

Child Soldiers in Marib and Shabwa



Child Soldiers in Marib and Shabwa

By: Ali al-Sakani, Majd Gawdat, and
Casey Coombs

September 18, 2024

Cover photo: A Yemeni child wearing military fatigues and holding a rifle at a demonstration organized by the Houthi group in support of Palestinians in Gaza in Sana'a city on May 31, 2024
// Sana'a Center photo.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

Executive Summary

The prevalence of child soldiers fighting in Yemen's war has become common knowledge as Houthi (*Ansar Allah*) forces continue to publicly recruit and deploy children in military operations.^[1] Other armed groups in Yemen also recruit minors, although on a smaller scale and in a less public manner. In order to understand what accounts for that disparity and other aspects of child recruitment in Yemen, this policy brief seeks to explore the reasons why children have joined armed groups in Marib and Shabwa, two frontline governorates in which Houthi forces, Saudi-backed pro-government forces, and UAE-backed forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) are present.

The warring parties have battled fiercely over control of Marib and Shabwa – two of only three governorates that contain all of Yemen's oil and natural gas production^[2] – and their immense economic resources. Ironically, limited economic opportunities in the governorates have led many residents, including children, to seek out the salaries offered by armed groups. While the prospect of a steady salary was found to be one of the main drivers of children joining armed groups in Marib and Shabwa, other factors were intertwined with economic motivations. Some children sought the status of being part of a group that wields power^[3] – even serving as a low-ranking soldier performing menial tasks is more desirable than being a seasonal farm hand or day laborer. For others, just being fed was a major draw, given the high rates of household food insecurity.^[4] Revenge, patriotism, ideology, religion, tribal duty, and a lack of educational opportunities also play a role.^[5] Moreover, in the absence of traditional career opportunities in a war economy, and the uncertainty of what may come after the conflict, many students do not see the utility of education as a key to a better future.^[6] Houthi efforts to create barriers to attending school have exacerbated the latter trend.^[7]

[1] "Yemen: Houthis Recruit More Child Soldiers Since October 7," Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/13/yemen-houthis-recruit-more-child-soldiers-october-7>

[2] Ammar al-Aulaqi, "The Yemeni Government's Triangle of Power," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, September 9, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11542>

[3] Interview with Shabwani community activist from Shabwa, August 19, 2024.

[4] Interview with an expert on armed groups in Yemen, January 11, 2024; "Yemen: Acute Food Insecurity Projection Update October 2023 - February 2024," Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1156803/>

[5] Interviews with a Shabwa Defense forces soldier, February 23, 2024; a pro-government soldier in Marib city, March 10, 2024; a human rights activist in Marib, March 2, 2024; a pro-government military commander in Marib, March 5, 2024; the head of a civil protection organization in Marib, March 8, 2024; a pro-government soldier in Marib city, March 9, 2024; and a tribal leader and father of a child soldier from Marib's Al-Abdiyah district, March 26, 2024.

[6] Interview with a community activist from Shabwa, August 19, 2024.

[7] Interviews with a human rights activist in Marib, March 2, 2024; a pro-government military commander in Marib, March 5, 2024; an activist and tribesman in Marib, March 6, 2024; and a teacher and relative of a child soldier, March 13, 2024.

Creating more economic opportunities would help remove key incentives for underage males to join armed groups.^[8] Teachers and other professionals in the education sector should receive extra compensation to help prevent them from joining armed groups, which undermines the quality of education and plays a factor in school dropouts. Students who have already dropped out to join armed groups should be incentivized to return to the classroom or provided with opportunities to learn trades that will prepare them for the labor market. Finally, any peace agreement must take into account the financial compensation currently provided by armed groups and explore alternative sources of income and retraining for current fighters.

^[8] Reducing child recruitment by Houthi forces will be more challenging due to the systematic nature of the group's recruitment efforts.

Marib and Shabwa as Frontline Governorates

Marib governorate has experienced frontline fighting since March 2015, shortly after the Houthis took over the capital Sana'a in September 2014.^[9] Due to its position as a strategic oil and gas hub located about 175 km east of the capital, Marib city emerged as the seat of the internationally recognized government's Ministry of Defense and a base for operations to retake Sana'a. Marib city also became a primary refuge for internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing Houthi-controlled areas, leading to a massive growth in population, from about 55,000 in 2014 to between 630,000 and 1.5 million by 2020.^[10] The majority of the governorate's population, estimated between 1.5 and 3 million,^[11] live in government-controlled Marib city, where the Islamist Islah party is the main political power.

Marib is largely a tribal society. Most of its tribes, including the Murad and the Abidah, follow the Sunni Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence, and have historically existed beyond the reach of the central state and on the fringes of power struggles between Zaidi imams and tribes in the northern highlands, an area the Houthis now dominate.^[12] In anticipation of Houthi advances into Marib, in late 2014 Marib's tribes began to form forces known as popular resistance committees.^[13] The tribal fighters partnered with pro-government army forces to thwart the advances of Houthi forces allied with forces of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and push them back to the Marib-Sana'a governorate border, where the frontline remained static for about four years. Starting in January 2020, Houthi forces began advancing into the western half of Marib and nearly managed to besiege Marib city and capture the nearby Safer oil and gas facilities to its east. The fronts have remained more or less static since a ceasefire was brokered by the United Nations in April 2022, despite its expiry in October of that year.

Currently, the Houthis control all or most of the geographical area of 12 of Marib's 14 districts. Only Marib city and Marib al-Wadi district, where the main population center and strategic oil and gas reserves are located, respectively, remain entirely in the hands of the internationally recognized government. Along the frontlines, Houthi forces battle pro-government national army forces, tribal forces, and a small number of Saba Axis forces of the UAE-backed Giants Brigades.

