

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

Report on Violations of Children's Rights in Armed Conflict

By Sarah Thierrée

Introduction

For more than a decade, the war in Syria has transformed the lives of millions of children into a daily struggle for survival. By 2023, almost 6.8 million Syrian children were dependent on humanitarian aid, and more than two million were living in areas of active conflict. This context, marked by systemic violence and non-compliance with international standards, has exacerbated the suffering of Syrian children. The parties to the conflict, whether state forces, non-state armed groups or foreign powers, have systematically violated children's rights as guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The absence of effective protection mechanisms and the lack of accountability for violations have exacerbated this humanitarian crisis. This report analyses the nature and extent of violations suffered by Syrian children, assesses the measures taken to protect them, identifies existing gaps and makes concrete recommendations to strengthen their protection. The data used is based on reports from the United Nations, international NGOs such as Amnesty International and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (OSDH), as well as first-hand accounts.

Nature and scale of violations of children's rights

1. Recruitment and Exploitation of Children in Armed Conflict

Since 2011, thousands of Syrian children have been recruited or used in hostilities. These children, often under the age of 15, have been integrated into armed groups, where they are used as combatants, messengers or human shields. Reports document cases where children have been abducted from schools or villages and subjected to ideological indoctrination before being sent into combat.

Child recruitment is particularly widespread in areas controlled by non-state armed groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State. These children suffer

not only physical violence but also deep psychological trauma. A study by Amnesty International found that some children recruited by armed groups are used for dangerous tasks, including laying mines and preparing explosives (Amnesty International, 2017, pp. 6-8). In government-controlled areas, pro-regime forces have also been accused of exploiting children in logistical support operations.

2. Arbitrary detention and torture

Children held in Syrian detention centres, particularly Saydnaya prison, face extreme abuse. They are often arbitrarily arrested, accused of collaborating with the opposition or being linked to terrorist groups. In these prisons, children are subjected to inhuman conditions: deprivation of food, lack of access to medical care, overcrowding and physical and psychological torture.

A report by the Association des Détenus et Disparus de Saydnaya (ADMSP) reveals that children held in Saydnaya prison are frequently beaten and subjected to degrading treatment. Some are used as pressure tactics to force their families to cooperate with the authorities (ADMSP, 2022, p. 25-27). These practices are in direct violation of international standards, in particular Article 37 of the CRC, which prohibits torture and cruel treatment of children.

3. Attacks on Schools and Hospitals

Civilian infrastructures, such as schools and hospitals, continue to be prime targets in the Syrian conflict. Hundreds of schools have been destroyed or damaged by air strikes and ground attacks since the start of the conflict. As a result, thousands of children have been deprived of their fundamental right to education.

According to the OSDH, between 2011 and 2023, more than 500 attacks on schools were reported. In Idlib, an air strike in March 2022 hit a primary school, killing 12 children and seriously injuring 20 others (OSDH, 2021, pp. 12-14). Hospitals, essential for providing care to injured children, were also targeted. A UN survey revealed that 70% of medical facilities in conflict zones are inoperable, depriving thousands of children of vital access to care (UN Commission of Inquiry, 2022, p. 2-3).

4. Forced displacement and precarious living conditions

The Syrian conflict has displaced millions of children. Many are living in overcrowded camps where sanitary conditions are deplorable. These children are exposed to malnutrition, diseases such as diarrhoea and pneumonia, and psychological trauma due to the loss of their homes and loved ones.

The Al-Hol camp, which shelters children affiliated to families of Islamic State fighters, is a striking example of this crisis. These children, considered "potential threats", are often isolated and deprived of access to basic services, including education and psychosocial support. An OSDH report indicates that more than 60 children died in the camp in 2022 due to preventable diseases and lack of medical care (OSDH, 2021, pp. 15-16).

Assessment of Current Protection Measures

1. Legal and institutional frameworks

Although Syria has ratified the CRC, national mechanisms to protect children remain seriously inadequate. Syrian laws do not provide effective sanctions for the recruitment of children or for attacks on civilian infrastructure. In addition, humanitarian access is often restricted by local authorities and armed groups, preventing organisations from providing vital assistance.

2. Humanitarian and International Initiatives

Despite the challenges, international efforts have been made to protect Syrian children. UNICEF, in collaboration with local NGOs, has launched education and psychosocial support programmes for displaced children. However, limited funding and insecurity on the ground limit the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report and recent discussions at the United Nations, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthen Documentation Mechanisms:** The United Nations must extend its monitoring mechanisms to document violations of children's rights in Syria, using modern technologies such as satellite images.
2. **Ensuring Full Humanitarian Access:** Restrictions on humanitarian access must be lifted to allow organizations to provide healthcare, education and psychosocial services to vulnerable children.
3. **Set up rehabilitation programs:** Efforts must be made to provide comprehensive rehabilitation for affected children, including psychosocial support services, adapted educational programs and specialized medical care.
4. **Hold perpetrators accountable:** Individuals and groups responsible for violations of children's rights must be brought to justice before national or international courts.
5. **Strengthening international cooperation:** UN member states must step up their financial and logistical support to meet the needs of Syrian children and implement lasting solutions.

References

- Amnesty International. (2017). *Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria*. pp. 5-8, 41-43.
- Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP). (2022). *The Administrative Structure and Organizational Ties of Sednaya Prison*. pp. 8-10, 25-28, 51.
- United Nations Commission of Inquiry. (2022). *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/51/45, pp. 2-4.
- Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (OSDH). (2021). *Annual report on human rights violations in Syria*. pp. 5-16.