

Child Soldiers in Yemen

How a society is captured by indoctrination and children are deprived of their future

A qualitative research conducted through interviews.

By

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this submission is entirely my own work, in my own words, and that all sources used in researching it are fully acknowledged and all quotations properly identified. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or another person, for the purpose of obtaining any other credit / grade. I understand the ethical implications of my research, and this work meets the requirements of the School of Public Policy.

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Abstract

Child soldiers have increased sharply since the civil war in Yemen began more than seven years ago. Families in Houthi-controlled areas in the country north have been particularly affected. The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which the Houthi militia's actions are affecting Yemeni society's ability to protect their children from participating in the war. To answer this question, guided, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight family members of child soldiers, as well as three other individuals who face this issue in their professional lives. The findings were organized according to two main aspects: the current prevailing living conditions of the majority of society and the indoctrination methods of the Houthi militia.

The results indicate that, on the one hand, the current precarious living conditions in the country are driving the recruitment of children as soldiers. On the other hand, they show that the Houthis have installed comprehensive propaganda mechanisms in all spheres of life in Yemeni society, especially in schools and summer camps, which succeed in winning many young people over to their ideology and to participation in the war, even against the will of their own parents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction, research question, and hypothesis	5
2. Literature review.....	7
2.1 Legal classification of recruitment.....	8
2.2 Root cause research and profiteer	11
2.3. Rehabilitation	13
3. Methodology.....	15
3.1. Interviews with family members.....	16
3.2. Interviews with a teacher and school supervisor.....	17
3.3. Interviews with organizations.....	17
4. Background analysis	18
4.1. Civil War in Yemen and Child soldier practice	18
4.2. Legal regulations	20
4.2.1. The international law of children protection	21
4.2.2. The national law about the prohibition of recruiting children.....	22
5. Empirical findings and discussion	23
5.1. First impressions of the situation in the country and the security situation on the ground for conducting Interviews.....	23
5.2. Context of the interviews.....	25
5.3. Society: between powerlessness, hope and delusion.....	26
5.3.1. Food insecurity and poverty	26
5.3.2. Lack of educational opportunities	28
5.3.3. Powerlessness of parents.....	30
5.4 Indoctrination of children and youth.....	33
5.4.1. Summer camps and schools became centers of brainwashing.....	33
5.4.2. Mosques are no longer places of worship.....	39
5.4.3. Mass media as instruments of propaganda.....	41
6. Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography.....	46
Appendix.....	55

1. INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH QUESTION, AND HYPOTHESIS

The list of facts that identify Yemen as a country in an ongoing humanitarian crisis is long. Inflation leads to little affordable food. Unemployment and devaluation of the Yemeni currency make daily survival difficult (WFP Yemen Country Brief 2022). Basic lack of medical care leads to deadly diseases, exacerbated by the pandemic since 2020. War-related internal displacement leads to homelessness and more unemployment. Acts of war, such as bombing and the use of mines, lead to a daily risk of death. Limited educational opportunities lead to hopelessness and prevent long-term economic stabilization. In addition to all these realities, children, in particular, are affected by the effects of war.

Numerous children's rights are being violated in Yemen, starting with the famine as a result of the seven-year civil war and the resulting diseases to the lack of educational opportunities and the recruitment of child soldiers in violation of international law. Many families suffer from the recruitment of children, but the most affected are the children themselves. Even if they proudly go to war due to indoctrination, they are not able to assess the consequences. There are suspicions that at least a third of the fighters in Yemen are children and adolescents younger than 18. (Hille 2016). In January 2021, the report of General Secretary Guterres confirmed that most violations against children in 2020 were committed in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. (Reuters 2021). For 2019, the Borgenproject had estimated that approximately 6000 children were recruited as soldiers in Yemen alone. (Dell 2019)

For years, the United Nations has been pointing out the grave fate of child soldiers in Yemen, among other places. In a paper published at the end of June 2021, the UN

documented cases of child recruitment between January and December 2020, most of them among the Houthis. Taiz-online, referring to human rights reports, states that the Houthi militia in Yemen ranks first on the list of child recruitment, according to which 67% of children recruited in wars around the world are part of the Houthi militia. (taizonline 2018).

In April 2022, the Houthis signed an "action plan" drawn up by the United Nations in which the Houthis pledged to end the recruitment of child soldiers and to prevent the maiming or killing of children and attacks on schools and hospitals. The signature was made by one of the key Houthi negotiators, Abdul Elah Hajar. It remains to be seen if the declaration of intent will be followed by clear action, but there are already signs that the signature was only a diplomatic concession that has nothing to do with reality. Aljazeera at least found evidence that recruitment is continuing, according to a June 2022 article. (Orellana 2022) .

Why is society not fighting back against these human rights violations? How is it that despite years of hardship and devastation in the country, civil society allows their children to be deprived of a peaceful future and abused as soldiers? Do they have no other choice? I was guided by these questions when I traveled to my home country of Yemen in May 2022 to conduct interviews with family members of child soldiers. The interviews and the insights gained from them are placed against the background of the international and national legal situation regarding the protection of children. Furthermore, it is important to outline the background of the civil war and the resulting living conditions for the children and their families, which are recurring themes in the interview responses and thus make the various circumstances of the recruitments

comprehensible. The interviews, therefore, provide insights into the role of society, on the one hand, through the families affected by child soldiers and their possibilities for action, and on the other hand, the three interviews with publicly effective persons underline how difficult it is to get involved politically and to counteract recruitment.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent do the actions of the Houthis affect the ability of Yemeni society to protect its children from participating in the war?

HYPOTHESIS

It is possible that the Houthis' radical approach to spreading their ideology affects Yemeni society's confidence in self-determination and exacerbates the problem of child recruitment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

How is the recruitment of child soldiers treated in the social and political sciences and in the media? What specific questions does science deal with? The scientific literature on the subject of child soldiers is very extensive, which is why only a selection can be made here that deals with the phenomenon in general. The numerous case studies on individual African, South American or Asian countries can not be mentioned here. As far as Yemen is concerned, the recruitment of child soldiers has been the subject of various journalistic texts worldwide, but research seems to have paid little attention to the phenomenon since the outbreak of the war more than seven years ago.

This literature review highlights three main themes of scientific studies: legal implications of child soldier recruitment, root cause research, and the issue of reintegration of former child soldiers. All three areas of research complement each other both in their understanding of the phenomenon and in their intention to counteract the problem.

Since, as far as I can see, there are no scientific studies on Yemen in connection with child soldiers, I think it is appropriate to refer to some journalistic texts as well. The situation of child soldiers in Yemen has been the subject of numerous articles, especially in recent years. The aim of the reporting is usually to make the topic internationally virulent and to attract attention. In doing so, the journalistic texts aim to reflect the respective current developments with regard to the recruitment of children and primarily assign responsibilities instead of conducting in-depth research into the causes. It was not least these articles that prompted me to devote myself to the topic in this thesis.

