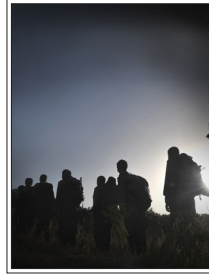


ANALYSIS

OCTOBER 2018 NO: 45

THE CHILD SOLDIERS OF THE PYD/YPG

FATMA SÜMER



THE CHILD SOLDIERS OF THE PYD/YPG

FATMA SÜMER

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Layout : Hasan Suat Olgun

Printed in Turkey, İstanbul by Turkuvaz Haberleşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2018

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ABSTRACT

Following in the footsteps of the terrorist organization PKK, which has been systematically recruiting child soldiers since 1994, the PYD, the PKK's Syrian branch, continues to recruit children today. Although the PKK/PYD signed the Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects Armed Conflict on October 5, 2013, in Qandil, Northern Iraq and responded to mounting criticism from international organizations by claiming that the use of children in combat was exceptional, there are individuals tasked specifically with recruiting and providing military training to children within the organization. At the same time, the forcible relocation of children to training camps by PYD officials (even at risk of violent clashes with the families of the children) and efforts to persuade children into joining the organization suggest that this situation is indeed systematic. This practice resulted from the decision by many individuals, who were of combat age and residents of PKK/PYD-controlled areas, to escape in an effort to avoid recruitment. Moreover, it is easier for the organization to indoctrinate and ensure the loyalty of children. Needless to say, the organization's lack of combat-aged recruits attests to its lack of ideological legitimacy.

■

This study seeks to establish that children in PYD-controlled parts of Syria are systematically used as child soldiers and analyzes how international law regulates the use of child soldiers.

By using children in combat, terrorist organizations replace the agency of each child with their instrumentalization. Children are used by such organizations depending on their physical qualities, capabilities, suitability for the tasks at hand, and the organization's needs. Therefore, using children in armed combat or in any other capacity is prohibited under international law. In this regard, the use of child soldiers entails the same types of abuse around the world. Notwithstanding, it is possible to argue that all existing data on the PKK applies to the PYD, provided that the two organizations have shared training camps, senior leaders, and methods. The PKK is known to use children in a range of combat missions, including guerilla-style and urban terror attacks, as well as for ideological purposes and sexual slavery.

The PYD pays lip service to fighting for the Kurdish people, liberty, women's liberation, and defending the Syrian Kurds against attacks by the regime or DAESH, while borrowing heavily from Western, universal ideologies and publicly accepted values. As such, the group continues to take advantage of children and, at the same time, seeks to legitimize its actions with reference to globally accepted concepts. Using children in combat, however, remains immoral and unacceptable.

INTRODUCTION

The use of child soldiers is a form of abuse that simultaneously violates the three core principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC): devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival, and development; and respect for the views of the child.¹ According to new information and cases that have studied² the PKK and other terrorist organizations around the world, children face combat-related and countless other risks if used by such organizations. The legal steps taken in response to those problems resulted in the prohibition of children's association with armed organizations under international law.

Since the Syrian civil war broke out, the PKK's Syrian branch, the PYD, has been using children in combat and for other purposes without any limitation. Although the use of children to address the organization's needs creates similar problems across the world, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the PYD's violations. After all, provided that the PYD is a branch of the terrorist organization PKK, it is possible to argue

that the problems that children encounter at PKK camps and conflict zones are similar to the experiences of the PYD's child recruits – keeping in mind the structural similarities between the two groups, their shared use of camps, and the similarities between their senior leadership. In this regard, the PKK uses children for a variety of purposes, including guerrilla-style and urban terrorist attacks as well as ideological propaganda and sexual slavery.

This study seeks to establish that children in PYD-controlled parts of Syria are systematically used as child soldiers and analyzes how international law regulates the use of child soldiers. Subsequently, it highlights the fact that the use of child soldiers creates similar problems around the world. Finally, it presents evidence that the PYD's use of child soldiers is systematic rather than an exception as is claimed by the organization.

This study is intended to raise awareness about the experiences of children, who are instrumentalized, abused and dragged into dangerous environments, although they deserve to be considered as a goal alone and supported during their transformation into social subjects. The protection of children entails the principle of non-discrimination and the responsibility to protect the identities of children who were abused or forced to commit crimes. Therefore, this study does not reveal the identities of any children and excludes images of children, which have been widely distributed in the media. Some images are blurred for the same purpose.³

1. Oğuz Polat, Evin Güldoğan, "Çocuk Askerler: Psikolojik, Sosyal ve Fiziksel Sorunlar" [Child Soldiers: Psychological, Social and Physical Problems], *Uluslararası Güvenlik ve Terörizm Dergisi* [The Journal of International Security and Terrorism], Vol: 1 (1), 2010, pp. 120-121.

2. Some of the research projects that have benefited this study are as follows: Child Soldiers International, "Annual Report 2016-2017", <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=245a3b5b-83ea-429e-9467-53398f4c4d86>; "Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa", 1997; TEPAV, "Kim Bu Dağdakiler" [Who Are the People in the Mountains?], http://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1335350447-4.Kim_Bu_Dagdakiler.pdf; UNICEF, Factsheet: Children Associated With Armed Groups and Forces Central Africa, https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/FactSheet100601Final_E_100603_.pdf; Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule - Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria", June 2014; U.S. Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report June 2016"; Kurd Watch, Report 10, "Forcible Recruitments and the Deployment of Child Soldiers by the Democratic Union Party in Syria", http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/Kurd-Watch_A010_en_Zwangstrekrutierung.pdf; Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban - Despite Promises, Children Still Fighting", July 15, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/10/syria-kurdish-forces-violating-child-soldier-ban-0>

3. As a matter of fact, UNICEF's outline for the "Children's Rights and Journalism Practice" program stresses that child abusers do not wish to witness their own behavior and notes that the publication of the photograph of a child soldier by a Western media outlet resulted in the death of the child in an African country thousands of miles away. Therefore, UNICEF calls on journalists to refrain from categorizing and describing children in such ways that could result in lifelong discrimination and alienation by their own communities. "Çocuk Hakları ve Gazetecilik Uygulamaları Hak Temelli Perspektif" [Children's Rights and Journalism Practice: A Rights-Based Approach], UNICEF, 2007, p. 93. <http://www.unicef.org.tr/files/bilgimerkezi/doc/Cocuk%20Haklari%20ve%20Gazetecilik.pdf>

THE NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK RELATED TO CHILD SOLDIERS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW

The body of international law on child soldiers clearly tackles two key problems. First, it creates an indisputable minimum combat age. Secondly, it clearly states that the ban on child soldiers refers to keeping children away not just from combat but also from all actions and environments potentially related to an armed force.

Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulated that “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years,” there has been a strong inclination towards setting the minimum age of combat at eighteen years.⁴ To be clear, the convention requires all states parties to refrain from recruiting children under the age of fifteen into their armed forces and urges them to give priority to the oldest children when recruiting children between the ages of 15 and 18. As a matter of fact, Article 38 states that states parties “shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict” in accordance with international humanitarian law; this extends to preventing the participation of children below 15 years of age in combat. Notwithstanding, the Optional Protocol to the Con-

4. Today, many countries set the minimum age for the recruitment of children into their armed forces at 18 years as a result of this tendency and a series of international regulations discussed below. Some countries, however, have lower age requirements. For example, children can voluntarily join the military at the age of seventeen, whereas the minimum age for mandatory military service is eighteen. In Canada and Australia, where there is no mandatory military service, children are able to volunteer at the age of 17 if their legal guardian consents to their decision. Under certain circumstances, the minimum age requirement in the United Kingdom, Bolivia, Tonga and Bangladesh is 16. “Military Service Age and Obligation (Years of Age)”, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/fields/2024.html#156>. In 2016, 23 percent of all soldiers in the United Kingdom were below the age of eighteen. Child Soldiers International, “Annual Report 2016-2017”, p. 16.

vention on the Rights of the Child (2000) raised the minimum age of compulsory recruitment and direct involvement in armed conflict to eighteen.

Before the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child entered into force, the minimum age for the recruitment of children was recognized as fifteen by the Protocol (I) Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 (1977),⁵ which was the first document related to the use of children as military personnel, and the Rome Statute (1998), the founding document of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the most significant international agreement on war crimes. The inclusion of a requirement to give priority to older children if children between the ages of 15 and 18 must be recruited, however, could be viewed as an implicit opposition to the recruitment of children below the age of eighteen. As a matter of fact, the Rome Statute identifies the recruitment of children below the age of fifteen as a war crime.⁶

Article 1 of the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on May 25, 2000, requires states parties to prevent the direct participation of children under the age of 18 in combat. Article 2, in turn, prohibits the

5. Article 77/2 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) of 1977 stipulates that “the Parties to the conflict shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, the Parties to the conflict shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.” Article 77/3 adds that children below the age of fifteen will enjoy special protection if they take a direct part in hostilities and fall into the hands of an adverse Party.

