

# The big dilemma of small soldiers: recruiting children to the war in Syria

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## ■ Executive summary

Despite calls from host countries and the United Nations for better monitoring, existing knowledge on children's participation in armed groups and armed forces in Syria remains scattered. This report considers child recruitment to the war in Syria from the refugee populations in Jordan based on interviews with international and Jordanian officials, as well as Jordanian citizens and Syrian refugees. The report highlights some of the dilemmas and political, economic and social sensitivities facing those seeking to help Syrian children refugees. The report echoes the call for more systematic monitoring as the basis for providing services that enhance protection, engagement and policing.

## Introduction

The recruitment of child soldiers is a sensitive and difficult issue for both refugees themselves and the officials charged with providing assistance to them. The recruitment of child soldiers from Syrian refugee camps in Jordan is an open secret among national authorities and the humanitarian community, and raises many dilemmas for those seeking to help Syrian refugees. The open recruitment of soldiers from refugee populations, regardless of age, defines a space as militarised rather than as neutral and threatens a camp's status as a safe haven for displaced civilians. Recruiting child soldiers is also a war crime, one that has been successfully prosecuted by the International Criminal Court.

These sensitivities will only increase as the war drags on and the issue of child soldier recruitment by the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), the Assad regime or opposition groups gains public attention (Brannen, 2014). Yet, implementing formal mandates for child and refugee protection is riddled with dilemmas for the responsible authorities, dilemmas that arise from the intersection of their mandates with a range of realities on the ground in Jordan:

- diversity in recruitment tactics;
- the refugees' desire to return home and social norms concerning adulthood;

- the socioeconomic realities of refugee coping and the informal economy; and
- the political imperatives of states and factions involved in the conflict.

For families and officials tasked with protecting children there are no simple solutions. As a contribution to fostering policy dialogue on these difficult questions, this report outlines some of the issues that international responses to child recruitment to the war in Syria will have to grapple with. The focus here is on the dynamics of child recruitment from Jordan, because this was the site of our field research. Much of the analysis is based on interviews in March 2014 with non-governmental organisation (NGO) and United Nations (UN) personnel, and child and adult refugees near the Zaatari camp in the Mafraq and Amman areas, as well as on document reviews.<sup>2</sup> The study refers to other areas based on reports describing the results from similar fieldwork by other organisations. The study is by no means comprehensive, but it indicates key areas for further developments in policy and practice.

## Recruitment of Syrian child soldiers: what we know

From the start of the civil war there have been reports about the use of children as soldiers, porters and helpers

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Akram Atallah Alayasa for field assistance.

<sup>2</sup> In March 2014 Fafo researchers conducted field research in Jordan to investigate the recruitment of child soldiers to armed groups in Syria. Our questions were uncomfortable ones for most of those we spoke to. It is difficult to come by concrete data, so we were forced to rely on the perceptions of those most affected by child soldier recruitment, i.e. the families, children themselves, relevant officials and local residents.

for armed groups in Syria. Whereas Syrian government forces and associated militias were accused early on of a range of human rights violations against children – the killing, maiming and torture of children; sexual violence against children; and the use of children as human shields<sup>3</sup> – the recruitment of children for combat or support roles for armed units has mostly been ascribed to various opposition groups. At first groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were reported to be using children as soldiers. As the opposition fragmented, similar reports began to identify others as involved in similar activities. These included Jabhat al-Nusra, various groups under the Syrian Islamic Front (e.g. Ahrar al-Sham), Syrian Kurdish groups, ISIS and others (cf. HRW, 2014; UNSC, 2014a: 4–6).

In November 2012 Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that its field workers met five boys between the ages of 14 and 16 years who told its interviewers that they had worked with rebels and participated in combat in the southern province of Dara, in the central Homs region and on the border with Turkey in the north (HRW, 2012). HRW reported that children were recruited to participate in at least three opposition brigades in Syria. In March 2013 a publication by Save the Children UK recounted reports of children being recruited by both government forces and the rebel movements (Save the Children, 2013).

