

Houthi's Indoctrination of Yemen's Youth

How to Untie the Gordian Knot of Educational Oppression?

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Key Points

- The Houthis are exploiting educational institution teaching staff to exert severe influence on children. Long-term mental effects are difficult to tackle and require a de-radicalization of affected teenagers.
- More than 18,000 children have been recruited by the rebels, mainly through coercion, fear, physical suppression or abuse. However, thanks to effective indoctrination, thousands of them lost their lives hoping to become a hero or a martyr.
- The Houthis must acknowledge that the international community will not take them seriously unless they fully comply with international laws, and that they will be held accountable for their actions.
- A combined approach by the international community and the GCC needs to address the rebels' financial resources and target weapon smuggling routes on the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent waters.

Introduction

For several years, the Houthis have been manipulating education institutions for the purpose of indoctrinating young children. In Houthi-held territories, thousands of teenagers have been subjected to indoctrination or 'brainwashing' to make them submissive and obedient devotees, ready to sacrifice their own lives for the Houthis' objectives.

History has plenty of examples of unscrupulous regimes using indoctrination as a means of population control. The *Hitler Youth* during the National Socialist regime in Germany, the *Young Pioneers* in the Soviet Union or *Xinjiang's re-education camps* in China, are all examples of regimes that used indoctrination for malign purposes. However, history also tends to show that region and global communities eventually pushed back against these techniques with catastrophic results for the malign regimes. Therefore, it is relevant now to consider how CENTCOM and the global community may end these practices in Yemen and deter their further use.

Analysis

Two Sides of the Same Coin – How the Houthis Abuse Education?

The Houthis' approach is simple and effective as it exploits the existing educational sector to promote sectarian and extremist ideas. The Houthis inherited this system when they seized the northwestern portion of Yemen and killed ex-president Saleh in 2017. For indoctrination purposes, the Houthis target two main "receiving audiences," i.e. pupils and students at universities. However, since "education providers" are also critical in the equation, the Houthis also rely on university professors and teachers, who are either loyal to the cause or

completely submissive for fear of reprisals. The indoctrination system has been rounded-out by the establishment of special institutions and cultural camps to propagate the indoctrination, while military camps provide young people with combat skills.

Houthis' Approach to Indoctrinating Students and Pupils?

In theory, the mental grip on the youth is strengthened by applying the following enduring principles:¹

1/ target children who have not yet reached the age at which critical thinking can develop; 2/ exploit authority effect by using respected and recognized people such as teachers and professors; 3/ endlessly repeat the ideas and thoughts that need to be conveyed to a group; 4/ exercise psychological pressure and social control through rewards and threats of punishment.

Indoctrination in early childhood (1) is extremely effective because young children learn the thought patterns that they will use throughout their entire life. It becomes far more difficult, although not impossible, to impose these changes later in life. As an example, religion and beliefs are patterns of thought that are usually "inherited" from the parents, as are cultural traditions. In addition, it is natural behavior that to accept or submit to demands from people who are endowed with some form of authority (2). Moreover, authority often translates into a security guarantee, which also explain why adults rarely lose respect for those vested with authority. Teaching also relies on the repetition of notions that need to be assimilated by students. Thus, repeatedly expounding ideas to a group (3) is key to successful learning, especially since structures of thought assimilate best when learn and reinforced in groups. The 'group effect' provides an additional advantage: The more people we see having the same conviction, the more likely we are to assume that what has been told is true. It is not the absolute number that matters the most, but the closeness of the involved group members. Sanctions are employed to either reward desired behavior or punish deviant behavior positive and are a critical aspect of indoctrination (4).

This Houthis approach seems to have paid off since approximately 18,000 child soldiers² have been recruited so far, and most of the 7,500 young people that have been killed or maimed during the conflict have been adolescent fighters.³

How do the Houthis Exploit University Professors and School Teachers?

Like many other civil servants or policemen in the Houthi-occupied portions of Yemen, schoolteachers and university professors are forced to attend specific courses in so-called "cultural centers" where they have to swear allegiance to the Houthi leader. They have to sit through "*lectures about Houthi religious teachings and the need to contribute money and fighters to the group.*"⁴ During these sessions, teachers are taught by force how to coerce and indoctrinate their students.⁵ Any teachers who are not convinced or are reluctant to push such teaching, are themselves processed through indoctrination camps until they are compliant.