^[9] Casey Coombs and Ali al-Sakani, "Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, October 22, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11778>

^[10] "Marib Urban Profile: A precarious model of peaceful co-existence under threat," UN Habitat, March 2021, pp. 8, 23, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/210408_marib_small.pdf

^[11] Ibid. The wide range of Marib city and governorate-wide population estimates reflects the tallies by the international community (low end) and the local authority (high end).

^[12] Casey Coombs and Ali al-Sakani, "Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, October 22, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11778>

^[13] Casey Coombs and Salah Ali Salah, "How Outsiders Fighting for Marib are Reshaping the Governorate," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 4, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15664>

In neighboring Shabwa, Houthi-Saleh forces overran the governorate in March 2015.^[14] Like in Marib, the tribes in Shabwa formed popular resistance committees. Unlike in Marib, however, the national army in Shabwa was in disarray and unable to assist the popular resistance committees. Nonetheless, Shabwani tribal fighters put aside long-standing disputes and worked together to fight the common threat. A lack of unified leadership and insufficient weapons and training contributed to their retreat in the face of the invading Houthi-Saleh forces. After losing Shabwa's capital Ataq in April 2015,^[15] the popular resistance committees there retreated to southern Shabwa. It would take more than two-and-a-half years for the pro-government army, popular resistance committees, and UAE-backed forces to eject the Houthis from all of Shabwa, the last district of which was northwestern Bayhan in December 2017.^[16] Houthi forces would later advance again into the governorate before being pushed out by Giants Brigade forces in January 2022.^[17]

In the meantime, the formation of new military groups with opposing political ideologies created deep divisions in Shabwa that persist to this day. In mid-2016, the UAE began training and funding local forces known as the Shabwani Elite, which were later rebranded as the Shabwa Defense forces.^[18] UAE-backed forces have controlled virtually the entire governorate since August 2022 when they expelled Islah-affiliated army and security forces from Ataq city and surrounding districts.^[19] The STC, meanwhile, has become the dominant political power in Shabwa with the help of its loyalist Shabwa Defense forces and allied Giants Brigades forces.

^[14] Marib al-Ward, "Tribal mobilization in Shabwa to confront the Houthis [AR]," Al-Jazeera, March 29, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/4rttfr4x>

^[15] "Houthis take control of Ataq city the center of Shabwa governorate [AR]," Al-Jazeera, April 9, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/3cb2nwfsm>

^[16] Ahmed Ashour, "After liberating Shabwa, the battle to liberate Yemen goes to Al-Bayda [AR]," Al-Ain News, December 24, 2017, <https://al-ain.com/article/yemen-release-shabwa>.

^[17] "State of the War – When Giants Strike – The Yemen Review January-February 2022," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 15, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/jan-feb-2022/17005>

^[18] See "Shabwa: Two High-ranking Security Commanders Suspended," South24, July 24, 2022, <https://south24.net/news/newse.php?nid=2826>

^[19] Maged al-Madhaji, "Defeat in Shabwa Forces Islah to Reckon With New Political Reality," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 18, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/18497>

Methodology

This policy brief first provides a brief overview of the tribal norms and state laws regulating the use of child soldiers in armed conflict in Yemen in general. It then examines evidence of child soldier use in Marib and Shabwa governorates, with a focus on the factors driving children to join the armed groups and the tactics the armed groups use in the recruitment process. Following this examination, the paper analyzes the current and future implications of the use of child soldiers in Marib and Shabwa and suggests ways to counter this phenomenon.

A desk review of literature on child soldiers^[20] in Marib and Shabwa governorates found minimal existing research. As a result, much of this paper's research relies on interviews with residents in the two governorates, as well as Yemeni researchers and human rights activists. A number of individuals contacted for the purpose of this research, based in both Houthi- and government-controlled areas of Marib and in Shabwa, declined interview requests due to fear of reprisals from armed groups or governing authorities. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, interviewees have been granted anonymity in order to speak freely.

In Marib, 12 interviews were conducted in March 2024 with residents from seven districts. The interviewees included a child soldier,^[21] relatives of recruited children, adult soldiers, military commanders, politicians, human rights activists, and teachers who have monitored cases of child recruitment.^[22] Some interviewees were from Hareeb al-Qaramish district, a key recruitment area for the Houthis that has been under the group's control since the start of the war. Others were from Serwah district, an active frontline since 2015 that is currently divided between Houthi and government control and is inhabited by the politically significant Jahm sub-tribe of the Bani Jabr tribe, as well as from Mahiliyah, Al-Jubah, and Al-Abdiyah districts in southern Marib. All of these districts have had active frontlines at various points during the conflict; Al-Jubah and Mahiliyah are populated by the Murad tribe, which is the largest in Marib in terms of population, while Al-Abdiyah is home to the Bani Abd tribe. Other interviewees live and work in government-controlled Marib city.

In Shabwa, ten interviews were conducted with residents in four districts, which at various periods during the war, have come under the control of Houthi, UAE-

^[20] For the purposes of this paper, a child soldier is defined as anyone under the age of 18 who has been recruited or used by state armed forces or non-state armed groups. See, "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN for Children and Armed Conflict, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/optional-protocol/>. Regarding roles undertaken by child soldiers, the paper applies the expansive definition used by the Paris Principles, which states that "a child associated with an armed force or armed group" refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities." See, "The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups," UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), February 2007, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/research/unicef/2007/en/42827>. For a discussion on the various definitions and terminology of child soldiering, see Legassick, M., Johnson, D., & Gribbin, C., "Definitions of Child Recruitment and Use in Armed Conflict: Challenges for Early Warning," *Civil Wars*, April 25, 2023, pp. 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2023.2167042>

^[21] One child soldier was 13-years-old at the time of the interview. His parents granted permission to the researchers to conduct the interview.

