabja to join the HPG in June 2015. He "noticed there were a lot of kids" at the registration center in Qandil, and estimated that during his two months and 15 days of training, a quarter of the other trainees he saw were under 18. He was on active duty for three months with the HPG, which in most cases did not allow children to engage in combat, but he believed some 17-year-old boys had participated in fighting. He then joined the YPG for another 2.5 months of training in northern Syria. He returned home after participating in combat with the YPG.