The kinds of activities for which children are being recruited are familiar from experience of child soldiering in other regions of the world (e.g. see Singer, 2006). In a report entitled *“Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die”*, HRW sums up what is known about the use of children by armed opposition groups in Syria as of June 2014 (HRW, 2014). The account is based on interviews with 25 children who have been members of various armed opposition groups. HRW found that boys as young as 15 were used in active combat and 14-year-olds filled support roles. In addition, a doctor who had treated a boy aged between 10 and 12 reported that the fighter who had brought the boy for treatment had explained that the boy’s job was to whip prisoners at an ISIS detention centre (HRW, 2014: 1).

There are also reports of children being trained for suicide operations (HRW, 2014: 20). Recent reports on ISIS activities from the conflating conflict zones between Iraq and Syria indicate that children are encouraged by ISIS fighters to take part in combat in order to train for and take part in atrocities (UNHCHR & UNAMI, 2014: 18). In ISIS-controlled areas of Iraq boys aged 15 and above who have escaped from ISIS after being forcibly recruited have reported to their families that they had been forced to form the front line for ISIS fighters during combat and had to donate blood to injured fighters (UNHCHR & UNAMI, 2014: 18).

Recruitment of children from Syria’s neighbouring countries – and the return of children to the war zone – is poorly documented. Most reports are anecdotal at best. An assessment among refugees in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan in 2013 showed that approximately a quarter of the respondents interviewed knew, through word-of-mouth and personal observation, cases of children returning from the camp in Jordan to Syria to fight (Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013: 19). A newspaper report from August 2013 cited UN officials estimating that about half of the 200 new recruits that enlisted in rebel ranks and who boarded buses each week to Syria from the Zaatari camp were under the age of 18 (Luck, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

## A mother’s dilemma, a boy’s burden

From experience with child soldiering in conflicts, the nature of incentives, motivations, pressures, and coercion in child recruitment and enlistment processes varies considerably. In some situations recruitment of children is part of an overall effort by state or non-state armed groups to recruit more soldiers to fill the thinning ranks of fighting units. This kind of mobilisation for enlistment often involves recruitment through family relationships or personal ties. This differs from the systematic targeting of children as preferred recruits, precisely because they are under-aged and easily manipulated (cf. Honwana, 2005). The latter process of conscious targeting of under-aged combatants is often accompanied by recruitment through ideological means or by force.

The 25 children interviewed by HRW in 2014 described different reasons for participation: whereas some had joined relatives, others had been recruited after having participated in protests against the regime. Some described having lived in areas without functioning schools and that joining an armed group was one option among very few. It seems that ISIS has more systematically targeted children in its recruitment: during the past year children have been recruited through ideological persuasion in public forums and not only through personal or kinship networks. HRW (2014: 12) reports that “Islamist groups such as ISIS have more aggressively targeted children for recruitment, providing free lectures and schooling that included weapons and other military training”. A recent article describes military training for children living in ISIS camps with their parents starting before they reach the age of 16 years (Brannen, 2014).

In conversations of the authors with Syrians in the Mafraq area in March 2014 adults and children conveyed the view that they desperately wanted to help their loved ones who had stayed behind in Syria. The Mafraq Governorate has received high numbers of refugees from Syria’s southern

<sup>3</sup> For example, one UN Human Rights Council report referred to an incident of several dozen children – “boys and girls ranging between the ages of eight and 13 years” – forcibly being taken from their houses by government forces and placed by soldiers in front of the windows of buses that carried military personnel to the raid on a village (HRC, 2012: 97).

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in locating the original internal UN report that the article refers to.

regions. The Zaatari camp is located 10 km from Mafraq city centre and includes a large portion of the governorate's refugees: it was the home of 107,130 people in March, according to UNHCR figures (UNHCR, 2014). Many refugees also rent housing outside camps, e.g. in Mafraq city.