2.1 LEGAL CLASSIFICATION OF RECRUITMENT

In April 2022, after two weeks of negotiations, the United Nations reached an agreement with the Houthi group in Yemen, known as the *Action Plan*, to end the recruitment of minors. The Houthi rebels agreed to stop using child soldiers and to accept that youth who have not reached the legal age for recruitment will be demobilized and returned to their families within six months (Peltz 2022). However, *Al Jazeera* reported as early as June 2022, based on a leaked video, that the Houthi rebels continue to use child soldiers. Children under the age of ten say the Houthis train

them on weapons and serve as mentors. According to the article, the Houthis also consider boys to be men, even if they are only 10 or 12 years old, and expect them to defend their country. In this way, they legitimize recruitment (Orellana 2022).

Several works deal with legal implications that the issue of child soldiers entails. In 1994 Cohn and Goodwin-Gills published the standard work *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflict*, which provides general and legal background information (Ilene Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994). Other works over the past 20 years have addressed the evolution of international law and the expansion of human rights with respect to the containment of child soldiers. In doing so, the legal situation is examined for obstacles and inconsistencies, as well as for its applicability, as the works cited here demonstrate. With respect to child soldiers, developments in international law and human rights law and their strengths and weaknesses are examined. Other work over the past 20 years has examined the evolution of international law and the expansion of human rights with respect to the containment of child soldiers. This involves examining the legal situation for obstacles and inconsistencies, as well as for its applicability, as the works cited here demonstrate. With respect to child soldiers, developments in international and human rights law and their strengths and weaknesses are examined. For example, author Mary-Jane Fox problematizes the lack of uniformity in international law, such as a uniform definition of an age limit, as well as the scope for legal interpretation (Fox 2005, p.27–48). With regard to ending the use of child soldiers, however, legislation must also be linked and reconciled with the prevailing social and cultural contexts of the countries concerned, as David M. Rosen warns, insofar as one

wishes to create a universal definition of "childhood" and derive rights and values from it (Rosen 2007, p.296-306).

Specifically, Yemen is the subject of an investigation from 2020, where child soldiers are mentioned only in passing and the focus is rather on examining the circumstances that led to the civil war and identifying its main actors. The focus of this thesis is not on child protection, but in reviewing which acts of war in Yemen were consistent with international law. This work finds mention here because it seems interesting to me that the issue of children's participation in war is worth only a brief note to an Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in the context of the civil war and its human rights violations. Instead, his stated goal is to distinguish between the so-called legal use of force and the illegal use of force with the result that the use of force by the Saudi coalition with the authorization of the Hadi government against the Houthis is legitimate, while the Houthis' aggression against Yemen and Saudi Arabia is considered illegal under international law (North Carolina Journal of International Law 2020).

Despite extensive legislation on child protection, little progress seems to have been made in combating the recruitment of child soldiers, notes author Vanessa Bramwell in a recent text, and argues that analysis and critique of particular legal norms is not a target for effective intervention. Instead, she argues for a stronger cross-disciplinary approach to better understand the nature and scope of this problem (Bramwell 2022).

2.2 ROOT CAUSE RESEARCH AND PROFITEER

In addition to the legal challenges, other research has focused on analyzing the root causes that give rise to the problem of child soldier recruitment. Closely related to this is the question of responsibilities. Who exploits preconditions and how? For the current situation in Yemen, many agree that it is mainly the Houthi militia that abuses children as soldiers. The *Defense Post* reported in 2019 that around 50,000 children were recruited as soldiers by the Houthis alone, 10% of whom are girls (Varfolomeeva 2019). In this context, *Deutsche Welle* reported in July 2021 on so-called summer camps, which will also be discussed in this paper and which are used primarily by the Houthi militia to recruit children as soldiers. *Deutsche Welle* refers to a religious radicalization that makes the children believe they are fighting for God (Hassan 2021). *Euro-Mediterranean and SAM* published a report on recruitment in Yemen in February 2021. This paper noted that recruitment had begun before the war and internal conflict in 2011, having started during the time of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Recruitment declined due to international pressure exerted at the time until fighting resumed, particularly on the part of the Houthis, who recruited more children than any other group involved in fighting in Yemen. Although Yemen has ratified international treaties protecting children's rights, the country continues to recruit and use youth in its armed forces. The investigation led to a number of conclusions, including that al-Houthi should immediately stop recruiting juveniles and that this crime should be tried in a criminal court. And that former child soldiers should participate in rehabilitation programs to help them find a better future for themselves. (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. SAM for Rights and Liberties 2021)

But there are also media reports that blame more than just the Houthi side for child recruitment. Annelise Adrian, Researcher of Arab Center Washington DC, published the July 2019 article *Child Soldiers in Yemen: One Element of a Humanitarian Disaster* (Adrian 2019). She reported on disguised recruitment by the Saudis and Emiratis since 2015, in which minors without formal education were immediately assigned to serve in the Saudi coalition's al-Buqa camp under the pretext of well-paid kitchen jobs on the front lines. She warned of the increasing danger of children being drawn into the war between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi rebels the longer the conflict continues. She also explicitly denounced the questionable role of the United States, which is, if not supporting, at least condoning the conflict by supplying weapons and thus not behaving constructively in terms of peaceful intentions.

The majority of researchers assume coercion experienced by children due to politically and economically evoked coercion. There is also agreement that poorer countries are particularly affected by the problem of child soldier recruitment, countries where rebel groups are fighting against the government or against each other. Whereby children are not only used as soldiers but also in other areas, such as laying and removing mines and drug smuggling. Crucial factors leading to the recruitment of children in disadvantaged countries such as Chad, Congo, Sudan, and Yemen are poverty and the loss of older men to armed combat (Carmody 2012).

In this context, however, it is also necessary, as Jason Hart pointed out in 2006, to take a very precise and differentiated look at the issue of child soldiers, i.e., to shed light on the different motives for young people's participation in armed wars and, above all, to distinguish between voluntary and forced participation in order to avoid oversimplifying

the issue, emotionalizing it and instrumentalizing it for political purposes. Due to the lack of quantitatively reliable data, it is not possible to determine whether this is a phenomenon that is gaining strength worldwide (Hart 2006). It is certainly important to examine the topic in a very differentiated way and to research the motivations of young people, but despite this, one always comes across two main causes that could lead to an environment that makes it easier for rebel groups to recruit children for the war: Poverty and poor or no educational opportunities, as NGOs repeatedly point out. Three years ago, in November 2018, the nonprofit organization *borgen project* published in this context on its website a list of facts about child soldiers in Yemen. Poverty and lack of schooling are cited as causal factors. (Helem 2018)

Despite the reference to insufficient quantitative evidence, many authors estimate the extent of the use of child soldiers worldwide at 200,000 to 300,000 in a total of about 20 countries, repeatedly blaming political and economic circumstances in the respective country while underlining the complexity of the phenomenon (Vautravers, 2009). In connection with the causes, the question of psychological and ideological indoctrination also arises. Schools, in particular, are worldwide places where competent fighters are systematically raised, as the work of M. Bloom points out (Bloom 2018).