^[22] Most of the interviews were conducted in-person. A small number of interviews were conducted via phone, as traveling to Houthi-held areas of Marib or to other frontline districts such as Hareeb al-Qaramish was not possible for security and logistical reasons.

backed STC-affiliated and Giants Brigades forces, or pro-government forces affiliated with the Islamist Islah party. Interviewees included a child soldier,^[23] the father of a child soldier, adult soldiers, a military recruiter, community activists, and teachers. Interviewees were from the governorate's capital Ataq and the adjacent Jordan district, the latter of which contains most of Shabwa's oil fields, and both of which changed hands from Islah-affiliated forces to STC-affiliated forces in August 2022. Other interviewees were from Shabwa's southern Al-Saeed district and northwestern Bayhan district, the latter of which Houthi forces held for the first three years of the war.

This research focused exclusively on male child soldiers because, traditionally, female child soldiers have been rare in Yemen, although the Houthi group has recruited female students to the group's summer camps since at least 2019.^[24]

^[23] The child soldier was over 15 years old and consented to the interview.

^[24] In 2019, the Houthi-run Supervisory Committee for Summer Centers stated that 120,323 female students had enrolled in camps that year, representing nearly half of total enrollment. See "Summer Centers. A Process Of Fortification And Acquisition Of Knowledge And Science from Its Correct Sources," Ansarollah, July 6, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/ye/archives/263724>. In 2016, female child soldiers were reportedly seen participating in a military parade as part of the group's female militia, Zainabiat. See Samia al-Aghbari, "Houthis 'Zainabia' – Soft Hands for Dirty Work," Al-Masdar Online, November 22, 2018, <https://www.almasdaronline.com/articles/161296>

Norms and Laws Governing the Use of Child Soldiers

The statistics on child soldiers in Yemen are incomplete and mostly focus on Houthi practices^[25] given that the group employs child soldiers on a much larger scale than other armed groups in Yemen. Houthi officials have proudly^[26] divulged figures in this regard.^[27] In areas controlled by anti-Houthi forces, the recruitment and use of child soldiers is less clearly understood. In these areas, which include Marib and Shabwa, government-aligned forces appear less inclined to employ child soldiers, and less willing to publicize the practice when it occurs. This is due to a number of factors, including that the main regional sponsors of the armed groups in these areas, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have, to varying degrees, sought to build professional military forces (or at least the appearance thereof) that adhere to national and international norms. The Yemeni government has signed international treaties and passed national laws prohibiting the use of children in combat.^[28] Nonetheless, child soldiers are present among and recruited by non-Houthi armed groups in both Marib and Shabwa,^[29] and some of this recruitment has been facilitated by the Saudi-led coalition.^[30] The weakness of accountability mechanisms regulating the recruitment of child soldiers, combined with incentives to fill manpower shortages, has perpetuated the phenomenon.^[31]

At the outset of the war, young men from all over Yemen started joining armed groups largely based on tribal, political, ideological, and geographical affiliation. The biggest pool of recruitment for the various armed groups in Marib and Shabwa, whether under the control of the Houthis or the government, is the young male population from various Yemeni tribes. Tribal culture in Yemen emphasizes honor, solidarity within the tribe, and the protection of its members and land at all costs. In this culture, boys carry guns as soon as they are big enough to bear them on their shoulders. Armed groups in Yemen incorporate these considerations into their recruitment criteria. Unlike other armed groups, the Houthi have compelled tribes

^[25] "Children, Not Soldiers," Yemeni Coalition to Monitor Human Rights Violations, 2023, unpublished report; "Militarized Childhood," Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor SAM for Rights and Liberties, February 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/militarized-childhood-report-houthis-recruitment-yemeni-children-during-war-february>

^[26] "Houthis continue to recruit child soldiers, despite Yemen truce," Al-Jazeera, June 16, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/16/houthis-continue-to-recruit-child-soldiers-despite-yemen-truce>

^[27] "In the style of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard... the Houthi militia concludes its summer centers and says that 1.1 million children participated in it (photos) [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, June 10, 2024, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/296414>; In 2023, the Houthis aimed to enroll 1.5 million children in summer camps, which serve in part as recruiting pools for the group's armed forces. See "Summer courses and schools... intellectual incubators to fortify generations and develop their talents[AR]," Saba News Agency, April 28, 2023, https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3236884.htm?file_id=1

^[28] In 2014, then-prime minister Mohammed Basindawa signed an action plan not to recruit soldiers below 18 years old and to demobilize existing child soldiers from the national forces. "Children, not soldiers," UNICEF, May 14, 2014, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/children-not-soldiers-yemen>

^[29] Between April 2013 and December 2018, the UN verified the recruitment and use of 3,034 children by parties to the conflict in Yemen, mostly by Houthi forces. See, "Children and armed conflict in Yemen: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Security Council, June 3, 2019, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/document/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-children-and-armed-conflict-in-yemen-2/>.

^[30] "Incineration of the border," SAM Organization for Human Rights, 2019, <https://samil.com/pdf/en/Incineration-of-the%20Border-EN.pdf>

^[31] "Children, Not Soldiers," Yemeni Coalition to Monitor Human Rights Violations, 2023, p. 7, unpublished report.

to contribute fighters, including children, to the group's constant war mobilization efforts.^[32] Heavy taxation, the non-payment of public salaries, and tightening control over the education system have also resulted in the increased enlistment of children in summer camps to meet Houthi recruitment demands, receive food aid, generate income, or simply avoid punishment.

