

Child soldiers in ISIS, PKK, Boko Haram...

HRWF (11.07.2016) - Thousands of children are serving as soldiers in armed conflicts and terrorist groups around the world. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 38, proclaimed: "State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities." Since then, UNICEF and the UN Security Council took steps to end the recruitment of children in conflict and war.

ISIS child soldiers

For several years, the Islamic terror group ISIS has been recruiting child soldiers and has posted videos of little boys firing weapons almost as big as they are.

In one of them, a child wearing a ski mask hoists an AK-47 onto a makeshift firing platform, pulls the trigger and then staggers from the recoil.

Reaching the hearts and minds of the next generation of terrorists has become ISIS principal tenet in the Middle East.

A disturbing new ISIS video has quite recently emerged showing child soldiers executing "Afghan Taliban spies".

The use of child soldiers far predates ISIS, but what concerns researchers and policymakers is that ISIS' use of boys and girls does not follow the trends of previous conflicts.

Child soldiers are seemingly treated no differently than adult soldiers by ISIS, according to a new study published in the CTC Sentinel under the title "Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016." ⁱⁱ

The authors - Mia Bloom, John Horgan and Charlie Winter - state that the Islamic State is mobilizing children and youth at an increasing and unprecedented rate. The authors present preliminary findings from a new database in which they recorded and analyzed child and youth "martyrs" eulogized by the Islamic State between January 2015 and January 2016. The data suggests that the number of child and youth militants far exceeds current estimates. The article presents data on the children and youth's country of origin, age, role, location of death, and under what circumstances they were killed. The authors also describe several trends in the propaganda before discussing the varied and complex implications of the Islamic State's long-term vision for its children and youth.

Most of the children are from Syria. Most were killed in Iraq. Of the 89 cases, 39% died detonating a vehicle born IED device and 33% were killed as foot soldiers. Some 4% killed themselves while committing mass casualty attacks against civilians, and 6% died as propagandists embedded with brigades.

Researchers say they have noticed an emerging ISIS tactic. Nearly 20% of the children killed were inghimasis, or "marauders" who carried out so-called "plunging attacks." That's a military operation in which a group of fighters attack an enemy position before blowing themselves up.

Children are integrated into ISIS' military operations -- often with parental consent. "It's interesting the degree to which the parents are giving the organization access to their children," said Mia Bloom, the co-author of the report told CNN ⁱⁱⁱ. "It's not a coercive endeavor like what we saw in Africa. The kids are not being kidnapped. The kids are not

being coerced. For the most part, what we're seeing is kids posing with a big smile and at least in one case saying goodbye to the parents."

PKK child soldiers

The pattern of PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party, recognized as a terrorist organization by the US, EU, Turkey and other countries) child soldiers is different. The PKK is also known to often recruit children, sometimes as young as 7-12 years. In 2010, a Danish national daily newspaper, Berlingske Tidende, published a story about the PKK's child soldiers. According to that report, there were around 3,000 young militants in the PKK's training camps. The youngest child at the PKK training camps was eight or nine years old. They were taught Abdullah Öcalan's life story (the jailed leader of the PKK) and how to use weapons and explosives.

After that story was published, the PKK encountered strong reactions from human rights organizations worldwide. The same year, UNICEF released a statement voicing its "profound concern" about the PKK's recruitment of child soldiers.

In October 2013, the PKK, represented by HPG (the PKK's military wing) commander Ms. Delal Amed, signed the Deed of Commitment protecting children in armed conflict. This document, drawn up by the Geneva Call NGO, is dedicated to promoting respect by armed non-state actors for international humanitarian norms in armed conflict. Despite this commitment, the PKK continued to recruit minors. A number of them are known to have been used in terror attacks in Turkey.

Under Article 2 of the Anti-Terror Law, those who are caught perpetrating an act of terror are deemed to be "terror offenders", whether they are adults or minors, and can be sentenced to six years to nine years in prison. According to Al-Monitor^{iv}, Kurdish minors aged 12-17 years make up the vast majority of suspects who have been temporarily detained or arrested pending trial for terror offenses since the clashes between the security forces and the PKK resumed in the south-east in summer 2015.

In the case of PKK, child soldiers are obviously abducted and forcibly enrolled. An increasing number of Kurdish families in Turkey are calling for the return of their children. They claim they have been abducted by the PKK^v.

In May 2014, mothers from across Turkey whose children had been recruited by the PKK held a sit-in protest in front of the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality building and called on the PKK to release their children. Their children were mostly 14-15 years old at that time. Some families claimed that their sons and daughters were kidnapped by the PKK against their will. The Diyarbakır Municipality, administered by the HDP (pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party), used water cannon to disperse the mothers. HDP Co-Chair Selahattin Demirtaş even claimed that these mothers were hired by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization. Despite the resistance coming from the PKK and the HDP, the families continued their protest, and some families' children were released by the PKK.

In an article published by the Anadolu Agency on 20th September 2015 under the title "PKK criticized over child soldiers claims", Turkish security sources said that the PKK had recruited around 2,000 children during the last two years.

Turkish security records say that in 2014, the PKK abducted 983 children aged between 12 and 17. In 2015 until 14th August, records said that 929 children aged between 12 and 17 years were taken by the PKK.

These figures come from families informing the Turkish authorities about the abductions.

Between 2013 and 2015, at least 410 children fled from the PKK and surrendered to Turkish security forces.

