

# Children joining the front lines in Syria

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Hussein Mansour, 16, (right) sits with fellow young rebel fighters in an ancient mosque near the front line in Aleppo, Syria. Thirteen of Mansour's uncles and cousins have been killed fighting government forces. Human rights groups say thousands of child fighters have taken up arms in the civil war. Raja Abdulrahim/Los Angeles Times/MCT

ALEPPO, Syria — The prayer room in the 12th-century mosque was a mess — cups of tea and coffee covered most surfaces, and cigarette butts were everywhere. A lanky teenager named Hussein Mansour plopped himself down. He placed a grenade and a small bag of pretzels on the table.

Hussein picked up the grenade again and pretended to pull the ring. A fellow rebel fighter, Abu Musab, gave the 16-year-old a harsh look.

“I mean, he’s carrying a grenade and a 3-cent bag of chips,” he said, shaking his head. “It doesn’t fit — he’s too young.”

## Teenaged Soldiers

As the Syrian civil war rages on, hundreds of fatigued rebel fighters are deserting the opposition. Many others are being killed daily. Their positions are increasingly filled by teenagers like Hussein.

Thirteen of Hussein's uncles and cousins have been killed fighting government forces. Now Hussein carries the assault rifle used by one of his late cousins. He picks it up often, as if playing with a new toy.

Hussein took a break from fiddling with the rifle and motioned to the gun rack beside him. "What do you think these are, anti-aircraft weapons? These are just rifles my 6-year-old brother could shoot."

In a war that has already claimed more than 190,000 lives, boys like Hussein expect to die one way or another. Most seem to live by the phrase often heard in rebel areas: "It's all one death."

The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates there are about 5,300 child fighters among the opposition, not including extremist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Another 2,000 children fight for pro-government forces. Most child soldiers are between the ages of 14 and 17.

## **Fear Of Permanent Violence**

In June, Human Rights Watch released a report on the use of child soldiers. It accused Syrian armed groups of violating international law by enlisting children whose families have been killed.

The Nusra Front and ISIL are two of the most extreme opposition groups fighting the Syrian government. Both have been called terrorist groups, and ISIL has seized large parts of Iraq and Syria. It is trying to set up its own country there, governed by its strict version of Islamic law.

In recent weeks, ISIL released videos showing the murder of two American journalists in Syria. ISIL has also been called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

According to Human Rights Watch, Nusra Front and ISIL have enlisted children through free schooling campaigns that include weapons training. They have even recruited them to become suicide bombers.

Many worry about the long-term effects of having so many teenagers fighting. They fear that violence will become a permanent part of Syrian society, even after the war ends.

The war is "only made worse by throwing children into the front lines," said Priyanka Motaparthy of Human Rights Watch.

## **A Desperate Situation**

Mainstream rebel groups have policies that prohibit enlisting fighters younger than 18. However, those policies are mostly ignored — the situation is so desperate that no willing fighter is turned away.

Hassan Suwaas is stationed on the same front line as his 14-year-old son, Omar.

Suwaas reasoned that it was better than having his son join one of the extremist Islamist groups.

A kid that "sees a shell fall on him or on his neighbor," he said, "is going to grow up and want to fight."

Here at the front line where the rebel-held mosque sits, there are only occasional clashes. The line between rebels and government forces has not changed for more than a year. Government soldiers are stationed just a few hundred feet away, and last tried to storm the mosque more than six months ago.

### **Fighters In Flip-Flops**

All the fighters are dressed in street clothes and many wear flip-flops, since they expect to spend their days lounging on worn sofas. They rotate four-hour shifts of watching 10 televisions that monitor the area around the mosque.

As others around him chatted and smoked, 16-year-old Majid stared at the TVs.

His father, who is stationed at another battle line in the city, was reluctant to allow his son to join the rebels. Only when his father's friend, a commander in Aleppo's Old City, pleaded on Majid's behalf did he give in. His mother still does not approve.

"I lied to her and told her that there are no (government) soldiers nearby," Majid said. "She thinks I'm far away from the front line."

Majid had just finished seventh grade when his school was closed as the fighting took hold in the city. With his skinny arms folded across his chest, he insisted he would finish his education when the war was over.

Aamir Mansour, five years older and twice his size, turned to Majid, "Why, you think you're going to live?"

"No," Majid said quietly, knowing that was the answer expected.

**Quiz**

- 1 How many lives has the Syrian civil war claimed?
  - (A) more than 190,000
  - (B) less than 100,000
  - (C) more than 250,000
  - (D) less than 190,000
  
- 2 In the section "Fear of Permanent Violence" select the paragraph that BEST explains how militant organizations are recruiting child soldiers.
  
- 3 Select the sentence which BEST explains the phrase "it's all one death."
  - (A) All the soldiers in the war expect to die.
  - (B) The teenagers expect to die one way or another.
  - (C) The war has claimed many lives.
  - (D) Thousands of soldiers have already died.
  
- 4 Select the sentence which explains the terms Nusra Front and ISIL.
  - (A) The Nusra Front and ISIL are two of the most extreme opposition groups fighting the Syrian government.
  - (B) ISIL has also been called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
  - (C) According to Human Rights Watch, Nusra Front and ISIL have enlisted children through free schooling campaigns that include weapons training.
  - (D) Mainstream rebel groups have policies that prohibit enlisting fighters younger than 18.