6. The Rome Statute notes that the conscription or enlisting of children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or their active use in hostilities amount to serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict (Article 8/2-b/xxvi) and the laws and customs applicable in armed conflicts not of an international character (Article 2-d/vii). <http://sorular.rightsagenda.org/Uploads/UCM%20MEV/Roma%20Stat%C3%BCs%C3%BC.pdf>

compulsory recruitment of those persons into the armed forces of states parties. Moreover, the protocol imposes a ban on the recruitment of children under 18 years of age into armed groups other than the armed forces of states parties, and calls on states parties to take all necessary steps, including punitive measures, to prevent it.⁷

Finally, the Paris Principles,⁸ which were born out of a global review of the Cape Town Principles⁹ (1997) initiated by UNICEF and adopted in 2007, defined child soldiers as children “associated with an armed force or armed group.” Within this framework, child soldiers are persons below 18 years of age that were recruited into armed forces or armed groups for the purpose of fighting, cooking, carrying news, transferring equipment, serving as spies, or performing sexual acts. According to this increasingly popular definition, children who are used for any military purpose qualify as child soldiers – even if they do not engage in combat directly.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, terrorist organizations expect children to perform various tasks that extend beyond serving in combat. The risks that children recruited into armed groups encounter around the world are in line with the cases identified in the Paris Principles. In this regard, the argument that child recruits are not used in combat, which armed forces and groups invoke to defend themselves, does

not mean that those children are protected.¹¹ As a matter of fact, the prohibition of compulsory recruitment of children into armed forces, in addition to imposing a ban on their use in combat missions by the Geneva Convention and the Rome Statute establishes that both documents seek to prevent the use of children not just in combat but also in military exercises, as messengers, or at checkpoints.¹²

The recruitment of children into armed groups lays the groundwork for all types of child abuse.

In accordance with those regulations, states are not only banned from using child soldiers but are also responsible for preventing the use of child soldiers by armed groups. Provided that the aforementioned rules apply to states parties alone, however, a large number of violations go unpunished which poses a serious risk. UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015) reaffirmed

11. Forty-three countries and some armed organizations reportedly recruit children but do not use them in active combat. Child Soldiers International, “How Is Recruiting Children Harmful”, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/how-is-recruiting-children-harmful> (Accessed: March 1, 2018). Armed organizations appear to make the case that they keep children away from the frontline and allow them to actively participate in active hostilities only after they turn eighteen. In 2012, senior PKK leader Murat Karayılan stated that the group kept children below the age of eighteen away from the frontline in order to train them. Serkan Kekevi and Gökmen Kılıçoğlu, “Uluslararası Hukuk Açısından Çocuk Askerler ve PKK’nın Çocuk Askerleri/Militanları” [Child Soldiers and the PKK’s Child Soldiers/Militants from an International Legal Perspective], *Ankara Barosu Dergisi* [The Journal of the Ankara Bar Association], 2016/3, p. 498. On November 15, 2013, the United Nations concluded that the YPG used child soldiers away from the conflict zone, such as at checkpoints, but trained them for combat. (http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/31&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC)

12. The use of child soldiers is considered a form of cheap labor. Therefore, the use of child soldiers falls within the scope of international labor law. The International Labour Organization’s Convention No.182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour relates to this issue. It prohibits the voluntary or enforced recruitment of children by armed groups to be used in armed hostilities.

7. Moreover, Article 3 of the protocol relates to the voluntary recruitment of individuals under the age of eighteen into the armed forces. Article 6/3 of the protocol, likewise, requires states parties to “take all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to the present Protocol are demobilized or otherwise released from service” and to “accord to such persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social integration.”

8. “The Paris Principles-Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups”, 2007, <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>

9. “Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa”, 1997, [https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles(1).pdf)

10. Child Soldiers International, “Who Are Child Soldiers”, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/who-are-child-soldiers>, (Accessed: March 1, 2018).

that parties abducting children in situations of armed conflict would be added to a list of grave human rights violators, called for the ending of impunity for crimes against children in armed conflict, and urged member states to take concrete measures in this regard.

Even if certain countries are not party to the aforementioned conventions, their positive responsibility to protect human rights alone would require them to prevent the recruitment of children into armed groups within their borders. Furthermore, the International Criminal Court has put on trial non-state organizations for using child soldiers; however, the various parties fighting in Syria have not ratified the Rome Statute and therefore cannot face repercussions. In 2006, the court issued a warrant for the arrest of Bosco Ntaganda, the former leader of the Rwandan-backed rebel group known as the National Congress for the Defense of the People, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who presided over another group, M23, from 2012 onwards. The arrest warrant cited allegations of forcible recruitment of children into Bosco's organization, the rape of child soldiers, and their use as sex slaves.¹³ Moreover, the court sentenced Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, the former leader of the Union of Congolese Patriots, to 14 years in prison for recruiting children under the age of 16 and using them in combat.¹⁴ Those two cases indicate that the International Criminal Court prosecute parties to internal conflicts and, by extension, leaders of terrorist organizations that commit war crimes, including using child soldiers.¹⁵

Provided that Syria did not ratify the Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction over crimes committed in that country. The UN Security Council, however, has the power to refer human rights violations in Syria to

the court – as it did with regard to violations in Darfur and Libya. The lack of a consensus among permanent members of the UN Security Council on the Syrian crisis, however, renders this process effectively impossible. In response, some scholars have called for the creation of an ad hoc tribunal that would take into consideration the responsibilities of all involved parties as well as local elements in light of the ICC's structure and the nature of the Syrian civil war. Keeping in mind that the creation of such a tribunal would require a UN Security Council resolution, ending ongoing violations in Syria depends on an agreement between the great powers.¹⁶

PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS: THE PKK AND OTHER CASES

The recruitment of children into armed groups lays the groundwork for all types of child abuse. As a matter of fact, the prohibition of such practices under international law reflects practical forms of abuse. Upon recruitment, children are reduced to a tool whose purpose is to address organizational needs. In this regard, child soldiers can be expected to perform tasks related to the organization's overall physical needs as well as to meet the personal demands of individuals higher up the food chain. Under the circumstances, the Paris Principles represent the single most comprehensive document on the age restrictions and use of children in armed groups. It prohibits the use of children not just in combat but also as cooks, messengers, and spies as well as for sexual purposes. These prohibitions reflect the fact that the use of child soldiers creates similar problems around the world.

13. See <https://www.hrw.org/topic/international-justice/bosco-ntaganda>.

14. See <https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc/lubanga>.

15. Kekevi/Kılıçoğlu, p. 503.

16. Ali Emrah Bozbayındır, "Suriye'deki savaş suçları ve uluslararası hukuk" [War Crimes and International Law in Syria], *Anadolu Agency*, April 19, 2017.

It is possible to categorize the main problems with the use of child soldiers in terms of the tasks assigned to children and the effects of living conditions on children, whose physical and emotional development is still underway. In certain cases, there are overlaps between those two categories. Furthermore, the methods used by armed groups to recruit children represent another problem.

In Turkey, the PKK, which has been systematically recruiting child soldiers since 1994,¹⁷ has recruited an estimated 3,000 children over the years. Moreover, children between the ages of 15 and 18 constitute the vast majority of PKK militants – which means that the majority of child soldiers recruited into the group were under the age of fifteen at the time of recruitment.¹⁸ According to a 2012 study, 33.4 percent of 1,362 PKK militants, who were killed between 2001 and September 26, 2011, were between the ages of 16 and 18. Another 9.25 percent were below 15 years of age. The same study concluded that the minimum age of recruitment was nine.¹⁹ Another study established that 36 percent of militants that the PKK recruited in 2012 were children.²⁰

The PKK, which uses child soldiers for various purposes and quite openly, has even formed a special unit called the Martyr Agit Children's Brigade, which was reportedly managed by five children between the ages of 8 and 12.²¹

There are many similarities between the case of the PKK, which, as mentioned above, set an example for the PYD in Syria, and other examples from around the world in terms of the problems encountered. The below assessment of problems associated with the use of child soldiers provides a number of examples.

Problems Associated with the Recruitment Process of Child Soldiers

Armed organizations overwhelmingly rely on kidnapping as a recruitment method. In certain cases, they exploit the weaknesses of potential recruits, such as anger, exclusion, fear, or commitment, to talk them into joining the group. For example, a 15-year-old child in the Congo, whose mother was killed by an armed group, joined their rivals out of fear and anger in 2015.²² Similarly, some children join the PKK to prevent harm against their family members or because they were told that they could contribute to the liberation of their people. In the aftermath of the peace process in Turkey, the U.S. Department of State released the Turkey 2015 Human Rights Report, which stated that 929 families petitioned the Turkish government to save their children from the PKK. The same report noted that the group was responsible for kidnapping or otherwise recruiting 2,152 children over the previous two years. The same year, 419 children escaped their PKK captors to surrender to the Turkish security forces. The Turkish government maintained that the PKK used child soldiers to carry out suicide attacks.²³

Generally speaking, armed groups tend to use children that come from disadvantaged groups or traumatized families in high-risk missions, such as on the frontlines, as such individu-

17. "PKK iki yılda 2 bin 52 çocuğu dağa kaçırdı" [The PKK Kidnapped 2,052 Children in Two Years], *HABERTURK*, September 21, 2015.

