

Terrorism at the Age of Sixteen: YPG and Child Soldiers

Operation Olive Branch initiated on January 20, 2018, has highlighted humanitarian crises present within Syria, primarily human security of children. Recent media and human rights organization reports have claimed the YPG, a Syrian offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization is utilizing child soldiers against the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Footage shows children as young as twelve years of age being used as foot soldiers and left in un-humane conditions. These recent reports do prove the operation consists of both a national security aspect for the Turkish State, but also a humanitarian aspect for Kurdish nationals living in Syria within YPG governed territory.

The utilization of child soldiers by non-state organizations involved in terrorist activities is not something new. Media echo-chambers have contributed to the bias and double-standards present in labeling terrorist organizations as 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters', and also turning a blind eye to the humanitarian tarnish these organizations have brought about, primarily the PKK/YPG/PYD in Turkey, Syria and even Europe.

The usage of children in terrorist activities is a strategic and carefully calculated choice by terrorist organizations. It is one that involves rational decision and careful planning as Operation Olive Branch has proven. Many children have been used by the PKK linked YPG throughout Syria. Fifteen-year-old Riyadh Ibrahim was sent to the front lines of the YPG/PKK and killed in Deir Ez-Zor. Ibrahim's death was not published on the YPG's official website, most likely for fear of uncovering of its utilization of children.

The humanitarian aspect of the operation has become more and more apparent as days have gone by as proven with footage from social media websites such as Twitter. The liberation of villages currently in Jinderes and Rajo has additionally uncovered the PKK's usage of children. Sixteen-year-old Fatima was also rescued by Operation Olive Branch Forces on Feb 18, 2018, while liberating various towns and villages in Afrin. The inhuman treatment of Fatima can be seen as she was left dehydrated, forced to fight on the front-lines, not given proper treatment and hygiene.

As terrorist organizations are entities that learn from each other and have a milieu of skills transfer, the PKK within Syria can be forecasted to be utilizing, or will utilize child soldiers by means of different pathways, just DAESH in Raqqa. These pathways consist of 1) Utilization on front lines 2) Utilization as suicide bombers 3) Utilization for logistic purposes and 4) Utilization for propagandist purposes.

It is quite well known now that the YPG/PKK are utilizing children for their modus operandi in different pathways.

The first pathway of utilization with means of child soldiers on the front lines of Afrin, and also the cases of Deir Al-Zor provides the PKK/YPG with strategic leverage. Children are generally used on the front lines for means of stealth as a result of their height and weight, aid in them blending into their surroundings. Children are first ideologically indoctrinated over a period of time, radicalized and sent to the front-lines to fight for the group's modus operandi. As operational forces tend to not shoot at children, they are used to get up and close to military personnel, and aid in their killing. Within this pathway, children are viewed by the YPG as 'expendable', sent to regions which are of high risk, whereby other combatants who are seen of strategic importance are not sent.

Within the second pathway, children could be forecasted to being used as suicide bombers if things don't go to plan for the YPG in Afrin. DAESH is known to have previously used children as suicide bombers with either suicide vests or vehicles which are used as mobile improvised explosive devices (IED). As children may think twice about pressing the button, switches are implemented into the vest for detonating the vest at a distance by a second operative. This is a highly likely outcome and should be considered with utmost certainty by human rights organizations and those backing the YPG.

Children in the third pathway are generally used for logistical purposes on-ground. This third pathway generally used to form rapport between the child and the terrorist organization, and in time links into the first or second pathway, with children either being sent to the front-lines of battle, or utilized as suicide bombers. As children are being used for logistical purposes, they are portrayed as being given important 'duties', making the child feel important and thus aiding in his or her radicalization. Child soldiers here are

generally made to carry weapons and ammunition. Hard labor such as carrying heavy ammunition boxes and artillery could be considered as well.

Within the last pathway, children are used as white and black propaganda material by the YPG through the PKK's official news outlet, the Fırat News Agency (ANF) and the YPG/PKK's social media pages on Facebook and Twitter. Children forcefully recruited by the YPG are portrayed as being very brave and 'fighting for the cause'. Propaganda served upon social media shows children being made to smile and being very happy with their lives, but photos and footage not shown by the PKK and YPG prove otherwise. Children are also used as black propaganda to aid in the radicalization of PKK sympathizers. Child soldiers are shown to being killed or 'brutally murdered' by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army, and help should be given to the YPG, though we know this is not the case.

In conclusion, it is quite well known now that the YPG/PKK are utilizing children for their *modus operandi* in different pathways, aiding in their radicalization, and using children as expendable foot soldiers. Operation Olive Branch has proven a grave human security situation for children is present within YPG controlled territories. Governments and international communities as a whole including non-state organizations should ponder upon the support given to the YPG as an ally, and also stop the utilization of child soldiers by terrorist organizations globally. Children who are rescued from YPG liberated areas will need to undergo psychological counseling and therapy. So what will the international media and organizations do?