In Mafraq we met five boys aged 11 to 13 years. All of them were living with their mothers at the time, while their fathers were in Syria. Two of the boys' fathers were fighting for the FSA. All were well aware of the situation in the areas of conflict in Syria. One of the boys explained that he knew through news on a bad Internet connection that his father was under siege in Homs: "They lack weapons or they lack good weapons", he said.

Social workers and psychologists who work for community-based organisations in Mafraq told us that among Syrian mothers' grievances is the wish to protect their young sons and prevent them from going back to the war zone. At the same time they appreciate their sons' desperation and feeling of uselessness. The mothers themselves long to be back in Syria. A woman psychologist in Mafraq quoted a mother who had said that "I will rather spend five minutes in my home, then die, than to stay here". The psychologist told us about mothers who phone their sons and husbands every day, begging for permission to return to Syria. But their husbands do not want them to come back because it is too dangerous. "So how can mothers stop their sons from going, when they themselves wish to return?" the psychologist asked rhetorically. At the same time, a UN report indicated that the recruitment of children below 18 years to the rebel movements in camps in Jordan is accompanied by economic incentives: the families of the young fighters receive monthly salaries from the FSA and even priority in the distribution of food aid and cash assistance in the camp (Luck, 2013). Reports of children and youth leaving Zaatari to fight for rebel groups in Syria mostly refer to the FSA (Luck, 2013), and the majority of refugees in Zaatari are perceived to be FSA supporters (e.g. see Halaby, 2013). A former UN employee we spoke with in March, however, who was currently working for an NGO and asked not to be quoted, had alerted camp authorities about encouragements in mosques in Zaatari to join the ranks of al-Nusra.

This impression of conflicting impulses among Syrian refugees is to be expected. Strong social norms and mores are at work in the decision-making and channels of child soldier recruitment. The cultural understanding of age distinctions among Syrian youngsters does not free boys under 18 from duties, work or feelings of moral obligation. This was confirmed by the specific circumstances of child recruitment in the Mafraq area: the cases of children returning to the war zone that were recounted to us during our talks with resource personnel characterised children

as deeply engaged in the events in their home country, and children and youth returning to the war as driven by despair and a sense of moral responsibility to help their brothers and fathers. We did not encounter evidence that children were being targeted for recruitment because of their low age.

In fact, the scale of child recruitment is not visible in the demography of Syrian refugees in the Zaatari camp in Jordan. As part of a broader investigation of the impact of Syrian refugees on the labour market in Amman, Mafraq and Irbid, Fafo carried out a survey in the Zaatari camp in March. While the survey showed a gender imbalance among adults, it did not show significant differences in the number of boys and girls below 18 years in the camp.<sup>5</sup>

There are also economic incentives in northern parts of Jordan that work against child soldier recruitment. For example, various cash assistance schemes from NGOs target parents in Mafraq to keep refugee children in school. The gendering of household coping strategies may also entail that children are kept at home: the group of five boys we met in Mafraq were active in the informal economy, selling chewing gum on the street. With the influx of refugees, Syrian labour has become cheap and in demand in Jordan, and young Syrian boys can be found working in many shops in Mafraq. The competition between Syrian refugees and Egyptian foreign workers in the agricultural sector is a much-discussed topic among people in both Mafraq and neighbouring Irbid.<sup>6</sup> While most Syrian mothers are reluctant to expose daughters to work outside the home, many refugee households depend on their young, breadwinning sons staying put in Jordan.

## Constraints on protection

Humanitarian organisations face rising demands from donors for effectiveness through increased levels of service delivery in assistance to refugees. To UN organisations, however, the dual responsibility for service delivery and protection is fundamental.

