

Middle East and North Africa

Regional overview

Children continued to be recruited as soldiers and used in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa.¹ There were child soldiers in **Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sudan** and **Yemen**. As of March 2004 there were an estimated 20,000 children in government forces and armed political groups in Sudan. Children were recruited and used by Palestinian armed groups and used as informants by the Israeli armed forces. Palestinian children were the victims of excessive force by Israeli forces and children detained by such forces were denied minimum standards for juvenile justice. Most states in the region failed to sign up to international legal commitments to protect children from involvement in armed conflict.

Children at war: Sudan and “low intensity conflicts”

The Global Report documents the alarming situation of child soldiers in **Sudan**. In March 2004, there were an estimated 17,000 children in government forces, allied militias and opposition armed groups in the north, east and south. Between 2,500 and 5,000 children served in the armed opposition group, the Sudan’s People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), in the south. Despite a widely publicized child demobilization program, in which the SPLA claimed to have demobilized over 16,000 children between 2001 and 2004, it continued to recruit and re-recruit child soldiers. In March 2004, some 6,000 Ugandan and Sudanese children were held

captive in southern Sudan by the Ugandan rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

As a humanitarian and human rights crisis unfolded in the western Darfur region of **Sudan** from early 2003, there were reports that young children were abducted and served with government armed forces as well as in government-backed *Janjaweed* militias. Armed opposition groups in Darfur also reportedly used child soldiers.

Children were involved in tribal armed groups in **Yemen**, where the proliferation of light weapons continued to be of concern. The recruitment and use of children in armed groups was difficult to document owing to the enormous difficulties faced by human rights and humanitarian organizations in carrying out research. The difficulties were due in part to government obstruction, but also to the impossibility of gaining access to large areas controlled by tribal militias.

Although **Iran** was not widely considered to host internal armed conflicts, under-18s may have been involved in armed clashes between Iranian forces and the *Mujahedeen Khalq* Organisation in 2003.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

The possible use of children as soldiers in **Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories** was the focus of considerable attention by the international community, the media and the general public. While there was no systematic recruitment of

¹ Country entries for Djibouti, Libya and Sudan are included in this section of the Global Report.

children by parties to the conflict, their active involvement was one of its main characteristics. Children in the Occupied Territories were constantly exposed to conflict and violence. While the Israeli authorities claimed that Palestinian children were subjected to indoctrination and coerced into action against Israeli forces, Palestinian leaders argued that their children were oppressed and humiliated by the occupying forces and deprived of their basic rights. Palestinian children were frequently the victims of excessive use of force by Israeli forces, resulting at times in the killing of bystanders or stone-throwing children.

There were reports of some cases of children being used by **Palestinian** armed groups as suicide bombers. The leaders of these groups publicly condemned the use of children in their ranks, including as suicide bombers, but it remained unclear what measures, if any, were taken to end the practice. At least nine Palestinian children carried out suicide bombings against **Israeli** soldiers and civilians between October 2000 and March 2004. At least 30 Palestinian children died while actively involved in organized military action by Palestinian armed political groups during the same period.

Palestinian children detained by the **Israeli** armed forces were systematically denied the right to minimum standards for juvenile detention and justice, and torture was widespread. Some children, including children who had been detained, were forced to collaborate with Israeli forces and in at least one case a child was used as a human shield.

Playing with fire

Political indoctrination of Palestinian and Israeli children was denounced by both sides in **Israel and the Occupied Territories**, in an increasingly politicized and militarized

environment, especially in the Gaza strip. Political education and military training by *Hezbollah*, and training by Palestinian groups in refugee camps in **Lebanon** allegedly continued.

Military training for under-18s was widespread in the Gulf region. In **Oman**, children received training as young as 14, and in the **United Arab Emirates** and **Bahrain** at 15. Some 16 year olds also received military training in **Djibouti**.

For over a decade, it was believed that thousands of **Iraqi** children were being trained for combat by the government of Saddam Hussein, and that they would be deployed against the US invasion. In fact, it was demonstrated that the *Ashbal Saddam* (Saddam Lion Cubs), were created primarily for propaganda and indoctrination purposes and that children were not used to fight the US-led Coalition forces. However, children were used by various Iraqi armed groups fighting the occupying forces. US-led forces also included under-18s in their ranks.

The legal framework: states fail to make a stand

Only four countries in the region ratified the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict between 2001 and 2004. They were **Morocco** in May 2002, **Qatar** in July 2002, and **Tunisia** and **Syria** in January and October 2003 respectively. States which signed the Optional Protocol between 2000 and 2004 were: **Israel**, **Jordan**, **Lebanon** and **Sudan**. Signature of the Optional Protocol did not bring an end to child recruitment in **Sudan**.

Most states had not signed the Optional Protocol. The region was thus still to make an unequivocal statement against the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. The reason commonly given by officials and commentators was a lack of acceptance of 18 as the age of majority,

making governments reluctant to end recruitment below that age.

Algeria, Djibouti and Egypt, which had not signed the Optional Protocol, supported the Common African Position, agreed at the Pan-African Forum for Children in Cairo in May 2001. The Position reaffirmed, among others, states' commitment to protecting children from involvement in armed conflict, as well as calling for the demobilization of all children under the age of 18.

Optional Protocol: ratifications and signatures

Acceded/ratified: Morocco/W Sahara, Qatar, Syria, Tunisia; **signed:** Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan; **not signed:** Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.