

How did Poverty and War Steal Ghamdan's Childhood?

Ghamdan's Story: A Victim of Recruitment Due to Poverty and Disruption of Education

The Houthi group continues to exploit children as a tool in its political and military conflicts. All parties to the conflict have committed serious violations against children, especially the Houthi group the most prominent perpetrator of these violations, as they are recruited under the pretext of fighting Israel and supporting the causes of Palestine and Lebanon. Many reports talk about the continued recruitment of children into the ranks of the Houthis, which raises deep concerns about the future of these children who are deprived of their childhood and forced to participate in conflicts that have nothing to do with them. The Houthi group has escalated its confrontation against other parties in the region, especially after the political changes witnessed by some countries, such as the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. This change may affect the balance of power in the region, prompting the Houthis to strengthen their position and readiness to face new challenges. Under the slogan of "resistance" and "for the sake of supporting Gaza and Lebanon", children are exploited in military training camps, where they are exposed to serious risks, including killing, injury, and physical and psychological violence. Which represents a flagrant violation of children's rights, and threatens the stability of Yemeni society in general.

This story is about child soldier Ghamdan Al-Ahwas, which was documented by the Rasd Coalition, through our researcher in Hajjah Governorate.

Ghamdan Yahya Al-Ahwas is a Yemeni child who is no more than fourteen years old, from Masaher Mor village, Al-Jumaimah District, Hajjah Governorate. He was recruited on February 23, 2024, after dropping out of school since the sixth grade of primary school in the 2019-2020 schooling year. He falls victim to poverty and disruption of education, and an easy prey for recruitment by the Houthi group.

Ghamdan grew up in a poor family working in agriculture, where he suffered from the loss of his father who worked in agriculture and became an orphan, which forced him to drop out of school in the sixth grade due to the war, which affected the education sector as the number of teachers decreased due to the non-payment

of salaries and the deterioration of the education system. Ghamdan's suffering worsened with the absence of educational opportunities, where the Houthi group exploits the state of poverty and destitution. Through our field research, we noticed that the focus of recruitment is in rural, remote, poor, and deprived areas, that have limited access to education services, which prompted Ghamdan to engage with his peers who were previously recruited into the ranks of the Houthis. Ghamdan was brainwashed through daily indoctrination sessions, where he was provided with Qat and got addicted to snuff, while he was influenced by listening to enthusiastic songs (Zamel) that reinforced his convictions in the group's ideology, as the Houthi group uses these methods to attract children, brainwash them and indoctrinate them.

Recruitment of Ghamdan Al-Ahwas started when he started meeting children who were previously recruited with Houthis, where the influencing and brainwashing began by listening to Houthi chants and the necessity of fighting the enemies of God, the Jews, and the Americans. Then the officials of the General Mobilization in Hajjah Governorate and the Security Administration of Al-Jumaimah District began to attract several children and adolescents, including Ghamdan, and invited them to attend a combat and intellectual training course, where he was enrolled on February 3, 2024 in the Abu Tayr military camp led by Houthi leader Imad Al-Qadi. Three months later, Ghamdan graduated and the graduating class was named (Al-Aqsa Flood Class). He was given a three-day leave to visit his family, then he was dispatched to Haradh and Midi fronts, and his family lost contact with him.

The Houthi group is still exploiting the war in Gaza and previously used the pretext of the aggression on Yemen to attract and recruit children to fight their opponents in the country. Houthis found in the Israeli war on Gaza, which claimed tens of thousands of Palestinian lives, "a means to attract children, stir their emotions, and convince their families of the need to volunteer to support Palestine,". Under the supervision of the General Mobilization Officer and the Director of Security in the Directorate, Ghamdan was recruited and sent to a training camp. He received intensive military training and graduated as part of a batch that carried the motto of supporting Al-Aqsa, to be later sent to the battlefronts in Haradh and Midi.

Ghamdan's family lost contact with him, and after about five months, Houthi official Zaid Dahshoush, the Director of Security of the Directorate, contacted his family

and informed them of his death. When they asked about the place of his death, he said he did not know.

Ghamdan Al-Ahwas was killed on September 21, 2024, as the period of his recruitment, and participation in the fighting, and his death was only 8 months. An official funeral was held for Ghamdan in the center of Hajjah Governorate, and his mother was not allowed to take a last look at him, and they only allowed his brother to look at the body before it entered the mosque. The family was given a food basket and Ghamdan's brother was interviewed by TV, following instruction by Houthis to talk about Ghamdan's martyrdom in support of Al-Aqsa and Lebanon.

Ghamdan's family was not allowed to see him during the funeral, and an official funeral was held for him amidst threats to his family not to question or object. Ghamdan left behind brainwashed brothers, who in turn became propaganda tools for the Houthis under the influence of threats and extreme poverty.