Testimony given to police intelligence also claims that PKK bribed children in southeastern provinces to make them attack Turkish forces.

Children said that they received an average of 100 Turkish liras (\$33) to assault Turkish forces. If they were old enough, PKK militants handed over guns, children said.

The PKK recruited these children during the solution process or "peace process" officially initiated in early 2013 and aimed at ending the 30-year conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state.

A search of the PKK's official gazette, [Serxwebun](#), reveals many stories about child soldiers that have died in battle. The paper used to give the birth dates of these children but discontinued the practice because they wanted to hide their ages to prevent reaction from human rights organizations and their breaches of the Geneva Deed of Commitment. On the other hand, in both [Serxwebun](#) and [Hpg-sehit.com](#) these children's photos clearly show that they are not older than 14-15 years.

International human rights organizations have previously urged the PKK to end mobilizing children for terrorist activity. The United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF, expressed its deep concerns in 2010 about PKK's recruitment of child soldiers. UNICEF called on the PKK to halt this illegal practice.

A Human Rights Watch [report](#) published on 15th July 2015, "**Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban**"^{vi}, provides a list of 59 children, ten of them under the age of fifteen, recruited for YPG (Kurdish People's Protection Units) or YPJ (Women's Protection Units) forces since July 2014. International humanitarian law and the Rome Statute that set up the International Criminal Court classify the recruitment of under-15-year-olds as a war crime. While the Obama Administration does not recognize the YPG as a terrorist organization, and supports them as a local partner in the region, the YPG continues to recruit child soldiers^{vii}.

The U.S. sees the PYD (Kurdish Democratic Union Party, a Syrian affiliate of the PKK) as a "reliable partner" in the fight against ISIS. However, the Obama Administration should notice the fact that the PYD is not an independent organization. It is linked to the PKK and recruiting minors under 18. The decision to found the PYD [was made](#) in 2002 during a PKK congress in Qandil^{viii}. The PYD also has a bylaw stating that "Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the PYD."

Also, a United Nations Human Rights Council report on Syria in 2013 said that anti-government and Kurdish armed groups had recruited and used child soldiers in hostilities.

On 5th June 2015, UN Secretary General's report "**Children and Armed Conflicts**", presented to the Security Council pointed out the same human rights violations and child abuses. It stated that "*the recruitment and use of children in combat has become commonplace in the Syrian Arab Republic. PYD/YPG-YPJ continued to recruit and use boys and girls, including children younger than 15 years, reportedly taking them to indoctrination and training camps.*"

Boko Haram child soldiers

In January 2015, Nigeria's Islamist sect Boko Haram released photos purportedly showing a training camp for child soldiers^{ix}. The images show kids dressed in blue and

black clothing aiming automatic rifles. They were the first pictures released by the group to show their child soldiers.

Al-Urwa Al-Wuthqa Media, the group's emerging media arm that posted the photos, described the children as Boko Haram's "the cubs of the Caliphate", a phrase used by ISIS to describe its own child soldiers.

At least since 2014, Boko Haram has abducted, recruited and deployed child soldiers in Nigeria, Chad and Niger, according to J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa Center at the Washington-based Atlantic Council. But the expansion of Boko Haram's activities in Cameroon has been especially striking.

[According to the United Nations](#), Boko Haram has kidnapped more than 1,000—perhaps as many as 1,500—children. Mostly they were used as servants, carrying tents and fetching water but in February 2015 some of them as young as 8 were deployed on the front lines, apparently as human shields.

In a statement released on 29th November 2013 "Nigeria: Boko Haram abducts women, recruits children", Human Rights Watch stated: "Several witnesses said they saw children in the ranks of Boko Haram during attacks. In Maiduguri, Human Rights Watch researchers saw a video recording of the interrogation by security forces of a 14-year-old boy, who described the role he played in Boko Haram operations. Commanders of the Civilian Joint Task Force said they had freed numerous children during a 2013 attack on a Boko Haram base in Sambisa Forest. Human Rights Watch also observed children who appeared to be aged 15 - 17 manning checkpoints for the Civilian Joint Task Force in Maiduguri; other witnesses described seeing children manning checkpoints elsewhere in Borno and Yobe states."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the international community must go on urging the US and the EU

- to abide by their commitments to respect and promote the UN-based human rights, and in particular children's rights
- to give up any support to armed terrorist groups, such as the PKK and its affiliates, who use child soldiers to fight against ISIS, Boko Haram and other Islamist terrorist groups
- to prosecute the recruiters of child soldiers before international jurisdictions.

ⁱ Mail Online, 3 July 2016 : ISIS child soldiers use handguns to execute 'Afghan Taliban spies' in shocking new video released by the terror group (<http://bit.ly/29Cujtu>)

ⁱⁱ <http://bit.ly/1Q5wi7C>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/19/middleeast/isis-child-soldiers/>

^{iv} The 'Child Terrorists' of Turkey. The militant Kurdish organization pushes children to the front lines and uses their arrests and deaths to stir up sympathy, Al-Monitor, 22 December 2015

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015-12-22/the-pkks-child-terrorists>

^v PKK missing children, Deutsche Welle, <http://www.dw.com/en/pkk-missing-children/av-17790160>

^{vi} <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/10/syria-kurdish-forces-violating-child-soldier-ban-0>

^{vii} <http://bit.ly/29vnmM4>

^{viii} <https://twitter.com/simdiveburadatv/status/700426439867416576>

^{ix} <http://dailym.ai/29KDK40>