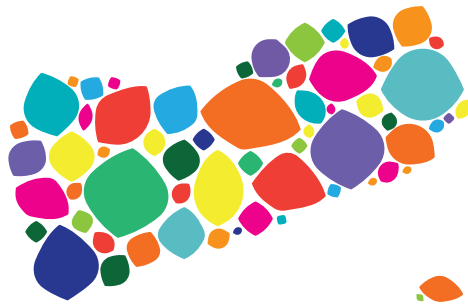




A War of Attrition: Higher Education in Yemen

By Fahmi Khaled





منتدى سلام اليمن
YEMEN PEACE FORUM

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Cover Photo : Students gather in the courtyard of Taiz University's College of Education at the start of a new school day on January 10, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha



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INTRODUCTION

The war has broken many of the basic elements of Yemeni society — but the legacy of its now-shattered higher education system will endure far beyond the cessation of hostilities. Unpaid salaries, plummeting enrollment, and unregulated privatization have eroded the quality of Yemen’s higher education system and left it teetering on the brink of collapse. The consequences of this collapse are far-reaching, for educators, students, and the country at large, with economic and social effects that will be felt far into the future.

Academics are struggling to cope with the basic costs of living without regular salary payments, and some have been forced to seek alternative employment not considered commensurate with their educational background and social status. As teachers have been forced to focus primarily on survival, and contend with associated negative mental health effects, the quality of education has declined. Over the past eight years of war, eight classes have graduated from Yemeni universities, and each should have produced tens of thousands of graduates to enter the workforce. Instead, these classes have been miniscule, and many graduates have not been properly taught fundamental skills. In the coming years, Yemenis will need to depend on these recently graduated professionals, including doctors for treating patients, civil engineers for maintaining and rebuilding infrastructure, and teachers for educating the next generation.

The overall outlook is bleak: an entire generation of Yemen’s workforce has been lost, and there is a real danger that the broken education system will fuel a downward spiral in capacity and human capital.



METHODOLOGY

This analysis seeks primarily to investigate how the war has reshaped the higher education landscape in Yemen and impacted academics, students, and the overall quality of education. The research included interviews conducted across four governorates with public universities (Sana'a city, Dhamar, Hudaydah, and Shabwa) with academics and other university staff, and current and former students. The study also reviewed articles on the state of higher education from news sites throughout the war, and reviewed social media discourse on the topic from November 2022 to March 2023. These sources provided an outline of academic working and living conditions. Finally, as Yemeni higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education do not publish enrollment statistics, data was collected from employees and academics at universities to estimate declines in enrollment during the conflict.

UNPAID SALARIES: LOST INCOME AND SOCIAL STATUS

More than any other disruption, unpaid salaries were repeatedly identified as the primary cause for the falling quality of education. Higher education is a part of the public sector in Yemen, and although students pay tuition, universities receive funding directly from the government.^[1] With the country absorbed in conflict, education has suffered a financial collapse — both in areas under Houthi (*Ansar Allah*) control and areas under the control of the internationally recognized government. The situation is dire. One professor working for Sana'a University reportedly starved to death in his apartment.^[2] Across Yemen, the decline of the education system is relatively consistent: university administrations are failing across the country, and gaps in pay have led to the severe deterioration of teaching and research.

Full salaries have not been regularly paid since 2016 in areas under Houthi control and living conditions for professors and lecturers have deteriorated significantly. Some have been evicted from their homes, while others have had lawsuits brought against them by their landlords, or face legal action from debt collectors or even grocery stores where they have outstanding bills.^[3] In government-held areas, salary payments are also irregular and increasingly worth less in real terms due to the depreciation of the local currency. A professor's salary, equivalent to around US\$1,000 at the outset of the conflict is worth approximately US\$140 now. A lecturer's salary, previously valued at around US\$350, is now worth around US\$45.^[4] In general, academics in areas under the control of the government are suffering from smaller salaries at the same time as the cost of living is skyrocketing.