Yemen's northwest is a seized "state" in which the Houthis enjoy the monopoly of power and implement their own rules. They have institutionalized their own government and ministers in which supervisors are appointed at every level to ensure total control and the success of the Houthis' ambitions. The walls of schools and universities are covered with propaganda posters that display war heroes or martyrs and victims of the Arab coalition. Likewise, enemies are clearly identified on the same posters and range from the legitimate Hadi-led

¹ "Glaube und Indoktrination: zwei Seiten einer Medaille," ["Belief and Indoctrination: Two Sides of the Same Coin"], Volker Dittmar, 10 Sep 2016.

² "How Al Houthis recruit and indoctrinate child soldiers," Associated Press, 19 Dec 2018.

³ "Yemen war's 'devastating impact' on child mental health: charity," Agence France-Press, 23 Mar 2020.

⁴ "Houthis Abusing Education for Sectarian Indoctrination," Asharq Al-Awsat, 12 Jul 2019.

⁵ "Houthis Abusing Education for Sectarian Indoctrination," Asharq Al-Awsat, 12 Jul 2019.

government, to the US, via the Arab coalition and Israel. To ensure schools and universities also diffuse anti-Western thoughts and resentment, every morning, teachers and students are also to perform the Houthi anthem: “death to America, death to Israel, Jews be damned and victory for Islam.”⁶

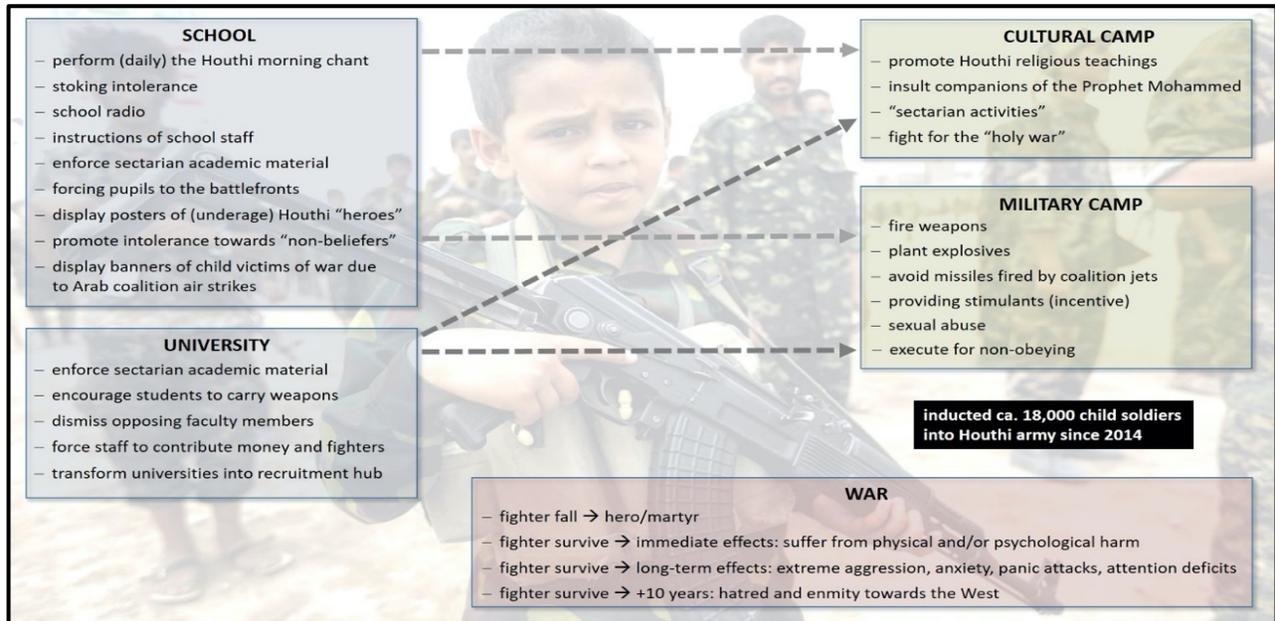


Figure 1: Target groups, utilized institutions and objectives of Houthi indoctrination.

