



Stockholm
University

Fall | 18

**Beyond the dichotomies of a coercion and voluntary recruitment
Afghan unaccompanied minors unveil their recruitment process in
Iran**

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Abstract

By shedding light on accounts from unaccompanied Afghan asylum-seeking minors in Sweden who were child soldiers in Syria, this thesis explores and examines their narratives and their involvement in the civil war in Syria.

The research aims to create a deeper understanding of how these children themselves made sense of their participation in the war by answering the following questions:

How were the children approached by the recruiters?

What kind of reasons for joining the war are put forward by the recruiters and what strategies do the children encounter: a) economic; b) identity formation; c) social deprivation; d) feeling of vulnerability; e) militarization; f) mental development; g) ideology/ religious-sectarian; or all together?

How do the children perceive these encounters and make sense of their recruitment to the Shiite Fatemiyoun Brigade? To which extent has the ideology of Shi'ism played an important role for them in joining the Syrian War?

This is a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews which combines procedures from two approaches and techniques: an ethnographic approach and a narrative approach that explores the interviewees' experiences in a period of time and also generates detailed insights.

Despite the fact that none of the respondents testified for being recruited at gunpoint or having been ill-treated, the respondents emphasized that they were forced to join due to the bad circumstances they were living in.

In addition, many similarities with other cases regarding child soldiering in several countries have been explored in this thesis, for instance factors related to the socio-economic context and the experiences that are related to the children's development processes.

Differences can be located in various details regarding ideologies and indoctrination since the respondents did not share the politico-religious purposes of the recruiters.

“War is all about control of spaces and humans. Nevertheless, children are actors in this space, they navigate, they succumb and they respond.”

(Podder, 2012:70)

Dedicated to those who suffer from war and conflicts, to the children of Syria and Afghanistan, to every child soldier and refugee.

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Acknowledgments

First of all, I'd like to thank the brave participants who voluntarily shared their narratives with me and made this work achievable.

Thanks to my supervisor Professor Erik Olsson who helped me with his valuable feedback and meetings.

Thanks to my Professor Elie Wardini for his inputs and comments.

Special thanks to the management, custodians and the minors of Ersta Lukasgården/ Ersta diakoni for unaccompanied minors who gave me the enormous opportunity and support to achieve this study.

Glossary

Unaccompanied minor: “A person under the age of 18 who has come to Sweden without his or her parents or another legal custodial parent.” (Migrationsverket, 2015, my translation)

Fatemiyoun Brigade: In Arabic (Liwā al-Fāṭamiyūn). I will use the English version of the name Fatemiyoun Brigade. More details about this brigade are clarified in the chapter “Relevant background (context)”.

Toman: The official currency of Iran.

Medan: Public square, Plaza. (According to the respondents)

Haram: Shrine, holy place. (According to the respondents)

LMA-kort: Asylum-seeker card. LMA stands for “lagen om mottagande för Asylsökande”. This card functions not as an identity card, but as a proof that the holder is an asylum-seeker and able to legally stay in Sweden while waiting for a decision. (Migrationsverket, 2016, my translation)

Daesh: Dāʿiṣ is the Arabic term of ISIS, and it is an acronym of “al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fi-l-ʿIrāq wa-l-Šām”, The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria ISIS.

Kuffār: plural of Kāfir, Arabic for infidel, disbeliever.

Zainab: Granddaughter of Prophet Mohammed and daughter of Ali the fourth Caliph and the first Shia imam. In many Islamic sources, especially the Shiite, it is said that her shrine is in Damascus, one of the holiest places for the Shia Muslims.

Ruqayya: According to Shia narrative, she is the daughter of Hussein ibn Ali. In many Islamic sources, especially the Shiite, it is said that her shrine is also in Damascus, one of the holiest places for the Shia Muslims.

Introduction

The war in Syria has become a duel between many international powers with direct or indirect intervention of these powers on Syrian soil. Syria, therefore, has become a fertile ground for Jihad following the increased growth of Sunni Jihadist groups regionally and globally. Many reports have mentioned that Iran plays a major role in Syria's war by directly and indirectly sending reinforcements to the Syrian regime. As for the indirect part, Iran is funding a coalition of Shia foreign fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and recently from Pakistan.

In 2015 the number of Syrian refugees in Sweden had reached about 51.000, turning them into the biggest group who sought asylum in Sweden that year, while the second biggest group were Afghan refugees, of which unaccompanied minors constituted about 66% of all 35.369 minors who came to Sweden that year. (Migrationsverket, 2016-01-01, my translation) The reports from The Swedish Migration Agency point out that almost all of those Afghan minors who came to Sweden are males, and half of those minors stated that they came from Iran, not from Afghanistan, and one of the reasons for those Afghan minors to flee from Iran, according to them, were the Iranian authorities' recruitment campaigns among the young Afghans in order to make them fight alongside Iran's ally, the Syrian regime. (Migrationsverket, 2016-01-21, my translation)

In 2014 I started working on a voluntary basis with refugees with different ages and nationalities to help them learn the Swedish language and various aspects of the Swedish society.

By the end of August 2015, my professional inclination went towards a particular group of refugees, unaccompanied minor refugees, so I became a full-time employee, working as a custodian with this group of asylum-seekers as the numbers of unaccompanied minors were rising that year. My work with these Afghan adolescents gave me a unique insight in understanding why many of them fled Iran for Sweden.

In October 2015 in the middle of what at that time was referred to as "the Refugee Crisis", Radio Sweden in its program "Konflikt" broadcast an audio report under the title "The unaccompanied minors and the War [...] How children fleeing is linked to the war in Syria" in which Radio Sweden conducted a few interviews with young Afghani men who described their situations in Iran and stated that they fled Iran to escape the recruitment campaigns. The radio program "Konflikt" had also been in contact with the

Iranian Embassy in Sweden which denied the reports about the coercion recruitment of minors. (Sverigesradio, 2015, my translation)

In his report for the Institute for the Study of War, Christopher Kozak¹ points out that the Iranian involvement and its proxies increased in Syria when ISIS took over Mosul in Iraq which resulted in thousands of Iraqi Shia fighters withdrawing from Syria and returning to their country. This in turn pushed the Iranian authorities to mobilize thousands of foreign Shia fighters including Afghanistan's Shia Hazara to increase the Syrian regime's forces. (Kozak, 2015:16) Kozak's report as it is based on various sources mentions that the Afghan Shia fighters, who are generally members of The Fatemiyoun Brigade (Liwā' al-Fāṭamiyūn), are fighting alongside other Shia militia like the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi militia Brigade of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas² (Liwā' Ābū al-Faḍl al-'Abbās), and many other militias that altogether are loyalists to the Syrian regime. (Kozak, 2015)

Despite the Declaration of Human Rights, Geneva Conventions, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and many other treaties and international efforts to stop the use of children in conflicts, the recruitment and employment of child soldiers is still growing extensively in the Middle East.

In light of all above mentioned, this study traces the experiences of three former child soldiers in Syria, who eventually became unaccompanied Afghan asylum-seeking minors in Sweden.

Problem Statement and Scope of the Study

There has been very little academic in-depth investigation in the field of the Afghan Shia soldiers in Syria as the problem has received scant attention in the research literature.

In light of recent events in the Syrian Civil War and various reports, however, it is becoming extremely difficult to ignore the existence of foreign Shia child soldiers in this conflict.

¹ Christopher Kozak: Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, where he focuses on Syria security with an emphasis on the Assad regime and the Iranian involvement in the Syria Civil War. He analyzes how the Iranian participation in Syria was actually essential to the Syrian regime's survival as the regime's troops were losing more lands to the opposition's armed factions.

² A significant analysis and discussion on this brigade is presented by Smyth (2015)
<http://jihadology.net/category/liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas/>

This study seeks to examine the phenomenon of recruiting Afghan refugee children for the Syrian War and offers important insights into accounts from three former Shia child soldiers from Afghanistan who have been recruited in Iran and then sent to Syria, before they eventually came to Sweden and sought asylum.

One of the main reasons for choosing this topic is my personal experience of working closely with Afghan unaccompanied minors for many years, and this aspect has promoted and driven this research, which has involved collecting children's accounts of their experiences of becoming soldiers. The aim is to understand how these children themselves made sense of their participation in the war, how their motivations were related to their social situation and to their perspective of reality as well as how they viewed the methods driving the process of recruitment. By analyzing the respondents' narratives on their involvement in the war I attempt to answer the following questions:

- How were the children approached by the recruiters?
- What kind of reasons for joining the war are put forward by the recruiters and what strategies do the children encounter: a) economic; b) identity formation; c) social deprivation; d) feeling of vulnerability; e) militarization; f) mental development; g) ideology/ religious-sectarian; or all together?
- How do the children perceive these encounters and make sense of their recruitment to the Shiite Fatemiyoun Brigade? To which extent has the ideology of Shi'ism played an important role for them to join the Syrian War?

Moreover, as Human rights groups and NGOs repeatedly announce that the use of child soldiers in the Syrian conflict has reached a crucial stage, and that it must be stopped, this study gives an insight into how refugees and especially children are more vulnerable to exploitation by warlords. Child Soldiers International Human Rights Organization emphasizes: "Reports continue to emerge of children being actively recruited by armed forces and groups in MENA countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Yemen. Recruitment risks are notable in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, which are hosting large refugee and other vulnerable populations." (Child Soldiers International)

Therefore, similarly to what Ryan suggested in her study about child soldiers in the Sudan civil war, "this paper can be used to inform not only other former child soldiers

on what they went through but also to educate the population as a way to prevent child recruitment being used in future conflicts.” (Ryan, 2012:21)

On the other hand, this paper shows that the desertion rates among child soldiers, who have been exploited, might be rising if children see a glimmer of hope to live a better life even far away from their native countries.

Relevant Background

Child Soldiering in Afghanistan

Afghanistan actually has a long history of being a home to child soldiers. In data available to the international community and researchers, child soldiers first emerge in 1979 when the Soviet forces intervened in Afghanistan in order to support their ally, the Afghan Communist Movement. Consequently the involved parties have recruited many children during the war, mostly by the mujahedeen who established anti-Soviet resistance and began a recruitment campaign that targeted households to provide one soldier. Despite the fact that the child soldiers were forcibly recruited, the families of these child soldiers often celebrated their sons in what came to be viewed as a historic successful campaign to expel occupying Soviet forces. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011)

Despite the victory of the mujahedeen in 1989 and the departure of the Soviet troops, the use of child soldiers continued, especially in the civil war from 1992 to 1996, thus creating a dilemma, namely that many Afghans are uncertain as to their precise date of birth, the time of their enlisting in armed groups, and whether they were below 18 or over. What is significant during this period, however, is that “for many families, participation in the mujahedeen had become a way of life which like any skilled trade or valorized identity, was passed from father to sons, oftentimes at a very young age.”

(Özerdem & Podder, 2011:161) The phenomenon of child soldiers in Afghanistan continues and increases with the emergence of the Taliban’s movement, as is widely noted (Özerdem & Podder, 2011), but there are no exact numbers of how many children have been mobilized and enlisted to other armed groups, especially the groups that opposed the Taliban movement and became one of their main enemies such as the Hazara minority group.

Hazara Afghans in Iran

By virtue of my working with the unaccompanied refugee minors in Stockholm, I have met many Afghan minors, mostly Hazaras who lived in Iran, who described their personal experiences and circumstances in Iran as ‘hell’, as they have significantly deteriorated.

According to the UNHCR in 2015 the Islamic Republic of Iran hosts and provides services to more than 950,000 registered Afghan refugees, of which Hazaras and Tajiks who arrived in the 1980s make up 70 percent. (UNHCR, 2015)

Iranian officials in 2012 pointed out that there are some 1.4 to 2 million Afghans who are not registered as refugees but live and work in Iran. (Human Rights Watch, 2013)

The registered refugees hold Amayesh cards which enable them to access basic services and the freedom to move – however, only within the province they are registered in. (UNHCR, 2016) This makes the refugees’ movement limited to so-called ‘No-Go Areas’. (ICMC Europe, 2013)

Hazaras speak a dialect of Dari (Persian Dialect) and the majority follows the Shia sect (Minority Rights Group, 2017), which makes them culturally and religiously linked to Iran, but seemingly did not prevent the discrimination against them in Iran. They have not risen to high-ranking positions in Iranian society but rather have a low socio-economic status, which makes their suffering continue as the Hazaras have already experienced a long period of discrimination and persecution in Afghanistan at the hands of the Sunnis, especially Taliban. (Public Intelligence)

Moreover, Human Rights Watch in its 124-page report documented that Afghans are ‘unwelcome guests’ in Iran, and that Iran violates the Afghan refugee and migrant rights by detention and deportation, as the authorities are using physical abuse and other inhumane methods against the refugees, including unaccompanied children, in order to push Afghans to leave Iran. (Human Rights Watch, 2013)

A few years later, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch’s, Peter Bouckaert said:

Iran has not just offered Afghan refugees and migrants incentives to fight in Syria, but several said they were threatened with deportation back to Afghanistan unless they did. Faced with this bleak choice, some of these Afghan men and boys fled Iran for Europe. (Human Rights Watch, 2016-01-29)

The Fatemiyoun Brigade (Liwā' al-Fāṭamiyūn)

A significant feature in the children's narratives is of course the army or brigade to which they were recruited.

The name Fatemiyoun originally derived from the name Fatimah, the daughter of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. The name could also have been derived from the Fatimid dynasty, belonging to the Shia Ismaili sect, who claims the descent from Ali and Fatimah. This dynasty, however, begun its ruling period in North Africa in the early tenth century with the help of Berber troops, then conquered Egypt, and transferred their capital from Tunisia to Cairo in 969. After that, they made more progress and gained control of territory in Syria, Palestine, the Hejaz and Yemen, until 1171, when Saladin eventually ended the Fatimid rule in Egypt. (Ochsenwald and Fisher, 2010:124)

However, the Fatemiyoun Brigade is nowadays one of the prominent fighting brigades in Syria, and perhaps was established in the beginning of 2013.

According to the TV channel al-Jazeera the brigade includes about twenty thousand fighters from Afghanistan's Shia Hazara refugees in Iran, fighting under the supervision of the Quds Force which leads the external operations of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps IRGC. (Aljazeera, 2016-08-28)

Several Arabic media reports claim that the Fatemiyoun Brigade emerged in late 2012, as the Afghan fighters initially were a part of other militias like the Iraqi Shia militia brigade Liwā' Ābū al-Faḍl al-'Abbās, and/or a part of IRGC, but later formed their own militia, the Fatemiyoun Brigade. (Alarabiya, 2015-05-21)

The motivations to enlist in this militia differ from one source to another, as some sources claim that recruitment is voluntary, pushed by religious reasons, attractive salaries, and the promises of legal stay and work Iran. Other sources from NGOs claim that recruitment occurs under coercion, Human Rights Watch for instance indicated in a report in January 2016 that Iran used threats to force undocumented Afghan refugees to fight in Syria, quoting Afghans saying they were told they would be deported or jailed should they not agree to fight in Syria. (Human Rights Watch, 2016-01-29)

There is now a steady increase of publications describing the role of Iran in recruiting Afghans, a more recent one published by Human Rights Watch. In this report "Human Rights Watch researchers reviewed photographs of tombstones in Iranian cemeteries

where the authorities buried combatants killed in Syria, and identified eight Afghan children who apparently fought and died in Syria.” (Human Rights Watch, 2017-10-01) As mentioned earlier, the Iranian Embassy in Sweden denied the reports about the coercion recruitment of minors. On the other hand, Iran officially claims that thousands of Afghans living in Iran have volunteered to join the militias (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In other words, Iran is indirectly saying that there is recruitment but it is voluntary.

Previous Studies:

The amount of relevant literature concerning child recruitment and child soldiering has rapidly increased during the past thirty years. Most sources used in this study focus on child recruitment in Africa (Liberia, South Sudan, Congo, Angola) and East Asia (Cambodia, Burma, Sri Lanka, Nepal) as well as in Latin America (Colombia, El Salvador) but can also be applied to many other child soldiers around the world like the Afghans who suffer from many decades of conflicts that have led to unstable, uneducated and unsafe generations, emerging especially among those who are displaced and became refugees in Afghanistan’s neighboring countries. These sources are essential for my approach both when analyzing in depth interviews and when pursuing a deeper understanding of the different motivations and factors that can explain the recruitment process.

Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration, edited by Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder (2011), mainly examines the relationship between recruitment process experiences of the children and their reintegration into society after they have left the rebel groups. In their useful five-part volume analysis, the authors highlight the social processes behind the recruitment in various rebel groups and the socialization, training, and indoctrination of child soldiers. (Madan, 2012) The book discusses child soldiering in ten countries across the continents such as Liberia, Angola, Uganda and Sudan in Africa, Colombia and Guatemala in Latin America, Nepal, Afghanistan and Philippines in Asia. Each country presents specific findings.

Child Soldiers: The role of children in armed conflicts by Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohen (1994) also is essential for this study and serves as the main source in understanding child soldiering in many parts of the world. Even though it was published a long time ago, it is still very valuable and many other authors such as Ryan and Gates

have utilized this book in their researches, as it begins with a definition of what a child is, and then investigates the reasons why children participate in the conflicts.

In her book *The Children of War. Child Soldiers as Victims and Participants in Sudan Civil War* Christine Ryan (2012) thoroughly studies the children's motivation for their involvement in the Sudanese War and gives an overview through organized interviews of 76 former child soldiers. By giving a voice to these former child soldiers, Ryan attempts to understand the reasons for their participation and the mechanism pushing them to join the armed group SPLA in the south of Sudan. Ryan examines the circumstances and the relevant cultural dynamics in which the child soldiers joined the armed group.

Ryan also emphasizes that NGOs need a better understanding of children during and in the aftermath of wars, and that child participation must be the core of the NGO's work as she explores overlooked issues in the perspective of former child soldiers on issues of motivations.

Ryan has also utilized the book *Child Soldiers in the age of fractured states*, edited by Scott Gates and Simon Reich (2010), which is also referred to in this study.

On the other hand, I agree with Mats Utas' (2012) critique of Ryan's research, in which he indicates that some accounts are not intelligible. Utas argues that the interviews heavily relied on a formal questionnaire covered some aspects but failed to give sufficient considerations to other aspects. Utas therefore claims that Ryan's study would have been more relevant had she adopted other questions that Utas provided in his review.

Another weakness that Utas found in Ryan's book is that the stacking of child soldier testimonies does not make Ryan's book more comprehensive, as he suggests that less would have been more (Utas, 2012).

Utas review of Christine Ryan's book, as well as the valuable inputs of Professor Olsson made me realize that firstly, the numbers of interviews are eventually not the most important. Most important is to have good interviews that give nuances and opportunities to reflect around, enabling the researcher to dive deep into the analysis.

However, there are many similarities between these previous studies and this study, for instance the in-depth interviews that the researchers conducted with the child soldiers, investigating the motivations, experiences, and social context.

The major difference, however, lies in the fact that all previously mentioned studies and researchers have discussed and dealt with child soldiers who fight for and in their own lands, whereas the focus of this study lies on unaccompanied Afghan former child soldiers' perceptions of their war involvement in a foreign country like Syria after seeking asylum in Sweden. Another difference is the method employed in this study allowing me to come closer to my interlocutors, which inspires them to give an account from the inside.

Theoretical Approach

Understanding child soldiers' reality and experiences

Literature provides a number of answers to the general question: Why are children subjected to recruitment in war?

The answer to the question will spontaneously be: because children are forced to participate, which is absolutely true, since many researchers like Gates demonstrate that "many groups, indeed, abduct or depend on fear and intimidation as the principal means of recruitment." (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:36)

Other answers could be: children voluntarily join armed groups because of their personal experiences and circumstances as children's understanding of reality is influenced by their social sphere. (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994) The researchers have also traced other patterns and argue that:

[...] these trends of socioeconomic dislocation of children, technologic simplification of weaponry, and the broader changes in the nature of much of contemporary warfare were necessary factors to the emergence of child soldiers as a global phenomenon. They created not only the mass availability of child recruits but also the new possibility that they could indeed serve as effective combatants. (Gates and Reich, 2010:104).

Moreover, some studies have explored that “the vast majority of young soldiers are not forced or coerced into participating in the conflict, but are subject to many subtly manipulative motivations and pressures that are all the more difficult to eliminate than blatant forced recruitment.” (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:30) In other words, it is common to see recruitment as either forced or voluntary but that these two positions can be problematized.

Here, it is necessary to explain and to define some important issues related to the meaning of forced and voluntary recruitment. Goodwin-Gill and Cohn define forced recruitment as following: “It is entailing the threat or actual violation of the physical integrity of the youth or someone close to him or her.” (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:23) Intimidation and force play a significant role in the recruitment of children in many conflicts worldwide.

Many studies (e.g. Achvarina and Reich, 2006; Lischer, 2009) have shown that several lines of evidence suggest that the method of forcible recruitment varies depending on the armed groups and the area, so this recruitment may come in the form of armed soldiers entering a refugee camp, a school (Becker, 2009) or a village and forcing inhabitants to enlist in the armed forces at gunpoint. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:36), whereas “coercive recruitment covers those situations where there is no proof of direct physical threat or intimidation, but the evidence supports the inference of involuntary enlistment.” (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:28)

In the case of voluntary recruitment, the authors put emphasis on various motivational factors, and they give an example of the war in El Salvador, as there were obvious differences in motivations of FMLN volunteers between those who belong to the urban, upper middle class, from those who belong to a rural and poorer class. (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:30) In the following, I will summarize the main reasons that push children to join an armed group, but in order to make these reasons clearer, I will deconstruct each factor and explain it by following Goodwin’s and Cohn’s subtitles, which I consider relevant in providing more explicit about the content. I will also give examples relating to the current period of time in order to enrich the study.