The main approach by UN and other organisations in Jordan to protect children from recruitment to armed groups and armed forces has been awareness-raising campaigns aimed at discouraging groups from recruiting and parents from encouraging or allowing their children to return to the war zones in Syria. They also encourage the establishment of child-friendly spaces in the camps. With respect to the Zaatari camp, the UN Children's Fund and the Child Protection Sub-Working Group report on child protection through the standardised Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms. However, reporting takes place at irregular intervals (e.g. see Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013) and

<sup>5</sup> In the age group 22 to 30 years, however, there is a deficit of men: 40% men compared to 60% women (Stave & Hillesund, forthcoming 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See Stave and Hillesund (forthcoming 2015) for a broader discussion of the impact of Syrian refugees on the labour market in Jordan. Based on fieldwork in 2013, Christophersen et al. (2013) explore similar social dynamics in Lebanon.

the monitoring of children leaving Zaatari for Syria is not systematically incorporated into the running of the camp on a daily basis.

The protection mandate of humanitarian organisations is constrained by the necessary reliance on the Jordanian authorities for camp security and the provision of infrastructure. Based on an agreement with the government, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is responsible for the coordination of services in the Zaatari camp, while the Jordanian police are in charge of security. UNHCR is dependent on the police for security to allow it to deliver water, electricity, housing and other services. Indeed, the Jordanian police play a vital part in the coordination of all organisations that work to meet the needs of the city of refugees that Zaatari has become.

UNHCR fosters a constructive engagement approach with local authorities, attempting to secure their assistance while at the same time engaging them in a dialogue in order to improve protection activities. This is a fine balance. Many NGO workers we interviewed were concerned that any attempt to address the recruitment of child soldiers would have an impact on the climate of cooperation with the Jordanian authorities necessary for effective service delivery.

Jordan itself faces dilemmas when it comes to the protection of children from recruitment to the war in Syria. Jordan has taken a strong position internationally opposing child soldier recruitment: the country's ambassador to the UN told the Security Council in March 2014 that Jordan

urge[s] international bodies to continue closely monitoring violations and developing the instruments, guidelines, training materials and information management systems necessary to strengthen the monitoring and reporting mechanism, as well as strengthening the capacities of relevant States by providing them with technical assistance, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, civil society, and the donor community (UNSC, 2014b: 23/79).

Jordan has itself actively sought to put a regulatory framework in place: in 2006 it ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The protocol instructs states to prevent the recruitment of persons under the age of 18 to armed groups. It also obligates states to take all necessary measures *to make effective* the prevention of child recruitment to armed groups (UNHCHR, 2000, arts. 4.1, 4.2, 6.1), regardless of whether these operate in an armed struggle in the country in question or in a neighbouring country. One implication of this obligation is that it places a duty on governments to investigate the purpose of children's movement across borders, in particular when as

refugees they return home to a country experiencing armed conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Jordanian criminal law makes it illegal to recruit soldiers for terrorist organisations, regardless of their age. In April 2014 the Jordanian parliament passed an amendment to the country's anti-terror law, which has been on the books since 2006. The amendment includes a clause that criminalises the act of joining (and attempting to join) extremist Islamist groups fighting outside Jordan. It also considers persons affiliated with these groups as terrorists (e.g. see Malik, 2014). The law was proposed following pressure from Saudi Arabia and the U.S., both of which see these kinds of laws as vital to curbing the growth of extremist Islamist groups in the region. This approach to sanctioning listed organisations is similar to that adopted by the UN Security Council in its counter-terrorism work, which was re-affirmed with respect to "violent extremism" and terrorism at a summit meeting of the Security Council in September 2014.<sup>8</sup>

In short, there would appear to be ample law – both international human rights law duties and domestic Jordanian criminal law provisions – to enable the Jordanian authorities to investigate the recruitment and movement of refugee children from Jordan and back into Syria as child soldiers. Yet there is a distinct lack of enforcement. The Jordanian counter-terrorist law does not cover recruitment by the FSA, because it is not on Jordan's list of terrorist organisations. In addition, policing cross-border movements is proving difficult. Border enforcement appears to be constrained by humanitarian imperatives: in attempts to stop extremist groups from passing into Jordan the government at irregular intervals ensures that illegal border crossings to and from Syria are closed. But for humanitarian reasons, unofficial refugee transit routes to Mafraq are allowed to function.