Key Events Governing Child Soldiers in Yemen	Date
Yemen ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, pledging to refrain from recruiting any child under age 15 into the national armed forces and limiting the Yemeni state's recruitment of children under 18.	1991
Article 149 of the Yemeni Child Rights Law of 2002 states that the Yemeni state shall work to adhere to international law in protecting children in armed conflicts by "prohibiting children from carrying weapons [and] not involving children directly in war – not recruiting any person under the age of 18."	2002
Yemen ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, committing to "retaining 18 years as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment into the Yemeni armed forces, as well as to retaining the ban on the compulsory or voluntary recruitment of any person under 18 years of age." The Optional Protocol also states that non-state armed groups may not, under any circumstances, recruit children under 18 or use them in hostilities.	March 2, 2007
President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi issued a decision to prohibit the recruitment of children into the ranks of the military and security forces.	November 27, 2012
Prime Minister Mohammed Basindawa signed a UN action plan to end child recruitment by the country's armed forces.	May 14, 2014

^[32] Adel Dashela, "Northern Yemeni tribes during the eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A comparative study," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 14, 2022, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Northern_Yemeni_Tribes_during_the_Eras_of_Ali_Abdullah_Saleh_and_he_Houthi_Movement_A_Comparative_Study_en.pdf pp. 10-12.

<p>The UN blacklisted essentially all armed groups in the Yemen war for violations against children, including the Saudi-led coalition, Al-Qaeda, the Houthis, and government and pro-government forces. The UN removed the Saudi-led coalition from the blacklist in 2020 and the Yemeni government in 2022.</p>	<p>October 5, 2017</p>
<p>The internationally recognized government inaugurated the work of a joint technical committee with UNICEF to prevent child recruitment, which was approved by the Council of Ministers.</p>	<p>November 6, 2018</p>
<p>The Saudi-led coalition signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN to enhance the protection of children affected by the armed conflict in Yemen.</p>	<p>March 25, 2019</p>
<p>The Houthi group signed a UN action plan to protect children and prevent grave violations against them during the war. The Houthis subsequently announced record levels of enrollment of children in summer camps in 2023 and 2024.</p>	<p>April 18, 2022</p>

Armed Groups and Child Soldiers in Marib

Houthi Forces

Although the Houthis currently control approximately half of the land area in Marib, the group has met stiff resistance from the local population. Many of the tribes in Marib, including its dominant Murad and Abidah tribes, were aligned against the Houthis when the war started, owing to historical opposition to the Zaidi imams for their attempts to exert control over the area through tribal proxies,^[33] while the anti-Houthi Islamist Islah party established its dominance politically in Marib city.^[34] However, the Houthis have still managed to attract children from Marib into their ranks through intense efforts by mobilization and recruitment officials, supervisors (*mushrifeen*),^[35] and local social and tribal figures.

Houthi recruitment of child soldiers is multi-pronged. The process typically begins through influence campaigns at schools and summer camps. The camps, which take place during the summer break from middle school and high school, are aimed at indoctrinating children with Houthi ideology through sectarian lectures. The summer camps first become available to students in middle school (age 13).^[36] Recruitment then progresses to more intensive indoctrination in closed cultural and combat training courses held at secure facilities, where the recruits are taught radical beliefs and sectarian ideologies, such as the Hadawi doctrine,^[37] which demands absolute obedience and submission to descendants of the Prophet Mohammed (*Ahl al-Bayt*) in general, and Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi specifically. Recruits are told that the Houthi group alone follows the righteous path while all others are misguided. Based on this doctrine, they are instilled with the belief that only the Hashemites, believed to be descendants of the Prophet via his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, have the authority to rule, as God has favored this lineage for the mission of leading the Muslim world. The Houthis also groom children for military activities by glorifying notions of jihad and martyrdom, portraying them as noble pursuits in the fight against perceived adversaries – including “takfiri” groups, infidels, the Saudi-led coalition, America, Israel, and their allies – with the aim of defending Yemen and eventually, liberating Jerusalem.^[38]

^[33] Anti-Houthi sentiment among Maribi tribes is due to a number of other factors as well, including that some of the tribes are Sunni Shafi'i while Houthis are Shia Zaidi, and the sparsely populated desert geography in which these populations live allowed them historically to minimize encroachment by the Zaidi imams and their tribal allies from the northern highlands. Casey Coombs and Ali al-Sakani, “Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances,” Sana’a Center For Strategic Studies, October 22, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11778>

^[34] Casey Coombs and Salah Ali Salah, “How Outsiders Fighting for Marib are Reshaping the Governorate,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 4, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15664>

^[35] For more on the role of *mushrifeen* within the Houthi group, see: Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, “Entrenched Power: The Houthi System of Governance,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, July 11, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/june-2022/18144>

^[36] Interview with a Yemeni human rights activist, September 5, 2024.

^[37] Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 126.

^[38] Although this abstract goal has been cited in Houthi propaganda for decades, it has become the driving force for military mobilization since the Gaza War started on October 7, even though Houthi foot soldiers are not directly participating in that war.

Children in military training camps are taught to use light and medium weapons of all kinds, such as AK47 rifles, various sniper rifles, DShK heavy machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers. They are also trained on how to plant landmines. Combat training in the camps consists of physical fitness exercises, long-distance marches, and instruction on military tactics. Older children undergo intensive specialized combat courses and conduct live-fire military exercises and maneuvers.^[39] Since the start of the Gaza conflict, Houthi authorities have stepped up recruitment of adults and children under the slogan, *Al-Aqsa Flood*, a reference to the name of the Hamas operation launched on October 7, 2023.^[40] A 13-year-old child soldier from western Marib said he joined the Houthi military in November 2023 after Abdelmalek al-Houthi's call to support Palestinians in Gaza. "The district's mobilization officer took me to a training camp as part of the Al-Aqsa Flood campaign," he said. "I received cultural and military courses to prepare for direct confrontation with the American-British-Zionist enemy and participate in the battle of the promised conquest and the holy jihad."^[41]

As part of these increased recruitment efforts, the General Mobilization Authority^[42] of the Houthi-run Ministry of Defense has expanded its reliance on summer camps. Most of the graduates of these camps return home as reserve forces in anticipation of any upcoming military operations. A select number of them are sent to military training camps, such as those run by the Houthi naval forces, which currently have the largest number of child soldiers.^[43]