Most academics have continued teaching while their living conditions deteriorate, but deprivation has deeply affected their motivation, performance in the classroom, and their mental health. One academic at Sana'a University said, "I no longer want to continue teaching. I don't know why I continue to teach. I hate this college and I hate

^[1] "Republic of Yemen: School Autonomy and Accountability, Saber Country Report, 2015," The World Bank, http://wbfiles.worldbank.org/documents/hdn/ed/saber/supporting_doc/CountryReports/SAA/SABER_SAA_Yemen_Report_final_formatted.pdf

^[2] Issam Wasil, "Academics Under War [AR]," Khuyut, October 4, 2022, <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/academics-war>

^[3] "Deprived of University Housing: Academics at Sana'a University Brought to Court over Rent [AR]," Yemen Shabab, October 21, 2021. <https://yemenshabab.net/news/70543>

^[4] Based on Yemeni rial exchange rate of 1,548 for US\$1 in government-held areas on January 15, 2024.

teaching. I no longer provide the same quality education I did when we were getting paid.”^[5] When professors and lecturers are struggling simply to survive, they can no longer develop new curricula or focus on students grappling with complex materials. Research has stopped almost completely; most scholars now view it as an unobtainable luxury as they cannot even put food on the table.

In some fields, academics have been able to overcome the problem of unpaid salaries by taking work in the private sector. Academics trained as medical doctors, engineers, accountants, and other fields have found alternate employers or freelance contracts to help pay the bills. Scholars working in the humanities, however, generally lack employment opportunities related to their areas of expertise outside academia.

Without any hope of consistent pay, some academics have turned to manual labor, driving buses, or working in construction, bakeries, or factories. But such jobs are typically viewed as incompatible with a scholar’s status. This offers many academics the hard choice of being seen to lower themselves socially in view of Yemeni society just to make ends meet. For example, Ahmad Yahya, an international law professor from Aden University, was lambasted on social media when he gave up teaching and started selling baked goods after he was hospitalized and could afford the medical expenses with his inconsistent university salary.^[6] According to another academic, “We don’t have space to work in a normal job like others. When a colleague goes to work in a factory or bakery, news spreads on the internet that a university professor is working in this field. So rather than finding paid work to support our families, we [professors] are afraid of the stigma... I am literally destitute and only want basic wages. I do not want a scandal.”^[7]

Some professors have sought to move past the social stigma. Pictures of Abdullah Muammar al-Hakimi, a former sociology and social anthropology professor at Sana’a University, working as a minibus driver circulated on Al Jazeera in 2022.^[8] Al-Hakimi later posted on social media that “work as a bus driver does not diminish my worth. Rather, it is a badge of honor at a time when respect for knowledge and scholars has decreased.”^[9] Al-Hakimi also authored a series of posts on Facebook, titled “The Daily

^[5] Author interview with a professor at Sana’a University, February 15, 2023.

^[6] “Photo of international law professor selling baked goods in Aden sparks controversy [AR],” Aden al-Ghad, February 2, 2023, <https://adengad.net/posts/665734>

^[7] Author interview with a professor at Sana’a University, November 25, 2022.

^[8] “A Driver with a Doctorate [AR],” Al Jazeera, January 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/aja-interactive/2022/8/1/-سائق-باص-بدرجة-أستاذ-دكتور-اليمن>

^[9] Post on Abdullah Muammar al-Hakimi’s Facebook page on July 29, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbido6851dQycoBf4NV49Ra6rLrp2aqLKZTkhoyA3rfa400TH1McTMD5jn18FijSfxn4j&id=100000680065292

Life of the Doctorate Driver,”^[10] discussing the challenges that Yemenis working in the higher education sector are facing, including poor working conditions and a lack of salary payments. Even though he had left his teaching post, Al-Hakimi found that his students would go to the bus station to look for him. “This makes me happy,” he said. “I feel like my students are still holding on to me as their teacher, despite slander online. It reminds me of Socrates – when he drank the cup of hemlock, only his students stood by him.”^[11] Other academics have left jobs at universities for agricultural work, like an academic at Dhamar University who gave up teaching and returned to his village in the Al-Hadda district said “growing [qat] has restored my dignity, which had completely eroded. I left teaching at the university after working for several years without a salary, to the point where my landlord was harassing me, and debts had piled up. So I returned to my village to work in the same fields where my father and grandfather worked.”^[12]