Children’s pre-war and war-related experiences

Militarization

Goodwin and Cohn argue that there are contextual conditions of children's pre-war and war-related experiences. (1994) One of these conditions is militarization. When a society is being built in a kind of militarized state it facilitates recruitment. In their interesting analysis of why children and youth join armed groups, Goodwin and Cohn suggest that refugee children at refugee camps are also vulnerable to political exploitation and are possibly ready to use guns, because these camps can be militarized environment and form an important resource for child soldiers whether conscripted or voluntary. An example carried out by the authors of how refugee camps can be highly militarized, when about 2000 unaccompanied Sudanese refugee children allegedly fled from a refugee camp in 1992, and have joined or been recruited by the SPLA in Southern Sudan (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:32). Militarization, however, comes in multiple forms, it can be soldiers patrolling the streets and military censorship of social life playing a major role in the everyday life of children, even before an actual war, and by giving examples of the effect of militarization in the lives of children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and South Africa, the authors argue that "excessive militarization of a society leads to a mental militarization, in which violent response to social problems is the norm." (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:39)

In Syria, for example, as I experienced it, students (intermediate and secondary) were obliged to wear military khaki-colored school uniforms until 2002, giving the impression of being groups of recruits heading to military barracks instead of pupils going to school. As indicated previously, up to this day, Afghanistan has suffered from a long period of many conflicts, and this long history of wars has pushed the militarization to be a vital part in the everyday life of Afghans until it became a way of life, as illustrated briefly by Özerdem and Podder: "For many families, participation in the mujahedeen had become a way of life which like any skilled trade or valorized identity, was passed from father to sons, oftentimes at a very young age." (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:161)

Moreover, despite some progress in the schooling system in Afghanistan, 40 percent of the children have no access to schooling as half the schools have no buildings, and many are being used for military purposes. (Human Rights Watch, 2017:10-17)

In the analysis chapter, I will present the main findings of the current investigation, depending on the children's perception of militarization in both Iran and Afghanistan.

Socio-economic injustice

Various accounts on war and child engagement have demonstrated how social, political and economic factors such as the lack of opportunities, corruption, unemployment, and authoritarianism can trigger both adults and children to take up arms. Among these accounts are Özerdem's and Podder's study which demonstrates that there are many contextual factors that might push children to join an armed group, such as "poverty, war, religious or ethnic identity, family or its absence and friends." (Özderem & Podder, 2011:33)

In addition to this, youth unemployment, and the absence of educational opportunities can have further impact on children's involvement (Gates and Reich, 2010)

Similarly, Ryan makes almost the same observations in her study on child soldiers in the Sudan Civil War, observations related to the war context, and examines the circumstances the children lived in such as regional location, year, political environment and family dynamics, breaking down motivations into five areas: protection, defense, access, support and future career. (Ryan, 2012:61-87)

Other researchers have also traced other patterns and draw attention to casual factors behind the child soldier phenomenon, as they blame social disruption and failures of development caused partly by developments of globalization which led to socioeconomic problems and fragmentation and weigh heavily on the youth generation. (Gates and Reich, 2010:96)

A child's socioeconomic situation during a conflict becomes worse because the conflict leaves destruction, oppression, and desperation, or children become orphaned, displaced or responsible for the whole family when one parent is killed or gone missing. (Goodwin and Cohn, 1994)

In the Liberian Civil Wars, for example, poverty was one of the major reasons that pushed a child to join an armed militia, as some children associated with the armed groups in order to bring back food and other materials and goods for their families. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011)

In the same vein, Goodwin and Cohn emphasize that a "gun often becomes a meal-ticket and a more attractive option than sitting at home afraid and helpless." (1993:23)

Armed organizations exploit child poverty in order to recruit children in the conflicts, because these organizations are aware of the fact that "a child will not join an organization unless the organization can offer a payoff over time that is greater than

what he would earn otherwise.” (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:34) That case was also proven in The Democratic Republic of Congo, as it indicates “payment seems to be a strong incentive for children to enlist, particularly in situations when their parents are missing or they have a hard time providing for themselves in terms of basic security and food.” (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:34)

In the Sudan Civil War, however, the conditions that the former child soldiers experienced were not straightforward conditions of poverty or lack of resources; the poverty that they were in was highly politically linked. (Ryan, 2012:62)

In such cases, armed organizations use a carrot-and-stick approach in order to reach their goals, giving basic human rights as a gift to attract more child soldiers. In this regard it is demonstrated that “children might more easily be recruited only on the basis of a promise of future delivery of benefits.” (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:34)

Children’s development processes

The child’s rationale for participating in armed conflict is also related to physical violence, as many children become soldiers after they themselves have experienced or witnessed humiliation, torture, sexual abuse, detentions, executions, massacres and many other atrocities. Such experiences are not only related to the socioeconomic motivations according to Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, but they are also related to the children’s development processes, since it affects the child’s perception of the decision to join an armed group (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994) as I attempt to clarify in the following examples. In Sri Lanka children were joining the LTTE after witnessing their family being killed, abused or detained by the army, such abuses promote *feelings of vulnerability* (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994). As a result, seeking security becomes one of the priorities for children themselves and/or for their families, because child soldiers were often offered family protection. (Ryan, 2012)

Another motivation can be *feelings of helplessness* as discussed by Goodwin-Gill and Cohn (1994), which explains how anger combined with a critical incident can promote enormous feelings of grudge and overwhelming desire for revenge.

Feelings of helplessness are very common in Syria, for example, after almost 6 years of the conflict many people including children are convinced that whether they fight or not,

they will be killed by one armed part or another since there are many powers involved in the conflict. Thus some children may find joining an armed group would be the least of all possible evils and consequently, many armed groups exploit such feelings in order to recruit more children.

In such situations children feel that they must act to help their families, as Ryan suggests, and the motivations for joining the army are both external and internal, external as in it is driven by the community, and internal as in the feeling of courage or adulthood (Ryan, 2012).

Moreover, feelings of anger and frustration can also affect the *identity formation or the identification* of adolescents, and such feelings can even infect the adolescents and young men in the developed countries. Randy Blazak in his essay “White Boys to Terrorist Men” argues that neo-Nazi movements in the United States tend to recruit white young individuals who suffer from “rootlessness or normlessness”. Blazak added, “such young individuals are more likely to join these groups in order to create an identity for themselves.” (Postel, 2013:102)

Therefore recruiters will need to reformat the identity, because “Re-identification is one of the most powerful socialization mechanism, whereby a new identity is constructed.” (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:43)

In light of the above, depending on the conditions the children are living in, it is important to consider the practical motivations for participation, because “within these predicaments, it is difficult to quantify a child’s free will of choice.” (Ryan, 2012:4)

These studies, however, provide theoretical knowledge about particular types of recruitment which do not necessarily apply in every case.

The influence of the children’s social environment

In this part I will continue to discuss contextual factors that may exert pressure or influence children to join an armed group, namely the social environment of children’s lives such as “parents, families, peer groups, religious communities and other community-based institutions.” (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:30)

Ideology and indoctrination

In order to understand why children are susceptible to ideologies and why they usually are easy prey for religious leaders or/and warlords, Michael Wessells gives the following answer:

Teenagers are susceptible to manipulation by propaganda because they lack the broad life experience needed to think issues through critically, particularly in contexts where they have had little education or education that does not favor critical thinking. (Wessells, 2006:53).

What Wessells says about education is a very important point in the child recruitment processes, as there are many examples of the above-mentioned method such as ISIS changing the school curriculum according to their ideology. The same can be applied on Taliban in Afghanistan.

In my experience, before the Syrian Civil War, the Arab-Israeli conflict played a major role in creating a school system that influenced schoolchildren and students and their way of engaging in the defense of their homeland, thus preparing these generations at least psychologically to engage in the military atmosphere. Alongside the ideological lessons in nationalism, there also was a subject called 'military education' in the Syrian intermediate school curriculum, in which the trainer or teacher taught the students how to use light weapons, some principles in first aid, civil defense, and discipline.

Another study (Borge, 2011) has shown that children's and adolescents' ideological belonging is strengthened during political violence. To find a meaning in the war can create a breeding ground for wishing to continue the fight. The ideology is helping the young people to place the violence within a social structure so it is given a meaning or function. It is therefore emphasized that ideologies among children and youngsters in war protect them from mental disorders. (Borge, 2011, my translation)

Researchers have also traced other patterns of indoctrination among child soldiers, and they found that many ethnic or religious identity-based groups tend to be characterized by higher solidarity preferences than other types of groups, and on the other hand, armed groups that recruit children forcefully utilize socialization and indoctrination to maintain allegiance to the group. (Gates and Reich, 2010:83)

In all the above-mentioned examples it is obvious that due to the risk of desertion, armed groups need to promote feelings of loyalty, in particular when recruits did not join out of their own free will. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011)

Social, community and family values

Another crucial strategy for recruiting children to military service goes via the social community and family alliance. For instance, commitments to the defense or warfare of the local territory or their people's interests and rights could be linked to strong community or family values. An example of such values in a community is how a society or armed group refers to its dead, and this can also be a source of pressure (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:39), which in turn has enhanced the mobilization of adolescents and children to the military.

In Syria for example, all the armed groups call their dead soldiers martyrs, and most of these groups look after the dead soldiers' families by providing them with food or fuel or even money. In the regime-controlled regions there are "Martyrs Affairs Offices" and "Martyrs' children schools" which follow the Ministry of Defense. (see figure 1.1)



(Figure 1.1, September 22, 2017) (<http://mss.gov.sy/> /الهيئة-عن)

Similar martyring of the dead occurs in many parts of Middle East, if not all. Moreover, children can also pick up "mixed messages from adults, and an example of this is when some Palestinian parents are proud of their activist children in the Israeli occupied territories, even as they fear for their safety." (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:39)

Methods and data

The method is qualitative based on in-depth interviews with three former child soldiers from Afghanistan who are 17 years old and sought asylum in Sweden for more than one

year on the one hand. Those minors lived as refugees in Iran, and according to them, they have experienced the recruitment process and fought in Syria. On the other hand it builds on insights generated from numerous meetings with individuals with similar backgrounds in my professional life as a custodian.

When research is conducted on children, the most important method is to engage children themselves in this research, because they will be the most valuable source of knowledge. Ryan suggests: "If a researcher does not embrace the value of the input of a child to their research, then the methods to their research are stunted." (Ryan, 2012:18) This study consists of qualitative individual semi-structured interviews, in which the task and the purpose of the qualitative research interview is

[...] to attempt to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations, but as professional interview, it requires a specific approach and technique of questioning. (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015:3 -27)

Since this study aims to be interactive to allow the informants to engage with the study and to inspire them to give an account from the inside, I combined procedures from two approaches and techniques: an ethnographic as well as a narrative approach to explore my informants' experiences in a period of time and also to generate detailed insights.

Ethnography in general focuses on entire cultural groups, and sometimes this group may be small, but typically it is large, involving many people who interact over time. (Creswell, 2007:68)

Ethnography tends to emphasize the importance of understanding things from the point of view of those involved. Rather than explaining things from the outsider's point of view [...] the researcher needs to spend considerable time in the field among the people who are being studied, because the researcher needs to share in the lives rather than observe from a position of detachment. (Denscombe, 2010:80)

My employment as custodian³ with unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors gave

³ My work as a custodian with unaccompanied minors, who were mostly Afghan male minors, included

me an enormous opportunity to meet Afghan minors and has prompted this research. As many as at least 80 Afghan minors have stated that they have information about the child recruitment in Fatemiyoun Brigade in Iran, because all of them lived in Iran, but most of them have not personally experienced the recruitment. My work alongside my personality allowed me to establish a unique relationship with the minors in general, not only with those whom I was working with at my work place, but also with minors from other accommodations in Sweden. This relationship was based on respect, confidence and a feeling of safeness but also caution at the beginning since we all needed time to gain each others' trust.

My interest in this area developed while these Afghan minors were talking about their lives in Iran on many occasions. Sometimes they wanted to share with me their narratives about Iran in general, other times their stories about the recruitment campaigns among the Afghans in Iran. With regard to that it is important to mention that few minors I have met with have actually been recruited or/and were former soldiers. Altogether, those individuals contributed their knowledge, interactions and their accounts of personal circumstances, which I am very grateful for.