The group intensifies its persuasion or coercion of families to enroll their children in the camps ahead of the summer months. This is often done under the pretext of offering religious and cultural lessons, and various activities that will purportedly benefit the students in their lives. According to a relative of a recruited child, the Houthis first began targeting 16-year-old M. and four of his classmates in 2020, using school radio broadcasts, daily and weekly cultural activities, special group events, and changes to the school curriculum.^[44] During the summer vacation, M.'s father reluctantly agreed to requests from a local Houthi supervisor to allow M. to participate in a summer camp. Upon returning home from the summer camp, the child had changed. He told his father that he planned to join "*Al-Sayyed* (Abdelmalek al-Houthi) in jihad for the sake of God to fight America and Israel and defend the country against aggression." Shortly afterward, without the consent of

^[39] Interview with the head of a Yemeni human rights organization, September 11, 2024; "Child Warriors – A human rights report that monitors child recruitment in Yemen (July 1, 2021 - December 31, 2022)," Mayyun Organization for Human Rights, September 28, 2023, <https://www.mayyun.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Child-Warriors%D9%A0.pdf>; "A shocking video reveals what is happening inside summer centers run by the Houthi group in Al-Qanawis, Hudaydah," Mayyun Organization for Human Rights, Twitter post, May 7, 2024, https://x.com/Mayyun_Ar/status/1787997605059793380

^[40] "An Al-Aqsa Flood march of summer school students in the Mikhlaf Bani Asaad area of Dhamar governorate [AR]," Science and Jihad summer courses Twitter post, May 23, 2024, <https://x.com/infocsyemen/status/1800973837653135657>

^[41] Interview with a child soldier, March 28, 2024.

^[42] For more on the relatively new role of the General Mobilization Authority and the Houthi recruitment apparatus more generally, see Michael Knights, Adnan al-Gabarni, and Casey Coombs, "The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in 'the Other Hezbollah,'" October 2022, Volume 15, Issue 10, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/october-2022/>

^[43] Interview with the head of a Yemeni human rights organization, September 11, 2024.

^[44] Manal Ghanem, "Curriculum changes to mold the jihadis of tomorrow," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 5, 2012, <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/curriculum-changes-to-mold-the-jihadis-of-tomorrow/>

their parents, the Houthis sent M. and his four classmates to a closed cultural and military training center in Sa'ada governorate, where they participated in combat courses and underwent further sectarian ideological indoctrination. Later that year, the Houthis deployed M. to a frontline in the governorate, where he sustained injuries during clashes.

During the recruitment process, the Houthis commonly assure the young recruits and their families that they won't be directly involved in frontline combat, but will instead perform secondary roles such as manning checkpoints, participating in media production, escorting influential figures, and securing facilities.^[45] However, many of the children end up on the front lines, digging trenches, planting landmines, transporting the wounded, resupplying the fronts, loading weapons with ammunition, or engaging in direct combat. In August 2019, 15-year-old M.T. had just completed a series of Houthi religious, sectarian, and combat courses without his parents' consent. During these summer camp courses, the Houthis had assured the child that he wouldn't be sent to the frontlines, and would instead be tasked with manning a security checkpoint. M.T.'s father attempted to contact and persuade him to return home, but the child refused, insisting that his father was misguided. As the battles intensified between Houthi and government forces in Marib, the group deployed M.T. to the frontlines, where he was instructed to distribute qat (a popular leafy narcotic) to the fighters. In June 2020, he was killed in direct combat.^[46]

The exploitation of poverty and deteriorating living conditions plays a significant role in the Houthi recruitment of children in Marib. The group offers monthly salaries between 15,000 to 30,000 Yemeni rials for each child soldier (approximately US\$28-57 as of September 2024) in addition to daily food rations, qat, and shammah (smokeless tobacco). Other material perks include food assistance for family members, personal weapons, and, in some cases, promises of a higher military rank. After Houthi recruiters failed multiple times to recruit 17-year-old A.R., a Houthi supervisor (*mushrif*) overseeing the mobilization and recruitment process in the region eventually convinced him to join with the offer of a military rank of first lieutenant and a pickup truck.^[47] Houthis also employ negative inducements to encourage children to join the military, such as threatening to remove parents' names from humanitarian aid recipient lists if they do not allow their children to be recruited.^[48]

In addition to fundamental changes to teaching curriculum in Houthi-controlled areas that glorify violence, the group introduced monthly fees of YR2,000 per student for enrollment in public schools.^[49] Students whose families cannot afford to pay the fees are expelled and become more likely to join the Houthi armed forces to generate income for their impoverished families.

^[45] Interviews with a relative of a child soldier, March 16, 2024; and a teacher and relative of a child soldier, March 13, 2024.

^[46] Interview with a relative of a child soldier, March 16, 2024.

^[47] Interview with a teacher and relative of a child soldier, March 13, 2024.

^[48] Interview with a human rights activist, March 2, 2024.

^[49] "Popular schools in Sana'a and Ibb to Al-Mashhad: Teaching administration offices engage in thuggery, extortion and threaten us with closure [AR]," Al-Mashhad al-Yemeni, July 23, 2023, <https://www.almashhadnews.com/259511>

Supervisors and other Houthi authorities further facilitate the process of children dropping out of school to join the fronts by making promises to students that they will receive high grades and test scores if they join the military, despite not attending classes or taking final exams.^[50]

Social, intellectual, and political factors also play a significant role in pushing children to the frontlines. The Houthis have introduced a number of new holidays during the war, such as Martyrs' Day, Eid al-Ghadir, and Al-Sarkha Day, and regularly organize social events such as tribal gatherings, qat-chewing sessions, and activities at mosques that are focused on mobilization and recruitment. In addition to holidays and other in-person events, the group's media apparatus produces TV^[51] and radio programs, as well as music^[52] and magazines^[53] aimed at children. The group propagates stories of the heroism of children fighting on the frontlines and glorifies those who are killed in media coverage.^[54]

Pro-Government National Army

The pro-government national army relies more on financial incentives for recruitment. However, feelings of animosity and resentment toward the Houthis among the large IDP population living in and around Marib city also motivate children to join the ranks of the army. For example, A.S. said he joined the pro-government army in Marib in 2021 at the age of 17 after his father was injured fighting Houthi forces, who displaced his family and looted their home in southern Marib.^[55]

Some children were recruited into the national army based on their families' political affiliations or were influenced by friends or military, social, and religious leaders from their areas. Like other soldiers, children recruited to the national army are promised a bi-monthly salary of YR60,000 from the defense ministry (approximately US\$31 as of September 2024), along with an additional bonus every year from the Saudi-led coalition.^[56] However, soldiers and their families have raised complaints about the irregularity of salary payments.