In Mafraq we spoke with a young Jordanian street vendor, a former student in Syria. He reported being able to cross back into Syria on several occasions. In the following week he reported that he was planning to go back to fetch books and papers to continue his studies: "Movement is not impossible", he said. "We know where the control posts are. If there is trouble on the road, we walk the smaller paths instead, and catch transport on the other side of the blockage." There is also evidence in the local Jordanian economy of fairly porous borders. Refugees bring their valuables to sell in Jordan: guns and gold jewellery are among the most well-known commodities sold by Syrian refugees. According to Jordanians in Mafraq the trade in Syrian refugee weapons has exploded: as one man put it, every Jordanian farmer "living near Syrian refugees" now owns a rifle. Whether it is for hunting, security or status, the prices of shotguns have dropped to a level that allows "everyone" to obtain one.

7 International criminal law, as adjudicated by the International Criminal Court, creates criminal liability for individuals who accept children under the age of 18 into the service of an armed group (enlistment) as much as it does for those who implement more coercive forms of recruitment (conscripted).

8 See UN Security Resolution 2178 (2014) on foreign terrorist fighters.

Local perceptions among Jordanians appear to take it for granted that economic interests are distorting the policing of the cross-border refugee traffic. In our fieldwork in March 2014 just mentioning the child soldier recruitment issue to Jordanians in Mafraq tended to prompt reports of a range of exploitative ills: corrupt camp personnel, too tight control of camp boundaries and lack of control of activities inside the camp. Our visit coincided with an increasingly strict regime of controlled access to the camp imposed by the Jordanian authorities, which may have disrupted economic relations with the local Jordanian community. During our fieldwork the entrances to Zaatari camp were almost closed. Only a few months previously, visitors could walk in and out freely, but in March 2014 camp residents referred to Zaatari as a “prison”. The Jordanians we spoke to in nearby Mafraq interpreted the increased control regime as an economic strategy by local authorities, not primarily as a protective or security measure. By limiting access to the camp the authorities empowered local middlemen: gold and weapons were sold outside the camps by those who had camp access and who profit from price arbitrage between the markets inside and outside the camp boundaries. The price of gold in Jordan has fallen accordingly, but is still higher in non-camp settings than inside the camp.

The perception on the part of local Jordanians of the camp control regime as benefitting officials also extended to the exploitation of Syrian refugee children. In a recent report Save the Children (2014) suggests that child marriage is on the rise among the Syrian refugee population in Jordan. In Mafraq Jordanians interviewed by Fafo regularly accused “Gulf men” of paying camp personnel to enter the camp to offer informal marriage to under-aged girls, and rumours abound of sexual abuse of Syrian boys. In January 2014 UNHCR’s camp manager in Zaatari, Kilian Kleinschmidt, asserted that UNHCR is trying to control the exploitation of young women through tighter controls on the camp and through the verification of marriages (Harper, 2014).

Evidence concerning these forms of exploitation remains poor and these allegations remain largely unverified. It is likely that these are also signs of an increasingly strict policy by Jordan in managing refugee flows and that the economic repercussions are the side-effects of such a policy. At present, the Jordanian authorities appear more concerned with targeting listed terrorist organisations than with preventing the recruitment of child soldiers by all parties to the conflict. Even so, the recruitment of child soldiers among refugees will remain a source of embarrassment for UN and Jordanian authorities, because it raises the question as to whether camp or other authorities are able to enforce the protection of children from recruitment.