18. Hüseyin Alptekin, "The PKK's Child Soldiers", *The New Turkey*, January 16, 2017.

19. "Kim Bu Dağdakiler" [Who Are the People in the Mountains?], TEPAV, http://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1335350447-4.Kim_Bu_Dagdakiler.pdf

20. Haşim Söylemez, "PKK'nın Çocuk Militanları" [The PKK's Child Militants], *Aksiyon*, June 11, 2012, <http://www.haksozhaber.net/pkknin-cocuk-militanlari-30306h.htm>, (Accessed: March 1, 2018).

21. "PKK iki yılda 2 bin 52 çocuğu dağa kaçırdı" [The PKK Kidnapped 2,052 Children in Two Years], *HABERTURK*, September 21, 2015.

22. Child Soldiers International, "Annual Report 2016-2017", p. 13.

23. U.S. Department of State, "Turkey 2015 Human Rights Report", p. 24. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253121.pdf>

als are more susceptible to their message.²⁴ In the case of the PKK, recruiters persuade children by telling them that they could become heroes, save their families from poverty, serve the Kurdish people, or see their relatives in the mountains.²⁵

Especially in May and June 2014, the Turkish media widely reported that mothers of child soldiers, who wanted their children back, organized a sit-in protest outside the Diyarbakır Municipality, which was controlled by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The peaceful protesters became the target of a violent crackdown by the local administration. On May 20, 2014, three 15-year-old children were kidnapped or persuaded that they had to join the PKK for the sake of their families during a school picnic in Diyarbakır. Their families organized a sit-in outside the local (HDP-controlled) municipality.²⁶ According to media reports from the same period, two 15-year-olds, who were ninth-grade students at the Industrial Vocational School in Diyarbakır, were kidnapped on May 27, 2014. Their relatives raided the local HDP headquarters. On the ninth day of the sit-in, the number of families camping outside the municipality soared to eleven.²⁷ On June 2, 2014, a spokesperson for the families, who were blocking the entrance to the Diyarbakır Municipality at that point, said 76 families from across the country had traveled to Diyarbakır and the protest continued with the support of 47 families.²⁸ The HDP-controlled Diyarbakır

municipality repeatedly attempted to disperse the protesters, who demanded the PKK release their 14- and 15-year-old children, by spraying them with pressurized water. Seeing that the families continued to protest despite mounting pressure from the PKK and the HDP, the group released the children of some families.²⁹ The PKK, however, continued to kidnap local children. On June 10, 2015, Şanlıurfa Governor İzzettin Küçük announced that 3,000 children had been kidnapped over the previous six months and 400 children were missing in the border town of Suruç alone.³⁰

Children, who are recruited into armed groups by being kidnapped, lack free will, since they are under immense pressure. To be clear, accepting child soldiers, who wish to fight for whatever reason, into their ranks does not absolve armed organizations from war crimes. After all, children cannot legally consent to become members of any organization. In order for them to consent, their actions must be in line with the law, morality, or customs.³¹ During this process, supporters of the PKK have made the case that child soldiers joined the organization voluntarily. For example, Selahattin Demirtaş publicly claimed that children were going to the

24. Child Soldiers International, "How Is Recruiting Children Harmful".

25. Emruhan Yalçın, "PKK Bu Çocukları Nasıl Kandırıyor?" [How Does the PKK Trick Children?], 21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü [21st-Century Turkey Institute], December 18, 2012.

26. "PKK'nın Çocuklarını Kaçırıldığı Aileler Oturma Eylemi Başlattı" [Families, Whose Children Were Abducted by the PKK, Launch Sit-In Protest], Haber.com, May 20, 2014.

27. "Aileler BDP'yi bastı PKK açıklama yaptı" [Families Raid BDP Office, PKK Issues Statement], *Hürriyet*, May 27, 2014.

28. "Çocukları dağa kaçırılan aileler yol kapattı" [Families, Whose Children Have Been Forced into the Mountains, Shut Road], En Son Haber, June 2, 2014.

29. Beybin Somuk, "The Forgotten Child Soldiers Recruited by Kurdish Militants in Turkey and Syria", Middle East Eye, June 1, 2016.

30. "Kayıp veren PKK, açığını çocuk kaçıarak telafi ediyor" [Suffering Losses, the PKK Seeks to Compensate by Kidnapping Children], *Akşam*, June 23, 2015.

31. Furthermore, the individual must have rights, over which they absolutely preside, and be capable of consent in order for their declaration of consent to be considered valid. An individual's ability to consent depends on the absence of the age of minority, mental illness or weakness, and intoxication. The statement of consent must rest on free and healthy will, and the individual must be aware of the meaning and conditions of forfeiting their legal benefits. Consent obtained through force or misdirection does not qualify as consent. (Mehmet Emin Artuk, Ahmet Gökçen and A. Caner Yenidünya, *Ceza Hukuku Genel Hükümler, Yenilenmiş Gözden Geçirilmiş 10. Baskı* [General Terms of Penal Law: Revised and Updated 10th Edition], (Ankara: Adalet Publishing, pp. 462-465.) For example, a child's inability to fully grasp the meaning and consequences of membership in an armed organization at the time of their conscription means that their consent is null and void.

mountains of their own free will.³² Provided that children are not in a position to consent to such an association, the armed group in question assumes liability for its actions by accepting children into its ranks.

By joining an armed organization, children accept to live under living standards not suitable for their mental and physical development, to engage in illegal activities, to face legal action, and, if they are above a certain age, to risk punishment according to the law if caught. Provided that leaving an armed group is not realistically possible and potential deserters are often tortured or killed, children are not in a position to consent to their recruitment. In many countries, child soldiers, who are captured, surrender or escape captivity, face the threat of ill-treatment, torture, and death as a result of the actions of their organization's senior leaders and other members. In a 2007 report, Amnesty International stated that the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group operating in Northern Uganda, was responsible for the kidnapping of thousands of young boys and girls, and noted that children, who completed an extremely violent training, were tortured or executed if they were caught trying to escape.³³

Another situation that children cannot reasonably foresee during their recruitment relates to the difficulty of going back to their normal lives upon escaping or being released by the armed organizations. In many cases, returnees are not welcomed by their families and communities. For example, a 15-year-old boy in the Congo, whose mother was killed by an armed group, joined a rival organization out of anger and fear only to escape three months later. His family and friends, however, rejected him due to his experiences.³⁴

32. "Selahattin Demirtaş: Çocuklar Kendi Kararları ile Dağa Çıktı" [Selahattin Demirtaş: Children Went to the Mountains Voluntarily], *Bugün*, April 28, 2014.

33. Polat/Güldoğan, p. 110.

34. Child Soldiers International, "Annual Report 2016-2017", p. 13.

Problems Related to the Living Conditions Offered by Armed Groups

Terrorist organizations do not provide living standards that are suitable for the accommodation and development of children. The situation child soldiers fighting among PKK ranks find themselves in is a case in point. According to media reports, the average child recruit survives for 4-6 years upon recruitment and the life expectancy of new recruits has been in decline.³⁵ A 1980 study on the situation in Uganda, which focused on the impact of poor living conditions on children, continues to shed light on this situation today. According to this report, only 2 percent of child soldiers lose their lives as a result of violence. Seventy-eight percent of deaths were caused by malnutrition and another 20 percent took place as a result of infections.³⁶

Armed organizations overwhelmingly rely on kidnapping as a recruitment method.

Children cannot learn the values, which must be taught to them by society and their families, upon joining illegal armed organizations. As a result of military training, children tend to reach a breaking point and learn to follow orders without questioning them. Over the long term, those experiences could permanently alter their personality.³⁷

Witnessing acts of violence and other types of traumas at early ages, when children's psychological and emotional development remains

35. "Çocuk PKK'lıların yaşam süresi 4-6 yıl" [Life Expectancy 4-6 years for Child PKK Militants], *Sabah*, January 1, 2013.

36. Polat/Güldoğan, p.112.

37. Child Soldiers International, "How Is Recruiting Children Harmful".

incomplete, has long-term and often irreversible effects on children's personalities. According to a 2007 report by Amnesty International on the situation in Northern Uganda, child soldiers used in armed conflict and forced to kill by the Lord's Resistance Army, a separatist organization, suffered from a lack of resistance, moral decline, and overall weakening.³⁸ Likewise, a 2010 study by UNICEF makes references to child soldiers recruited into the PKK, which the international community considers a terrorist organization. It adds that child soldiers suffer psychological and often physical injuries, grow up to be adults encouraging violence, and tend to arm children as adults. This type of behavior is caused by traumatic events that the individuals in question experience in war.