Other underage recruits joined the national army to fulfill its slogan of defending honor, land, and religion against the Houthis, and liberating the country from them. "The people of Marib didn't go to Sa'ada to attack the Houthis; it was the Houthis who mobilized both adults and children from the regions under their control to

^[50] Interview with a teacher and relative of a child soldier, March 13, 2024; See also, "Yemeni teachers: A document revealed the Houthi recruitment of children [AR]," Al-Arabiya, June 16, 2021, <https://shorturl.at/kwkQH>

^[51] "Al-Masirah Series," produced by Houthi satellite TV outlet Al-Masirah, heavily promotes the theme of martyrdom while marketing the show to all ages: <https://t.me/mslslatAlmasirah>. Another Al-Masirah series, "Temporary Entity," a cartoon billed as an "awareness-raising children's series during Ramadan," features military themes: https://web.telegram.org/k/#@The_temporary_entity.

^[52] Specifically, tribal poems known as Zawamil.

^[53] Jihad Magazine, "which is affiliated with the Houthis' Al-Hadi Cultural Foundation, targets child audiences: https://t.me/s/Jehad_mag

^[54] "Martyrs' Meadow" is a Telegram channel affiliated with the Yemeni Military Media of the Houthi Ministry of Defense and publishes videos of the group's martyrs, many of them under 18 years old: t.me/RawMMY

^[55] Interview with a pro-government soldier in Marib city, March 10, 2024.

^[56] Interview with a pro-government soldier in Marib city, March 9, 2024.

assault, displace, and humiliate us, conquer our territory, and attempt to impose their ideology on us,” said a tribal sheikh from southern Marib. In 2021, the sheikh’s son enlisted in the national army at the age of 16 to help defend the tribe’s territory. His son provided logistical support and transported ammunition during clashes with Houthi forces, the tribal sheikh said.^[57] Child soldiers in the pro-government army in Marib typically don’t participate in direct combat on the frontlines and instead are assigned minor tasks such as escorting military leaders or manning checkpoints.^[58]

In addition to the national army and tribal fighters, the Saba Axis of the UAE-backed Giants Brigades also operate in Marib. The group was formed after Giant Brigade forces expelled the Houthis from northern Shabwa in late 2021. Stationed in Marib’s southern Hareeb district, which borders northern Shabwa, Saba Axis soldiers receive a monthly salary of 1,000 Saudi riyals funded by the UAE (approximately US\$266 as of September 2024). The majority of the soldiers and leaders in these forces hail from Marib’s Murad tribe, which has led to a significant number of children from the tribe enlisting in its ranks.^[59]

Popular Resistance Committees/Tribal Forces

Tribes in Marib have typically not encouraged the forced or systematic recruitment of children to fight for any other party. However, when the tribe or its interests face external threats, they mobilize all members capable of bearing and using arms in accordance with their tribal customs and traditions. The tribe considers encroachment on its lands and interests by an external party without consent as a red line. Most tribes in Marib have chosen to confront the Houthis because they perceive them as an existential threat.^[60] In response, they initiate mobilization by issuing a call to all tribe members to be prepared and take up arms, a tradition often known as nakaf.^[61] The widespread ownership of weapons among tribesmen of all ages has resulted in the participation of many children on the battlefronts in response to tribal calls for general mobilization.

^[57] Interview with a tribal leader and father of a child soldier from southern Marib, March 26, 2024.

^[58] Interview with a government soldier in Marib city, March 10, 2024.

^[59] Interview with a tribal leader and father of a child soldier from southern Marib, March 26, 2024.

^[60] Ibid.

^[61] “The tribes of Marib declare Nakaf... Large tribal reinforcements for the national army in the Nehm front [AR],” Al-Mashhad al-Yemeni, January 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTg99rIRxso>

Armed Groups and Child Soldiers in Shabwa

In Shabwa, poverty and poor living conditions due to the war economy are currently the main reasons people under age 18 join armed groups. Declines in the quality of education during the war and unpromising future employment opportunities have also led many students to drop out of school and attend recruitment camps. Those who manage to secure a regular job, whether in the public or private sector, expect to earn monthly salaries of no more than YR100,000 (about US\$53 or 195 Saudi riyals). By contrast, soldiers employed by UAE-backed forces, including the Shabwa Defense forces or Giants Brigades, will earn, on average, 1,000 Saudi riyals per month (US\$266). In addition to the provision of large salaries, recruits are provided with shelter, personal weapons, daily food, qat and cigarette rations, and daily allowances of about YR5,000.^[62] The fact that Saudi- and UAE-backed armed groups in Shabwa are paid salaries in Saudi riyals is an added bonus for recruitment that further incentivizes adults and children to choose military or security professions over alternatives which are typically paid in Yemeni rials – a continually weakening currency whose purchasing power has steadily eroded during the war.^[63]

Armed groups based outside of Shabwa have also recruited Shabwani children under 18 years old, including the National Resistance forces (another UAE-backed armed group that is based in the Red Sea coastal city of Al-Makha) and the Saudi-funded and -trained Nation's Shield forces, which have a presence in several southern governorates including Hadramawt, Abyan, Al-Dhalea, Hudaydah, and Lahj.^[64]

Methods of recruitment

Child recruits are often targeted through intermediaries, such as peers who have already joined a particular armed group. Some factions announce recruitment drives on social media^[65] (including through local WhatsApp groups),^[66] tribal appeals, or at military camps inside and outside the governorate. The camp leaders inform troops inside the camps of their desire to recruit additional personnel, and these individuals then inform their friends and acquaintances of the availability of military opportunities.^[67]

The father of a child soldier, A.H., who was recruited to the Shabwa Defense forces,

^[62] Interview with an activist from Shabwa, August 18, 2024.