Mutahhar Al-Bathiji, CEO of the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations, confirms that the Houthi group continues to mobilize and recruit children at a high pace to fight on the battlefronts, especially in the recent period after the fall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime, in preparation for any potential confrontations with other parties. According to our information, the Houthi group's mobilization and recruitment officials hold intensive courses and visit schools asking principals to ensure that all students are present. Whoever is absent is warned and a warning is given to the student's parent. The recruitment and propaganda methods are still ongoing, under the pretext of supporting Gaza and fighting the Israeli enemy, a list for the sake of supporting Gaza and Lebanon, where children are indoctrinated, brainwashed, and trained in security camps as happened to Ghamdan Al-Ahwas, where only 8 months passed between his recruitment, training joining the front, and return of his dead body.

On the monitoring and documentation activities, Al-Bathiji confirms that the monitoring and documentation of child recruitment violations "are carried out by our researchers and monitors through field visits, conducting interviews with the victim's families and witnesses, as well as through from open sources, the Internet and Houthi media, and the published news and videos related to child recruitment."

He adds that the Houthi group "used schools, mosques, and summer centers, and it became clear that it has a great ability to attract and recruit children through a

series of supervisors and mobilizers, among sheiks and neighborhood leaders, and provide them with sufficient funding to facilitate their work in influencing children."

Repercussions of war on children

UN reports indicate that 4.5 million Yemeni children dropped out of school due to the war, as repeated attacks on schools have destroyed the educational environment, with 818 attacks recorded, on schools and hospitals or their use for military purposes.

Reports of the Yemeni Coalition to Monitor Human Rights Violations (Rasd Coalition) covering the period September 2015 to September 2024 revealed that the Houthis were able to recruit 7,171 children, 48 of whom were injured on the battlefronts. 5,552 children were killed during combat and military operations, 503 are still on the battlefronts, 907 are still missing, and 161 children have returned to their families. These figures reflect what our field team has reached, and they are part of the truth, but not the whole truth.

Taking advantage of the war in Gaza and the Red Sea to attract youth and children. Houthi groups used schools, mosques, and summer centers to attract children through a network of supervisors and mobilizers.

On the other hand, about 600,000 government employees have been suffering for the eighth year in a row due to the suspension of their salaries, which has negatively affected about 5 million people, forcing many children into the labor market or forced recruitment.

The case of Ghamdan reveals how the security and economic conditions have violated children's rights to education and safety, turning them into fuel for war. With the continued targeting of schools, the absence of teachers, and the suspension of salaries, thousands of families are facing a dark future that threatens entire generations with ignorance and forced recruitment.

Tawfiq Al-Humidi, head of the SAM organization, says that the Houthis are exploiting the war in Gaza to intensify their propaganda and campaigns for mobilization and recruitment, exploiting the raging feelings towards the Palestinian cause to justify their internal agenda and expand the ranks of their fighters. They

have drawn a link between the “Palestinian resistance” and their armed approach, using populist rhetoric that links the war in Gaza to confronting American and Israeli conspiracies”, a propaganda language aimed at attracting popular support and creating justifications for the ongoing recruitment process. In the absence of clear recruitment standards and complete disregard for their obligations to prevent child recruitment according to international laws, the Houthi group has expanded its targeting of the most vulnerable groups, especially children. Reports indicate that they are exploiting schools as recruitment centers, where military discourse is introduced into school curricula and activities, to brainwash students and recruit them systematically.

Al-Humidi confirms that this approach not only violates children's rights but also reflects a systematic strategy to perpetuate the conflict, where children's future is sacrificed and they are thrown into battlefields, in violation of all international conventions that prohibit the recruitment of children and their use in armed conflicts. These practices require strong condemnation and the intervention of the international community to pressure the Houthis to stop this blatant violation of human rights.

Human rights activist and legal expert Nabil Abdul Hafeez Manea says that the recruitment and use of children in military operations is a blatant violation of human rights laws, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in armed conflicts. It is a war crime.

In Yemen, the parties to the conflict have been involved in recruiting children and using them in military operations to varying degrees. According to available information, the Houthi group has been systematically recruiting children, especially since December 2023, when the Houthis recruited and held military courses for tens of thousands of children in an unprecedented manner, exposing them to serious risks including killing, injury, mutilation, and the risk of physical and psychological assault.

Nabil Manea stresses that all parties must avoid using children as soldiers, as this is a war crime under international humanitarian law and requires holding those responsible for these violations accountable.

Manea stresses that protecting children is a collective responsibility, and we must all work to stop these violations and ensure a better future for the children of Yemen. In this context, we call on the international community, including humanitarian and human rights organizations and UN member states, to take effective measures and pressure the Houthi militia to stop these illegal practices, prioritize the protection and rehabilitation of children, and provide the necessary support to them and their families.

Rasd Coalition stresses that the children of Yemen have suffered from the horrors of war and the six grave violations have been committed against them by all parties. These violations must not continue and must stop immediately, especially by the Houthis, and children must be spared war and violence. The continued violations of children's rights, including recruitment and use in military operations, constitute a flagrant violation of international laws, and threaten the future of Yemen.