



Justice4Yemen Pact
ميثاق العدالة لليمن

INFORMATIONAL BRIEF

Childhood Interrupted: Two cases highlight Yemen's ongoing child recruitment crisis



NOVEMBER 2023

Introduction

The Houthis have received considerable media coverage and international condemnation for their systematic recruitment of child soldiers during the Yemen war. Among other strategies, the Houthi movement has manipulated education to recruit children by altering curricula, holding in-school indoctrination sessions and weapons displays, and organizing mobilizing summer camps.¹ A U.N. panel of experts reported that nearly 2,000 children recruited by the Houthis were killed in combat from January 2020 to May 2021 alone,² and the movement continues to recruit children despite signing a pledge with the UN to end the practice in April 2022.³

About the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+)

The goal of the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+) program is to increase recognition and protection of human rights in Yemen by empowering Yemeni civil society to champion justice and accountability through human rights documentation, reporting, and advocacy efforts. The YHRFL+ program is working to systematically document, preserve, corroborate, analyze, and report on evidence, obtained from a variety of sources, of human rights violations committed by all parties involved in the Yemeni conflict. Results of this analysis are summarized and presented in a series of investigative reports focusing on specific identified incidents of human rights violations. YHRFL+ also support efforts by Yemeni CSO partners to carry out strategic advocacy, community outreach, and victim and survivor engagement interventions locally and internationally.

About Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition

The Justice4Yemen Pact is a coalition of human rights organizations and civil society actors that are united for the promotion and protection of human rights in Yemen. The coalition's mission is to advocate for the rights of all Yemeni people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. The coalition is committed to addressing the systemic human rights violations that have been plaguing Yemen through years of conflict and violence. The Justice4Yemen Pact works to empower Yemeni people to claim their rights, raise awareness of violations, and advocate for justice and accountability at local, national, and international levels. The Justice4Yemen Pact is guided by the principles of respect for human dignity, equality, justice, and non-discrimination. The coalition believes that by working together, its members can end impunity, provide meaningful support and redress for victims, and contribute to a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for Yemen.

Acknowledgement

The YHRFL+ program would like to thank the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations (the Rasd Coalition) for their work documenting child recruitment in Yemen, which is featured in this report.

¹ "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014; Detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen – A/HRC/45/CRP.7," Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, September 29, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/A-HRC-45-CRP.7.pdf>. See paragraphs 260, 273, 277, 285-293; "Curricula and Activities at Summer Camps in Houthi-controlled Areas," Sidq, Google Drive, December 16, 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bb7LpXMT41JAq7RYnjNPxf1UZEJY3oI/view?fbclid=IwAR0jc-os-0_atkqrQ8LqXH8ThnXsiF9STe3H9oYoFqzKz1Y1tudfuE293HI

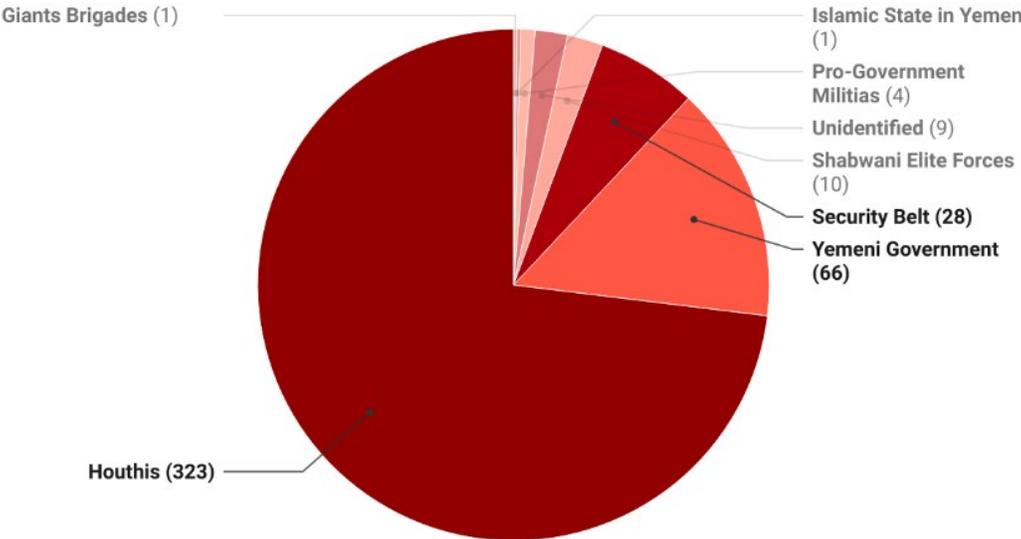
² "UN: 2,000 children recruited by Yemen's rebels died fighting," Edith Lederer, Associated Press, January 29, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-united-nations-yemen-houthis-17c3e19c239be8a2f41ee3e27469fc6e>