Besides contending with low or absent salaries, dignity in the workplace came up repeatedly as a factor driving the exodus of educators from universities in Yemen. Al-Hakimi wrote several Facebook posts alleging that he was fired from Sana’a University’s College of Arts because he refused to inflate student’s grades: ^[13]“If a university professor is not respected in their work and treated appropriately for the knowledge that they have, then it is a thousand times more honorable for them to stay at home rather than teach. It is morally better to wash the dishes and children’s clothes than work with people who do not respect knowledge and studies.”^[14]

^[10] Abdullah Muammar al-Hakimi, Facebook profile, accessed February 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000680065292>

^[11] Abdullah Muammar al-Hakimi, “The Daily Life of a Professor, Lesson 23: Defending Academic Principles [AR],” Facebook, October 10, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbido23A4cEzNRBaV3nGE9EnGykMFY3RBT3QDMMabPxQHF4mh3DSZSewQ36Kxy86P9jbp2l&id=100000680065292

^[12] Author’s telephone interview with a professor at Dhamar University, February 17, 2023.

^[13] Abdullah Muammar al-Hakimi, “Lessons Learned: Lesson 1 [AR],” Facebook, July 29, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbidoqsTX9S8QNkZaEaxVfjrVR1CTLQJjggs9BRgVzpsKv7gVNwZ2ZrybP3Qpm7bv8SYul&id=100000680065292

^[14] Ibid.

THE DECLINE IN RESEARCH

Brain drain is a common concern in academia, but talented minds previously migrated to higher-paying jobs or universities in other nations where they were still able to teach, publish, and contribute to their respective fields of study. Now, many have left the field altogether, sometimes for menial work. For those who remain in academia, professional advancement is hindered by barriers to conducting and publishing research and participating in conferences.

Since 2015, many academics who returned to Yemen after completing their doctorates have not conducted any further research. One assistant professor lamented his inability to seek tenure. “I finished my doctorate in 2013. In the 10 years since I have not conducted any research. These are the prime research years for any professor, the period after their graduation, but there is nothing to encourage me to conduct research. How can I write and focus on research when I find it difficult to think about anything other than feeding my children?”^[15]

In Yemen, peer review and tenure require fees to be paid by scholars, and most are now unable to afford these costs. Sana’a University added an additional hurdle for academics seeking academic promotion in 2022, saying it would only consider research published in scholarly journals listed in the Scopus database, many of which have prohibitively high publication fees.^[16] The update was apparently part of an attempt by the university to improve its international ranking, but administrators seemingly did not take into account the financial and psychological strains already placed on their staff. While it is sometimes possible to receive waivers for publishing in Scopus journals,, this depends on several factors, including the topic, quality of research, language, and type of journal, and requires researchers and institutions to understand the various options available. Only some journals listed in Scopus accept research in Arabic, the primary language for research in Yemen.

^[15] Author interview with a professor at Sana’a University, February 17, 2023

^[16] “Sana’a University issues strict regulations unjust to Ph.D. students and faculty members [AR],” Yemeni Student, October 16, 2022, <https://yemenistudent.org/news-details.php?nid=313>

One professor elaborated on the impact of this regulation, saying “the decision to only consider research published in journals in the Scopus database completely demoralized us - many colleagues simply stopped their research. In addition, the university does not provide any financial support for research, while some journals in the Scopus database have fees ranging from US\$600 to US\$2,000. It would be impossible for me to cover these fees even if I was being paid regularly, so imagine the situation without my salary.”^[17] He said that the university has somewhat backtracked on the regulations and now allows publications in non-Scopus journals to be considered for promotions up to associate professor.