Thanks to their indoctrination process, the Houthis thus seek to ensure total control over children or young adults, but they also rely on teachers or professors, who in turn become a powerful amplifier of their influence. The ultimate goal is to secure a pool of combatants ready to give their lives for the cause. If these young fighters die in battle, they will become martyrs and heroes. However, if they do not die, they will then join the ranks of the most loyal servants of the Houthis' cause and of the most fervent defenders of the system. In short, the effects of indoctrination are not only worrying and harmful in the short term since, in the longer term, a whole generation risks perpetuating the Houthi ideology. Unsurprisingly, this war also has a devastating impact on the mental health of young child soldiers, as evidenced by recent reports by the NGO Save the Children, which reveal that more than half of indoctrinated adolescents suffer from deep depression.⁷

Countering Indoctrination? Is it Possible to Untie the Gordian Knot of Educational Oppression?

There are plenty of strategies for how to protect oneself against indoctrination. The following six ways are proven effective in fighting attempts of indoctrination on an individual basis:⁸ 1/ ask for evidence; 2/ reject faith-based beliefs; 3/ study the opposing view; 4/ be wary of persuasion by repetition; 5/ be wary of appeals to popularity; 6/ practice sound reasoning. However, in the absence of alternative perspectives and leadership, it is highly unlikely that Yemeni youth living under the Houthis can self-inoculate against indoctrination.

The Houthis have, so far, recruited more than 18,000 child soldiers, so their techniques have proven very effective. For most of the targeted youth, the prospects of becoming a hero and providing better living conditions for their families are often too tempting to resist, although many become submissive in response to fear of physical punishments or sexual abuses. Helping victims get back to normality requires an approach comparable

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Yemen war’s ‘devastating impact’ on child mental health: charity,” Agence France-Press, 23 Mar 2020.

⁸ See www.peopleskillsdecoded.com/protect-yourself-against-indoctrination

the de-radicalization processes used for members of violent extremist organizations such as Daesh. However, in the case of Yemen, a considerable portion of the country’s youth is at stake. Therefore, a true commitment from the Yemeni government, supported by the international community, will be of vital importance. Beside the traditional economic and humanitarian aid, countering indoctrination is yet another area of this war which requires - and is worth - a serious investment with regard to Yemen’s future. However, as long as the Houthis continue to resort to indoctrination, any attempt at improving this situation will be elusive.

History has demonstrated that state-organized indoctrination basically ended only when the regime itself ended, such as in Nazi Germany, the German Democratic Republic or the Soviet Union. In Yemen, neither the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition nor the international community have the political will to attempt to eliminate the Houthi controlled areas. Since a collapse of the Houthis seems out of question, what (prudent) incentives could make them renounce resorting to indoctrination and oppression without jeopardizing the well-being of the weakest link in the chain, i.e. the children of Yemen?