³ "In Yemen, child soldiering continues despite Houthi promise," Samy Magdy, Associated Press, June 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-middle-east-sanaa-houthis-religion-5e62561f8070441412ed52d222c950e3>

While the Houthis are the worst offenders according to various UN, NGO, and media reports,⁴ all major conflict actors have been documented recruiting children, including the Yemeni government, the Saudi-led Coalition that backs it,⁵ and the Southern Transitional Council. The following graph displays UN-verified cases of child recruitment in Yemen from 2020 to 2022—the actual number of cases is likely far higher. The data highlights the variety of conflict actors contributing to Yemen’s ongoing child recruitment crisis.

Child Recruitment Cases Verified by the UN from 2020-2022, by Reported Perpetrator [442 Total]

These figures only include cases verified by the UN during the relevant reporting periods; the actual numbers of the children recruited across Yemen is likely far higher.



Source: Annual Reports of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2020-2022 - Created with Datawrapper

Various push factors have exacerbated child recruitment since the start of the war in 2014. Yemen’s economy is in shambles, prompting children from poor families to enlist to earn money.⁶ This dynamic is reinforced by cultural attitudes that view teenagers as adults expected to work.⁷ In addition, the education sector has collapsed,⁸ reducing both the real and perceived value of staying in school. A desire to take revenge on conflict parties is another reason some children pick up arms.

⁴ See: Annual Reports of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2015-2022; “A General Announcement on Child Recruitment in Yemen,” SAM for Rights and Liberties, May 7, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/y4nk732s>; “Children as young as 10 fight, kill and die in Yemen’s War,” Maggie Michael, Associated Press, December 19, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-child-soldiers-yemen-ap-top-news-houthis-082c0b7b6253468e97da5ee0c3f43066>

⁵ “On the Front Line of the Saudi War in Yemen: Child soldiers From Darfur,” David Kirkpatrick, The New York Times, December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/africa/saudi-sudan-yemen-child-fighters.html>

⁶ “Child Soldiers in Yemen: Cannon Fodder for an Unnecessary War,” Afrah Nasser, Arab Center Washington DC, February 2, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/child-soldiers-in-yemen-cannon-fodder-for-an-unnecessary-war/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023,” OCHA, December 20, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-december-2022-enar>

Pull factors play a role as well. Carrying a weapon in Yemen is a symbol of manliness and prestige—guns are widely displayed in public, and Yemen has been described as having a “weapons culture.”⁹ War, poverty, and displacement have disrupted jobs and schooling for millions of Yemenis while joining the military provides a reliable, readily available source of income.

Child soldiers are taken out of school and thrust into violent situations, leaving psychological scars that can last a lifetime. Many are physically injured and face permanent disabilities, while others are killed. The Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations (the Rasd Coalition), whose work is featured in this report, documented 248 cases of child recruitment from 2015 to 2022.¹⁰ 142 of the children, or 57% of the documented cases, were killed in combat.¹¹

Incident Summary

This report profiles two cases of child recruitment drawn from the Rasd Coalition’s database. The first case is Ashraf, a hearing-impaired child who joined the Houthi military at 13 to support his family and for a sense of power and belonging. He was killed in combat in 2022, at 17 years old. The second case is Ahmed, who joined a government military outfit in a support role when he was 14 to provide an income for his family. He is unsure of his future and spoke about his experience in the military with Rasd.

Methodology: Rasd documented the 248 cases in its database by interviewing family members of child soldiers, witnesses, human rights defenders, and others with knowledge of the events. Where possible, Rasd collected photos of victims and the locations where the recruitment occurred.

Both cases demonstrate the psychological, social, and economic pressures leading to enlistment and the tragedy that can result from children picking up arms.