The war has made travel almost impossible, further isolating researchers in Yemen and preventing them from attending conferences and seminars abroad. Yemeni universities used to support academics by covering travel expenses and providing a stipend to encourage participation in these events. Although some scholars have participated in virtual conferences, in-person participation provides greater networking opportunities and potential for research collaboration. Restrictions on research, travel, and promotion present an even greater challenge to junior staff. Most of the lecturers who were appointed to Sana’a University in 2011 and 2012 have not continued their graduate studies. “I have been a lecturer since 2011. For 12 years I have taught without finishing my education. I used to dream of traveling to continue my education, just like my colleagues in the department did, and of earning my doctorate. These dreams have all been dashed, and I no longer want to study or teach.”^[18]

^[17] Author interview with a professor at Sana’a University, February 25, 2023

^[18] Author interview with an instructor at Hudaydah University, February 21, 2023

PLUMMETING ENROLLMENT AND FEWER CAREER PATHS

The war has had an impact on all aspects of higher education, but it is perhaps most visible in declining enrollment numbers. The humanities in particular are under-enrolled, with many programs only instructing one or two students per department. Overall, the demand for higher education among youth has declined amid a lack of an educational foundation to build on and job opportunities for the future.

In 2014, the Arabic Department at Sana'a University had over 100 first-year students, and the department as a whole had over 300. As of 2023, there were only 26 students enrolled in the department across four years. The situation was even worse in the History and Philosophy Department, which had only one first-year student.^[19] In Dhamar University's Arabic Department, only 12 students were enrolled in 2023, down from 150 students in 2014. For the Faculty of Arts as a whole, 280 students were enrolled for the 2022–2023 academic year, compared to the more than 1,300 students in 2014–15.^[20] The College of Education at Shabwa University had 200 students enrolled for 2022–23, compared to 2,100 in 2014–15. At the College of Education at Aden University, enrollment has dropped from 2,276 students in 2009–10 to 99 students in 2022–23.^[21]

At best, classroom morale is damaged when students leave programs. At worst, the programs are shut down. At Shabwa University, many departments have had to close due to a lack of enrollment, including the History and Geography departments. Enrollment has remained consistent in the English and Math departments, with the latter benefiting from an incentive offering students YR150,000 a year to study the major.^[22] One professor noted that “female students make up 80 percent of the student body because male students prefer to join military groups, where the salary is double that of a university professor.”^[23]

^[19] Author interview with a professor at Sana'a University, March 12, 2023

^[20] Author interview with a professor at Dhamar University, March 13, 2023.

^[21] Raad al-Raymi, “College of Education at Aden University: Low enrollment threatens the educational process [AR],” South24 News, October 27, 2022. <https://south24.net/news/news.php?mid=3008>

^[22] Author interview with a professor at Shabwa University, March 16, 2023.

^[23] Ibid.

Science departments also struggle with enrollment as there are increasingly fewer career paths for graduates. At the College of Applied Sciences at Dhamar University, the Geology, Mathematics, and Physics departments have seen the number of first-year students drop from more than 70 pre-war to three in 2022-23.^[24] Many other students have dropped out of university because they have to help provide for their families. An academic from Sana'a University summed up the situation saying that "demand for education, as a whole, has decreased significantly. There is no use for learning and knowledge in times of war, so students have gone to look for opportunities elsewhere."^[25]

The Dean of the College of Education at Aden University, Dr. Nasser Salem Lajda, said that low enrollment levels are "a huge problem faced by education departments in all Yemeni universities."^[26] He added that one of the reasons for the decline is the dismal outlook for prospective teachers. "How can we expect families to encourage their children to study education for years, only to graduate and not be able to find a job? Even if they do find a job, the salaries are very low."^[27]

At Sana'a University, some students are unable to attend lectures "because they are either working to support their families, or they cannot afford transportation from their villages or homes to the university, so they are forced into routine absence and only come to campus to take final exams. This hollows out their education [...] students' understanding is shallow, and graduates suffer from a dearth of knowledge and lack of skills."^[28] This has an immediate effect on the education system, but future generations will also pay a price for the nationwide deterioration of expertise.

The fracture of the education system began even before these students enrolled in university: Primary and secondary education broke down early in the war. Students that enrolled in university in 2022-2023 were in fifth grade in 2015, and received a primary and secondary education from a collapsing system, as teachers' salaries went unpaid and approximately one in four schools were damaged or destroyed by the conflict.^[29] These students have arrived at university with little basic education and less hope for

^[24] Author interview with an academic at Dhamar University, March 13, 2023.