2.3. REHABILITATION

In 2018, *Fox News* reported on the long-term psychological damage suffered by child soldiers in Yemen, not only from their use of weapons but also from other abusive experiences (McKay 2018). This specific topic of the long-term effects and the issue of resocialization and rehabilitation of children and adolescents is also finding its way into

research. Comprehensive insights are provided in Michael Wessells book *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, in which the problems of reintegrating former child soldiers into society and the long-term effects of child soldiers on society are discussed. Based on interviews with over one hundred former child soldiers in various countries, the author argues for local and global strategies to stop recruitment. In addition, he shows that healing and resumption of civilian life are possible (Wessells 2009).

Less confident in this context is the recently published paper by Yousra Ibrahim Hasona & Ibrahim Khatib, which is based on the hypothesis that child soldiers will, in the long run, endanger free stabilization in many Arab countries as the children could be excluded from society in the long run due to their participation in the war and the crimes they have committed. The authors tried to prove this hypothesis through 16 interviews with experts from the judiciary and academia and came to the conclusion that it will be the task of the judiciary to enable children and future men to resocialize without being stigmatized. The result of his work is that instead of retribution, restorative justice is the better alternative (Hasona and Khatib 2022).

There are sporadic reports and interviews with former Yemeni child soldiers about their war experiences, such as a video published in 2017 (Al Arabiya English 2017). In contrast, I could not find interviews with family members whose sons and brothers were affected by recruitment in Yemen. The thesis aims to fill this gap by interviewing affected families about the circumstances under which their children were recruited. This will be another building block to a very complex issue that can help get to the root of the problem.

3. METHODOLOGY

As a method of empirical qualitative social research, guided, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This methodology is suitable for obtaining information about the current concrete situation of Yemeni society in its simplest form, the family, in relation to child soldiers.

These are sample interviews in which a total of 8 family members were interviewed. In addition, two people who deal with the issue of child soldiers in their professional capacity were interviewed, as well as a supervisor of teachers who has insight into the current situation in Sanaa schools. An interpretive research approach was chosen to analyze the interviews. In this respect, I looked for key categories that were repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees in connection with the recruitment of children.

Because child soldiers are a symptom of deeper problems of a political and economic nature, an effective approach to addressing the problem should begin with understanding the root causes. In this sense, the themes found in the interviews were clustered. First, the causes mentioned by the respondents themselves were identified, and in a second step, the path of indoctrination by the Houthis described by the respondents was analyzed.

For the analysis of the interviews, I used a structuring procedure. That is, I collected all the information from the interviews through transcription and then categorized the main themes, resulting in a summary content analysis.

3.1. INTERVIEWS WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

The interviews conducted were a random selection of family members. The only condition for the sample was that the interviewees should come from different areas. Therefore, I conducted the interviews both in Sana'a and in a refugee camp in Al-Hudaydah, where people from different regions come together. Five of the interviewees live in the capital Sana'a, three in the refugee camp on the west coast in Al-Khokha in district Al-Hudaydah, which is not controlled by the Houthis.

Since it was not possible to travel to different areas and conduct interviews at the time of the research, the aim was to gain an insight into different areas controlled by the Houthis and their recruitment practices, and not just in the capital. I also wanted to understand what the stories were in the different towns in Yemen, whether there were differences in the acceptance of conscription of their children, and whether there were different ways and methods of luring children to the front and convincing families to let the children be recruited.

It was not easy to find families who were willing to talk about the issue of their children being recruited. In preliminary interviews, the victims refused to be interviewed, even after being told that the interviews would not be recorded or filmed and that the results would be anonymized. With the help of Save The Children's child protection officers, I was able to contact families in Sana'a and meet them. The samples were randomly selected from different areas in Sana'a, where the child protection organization distributes water.

The camp where the other three interviewees are from is home to people who have fled their homes because of war, hunger, or fear that the Al-Houthi might kidnap another child. I could not go there myself as I was warned not to go to this area as the road there is very dangerous due to warfare and landmines, but I found help from the head of the Emirates Red Crescent Relief Organisation, who in turn was able to put me in touch with families living in this camp. We contacted them by phone, wrote down their responses, and processed them remotely. Yemen has a strong patriarchy, so women do not usually talk to strangers about economic, political, or social matters without permission. For this reason, 7 of the eight interview partners were fathers and brothers; only in Al-Hudaydah did I find the sister of a recruited child soldier who wanted to talk to me.

3.2. INTERVIEWS WITH A TEACHER AND SCHOOL SUPERVISOR

While interviewing families, I realized that it was important to interview a teacher or supervisor at the school who would be tasked with verifying the extent to which the school plays a role in recruiting children and the relationships between students and subjects. In all the interviews, I talked about schools as an important component of the recruitment of these children. The interview consisted of a broad and open discussion about children in schools and the process of moving them from schools to the front lines, which I will describe in more depth in a later section of this research.

3.3. INTERVIEWS WITH ORGANIZATIONS

It was important for me to get an insight into a professional perspective in addition to those personally affected. For this purpose, I interviewed the head of the child

protection organization *Seyaj*, a local organization that works on the ground and provides information about the current situation of children and campaigns for their protection. *Seyaj* is considered one of the most important organizations in the country in connection with child protection.

In addition, I interviewed a researcher at *Sana'a Center*, which is responsible for producing reports and conducting research on the political situation in Yemen in general, as well as on the recruitment of children in Yemen. I was interested in getting an opinion from an academic point of view on the issue of recruitment and the level of agreement and acceptance in the community and families.

4. BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

4.1. CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN AND CHILD SOLDIER PRACTICE

Young people in Yemen's capital city of Sana'a took to the streets at the beginning of February 2011 to demonstrate political reform in the wake of a dictatorship that had controlled the country for more than 33 years (Laval 2011). Yemen was one of the nations that followed the Arab Spring at the time, and all sectors of society suffered from difficulties in getting the basic necessities of life. At the same time, Yemen was one of the countries that participated in the Arab Spring. This change, which the youth and the Yemeni people wanted, was the ambition of a people who wished to change and took the most straightforward approach to international human rights. Whereas she wanted to topple the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Yemeni people and the youth wanted this change. Unfortunately, what began as a popular revolt filled with hope for

change and a brighter future in Yemen swiftly transformed into something else. To a battle inside the country that started in 2015. Following the attack that happened by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012 and the subsequent transition of power to Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, the country has been experiencing political instability. Subsequently, Yemen has become a regional as well as an internal struggle. The capital city of Sanaa started to fall into Houthi hands in 2014 (The Associated Press 2021).

