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WATCH

# “Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die”

Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria



**“Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die”**  
Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria

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## Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria

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## Summary

Since Syria's armed conflict began in late 2011, there have been numerous serious violations of international law. Syrian government armed forces have been primarily responsible for these violations. But armed groups fighting the government have also committed many serious abuses—including recruiting and using children under 18 in combat and in direct support roles.

Human Rights Watch first documented this practice in November 2012, finding that boys as young as 14 assisted in support roles for the “Free Syrian Army,” an umbrella term for multiple armed groups fighting against Syrian government troops. Since then, the number of armed groups in Syria has proliferated to include extremist Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) that, local residents and former child fighters say, have systematically sought to recruit children.

This report documents the experiences of 25 children who are current or former members of opposition armed groups. It does not, for logistical and security reasons, cover all groups that reportedly use children in Syria, in particular children who reported supporting, or participating with, government troops or pro-government militias, although several credible sources indicate that children have done so.

Human Rights Watch found that opposition armed groups used boys as young as 15 as fighters and children as young as 14 in support roles. Some children who participated were detained or killed in battle. Boys interviewed fought on the frontlines, spied on hostile forces, acted as snipers, treated the wounded on battlefields, and ferried ammunition and other supplies to battles while fighting raged. One doctor described treating a boy between 10 and 12 years old whose job it was to whip prisoners held in an ISIS detention facility, according to the adult fighter who brought him.

The number of children who have taken part in Syria's armed conflict is not known. However, by May 2014, the Violations Documenting Center, a Syrian monitoring group, had documented 194 “non-civilian” male children killed since September 2011.

The use of children by opposition armed groups has not been confined to one group, or to certain ideologies or ethnicities. Children interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported serving in brigades and battalions associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), extremist Islamist forces such as the Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), and Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) military and Asayish police forces in Kurdish-controlled parts of northern Syria.

Boys have joined armed opposition groups for various reasons. Many simply followed their relatives or friends. Others lived in battle zones without open schools, participated in public protests, or had personally suffered at the hands of the government. Islamist groups such as ISIS have more aggressively targeted children for recruitment, providing free lectures and schooling that included weapons and other military training.

“At first I was so scared...then I got used to it,” said Ayman, who began fighting with an FSA brigade in Salqin when he was 15 years old. Others interviewed echoed his words. Few had plans or real hopes for their future beyond the next battle. “Maybe we’ll live, and maybe we’ll die,” said Omar, who began fighting at age 14 with Jabhat al-Nusra.

International humanitarian law (the laws of war) and international human rights law ban government forces and non-state armed groups from recruiting and using children as fighters and in other support roles. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Syria ratified in 2003, bans non-state armies from recruiting or using children under age 18 in direct hostilities. Conscripting or enlisting children under 15, including for support roles, is a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Several of the children interviewed said they fought with two or three different armed groups fighting Syrian government forces. Some—like Amr who said he received US\$100 a month—received monthly salaries of up to \$135, while others said they participated without pay. Many attended training camps where they learned military tactics and had weapons training.

Children who wished to leave armed groups and resume a civilian life told Human Rights Watch they had few options to do so. Saleh, 17, said he fought with the Free Syrian Army at 15 after he was detained and tortured by government security forces. He later joined Ahrar

al-Sham, then left to join the Jund al-Aqsa, an independent Islamist armed group. “I thought of leaving [the fighting] a lot,” he said. “I lost my studies, I lost my future, I lost everything. I looked for work, but there’s no work. This is the most difficult period for me.”

All of the armed groups have taken insufficient measures to prevent children from joining their ranks, not asking or verifying through documents children’s real ages when they joined, or failing to turn children away. Three commanders of various FSA units told Human Rights Watch that their units did not accept children under 18 as a matter of official policy, but did not turn them away when they came to them eager to fight. “16, 17 is not young. [If we don’t take him,] he’ll go fight on his own,” Abu Rida, leader of the Saif Allah al-Masloul brigade, an FSA group in Daraa, said.

Some armed groups told Human Rights Watch that they prohibit child recruitment, or have taken preliminary steps to end the practice. In March 2014, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a coalition of opposition groups supported by the Free Syrian Army, announced that it had implemented “new training for Free Syrian Army members in International Humanitarian Law to eliminate the recruitment and participation of children in armed conflict.” In December 2013, the YPG General Command issued an order prohibiting enlistment of children under age 18. In January, a YPG spokesperson told Human Rights Watch that the force had demobilized fighters under 18, though researchers met child fighters after his statement. Much more should be done to stop child soldiers from joining or continuing to fight with these groups, and the others mentioned in this report.

If they have not already done so, armed groups operating in Syria should publicly commit to end recruitment and use of children under age 18, and should demobilize all fighters or others under 18 currently in their ranks. Those recruited under age 18 but now no longer children should be free to leave opposition forces. Armed groups should also work with international agencies specialized in child protection to rehabilitate and reintegrate these children into civilian life. Finally, they should ensure that all officers under their command understand the ban on recruiting or seeking assistance from children, and establish age-verification procedures they must follow to enforce it. Officers responsible for recruitment who continue to enlist children should be appropriately disciplined.

To address the practice of children joining armed groups in Syria, UN bodies should seek public commitments from armed groups not to recruit or enlist children under age 18 and use age-verification procedures to ensure that children do not join. The UN Security Council should refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to allow prosecution of war crimes, including the conscripting or enlisting of children under 15 into armed forces or non-state armed groups or their active participation in hostilities.

Governments providing aid to armed groups in Syria should review these groups' policies on child recruitment, and should suspend all military sales and assistance, including technical training and services, to all forces credibly implicated in the widespread or systematic commission of serious abuses, including the use of child soldiers, until they stop committing these crimes and take appropriate disciplinary action against perpetrators. They should also restrict residents of their countries from providing military support to these groups.

Finally, humanitarian agencies operating in Syria or assisting refugees in neighboring countries should support efforts to provide secondary education opportunities for children, and address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of boys aged 13 to 18 in their child protection programming.