According to a study on former child soldiers in Uganda and the Congo, the average child is recruited at 12.1 years of age and serves for 38 months. On average, child soldiers experienced 11.1 traumatic events, while 54.4 percent of child soldiers reported witnessing the killing of a person and 27.8 percent of them stated that they were forced to perform sexual acts. Another study on Ugandan child soldiers, which was based on interviews with 301 former child soldiers abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, concluded that the average child was kidnapped at 12.9 years of age and served for 25.6 months. Almost all participants witnessed at least one traumatic event. Seventy-seven percent of children reported to witnessing the death of an individual, while 39 percent of them were actively involved in the killing of an individual.³⁹

Under wartime conditions, many children experience visual and hearing impairment, along with, among others, death and mine-related injuries, in addition to malnutrition, respiratory problems, skin disorders, and

infectious diseases. For the purpose of numbing children in order to use them in combat or to ensure that they can perform violent tasks, armed organizations are known to promote the use of alcohol and illicit drugs, which may result in addiction over time.⁴⁰ In this regard, the PKK has a record of making recruits use certain substances in order to cloud their judgment. An autopsy performed on dead terrorists in 2010 by the Forensic Medicine Institute in Malatya revealed that there were drugs and stimulating substances in their bloodstreams.⁴¹ According to aggregate data from various law enforcement operations, illicit drugs account for almost half of the PKK's revenue.⁴²

Generally speaking, children recruited into militia groups face a high risk of sexual assault by adults and other children.⁴³ As a result of rape, children tend to become infected with sexually transmitted diseases. Provided that such diseases are often transmitted through blood, infection rates are notably higher in sites of armed conflict. According to a study on the situation in the Congo, approximately 80 percent of young girls admitted into medical clinics were infected with STDs.⁴⁴

Problems Related to the Areas of Use

The Paris Principles prohibit the use of children in combat and for other purposes, including cooking, carrying information, transferring equipment, espionage, and performing sexual acts as armed groups use children to address all

38. Polat/Güldoğan, p. 110.

39. Polat/Güldoğan, pp. 115-116.

40. "Çocuk Askerler Küresel Araştırma Raporu" [Child Soldiers Global Research Report] <https://m.bianet.org/biamag/insan-haklari/2869-cocuk-askerler>.

41. "PKK'lılar 'cesaret hapi' almış" [The PKK Militants Took 'Courage Pills'], *Hürriyet*, November 12, 2010.

42. "PKK uluslararası açıdan kabul görmüş bir narkoterör örgütü" [The PKK Is an Internationally Acknowledged Narcoterrorist Organization], *Sabah*, February 21, 2018.

43. Child Soldiers International, "How Is Recruiting Children Harmful".

44. Polat/Güldoğan, p. 114.

types of organizational needs. In addition to loss of life and physical injury in combat, children find themselves at risk, since they are encouraged to perform tasks that would serve group interests. For example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a rebel group in Sri Lanka, are known to have recruited Tamil girls, many of whom lost both of their parents, and trained them as suicide bombers.⁴⁵ This decision reflected the assumption that young girls were more likely to avoid detection by the security forces. Likewise, a young child was responsible for carrying out a suicide attack in Turkey on August 20, 2016, against a wedding ceremony in Gaziantep on behalf of DAESH.⁴⁶

Likewise, the PKK uses children for a variety of purposes. Although child soldiers were initially used in combat, they were trained to carry out bombings and sabotage when the group decided to have a permanent presence in residential areas. This was mainly because young recruits would be punished more leniently than adults under Turkish law.⁴⁷

One of the ways in which armed groups use children is sexual slavery, which was listed as a problem related to the living standards offered by armed groups. A former PKK militant, known by her initials as “Z.T.”, stated that sexual harassment and rape were some of the main problems that children faced in the mountains. Z.T. said that she witnessed approximately 15 such acts involving seasoned militants and young girls, who were raped and threatened by their attackers.⁴⁸ According to a report on armed conflict in Uganda, the Lord’s Resistance Army was respon-

sible for kidnapping and using girls above the age of 13 as sex slaves.⁴⁹ Moreover, a 2016 study concluded that approximately 250,000 children around the world were actively serving in armed forces or groups.⁵⁰ Girls constitute approximately 40 percent of those child soldiers and are forced into sexual slavery or used in suicide missions and assassinations.⁵¹ The ICC’s rulings on Bosco Ntaganda and Thomas Lubanga Dyilo suggest that children are used as sex slaves by terrorist organizations in the Congo as well. Those examples are among a large body of concrete evidence indicating that child soldiers encounter similar problems among the ranks of armed groups around the world.

Many organizations use children for ideological indoctrination and propaganda purposes. This is certainly a key consideration for the terrorist organization PKK.⁵² According to a 2010 story that appeared in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, approximately 3,000 children, some of whom were not older than eight or nine years of age, received training at PKK camps, where they were taught about the life of Abdullah Öcalan and how to use weapons and explosives.⁵³ Especially since Turkey captured Öcalan, the organization has actively used women and children to mobilize public support. The PKK, which recruits children to transform them into loyal militants through ideological indoctrination and teaches them about the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan, has used children in political acts as well. Against the backdrop of protests calling for the PKK founder’s release from prison, the organization included seven children at the E-Type

45. “Çocuk Askerler Küresel Araştırma Raporu” [Child Soldiers Global Research Report] <https://m.bianet.org/biamag/insan-haklari/2869-cocuk-askerler>.

46. “Erdoğan: Gaziantep saldırısında canlı bomba 12-14 yaşlarında” [Erdoğan: Suicide Bomber in Gaziantep Attack Was 12-14 Years Old], *BBC Türkçe*, August 21, 2016.

47. Kekevi/Kılıçoğlu, p. 499.

48. Söylemez; *PKK’nın Çocuk Militanları* [The PKK’s Child Militants].

49. Polat/Güldoğan, p. 110.

50. UNICEF, Factsheet: Children Associated with Armed Groups and Forces Central Africa, p. 1. https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/FactSheet100601Final_E_100603_.pdf

51. Kekevi/Kılıçoğlu, p. 487, Footnote 6.

52. Polat/Güldoğan, p. 111.

53. Beybin Somuk, “The Forgotten Child Soldiers Recruited by Kurdish Militants in Turkey and Syria”, *Middle East Eye*, June 1, 2016.

Correctional Facility in Mersin among militants performing a hunger strike. This stands as proof of the organization's abuse of young children.⁵⁴

Once armed groups start using child soldiers, they no longer abide by the minimum age of combat. In certain cases, even 7-year-old children participate in combat. Under those circumstances, children are encouraged to serve the organization to the best of their ability. For example, children who are in no condition to carry arms are recruited into the military in Myanmar, but forced to discover landmines or sweep streets until they are 10 years old at which point they are deployed to the front.⁵⁵

THE CHILD SOLDIERS OF THE PYD/YPG

Overall Situation

Like many other terrorist groups, the PKK's Syrian branch,⁵⁶ the PYD, uses child soldiers in combat, to address organizational needs and train future militants. In this sense, the PYD's recruitment of children reflects practical considerations. The most obvious reason is that many men between the ages of 18 and 40, who resided in PYD-controlled territories and could be used in combat, left Syria out of fear of forced recruitment and the group's political pressures.⁵⁷ This

development, in turn, creates a shortage of new recruits for the PYD's military wing known as the YPG. Therefore, the PYD has been recruiting at least one person from each family with complete disregard for age and gender.

The organization's use of child soldiers has been documented in many international reports. In 2014, Human Rights Watch published a report titled "Under Kurdish Rule" to establish that the PYD and local law enforcement used minors at checkpoints and in combat missions since their establishment.⁵⁸ In January 2015, Human Rights Watch stated that at least 59 children - including 10 children under the age of 15 - were forced to serve in YPG ranks as of January 2014.⁵⁹ On August 16, 2013, the United Nations International Commission of Inquiry into the Syrian Arab Republic stated that the group recruited 12-year-old boys and girls in Afrin and Hasakah. At the same time, the United Nations confirmed in its report on children and armed conflict that children between the ages of 14 and 17 were recruited by the terrorists in Hasakah and served at checkpoints and in combat alike.

In addition to the shortage of new recruits to serve in combat, the PYD uses child soldiers due to the inability of children and teenagers to resist ideological indoctrination as strongly as adults. As such, it reflects an eagerness to train loyal fighters.⁶⁰ Therefore, children in PYD-controlled parts of Syria undergo serious ideological training. Documents and memory cards located in cameras found in housing areas and on the persons of dead terrorists in Afrin during Turkey's military operations in the area confirm that a large number of child soldiers between the ages of 13 and 17 were used by the orga-

54. Kekevi/Kılıçoğlu, p. 499.

55. "Çocuk Askerler Küresel Araştırma Raporu" [Child Soldiers Global Research Report], <https://m.bianet.org/biamag/insan-haklari/2869-cocuk-askerler>.

56. The CIA's official website refers to the PKK as one of the terrorist groups operating in Syria and states that the PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>. In his annual report, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats warned that the YPG was the PKK's militia force in Syria. "ABD istihbarat raporu: YPG, PKK'nın Suriye'deki milis gücü" [U.S. Intelligence Report: YPG Is the PKK's Militia Force in Syria], *AA*, February 14, 2018.