^[63] Interview with a community activist, August 19, 2024.

^[64] Interview with a community activist, August 19, 2024.

^[65] "Announcement of attendance and presence of the second and third batches who were accepted [AR]," Facebook, January 10, 2018, <https://shorturl.at/kiZBV>

^[66] Interview with a community activist, August 19, 2024.

^[67] Interview with a community activist, August 19, 2024.

said his son was convinced to join the group by already enlisted friends. They told him the group was paying large sums of money and offering plenty of food.^[68] Another child soldier, A.G., who dropped out of school at age 16 to enlist in the Shabwa Defense forces before later registering with the Nation's Shield forces, also said he enlisted for financial reasons. The salaries and benefits of the armed groups are highly sought after due to the lack of employment opportunities in Shabwa, he said.^[69] It is common for existing soldiers to enlist simultaneously with the Nation's Shield forces because they do not require recruits to be in camps. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that the military group is relatively new and faces political complexities in establishing bases, and that recruitment to the Nation's Shield forces is partially aimed at buying loyalties within communities and tribal regions.^[70]

Saudi- and UAE-backed forces recruiting fighters from Shabwa during the war have sought to avoid the perception that they enlist child soldiers, in keeping in accordance with national and international laws. A Shabwa Defense forces recruiter said that everyone he registered was above 18 years old and he refused on multiple occasions to sign up younger prospects.^[71] However, recruits can bypass the minimum age requirements by submitting inauthentic birth certificates at the Civil Status Office to obtain personal identification cards stating that they are 18 years old. The practice of altering one's age in official documents was widespread in Yemen even before the war – for the purpose of voting in elections, for example.^[72] With official documents in hand, officials are able to claim that no international agreements or national laws have been broken. This also makes it difficult to find reliable statistics on child recruitment in Yemen.^[73]

Politics also plays an important role in recruitment, according to the Shabwa Defense recruiter. As a secessionist who supports the reestablishment of the former South Yemen, he seeks out like-minded recruits and members of his own tribe. However, he estimated that about 80 percent of the young men who asked to join were financially motivated, given that the initial salary of 1,500 Saudi riyals for each soldier “was just too much to refuse.”^[74]

^[68] Interview with the father of a child soldier, August 20, 2024.

^[69] Interview with a former child soldier, August 20, 2024.

^[70] Interview with a community activist, August 19, 2024.

^[71] Interview with a Shabwa Defense forces recruiter, March 11, 2024.

^[72] Interview with a Yemeni researcher, September 2, 2024.

^[73] Interview with a community activist, August 19, 2024.

^[74] Interview with a Shabwa Defense forces recruiter, March 11, 2024.

Implications of Child Soldiers on Local Communities in Marib and Shabwa

The ramifications of child recruitment in Marib are felt in different ways in Houthi- and government-controlled areas. In Houthi-held areas, the education sector has been dismantled as part of systematic efforts to target students for military recruitment.^[75] The group has made changes to the curriculum that glorify violence and martyrdom, introduced enrollment fees for public schools, and routinely grants students high grades and test scores if they drop out of school to join the military. Outside of the classroom, children are indoctrinated at the group's summer camps and targeted by Houthi-produced television shows, radio programs, magazines, and music that encourage them to join the group in waging jihad. In addition to these obstacles to attending school in Houthi-held areas of Marib, students face economic pressure to join the military in order to help their families, whether through contributing their salaries to family finances or ensuring that Houthi authorities add their names to humanitarian aid lists in exchange for joining the war effort. Military salaries represent one of the few consistent sources of income in Houthi areas; the group has failed to pay other public sector salaries for years.^[76]

One of the effects of Houthi efforts to undermine education and promote military service is a reorganization of societal values. Children are indoctrinated to hold Houthi ideology in high esteem. "Young men who are enthusiastic about carrying and using weapons are granted elevated status and the opportunity to meet [Houthi] leaders and supervisors, while those excelling in education are overlooked," said a pro-government military commander. "They are given a sense of belonging, as if they had received a certificate as an inventor or innovator."^[77]

The situation is different in government-controlled parts of Marib; in particular, Marib city, where the majority of the population live. The economy in Marib city is relatively stable compared to other areas nominally controlled by the government. However, like in the rest of government-held territory, the Yemeni rial remains exceedingly weak compared to the rial in Houthi areas. The government's inconsistent payment of military salaries further erodes the economic security of its soldiers.

In Shabwa, the uptick of young men joining armed groups has had economic and demographic impacts that will be felt for years to come. A teacher said he has never seen a more dramatic change in student attitudes and attendance in his 20 years of teaching.^[78] "It's as if all high school students can think of after graduating is joining

^[75] Interview with the head of a civil protection organization in Marib, March 8, 2024.

^[76] Interview with a tribesman from Marib, March 3, 2024.

^[77] Interview with a pro-government military commander in Marib, March 5, 2024.