The conflict in Yemen has since expanded beyond its borders. When Abd Arabuh Hadi, the newly elected president of Yemen, fled to Saudi Arabia, he begged for assistance in preventing the Houthi movement, which is supported by Iran, from penetrating the governorates of Sanaa. As a direct response to the call from the president, the ten nations that make up the military coalition have provided their full assistance militarily in the effort to prevent the Houthis, who are sponsored by Iran, from expanding their influence within Yemen. In order to combat Iranian aid to the Houthis that was being sent via maritime channels, the coalition forces conducted air attacks and naval obstacles. In the midst of the crisis, this has led to the destruction of infrastructure and has made it more difficult for humanitarian aid to reach the people of Yemen (Shapiro 2015).

To provide a brief summary of the present situation, Yemen has endured and is continuing to suffer as a result of internal and regional conflicts of devastation and starvation, as it has evolved into the worst humanitarian disaster in the world. A significant number of people inside Yemen were uprooted from their homes. Several buildings, including houses, residential areas, and schools, were leveled. Many

individuals lost their lives, and a large number of youngsters and children were conscripted. In August 2020, the Borgen project reported that the number of suspected child soldiers in Yemen fluctuated widely, ranging from 3000 to 50,000 in 2019. (Shrestha 2020).

It is obviously a phenomenon whose extent is difficult to assess. Proven figures were provided in 2021 in a report by the *Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor*, which included statistics listing confirmed cases of child soldiers in Yemen by age and local affiliation at the time of publication. According to this report, there were, until February 2021, over 10,000 documented cases of children between the ages of 8 and 17 being used in combat (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor SAM for Rights and Liberties 2021, p.10) . The dark figure could be much higher, for which the statements of the head of the child protection organization *Seyaj* in particular, provide rich evidence, as will be explained later in the chapter about summer camps.

4.2. LEGAL REGULATIONS

In wars, usually, children are particularly vulnerable to violations in armed conflicts. The recruiting of children by armed terrorist organizations and groups persists even though there are international rules and regulations for the protection of children. Even after the legislation was written to safeguard children, there are still breaches of this kind in nations all over the globe (sorea, n.d.). They are often split off from their families, uprooted from their homes, or forced to endure the most heinous forms of exploitation,

such as recruiting, labor that is too difficult for youngsters to handle, working in the drug trade, and a variety of other forms (CWSL Scholarly Commons 2012, p. 239).

4.2.1. THE INTERNATIONAL LAW OF CHILDREN PROTECTION

International humanitarian law prohibits the recruitment of children in armed conflict.

Article number 38(3) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly in 1989, prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of 15, whether by force or voluntarily. (OHCHR 1989)

In 2000, this Convention was supplemented by Article 77 of Additional Protocol I and Article 4 of Additional Protocol II (P I, Art. 77(2); P II, Art. 4(3)(c)) and applied to international and non-international armed conflicts (ICRC, n.d.). Several states agreed to the age increase and signed additional protocols in 2000. These protocols address the rights of children in armed conflict and set the minimum age for recruitment at now 18. At the international level, the importance and necessity of signing and ratifying these two conventions have been highlighted and supported. (OHCHR, n.d.).

The Paris Conference in 2007, coordinated by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), brought together concerned representatives of governments and organizations to adopt the Paris Principles and Commitments. On that day, protection was extended to one hundred and five nations. States pledged to do everything in their power to comply with the provisions of these treaties (France Diplomacy 2022). Yemen also ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2007, which sets a minimum age of 18 for conscription or direct participation in hostilities. In

addition, the 2011 Rome Statute describes the recruitment and conscription of children as a war crime in Article 8 (b) (xxvi), (e) (vii) (International Criminal Court 2011).

Thus, there are comprehensive international legal requirements, but also many countries where these prohibitions are disregarded, although on paper, they have given their consent by signature, as in the case of Yemen.

4.2.2. THE NATIONAL LAW ABOUT THE PROHIBITION OF RECRUITING CHILDREN

Yemen's Law No. 45 (2002) on Child Rights states in Article 149 that "persons under the age of 18 cannot participate in armed conflicts or be recruited" (Child Soldiers International 2013). However, Yemeni law does not include deterrent penalties for persons or entities that recruit children. Alternatively, finding any supportive ways to prevent conscription, legal accountability has not been undertaken. Also, there is no item in the law to treat or rehabilitate children who have been harmed in any form of war (Child Soldiers International 2013).

The United Nations has published a report covering the situation of affected children in Yemen from the beginning of January 2019 to december 2020. It published in point 53 about the attempts and challenges faced by emergencies in Yemen (UN 2021).

Furthermore, on 18.04.22, the Houthis signed a plan to stop the recruitment, mutilation, and killing of children with the United Nations. This plan is considered a step forward in stopping the torture of children in the shadow of the war in Yemen. (UN GENEVA 2022).

Nevertheless, what happened was that it was revealed to Arab news that recruitment is still going on in Yemen through a leaked video in which people under the age of ten are seen in training camps or so-called summer camps and schools. The Houthis do not seem to abide by the truth because they suffer from children and stop their recruitment (Al-Batati 2022).

5. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the following part of the paper, the interviews of the family members are analyzed with regard to, on the one hand, the causes of child recruitment and, on the other hand, the manner of recruitment. The statements made by the family members are compared with those of the expert interviews and the secondary scientific literature.

5.1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY AND THE SECURITY SITUATION ON THE GROUND FOR CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

In May 2022, I traveled to Yemen to better assess the situation on the ground. Since the airport in Sanaa has been closed for seven years, I traveled from Vienna to Jordan and from there on to Aden in the south of the country. From Aden, I took an arduous 13-hour car journey through the mountains to Sanaa with a driver. On this drive through the rural surroundings I was able to gain first impressions and it became immediately clear to me that the situation has changed drastically compared to my last visit 3 years ago. People are starving, animals are dying on the roads because they cannot find food either.

But most of all, as I drove through the country, I noticed that there seems to be no end in sight to the recruitment of children as soldiers. On the contrary: Everywhere there are posters publicly honouring killed child soldiers as martyrs (Photos attached).



Obviously, there is a huge gap between the internationally published political declarations of intent and the reality. My perceptions are confirmed by a report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Security Council, *Children and Armed Conflict in Yemen* (UN Document 2021) published as early as August 2021, which states that child recruitment is the third most common violation of children's human rights in Yemen, after killing and maiming.

5.2. CONTEXT OF THE INTERVIEWS

There is a country-specific United Nations task force monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan to Address Human Rights Violations against Children in Yemen (S/2021/761), adopted in 2014 (UN 2021). This UN report describes how difficult and dangerous it is for staff in over 40 conflict areas (including Ma'rib, Hajjah, Sa'dah, Ta'izz and Hudaydah governorates) to collect information on the situation of children.