# Recommendations

## To All Armed Groups Fighting in Syria

- Immediately cease the recruitment, enlistment, and use of children under 18 as fighters or in military support roles. Implement age-verification procedures during recruitment by at a minimum:
  - Checking documents including identification cards or documents, school diplomas, or medical records; and/or
  - Checking with family members or community members, to ensure that children under 18 do not continue to enlist.
- Do not recruit or enlist any individual whose age is in doubt and cannot be confirmed as over 18.
- Make public commitments prohibiting the use of children under 18 as either fighters or in military support roles in violation of international law, and ensure these commitments are communicated to all members of the armed group.
- Review the ages of members currently enlisted or supporting troops using age-verification procedures, and demobilize any fighters under 18. Permit fighters who joined under age 18 but are currently adults to freely resign.
- Adopt and implement disciplinary measures against members who recruit children for combatant or military support roles.
- Facilitate children under 18 rehabilitating and reintegrating into civilian society, in coordination with international agencies and local groups that specialize in, or work on, child protection. Provide public updates on how many children have been demobilized from their respective forces and what is happening with those children.
- Cease cooperating and coordinating with groups that are credibly found to systematically use child soldiers.

## To Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham

- Cease deliberately recruiting children, in particular through weapons training and other military training in school environments. Prohibit recruitment campaigns in schools, educational environments, or other locations likely to attract children.

## To Governments Providing Assistance to Armed Groups in Syria

- Review groups' regulations on use of children and seek public commitments to end the recruitment and use of anyone under 18.
- Suspend all military sales and assistance, including technical training and services, to all national forces and non-state armed groups credibly implicated in the widespread or systematic commission of serious abuses in Syria, including the use of child soldiers, until such time as they stop committing these crimes and perpetrators are appropriately disciplined.
- In accordance with domestic law and due process, restrict money transfers and other support from residents to groups credibly implicated in the widespread or systematic commission of serious abuses, including use of child soldiers.
- For countries on Syria's borders, adopt measures to restrict entry of fighters and arm flows to groups credibly implicated in the widespread or systematic commission of serious abuses, including the use of child soldiers.
- Call on the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, as the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria.

### **To the UN Security Council**

- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court as a first step toward ensuring accountability for serious crimes committed in Syria, including the practice of "conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities."
- Require states to suspend all military sales and assistance, including technical training and services, to all national forces and non-state armed groups credibly implicated in the widespread or systematic commission of serious abuses, including use of child soldiers, until such time as they stop committing these crimes and perpetrators are appropriately disciplined.

### **To the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict**

- Authorize the special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict to transmit information on grave violations against children in the armed conflict in Syria to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court under article 15 of the Rome Statute.

## **To the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict**

- Engage with armed groups in Syria to secure commitments to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

## **To the UN Country Team for Syria**

- Advocate with armed groups mentioned in the secretary-general's annual report on children in armed conflict and negotiate action plans to end their use of child soldiers. Investigate recruitment and use of children by armed groups and advocate with them to end abuses.

## **To International Humanitarian Agencies Working in Syria and with Syrian Refugees**

- Support efforts to provide secondary education opportunities for children, to reduce the drop-out rate from secondary education, and to address through child protection programming the particular vulnerability of boys aged 13 to 18, who armed groups may target for recruitment.

## Methodology

This report is based on interviews with 25 children who were current or former fighters or otherwise assisted opposition armed groups in Syria, as well as six adult fighters and 4 military commanders. Human Rights Watch conducted in-person interviews in Jordan, eastern Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, and in the Idlib governorate and Kurdish-controlled areas of Hasakeh governorate in Syria.

Researchers located child interviewees in hospitals and medical clinics, including medical clinics primarily serving particular armed groups; in public gathering places frequented by Syrian refugees; and in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. We met additional interviewees through Syrian activists concerned with child recruitment by non-state armed groups.

In addition, researchers interviewed four family members of child soldiers, four medical and psychosocial service providers who treated child fighters in Turkey or Syria, and 14 people who witnessed boys or girls (in Kurdish areas) they identified as under 18 manning checkpoints. These witnesses included both Syrians and international humanitarian workers.

Researchers conducted interviews primarily in Arabic, or with the help of an Arabic translator. Interviews with a small number of native English speakers were conducted in English. Where interviewees preferred to speak in Kurdish, interviews were conducted with the help of a Kurdish translator. Researchers asked interviewees for their names but did not require them to provide full names.

We used pseudonyms for all child interviewees named in this report for their own protection, even when interviewees stated that the report could include their real names. Researchers did not pay interviewees or offer any form of compensation for their testimony; in a few cases, travel costs to the interview location were reimbursed.

In this report, “child” and “children” are used to refer to anyone under the age of 18, consistent with usage under international law.

## Background

Since late 2011, non-state armed groups in Syria have recruited and enlisted children under age 18 and deployed them in combat and for other purposes.<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch first documented this practice in November 2012, finding that boys as young as 14 assisted in support roles for the “Free Syrian Army,” a general term for various armed groups opposed to the Syrian government. Children as young as 16 served as fighters and took part in combat operations.<sup>2</sup> Children interviewed at that time said they joined armed groups along with male relatives, friends, or other members of their community.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the number of armed groups in Syria has proliferated. The Free Syrian Army has waned in influence as regional groups have gained power and foreign funding. Anti-government armed groups have come together in a variety of alliances to combat government advances and to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). Extremist Islamist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS have gained control over territory and expanded their presence in the country. Residents of areas controlled by ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra say these groups have reached out to young people, including children, in systematic ways, entering schools and providing education in mosques that includes weapons and military training.<sup>4</sup> Child fighters and witnesses have confirmed their accounts.

Children told Human Rights Watch they fought with members of the following armed groups in Syria:

**Free Syrian Army (FSA):** The FSA was formed in August 2011 by Syrian army defectors based in Turkey. In December 2012, a number of groups calling themselves members of the Free Syrian Army aligned under the Supreme Military Council, with Gen. Salim Idris

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<sup>1</sup> “Syria: Opposition Using Children in Conflict,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 29, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/29/syria-opposition-using-children-conflict>; UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” A/HRC/21/50. August 16, 2012, [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf) (accessed April 24, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch group interview with activists from Raqqa governorate, Gaziantep, Turkey, March 20, 2014.

serving as its chief-of-staff. The Supreme Military Council, led since February 16, 2004 by Abdullah al-Bashir, remains a loose coalition of brigades based around the country, and lacks a strong central command structure.<sup>5</sup> Experts have described the FSA as an umbrella term encompassing a range of non-state armed groups fighting against government forces, rather than a defined military unit.<sup>6</sup> FSA brigades have fought primarily against government troops, but have also fought against extremist Islamist groups including ISIS.