^[78] Interview with a teacher from Shabwa, February 22, 2024.

a military group in line with their family's political affiliation," he said, alluding to the two dominant political groups in the governorate, the Islah party and STC. Since 2018, about 300 graduates from his school have joined different military groups, and many of the current ones are eager to do the same. He added that some teachers have also joined armed groups. Amid these dismal economic conditions and polarized political climate, the teacher fears that the rapid decline of the education system and the lack of interest in pursuing higher education by such large numbers of young men in Shabwa will result in a generation that is easy prey for dangerous ideologies.^[79]

Another teacher said that so many colleagues from his area joined the army and the Special Security Forces that the school had to discontinue certain classes and, at times, school was canceled altogether because of a shortage of teachers.^[80] Because the different brigades of the Shabwa Defense forces are mostly made up of common relatives and based in their local communities, the teacher fears that mistakes during military missions will one day spill over into tribal conflict, and blood feuds will multiply with each killed tribesman at the hand of a soldier from another tribe.^[81] Both teachers from Shabwa expressed their concerns about the future of their students and what kind of trauma and other troubles will linger after the war is over.^[82] For the time being, however, the prevalence of salaried soldiers helps prop up the economy.

According to the Shabwa Defense recruiter, the influx of salaries in foreign currency, military supplies, and the infrastructure necessary to support military forces have all had a short-term positive effect on the local economy and the livelihoods of families in Shabwa. "What will happen when that money stops coming? How will all of those young men, and the local businesses that depend on their salaries, cope if they don't have the skills to pursue any other job?" he asked. To avert potential social upheaval in this scenario, he argued that Shabwa's various political factions must consider programs to absorb these young men after the conflict ends and support local businesses.^[83]

^[79] Ibid.

^[80] Interview with a teacher from Shabwa, February 28, 2024.

^[81] Ibid.

^[82] Daily qat chewing and cigarette smoking are common among the soldiers and contribute to public health concerns. Interviews with two Shabwani teachers, February 22 and 28, 2024.

^[83] Interview with a Shabwa Defense forces recruiter, March 11 2024.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A multitude of factors in wartime Yemen have helped fuel the recruitment of child soldiers in Marib and Shabwa. In non-Houthi-held areas, economic insecurity is one of the main reasons children have enlisted with armed groups that mostly offer generous salaries. While poor economic conditions are also a key component of child recruitment in Houthi-held areas, the group offers relatively low salaries, relying on other tactics to enlist children.

In parts of Marib, as in other Houthi-held areas, the group has institutionalized child recruitment through summer camps that have reportedly enrolled more than one million middle and high school students each year since 2022. At these camps, children are indoctrinated with notions that glorify jihad and martyrdom, and the idea that certain descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, including the Houthi family, have a divine and exclusive right to rule Yemen and the broader Muslim world. In addition to ideological indoctrination, the group has instituted public school fees that force impoverished families to remove their children from school and seek employment. Enlistment in Houthi forces earns a monthly salary in addition to daily food rations, qat, and shammah (smokeless tobacco). Some families that have refused to allow their children to join the Houthi forces are threatened with the removal of their names from humanitarian aid recipient lists. Houthi authorities actively groom children from a young age to embrace jihad, martyrdom, and the group's constant mobilization of society for open-ended conflicts like the liberation of Jerusalem. The group's media apparatus furthers these aims through TV and radio programs, as well as music and magazines specifically aimed at children. National pro-government army forces, tribal militias, and a small number of Saba Axis forces affiliated with the UAE-backed Giants Brigades in Marib rely more on financial incentives to recruit soldiers (including children) although family political affiliation, tribal, community, and religious influence, as well as resentment toward Houthi incursions into the governorate, also play a role.

In Shabwa, which has been fully under the control of UAE-backed Shabwa Defense and Giants Brigades forces since August 2022, poverty and poor living conditions due to the war economy are the main reasons people under age 18 join armed groups. These forces are paid monthly salaries in valuable foreign currency and are provided with shelter, daily meals, qat and cigarette rations, and daily allowances. Children are often recruited by peers who have already joined a particular armed group. Recruitment drives are announced on social media, in local WhatsApp groups, through tribal appeals, or at military camps. Politics also plays an important role given the struggle between the STC and the Islah party in the governorate. Armed groups outside of Shabwa, including the UAE-backed National Resistance forces and the Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces, have also recruited Shabwani children.

Countering child recruitment requires multifaceted efforts, including improving economic conditions, enhancing educational opportunities (including vocational and technical centers), and raising community awareness of the dangers of child recruitment. The availability of more jobs with higher salaries would allow heads of households to generate sufficient income so that children do not need to enlist in armed groups to survive. Placing restrictions on the military enrollment of teachers and providing financial incentives to encourage teachers to stay in the classroom would help prevent a decline in the quality of education, which several children cited as a reason for dropping out to join armed groups. Creating educational or alternative economic opportunities for existing child soldiers is an important start to luring children out of the armed forces. Any peace agreement must take into account the financial compensation provided by armed groups and explore ways to provide alternative sources of income and retraining for current fighters.

After nearly 10 years of war, many of the children currently being targeted for recruitment have little or in some cases no recollection of the opportunities life offered during peacetime, making it difficult to imagine a future in which joining an armed group is not the best career option. Countering child recruitment – particularly in Houthi areas where the vast majority of Yemen's population resides – will take considerable time and effort. Ignoring the problem is not an option, and will only facilitate the continued normalization of the use of child soldiers.

Ali al-Sakani is a Yemeni journalist specializing in Marib and Al-Jawf. He previously reported for Al-Masdar Online English and was a graduate teaching assistant at Amran University northwest of Sana'a.

Majd Ibrahim is a researcher on Yemeni affairs with a focus on the economic and political dynamics of the Yemen war. He has served as a humanitarian worker since 2016, which has involved aiding internally displaced people, monitoring economic and social patterns in eastern Yemen, and working on livelihood and community resilience building in rural Yemen.

Casey Coombs is a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. Coombs also works as an independent journalist, reporting extensively on Yemen, where he was based between 2012 and 2015. Prior to Yemen, he reported from United Nations headquarters in New York, covering UN Security Council work on the Arab political uprisings. He holds BAs in English & Anthropology and an MS in International Relations.

This policy brief was produced by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies in partnership with Saferworld as part of the Alternative Methodologies for the Peace Process in Yemen program, funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).



WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG