

## **Statement by Yemeni Civil Society Organizations Calling on the United Nations to Take Urgent Action Against the Houthis**

We, the undersigned representatives of Yemeni civil society and media, write to express our profound disappointment and frustration with the United Nations' approach in Yemen over the past decade. We believe that the UN has failed to adhere to the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, and do no harm. This has enabled the Houthis to divert and weaponize aid, commit gross human rights violations, empowered them militarily and undermined efforts to end the war in Yemen. We are also extremely disappointed by the UN's lack of action following the recent Houthi mass abductions and enforced disappearance of UN, INGO and NGO staff, as well as civil society leaders that started in last June. The Houthis accused these Yemeni civilians of espionage on behalf of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Israeli Mossad, and some UN agencies such as the World Food Programme, UNICEF, OHCHR, and Save the Children of providing cover for them.

At a time when we expected the UN to hold the Houthis accountable for their actions – the abduction of staff, the raid on OHCHR's office and the seizure of equipment and documents, the systematic erosion of women's rights, the indoctrination of children and recruitment of child soldiers - we are deeply dismayed by the approach of the new Resident Coordinator, Julien Harneis.

Instead of taking a firm stance, Harneis appears to be adopting an even softer approach towards the Houthis. Since assuming his position, Harneis has emphasized that the UN must continue working with the Houthis, resume WFP's General Food Assistance program regardless of the circumstances, and 'strengthen ties' with them. In meetings with UN and INGO country directors, he has asserted that the Houthis have "won the war" and that the UN's role is simply to support them. He has dismissed dissenting views from country directors and even orchestrated the removal of Renaud Detalle, the head of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) who was based in Aden. Detalle, who had long been based in Sanaa and had a deep connection with the city and Yemen, was critical of the Houthis and advocated for a tougher stance, and he and Harneis frequently clashed at UN meetings. Harneis' actions and comments undermine the

UN's credibility and fail to address the serious issues at hand, exacerbating the suffering of Yemenis, who have already suffered for too long.

### **UN's Current Approach Enables Aid Diversion and Manipulation**

Following the Resident Coordinator's approach, the new WFP Country Director, Pierre Honnorat, is keen to resume food assistance. In early August, WFP announced plans to restart food aid to the north, despite having suspended the program in November 2023 due to disagreements with the Houthis over reducing the beneficiary caseload and retargeting the population to identify those most in need of assistance. A pilot agreement was finally signed in January, but it involves collaboration with the School Feeding and Humanitarian Relief Project (SFHRP), a Houthi-affiliated NGO operating under the Ministry of Education in Sanaa. The SFHRP is directly supervised by Yehya Al-Houthi, the brother of the leader of the Houthi militia. The SFHRP has a troubling record of diverting food aid for various abuses, including recruitment or feeding fighters on the front lines, coercing families to send members to the front lines, distributing aid to supporters, or selling it on the black market.<sup>1</sup>

WFP suspended its program in a few districts north in 2019 for three months to attempt to address aid diversion by the Houthis., but the problem continues to persist. A recent study by the Counter Terrorism Project confirms what the signatories of this letter have been warning about for years. The study states that:

“Many aid organizations appear to minimize or ignore altogether the challenge of their relationship with the Houthis. In general, they appear to emphasize the metric of how much aid was brought into Yemen, while diminishing the metric of whether those in need of assistance received it. This leads to suboptimal outcomes. In one of the instances documented in this report, aid diversion rates for an entire governorate appear to be around 80 percent. The lack of transparency and accountability among the United Nations (UN) and the community of international non-governmental organizations (INGO) operating in Yemen regarding aid diversion raises serious doubts about the effectiveness of their efforts.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/218521> مشروع التغذية المدرسية والإغاثة الإنسانية التابع لوزارة التربية والتعليم

This endemic problem was previously addressed by Sarah Vuylsteke who worked as the Access Coordinator for WFP in Yemen during 2019 articulates in a report she wrote in 2021 in which she interviewed 73 humanitarian aid workers, analysts and experts, donors, and civil society representatives stated in her piece as shown in these excerpts from her report<sup>2</sup>:

“Well into the humanitarian response’s seventh year, the reports from Yemen are bleak: Diversion, corruption, restricted access and a lack of or diminishing operational space are well documented. Challenges and obstacles to evaluating need and response delivery in Yemen are often blamed on the restrictive operating environment and the impediments created by authorities, mainly the armed Houthi movement, which controls the more populous north.

Throughout the response, the humanitarian community has diminished its own operational environment. By putting in place and maintaining bad practices that directly affect access, the response has allowed, and continues to allow, unacceptable behavior from, primarily, Houthi authorities, such as detention of staff, restrictions on movement, refusal to permit independent assessments and response, diversion and operational interference. Moreover, it continues to use authorities who are a party to the conflict to directly implement humanitarian aid. Using entities that created the problem to fix it does not provide incentive for change, and in the long run has only decreased direct access to populations. The unwillingness and inability to draw and enforce redlines surrounding such issues has only emboldened authorities who continue to inset obstacles to aid deliver. Without boundaries and willingness to apply consequences for unacceptable behavior, the operating environment and access can only be expected to continue to deteriorate.”

### **The Perils of Localization & Normalization: Enabling Houthi Control Over Food Aid Distribution**

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Vuylsteke, “How the International Humanitarian response is Failing Yemen, Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, October, 2021, [https://sanaacenter.org/files/When\\_Aid\\_Goes\\_Awry\\_00\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/When_Aid_Goes_Awry_00_Executive_Summary_en.pdf)

The current UN Resident Coordinator, WFP Country Director, and other UN country directors are adopting a softer approach in hopes of ensuring smooth program operations, regardless of the broader impact on Yemen. During a staff meeting earlier this month, in preparation for a gathering with UN and INGOs organized by SCMCHA, the WFP Director described this as an opportunity to rebuild trust with the Houthis and demonstrate to them that WFP is a reliable and trustworthy partner. His security director even referred to it as an opportunity to "pay respect" to the Houthis. Staff were instructed to leave their phones at home or silence them and were prohibited from recording the meeting or taking photographs.

During both SCMCHA meetings, staff were instructed to chant the Houthi slogan "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews, Victory to Islam". While UNICEF and UNDP staff refused, on August 11, local WFP and WHO staff complied and chanted the slogan in front of their UN superiors. The Houthis made several derogatory jokes about women, which were met with laughter from the male staff. The Resident Coordinator, along with the WFP and WHO Country Directors and Deputies, were present but took no action.

During the SCMCHA meeting, the Houthis demanded the localization of humanitarian operations. The UN Resident Coordinator has also been advocating for this since his arrival in Yemen. This approach is extremely risky, as it would funnel funds directly into the hands of local NGOs and firms affiliated with the Houthis.

### **The Famine Narrative is highly flawed and problematic**

The UN's reluctance to enforce red lines with the Houthis reflects a concern about losing funding and operational space, as well as the fear that the Houthis might expel them from the north. To justify their continued operations in the north, the UN has amplified the fear of crisis—such as famine, starvation, deepening food insecurity, and disease—to persuade donors to maintain their support. This tactic is highly problematic as former WFP staff Sarah Vuylsteke stated in her report:

“This portrayal of Yemen as a country where problems relate directly to the war and can be resolved with more money to provide more food baskets for ever more people in need is as seductively straightforward as it is inaccurate. This rarely changed narrative persists in

part because acknowledging its flaws would require admitting failure on a multi-billion-dollar scale.

Along with absence of motivation for change, a lack of transparency and the genuine challenges found in complex and protracted conflict settings enabled these narratives to continue unchecked. Informed analysis has been hard to come by in the Yemen humanitarian response, which is marred by a willingness [by the UN] to tolerate partial data that is often biased, usually out of date and lacks nuance, all of which has made it easy to manipulate or ignore to suit priorities.”

There is no immediate evidence of famine risk in Yemen, and independent studies have not conclusively proven that aid has effectively mitigated famine threats, nor is there any independent evidence that populations have been gravely harmed by the pause in WFP’s food distribution program since last November. The IPC Phase 5 (famine) classification triggers large-scale emergency assistance without delay or scrutiny. As a result, some organizations may manipulate data to depict widespread famine, knowing that donor countries will be compelled to respond rapidly.

The UN's ongoing operations in northern Yemen, ostensibly for famine prevention, have been exploited by the Houthis to extract concessions and financial benefits from the UN and international donors. The Houthis' systematic diversion and weaponization of aid resources have transformed humanitarian assistance into a tool of conflict, fuelling war and enabling the Houthis to bolster their military capabilities.

The Houthis have established a repressive theocratic regime, committing severe human rights abuses. They have made over 500 modifications to the school curriculum to indoctrinate children with their sectarian and Jihadist ideology.<sup>3</sup> During 2024 alone, 1.1 million boys and girls graduated from the Houthis summer indoctrination camps.<sup>4</sup> Earlier this year, the Houthis announced the recruitment of over 360,000 individuals for what they term as "the Battle of Promised Conquest &

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<sup>3</sup> United States Department of State, “2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Yemen,” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/yemen/#:~:text=The%20Hudson%20Institute%2C%20in%20a,Abdulmalik%20al%2DHouthi%2C%20to%20the>

<sup>4</sup> Houthis’ official Saba news, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3338628.htm> ; <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/296414>

Holy Jihad," signalling a commitment to expand their disruptive military operations in Yemen, Red Sea, and the region.

The continued inaction or inadequate responses from the UN will only serve to further embolden the Houthis and prolong the suffering of millions of Yemenis. By failing to decisively address these critical issues, the UN and its donors risk complicity in enabling an extremely repressive and violent group to dictate Yemen's future. When the UN and its donors eventually withdraw from Yemen and the region, it will be the ordinary Yemenis who are left to contend with the aftermath: an uneducated generation indoctrinated with medieval ideology and a society gripped by fear and terror and distrust. This situation not only fails Yemen but also undermines regional and global stability, and goes against all humanitarian norms.

A firm and principled stance is essential to uphold the values and effectiveness of the United Nations. We urge you to prioritize this urgent matter and take decisive action to support the people of Yemen in their time of dire need. The international community cannot afford to continue appeasing the Houthis at the expense of Yemeni lives and regional stability.

### **How Diplomatic Efforts Have Backfired: Strengthening Houthi Defiance and Escalation**

Diplomatic efforts have thus far only emboldened the Houthis, who have repeatedly displayed arrogance and a blatant disregard for international norms. Statements of condemnation and appeals to their conscience by the UN Special Envoy or UN officials have had the opposite effect, energizing them to become even more defiant and violent. The Stockholm Agreement, signed in 2018 under UN auspices, is a prime example of this. The Houthis failed to adhere to its terms, repeatedly violated its provisions, and used the period to regroup, escalate militarily, and secure significant territorial gains. These gains have since empowered them militarily, making them even less willing to compromise in peace talks. For example, the Houthis continue to deny visas to the UN Envoy Hans Grundberg to visit Sanaa, and they persist in refusing to engage in negotiations in good faith, opting instead to use violence as a means of extortion against the Yemeni government, regional actors and the international community. This further undermines the prospects for a sustainable resolution to the conflict.

## **Recommendations:**

In light of these alarming issues, we urge the UN leadership to take the following immediate steps:

**1. Suspend all UN projects in northern Yemen and relocate headquarters to Aden:** Until the Houthis demonstrate a genuine commitment to humanitarian principles and international law, continuing these projects only legitimizes their rule and enables further violations. Staff working for UN agencies are now targets under these horrific circumstances. Continuing operations means that the UN will be forced to hire Houthis as staff (the Houthis have demanded to see organigrams of several agencies and have said they want to control the hiring process), prompting current staff to resign or comply with Houthi demands. International staff are under constant threat of expulsion from Sana'a if they step out of line. This situation will lead to increased infiltration, diversion, and misuse of aid. Such infiltration could allow the Houthis to control UN agencies and INGOs, affecting staffing, procurement, and daily operations. This thwarts humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality.

