

الائتلاف الوطني لقوى  
الثورة و المعارضة السورية



National Coalition of Syrian  
Revolution and Opposition Forces

Representative Office to the United States

Priyanka Motaparthy  
Researcher, Children's Rights Division  
Human Rights Watch  
350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor  
New York, NY 10118

18 June 2014

Dear Ms. Motaparthy,

Thank you for your letter on the exploitation of children in the Syrian armed conflict, and for the dedication Human Rights Watch has shown in drawing attention to this important issue. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces and our partners on the ground, including the Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the Free Syrian Army, are committed to upholding and protecting the human rights of all Syrian children, and to ensuring that those who violate such rights are held accountable.

No Syrian child should have to live in fear of violence. The exploitation and recruitment of children in armed hostilities violates international law and represents a war crime, as defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Both the Coalition and the SMC staunchly oppose the use and exploitation of children as instruments of war. For this reason, we have instituted clear policies and orders prohibiting the recruitment and use of children in combat and auxiliary roles, and we have trained Free Syrian Army ranks in the tenets of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child.

Our commitment to ending the use of children in armed conflict is consistently reflected in our public statements. As the SMC's Proclamation of Principles states, we refuse to tolerate "the recruitment or use of children by armed groups." This position was confirmed with our adoption of the Declaration of Commitment on Compliance with IHL and the Facilitation of Humanitarian Assistance, in which we jointly pledged to "refrain from the recruitment of children and the use of children in hostilities." We have likewise publicly called for the immediate demilitarization of schools, and demanded that all parties to the crisis in Syria protect schools and their civilian character.

Our stated commitment in support of children's rights in Syria has been matched by our efforts to reach out to UN representatives and galvanize the international community to more effectively support and monitor human rights in Syria. Syrian Coalition representatives have met repeatedly with staff of the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and we have issued multiple letters to the UN Secretary-General, the UN Security Council and UN agencies on the need to better protect civilians in the Syrian armed conflict, including specifically Syrian children, as well as victims of sexual violence.

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Despite our efforts, however, too many children continue to be displaced, killed, tortured, raped, and exploited throughout the Syrian conflict. Syrian regime forces bear the overwhelming responsibility for such crimes, which include the documented use of children as human shields, the targeting of schools and the torture, rape, and murder of Syrian children.

The Syrian regime's overwhelming responsibility for war crimes does not, however, excuse the transgressions of others. All parties must be held accountable for their crimes, and all parties should be bound by international law. For this reason, both the Syrian Coalition and the SMC are actively examining allegations that members of Syria's armed opposition have engaged in the recruitment of children. We take such allegations extremely seriously and are committed to ensuring that anyone responsible for the voluntary or involuntary recruitment of children is held to account.

To ensure that our commitments to Syria's children are upheld, we are currently in the process of reviewing our age-verification procedures and are considering the institution of new command orders which would prohibit the acts that enable child soldier recruitment. We welcome Human Rights Watch's thoughts on what such policies might entail, and how our brigades might best institute them.

On behalf of the Syrian Coalition, I thank you for your attention to this letter, and look forward to working with Human Rights Watch to shine further light on this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Najib Ghabbian  
Special Representative of the Syrian Coalition to the US