57. Anadolu Agency YouTube, "Young People Forced into Arms by PYD/PKK Speak Out", February 8, 2018, (Accessed: March 15, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIsnuYGCuAQ&sns=tw>.

58. Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule-Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria", June 2014, p. 38.

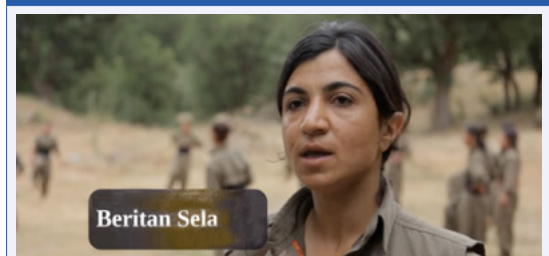
59. Beybin Somuk, "The Forgotten Child Soldiers Recruited by Kurdish Militants in Turkey and Syria", *Middle East Eye*, June 1, 2016.

60. Eva Savelsberg, "War Is No Excuse: PYD Deployment of Child Soldiers", *NewsDeeply*, February 26, 2016.

nization. Some images showed children posing in front of pictures of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan and other senior leaders of the organization.⁶¹ According to *Her War: Women vs. ISIS*, a story published by RT America YouTube, a YPG member called Tolheldan trains young girls at the Martyr Berivan training camp; the training includes an introduction to the thoughts of Abdullah Öcalan.⁶² Likewise, school textbooks used in PYD-controlled areas feature the PKK founder's speeches, as children are encouraged to fight and die at a very young age.⁶³

Provided that children are quick learners, they make suitable targets for ideological recruitment and combat missions. According to Beritan Sala, a PKK commander, the organization trains "very young" people but does not deploy them to the front until they are 18 years old. She notes that young people learn faster and are taught that "if you have a goal, there are no obstacles."⁶⁴

FIGURE 1. A MILITANT RESPONSIBLE FOR TRAINING CHILD SOLDIERS



In addition to combat missions, the PYD uses child soldiers to address various organizational needs. In October 2014, the fashion

61. "YPG/PKK'nın zorla askere aldığı çocukların görüntüleri ortaya çıktı" [Images of Children Forcibly Recruited by YPG/PKK Uncovered], TRT Haber, March 7, 2018.

62. RT America Youtube, "Her War: Women vs. ISIS", March 8, 2016. (Accessed: February 20, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDoto9reCg&t=1s>

63. Hüseyin Alptekin, "The PKK's Child Soldiers", *The New Turkey*, January 16, 2017.

64. BBC News YouTube, "Kurdish and Yazidi Women Fighting ISIS", August 20, 2015. (Accessed: February 28, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQZR6xzDkjc>.

magazine *Marie Claire* ran a story on women fighting DAESH, which featured the photograph of a 12-year-old girl, Hevedar Mohamed, wearing a military uniform and carrying a rifle.⁶⁵ According to the magazine, Hevedar was not allowed to fight since she was a minor, but received training and did some domestic work at the women's living quarters.

In addition to the shortage of new recruits to serve in combat, the PYD uses child soldiers due to the inability of children and teenagers to resist ideological indoctrination as strongly as adults.

Although *Marie Claire* made the case that children were not used in combat, there are a large number of cases, including the death of 15-year-old Dalil Riyad Qasim Khalil⁶⁶ during a counter-DAESH operation, suggesting that the PYD indeed uses child soldiers in combat.⁶⁷ To be clear, providing such instructions to minors is considered use of child soldiers under international law.

According to a January 2016 report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Wissam Alo told SNHR reporters that a young girl below the age of 15 stopped them with a machine gun in her hand to conduct ID checks.

Like many other terrorist organizations, the PYD does not require fighters to be at a certain

65. Elizabeth Griffin, "These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It's Time You Know Who They Are", October 4, 2014 <https://www.institutkurde.org/info/these-remarkable-women-are-fighting-isis-it-s-time-you-know-who-they-are-1232550804.html>.

66. For more information, see <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3017&z=en>.

67. The fact that a number of child soldiers were captured attests to their use by the YPG in active combat. For example, the Free Syrian Army released footage of a 16-year-old girl, who they captured, on YouTube. Tuzrune Issik Youtube, "US-backed SDF-YPG/PKK Uses Child Soldiers in Afrin, Syria", February 18, 2018. (Accessed: February 28, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R03WEOY5V38>.

age when it comes to the use of child soldiers. According to the United States Department of State, the YPG uses children under the age of 15.⁶⁸ A video released by a currently suspended Twitter account called “Seri Hilde” (@SeriHilde) purports to show children under the age of 7 with AK-47 rifles in their hands.⁶⁹

The PYD is not dissimilar to other terrorist organizations, provided that many of its members use illicit drugs and pose a threat to children. In Burseya, the Turkish military and the Free Syrian Army found large amounts of Captagon pills that fighters would consume before carrying out suicide attacks.⁷⁰

It is difficult to establish exactly how many child soldiers the PYD uses because their parents keep silent out of fear or hope that their children will be released through negotiations. In the final week of 2015, it became clear after the death of Latife Kaya (“Cahide”), a child soldier trainer, that Kaya and her friends had recruited over 500 young girls to the PKK/YPG.⁷¹

Although the current number of child soldiers is impossible to estimate, there are many cases involving eyewitness accounts by former child soldiers. As a matter of fact, some data is featured in PKK/PYD official websites. Furthermore, cases have been reported by Western media outlets in an attempt to rehabilitate the organization’s public image. A quick glance at those cases would reveal that certain governments have actively ignored the ban on the use of child soldiers by armed groups under international law. A story that French fashion magazine

Marie Claire ran in October 2014, for example, featured photographs and statements of teenage girls and hailed them as “heroic warriors fighting for a revolutionary cause.” By publishing pictures of young children in camouflage gear holding firearms, the magazine sought to idealize child soldiers.⁷² Noting that the YPJ, the PYD’s women’s brigade, consisted of 7,500 fighters and had been involved in dangerous combat missions for two years, *Marie Claire* reported that those individuals faced a risk of injury and death every day. Furthermore, it stated that the YPJ militants sheltered the Syrian Kurds from the regime, the Al-Nusra Front, and DAESH. Ironically, the story turned a blind eye to the exploitation of child soldiers by the PKK since 1994 and argued that the YPJ promoted honesty, morality, and a sense of justice among recruits. As a matter of fact, the reporter said that the YPJ’s actions created a sense of belonging and affinity in the children’s hearts. Young girls, who looked like American youngsters, the magazine stated, spent their time like they were in a summer camp. An editor’s note appended to the end of the story warned that the vast majority of those women were either injured in DAESH attacks or captured alive.

The official Twitter account of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) used images of child soldiers fighting among PYD/YPG ranks as well. It is possible to argue that CENTCOM’s praise for child soldiers (“ready for the fight”) was an attempt to legitimize the PKK/YPG’s human rights violations with reference to the fight against DAESH. As a matter of fact, U.S. officials said that there was no age restriction on weapon deliveries and thereby ignored the recruitment of children into the YPG forces.⁷³

68. U.S. Department of State, “Trafficking in Persons Report June 2016”, p. 360, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf>.

69. Trugan hatan, Twitter, March 2, 2018. (Accessed: March 9, 2018), <https://twitter.com/truganhatan>,

70. “Burseya Dağı’ndan PYD/PKK’nın uyuşturucuları çıktı” [PYD/PKK Drugs Found on Mt. Burseya], *AA*, January 28, 2018.

71. Beybin Somuk, “The Forgotten Child Soldiers Recruited by Kurdish Militants in Turkey and Syria”, *Middle East Eye*, June 1, 2016.

72. Elizabeth Griffin, “These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It’s Time You Know Who They Are”, October 4, 2014, <https://www.institutkurde.org/info/these-remarkable-women-are-fighting-isis-it-s-time-you-know-who-they-are-1232550804.html>.

73. “US Insists on Backing YPG Terrorists, Its Child Soldiers”, *Daily Sabah*, March 1, 2017.

The So-Called PYD Norms and Geneva Call

Mandatory Conscription and Its Implementation under the So-Called PYD Norms

On July 13, 2014, the Jazira canton passed the “self-defense duty” law to introduce conscription. This decision, which was made by a PYD-authorized local council, imposed arbitrary restrictions on individual freedoms and was not legally binding. A closer look at the legislation reveals that each family was required to send one of their members to fight for the PYD (Article 2) and military service was made mandatory for all men between the ages of 18 and 30, whereas women could join as volunteers (Article 3).⁷⁴ Together, the two aforementioned articles made it possible for the YPG to recruit other members of families with no men between the ages of 18 and 30. In other words, the “self-defense duty” law included a loophole that facilitated the recruitment of children into the group.