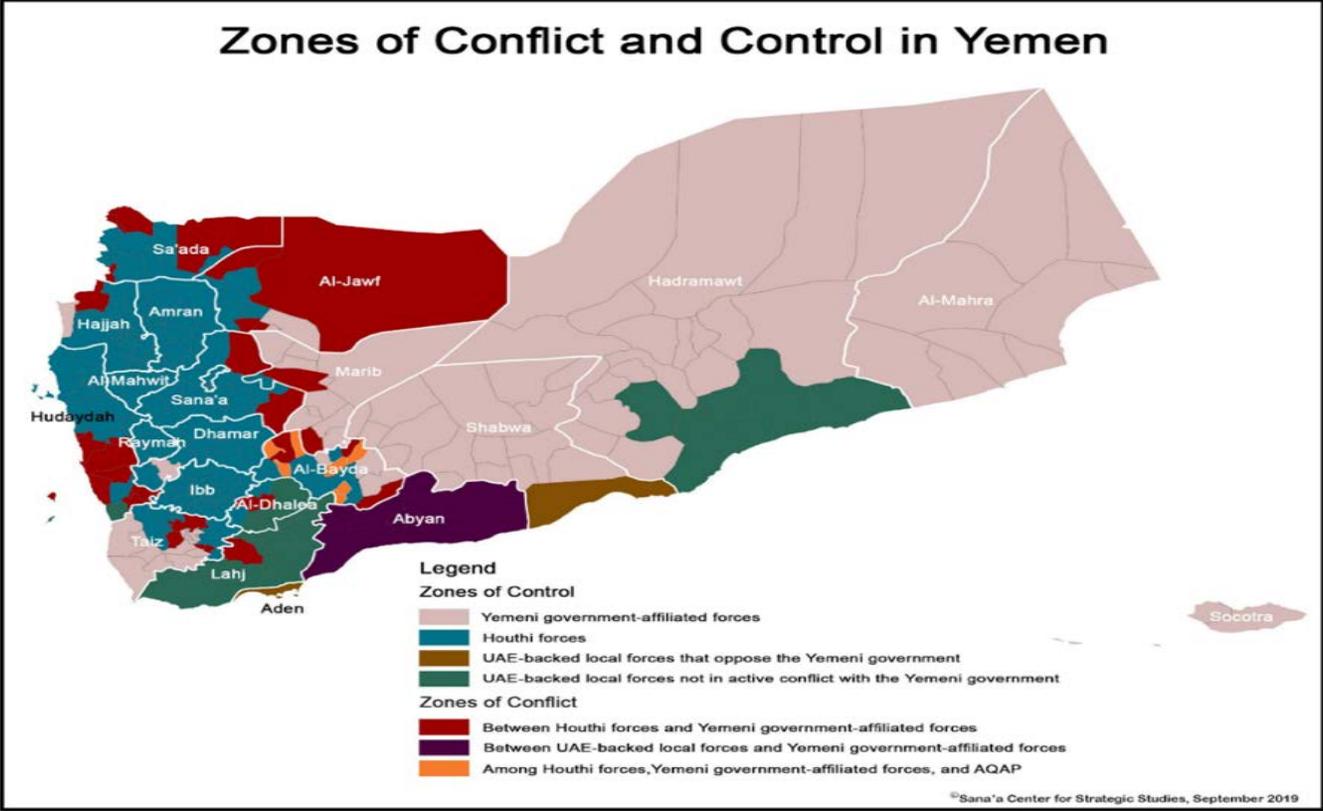


Figure 2: Zones of Conflict and Control in Yemen⁹

In 2018, as the international community strove to end one of the 21st Century’s worst humanitarian crises by supporting any promising initiative, the Hadi-led government and the Houthis negotiated the Stockholm agreement on the same level, as equal parties to the negotiations. However, a lasting resolution remains elusive.

To fully implement the agreement, the Saudi-led coalition, the international community, and the UN must now pressure the Houthis to comply with international laws and they must be held accountable for their actions. In 2017, Yemen’s government ratified the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict* and declared by that “its commitment to retaining 18 years as the

⁹ “Zones of Conflict and Control in Yemen,” Sana’s Center for Strategic Studies, September 2019.

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."¹⁰ Such a protocol should therefore be used by the Arab coalition and the international community to pressure the Houthis and force them to fully comply with global norms.

Although the treaty was never officially signed, the Yemeni government has confirmed its adherence to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. By this, Yemen has thus clearly indicated its intention to be legally bound to the terms of this Convention. In November 1989, most world leaders had already made a historic promise to the children of the world by adopting the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* - an international agreement on childhood. This convention was the first-ever global set of legally binding rights to apply to all children. Today, more than 30 years later, it remains the most widely ratified Human Rights treaty in history.

However, despite careful monitoring of violations committed by state and non-state actors, the UN has failed to guarantee a comprehensive implementation of this international framework aimed at protecting children. The violation of children's rights in Yemen, as in many other armed conflicts, is in fact only the by-product of the failure of some states, and most often of rebel militias, to guarantee the basic Human Rights. For the civil society, the "list of shame" is a useful and powerful tool to stigmatize perpetrators and reduce violations against children's rights. However, it should be made extremely clear to all actors that the only way to see their name removed from such a list is to concretely end children abuses rather than seeking to use political maneuvering.¹¹ Nonetheless, the inherent and well known weaknesses of the UN system are expected to continue to impede any chance of success because of a lack of innate military power to enforce law but also because of the prevailing national interests of the permanent members of the Security Council that still hinder the UN from acting effectively. Therefore, alternative methods must also be identified.