^[25] Author interview with an academic at Sana'a University, March 2, 2023.

^[26] Raad al-Raymi, "College of Education at Aden University: Low enrollment threatens the educational process [AR]," South24 News, October 27, 2022, <https://south24.net/news/news.php?nid=3008>

^[27] Ibid.

^[28] Author interview with a professor at Sana'a University, March 17, 2023.

^[29] "Education," UNICEF Yemen, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/education>

the future. The problems at lower levels persist: UNICEF reports that “Yemen is facing a severe education crisis, with almost 6 million children experiencing disruptions to their learning.”^[30]

A professor at Sana’a University acknowledged that “there is a difference between the students we used to teach and those we are teaching now. The students currently in university are depressed. They do not care about education. The education they received before university was inadequate, so they started college without a rudimentary foundation to build on. This means that we have to waste a significant amount of time explaining basic concepts that previous groups of students had learned in their pre-college education.”^[31] An academic at Hudaydah University compared trying to teach distracted and untrained students to “inflat[ing] a torn balloon.”^[32] Another professor at Dhamr University said, “Honestly, most of the time I do not try to push the students to learn because I feel like their lives are already very difficult. I know that they are facing mental health struggles because I am in the same boat - I understand what they are going through. I usually raise their exam grades to ensure that they pass.”^[33]

^[30] Ibid.

^[31] Author interview with a professor at Sana'a University, February 15, 2023.

^[32] Author interview with a professor at Hudaydah University, March 1, 2023.

^[33] Author interview with a professor at Dhamar University, February 15, 2023.

PRIVATIZATION

Universities have become focused on finding new revenue streams to finance their activities in response to the lack of government funding. Notably, this has led to the birth of a parallel education system where public universities guarantee admission to highly competitive programs in exchange for higher fees, usually paid in US dollars.^[34]

Prior to the conflict, students were distributed in public universities evenly among different departments. The Medical College had strict enrollment limits, as did the schools of dentistry and engineering. With such limits in place, students who did not earn a spot in their preferred program would choose from other majors offered by the university. This led to high levels of enrollment in humanities programs like education and literature. With the new market-driven education system, however, private universities and medical institutes at public universities have removed enrollment caps.^[35] As a result students, are now primarily enrolling in medicine, dentistry, engineering, and pharmacology programs, as there is a perception that scientific fields offer better career prospects. However, this is not necessarily the case.

The Dhamar city, the capital of the governorate of the same name in northwest Yemen, is home to a public university, a college of pharmacy, a continuing education institute, four private universities, and several medical institutes that grant diplomas. An estimated 8,000 pharmacists graduated there between 2015 and 2023, but the city needed only 160 new pharmacists during that period to keep up with the local population growth and urban expansion, according to an official at the governorate's Health Office.^[36] Most of these graduates were thus unable to find work related to pharmacy and moved on to other fields or opened small businesses. This market saturation is observable in other 'marketable' fields like dentistry, medical laboratory sciences, and engineering.

^[34] Taiz University website, https://taiz.edu.ye/DefaultDET.aspx?SUB_ID=30495

^[35] Essam Wasel, "Spawning Private Universities: Destroying Public Universities [AR]," Khuyut, December 12, 2023; <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/gov-private-universities>

^[36] Ibid.

Accreditation also became more lenient for private universities following the 2015 division of the Ministry of Higher Education.^[37] One branch is now in Sana'a and the other in Aden, and the two do not work together. As such, there is no way to know how many private universities or institutes have been granted permission to operate across the country. The Ministry of Higher Education in Sana'a has not published records of permits issued to private universities, while the Aden Ministry's website has statistics only covering private universities in the areas under government control.^[38] Neither website includes information about private health institutes. On the National Information Center website, which includes records of both public and private universities, statistics have not been updated since 2011.^[39] Ala al-Shalali, a researcher, conducted a field review of private universities for Khuyut, concluding that there were 18 private universities in Yemen before 2014, and another 19 have been established since the beginning of the war.^[40] Permits seem to be issued to private universities or institutes without a clear review process, or even baseline requirements for quality assurance.^[41] Each ministry collects fees for their permits, but there is no oversight or evaluation mechanism in place for private universities or institutions.^[42] The most recent performance audit of Yemeni universities was published on the Ministry of Higher Education's website in 2010,^[43] and no reports have been produced since the war began.