Ashraf

Ashraf felt like a burden on his family at 13 years old. He was not in school as he was hearing impaired and there were no schools for the deaf in his area of Mahwit. He was unable to find work because of his disability, and his family was mired in poverty.

Racked by feelings of inadequacy, Ashraf made an easy target for a local Houthi recruiter who promised him a monthly salary and a food basket if he enlisted. He signed up for duty in December 2016 and attended a training seminar in Sana’a, where he became convinced that he was destined for martyrdom and belonged in heaven.

Ashraf was dispatched to the front lines despite not being able to fully hear gunfire or approaching planes. In 2018, his leg was injured during fighting in Hudaydah, and in 2021 he suffered a head injury from shrapnel in Mareb. Despite his injuries, he was repeatedly returned to the front lines, and on January 2, 2022, Ashraf was killed during an air raid by the Saudi-led Coalition in Shabwa. He was 17 years old at the time of his death and had been fighting for nearly five years, having achieved the rank of “First Lieutenant” in the Houthi military.



Video of Ashraf shortly before he was killed at 17 years old, having fought for nearly five years.

⁹ “Weapons are Yemen’s Dangerous Pride,” Abdul Aziz al-Badawi, al-Jazeera, April 4, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2018/4/4/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AE%D8%AE%D8%A9>

¹⁰ “Children, not Soldiers,” Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations (Rasd), May 2023, https://ycmhrv.org/uploads/files/%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF-Soft.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1vVe9j-QAIQ9TLjHbvBLLn1szE7I0f0gE7enaWO_ZOWH8YpUAP1tEdzo

¹¹ Ibid.



Houthi authorities held a funeral for Ashraf in Mahwit, which was publicized by the al-Maseera news channel.¹² During the ceremony a Houthi soldier, wearing camouflage and surrounded by children, said:

“Even if they kill us all, we will sacrifice our blood, our children, everything we own, in service of this path, because it’s the true path, the path of the Quran.”

Ahmed

Ahmed was 14 and studying in the 8th grade when he left school and enlisted with a government military unit near his home. Wartime inflation and currency depreciation had stretched his family’s resources to the limit. The military salary on offer, 1,000 Saudi riyals a month (\$267), is a hefty sum in Yemen and represented a lifeline for his family. However, after spending nearly a year performing in-camp duties, Ahmed’s military unit moved to a distant governorate, and his parents refused to let him leave with the unit. Rasd spoke to Ahmed about his time in uniform. Certain details have been changed or omitted to conceal his identity, including the use of a pseudonym.

Q: Describe your life before enlistment—how did you spend your days?

A: It was a normal life, like any other kid in the neighborhood. In the morning I went to school—I was studying in eighth grade. I would spend recess with my friends, then we would finish studying. After noon I would return home, sleep until two, then watch television, then go pray. Afterwards me and the neighborhood kids would go play sports, go to the pitch to play soccer. On the weekends I helped my dad plant our fields, and when we had to sow or irrigate the fields my dad would stop me from sleeping in the afternoon or playing with my friends. That’s what I did, in general.

Q: Why did you decide to join the army? What did your parents think of your decision?

A: I decided to join when I saw young men from the neighborhood, who used to live in poverty, their conditions improved, and they began to spend money on whatever they wanted from the grocery store. They chewed as much *qat* as they wanted, their families were happy with them because they provided money, because they were making 1,000 Saudi riyals a month.

To be honest my dad was hesitant, but he would say to my mom ‘let him become a man, being a soldier is manliness.’ But my mom was totally against it. She would say to me ‘I want you to study, if you become a soldier you’ll die on the front, I don’t want money, I want my son to be safe.’

Q: What does it feel like to perform military duties?

A: At the beginning, I was energetic and happy to wear the uniform. I felt proud. I was especially happy when I got my first salary and I gave it to my dad—my mom was happy. But with the difficulty of training, of guard duties, not being allowed to leave, to play soccer, or study, I’ve started to get annoyed and

¹² “Al-Mahwit – Funeral for the First Lieutenant Ashraf...,” al-Maseera, Telegram, February 20, 2022, <https://t.me/s/AlmasirahVideos?q=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA+%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%B9+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85+%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84+%D8%A3%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%81+%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A+%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF+%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1>

angry. When the division moved and my dad didn't allow me to go, I was extremely happy to be able to relax.

Q: Do you think that your decision to enlist was the right one?