According to the report, there is a risk of being arrested by the Houthis as soon as they become aware of the task force's intentions. I too immediately had doubts about whether I would succeed in conducting interviews on my own. Already on entry, I was checked extensively at the checkpoints on the way between Aden and Sanaa. I was advised not to conduct interviews in person at a refugee camp at this time. The interviews in Sana'a, however, I was able to conduct personally face to face.

In all the interviews I conducted, whether by telephone with the refugees in the camp or with the residents of Sana'a, I had the impression that people spoke about the subject of the recruitment of their sons and brothers with a certain shyness, from a certain distance, as if they wanted to generalize the subject instead of individualizing it.

Perhaps this was to focus on the fact that it was by no means a matter of individual fates, but rather a problem affecting the whole of society. Perhaps distancing themselves also helped them not to confront their own pain too much. This is my perception. More detailed psychological analysis and evaluation would have to be done by trained therapists.

This fact led me to the decision to focus less on the "how" of what was said, but to filter out themes that overlapped conspicuously in the statements and that give clues to the

strong influence of the Huthis in recruitment practices. I use the statements from the expert interviews as well as secondary literature to check the validity of the circumstances of recruitment cited by the families.

5.3. SOCIETY: BETWEEN POWERLESSNESS, HOPE AND DELUSION

In the following I would like to point out possible driving factors for the recruitment of children as soldiers.

5.3.1. FOOD INSECURITY AND POVERTY

According to the head of Seyaj, "77% of Yemenis live well below the poverty line", so the limited family income could be one of the main reasons for recruiting children, as families have lost their businesses and houses due to the war. There are no more sources of income to help the family live a decent life. In a recent report, the World Bank confirms extreme poverty and outlines a chain of causes responsible for the macroeconomic instability: starting with armed conflicts in the country, resulting in damaged infrastructures, environmental disasters such as floods, and the increase in raw material prices caused by the Ukraine war. All of this leads to poverty (The world bank 2022). All but one of the family members I interviewed indicated that their living situation was very poor and that they could not find work to support their families.

Against this background, I asked the families whether the Huthis had promised a salary if their children participated in the armed conflict. This was affirmed by all interviewees from Sanaa. Participants A, B, C, D, and E, all from Sana'a, stated that they had been

promised salaries but that their sons had not received any. Only participants A and E said they had very rarely received a food bag.

Participant F (Al-Hudaydah/Camp) even stated that the family was asked to pay additional money for the war effort. Interviewee G stated that as soon as one of his two recruited sons returned, they immediately fled and were not in any contact with the Huthis, and therefore they received nothing. The situation was similar for the family of interviewee H. They, too, did not receive any financial support for the child's participation in combat operations.

The head of Seyaj also mentions the fact that children often hope to improve their lives by attending summer camps organized by the Houthis. Interviewee H outlines the expectations raised quite simply: "They say to us (kids), we'll give you a salary and a gun, and you'll help your family for their needs." For the children, it must sound as if they can only win as if the Houthis do not expect anything in return. Even the goal of having to fight or the risk of having to die seems to be concealed. The innocence of the children is being abused here in the most negligent way.

It can be deduced from all eight statements that the Huthis obviously raise hopes for financial support but do not fulfill them at all. At best, they distribute food bags from time to time; at worst, they even demand money from the families.

We know from reports by *Al Jazeera* that such food bags are often stolen property of aid organizations and should actually benefit civil society suffering from hunger (Aljazeera 2018).

5.3.2. LACK OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

"Educational opportunities have also been lost, and that plays a big role in recruiting children, no schools, no teachers, or they are taught with wrong curricula to mobilize them with wrong ideas, and that also plays a role", says the researcher of Sana'a Center. Unicef stated in July 2021 that at least 2 million children in Yemen are unable to attend school, and there is a risk that this number could increase rapidly. Unicef cites the fact that children are being used for work in general, but also for the war effort as one of the causes. In addition, many teachers do not receive a salary, forcing them to give up their profession and look for other sources of income to feed their families (UNICEF 2021). The head of *Seyaj* also draws attention to the negative implication of internal displacement. According to the child protection organization, almost 4 million children are affected by internal displacement, which means that they are deprived of education and life.

This results in a vicious circle: poverty leads to teachers giving up their jobs and canceling classes, which means that children cannot attend classes and do not receive education, which has a long-term impact on their standard of living and future job opportunities. Poverty also often causes families themselves to not send their children to school at all and instead have them work to make a small contribution to the family income. In the long run and in the future, lack of education or incomplete education

leads to poverty. The covid pandemic has exacerbated the deterioration of educational opportunities.

In one of the interviews, the perspective of the young people themselves on the school was mentioned. Participant G offered an interesting insight into this. Children themselves did not want to go to school anymore but realized or rather believed that there was no point in learning at school anymore. He said that the children would come home and say: "Dad, there is no future in learning and studying." Continuing with resignation, the interviewee asked: "What is the benefit of education, so the son becomes convinced that the fronts are better and there is no benefit from education?" Moreover, according to this interviewee, the Houthis devalue the natural sciences because they believe they are linked to Western influences, which is why knowledge of religion is most important in their eyes.

There is also the case, as interviewee A stated, that the Houthis were taking advantage of the precarious education situation in Yemen. In the specific case, the brother stated that his brother was attending school and working at the same time to earn some money, but there was a risk that he would fail in school. This could be due to overwork, but the respondent did not comment on this. What he did say was that at that moment, the Houthis came and promised him success if he joined them and participated in combat training. In this case, the insecurity caused by a failure in school seems to have played a role in the decision to be recruited by the Huthis. The Huthis seem to abuse the desire for school success for their own purposes and make false promises.

Clearly, Yemeni society is faced with a very weakened and vulnerable educational situation, which allows militant groups, most significantly the Houthis, to poach children and re-educate them for their own purposes.

The assumption that school does not provide a meaningful foundation for future livelihoods is closely related to the limited educational opportunities that currently exist in Yemen. Once again, we are dealing with two mutually dependent phenomena.

5.3.3. POWERLESSNESS OF PARENTS

According to family members' perception, there is nothing they can do about the current recruitment in Yemen, as the Al-Houthi have various ways of attracting children for recruitment. In the majority, 7 out of 8 interviewees, the families do not agree that the children go to fight. The only exception seems to be interviewee A. The launched mobilization takes advantage of the children's ignorance. Asked whether the children themselves knew what they would face once they joined the Houthis, all eight said the children had no idea what it meant to fight in the war.