To be effective, any action should undoubtedly tackle financial flows, especially since the Houthis' operations require increasingly costly capabilities (UAVs, ballistic missiles, etc.). Freezing their assets and depriving them of financial resources could thus force the Houthis to agree to implement international standards and laws. Recently, the US, so far one of the major donors, began cutting aid funding to the north of the country due to the obstruction and abuses of Iranian-backed rebels. Unfortunately, this type of approach must be cautiously balanced due to the inherent side effects that affect not only the rebels and their financial resources but also the civilian population living in the rebel-controlled areas.¹²

In addition to endeavors to reduce the Houthis' financial resources, weapon smuggling into Yemen, especially by land and sea, should be eliminated. With regard to land lines of supply, weapon smuggle routes from Oman should be cut. Therefore, the international community, the US and, above all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries should pressure Oman to better control its borders. Despite Muscat's neutral foreign policy, the GCC should firmly remind the Sultanate of its obligations towards the GCC, which requires unity among its members on shared peace objectives for the region, all the more since Yemen, the only non-GCC member of the Arabian Peninsula, remains a real threat to all neighboring countries, and not only to Saudi Arabia. In this respect, acting commonly and much more decisively seems to be the only way forward.

Last, the international community must also seek to assist the thousands of child soldiers recruited by the Houthis who are victims of physical and emotional violence. Most have witnessed death, killing, and sexual abuses. Many of them have already committed violent acts on their own and will suffer serious long-term psychological consequences. The reintegration of such victimized and hurt children back into a normal life remains essential and

¹⁰ UNICEF "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict," New York, 25 May 2000.

¹¹ "Politicizing children's rights: the United Nations and the crisis of impunity," Politheor – European Policy Network, 7 Jul 2016.

¹² "UN: Yemen faces 'staggering' 16 million coronavirus cases," The National, 28 Apr 2020.

must find its way on to the international community's agenda. So far, neither the Stockholm Agreement nor the Riyadh Agreement emphasizes this part of restoration of normality to an appropriate extent.

Conclusion

Currently, both major peace agreements are stalled, and a unilateral ceasefire is the only available option for now. However, this ceasefire remains fragile and unilateral, which means it has not been mutually agreed. Recent independence moves by the STC in southern governorates have also reignited frictions between factional partners. Therefore, the current situation, about to again worsen because of the likely spread of COVID-19, requires Yemen's problems to be addressed in a coherent and consistent way by fully committed actors from the region and the international community. This is the ultimate precondition for approaching the short and long-term challenges that go along with the Houthis' indoctrination of students and pupils.

Within the UN system, UNICEF is in charge of the reintegration of former child soldiers and their first priority is to prepare them for a return to a normal life through psychosocial support, education and/or training, which are all important aspects of reintegration programs. Attempting to reunite children with their families and communities are also essential, but sensitization and reconciliation efforts are sometimes necessary before a child is eventually sent back at home. A future reintegration is an enduring process which requires extensive support from the international community. Taking care of children who are deeply affected by conflict, is the first step to helping the country to build a peaceful future for all Yemenis.

Recommendations for the US / for USCENTCOM

- Support Yemen's government information operations aimed at revealing the true nature of Houthis' abuses of child soldiers.
- Urge the Houthis to comply with international rules and laws, as well as with peace agreements, if they truly want to be part of Yemen's political future, and support Yemen's government endeavors to define what the Houthis' role and place could be in Yemen's society.
- Support the implementation of the UN Security Council sanctions on Yemen, especially those related to the Houthis' financial assets.
- Support the Arab coalition's efforts to counter weapon-smuggling and provide targeted training and intelligence aimed at cutting the sea and land lines of supply.
- Support Gulf countries' efforts to bring Oman back into the GCC main purposes and, along with the international community and UN, consider pressuring Oman diplomatically to make the Sultanate better control its borders to halt weapon smuggling to Yemen.
- Support UNICEF and NGO's initiatives regarding the reintegration programs for affected and traumatized child-soldiers.