A: No. We thought we'd stay at the military camp that's near my home, we could go in the morning and return at night to our families and sleep each night at home. But we were surprised we had to take on night sentry duty in a desolate place...

Q: What's your plan for the future?

A: Hopefully I'll continue my studies. Unless my dad can come to an understanding with the military commander, that he'll give me light duties inside the camp, and only during the day. If he can convince him to let me study that would be even better.

Legal Analysis

The recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts contravenes Yemeni law as well as international human rights and humanitarian law.

National Law

Yemen's Rights of the Child Act, established in 2002, enables the protections and rights laid out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was ratified by Yemen in 1991. The Rights of the Child Act forbids military recruitment of anyone under 18 years old.¹⁷

Commitments to the UN:

In 2012, Yemen's government—headed by former president Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi—pledged to end the recruitment and use of children in government forces.¹³ The government signed an action plan to end the recruitment and use of children in hostilities in May 2014;¹⁴ the government later signed a roadmap to end and prevent child recruitment in 2018.¹⁵

The Houthi movement signed an action plan with the UN in April 2022 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, as well as the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, and other grave violations.¹⁶

¹³ "Special Representative Zerrougui secures commitments from the Yemeni authorities and Al Houthi armed group to end child recruitment," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, November 28, 2012, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2012/11/yemeni-authorities-and-al-houthi-armed-group-to-end-child-recruitment/>

¹⁴ "Children, Not Soldiers: Yemen Signs Action Plan to End Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Forces," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, May 14, 2014, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2014/05/yemen-signs-action-plan/>

¹⁵ "New Action Plan to Strengthen the Protection of Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Yemen Signed with the Houthis," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, April 18, 2022, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2022/04/new-action-plan-to-strengthen-the-protection-of-children-affected-by-armed-conflict-in-yemen-signed-with-the-houthis/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rights of the Child Act, Article 149. See: http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/arabic/Yemeni_Laws/Yemeni_Laws29.pdf

International Human Rights Law

In 2007 Yemen acceded to the CRC Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. The Protocol stipulates that States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure those under 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities, and that armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a country should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities anyone under 18.¹⁸

Yemen also ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention in 2000, committing to take “immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor.” Among the worst forms of child labor delineated in the convention, alongside drug trafficking and prostitution, is “the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.”¹⁹

International Humanitarian Law

The international community has repeatedly demonstrated a strong stance against the recruitment and use of child soldiers in both international and non-international armed conflicts, including through international criminal mechanisms establishing individual commander responsibility for the use of children under 15. The Special Court for Sierra Leone’s ruling on the Hinga Norman case as well as declarations from the international tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda have established the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict as a war crime.

The International Criminal Court defines the conscription or enlistment of children under the age of 15 into armed forces or groups using them to participate actively in hostilities as a war crime prosecutable under the Rome Statute.²⁰

Yemen has ratified Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, which stipulates that “children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities.”²¹

¹⁸ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, Articles 1, 4

¹⁹ Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention, Article 3.1

²⁰ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 8.e.7

²¹ Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, Article 4.3.c

Recommendations

To the
**Yemeni NGOs
combatting child
recruitment:**

- Coordinate with local stakeholders and consider establishing a coalition or coordination group that includes a diverse array of human rights organizations. Collective efforts should prioritize implementing remote awareness campaigns for children and parents in Houthi-held areas highlighting the dangers and tragic impacts of child recruitment. Child recruitment is a pressing issue in Houthi-held areas but holding in-person activities is difficult given security and access concerns.
-

To the
**Yemeni and
international NGOs
documenting human
rights violations:**

- Continue to publicize reports illustrating the scale of child recruitment in Yemen while profiling specific cases to maximize the advocacy impact of the reports. Consistent reporting helps ensure the child recruitment issue is not forgotten as peace talks proceed.
-

To the
Yemeni government:

- Investigate government military units that are allowing children into their ranks, which violates both Yemeni and international law, and robustly implement the 2014 Action Plan and 2018 roadmap with the UN. Update existing legislation to specify criminal penalties for those who exploit children in armed conflicts.
-

To all
**conflict parties in
Yemen:**

- Immediately cease recruiting children into military units in contravention of Yemeni and international law and demobilize children who are participating in hostilities. Cooperate with and facilitate the reintegration of former child soldiers into society.
-

Contact

Info@justice4yemenpact.org