**Islamic Front:** In November 2013, seven Islamist groups including Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (Ahrar al-Sham) and Liwa' al-Tawhid, both noted below, announced that they were forming an alliance.<sup>7</sup> Combined, the groups represented an estimated 45,000 fighters.<sup>8</sup>

**Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (Ahrar al-Sham):** A Salafist group that first emerged in the northwestern province of Idlib in late 2011 as Ahrar al-Sham. It later merged with three other Islamist groups to form Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. Its leader is Hassan Abboud, also known as Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi.<sup>9</sup> It consists of an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 fighters.<sup>10</sup>

**Liwa al-Tawhid:** Liwa al-Tawhid was formed in July 2012 from several armed groups operating in the northern Aleppo countryside. Liwa al-Tawhid is considered one of the main forces operating in Aleppo province.<sup>11</sup> Abdul Aziz Salama serves as the group's political leader; former military commander Abdul Qader Saleh was

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<sup>5</sup> "Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition," *BBC News*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003> (accessed May 5, 2014); Aron Lund, "A New Free Syrian Army Leadership," post to "Syrian Crisis" (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 4, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55245> (last accessed May 20, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Lister, "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape," Policy Briefing, Brookings Institution, May 19, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/05/19-syria-military-landscape-lister> (accessed June 2, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> "Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition," *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Official Ahrar al-Sham website <http://ahraralsham.net/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Aron Lund, "Fighting in Aleppo, Resisting Geneva: An Interview with the Tawhid Brigade," post to "Syria in Crisis" (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54064> (accessed May 20, 2014).

killed in an airstrike along with several other Tawhid leaders in November 2013.<sup>12</sup>  
The group contains an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 fighters.<sup>13</sup>

**Jabhat al-Nusra:** An extremist Islamist group that declared its existence in January 2012.<sup>14</sup> Abu Mohammed al-Jolani leads the group, which contains an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 fighters.<sup>15</sup> In 2013, al-Jolani affirmed the group's allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Jabhat al-Nusra has brigades in several Syrian provinces including Idlib, Aleppo, and Daraa.<sup>16</sup>

**Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS):** An extremist Islamist group that is active in both Iraq and Syria. ISIS announced the inclusion of the Sham, or Levant (referring to a group of countries including Syria in the eastern Mediterranean), in its name in April 2013 to reflect its participation in the Syrian conflict.<sup>17</sup> In February 2014, Al-Qaeda renounced any ties with ISIS, which had at one time been an affiliate.<sup>18</sup> ISIS is primarily active in Syria's northern provinces and has controlled Raqqa city as well as parts of Raqqa governorate since May 2013.<sup>19</sup> The group is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and has an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 fighters. ISIS fighters have battled with other anti-government groups including Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and FSA brigades in northern Syria.<sup>20</sup>

**Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) military and Asayish police forces:** Respectively, the military wing and police forces of the Syrian Kurdish political party, the Democratic Unity

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition," *BBC News*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

<sup>14</sup> Aron Lund, "Holy Warriors: A field guide to Syria's jihadi groups," *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/15/holy\\_warriors](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/15/holy_warriors) (accessed April 26, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> "Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition," *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Liz Sly, "Al Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html) (accessed April 27, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Tim Whewell, "Syrian activists flee abuse in al-Qaeda-run Raqqa," *BBC News*, November 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-24926584> (accessed April 27, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Party (PYD), supported by the Turkish Kurdish movement the Partiya Karkarane Kurdistan (PKK).<sup>21</sup> The PYD exercises de facto control over three predominately Kurdish areas in northern Syria: Ain al-`Arab, `Afrin, and Jazira. In 2012, the Syrian government and its security forces largely withdrew from these areas, apparently not wanting to open hostilities with the Kurds.<sup>22</sup> The PYD, the strongest and most organized Kurdish political party in the area, its armed wing and police force, promptly filled the void with little to no state resistance. Estimates on the number of YPG and Asayish fighters vary; YPG fighters reportedly number between 10,000 and 30,000; the Asayish include an estimated 20,000 police officers.<sup>23</sup> Since mid-2013, they have clashed with extremist Islamist forces, in particular ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, in areas under their control.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group, "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria," May 8, 2014, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/151-flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/151-flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf) (accessed May 20, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; "Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition," *BBC News*, , <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Drott, "Arab Tribes Split between Kurds and Jihadists," post to "Syria in Crisis" (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 15, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55607> (accessed May 20, 2014).

## Recruitment and Use of Children

An unknown number of children have joined armed groups fighting in the Syrian armed conflict, either as combatants or to otherwise provide support. The documentation groups on Syria have not collected data on the numbers of children involved. However, as of June 2014, the Violations Documenting Center, a Syrian monitoring group, had documented 194 cases of “non-civilian” male children killed in the fighting since September 2011.<sup>25</sup>

Human Rights Watch interviewed 25 children who fought with or assisted armed groups in Syria. Children interviewed fought with the Free Syrian Army (FSA); Ahrar al-Sham; Jabhat al-Nusra; the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS); and the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) as well as the Asayish (Kurdish Peoples’ Defense Forces and police force). Two children under 15 described providing support to FSA brigades, and there were credible reports that Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS used children under 15 in combat or support roles.

Children told Human Rights Watch that they took up arms for a variety of reasons: after government security forces detained and tortured them; after participating in political protests; alongside male family members or with friends; after their schools closed or they were expelled for political reasons; and simply because they had a desire to go to battle.

In some cases, anti-government armed groups recruited and enlisted children from refugee camps and communities in neighboring countries, as well as inside Syria itself.<sup>26</sup> A 17-year-old boy said he returned to Syria to fight at age 16 after attending sermons encouraging attendees at mosques and public speeches in Tripoli, Lebanon, to go for jihad in Syria.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Martyrs’ Database,” Violation Documentation Center in Syria, accessed April 25, 2014 <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs> accessed April 25, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor Luck, “As Syrian rebels’ losses mount, teenagers begin filling the ranks,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2013 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/as-syrian-rebels-losses-mount-teenagers-begin-filling-ranks/2013/08/24/2bdbdfea-0a8f-11e3-9941-6711ed662e71\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/as-syrian-rebels-losses-mount-teenagers-begin-filling-ranks/2013/08/24/2bdbdfea-0a8f-11e3-9941-6711ed662e71_story.html) (accessed April 25, 2014), which describes recruitment of children in Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Saleh, Reyhanli, Turkey, April 4, 2014.

Humanitarian assistance agencies and Syrians responsible for overseeing the return of Syrians from Jordan's Zaatari refugee camp back to Syria described how any child who wished to return to Syria alone had to appear with his parents before the head of the camp (an official in Jordan's Interior Ministry) to describe his reasons and get approval for the return journey. This process, they said, had significantly diminished the number of children returning alone to Syria, including those returning to fight. Human Rights Watch did not meet children who said they had immediate plans to return and join armed groups in Syria. Children interviewed in Turkey said they had joined armed groups inside Syria and left for brief periods, rather than being recruited in Turkey.

The March 2014 report of the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria found that pro-government armed groups also recruited and used children, stating that "pro-government militia armed and used children from the age of 13 at checkpoints in Aleppo, Dara'a, and Tartus. In October 2013, in Ataman (Dara'a), children from the age of 14 were armed and trained by popular committees."<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch could not corroborate this information because for security reasons and access limitations we did not conduct research in areas or among populations who were likely to participate in pro-government armed groups. An 18 year old said that when he was 16, government security officers attempted to recruit him to inform on his classmates at school, but that he refused.<sup>29</sup>

## Islamic Front Battalions

### *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya*

Human Rights Watch interviewed seven children who fought with Ahrar al-Sham in Syria as early as January 2013, when the group was formed. All seven had combat roles; the youngest said he joined when he was 15.

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<sup>28</sup> UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/25/65. February 12, 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>, (accessed April 24, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ayman, Reyhanli, Turkey, April 5, 2014.

Several joined Ahrar al-Sham battalions after serving or training with other armed groups; others joined with a friend or family member. It is not clear whether Ahrar al-Sham actively targeted children for recruitment. Some said that leaders did not verify their ages before they joined, while others said commanders allowed them to join despite their young age.

Children attended military training camps with adults, participated in battles, fought on front lines, and received salaries of between SYL 7,000 and 15,000 (US\$47 to \$101) a month.<sup>30</sup> One interviewee said he received a monthly box from his brigade, along with his salary, that contained food supplies including oil, canned goods, and grains.<sup>31</sup>

Riad, 17, said he joined the Abu Talha al-Ansari brigade of Ahrar al-Sham at age 16, after attending an Ahrar training camp.<sup>32</sup> After participating in anti-government demonstrations, he left school and fled to Lebanon for a period to avoid arrest. When he returned, he spent 15 days training with Ahrar al-Sham in late 2013. At the training camp, at a former agricultural institute in Harim, northern Syria, he said he studied Sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic studies as well as learning battle tactics and how to use weapons. After training, he fought in battles at Jabal Turkman, in Latakia governorate, and in the Aleppo countryside, near the town of al-Aziza. Riad told Human Rights Watch that he had the same duties as adult fighters in his brigade.<sup>33</sup>

Hassan, 17, said in late 2013, when he was 16, he spent a month training at an Ahrar al-Sham camp in the Sarmada mountains, in Idlib governorate.<sup>34</sup> He entered the training camp after volunteering to participate in a battle with Ahrar al-Sham fighters in the Raqqa governorate. Of the 100 fighters in the camp, he said, five or six were under 18. At the camp, he said, his daily schedule included praying, religious instruction, and military tactics instruction, as well as weapons training. During training, he also performed guard duty at the camp.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Saleh, April 4, 2014; Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Omar, location in Syria withheld March 12, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Saleh, April 4, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Riad, April 5, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Hassan, location in Syria withheld, April 15, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Ayman, who joined Ahrar al-Sham at age 17, told Human Rights Watch that children under 15 assisted Ahrar al-Sham by bringing them supplies, including during a battle he participated in at Rashideen, a district in Aleppo.<sup>36</sup> “[They] would bring us food and ammunition because there were snipers and so we could not cross. But [the snipers] wouldn’t shoot children,” he said.<sup>37</sup>

### *Tawhid Brigade*

Human Rights Watch interviewed a psychological counselor who counseled three children, aged 13-15 after they fled to Turkey, all of whom she said fought with the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo.<sup>38</sup> The counselor said that one of the children, a 15 year old, had joined because his “financial situation was very hard,” and that “his dad was dead and he had no family to take care of him.” Another of the children, 13, was shelled while at a Tawhid base. “He had to have his leg amputated,” the counselor said. The 14 year old joined after government forces arrested and killed his father, and had been injured five months earlier in battle. “He told me he learned how to snipe and shoot a [machine gun],” the counselor said.<sup>39</sup>

Human Rights Watch also interviewed two boys who fought with the Tawhid brigade: one joined in Idlib at age 17, and the other in Aleppo, also at age 17.<sup>40</sup>

## **Free Syrian Army (FSA)**

In November 2012, Human Rights Watch documented children as young as 14 serving in support roles and those as young as 16 in combatant roles with Daraa and Homs-based brigades affiliated with the Free Syrian Army.<sup>41</sup> Research conducted for this report shows that in 2013 and 2014, children continued to serve as both combatants and in support roles for

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<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ayman, Reyhali, Turkey, March 17, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with doctor, Blue Crescent Clinic, Kilis, Turkey, March 14, Human Rights Watch interview with psychological counselor, Blue Crescent Clinic, Kilis, Turkey, March 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Riad, April 5, 2014; Human Rights Watch interview with Ammar, Gaziantep, March 26, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> “Syria: Opposition Using Children in Conflict,” Human Rights Watch news release, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/29/syria-opposition-using-children-conflict>.

units that claimed allegiance to the Free Syrian Army. The youngest FSA supporters interviewed participated at 14, and the youngest combatants interviewed joined at 15.<sup>42</sup>

Children told Human Rights Watch that they joined or supported Free Syrian Army brigades in Daraa, Damascus countryside, Aleppo, and Idlib governorates. Many did so because they had immediate or extended family members, friends, or community members with the unit. Others joined without such personal connections.