^[37] Afrah Nasser, "Yemen's prospects for unity are uncertain after many years of war," Arab Center Washington DC, July 28, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/yemens-prospects-for-unity-are-uncertain-after-many-years-of-war/>

^[38] "Private Universities," Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Aden, <https://moheye.net/yemeni-universities/private-universities/>

^[39] National Information Center, accessed March 7, 2013. <https://yemen-nic.info/sectors/education/#3>

^[40] Ala al-Shalali, "Private Universities: A Business at the Expense of Education [AR]," Khuyut, April 20, 2021. <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/private-universities>

^[41] "The Supreme National Anti-Corruption Commission files charges against the Minister of Higher Education and summons his aides for investigation [AR]," Yemeni Press website, December 12, 2023, <https://www.yemenipress.net/archives/87718>

^[42] Ibid.

^[43] "Higher Education. Facts and indicators of achievement over 20 years," Ministry of Higher Education, 2010, <http://www.yemen.gov.ye/portal/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=JkNaE21wrEo%3d&tabid=583>. The website has since gone offline, but a copy of the report is available [here](#).

CONCLUSION

Post-war reconstruction will require engineers to build infrastructure, architects and city planners to design cities, policy-makers and sociologists to provide social services, support communities, and rebuild trust, economists to advise development efforts, and multi-disciplinary thinkers to identify the skills needed to steer the future of work in Yemen.

Yet, Yemen's higher education system is being neglected, as it was in the years before the war. In 2014, Minister of Higher Education Hisham Sharaf complained that higher education's budget was capped at 11 million Yemeni riyals.^[44] That same year, Dr. Abdulkareem al-Sharjabi, former dean of Sana'a University, noted that the research budget was only two percent of the amount reserved for Yemen's Tribal Affairs Commission, and that inadequate funding had seriously lowered the quality of education. He lamented that "Yemeni students at the School of Dentistry at Sana'a University learn 10 percent of the things that Syrian or Egyptian students learn at Cairo and Damascus universities."^[45]

After years of conflict, education has dropped to the bottom of the list of policymakers' priorities. Now, more than ever, education urgently needs attention. Public universities are in the middle of an economic collapse, professors are fleeing due to unpaid salaries, enrollment is plummeting as students seek brighter futures elsewhere, and although highly marketable, private degrees have high price tags, no quality assurance, and are further decimating the job market by oversaturating some sectors while depleting others.

Immediate policy interventions are needed to stabilize Yemen's educational system before it reaches the point of no return. First and foremost, this requires more spending on higher education. Additional funding could help ensure the regular payment of salaries to higher education workers, including increases to salaries in government-controlled areas to partially offset losses due to currency depreciation, as well as support for academics' research.

^[44] "The Minister of Higher Education: The budget for scientific research is less than 11 million rials [AR]," Hour News, February 12, 2014, www.hournews.net/27169/ وزير التعليم العالي - ميزانية البحث العلمي في اليمن - لا تتجاوز 11 مليون ريال

^[45] "Dean of Sana'a University describes education in Yemen as a 'disaster' as the budget for research is less than 2 percent of the budget allocated to the Tribal Affairs Commission [AR]," Akhbar Alyom, March 9, 2014, <https://akhbaralyom.net/nprint.php?lng=arabic&sid=77051>