However, in order to generate an objective account, far from personal bias and political goals, I employed the realist ethnographic approach, which means that the researcher narrates the study in a third-person dispassionate voice and reports on what is observed or heard from participants. In other words, I utilized this approach to produce the participants' views through closely edited quotations. (Creswell, 2007:66-70)

Moreover, for a better understanding of personal experiences, and to give deeper insights into my field, the narrative approach is also recommended, as it is

[...] best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals, and beyond the chronology, researchers might detail themes that arise from the story to provide a more detailed discussion

assistance and helping in the everyday life such as: giving information about the Swedish society like the rights of children in Sweden, seeking healthcare by booking a medical appointment, finding activities, cooking etc.

of the meaning of the story. (Creswell, 2007:55-56)

The narrative method is defined as a qualitative method “with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals (Polkinghorne, 1995), and ‘narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected’ (Czarniawska, 2004, p.17).” (Creswell, 2007:54) However, the narrative also has its challenges as narratives are told from specific individuals in a specific context with a particular audience in mind and could be an account of personal circumstances.

Ryan for example states: “When the experiences of the child soldiers are involved, the literature starts at the point of abduction and continues with a narrative that is limited to their victimization.”(Ryan, 2012:48)

Altogether serve as instruments in my analysis and as a theoretical framework.

Reflection on data and interviews

My main methods have been narratives of experiences and interactions of three minor participants who are former child soldiers, fought in Syria and then sought asylum in Sweden. I was present in these interviews, reflecting the participants’ interpretations.

The participants have been living in Sweden 15 months at least and have already finished their asylum investigation with the Migration Agency during the asylum process.

I have also taken into consideration one of the challenges in the narrative research, which is that “the research needs to collect extensive information about the participant, and needs to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual’s life.”(Creswell, 2007:57) This was also a good reason to also apply the ethnographic technique. As Wagenaar explains, “interviewing is not about asking questions, but about working with the respondent to produce useful data. To obtain that goal, asking questions is secondary to monitoring the quality of the interview material” (Wagenaar 2011:251), so I met the respondents individually several times in different places in order to create an atmosphere of trust, to get to know them better and also to test their Swedish.

In the beginning, the meetings with each respondent were individual, open, unlimited and consisted of general questions about their lives and futures in Sweden. This was undertaken to make them feel comfortable and to give them a sense that I am an ordinary student and interested in listening to their narratives, so in fact the first meeting with each participant was informal and the conversations were friendly. Here, the first part of the questions of the interview guide (part A) was designed to find out the participants' background. (See appendix)

As time passed, I managed to establish a good relation with the respondents, so I asked them whether they would participate in an audio interviewing, and as a result, all interviews were audio-recorded backed up by written field notes.

During these audio-recorded interviews I only motivated the participants to expand on various sections of their narratives, otherwise the participants were completely free to convey their experience.

Therefore, I prepared an interview guide focusing on the themes of this study in order to help me direct the conversations toward these themes, but not all questions necessarily had to be asked as some of these conversations flowed naturally.

However, part B and C of the interview guide were designed to grasp greater details in the responses, for example some questions about Shia and the shrines were asked differently depending on the religious education of each respondent.

Despite the fact that the respondents have not requested anonymity, I decided to code them with the following fictive names: Reza, Hassan and Hussein.

As the respondents could speak Swedish but not very well, the interviews were conducted in the presence of a Dari-speaking interpreter.

Dari is closely related to Persian, perhaps a derivative of Farsi according to some sources, and spoken by the majority of Afghani in some regions. The respondents insisted on the Dari-speaking interpreter and not the Farsi, emphasizing that they understand Dari better than Farsi. They in fact trust the Dari interpreter more than the Farsi interpreter, because the Dari-speaker knows both Farsi and Dari whereas the Farsi-speaker does not speak the Dari dialect, meaning that the Dari speaker would be originally from Afghanistan and therefore the respondents can trust him.

The argument about the interpreters appeared as the respondents experienced it as a big problem in their interviews at the Migration Agency during the asylum-seeking

procedures or at other agencies. The audio recording interviews took place at Stockholm University Library, where I booked a room at Frescati Library. I documented the collected data in addition to the original audio files, transcribed the texts in Swedish and then translated them into English.

For the secondary sources, the data was gathered from multiple sources at various times, since I have collected relevant material that substantiates the thesis' focus and deployed them in the background. (See appendix) To that end, I believe that I have collected a good amount of material that enabled me to have a clear understanding of the context of the case, and to corroborate this material with interview data as well, or vice versa.

Ethical considerations:

Since my fieldwork was conducted in Sweden, I was to “abide by the laws of the land.” (Denscombe, 2010:338) I have, therefore, informed my participants of the requirements of the Principles of Research Ethics within humanities-social science research, which is published by the Swedish Research Council. The information I gave the participants included, for example, that participation is voluntary and that they can interrupt their participation if they want. I also informed them of the purpose of this study, and that their personal identity will be handled confidentially, and that I will delete all the names of my respondents in order to protect their anonymity.

One of the basic requirements for research is to obtain the consent of the parent/guardian if the participant is under 15 years of age. (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002) Although all my respondents were 17 years old, I informed them that I need permissions from their guardians. As a result, two informants had oral permission from their guardians to participate in this study. The third one had an oral permission from his contact person, because he did not have a guardian yet. Moreover, the psychological and emotional issues of the respondents have been taken into consideration, as all of them have been asked several times whether they want to contribute to this study in which the narratives may awaken negative memories and flashbacks. Therefore, the respondents were completely free to answer the questions that were asked during interviews, and they also had the opportunity to take a break anytime they wanted, or even to interrupt their participation.

In addition, I acknowledge that I operated in an open and honest manner in the conduct of this research, based on the key principles of research ethics, and avoided any forms of deception or misrepresentation in my dealings with the participants. In order to produce an objective and credible research, the researcher needs to do the best to collect and analyze data in an objective and honest way, so the researcher shall be unbiased from personal preferences and ideals and/or not be swayed to give findings that suit the needs of funders or sponsors. (Denscombe, 2010:329-342)

Moreover, all the ethic issues of interviewing were taken into consideration, such as the differences between the oral and the written language, the differences between the two languages Swedish and Dari, and the accuracy of what has been translated by the interpreter, which may appear as incoherent and confused speech. To avoid that confusion, I met the respondents in the presence of a Dari-speaking interpreter for a second time, in order to check the transcript with them (only the texts that have been used in this study).

As a researcher I must respect the interviewees and their individuality, ideas, and their political-religious backgrounds, especially the child interviewee, but at the same time “the conceptualization must go beyond the victim, irrational, helpless child in order to form an interaction with the child that is rich, valuable, and multi-dimensional.” (Ryan, 2012:19)

Limitations

This study focuses solely on the recruitment campaigns among Afghans that took place only in Iran and not anywhere else although there are some reports claiming that the Iranian regime has also begun to enlist Afghans inside Afghanistan.

Moreover, Shia Afghans have also been recruited in other Shia militias inside Syria, like the Iraqi militia, the Brigade of Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas, and recently Zainebiyoun Brigade, which consists of Shia Hazara living in Pakistan. My study, however, focuses on just one specific brigade, which is called “Fatemiyoun Brigade”.

Interviewing as a method has its limitations, and since the interview is seen as a way to explore the meanings that people create in social interaction and the language here is both object and tool for analysis, but on the other hand several interviews can sometimes give more work but without enriching the analysis. (Jørgensen and Phillips 2000:117 -120)

My study, therefore, relies on three interviewees and excludes details that are not related to the purposes of my research. In other words, it is not concerned with details of the fighting in Syria, the description of what the former child soldiers were doing during the battles in Syria lies beyond the scope of this study and will not be discussed in detail.

Credibility (validity)

I emphasize that I closely adhered to the theoretical frames of Creswell concerning the validation of qualitative research. Creswell's research is correlating with my own approach in the fieldwork; underlining staying close to the participants and spending a great deal of time with them.

Validation is a distinct strength of qualitative research in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the research to participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of a study. (Creswell 2007:207)

Creswell also recommends "to demonstrate credibility, the weight of evidence should become persuasive." (Creswell 2007:204)

Since going through the transcript with the respondents is a matter of both ethical principle and validity, I wanted to ensure that the information I gained was correct and also provide an opportunity for the interviewee "to confirm that what was said at the time of the interview was what was really meant, and not said 'in the heat of the moment'." (Denscombe, 2010:189)

One of the main questions that I have been asked several times was: How do you know that your respondents are telling truth? Do you believe in what they have said?

To them and to all readers I would like to make it clear that it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in their responses and that they might be dubious assumptions, but the aim of the study is not overly concerned with whether the content of the narratives are built on truth or not, the focus lies more on the children's understanding of their reality as well as on how these narratives work.

By saying this, I am not abdicating from my responsibility or my role as a researcher; I demonstrate that my data is appropriate and accurate since I have taken the important steps that offer credibility to this research, such as: respondent validation, grounded

data, dependability, transferability, conformability and the researcher's self etc.
(Denscombe, 2010:297-303)

Facts and observations

Here, I would like to begin with some important observations as well as some difficulties I have faced during the interviews.

Time, age, and dates are not on the top of the priorities for my respondents; it was difficult for them to remember in the beginning, when exactly they had been recruited, and in which year. Two respondents could remember which day they had been abducted but it was difficult to remember which year. One respondent for example did not know which year he came to Sweden, but then he mentioned that he came here when "Europe opened the borders for refugees. "Yes, it was 2015, right?" (Hassan: 2017)

Another example of the time confusion arose when a respondent stated that he was 16 years old when he was recruited in 2014, and during the interview with me, which took place in 2017, he said that he is 17 years old, which may appear as incoherent and confused speech. In this example, I will not try to impose any skeptical attitude toward his age, because this respondent has a Swedish ID card that proves he is 17 years old, but I want to inform the reader about the bearings of analysis.

The dilemma lies in that birth is not formally registered in Iran according to some sources. Another possible explanation for the confusion of dates might be related to the difference in the calendar systems, because Iran and Afghanistan officially use the Solar Hijri Calendar.⁴ It is also known as the Persian Calendar, whereas the Gregorian calendar is the accepted civil calendar in Sweden as well as in many other parts of the world. This calendar is not the same as the Hijri calendar used in many other Muslim countries.⁵

Another possible explanation for "the time confusion" is might be related to the lack of rights and opportunities that these minors have faced during their lives, as all of them are illiterates and had neither opportunity for education nor for protection, and therefore the date of birth might not be an important issue for some of them. "Since I knew myself in this life, I was working all the time. It is not like here in Sweden when you celebrate your birthday every year. I've never had a chance to celebrate mine."

⁴ The Solar Hijri Calendar (<https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/persian-calendar.html>)

⁵ The Islamic Calendar (<https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/islamic-calendar.html>)

(Hassan: 2017)

The respondents were more interested in talking about when they were fighting in Syria than about the way they were recruited. As a researcher I did not want to interrupt my respondents when they were talking about some events that might not be related to my research. I was taking notes in an unobtrusive manner and recording at the same time in case I forgot to take note of something.

Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, the narrative research is the best method for capturing the detailed stories, and I followed the procedures for conducting narrative research, one of which is “Restorying”: “Often when individuals tell their stories, they don’t present them in a chronological sequence.” (Creswell, 2007:56)

It is noteworthy to mention that all the respondents were migrants in Iran when they enlisted in the Fatemiyoun Brigade, and they all came to Sweden in the end of 2015 in what at that time was referred to as the “Refugee crisis”.

Moreover, all the respondents belong to the same ethnic and religious sect which they call “Sa’id” or “Sayyid”. According to the respondents, Sa’id or Sayyid is a branch of Hazara which is a part of the Shia sect in Islam. Further, all the respondents stated that they were soldiers and that they fled Iran and came to Sweden because of the fear of Iran sending them back to Syria.

Two of the respondents were not familiar with the concept of child soldiers.

One respondent did not know why the brigade he fought with is called Fatemiyoun or where the name is derived from.

The respondents

Before accounting for the narratives of these unaccompanied minors and how they perceived their recruitment into the brigade, I would like to give a brief presentation of the main characters of the study.

Reza is a 17 years old male living in Stockholm. He fled from Afghanistan to Iran with his mother and a younger brother when he was 9 years old. He worked with his mother’s brother in Tehran in order to support his family and make a living, and he has never gone to school neither in Afghanistan nor Iran.

Reza does not remember which year exactly he was recruited, but he is guessing that he

was about 15 years and 3 months old. He fought in Syria for 1 year and six months.

Hassan is a 17 year old Afghani male born in Tehran now living in Stockholm. His parents fled from Afghanistan to Iran, but his father was murdered when he went back to Afghanistan, leaving Hassan and a younger brother alone with the mother. He has never attended school in Iran and he states that Iran does not allow 'them Afghans' to study. He was 15 when he became a soldier, and he stayed in Syria for six months.

Hussein is a 17 year old male born in Afghanistan now living in Stockholm. He fled from Afghanistan to Iran when he was 5 years old. He has a mother and a little sister in Iran now, and he has never attended school in Iran. He was recruited in Iran in 2014 when he was 16 years old.

A very important observation in his narrative is that the his brother was sent back to Afghanistan, because he (the brother) refused to be recruited as a soldier.

Analysis and results

As mentioned in the previous chapter, these Afghan respondents were migrants in Iran when they enlisted in the Fatemiyoun Brigade. When I met these minors in 2017, they expressed their happiness to be in Sweden, but they were at the same time worried about their families in Iran. The participants illustrated that they used a part of the money they had earned as soldiers in Syria to fund their trips to Sweden.

The journey to Sweden for these minors was not easy from Iran, since they had to pay lot of money to the smugglers in Iran to get to Turkey and then take boats heading for Greece. They had to walk for many hours, they had to hide for several months and they had very little to eat so as to save as much money as possible.

However, the journey became easier and cheaper as they advanced, since they did not have to pay money to the smugglers from Greece to Sweden, because they neither had to hide from border control nor had to pay to find the routes to Sweden. They reached Sweden in 2015 and sought asylum, and after that they moved from southern Sweden to Stockholm as they were living in an accommodation for unaccompanied minors.

In my last contact with these minors in November 2017, they emphasized that they were granted a permanent residence permit in Sweden.

In the following sections, I will highlight and comment on the subjects that emerged from the analysis. These comments will often be illustrated with excerpts from the raw data, thus they can best be treated under five headings, as they are chronologically connected and sorted by subject based on the respondents' accounts. I will comment on each case and at the end of each theme I will explore the main similarities and differences between the accounts.

The first encounter

In the following accounts, the respondents talk about the recruitment methods they encountered.

Reza, the first respondent I conducted an interview with, was very excited to talk about his experience as a soldier. He showed several personal photographs of himself in military uniform in a place he claimed is in Syria. He also had a short video clip in which he was carrying two Kalashnikov and shooting at a target somewhere in the desert, according to him filmed in Palmyra in Syria.

Reza comments on his first encounter with the brigades as the following:

One day the police took me from the street to the Police Station, because I did not have paper (ID). There they were talking about Syria, and when my mother's brother came there he told me that it is good, because the police also said that if I travel to Syria I would get an Iranian ID card, but the police wanted a permission from my parents, and because I don't have a father and my mother is sick, my mother's brother gave them the permission. Iran does not care about permission. It is not a matter of a father or uncle; it is a matter of finding anybody who is an adult. (Reza: 2017)

After first reading, this account seems to be a little confusing, because at first Reza does not mention why the police stopped him in the street. I actually did not ask Reza about the reason why he got arrested in our first interview, but the question never left my mind until I met him for the second interview. Reza was a bit surprised when I asked him why the Police stopped him, but then he said,

Ok, maybe you should know that I'm an Afghan boy, and I must be prepared to get stopped and arrested anytime. The police can recognize our faces; they know we are not Iranians. We do not look like Iranians.
(Reza: 2017)

Most of the Afghan minors I have met in Sweden mentioned the same as Reza has mentioned above. They argue that many Afghans, in particular the Hazara community, look like Mongolians or Asians in general, because they are usually shorter than Iranians and they have different eye shapes as they have small and slanted eyes. Going back to Reza's first comment, one can see that the Iranian Police used an enticement discourse at the beginning as they promised him an ID card and medical care for his mother. Directly after that they used intimidation as a next step, as it is illustrated by the following comment:

After the police wrote down my name and number and everything else, they released me and told me that they would call me after a week and I must come to them, 'otherwise if we get you next time it won't be nice,' the policeman said to me. That means if I don't go back to them they will beat me up and then send me back to Afghanistan, because they took my fingerprint. After a week they called me and told me to come there, and then they put us in buses. We were about 200 persons, and they lowered the curtains and drove us to a special area. (Reza: 2017)

Hassan the second respondent has a different story about his recruitment:

My mother was very sick so I took her to the hospital, but they did not do anything, because we had bad economy. My Afghan neighbor advised me, 'If you go and register yourself in the recruitment office, and travel to Syria and fight there, then they can help your sick mother.'

I went to the recruitment office, and there were many Afghans there, and they took us to the buses and lowered the curtains and told us not to raise the curtains and then they drove us to an area in Tehran.

I neither needed permission from my parents/an adult nor a signature. I only got a paper to write my name on and how many family members I have, something like that. Somebody else helped me fill in that paper.

They did not even ask how old I was. (Hassan: 2017)

There are many important elements in this account, the first one being the role of the neighbour in pushing Hassan to be a soldier, which corresponds well with what Ryan (2012) described in her study about external motivation and being driven by the community.

Goodwin-Gill and Cohn have also argued that “parents, families, peer groups, religious communities and other community-based institutions” (1994:30) are parts of contextual factors that may exert pressure and enhance the mobilization of children to the military. This theme came up for example in the discussions of the role of the family and society, as Hassan later said that his mother was against his idea of becoming a soldier, and that she was crying when she heard that, as were Reza’s mother and Hussein’s mother. But at the same time, there were one or several individuals who pushed or encouraged these minors to the military.

In Reza’s case, the person who played a role in his recruitment was his mother’s brother. In Hussein’s case, there were many old Afghan male ‘prisoners’ who were talking about the recruitment and its benefits, as illustrated below.

That, in other words, is a crucial strategy of recruiting children to military service, as it goes through the social community and family alliance. For instance could commitments to the defense or warfare of the local territory or their people’s interest and rights be linked to a strong community or family values.

The second important aspect of this story is the ‘recruitment office’, which reveals that there is an official local place where the recruitment of men takes place and it is obvious that most of the Afghans know about it.

Hussein, the third respondent, talks about his first encounter as following:

It was on Friday when I was in Shah Abdul-Azim Medan on my way to Shah Abdul-Azim haram in Tehran. A civil police officer stopped me and asked me about whether I have papers (ID), and I didn’t have any papers. He took me to the bus, and waited until the bus was full of detainees, and then they took us to the police station in Askarabad. This place is a prison only for Afghans who have no papers and should be send to Afghanistan. We stayed two days, and there were their people

[old Afghan male prisoners who work for the police] who told us ‘if you will be recruited and go to Syria, you will get a residence permit in Iran, but if you won’t go to Syria you will be sent to Afghanistan.’

(Hussein: 2017)

A comparison of the three narratives reveals that there is a variation in the procedures followed by the police and then in the recruitment process.

Although Hassan was born in Iran he claimed that he did not have any official papers/ID card, which means that every Afghan child born in Iran may face the same problem in the future. How can it be possible, however, that Hassan did not have any papers proving his identity and was still registered in the recruitment’s lists?

He repeated what he mentioned before: “I only got a paper there at the office in order to write down my name. Somebody else helped me fill in that paper.” (Hassan: 2017). A divergent and conflicting discourse emerges, as two of the respondents - Hassan and Hussein - did not need permission from parents/guardians unlike what Reza pointed out. However, the observed difference between these accounts concerning this issue is still unknown since the only answer I obtained was that they do not know.

A common fact among Reza and Hussein is that the Iranian authorities used round-ups, taking Afghan males from market places or mosques or as they walked down the road. While Hassan went to the recruitment office voluntarily after his neighbor recommended him to do so, the other two of the respondents mentioned that they were detained in a main street in Tehran by the police because they did not have residence permit papers and ID.

The respondents also pointed out that there is a high risk to be caught by the police because of the huge number of policemen in the streets of Tehran, which means that, according to the respondents, every Afghan refugee who does not have official papers is in danger of being detained and sent back to Afghanistan if he does not accept the recruitment.

Respondents were asked to suggest other reasons for the high number of police checkpoints in Tehran and whether the only reason is to identify / arrest paperless Afghan refugees, but the overall response to the question implied that it is very normal

to see policemen and soldiers everywhere in Iran.

These accounts seem to be consistent with other research which found that the system in Iran is actually “a military-led system or, in political-science terms, a 'praetorian' state.” (Hen-Tov & Gonzalez, 2011:45) However, the respondents argued that they were doing the best they could to avoid checkpoints as well as any government agencies by taking other routes or streets. On the other hand, one of the respondents pointed out that he participated in a funeral for 6 fallen Fatemiyoun militants in Tehran, which he described as a military funeral.

Overall, these cases support the view of the effect of militarization on the lives of children as indicated in the theoretical chapter: the effect of soldiers patrolling the streets and military censorship on social life. However, these accounts also suggest that the method of recruitment varies depending on the situations the respondents were in.

In these cases, up to now, it is not yet clear whether to agree or not with what Goodwin-Gill and Cohn have argued about the coercive recruitment, which “covers those situations where there is no proof of direct physical threat or intimidation, but the evidence supports the inference of involuntary enlistment” (1994:28) because here we may not have proof of direct physical threat but we have proof of intimidation.

At this stage, I would like to remind the reader of the logic of the narrative approach: it is the way the respondents describe themselves and make sense of the incidents and the circumstances when being recruited, not an objective mechanism.

Transforming children into soldiers

The second phase of the recruitment process is the situation at the training camp, which will be explored in this chapter.

Talking about this issue Reza said the following:

When we arrived at this special area, they told us the training will last for one month, but it lasted only 20 days. We were about 200 people, and about 20 people were adults and the rest were minors.

Most of them had no parents or came from prisons. Iranians say we are

going to release you from the prisons, but you are going to Syria.