To be clear, the recruitment of new members in PYD-controlled parts of Syria takes place within this legal framework. As such, there is no actual geographical, temporal, or age restriction on the use of child soldiers by the organization. The group’s need for fighters mounts pressure on recruiters and results in changes to the already ambiguous limits of recruitment. For example, everyone between the ages of 18 and 40 was required to serve in Kobani, whereas the local regulation in Jazira stipulated that people between the ages of 18 and 30 would be drafted. Families some of whose members had already died in combat were exempted.⁷⁵

Likewise, the local council in Manbij passed a law in 2016 to force people between the ages of 16

and 35 to serve.⁷⁶ Upon introducing compulsory military service in the former DAESH stronghold of Manbij, the PYD conducted raids around the city to arrest civilians. In response, approximately 50 civilians escaped the area. During this period, the PYD forces reportedly raided houses.⁷⁷

The introduction of compulsory military service in Afrin coincided with Operation Olive Branch, which Turkey carried out in cooperation with the Free Syrian Army. During the lead-up to the ground offensive, the organization redoubled its efforts to recruit child soldiers in a state of panic.⁷⁸ On June 4, the Defense and Civil Protection Committee in Afrin issued a decree to extend the military service, which was scheduled to end at the end of June. According to rumors among civilians and soldiers, the decision to extend the 9-month compulsory service by two months reflected dire circumstances. In the wake of this decision, 700 people were recruited into the group and trained at Camp Mabatli for 45 days before their deployment to frontlines in and around Afrin.⁷⁹ The extension of compulsory military service to 11 months in Afrin, said Kurdish political parties and movements opposed to the so-called Rojava Autonomous Administration, resulted in an exodus of young people from Northern Syria.⁸⁰

A civilian, who was forcibly recruited into the PYD in Afrin and deployed to Al-Maslamiyya to fight the Assad regime, stated that he could not

74. Kurd Watch Report, “Forcible Recruitments and the Deployment of Child Soldiers by the Democratic Union Party in Syria”, p. 5.

75. “Batı Kürdistan PYD’nin zorunlu askerlik uygulaması tartışıyor” [A Debate on the PYD’s Mandatory Conscription in Western Kurdistan], *Basnews*, June 20, 2017.

76. “Bir bu eksikti... Kız ve erkeklere zorunlu askerlik kararı” [Now This... Mandatory Conscription for Boys and Girls], *Hürriyet*, September 5, 2016.

77. “PYD zorunlu askerlik başlattı; gençler Münbiç’i terk ediyor” [PYD Introduces Mandatory Conscription, Young People Run away from Manbij], *TIMETURK*, July 10, 2017.

78. “Çocukları savaştrın PYD/PKK kendini ele verdi” [Making Children Fight, PYD/PKK Gets Caught Red-Handed], *AA*, January 21, 2018.

79. “PYD Extend Forced Conscription Period in Afrin and Enlist 700 Males in New Military Course”, *NSO*, June 4, 2017.

80. “Batı Kürdistan PYD’nin zorunlu askerlik uygulaması tartışıyor” [A Debate on the PYD’s Mandatory Conscription in Western Kurdistan], *Basnews*, June 20, 2017. (<http://www.basnews.com/index.php/tr/news/359026>)

refuse to serve out of fear of being executed.⁸¹ As a matter of fact, a number of people were killed for trying to avoid compulsory military service. According to Nuri Birimo, a senior member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (S-KDP), armed PYD militants raided a village near the city of Derik in Hasakah to forcibly recruit new members and shot dead 18-year-old Hani Muhammad Hadji Siddiq for trying to escape.⁸²

A former PKK militant, known by her initials as "Z.T.", stated that sexual harassment and rape were some of the main problems that children faced in the mountains.

In stark contrast to the PYD claims that its members are brought together by their shared ideology, the group often cannot find new recruits and force individuals, who do not share its ideology, to fight among its ranks. For example, another civilian who says he joined the militia to avoid execution, states that he was unwilling to join a fight between Arabs and Kurds.⁸³

Same goes for children. The PYD systematically kidnaps children of not just Kurds but also rival minorities, and forces them to fight among its ranks. In 2016, Mehma Halili, the local governor of Sinjar and a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), accused the PKK and the PYD of deceiving or abducting Yazidi children to force them to fight.⁸⁴ A 14-year-old Yazidi girl, who was kidnapped and forced to fight

for the YPG, eventually escaped captivity and stated that she did not want to fight for an armed group that killed Yazidis.⁸⁵

Geneva Call

On October 5, 2013, the PKK/PYD signed the Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, a document calling for respect to humanitarian law in armed conflict, with a non-governmental organization called Geneva Call.⁸⁶ The deed of commitment, signed by Dalal Amed on behalf of the PKK and Elisabeth Decrey Warner on behalf of Geneva Call, meant that the group pledged not to recruit child soldiers under the age of eighteen. Subsequently, on June 5, 2014, the PYD leadership publicly acknowledged the use of child soldiers and promised to release all children under the age of eighteen within one month.⁸⁷ The PKK/PYD, however, reserved its right to create a new category of non-combatants and include children between the ages of 16 and 18 into this category.⁸⁸

Although the PYD released 149 child soldiers upon signing the Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call, Human Rights Watch documented the continued use of child soldiers by the group – in certain cases, without parental consent. Having received a statement from an individual in Qamishli, whose 14-year-old daughter was kidnapped from her school and was subsequently informed by a YPJ commander that she had joined the organization, Human Rights Watch urged the YPG to respond to the allegations on June 10, 2015. On June 24, the group proceeded to acknowledge that it could not stop the use of child

81. "PYD Extend Forced Conscription Period in Efrin and Enlist 700 Males in New Military Course", *NSO*, June 4, 2017.

82. "PYD zorunlu askerlik yapmaktan istemeyen genci öldürdü" [PYD Kills Youngster for Resisting Mandatory Conscription], *AA*, September 20, 2016.

83. "PYD Extend Forced Conscription Period in Efrin and Enlist 700 Males in New Military Course", *NSO*, June 4, 2017.

84. "US Insists on Backing YPG Terrorists, Its Child Soldiers", *Daily Sabah*, March 1, 2017.

85. TRT World, Twitter, February 2, 2018. (Accessed: March 9, 2018). <https://twitter.com/trtworld>

86. Geneva Call, "Turkey: Monitoring in the HPG/PKK's Prohibition on Using Children in Hostilities", July 25, 2015.

87. Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule-Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria", June 2014, p. 38.

88. Geneva Call, *Major Kurdish Armed Group Commits to the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict*, October 25, 2013.

soldiers due to ongoing armed campaigns and admitted to creating certain exceptions. It added that many children were released by the PYD and recruiters were prohibited from taking more children.⁸⁹ All available data, however, suggests that those statements were part of an attempt to mislead the international public opinion. As a matter of fact, the U.S. Department of State published a report on human trafficking in 2015 to point out that the PKK and its Syrian branch, the YPG, were responsible for the kidnapping of underage Kurdish children. The following year, it accused the YPG of recruiting and training minors.⁹⁰

Evidence of the Systematic Use of Child Soldiers

Although the PYD initially prohibited the recruitment of soldiers under the age of eighteen, signed the Deed of Commitment by Geneva Call, and argued in its response to Human Rights Watch that the use of child soldiers was an exception, it has been using child soldiers systematically for years. Evidence of the systematic use of child soldiers can be found below.

Trainers and Supervisors of Child Soldiers

There are people among the PYD's senior leaders who are responsible for recruiting and training child soldiers. This fact attests to the systematic use of child soldiers by the organization. Latife Kaya, also known as Cahide, whose personal information was provided above, was one of those individuals. Following her death, it became clear that she recruited, either voluntarily or by force, young girls passing through PYD checkpoints in Qamishli. Kaya and her associates have been accused of denying children contact with their

families in order to expedite their adaptation to the organization, and intimidating or killing members of their families who sought information about the whereabouts of child soldiers. In the end, Kaya was killed by members of the Miranda tribe in Derik, Qamishli after attempting to kidnap a 17-year-old girl from the tribe.⁹¹

Britan Sela was another commander who was responsible for kidnapping and training child soldiers. In an interview with BBC News, which was published on YouTube, she admits to recruiting and training seventeen- and eighteen-year-old girls.⁹² Another YPJ member, known as Tolheldan, appears to oversee the training of young girls at the Martyr Berivan camp in a story posted on YouTube by RT America.⁹³

Another case in point is a YPG militant called Qaraso, who was mentioned in the story of Natheer Mostafa, a local resident who was arrested for trying to protect his children from the group. According to the story, Qaraso, along with other militants, visited the Mostafa home to persuade their girls to join the YPJ while their parents were away.⁹⁴

The Recruitment of Children by the YPG

As a general rule, the PYD kidnaps children as a form of recruitment. A story that was published on February 11, 2018, cites statements made by children who escaped YPG training camps. A young boy between the ages of 12 and 14 states in Kurdish that he was forcibly recruited and

89. Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban-Despite Promises, Children Still Fighting", July 15, 2015.

90. "YPG/PKK Afrin'de de çocukları kaçırıp savaşa zorladı" [YPG/PKK Kidnaps Children, Forces Them to Fight in Afrin], *Haber Çarşamba*, March 13, 2018.