Two 14-year-olds said they supported FSA brigades operating in Jarablus, Aleppo governorate, by carrying supplies, loading ammunition, and informing on enemy troop movements.<sup>43</sup> Ahmed, 14, said he helped an FSA brigade in Jarablus, which included many of his relatives, by bringing them food and weapons.<sup>44</sup> Mahmoud, 14, told Human Rights Watch that he informed the FSA brigade in his hometown of Jarablus about ISIS movements, and that ISIS captured and severely beat him for doing so.<sup>45</sup> The unit he supported included his family members and friends.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 15 boys and young men who joined FSA brigades in Daraa, Damascus countryside, and Aleppo governorates while under 18. Some reported more protective treatment because of their age: they said commanders assigned them different duties than adults or prevented them from going to battles.<sup>46</sup> Others had the same duties as adult soldiers and fought on the front lines.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Ahmed and Mahmoud, Karkemish, Turkey, March 22, 2014; Human Rights Watch interview with Jawad, Reyhanli, Turkey, March 24, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Ahmed and Mahmoud,, March 22, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ahmed, Karkemish, Turkey, March 22, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mahmoud, Karkemish, Turkey, March 22, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Omar, location in Syria withheld, March 12, 2014; Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Hassan. April 15, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Massoud, Reyhanli, Turkey, March 24, 2014.

Three commanders of various FSA units told Human Rights Watch that their units did not accept children under 18 as a matter of official policy.<sup>48</sup> However, they added that when children under 18 came to them eager to fight, they did not turn them away.<sup>49</sup>

Abu Rida, leader of the Saif Allah al-Maslool brigade, an FSA group, in Daraa, told Human Rights Watch:

If a boy is hardheaded or stubborn, if he lost someone, we'll keep them in the camp. But 16, 17 is not young. [If we don't take him,] he'll go fight on his own. In clashes they'll be in the second or third row, or doing first aid, driving, loading ammunition for people who attack.<sup>50</sup>

Mohsin, 20, commander of a small group of FSA fighters in Jarablus, said:

When we formed our brigade, we didn't differentiate between strong and weak youth—we just looked for revolutionary works. We would accept them whatever the age.<sup>51</sup>

Saleh, 17, said that he joined the Idlib Martyrs' Battalion, an FSA group, when he was 15. He told the commanders that he was 20 years old, and said that no one asked for proof of his age.<sup>52</sup> He did not receive formal training, but fought in several battles, including a battle to free Harem, a town in Idlib. He stayed with the brigade for seven months, leaving when he was 16 to join Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abu Rida and Mohammed Salish, Irbid, Jordan, December 17 2014; Human Rights Watch interview with Abu Musafir, Antakya, Turkey, March 23, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abu Rida, Irbid, Jordan, December 17, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mohsin, Karkemish, Turkey, March 22, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Saleh, location in Syria withheld, April 4, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Hassan, 17, said he joined the Asad Allah Hamza battalion, an FSA group headed by his sister's husband, when he was 15.<sup>54</sup> "At first they prevented me from joining battles because I'm young," he said. "I tried for one month to go to battles with them and they didn't agree. [But] after that, they let me go with them." Hassan said that he fought his first battle in Harem, in Idlib governorate. He carried a Kalashnikov [assault rifle] and the battle lasted for five days. After the battle, his brigade assigned him to guard a checkpoint at night.<sup>55</sup>

Fouad, 18, said he joined the Ahfad al-Rasul battalion, an FSA group, in Eastern Ghouta, in Damascus countryside, when he was 17 years old.<sup>56</sup> He stayed with his unit for only a month and a half, and provided first aid to wounded fighters. He did not receive weapons training, he said. He said that the brigade assigned combat duties to defectors from the government army, which is why they did not provide him with combat training or duties.<sup>57</sup>

Massoud, 19, a young Kurdish man from Aleppo, said he joined an FSA unit of Kurdish fighters from his neighborhood in Aleppo city when he was 17.<sup>58</sup> "I was a sniper and I participated in battles," he said. "I participated in the liberation of Midan al-Ashrafiyeh, Sheikh Mansour, and Bustan Basha. I was on the front line." Massoud left Syria to receive medical treatment for a serious leg injury he sustained in battle.<sup>59</sup>

Samir, 19, told Human Rights Watch that he joined an FSA brigade at 17 after he was arrested and tortured by Syrian government security forces: "After I was released, a month or two later I decided to take up arms. One of my friends was in the FSA. I told him I wanted to join and participate in battles."<sup>60</sup> Samir attended two separate military training camps and participated in combat. "My role was to attack checkpoints with other fighters," he

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<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Hassan, April 15, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Fouad, Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan, December 15, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Massoud, March 24, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Samir, Reyhanli, Turkey, March 24, 2014.

said. “I was on the frontline, and I used a Kalashnikov...I [also] used to guard checkpoints at night and check IDs.”<sup>61</sup>

Eyad, 15, said he joined the Hanano brigade, an FSA group in the Aleppo governorate for six months, and received 15 days of training in a training camp.<sup>62</sup> He sustained shrapnel injuries in his first battle, at Sheikh Najjar, and had been in the hospital for three months. He said that other children his age also fought with the brigade, as well as a child one year younger than him.<sup>63</sup>

On March 7, 2014, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces announced that it had implemented “new training for Free Syrian Army members in International Humanitarian Law to eliminate the recruitment and participation of children in armed conflict.”<sup>64</sup> A few days later, the UN special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict also announced that the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army had “sought the United Nations’ assistance to end the recruitment and use of children in their ranks.”<sup>65</sup>

## Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS)

Human Rights Watch found, based on interviews with four former ISIS child fighters and two adult fighters, as well as civilians in ISIS-controlled areas, that ISIS has actively recruited children to send to their military training camps and used them in military operations, including suicide bombing missions. The two adults interviewed had attended ISIS training camps in the Aleppo governorate and observed children as young as 13 receiving training. Of the four children interviewed, the youngest began fighting at age 15.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Eyad, Reyhanli, Turkey, March 24, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “Syrian Coalition Condemns Assad Regime’s Assaults on Children, Calls on UN to Ensure Accountability,” National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces press statement, March 7, 2014, <http://en.etilaf.org/press/syrian-coalition-condemns-assad-regimes-assaults-on-children-calls-on-un-to-ensure-accountability.html> (accessed April 26, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> “Syria has Become One of the Most Dangerous Places to be a Child,” Statement by Leila Zerrougi, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, March 12, 2014, <http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/statement/syria-has-become-one-of-the-most-dangerous-places-to-be-a-child/> (accessed April 26, 2014)

Interviews indicated that ISIS also recruited children at younger ages. An FSA military commander told Human Rights Watch he captured 30 children between ages 13 and 15 who had fought with ISIS and attempted to rehabilitate them by isolating them in a remote rural location and bringing religious leaders as well as male relatives to speak with them.<sup>66</sup> Researchers interviewed two medical service providers who treated children as young as 12 injured while fighting with ISIS.<sup>67</sup> Several interviewees reported interacting with children 13 years old or younger who trained or served with ISIS.