Iranian commanders usually came and divided us into groups, like 50-100 soldiers in each group, and then took us to the mountains in order to teach us shooting. They taught us only how to use the conventional weapons like Kalashnikov, and during these 20 days they taught us nothing. The last days we stood in lines and we chanted together some of the Shia chants. After that they put us in different buses and took us to Imam Khomeini airport, there they had already fixed all passports and the official papers. I mean that passport was an ID card which is exactly like the LMA-kort in Sweden. This card we then gave to a guard in front of the plane in order to allow us to get on the plane. (Reza: 2017)

Hassan describes his training as following:

When we arrived at the training camp they divided us into different groups: a group for using tanks, a group as snipers, and a group for using RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade), and I was an ordinary foot soldier. The majority were adults, like about 90%, and minors were about 10%, and all of them were Afghans. All the commanders in the training camp were Iranians. (Hassan: 2017)

The nationality of the commanders came up as an important issue when the respondents pointed out that the commanders were Iranians; but how did they know that the commanders were Iranians?

The respondents argued that the commanders had a Persian accent and did not look like Afghans, but Hassan has a broader interpretation:

I know that we know they were Iranians, because there's a huge difference between Iranians and Afghans. They had luxury cars, and we can see their clothes/uniforms and their dialect when they speak. (Hassan: 2017)

This account reflects Hassan's perception of the differences between Iranian commanders to Afghan ones; it may be explained by the fact that the Fatemiyoun Afghan commanders will not or have not risen to a high-ranking position since they have not

obtained 'luxury cars' or only Iranian commanders have the ability to get one. Hassan continues his story in the training camp as following:

They taught us how to protect each other, like three soldiers stand and protect the other three soldiers who must go forward, and they taught us how to open and close (disassemble) the weapon.

After 25 days of training they took us to the buses with our normal clothes and then they took us to Imam Khomeini airport. At the airport they handed out small cards, and when we went to the airplane we gave the card to the Pilot or a person who perhaps was a guard, and he checked the card and then let you go in. It was a normal civil airplane, but they usually did not mix us with the regular passengers.

We could sit at the back or at the front. Those civilian passengers travel to Damascus to visit the Zainab Shrine as pilgrims. (Hassan: 2017)

The third respondent commented:

The training was 23 days and on day 24 they sent us to Damascus.

They taught us Kalashnikov, grenades, rockets.

We were 270 persons. We had morning exercise altogether, and we used to go to the same Mosque in the evening. There were many soldiers under 18 years of age, and few over 20 years, but those who were under 18 were recruited by force.

When they took us to the airport, they led us on another path (not the main path) so nobody could see us. Iranian people don't know about this, because they smuggled us into the airplane.

They sent us to the plane in a way that the other normal/ordinary passengers on the flight did not see us and would not know that we are going to the war. (Husseini: 2017)

Comparing these accounts, some differences can be noted such as the different given numbers of the soldiers and the different given percentage of minors and adults at the camp. The reason for this may be that each respondent served at a different period of time or each one has a different interpretation of the events.

The respondents, however, all stated that Fatemiyoun Brigade consisted only of Afghan Shia fighters, but all the military experts and commanders at the camp were Iranians.

None of the respondents had any information about the acceptable age of recruitment in Iran, in other words they had never heard of the notion of child soldiers.

The respondents emphasized that they were taught to use small size and lightweight weapons like Kalashnikov, and this is what Cohn and Goodwin for instance point out when they argue that small boys and girls can handle weapons like M16 and AK47, and consequently they can be more useful in conflicts with less training (1993).

Another common aspect among the respondents was that the training period lasted between 20-25 days. There was a sense of dissatisfaction among the respondents as they complained about the 'very short' period of training since they could not learn much about the military life, which they claimed later resulted in a high number of casualties among them during the conflict in Syria.

The reason behind such short training period may be explained by the fact that Iran probably had a strong urge to fill the military shortage in Syria and to mobilize as many soldiers as possible to increase the Syrian regime's forces.

Two of the respondents mentioned that after they got arrested and were taken to the buses, the police lowered the curtains in the buses and ordered the detainees to not raise them. The respondents in these interviews emphasized that they were smuggled by their commanders into the same airport (Imam Khomeini) and then into the plane with civil clothing, not in military uniforms.

This means, as the respondents interpreted, that the Iranian commanders were doing their best to avoid any direct confrontation with the civilian passengers or perhaps trying not to spread panic in flights toward Damascus. It is likely that the reason why Iran does not send these soldiers by military aircraft is that Iran wants to avoid accusations and the risk of sanctions from The International Community.

In all the three cases, the respondents reported that they had never used any type of weaponry before joining this brigade, but Reza's case actually raises more questions: his Facebook account with the pictures of him carrying different weapons, the video clip in which he is dual-wielding two Kalashnikov, one in each hand, and his ability to hit a given target, all of that raised question marks whether Reza was perhaps a professional

before he enlisted in the brigade.

While asking Reza these questions and walking together, he was smiling and smoking his second cigarette. He said, “I told you before, I never used a gun. These photos were taken in Syria and I gained my experience there. I learned carrying two Kalashnikov from action movies.” (Reza: 2017)

It has always been a debate, and there is extensive research and writing on whether violent games and movies could be contributing factors to violent behavior. A study for example argues that “watching violent movies really does make people more aggressive but only if they have an abrasive personality to start with.” (Telegraph, 2014)

On the other hand, research on a direct causal relationship between such movies and their roles – whether they can trigger both children and youth to take up arms – is clearly lacking.

However, the most important aspect is the social environment of children’s lives, which I will further analyze in the upcoming discussions.

Soldiers with jobs

After these minors became more or less tied to their brigade by threats and restricted choices, they were regularized as professional soldiers with a job to do in Syria.

The details of their jobs as soldiers in Syria will not be discussed here, but merely the details of the recruitment process and their perceptions to it. Interestingly, the respondents claim that the Iranian contact with them ended once they arrived at Damascus airport, and that they then got orders only from the Afghan commanders in the Fatemiyoun Brigade.

The Iranian role, according to the respondents, remained in the logistic aspects, material supplies and through the promises to the soldiers.

The respondents pointed out that after 2 months of fighting in Syria they earned a paid leave which was between 20-30 days. Each one of these former soldiers went back to Iran during their army leave, where they received residence papers valid for one month and a credit card.

The Iranian authorities also offered these former soldiers salaries:

I earned 400 dollars monthly in the first period, and in the second period it was 600 dollars. Every period was 2 months. (Reza: 2017)

The second respondent was much more specific on this issue:

It was 2,5 million toman every month from the beginning, and 100 dollars as pocket money in order to buy cigarettes in Syria. I got 2,5 million toman two times and the third time I got 3 millions. I have been in Syria 3 times, each time 2 months, and I got 3 times vacations, so it becomes 9 months.

When I landed in Tehran during my army leave, I received a packet with 10 000 toman and a credit card from Risalat Bank with a code. When I went to the bank and I gave them the code, they put in my card 8 million toman.

I stayed longer than 2 months in Syria, so if you spend one day extra there, they count this extra day as well, and also they pay for my vacation. (Hassan: 2017)

While Hussein earned 2 millions toman monthly, had been in Syrian four times, and each time 2 months, and his leave was about 20-30 days.

When interpreting what is indicated in the narratives, at first glance it looks like recruitment in any job. The respondents are visualizing a regular job, with salary and vacation.

It is interesting to note that in all three cases, the respondents mention two main currencies they were earning: the Iranian toman and the US dollar. By asking them about the reason behind it, the respondents gave the same answers: they received a small amount of US dollars as pocket money in order to spend in Syria.

Reza and Hassan mentioned that they spend this money to buy cigarettes.

Moreover, it seems that the recruiters have partly done their pecuniary promises to these former child soldiers as a part of their policy to maintain and to entice them, and it is also noteworthy that Iran has an advanced and generous recruitment system with regard to the financial aspect as in the monthly salary and the paid army leave.

On the other hand, the respondents demonstrated that the authorities did not fulfill the other promises like giving permanent residence or/and taking care of the soldiers' families. For example, one respondent said:

On my leave I was in Iran for three weeks. They did nothing for my mother. They only took her to the hospital and brought her medicine. When they called me and said 'you must go back again to Syria' I asked them why, you did not do anything for my mother, they said 'if you go back to Syria this time, everything will be fine'. I was forced and could not do anything, because things were the same for my mother and I had no ID, and the paper was only valid for one month. Same thing as the first time, they took us to the airport and then to Damascus. (Reza: 2017)

The second respondent explained:

My mother was better, and they took care of her and the medical treatment was almost finished. After one month they called and told me 'we did not fix your ID, not your residence permit either, but next time when you come back from Syria we will give you everything at the airport'.

At the same time they told me 'You must go back to Syria'. I was very afraid because many guys were killed there. I did not want to go back there, but they told me 'we already have your fingerprints, so wherever you go we will catch you. It is better to come by yourself, so you must come back.' (Hassan: 2017)

The third respondent commented:

They promised to give us permanent residence, but every vacation I came back to Iran I got 20 days residence permit. They deceived us. They told us 'if you travel to Syria two or three periods, you will get papers (residence) for 10 years and you will live in peace in Iran.' This paper does not mean you will be like an Iranian, but they cannot send us to Afghanistan. And we must renew this paper every year, and in order to renew it you must travel to Syria every year. (Hussein: 2017)

Overall, these accounts up to now highlight what is indicated in the chapter above about socio-economic injustice, namely that the authorities used payment as a strong incentive for children to enlist as well as promises of future delivery of benefits to easily recruit children (Gates, 2011) as it is first described as a regular job, and with this follow the expectations of such employment.

In the same vein, Goodwin and Cohn emphasize that, a “gun often becomes a meal-ticket and a more attractive option than sitting at home afraid and helpless.” (1993:23) This, however, gives a clear picture of how armed organizations like the Fatemiyoun Brigade exploit child poverty in order to recruit children, because such organizations are aware of the fact that “a child will not join an organization unless the organization can offer a payoff over time that is greater than what he would earn otherwise.” (Özerdem & Podder, 2011:34) According to these accounts, the authorities did not fulfill the other promises but instead postponed some promises and continued using intimidating discourse in order to get the soldiers back to the battleground in Syria, and because those minors had no other options since they are in a state of helplessness (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994) they are obliged to return back to the war.

In other words, they were trapped in a situation where they had no choice of quitting the job or staying, and this was a recurring theme in the interviews. However, at the time of writing this study, and according to some media reports quoting the Head of Iran’s Foundation for Martyrs and Veterans, they have claimed that the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has issued orders to grant the Iranian citizenship to Afghans fighters in the ranks of Fatemiyoun Brigade fighting in Syria. (Huffpostarabi, 2017-03-12)

Perceiving the encounters and the respondent’s meaning-making

Obviously, these accounts demonstrate how quickly things went and how those young men surrendered to their reality as if it was inevitable.

In order to get the whole picture, it is necessary to connect the dots and understand those former child soldiers’ reality and their motivations that pushed them to join Fatemiyoun Brigade.