91. Beybin Somuk, "The Forgotten Child Soldiers Recruited by Kurdish Militants in Turkey and Syria", *Middle East Eye*, June 1, 2016.

92. BBC News YouTube, "Kurdish and Yazidi Women Fighting ISIS", August 20, 2015. (Accessed: February 28, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQZR6xzDkjc>.

93. RT America YouTube, "Her War: Women vs. ISIS", March 8, 2016. (Accessed: February 20, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDoto9reCg&t=1s>.

94. "Freedom of a Man for Recruiting His Daughters, Story of a Detainee at YPG Prison Refused YPJ Recruiting His Daughters", *NSO*, June 28, 2017.

trained for 12 days before he escaped. He says that everyone he saw at the training camp was recruited by force. According to the child soldier's testimony, the militants force recruits into cars and make them wear uniforms after forcing them to sign a piece of paper.

Another boy states that YPG militants came to his home to take him and recalls that his father tried to resist to no avail.

A 16-year-old boy, who managed to escape the YPG training camp, says he was transported to the frontline by car after being placed in a sack for resisting his captors. He states that he did not know what war was until then.⁹⁵

An 18-year-old male, who appears in the same video, recalls having been forced to join the PYD ranks. When he told the militants that he was the only breadwinner in the family to avoid recruitment, the militants told him that they would take one of his younger siblings or, as a last resort, his mother. They said at least one member of each family was required to serve.⁹⁶

A video published by a PKK mouthpiece to improve the morale of their militants in Afrin purports to show two young girls with weapons and a female terrorist, who appears to be their supervisor. One of the girls, visibly distraught, says it was difficult to defend Afrin. The other girl states that she fought against DAESH in Deir ez-Zor.⁹⁷

Detailed information about 15-year-old Hemrin Abdi, who was one of the first child soldiers recruited by the YPG militants in 2014, is still missing.⁹⁸ According to a January 2016 report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights,

16-year-old Dilber Ahmed was forced to join the YPG on April 4, 2015. In an interview with the group, Wissam Alo stated that a 15-year-old girl carrying a machine gun stopped them at a checkpoint and checked their identification papers.

On September 1, 2016, a video was released that purported to show young girls being instructed to fire machine guns by YPG militants.⁹⁹

According to a May 2015 report by Kurd Watch, 12-year-old Fatima Salim Ali was kidnapped and recruited without the consent of her parents, who said that their daughter suddenly went missing.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Kurd Watch published profiles of 23 minors serving among YPG ranks.¹⁰¹

In "Under Kurdish Rule," Human Rights Watch documented that 14-year-old Jamin Sadiq Ahmad was kidnapped by YPG militants on November 4, 2014 in al-Kahtaniyah. According to the report, militants told her father that Jamin was with thousands of women marching towards the Qandil mountains and urged him to forget his daughter.¹⁰²

Evidence of the use of child soldiers by the group has been found in cameras and memory sticks seized on the persons and in the housing facilities of terrorists killed during Turkey's military operation in Afrin. According to those documents and images, the organization recruited a large number of child soldiers between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Some images purport to show children armed with AK-47 rifles.¹⁰³

95. Anadolu Agency YouTube, "Young People Forced into Arms by PYD/PKK Speak Out", February 8, 2018. (Accessed: March 15, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PISnuYGCUaQ&sns=tw>

96. Ibid.

97. "Çocukları savaşçı PYD/PKK kendini ele verdi" [Making Children Fight, PYD/PKK Gets Caught Red-Handed], *AA*, January 21, 2018.

98. "YPG Recruiting Underage Fighters in Efrin", *NSO*, May 25, 2017.

99. "US Insists on Backing YPG Terrorists, Its Child Soldiers", *Daily Sabah*, March 1, 2017.

100. "Forcible Recruitments and the Deployment of Child Soldiers by the Democratic Union Party in Syria", *Kurdwatch*, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/>

101. "PYD Saffarında Çocuk Askerler" [Child Soldiers among PYD Ranks], *Kurdologie*, <http://warisnoexcuse.kurdologie.de/tr/war-is-no-excuse-2/pyd-saffarinda-cocuk-askerler/>.

102. Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule-Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria", June 2014, p. 38.

103. "YPG/PKK'nın zorla askere aldığı çocukların görüntüleri ortaya çıktı" [Footage of YPG/PKK Forcibly Recruiting Children Uncovered], *TRT Haber*, March 7, 2018.

The Role of Families in Children's Recruitment

The PYD leadership is willing to risk open confrontation with the families of potential child soldiers. The aforementioned case of Latife Kaya, who was murdered by the group, attests to the hardship that families face to protect their children from terrorists. Family members of children voluntarily joining the organization risk lengthy prison sentences and torture. At the same time, families have limited influence on the way their children are raised in PKK-controlled parts of Syria. Another case in point is the arrest of Natheer Mostafa for trying to prevent the PYD from recruiting his children. According to media reports, Mostafa, a disabled individual, sent the family's 16-year-old son to Turkey in order to avoid recruitment. A member of the YPG, Qaraso, and two YPJ militants arrived in the Mostafa family's home when the parents were away to tell their two girls, aged 10 and 12, about the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan, and talk them into joining the women's brigade, the YPJ, which was formed in 2012. At the same time, they pledged to provide financial assistance to their low-income family. By the time their mother returned home from an extended trip, the two girls were talking about the importance of resistance and making sacrifices for their homeland in line with the idea of democratic confederalism. Mostafa responded by sending his wife and children to an undisclosed location in order to protect them from YPG recruiters. Qaraso proceeded to arrest Mostafa and take him to a YPG command center near the town of Rajo. When his wife asked why Mostafa was arrested, YPG officials told her to send her two daughters to the mountains if she wants to secure her husband's release.¹⁰⁴

Another Syrian national, a former resident of Tal Abyad, Raqqa who sought refuge in Tur-

key, stated that the PYD recruited young girls from households with no eligible men after the liberation of Raqqa and asked for \$20,000 from families that resisted the draft – an amount that their family could not pay. Their 65-year-old uncle was assaulted by militants with rifles for refusing to let his two daughters go. In light of those developments, the two families met at night and sought refuge in Turkey. Said Numan, another Tal Abyad resident, said that he decided to go to Turkey when his brother was forcibly recruited into the organization.¹⁰⁵

On February 11, 2018, a series of interviews with young boys, aged 12 through 14, who escaped YPG training camps, appeared in the Turkish media. One of the boys said that his father fought YPG recruiters in order to keep him, but could not prevent them from taking him away.¹⁰⁶

To be clear, other children have been persuaded to join the YPG. According to media reports, the group recruited a 14-year-old boy, Ahmad, in Shaykh al-Hadid. His entire family were supporters of the PYD and his mother was a member of the Star Women's Congress. Ahmad joined the YPG with his family's permission and registered at a training camp in Afrin. According to his relatives, Ahmad was enrolled in school before he was probably influenced by his family to join the group. This decision, they said, made Ahmad more popular among his peers. Still, his relatives were surprised that Ahmad's family actively encouraged him and were proud of him for joining the group.¹⁰⁷

In an interview with RT America, a 16-year-old girl says that her request to join the self-de-

104. "Freedom of a Man for Recruiting His Daughters, Story of a Detainee at YPG Prison Refused YPJ Recruiting His Daughters", *NSO*, June 28, 2017.

105. "Terör örgütü YPG/PKK'nın sivillere eziyeti bir kez daha ortada" [The Terrorist Organization YPG/PKK's Torture of Civilians Revealed Yet Again], *TRT Haber*, February 19, 2018.

106. Anadolu Agency YouTube, "Young People Forced into Arms by PYD/PKK Speak Out", February 8, 2018, (Accessed: March 15, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIsnuYGCuAQ&sns=tw>.

107. "YPG Recruiting Underage Fighters in Afrin", *NSO*, May 25, 2017.

fense forces was considered an honor by her family, as women's liberation was more important than school.¹⁰⁸

Notwithstanding, the inability of recruits to leave the organization raises additional questions about the already questionable ability of child soldiers to consent to their recruitment. Nurman Ibrahim Khalifa, who was 13 years old when she was kidnapped by the PYD in Qamishli in 2014, says many children who unsuccessfully attempted to escape training camps in the KRG were severely punished. According to Khalifa, an 18-year-old militant, who was recruited as a child, was publicly executed by a PKK commander after attempting to escape for the eighth time. Her body was thrown into the nearby lake.¹⁰⁹

The Arguments Used by the Group to Persuade Children

The organization recruits child soldiers by using a systematic approach and employing a certain set of methods. The first method is to convince children that protecting the Kurdish people is crucial; an argument that evokes a sense of commitment in their hearts. In a February 12, 2014 interview with Human Rights Watch, a 14-year-old YPG militant stated that they joined the group a year prior after being told about the challenges faced by the Kurdish people. In the case of Natheer Mostafa,¹¹⁰ militants came to their family home when both parents were away in order to tell their girls, aged 10 and 12, about the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. This suggests that recruiters visit each house in order to spread their ideology among young children for recruitment purposes.