Parents, according to the results of my interviews, were largely surprised by the disappearance of their sons. Those who went looking found their children with the Houthis, either in training camps or on the front lines fighting in their ranks. The Sana'a Center's researcher spoke about a mother who tried to find her son, and when he returned after fleeing the Houthis, she was forced to flee far from places controlled by Houthis. In the interview G, the father was able to bring back one of his sons, who in turn fled the Houthi-controlled areas and went to the camps in Hodeidah, and he was

unable to bring back his second son, who is younger than our age because he was completely brainwashed and convinced that God is the ultimate goal.

In addition, children who join the Houthis are strictly forbidden to revise their opinions. There is no way back into the family tolerated by the Houthis. Evidence of this can be found in the statements of both family members and experts. The Houthis consider the greatest danger of a reversal to be the possible disclosure of war secrets, of which neither the Yemeni population nor others are supposed to know. Therefore, according to the Sana'a Center's researcher, the Houthis have a so-called preventive security service to stop child soldiers from fleeing the battlefield. Those who flee would be stigmatized as traitors and criminals. The researcher cites a specific case as an example: after a son fled from the Houthis, the mother had to immediately leave home with him and flee to a place not controlled by Houthis. Otherwise, the children are taken back, and then bad things seem to happen to them, as interviewee H describes. His brother also fled, was recaptured by the Houthis, and taken to prison in Sana'a, where he was still imprisoned at the time of the interview. Interviewee G also points out that return is not possible and that instead, the children are threatened that they will have to fear repression if they want to return to their families. He, too, suspects security reasons and an attempt to conceal war secrets and does not want to make them transparent. In this ideologically extremist logic, only a fallen child soldier appears to be able to become a hero because only as a dead person can he not run the risk of damaging the reputation of the al-Houthi group. Interviewees B, D, E, F, and G also confirmed that the boys were not allowed or able to return and that the families had no way to bring their children back. Thus, B also emphasized the powerlessness insofar as the family was

pressured or forced to send another child when trying to bring the recruited son back.

Or, as D described, one would be reassured by the Houthis upon inquiry and investigation that the child was only in a summer camp and would then return.

Interviewee D also reports trying to keep the brother from getting involved with "bad friends," which did not succeed. It seems that the Houthis deny the parents any responsibility and that the families do not dare to take any initiative to oppose this. It is as if the family is no longer the closest community to a child but rather Al-Houthi.

A particularly extreme abandonment of possible family influence is described by interviewee F, sister of the younger brother who was killed at the front. Here the helplessness and powerlessness of the family were shown in the most extreme form.

The son turned massively against the family and even attempted to kill his own father in order to obtain the family's assets, which he wanted or was supposed to make available to the Houthi for the fight.

A deviating statement in this context was found in the case of interviewee A. He stated that one might very well change one's mind when one has had a four-day examination. He did not describe further what happened in this examination room. But his own brother had come back that way. From other statements made by this interlocutor, I got the impression that this was a family sympathetic to the Houthis. The brother went to the summer camp voluntarily, then returned because he did not want to fight at the front, only to end up working on behalf of the Houthis. This Interview partner A was, therefore, the only one who did not indicate that they were powerless against the Houthis.

The helplessness of parents is also underscored by the *Seyaj* leader, who assumes that families, for the most part, do not consent to recruitment, and there are many "families, (who) don't know that their children have gone to fight unless they return dead or injured."

5.4 INDOCTRINATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The fact that the Houthis use various methods to spread their messages is not a new phenomenon. Already in a 2010 paper on the Huthi in North Yemen, the authors drew attention to the fact that the Huthi has developed very complex mechanisms to reach people. These include poems, lectures, and hymns.

But they also use modern tools such as websites, videos, and web forums. (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells 2010,p.216). Since the outbreak of the war and their increased control over most of the north, the Huthis have intensified their methods and used them in all areas of public life. For example, they target children and young people, as the Sana'a Center staff member points out. They target schools and mosques, setting up so-called summer schools in which they urge children to fight America and Israel and defend Islam.

5.4.1. SUMMER CAMPS AND SCHOOLS BECAME CENTERS OF BRAINWASHING

There are two types of camps: the camps that are inside the cities and the ones that were used in the past for memorizing and teaching the Quran and as computer and writing classes, as a place where children had time to learn some things besides school. These schools have been converted by Al-Houthi to teach the children religious and

sectarian beliefs and to motivate them to fight, as well as to watch lectures and documentary videos teaching the children about combat. There is a second type of camp where children receive hands-on training in combat, usually in secret locations. Here it is not announced where the children go, so it is difficult for families to find their children when they leave there. According to *mena24tv*, the Houthis' self-declared goal is to "immunize" children against false cultures during so-called summer camps that last an average of 45 days. At the end of such camps, public ceremonies would be held in cities such as Sanaa, Saada, Hajjah, and Al-Bayda, where children in military dress would demonstrate their fighting skills and chant slogans cursing the U.S. and Israel and accusing them of being warmongers (Mena24, n.d.). The head of *Seyaj* has a very firm stance on this and is convinced that the camps are part of the war machinery to prepare youngsters for their participation in the war. He refers to the Houthis' own statements that they have set up six thousand summer camps in 2021 alone. Compared with the information and estimates derived from it, the organization assumes an average of 90 to 100 children per camp. The head of *Seyaj* points out to me the dimension: "We are dealing with more than half a million children who are recruited in schools, summer centers, and so on. We estimate that among these recruits, there are thousands, more than ten thousand children, who are taken to weapons training centers to be directly involved in the armed conflict."

As reported by *Al-Istiqlal Newspaper* on July 23, 2022, the Houthis announced on May 12, 2022, that one million children had been registered in the summer centers they have established in schools, mosques, and other public institutions (Dhahra 2022). It is

possible that the Huthis exaggerate their numbers for propaganda purposes, but even the half-million figure suggested by the Children's Organization is significant.

According to the *Sana'a Center* researcher, despite calls from the United Nations to stop recruiting children, the Houthi group has no interest in doing so and does not fear public or international opinion about them. Ultimately, they do what they deem useful for their beliefs and agenda. Both training and recruitment and direct participation in warfare change children's behavior, their attitude toward life, and also their communication and interaction with family, as described by the *Sana'a Center* researcher using the example of a child who returned to his home and killed the entire family. This shows the profound mental change that children can experience through indoctrination, even if they should return home physically healthy.

Looking at the statements of family members, we come to similar findings as indicated in the media and by *Sanaa Center* and *Seyaj*. Four of the interviewees from Sanaa A, C, D, and E confirmed that their sons and brother had participated in summer camps. The son of interviewee B did not attend any camp, but he knew of many neighbors who enroll their children in camps locally in Sana'a, and he said: "The Houthi militias mobilize their minds and brainwash them with misguided ideas that encourage these children to join the fronts." Once again, the declining ability of families to influence is evident in the context of summer camps. Interviewee A, for example, stated that his son went voluntarily and against his family's wishes to a summer camp for about three months, where he was taught religious and cultural values as well as combat skills by the Houthis.