The four children we interviewed said ISIS recruited them through public forums and ideological tools, rather than through community or family networks. None of these children had relatives in those units. Bassim, 17, said he joined at age 16 after attending speeches and sermons given by members of the group.<sup>68</sup> After attending speeches at public mosques, he began visiting the ISIS headquarters in Salqin for additional lessons about religion and jihad.<sup>69</sup> He told Human Rights Watch that his father supported his participation with the group and that he left after sustaining serious shrapnel wounds in battle.<sup>70</sup> Raed, 17, said that he was also attracted to ISIS despite not having personal connections to the group.<sup>71</sup> “When ISIS came to my town...I liked what they are wearing, they were like one herd. They had a lot of weapons. So I spoke to them, and decided to go their training camp in Kafr Hamra in Aleppo.”<sup>72</sup> He attended the training camp when he was 16 years old. “The leader of the camp said [ISIS] liked the younger ones better,” he said. “He told me, ‘Tomorrow they’ll be a stronger leader or a stronger fighter.’”<sup>73</sup>

Both children and adults who fought with ISIS consistently reported seeing children 13 years old or younger undergoing the same training and performing the same military duties

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<sup>66</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abu Musafir, Antakya, Turkey, March 23, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with a doctor who worked in Tal Abyad, Raqqqa governorate, Gaziantep, Turkey, March 20, 2014; Human Rights Watch interview with doctor, Blue Crescent Clinic, Kilis, Turkey, March 21, 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Bassim, April 16, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Riad, location in Syria withheld, April 4, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

as adults. Two adult fighters who attended an ISIS training camp near Jarablus reported seeing children in training. Ahmed, 20, trained for 15 days. He said that in his training group of 200, there were children as young as 13 or 14, and that “many” of the trainees appeared to be under 18.<sup>74</sup> “Wissam,” 22, who attended the same camp in the Jarablus mountains for 45 days, said he saw children aged 13 and 14, and estimated that 60 percent of the trainees were under 18.<sup>75</sup>

At age 16, Riad trained for 15 days in Kafr Hamra, Aleppo, with a group of between 250 to 300 people, he said. In his group, he said that many of the trainees were under 18, and some as young as 12 years old:

It was a very difficult camp. They gave us a very severe training. We would wake up, pray, after prayer maybe around 9 a.m. we did exercises, then rest in the room, then Sharia courses, then military study, then more Sharia courses, then some rest, prayer.

[Between afternoon prayers], they didn’t let us sleep, they would come in our tent and fire into the sky and [send us] to guard a trench. Many times we fell asleep in this trench because we were so tired.<sup>76</sup>

Amr, 17, told Human Rights Watch that he joined the Daoud Brigade in his hometown of Sarmeen in Idlib governorate when he was 15.<sup>77</sup> At the time he joined, the Daoud Brigade was an independent Islamist group but joined forces with ISIS from late 2013 until late January 2014.<sup>78</sup> Amr said that his unit included children as young as 15.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ahmed, Karkemish, Turkey, March 20, 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Wissam, Karkemish, Turkey, March 20, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Riad, April 4, 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Amr, Reyhanli, Turkey, March 25, 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Inside Baseball on Syrian Rebel Infighting,” The Washington Institute, February 7, 2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-baseball-on-syrian-rebel-infighting> (accessed April 27, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Amr,, March 25, 2014.

When he first joined the Daoud Brigade at age 15, he said, he participated in a “sleeper cell” to collect information on the government’s operations in Idlib. He told Human Rights Watch that the three others in his cell were the same age as he.<sup>80</sup> After he had been collecting information for six months, government forces arrested the other members of his group. Amr told Human Rights Watch:

That was when I decided to join the jihadi movement full time. I joined in an indirect way, so that my mother and father would not know I had joined an armed jihadi group.<sup>81</sup>

The group gave him weapons and equipment, he said: “I got a Kalashnikov with six [ammunition] cartridges, and a military uniform with a bulletproof vest.” He also received a salary of US\$100 a month, while he said that adult fighters received US\$200 a month.<sup>82</sup>

Amr told Human Rights Watch that fighters in his unit, including children, signed up for suicide attack missions. “They had a list of people who volunteered to do suicide bombing operations. I signed up on the list, but reluctantly and at the end, so my name was [several hundred down].”<sup>83</sup> Amr said he eventually signed the list because he felt social pressure to do so.

Abu Musafir, a leader of the Fursan al-Furat battalion from Minbej in Aleppo governorate, said he consistently saw children fighting when engaged in battles against ISIS. “Every battle we fight with Da`esh [ISIS] is a fight,” he said. “We’re trying to stay alive. But when we finish the battle and look at the corpses [of the ISIS fighters], we see a lot of children.”<sup>84</sup>

Abu Musafir told Human Rights Watch that his battalion detained 30 children ages 13 to 15 fighting with ISIS after a battle with ISIS in Minbej in late 2013. “We found them in a

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Amr, March 25, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. List number withheld to avoid identification.

<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abu Musafir, March 23, 2014.

training camp in Minbej, all of them were from Minbej,” he said. “We kept them for two-and-a-half months. We put them in a rural area with a school and we tried to reverse the brainwashing of ISIS.”<sup>85</sup>

A doctor who had worked at a clinic in Tal Abyad in Raqqa governorate told Human Rights Watch he treated two children injured while training or serving in ISIS military camps:

[In August 2013,] a child came in who appeared to be between 10 and 12 years old, called “Abu Bakr.” His hand had been cut by a piece of metal. [We] talked to his escort, an armed man from “Da`esh” [ISIS] who came and brought him. He said this boy was a guard in their prison in Tal Abyad, and he had the job of whipping prisoners.