Likewise, the organization makes frequent references to freedom and, specifically, women's

freedom. This discourse of liberation has been used by the group to persuade young girls into joining their ranks and to seem more credible in Western eyes. A member of the YPJ, Tolheldan, says that families that send their children to fight are motivated by the prospect of a free future.¹¹¹

Zin, another YPJ commander who was featured in 2016 videos published by the YPG Press Office on YouTube, argues that women have been able to play certain roles in all institutions across Rojava thanks to the YPJ's efforts. She notes that they view European women, who partook in resistance movements, as their role models and says that European women should support them in return. Another female commander featured in the videos, Azima, states that 80 percent of all fighters in Kobani are women. Moreover, the video stipulates that the YPJ are motivated by direct democracy, ecology, and a communal lifestyle that makes women strong and free.¹¹²



Figure 2. Azima, a YPJ commander, says that the group is opposed not just to DAESH but also to the conditions imposed on women by society.

In the same video, another YPJ commander by the name of Zin states that they consider European women such as Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxembourg as role models and urge Europeans

108. RT America YouTube, "Her War: Women vs. ISIS", March 8, 2016. (Accessed: February 20, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDoto9reCg&t=1s>.

109. For the interview, see: <http://kurdwatch.org/?e3544>.

110. "Freedom of a Man for Recruiting His Daughters, Story of a Detainee at YPG Prison Refused YPJ Recruiting His Daughters", *NSO*, June 28, 2017.

111. RT America YouTube, "Her War: Women vs. ISIS", March 8, 2016. (Accessed: February 20, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDoto9reCg&t=1s>.

112. YPG Press Office YouTube, "YPJ: Women's Defense Units (Women's Protection Units)-English/Kurdî, September 25, 2016. (Accessed: February 20, 2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OWQ-apZC78&feature=youtu.be.

to support them. The video purports to show many children receiving military training. A young girl proceeds to approach a vehicle filled with YPJ terrorists to inquire about the location of the nearest military camp. When asked by the terrorists why she would like to go to the base, she says that she loves them and wants to join them.

In certain situations, this discourse can appeal to young girls – provided that women tend to be oppressed by the dominant traditional structures in the region.¹¹³ Failure to be considered valuable by society and their families due to their gender encourages some young girls in the region to join the YPJ ranks. A 16-year-old girl, who joined the group, was motivated by the prospect of a freer life. Another child, who left Cizre to go to a training camp, says that she joined the YPJ because her mother wanted to marry her off before she could finish school and she did not want to become a slave or live in her parental home. She adds that she wanted to become part of the revolution and safeguard women's rights. Another 16-year-old girl states that she made her family proud by joining the self-defense forces and argues that women's liberation was more important than school.¹¹⁴



Figure 3. The organization engages in propaganda across the region. Posters for the YPJ, the women's branch of the PYD, line the streets.

113. "PYD Saflarında Çocuk Askerler" [Child Soldiers among PYD Ranks], *Kurdologie*, <http://warisnoexcuse.kurdologie.de/tr/war-is-no-excuse-2/pyd-saflarinda-cocuk-askerler/>.

114. RT America, "Her War: Women vs. ISIS", March 8, 2016. (Accessed: February 20, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDoto9reCg&t=1s>.

As such, the organization continues to use child soldiers despite the obvious risk of child abuse and seeks to legitimize its actions by making references to globally respectable concepts. One cannot reasonably argue that an individual, who joins an armed group voluntarily or forcibly and cannot leave at will, would be in a position to exercise free will.

On June 10, 2015, Şanlıurfa Governor İzzettin Küçük announced that 3,000 children had been kidnapped over the previous six months and 400 children were missing in the border town of Suruç alone.

Like many other armed groups around the world, the organization seeks to talk children of low-income families into joining them through financial incentives. The claim that low-income families send their children as a service to their motherland, which was made by the militant Tolheldan,¹¹⁵ thus must be considered together with the use of financial assistance as a recruitment tool. It should be recalled that the YPJ militants offered to provide financial support to the family of young girls in the story of Natheer Mostafa.¹¹⁶

Another example of providing financial assistance to young people in return for their service took place in Manbij and the surrounding area in 2016, when all boys and girls were forced to serve as child soldiers for a period of nine months and, according to the group, would be paid \$100 per person.¹¹⁷

115. Ibid.

116. "Freedom of a Man for Recruiting His Daughters, Story of a Detainee at YPG Prison Refused YPJ Recruiting His Daughters", *NSO*, June 28, 2017.

117. "PYD'den 16 yaş üstüne 'zorunlu askerlik'", *HaberTürk*, September 4, 2016.

CONCLUSION

Children do not just lack the mental faculties to understand the meaning and consequences of war but also need to be protected during their physical and emotional development. Under international law, the involvement of children in any activity related to armed organizations is considered use of child soldiers and is strictly prohibited. After all, organizations that use children replace their agency with instrumentalization and take advantage of children based on their physical attributes, capabilities, suitability to the tasks at hand, and organizational needs.

In this regard, the Paris Principles refer to “children associated to armed forces or armed groups” and impose restrictions on the involvement of individuals under the age of 18 in regular and irregular armed groups as well as on the tasks they may perform. According to the Paris Principles, the claim made by certain state actors and armed organizations that children recruited into their ranks are not used in combat is completely meaningless.

The PYD recruits children due to the shortage of combat-ready fighters in PYD-controlled parts of Syria and in order to train ideologically susceptible children as future militants. Depending on the PYD’s position on the battleground, the organization’s leadership and mouthpieces hail the use of child soldiers in the name of the Kurdish people’s liberation, freedom, women’s liberty, and defending Kurds against the regime or DAESH.

In other words, the organization continues to recruit children to serve its ideological agenda and seeks to legitimize its actions by making references to universally credible concepts. Although the group attempts to idealize its armed campaign as a war of liberation, it is noteworthy that many Kurds escape their native lands to avoid recruitment. This, in turn, results in greater reliance on child soldiers. Statements made by

Kurdish children, who were forcibly recruited in 2018 and subsequent escaped captivity, attest to the facts.

To be clear, the PYD leadership attempted to push the narrative that the recruitment of child soldiers was an exception as opposed to the rule. The group’s initial code of conduct banned the use of children under the age of eighteen. At the same time, it signed the Geneva Call and responded to the criticism by the Human Rights Watch. However, the assignment of specific individuals to recruit and train child soldiers, along with house raids by PYD militants and efforts to talk children into joining the organization, indicate that this practice is systematic. Needless to say, it is not possible to legitimately claim that children who volunteer to join the group are able to legally consent to their recruitment. By telling children that they can be heroes, save their families from poverty, serve the Kurdish people’s interests, or see their relatives in the mountains, the PYD merely targets vulnerable minors who cannot resist ideological brainwashing.

The fact that the PYD’s discourse borrows from universal ideologies or socially-accepted values does not mean that the group genuinely subscribes to them. Nor does it legitimize the use of children in combat. Although *Marie Claire* and other magazines drew parallels between summer camp and the PYD’s training camps by making positive references to fraternity, friendship, and sharing, the truth is that child soldiers of all ages are forced to go through combat training rather than attend fun summer activities. Although such publications glorified the PYD’s feminist discourse, it is not difficult to appreciate that compelling children to fight is no way to elevate the social status of women. The glorification of volunteers by fashion magazines and the U.S. Central Command alike, moreover, suggests that the Western notion of human rights is limited to theories. It is impossible to argue

that an individual who either is forcibly recruited into an armed organization or volunteers and in time finds out that they cannot leave and have a normal life is able to exercise free will during their membership.

Even if child soldiers, many of whom are killed before the age of eighteen, survive the

harsh living conditions and combat missions, they experience serious postwar challenges in education and rehabilitation. Not just armed organizations but also Western governments and media outlets, which disregard the use of child soldiers by such organizations, are responsible for the current situation.

Following in the footsteps of the terrorist organization PKK, which has been systematically recruiting child soldiers since 1994, the PYD, the PKK's Syrian branch, continues to recruit children today. Although the PKK/PYD signed the Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects Armed Conflict on October 5, 2013, in Qandil, Northern Iraq and responded to mounting criticism from international organizations by claiming that the use of children in combat was exceptional, there are individuals tasked specifically with recruiting and providing military training to children within the organization.

At the same time, the forcible relocation of children to training camps by PYD officials (even at risk of violent clashes with the families of the children) and efforts to persuade children into joining the organization suggest that this situation is indeed systematic. This practice resulted from the decision by many individuals, who were of combat age and residents of PKK/ PYD-controlled areas, to escape in an effort to avoid recruitment. Moreover, it is easier for the organization to indoctrinate and ensure the loyalty of children. Needless to say, the organization's lack of combat-aged recruits attests to its lack of ideological legitimacy.

This study seeks to establish that children in PYD-controlled parts of Syria are systematically used as child soldiers and analyzes how international law regulates the use of child soldiers.



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