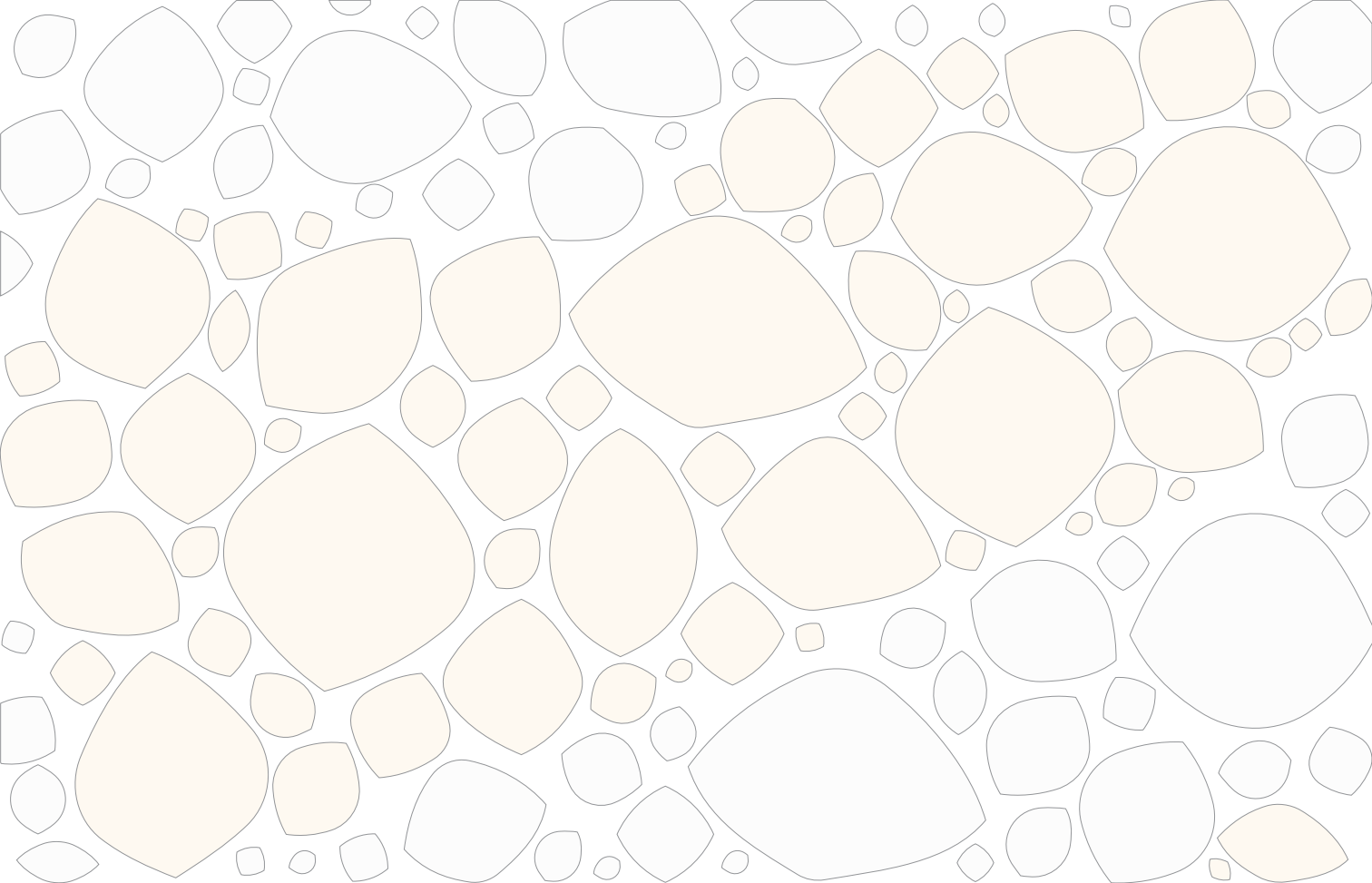
Authorities should also limit the issuance of new permits for private universities and other educational institutes, conduct a rigorous review of existing ones, and shut down any that do not meet quality assurance standards.

As post-conflict nations rebuild their economies and societies, history has proven that higher education is central. In the early stages of reconstruction, higher education offers a path to employment for former soldiers or those displaced by war. But with a little focus and planning, higher education can offer much more than this. Education can help Yemen diversify its economy, pivot to new technological skills, and develop its workforce in new and more effective ways. Following the ruin of war, there must be a path forward. Education is that path.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fahmi Khaled is a pseudonym for a Yemeni researcher interested in issues related to higher education in Yemen.

This analysis was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.



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