**2. Demand the unconditional and immediate release of all hostages:** The UN must insist on the unconditional and immediate release of all hostages as a non-negotiable precondition for any further engagement. The ongoing captivity of UN and NGO staff, as well as civil society leaders, undermines humanitarian efforts and violates international norms. Their whereabouts or condition remains unknown. Immediate action to secure their release is imperative to uphold humanitarian principles and ensure the safety of aid workers.

**3. Ensure full access for UN operations as a precondition to resume aid:** The UN must demand and secure unhindered access for its personnel and humanitarian aid to reach those in need without interference. The ability to operate freely and independently is essential to delivering vital assistance and assessing humanitarian conditions accurately. Any restrictions on access hinder effective aid delivery and compromise the humanitarian response.

**4. Enforce redlines against extortion and aid diversion:** The UN must enforce stringent measures to combat Houthi extortion and prevent the diversion of humanitarian aid. Clear redlines must be established to safeguard the integrity and effectiveness of aid programs. Transparent

monitoring and accountability mechanisms are necessary to ensure aid reaches its intended recipients and is not exploited for political or military purposes.

**5. Finally, we demand the immediate replacement of the current Resident Coordinator**, who is alarmingly focused solely on programs and operations, with someone who will prioritize conflict sensitivity and adhere to the principle of "do no harm." This new leader must ensure that aid delivery does not exacerbate the situation or undermine peace and stability.

**Yours sincerely,**

1. Abductees' Mothers Association
2. Peace Track Initiative
3. Rights Radar for Human Rights
4. TOBE FOUNDATION FOR RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS
5. Mayyun for Human Rights and Development
6. Musaala for Human Rights
7. Defence for Rights and Freedoms
8. The Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations – Rasd Coalition
9. SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties
10. Yemen Future for Culture and Media Development
11. Women for Peace in Yemen
12. True Human Rights Institution
13. Rasd Organization for Rights and Freedoms
14. Taiz Human Rights Center (THRC)
15. Massar Foundation
16. Yemeni Parliamentarians against Corruption (Yemen PAC)



17. Yemeni Women Empowerment Foundation
18. Awareness Center for Media and Human Rights
19. Hemaya Organization for Civil Orientation
20. Muusawah for Human Rights & Freedoms
21. Resalty Foundation for Women Development
  
22. Th Yemeni Network for Rights and Liberties
  
23. Munasara for Development and Human Rights
  
24. Yemeni Legal Rights
  
25. Aswat Horra for Media and Freedoms
  
26. Coordinating Council of Civil Society Organizations and Human Rights
  
27. National Foundation for Women and Children Protection
  
28. Aden Gulf Foundation for Human Development and Social Services
  
29. Nedal Organization for Human Rights
  
30. The Yemeni Organization for the Defence of Rights and Freedom (HOOD)
  
31. Association for the Protection of Victims of Abuse and Survivors of Houthi Prisons
  
32. Adalah for Rights and Development
  
33. Rescue Call Organization for Rights, Liberties, and Relief
  
34. Aswat Hurra for Information outreach
  
35. National Center for Development and Freedoms
  
36. National Organization for Human Rights
  
37. Peace Foundation for Humanitarian Relief

38. Yemen Future Center for Strategic Studies (YFCSS)
39. Rasd for Rights and Development
40. Humanitarian Journalism Foundation
41. Shohood for Human Rights
42. Civil Commission for Victims of House Bombings
43. Taqesy for Human Rights
44. Need for Human Rights
45. Ain For Human Rights
46. Elaf for Community Development
47. Risalah for Community Development
48. Dameer Foundation for Human Rights