But the schools themselves are also used to spread the ideology of the Houthis.

According to the detailed report published by the *Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor* in February 2021, entitled *Militarized Childhood. A Report on the Recruitment of Yemeni Children by the Houthis During the war*, states that it "is believed that recruitment of child soldiers is taking place in over 150 schools in various governorates in northern Yemen as a result of Houthis' activities". (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 2021, p. 7). Similarly, a United Nations report published in August 2021 comes, in its third documentation of the certain situation of children and armed conflict in Yemen for the period January 1, 2019, to December 31, 2020, concludes that 80 schools, including 46 in 2019 and 34 in 2020, were abused for military purposes. The report confirmed that most of the incidents occurred in the Houthi-controlled northern governorates, especially in Mahwit, Raymah, and Sa'dah. The report specifically noted that the Houthis use schools to disseminate propaganda and conduct recruitment campaigns in political rallies in front of adults and children. They solicit financial and personnel support for their cause. Although the UN report comes to different figures, it is evident that schools are a welcome place for the Houthi to spread their ideology (UN 2021).

This happens in various ways, quite officially through certain teaching formats, also through lectures by Houthi lieutenants, as interviewee C reports, but also in a perfidious and clandestine way. One can gain knowledge of this through interviewee D, who tells of children being used specifically to attract their classmates to the Houthis' ideas. "Like a secret agent recruited at the same age, so it does not seem that they are with Al-Houthi.(...) This person or secret agent will start making insults against Al-Houthi, and it does not seem that he is with

the Houthis. Until the children start to feel comfortable with him, then he lures the children to come home with him to study". In this case, too, secrecy played a decisive role. The brother pretended to study for school with his classmates in the afternoon, but in fact, he took part in courses offered from the Houthis. This method is perfidious because the infiltrated children pretend to be one of the others and make friends of their own choosing, but in fact, they are not. The same Participant D also reported that the parents were opposed to attending site-based summer school and tried to convince the brother to continue attending school. He calmed the parents and agreed with them, but he lied and continued to listen to the Houthis' lectures and came home with new slogans. "They took him without our knowledge," so he disappeared one day and was deployed to the front. Interviewee E talks about his son hearing educational lectures at school about the importance of defending the homeland. This and the example of friends who had already joined the Houthis prompted the son to join the Houthis in battle.

Interviewee F from Al-Hudaydah, the sister of a radicalized Houthi supporter, also speaks of aggressive indoctrination methods at school and in the afternoon, which the family did not know about for a long time, but suddenly "it became clear to us that he had been lured by the Houthi militias, and he had been brainwashed and stuffed with aggressive racist thought, and most importantly and most dangerously, he had been convinced that his father had no right to own this house."

Respondent G, who originally lost two sons to the Houthis, points out that the younger children are, the more quickly and extensively they can be indoctrinated, as their opportunities for reflection are more limited than those of older children. About his

younger son, who joined the fighters at the age of 13, he reports: "He told us we are going to Jerusalem. I asked him what Yemen had to do with Jerusalem. But this is the way they are urged because they ask them, 'do you want to liberate Jerusalem?' and the children say yes. They say okay, we start from here. Our goal is to liberate Jerusalem from Israel. This is how they are urged and persuaded."

It becomes clear that indoctrination seems to be a very complex issue and that the children also are lured by something that is passed down from generation to generation in many Arab countries, namely a hostility towards Israel. This animosity is used by the Houthis to recruit child soldiers, as this example shows. The supervisor and teacher very drastically describe the new role of the school, which no longer serves to teach different educational content. It serves as a meeting place to pass on Houthi opinions.

In history classes, the past of the Houthis and the wars they waged are discussed, and the stated goal is to teach the children to free the country from injustice and aggressors from abroad and to lead the people back to the right way. Even the Arabic curriculum now includes poems that discuss the ideology of the Houthis. The weekly schoolyard roll call is also obligatory. Every Wednesday, both teachers and students must listen to an educational speech by Mr. Al-Houthi calling for Jihad and war. The indoctrination and manipulation also include threats should a teacher decide that he or she would rather quit the service. Threats include long-term unemployment and a ban on employment.

Schools are also used to exhibit propagandistic heroism, as the supervisor told me. Pictures of fallen child soldiers are displayed on their chairs so that everyone learns that their friends were heroes and died as martyrs. In conclusion, the interviewee states that

the educational system in Yemen has completely collapsed and that families opposed to this war are very afraid to send their children to school for fear that going to school will lead to the front. If one takes all these statements by the interviewees into account, the picture that emerges is one of a massive propaganda machine in the education sector, far from imparting heterogeneous world and subject knowledge. Civil society is obviously unable to counter this since all of the interviewees feel threatened by fear and terror.

5.4.2. MOSQUES ARE NO LONGER PLACES OF WORSHIP

A report published in September 2020 by *Center for Middle Eastern Studies* states that a large number of mosques in Sanaa have been converted by the Houthis. They are no longer places of worship but serve as sites of mobilization and recruitment for the Houthi militia. The newly appointed Imams must speak out about the importance of recruiting young people to fight for Yemen and its freedom. If the Imams refuse to be used for the Huthis' ideology, there will be violent consequences. Fear and terror are also being used to intimidate civilians in this area (Adel 2020).

Many Imams in mosques in Yemen were replaced as the Houthis waged war against mosques that were not of their faith (Shia). They also targeted madrasas. Instead, religious preachers belonging to the Houthi group were used in many places. In addition, mosques have also been closed in Houthi-controlled areas. In addition, mosques in Houthi-controlled areas were blown up, and looted by the Houthis. From

2013 to 2016, 750 mosques were bombed in Sana'a, Sa'ada, and Achi areas (al-ain News 2021).

The non-active mosques are often instrumentalized to recruit soldiers. Children are even less able than adults to appreciate what it means to go to the front lines. As in schools, in mosques, the community is taught the importance of defending the homeland. Thus, supposedly religious education in mosques has shifted to teaching the importance of fighting and jihad in the name of religion and protecting the homeland. There is also bad talk about the enemy and the injuries and destruction they have caused. The devastation is also exaggerated so that the children and young people feel that it is their duty to protect their homeland and families from this aggression that has brought the country to this miserable situation (al-ain News 2021).

In addition, participation in the war is presented as an adventure. Even possible death is mentioned in the fight for the sake of the homeland and religion. This death, however, leads to an entrance into heaven without having to fear accountability or punishment before God. This is what every Muslim desire. Preachers in mosques succeed in winning over young people with such simplified and religiously dressed-up ideas, as two of my interviewees also confirmed. Interviewee B specifically mentions the mosque, along with school and cultural classes, as a crucial place where the Houthis, through educators and leaders, manipulate and seduce children to become a hero. Especially as a teenager, he says, heroism is tempting, even if one's family is against the war, as in his case. Interviewee G also notes that children are taught, not only in schools but especially in mosques, that knowledge of religion is much more important than any

other science. And children at this age, he says, respond to this false information and believe it.