[In November,] a 14 year old came into the clinic. He had been shooting a rock in the training camp and the pieces came back and hit him, they splintered in his stomach. He came with an escort of about 10 armed men. They were dressed in the Pakistani style, wearing short pants and a tunic, mostly black. [The boy] had to have two operations, and the second time, a group of children from the camp came to visit, they were all dressed the same way.<sup>86</sup>

Emad, a former teacher from Raqqa, told Human Rights Watch that in November 2013, he entered the Islamic court run by ISIS in Mansoura, in Raqqa governorate, which was held in the Mansoura primary school.<sup>87</sup> “The guards were six children, they appeared to be between 12 and 16 years old,” he said. “They were carrying weapons and wearing explosive belts.”<sup>88</sup> The children were wearing masks, but he guessed their ages from their voices and from their stature.<sup>89</sup> Four other interviewees reported seeing children who

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with doctor from Tal Abyad, Gaziantep, Turkey, March 20, 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ayman, Antayka, Turkey, March 23, 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

appeared to be between 13 and 16 years old guarding checkpoints in the Raqqa governorate on the road to Tel Abyad, an area controlled by ISIS.

## Jabhat al-Nusra

Human Rights Watch found that Jabhat al-Nusra has actively recruited children through free schooling programs that included weapons training and other public events. Children interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that commanders did not discourage recruitment because of age. Three who joined Jabhat al-Nusra brigades in Daraa and Idlib said the youngest joining a training camp was 14. A 19-year-old who joined Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo said he did so when he was 17.

Majed, 16, from Inkhil in the Daraa governorate, described how Jabhat al-Nusra recruited him at age 15 through an educational program that later included weapons training.<sup>90</sup> He said:

[Jabhat al] Nusra used to tell us to come and learn with them. They would bring a car and go around to houses to pick up children. We were 60 people, [between] the ages [of] 12... and 20.

They taught children how to read the Quran, then taught about weapons. They taught us how to take apart and put together a weapon. They put a target for us to practice shooting outside the mosque. Anyone who hit the target got a reward. If a family needed more supplies, for example, this would be a reward.<sup>91</sup>

Majed stayed with Jabhat al-Nusra for three months, he said, and participated in a military operation to take over government checkpoints around Inkhil in late 2013. During his military service, he said, leaders assigned him to a group of 25 fighters of whom 7 were under 18, and the youngest approximately 12 years old.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Majed, Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan, December 12, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Omar, 16, first attended a Jabhat al-Nusra training camp when he was 14. His father was a Jabhat al-Nusra fighter.<sup>93</sup> Omar told Human Rights Watch that in 2011 he joined demonstrations from his school, where he was in the sixth grade.<sup>94</sup> Then, he joined public demonstrations in his hometown of Salqin in Idlib governorate. After *shabiha* (members of pro-government militias) threatened him with a knife in the street, he said, his father brought him to a Jabhat al-Nusra headquarters.<sup>95</sup> Soon after, he left for a 20-day training camp in the mountains of Kafr Takharim, where he said three other children aged 12 to 17 trained alongside him.<sup>96</sup> He described his daily schedule:

We woke up at 5 a.m. to pray and then have breakfast. Then we had a military lesson on how to use weapons, then a religious lesson, then noon prayer, then lessons on how to make and use hand bombs and mines.<sup>97</sup>

After training, Omar told Human Rights Watch, he participated in a battle at Taftanaz airport in late 2012, and a battle at al-Gaziya checkpoint in Salqin, in early 2013. Both are in Idlib governorate. In his first battle, at Taftanaz, he said:

[During] the first two days, I hesitated to go to the front line and felt so afraid. Then our sheikh came to encourage us to go fight and gave us speeches about jihad, so after two days I went to front line.<sup>98</sup>

He said that Jabhat al-Nusra paid him a salary of 20,000 Syrian pounds (US\$135) a month.<sup>99</sup> Saleh, who joined Jabhat al-Nusra in March 2014 when he was 17, and fought with them in the battle at Kasab in Latakia governorate in April 2014, said he received a salary of 10,000 Syrian pounds (US\$68) plus a food box monthly.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Human Rights Watch consultant interview with Omar, location in Syria withheld, March 12, 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Human Rights Watch Skype interview with Saleh, April 4, 2014.

## Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) and Asayish

Human Rights Watch reported on human rights violations committed in Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria, including the recruitment and use of children, in June 2014. Since assuming power in 2012, the YPG and the Asayish, the police arm of the PYD, have deployed boys and girls at checkpoints and on bases in all three areas under their control: Jazira, Ain al-`Arab, and `Afrin.

In December 2013, YPG General Command issued an order that prohibited children under age 18 from participating in the YPG. The order stated that those in violation will be held “strictly accountable.”<sup>101</sup> This reiterated the prohibition on child recruitment in article 5.2 of the YPG’s internal regulations, which states that YPG members must be 18 or older.

YPG spokesman, Redul Xelil, told Human Rights Watch that the YPG had implemented the order by removing from military operations 17 people under age 18, instead assigning them tasks in media, education or political training centers. In a February 2014 meeting, Xelil said that no YPG members had been disciplined for having violated the regulations of the December order.<sup>102</sup>

Asayish internal regulations in article 7.2 also forbid individuals under 18 from joining the police force. Head of internal security in Jezira, Kanan Barakat, who supervises the Asayish there, said on February 9, 2014, that the force previously enlisted children but that practice changed “four or five months ago.” He said that currently all Asayish members had to be over 25 and there are no children in the force.<sup>103</sup>

However, during a visit to Jazira in February 2014, Human Rights Watch found continued evidence of child participation in both the YPG and Asayish. Researchers interviewed a 16-year-old boy who said he had been in the YPG since the previous year, the mother of a 13-

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<sup>101</sup> Redul Xelil, facebook note, December 15, 2013, [https://www.facebook.com/groups/344020305625449/#!/Redurxelil/posts/462356670536408?stream\\_ref=10](https://www.facebook.com/groups/344020305625449/#!/Redurxelil/posts/462356670536408?stream_ref=10)

<sup>102</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Redul Xelil, Rmeilan, February 12, 2014.

<sup>103</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Kanan Barakat, Qamishli, February 9, 2014.

year-old boy who joined in December 2013, and the brother of a 17-year-old who joined in January 2014.

The 16 year old, Arhat, told Human Rights Watch he joined at age 15 after going to YPG meetings at local youth centers, where YPG members spoke to him and other children. “They would talk to us about the Kurdish situation and explain the importance of defending the [Kurdish] nation,” he said. “It is our choice to join. ... My mom and dad were against it and said no but I wanted to.”<sup>104</sup>

Arhat said he went to a YPG base to register with his real name and age, and the YPG allowed him to join. He received weapons training and has since worked at checkpoints, and been sent to places where there have been explosions to conduct investigations after the fact. “In the morning I go to school and then I go to serve,” he said.

A woman in Qamishli said her 13-year-old son had joined the YPG in December 2013 without her knowledge after spending time at a PYD youth center.<sup>105</sup> A Kurdish man from Amuda said his 17-year-old brother had joined the YPG in January 2014. The man said his brother had left home without informing the family of his intentions:

He disappeared and for three days my parents searched for him everywhere, including police stations and security branches, but they didn’t find him. On the fourth day a YPG official, not high ranking, came to my parent’s house and told them that he had joined the YPG.<sup>106</sup>

Human Rights Watch also spoke to two girls, both aged 17, who were armed and guarding Asayish checkpoints in Malikiyah and near the Semelka (Faysh Khabour) border crossing with KRG. The Faysh Khabour guard said she had worked with the Asayish for more than two years.

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<sup>104</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, name and place withheld, February 12, 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, name withheld, Qamishli February 12, 2014.

<sup>106</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview, name withheld, March 21, 2014.

## International Legal Standards

International humanitarian law (the laws of war) and human rights law prohibit the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. The Second Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (Protocol II), which applies during non-international armed conflicts, prohibits states and non-state armed groups from recruiting or using children under the age of 15 in armed conflict. While Syria is not a party to Protocol II, the prohibition on the recruitment and use of children below the age of 15 is now considered customary international law, and is binding on all parties to armed conflict.

In 2000, the UN adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (the “Optional Protocol”).<sup>107</sup> The Optional Protocol, to which Syria is a party, raised the standards set in the Convention on the Rights of the Child by establishing 18 as the minimum age for any conscription or forced recruitment or direct participation in hostilities. Article 4 bans *any* recruitment or use of children under 18 by non-state armed groups: “[A]rmed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a state should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of eighteen.”<sup>108</sup>

The protocol also places obligations on governments to “take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices.”<sup>109</sup>

Individuals who commit serious violations of international humanitarian law with criminal intent are responsible for war crimes. Under customary international humanitarian law and

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<sup>107</sup> Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, adopted May 25, 2000, G.A. Res. 54/263, Annex I, 54 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 7, U.N. Doc. A/54/49, Vol. III (2000), entered into force February 12, 2002. The protocol has been ratified by 155 states.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, adopted May 25, 2000, G.A. Res. 54/263, Annex I, 54 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 7, U.N. Doc. A/54/49, Vol. III (2000), entered into force February 12, 2002. The protocol has been ratified by 155 states.

the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), it is a war crime for members of armed forces or non-state armed groups to conscript or enlist children under 15, or to use them to participate actively in hostilities.<sup>110</sup> The ICC statute clarifies that individual criminal liability also extends beyond the use of children as armed combatants. Under the ICC, the war crime of recruiting or using child soldiers:

Cover[s] both direct participation in combat and also active participation in military activities linked to combat such as scouting, spying, sabotage and the use of children as decoys, couriers or at military checkpoints. ... [U]se of children in a direct support function such as acting as bearers to take supplies to the front line, or activities at the front line itself, would be included.<sup>111</sup>

Prior to Syria's ratification of the Optional Protocol in October 2003, it adopted measures to comply with the treaty. On June 30, 2013, the government enacted Law No. 11 of 2013, which criminalized all forms of recruitment and the use of children under the age of 18 by armed forces and non-state armed groups, including taking part in direct combat, carrying and transporting weapons or equipment or ammunition, planting explosions, standing at checkpoints or carrying out surveillance or reconnaissance, acting as a distraction or human shield or assisting or serving the perpetrators in any way or form.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, eds., *Customary International Humanitarian Law* (Cambridge: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Cambridge University Press, 2005), rules 136 and 156; Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted July 17, 1998 U.N. Doc.A/CONF.183/9 (1998), entered into force July 1, 2002, arts. 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and 8(2)(e)(vii).

<sup>111</sup> Michael Cottier, in *Commentary on the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court: Observers' Notes, Article by Article*, Otto Triffterer, ed., (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft (2nd ed.), 2008, p. 471.

<sup>112</sup> H. Sabbagh, "President al-Assad issues law on penalties for involving children in combat activities," *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, June 30, 2013, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2013/06/30/490101.htm> (accessed April 25, 2014).

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# “Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die”

## Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria

In Syria’s brutal conflict, armed groups fighting against the government have recruited and used children as young as 14 to support their military efforts and sent children as young as 15 into battle. Brigades associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Islamic Front, and Kurdish forces fighting in northern Syria have all trained children and used them to perform military roles. Islamist extremist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) have specifically targeted children for recruitment, providing them with weapons training at young ages and in school settings.

*“Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die”* documents the experiences of 25 children who are current or former members of armed groups fighting in Syria. Boys interviewed spied on hostile forces, acted as snipers, treated the wounded on battlefields, and ferried ammunition and other supplies to frontlines while fighting raged. Some children who fought were detained or killed in battle.

The use of children by anti-government armed groups has not been confined to one group, or to certain ideologies or ethnicities. For security and logistical reasons, the report does not examine the use of children by pro-government militias or the Syrian armed forces.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Syria in 2003, bans government forces and non-state armed groups recruiting and using children, defined as anyone under age 18, as fighters and in other support roles. The report calls on armed groups operating in Syria to publicly commit to end recruiting and using children under age 18, and to decommission all fighters or helpers under 18 currently in their ranks. They should also work with international agencies specialized in child protection to rehabilitate and reintegrate these children into civilian life.



*A 14-year-old fighter in a Free Syrian Army brigade takes position inside a house in Deir al-Zor, a city in eastern Syria, in July 2013.*

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