Political sensitivities that may constrain action are not just internal, but also extend to the regional politics of the Syrian conflict. Jordan has a traditional policy of attempting to remain as neutral as possible, but the country finds

itself at the centre of an increasingly polarised regional political conflict. Regional powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have conflicting goals and agendas in Syria, including proxy relationships with factions on the ground. Jordan is trapped between Saudi demands for support to all forms of anti-regime forces and Turkey’s and Qatar’s support for Islamic resistance forces in particular. Jordan has no interest in losing financial support from any of these countries, especially with its growing burden of Syrian refugees.

In addition, Jordan is well aware of the growing influence and power of Islamist militant groups on its borders. The development of these movements has been unpredictable during a time of highly volatile regional politics and regime instability. In addition, there is constant uncertainty over the affiliations and ideologies of the Syrian opposition, which further complicates any decision-making about direct or indirect support to such groups, including turning a blind eye to child soldier recruitment and movements.

In other words, the Jordanian authorities face a delicate balancing act. No state can easily admit to a lack of control in its own territory or a failure to police its own borders, yet Jordan faces unprecedented levels of refugees and pressure from the powerful backers of various factions to at least permit armed-group activities. In addition local dynamics are at work that limit the ability of the Jordanian authorities in Amman to enforce their own legal commitments. It might also be opposed by segments of the refugee population the Jordanian authorities would seek to protect.

## Ways forward, but no good options

As pointed out by the UN and Jordanian authorities, humanitarian service provision and programmes that target the child soldiering phenomenon are important to create a climate that discourages child soldier recruitment. But they are unlikely to be sufficient.

A more assertive response will be needed. Factions actively targeting children for recruitment should be identified and the Jordanian police encouraged to take the necessary action to disrupt and prosecute such recruitment. Constructive engagement with those factions benefitting from enlistment activities – but not actively conscripting or targeting children – should be a priority for UN or non-governmental agencies. The aim of this engagement should be to identify incentives for those factions to stop the enlistment of children and to find ways to demobilise those presently fighting. In turn, demobilisation will require rehabilitation and schools to receive them, otherwise children may move from soldiering to child labour. Parallel work will need to be undertaken with families and local leadership, including those politically affiliated to Syrian factions.

For such an approach to work a prior step is an improvement in the knowledge base about child soldier recruitment. It would be logical for a monitoring initiative to take a multi-stakeholder approach, i.e. including engagement with the relevant political and religious communities in the refugee population, as well as the relevant Jordanian and UN agencies. In this way improved monitoring will not only permit better targeting and the development of more appropriate programmes of engagement and policing, but can itself provide the basis for the creation of common ground among the refugee community, humanitarian organisations and the Jordanian authorities.

Improved engagement, service provision, and protection activities require improvements to monitoring, which should do the following:

- Permanent monitoring mechanisms should be developed. At a minimum, these monitoring mechanisms should be established in the education facilities that now form a standard part of all humanitarian emergency response.
- As part of this monitoring process the various social-political mechanisms that are at work in recruitment processes (coercion, self-recruitment, etc.) should be mapped in order to adjust responses and mobilise partners (police, border control personnel, the education system, the health system, etc.) and target resources for the work.
- Monitoring must go hand in hand with the investigation of cases of disappearance or known recruitment.
- The provision of services for children in camps should be organised in a way that discourages recruitment through promoting rehabilitation and education.

The international donor community and national governments should:

- Demand that funds donated to provide services for refugees are given with conditions related to protection. Putting money to good use is more than increasing levels of services. Donors should ensure that funds given for refugees are in fact distributed in a way that links humanitarian service delivery with monitoring and reporting on the protection of children against recruitment to armed groups and other protective needs.

Jordanian authorities should:

- Honour their legal obligation to take all necessary measures to prevent child recruitment to armed groups by investigating and controlling the passing of children from Jordan back into Syria.

The parties to the conflict in Syria should:

- At a minimum, not actively recruit children under the age of 18 to armed forces or groups in Syria and actively cooperate with Jordanian, international and other agencies seeking to demobilise and otherwise assist such children.<sup>9</sup>

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