When I was in Yemen in May 2022, the Friday speeches also talked about Jihad for the sake of God. The Friday prayer also covered the issue of corruption, which has spread throughout the nation. It also emphasized how important unity is and how Yemenis must stand together in the face of any external aggression or threat. As soon as the sermon ended, the faithful began chanting the Houthi songs and slogans that could be heard all over the country, in the streets, in the mosques, and in the schools. These are omnipresent in public life, both through radio stations and loudspeakers in the streets, but also through private individuals. My impression from observing the neighborhood and my own family in Sana'a is that many Yemenis no longer want to go to the mosques to pray because of the indoctrination but prefer to pray at home. People avoid the Houthis by retreating into the private sphere. In this way, they increasingly leave the public space to those who seduce their children.

5.4.3. MASS MEDIA AS INSTRUMENTS OF PROPAGANDA

A report published in the *Gulf International Forum* in 2020, *A Battle of Hearts and Minds: The Growing Media Footprint of Yemen's Houthis*, shows the Houthis' sophisticated use of the media for their own purposes (Porter 2020). Footage and images glorifying their own military successes as well as condemning the airstrikes of the opposing coalition are widely used for propaganda purposes, according to this report. We see rows of soldiers displaying the Nazi salute from World War II, symbolism that is absolutely frowned upon in the Western world and can be taken as a sign of their anti-Semitic doctrine.

Most importantly, the Houthis appropriated one of Yemen's oldest cultural assets: poetry and its chants, in order to denigrate it for propaganda purposes. The Zawamil (poems) and anasheed (hymns) cover a wide range of topics, including praise of leaders and commentary on world politics and religious tradition. In these Zawamil they threaten Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Their goal is to encourage followers, motivate children, and frighten enemies.

Yemen is a tribal country by nature and famous for its lyrical heritage and the so-called Zamil, a type of traditional art in Yemen villages, often in dialect form, a hymn of praise to the Yemeni tribes. Al-Houthi has created new content for these songs. You hear these abused song forms everywhere today, on the radio, in private cars on the streets. They speak of victory and the liberation of Yemen from the invaders. Since the Al-Houthi took control of many radio stations, all broadcasts have become expressions of sectarian ideas and beliefs.

I was able to see this myself during my visit in the spring. Even the news is now focused on the Houthis, their victories, and the areas they control. They mention their heroism and the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the homeland. They also use the media to spread their songs and chants, asking Yemenis and children to support the war. I heard them every day, and what also surprised me was that at a Yemeni wedding I was invited to, Houthi chants were heard in the middle of the wedding festivities. This is probably a new psychological method that the Houthis are using to get people on their side. Beliefs can change when people are infiltrated in constant loops with convictions that may not have originally been their own. Sooner or later, one can be made to

believe that what they hear or learn is right. Children in particular lack critical distance. They are relatively easy victims of manipulation.

The head of *Seyaj* also emphasized the effectiveness of the songs and poems. They sing about war, Jihad, and its heroes. They lure the young with images of masculinity. The respondent believes that this method of recruitment has led and will continue to lead to a massive increase in recruitment rates and the involvement of children in armed conflicts. Probably, it is precisely the recourse to traditional cultural assets, to those that are familiar in form, that plays into the arms of the Houthis and thus enables them to mislead and win over a particularly large number of people, including young people and children.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of my research have confirmed that the propaganda methods of the Houthi militias and their middlemen seem to be omnipresent in the areas they control. This propaganda obviously has a very strong influence on the psyche of society as a whole, so that even if there is no consent, it obviously causes some kind of paralysis or, in any case, a retreat of the population into the private sphere.

All family members reported that schools and summer camps were responsible for removing children from their sphere of influence. They described the situation and the various methods of indoctrination in detail but made no mention of ways to change the new status quo created by the Houthis themselves. This confirms my hypothesis that the Houthis' actions have a negative impact on the self-empowerment of society. Based on the results of the research, people do not seem to see an opportunity to resist the

ideology but instead respond by withdrawing. This was also confirmed by the decision of many families I observed to stop going to the mosque on Fridays and pray at home. Children are particularly vulnerable to the powerful mechanisms of indoctrination. As the study has shown, the ubiquity of Houthi ideology in everyday life causes children to believe its teachings and to follow calls to contribute to the defense of the country. The analysis of the interviews also showed that the Houthi militia uses totalitarian methods, attempting to influence all social conditions and seeking the extremely active participation of all children and young people. To this end, they primarily use schools and converted and newly established summer camps, as was evident from all 11 interviews. In this way, the Houthi militia manipulates the educational mission, whose goal should be to impart knowledge and skills and to educate children to become responsible individuals who contribute constructively to society. Seven of the eight family members interviewed described their living conditions as difficult, characterized by poverty and misery. It became clear that both inadequate educational opportunities and poverty exacerbate recruitment. In the interviews with family members, it became clear that their ability to influence the boys' personal development is severely limited by the Houthis' activities. Children turn away from their own families to follow the Houthis' beliefs and are persuaded to participate in the war. In particularly blatant cases, sons even turn against their own families, according to a sister and the Sanaa Center researcher. Since schools, in particular, seem to be a place of indoctrination and recruitment for participation in the war, rapid intervention would be called for. If the April 2022 agreement is more than lip service, the next step would be the ratification of an agreement to withdraw the Houthis from schools. With the help of the United Nations,

funds would have to be raised to pay the teachers and thus, in the long term, return the schools to their proper role: to be a place of education to strengthen society and train responsible and peaceful citizens for the future.

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APPENDIX

Data on the interviewees and the recruited children

Participants	The families originally come from	The families currently live in	Age of the child at recruitment	The condition of the children
Participant A Interview with the brother	Taiz	Sanaa	15	alive
Participant B Interview with the father	Sanaa	Sanaa	15	No Info about the child, Family doesn't know
Participant C Interview with the father	Sanaa	Sanaa	15	dead
Participant D	Sanaa	Sanaa	14	alive

Interview with the brother				
Participant E Interview with the father	Sanaa	Sanaa	15	alive
Participant F Interview with the sister	Al Hudaydah	Al Hudaydah	14	dead
Participant G Interview with the father	Dhamar	Al Hudaydah	13 and 15	the 13-year-old is still with the Houthies, the 15-year-old is back with the family
Participant H Interview with the brother	Al Hudaydah	Al Hudaydah	15	still imprisoned by the Houthies , the family can

				not help
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Data on interviewees who are professionally involved with the issue of child recruitment

School Teacher	Yemen, Sanaa
Child Protection (SEYAJ)	Yemen , Sanaa
The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies	Yemen, Sanaa