Hassan, who voluntarily went to the ‘recruitment office’, commented:

When my mother was sick I became forced to leave everything and put my own life at risk. My mother's sickness was the motivation to be a soldier, because we Afghans are not able to get health care if we don't have ID cards. Afghans usually go only to the pharmacy and buy medicines. (Hassan: 2017)

Reza:

I said that my mother was very sick, so my motivation was firstly my mother and then my ID card, with which I become like an Iranian citizen and get to live a normal life. It is not exactly an identity card, but it is only to show it to the police when they stop me in order not send me back to Afghanistan. (Reza: 2017)

The third respondent commented as follows:

I can't go back to Afghanistan. It is very difficult. For me it is only about the paper of permanent residence. (Hussein: 2017)

The most striking result to emerge from the data is that none of these former child soldiers testified for being recruited at gunpoint, instead they blame it on the circumstances they were living in, in other words they were forced by circumstances. In this case "there may be little distinction in practice between coercion and seemingly voluntary enlistment." (Gates and Reich, 2010:78)

Iranians treat Afghan people very badly. They do something so you become forced to go to Syria. They will not tell you with a weapon (at gunpoint) you must go there, but before they send you back to Afghanistan they are telling you 'come travel to Syria if you don't want to be sent to Afghanistan'. Or to those who are in prison 'we will release you if you go to Syria'. This is an Iranian plan; they are doing it so that many Afghans will be killed. Every month 30-40 Afghans die at least, and they don't send all their dead bodies at once but few at a time, because they don't want to scare the others. (Reza: 2017)

In regards to the earlier statement of Hassan, in which he said that he went to the recruitment office voluntarily in order to be recruited, he also mentioned that he was indirectly being forced:

Personally, they did not come to me and force me. No, it was not by force directly, but they did it indirectly. They shut down all the possibilities and then I had to travel. In the training camp I met many others who said they were forcibly recruited. They did not have any IDs so the police arrested them and they took them to an area where the police gather all Afghans in order to send them back to Afghanistan, and there the police made a proposal: 'Will you travel to Syria or be sent back to Afghanistan?' People are forced to sign on papers to be sent to Syria instead of Afghanistan. There were old people who were being sentenced to life imprisonment, but Iranians told them 'you will be released if you go to Syria'. (Hassan: 2017)

One of the remarkable aspects of these recruitment campaigns among the Afghans which I have not heard or read about before is illustrated by the following comment of the same former child soldier:

When Daesh became stronger in Syria, Iranians used to come to workplaces where Afghans work. They took Afghans from workplaces by compulsion. (Hassan: 2017)

The other respondent said:

I did not choose to travel to Syria and fight. I feel I was recruited by force. Shia Muslims have difficulties in Afghanistan, and when they flee to Iran, Iran exploits them, and I have problems in Afghanistan, I cannot go back. (Hussein: 2017)

A divergent and conflicting discourse emerged in Hussein's case, as he previously mentioned that his elder brother was sent back to Afghanistan because he (the brother) refused to be recruited as a soldier, but here Hussein emphasizes that he was recruited by force. The problems that Hussein has in Afghanistan which prevent him from going back are related to the lack of security and economical issues.

I agree with Ryan regarding such issues when she argues that the causality is not straightforward as the respondents revealed a high level of complexity in the interpretation of 'forced'. (Ryan, 2014:77) In these narratives a common perspective was expressed that what forced these minors to join the Fatemiyoun militia was a

matter of circumstance such as protecting the family and the threat of being deported to Afghanistan.

Concerns regarding bad circumstances were very widespread, as is obvious in these narratives, thus pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits are often jointly evident since helping the family (e.g. a sick mother) as well as promises of getting an ID/permanent residence in Iran in order to not be deported are altogether the major motivations that pushed these young adolescents to be soldiers and fight in Syria.

Another reported problem was the feeling of responsibility towards the family which played a major part in joining the Brigade. Ryan (2012) in this regard suggests that the feeling of courage or adulthood is the internal motivation for joining the armed groups as explained under the subtitle “Developmental stages” in the theoretical chapter.

Moreover, Ryan (2012) as well as Reich and Gates (2010) demonstrated that poverty, family, protection, and the absence of educational opportunities (as all the respondents are illiterates) altogether drew those casual factors behind the child soldier phenomenon in Iran, which can be placed as a socio-economic injustice factor, but the most important factor here is what Gates pointed out, namely that “children might more easily be recruited only on the basis of a promise of future delivery of benefits.”

(Özerdem & Podder, 2011:34) Taken together, these results suggest that there is an association between the circumstances and factors behind their participation in this armed group, which is understandable, as Ryan points out in her study that “they are forced by the lack in choice.” (2014:77) On the other hand, one may ask, as there are many Iranians who perhaps more or less live under the same conditions of poverty and distress, why the Iranian authorities target only the Afghan youngsters?

The respondents illustrated as following:

Old people don't manage the war; there are mountains and the desert.

One month in Syria we ate only dry bread shared between three soldiers, old soldiers can't do that. Iranians think in a way that young people have more patience and endurance, and they can endure longer.

Iran is sending Afghans to Syria, because Afghans have been fighting for a long time and they are good at it, and sending Afghans is less trouble for Iran than sending Iranians, and it costs less money to recruit

Afghans than Iranians.

They know that all Afghans have been in the war and that they know how it was. Since I was 9 years old, in the area I come from, it was war 24 hours. (Reza: 2017)

The second respondent commented:

I don't know why exactly they recruit Afghans, but I understood Afghans are worthless for Iranians, and they just want to get rid of them. They don't care how old we are. This is business for Iranians to sell their weapons to Syria. (Hassan: 2017)

While Hussein commented:

It is the Iranian political system, they know that Afghans have problems, and because most of these youngsters don't have papers we are forced to do this. (Hussein: 2017)

Reza has actually mentioned an important issue when he argued that they cost cheaper. Many studies have also indicated that child soldiers tend to be much cheaper than adults; especially organizations that rely on economic incentives have more to gain financially by employing children. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011) A well-known classic example of why children are preferred by some army commanders is because they are easier to manage and manipulate than an adult, and they are not likely to question orders. (Miller, 2002) Another example of this is the study carried out by Gates in which he underlined that some groups find that children may be easier (through coercion, intimidation or persuasion) to recruit than adults, given the strategic ambitions of the group. (Gates, 2010:78)

In the Iranian case the strategic ambitions could be to get rid of these young refugee men, as one of the respondents claimed, and probably to use them in other possible future wars.

Reza's case, however, provides more questions about his life before moving to Iran, because he lived in Afghanistan until he was 9 years old in an area he called a war zone where he experienced the woes of the Afghan war 24 hours a day as he claimed.

This raises the question whether his previous life had an impact on his mental growth

and then on his joining the brigade, since the child's rationale for participating in armed conflict is also related to the experience of physical violence, as many children become soldiers after they personally experienced or witnessed humiliation, torture, sexual abuse, detentions, executions, massacres and many other atrocities. However, Reza argued that his previous life in Afghanistan was not a reason for or did not play any role in joining the Fatemiyoun Brigade

The religious impact

Despite all the news reports, particularly the Arabic ones which claim that the members of the Fatemiyoun Brigade are Shiite fanatics driven by Iran's Shiite sectarian policies, none of the respondents mentioned anything about religious motivations for being a soldier and fighting in Syria.

On the contrary, the respondents stated that religion and Shiism was the last thing they thought of.

This however, does not mean that the respondents did not get any religious and ideological guidance during their training period:

Yes. They were showing how Daesh beheaded young guys. We were very scared and about 20-25 people escaped the training camp. Anyone would be scared like that, but my mother's sickness forced me to stay. Iranians told us that Daesh are Kuffar and that they are not humans and that we must protect our shrines. I did believe in that sometimes, but all I thought of was my mother. (Reza: 2017)

Hassan added:

After the physical training, we had lessons about half an hour or so. They talked and showed us videos of how Daesh murdered Syrians. They showed us how Daesh beheaded people, and they told us that Daesh are murdering all Muslims and therefore we shall go there and protect Zainab's Shrine. They showed us all of that every day on a screen after our training. They wanted to prepare us. (Hassan: 2017)

Broadening the argument, Hussein gives a deeper account about this issue as he points out that:

There is a lot of brainwashing and advertising [propaganda] for religion, that we all go there and die and become martyrs. Sheikhs and Mullahs came and told us about the Shrines and the Shia in Syria, and they showed us the war in Syria, and that we will fight Daesh, because Daesh is going to destroy our shrines and we are Shiite, we must protect our shrines, the Ruqayya and the Zainab shrine in Damascus. For me it is not because of religion or something else, but only for resident paper. (Hussein: 2017)

Martyrdom, paradise and eternity are typical propaganda utilized by different armed groups and even by regular armies to maintain allegiance to the group, for example, this has been seen in the Iraqi-Iranian war: Iranian children were given rifles and a little training but with 'headbands with religious slogans bearing a message that they have "permission" of the Imam to enter heaven, along with keys on chains around their necks ensuring such entry.' (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994:38) Another example of this can be found in the Syrian conflict, as some media networks, having published pictures of a "Passport to Paradise" found in ISIS self-declared capital, the city of Raqqa, were accusing ISIS of issuing such passports for their militants to encourage them to keep fighting and convincing them that they will have a guaranteed trip to heaven. (The Sun, 2017-06-26)

Bearing in mind the fact that ISIS committed atrocities against children and has promoted religious speech to brainwash them in order to recruit as many children as possible, the allegations that the passports issued by ISIS are actually not reliable, because the same passport has been seen in the hands of the Syrian rebels in May 2013 in the city of Raqqa before ISIS took over the city who have claimed that they have found this passport when the rebels took over a regime army base and claimed that the Passport to Paradise was given to the Iranian members who fight in Syria to ensure a place in paradise for themselves. (Details of passport to paradise that is existed in the Shiites, 2013)

The respondents also pointed out that during the training period and even during their presence in Syria they were standing in groups and singing Shia chants as a form of

religious devotion and a preparation for the battles. One respondent showed a copy of these songs and chants. This means that the musical propaganda was used as a key propaganda strategy by the Fatemiyoun Brigade as a kind of religious guideline for its members.

The respondents demonstrated having been told that they were defending and protecting their holy Shia shrines which are all located in Damascus, but during the interviews it turned out that none of them had actually served in Damascus since all of them talked about their battles in other cities like Aleppo, Dara'a, Lattakia and Homs countryside.

Another prominent outcome in the interview data was that two of the respondents did not know some basic information about the Shrines of Zainab or Ruqayya in Damascus; for example, one respondent said that Zainab is the daughter of Hussein ibn Ali, but according to many historical sources she was actually Hussein's sister.

Another respondent answered my question about Ruqayya with a smile and said, "All I know is that Ruqayya is our mother. I don't know whether she is a wife of Hussein or his sister or maybe his daughter." (Hassan: 2017)

Moreover, none of the respondents mentioned anything about fighting against the other Syrian Opposition factions, all they mentioned and were taught by their leaders was that they were battling Daesh/ISIS.

The allegation that the Fatemiyoun Brigade fights only ISIS actually opposes the evidence that some Syrian Opposition armed groups recently published, as several video clips and photos show Afghan fighters either being killed or captured in Syria by these factions and not by ISIS. (See the appendix)

In light of the above, religion, ideology and indoctrination have been tools in the hands of the armed group's commanders; they utilize socialization and indoctrination among child soldiers to maintain allegiance to the group. (Gates and Reich, 2010).

In addition, this armed group attempts to manipulate the soldiers, especially the child soldiers, because as Wessells describes "teenagers are susceptible to manipulation by propaganda because they lack the broad life experience needed to think issues through critically, particularly in contexts where they have had little education or education that does not favor critical thinking. (Wessells, 2006:53; Özerdem & Podder, 2011:76)

Despite all above-mentioned, these respondents pointed out several times that their Shiite identity in particular did not occupy a place in their minds, or at least it was not on the top of their priorities, and that they knew that Iran was manipulating them by using religious pretexts, but still they eventually had to obey the orders.

As explained earlier under the subtitle “Ideology and indoctrination”, these cases also confirm that due to the risk of desertion, armed groups need to promote feelings of loyalty, in particular when recruits do not join out of their own free will. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011)

On the other hand, it could be argued that religion, for example standing in groups and chanting religious songs, is perhaps needed in such cases, as ideologies among children and youngsters in war protect them from mental disorders. (Borge, 2011, my translation)

Discussion of findings

Previous studies have shown and noted the importance of the relationship between recruitment process experiences of the children and how socio-economic circumstances and other factors impact on their perspective of reality.

However, the first question in this research was how the children were approached by the recruiters.

The second question sought to determine the reasons for joining the war are put forward by the recruiters and what strategies do the children encounter: a) economic; b) identity formation; c) social deprivation; d) feeling of vulnerability; e) militarization; f) mental development; g) ideology/ religious-sectarian; or all together.

The third question set out with the aim of understanding how the children perceived these encounters and make sense of their recruitment to the Shiite Fatemiyoun Brigade, and to which extent has the ideology of Shi'ism played an important role for them to join the Syrian War.

The most obvious general observations to emerge from the analysis are that all the respondents were refugees in Iran who belong to the same ethnic group (Afghan Hazara), have the same religious (Shia Muslim) and educational backgrounds (all are illiterates), share the same economical background (very poor), are the same age (17) and last but not least fatherless.

Most of the above-mentioned findings are consistent with those of Gates who demonstrates that there are many contextual factors that could push children to join an armed group, such as “poverty, war, religious or ethnic identity, family or its absence and friends.” (Gates, 2011:33)

More specifically, the current study found that there were many police checkpoints in the Iranian capital Tehran, where police roundups and detentions mostly targeted the Hazara refugees, based sometimes on their facial features (regardless of their ages) since the Hazara have a different eye shape, as explained under the heading “The first encounter.”

The respondents argued also that the recruitment campaigns targeted them because firstly, they are Afghans, and secondly, because they are Hazara by highlighting some incidents showing how different, defective and inferior they were in the eyes of the authorities, as illustrated under the heading “Perceiving the encounters.”

These findings broadly support the work by Gates and Reich (2010) which showed that refugee children were a regular target for recruitment as well as vulnerable to political exploitation, thus these displaced children are more at risk of recruitment as they are more at risk of other human rights violations.

A note of caution is due here since the respondents, however, emphasized that they did not have any official or properly documented papers in Iran, the detentions of the Hazara in Tehran may likely be attributed to the immigration laws in Iran which allows the police to lawfully approach people simply to check on their immigration status. In other words, the detentions may target other illegal migrants from other ethnic groups, not only those of Hazara, but offering recruitment targeted only the Afghan Hazaras since the Fatemiyoun Brigade consists only of Shia Hazara militants according to all available data.

Another important finding was that the respondents put their family members, especially their mothers, on the top of their priorities. They also pointed out that there was someone in their social network who played a role in joining the brigade, which is consistent with Goodwin-Gill and Cohn who argued that “parents, families, peer groups, religious communities and other community-based institutions” are parts of contextual factors that may exert pressure and enhance the mobilization of children to the military. (1994:30) (Clarified in chapters “The first encounter” and “Perceiving the encounters”)

Moreover, despite the fact that it was unclear whether child soldiers constitute a great proportion of the Fatemiyoun Brigade or not, employing children is evident in this brigade.

There are several possible explanations for this result that match those observed in earlier studies (e.g. Cohn and Goodwin, 1993; Özerdem & Podder, 2011; Gates, 2010), namely that a child soldier is cheaper, easier to manipulate and can be more useful in conflicts with less training, as explained under the headings “Transforming children into soldiers” and “Perceiving the encounters.”

After these minors became more or less tied to their brigade not only by threats and restricted choices, but also by promises of a better life and a monthly wage payment they were regularized as professional soldiers with a job to do in Syria.

Here, the economic background was actually an important determinant to enlist as all of the respondents stated that they came from very poor families who fled Afghanistan because of the economical situation and the war. This finding supports evidence from previous observations which found that a “Gun often becomes a meal-ticket and a more attractive option than sitting at home afraid and helpless.” (Goodwin and Cohn, 1993:23)

This finding also gives an insight into the professionalization of their mission rather than their religious mobilization, as explained thoroughly in the chapters “Soldiers with jobs”, “Perceiving the encounters” and “The religious impact.”

Contrary to expectations, none of the respondents said he was either driven by his religious background or supported the politico-religious mobilization of the recruitment although all of them have the same religious Shiite background and attended visual lessons at the training camp which were part of the armed group’s agenda to promote and publicize a particular ideological cause.

These cases also confirm that due to the risk of desertion, armed groups need to promote feelings of loyalty, in particular when recruits do not join out of their own free will. (Özerdem & Podder, 2011)

However, the respondents argued that they knew they were being manipulated by their commanders’ religious pretexts, and were highly critical of such propaganda, but they eventually had to obey the orders to protect themselves and their families. According to these data, we can infer that ideologies among children and youngsters in war were

needed to protect them from mental disorders as Borg (2011) emphasized, as explained under the heading “ The religious impact.”

These data, however, must be interpreted with caution because it is possible to hypothesize that the respondents would not have joined the Fatemiyoun Brigade if it were not a Shiite-based institution.

That being said, all the respondents expressed their deep regret for joining this brigade and claimed that they feel ashamed for doing it. On the other hand, despite the financial incentives and the religious propaganda, it seems that the respondents were not obedient and loyal to their brigade in the end. On the contrary, these former child soldiers were waiting for a chance to leave the brigade and therefore they are now here in Sweden. This, however, might have turned out differently if the respondents had obtained ID or residence permits in Iran, thus, a better position in society.

Another unanticipated finding was that none of the respondents testified for being recruited at gunpoint or being ill-treated, but they rather perceived the process of recruitment as forced against the backdrop of the circumstances they were living in. In other words, they were forced by circumstances since they described their reality when being recruited as a desperate situation with no other option than accepting the offers of the recruiters which is indicated under the headings “The first encounter” and “Perceiving the encounters.”

It can therefore be assumed that the desertion rates among child soldiers who have been exploited might be rising if the international community provides a better life for these refugee minors even faraway from their native countries.

Despite these promising results, questions remain regarding the desertion rates among those who are driven by their religious beliefs. Further studies which take these variables into account will need to be undertaken.

Conclusions and proposed prospects

Based on in-depth ethnographic interviews and accounts from three Afghan former child soldiers who sought asylum in Sweden as unaccompanied minors, this thesis set out to examine in retrospection how these minors themselves made sense of their participation in the Syrian war, how their motivations were related to their social

situation and to their perspective of reality, and how they viewed the methods driving the process of recruitment.

This research, similarly to most utilized previous studies, found that according to these narratives and the empirical evidence gathered about the recruitment in Iran, relying on information I have that is congruent with other accounts, suggests that there is a strong relationship between the following factors: children's pre-war and war-related experiences, children's development processes, and the children's social environment.

In general, it seems that the dream of obtaining a legal residence permit to firstly, not be deported, and secondly, have a better socio-economical position in Iran, can play a pivotal role in why these minors enrolled in the Fatemiyoun Brigade, whilst the Shiite identity was not on the top of their priorities.

An implication of this is the possibility that these minors have been used as pawns in the hands of authorities, on the basis of the promise of future delivery of benefits such as a legal position in society by giving them, for example, resident cards, and medical treatment not only for themselves but also for their families.

In a recent study of why well-educated adult individuals like engineers join extremist movements, the evidence the authors presented was ample enough to revive the theory of relative deprivation and frustrated expectations as a substantial explanation (Gambetta and Hertog, 2016:159). This may similarly if not more easily apply to the recruitment of illiterate minors who suffer from deprivation.

Therefore, more research is required to determine the efficacy of deprivation as a tool in recruiting children; in other words, further research needs to examine more closely the links between deprivation and recruitment. In accordance with the theoretical contributions and implications, former child soldiers who are rescued from combat or who survive until the conflict's conclusion suffer from emotional difficulties and traumatic experiences. Therefore they may face an enormous challenge, especially psychological challenges in trying to return to a normal civilian life. Based on this, greater efforts are needed from the society to help and embrace them in order to enable them to do so.

Last but not least, this study also offers suggestions for further research which can accompany these former child soldiers in their new society in Sweden and find the best ways for them to be integrated.

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Interviews:

Hassan: March, April and May 2017.

Hussein: April and May 2017.

Reza: February, March and April 2017.

Appendix

Interview guide

The questions were in Swedish during the interviews

Part A

- I. How old are you?**
- II. Where were you born?**
- III. How old were you when you left Afghanistan?**
- IV. What is your religion? Which sect?**
- V. Have you been in Iran? When? How long?**
- VI. Do you have relatives there?**

- VII. How long have you been in Sweden?**
- VIII. Is the recruitment the reason behind seeking asylum in Sweden?**
- IX. Have you told migration that you were a soldier in Iran/Syria?**

Part B

- I. Can you tell me how you have been recruited?**
- II. How old were you? Which year?**
- III. Which armed group were you in? What do you know about it?**
- IV. Why have you decided to become a soldier? What were your motivations?**
- V. Has anybody from your family, relatives or friends pushed you to be a soldier?**
- VI. What happened at the training camp?**
- VII. How many child soldiers have you met there?**
- VIII. Tell me more about the religious lessons at the camp.**
- IX. What happened after you finished your training period?**
- X. How long have you stayed in Syria?**
- XI. How much money have you earned?**
- XII. For how long have you been a soldier?**

Part C

- I. Can you tell me the meaning of child soldier? Can you tell me about the difference between voluntary and forced recruitment?**
- II. Do you feel/think that you were forced to be a soldier?**
- III. In your opinion, why have you been recruited?**
- IV. Why have you left the brigade?**
- V. Can you tell me about your thoughts after you left the brigade and came to Sweden?**
- VI. Do you believe that your friend/comrade who died in the conflict is a martyr?**
- VII. Can you tell me what Shia means?**
- VIII. Who is Zainab/Ruqayya?**

Secondary sources used as background

Secondary sources consist of media reports from Swedish, English and Arabic sources, but mostly from Arabic ones. Since I am originally a Syrian citizen and a fluent Arabic-speaker, I have noticed that the Arabic media puts much more focus on the Iranian role in the Arabic region as a whole, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and recently Yemen, where the Arab Gulf States, primarily Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, accuse the Islamic

Republic of Iran for its Shiite sectarian and expansionist policies, whereas Iran accuses its Sunni neighbors, mostly the Saudis, for supporting the Sunni extremism in the region.

I have also collected pictures and video-clips from YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, since all these materials are tied to the Afghan soldiers in Syria and the Iranian essential role in it. Most of the pictures and YouTube clips are available in the appendix, and some of them I have mentioned earlier under the subtitle “Fatemiyoun Brigade.”

Pictures of Fatemiyoun Brigade members who allegedly killed in Syria. Published by Syrian pro-opposition activists.





@Bani_Omaia · 22 sep.

Visa översättning

#طهران

مصرع 6 غلمان من لواء #فاطميون الحرس الثوري الإيراني في #سوريا



2 11 12 ...



@MousaAlomar · 2 tim

Visa översättning

وصول عشرات الجثث من لواء فاطميون المرتزق الى
ايران .. ومنها الى سقّر وبئس المصير .. #خيرات_حلب



277 311 ...