



Education in Yemen: Turning Pens into Bullets

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INTRODUCTION

In Yemen, education and conflict are intertwined. This unfortunate state of affairs is not new. In fact, it predates the ongoing war, which erupted in 2014 and has only compounded the problem. Indeed, because the educational sector has since the beginning of the conflict fragmented and descended entirely into partisanship and propaganda, with the warring parties modifying the content and nature of classroom instruction in line with their religiopolitical ideologies, education now serves to perpetuate social division. War has thus engendered a disastrous situation in which the education sector has had to contend with a development even worse than the periodic disruption of the school year and declining levels of student enrollment. Schools across Yemen have for all intents and purposes become centers of indoctrination. Those students who still attend them are often groomed to join the ranks of one or another of the country's armed factions, albeit not necessarily in combat roles. This phenomenon is especially apparent in areas controlled by Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthi movement.

A LONG-STANDING MISUSE OF THE CLASSROOM

The [politicization of education](#) in Yemen was already a problem well before the current conflict erupted. To begin with, religious schools, which predate government-run public schools and enjoy greater popular legitimacy, were neither required to obtain a license nor subject to any kind of oversight. The existence of networks of such schools, with their wholly differing orientations, did not simply result in inconsistent standards. Due to the politicoreligious movements or parties that backed them, they promoted clashing, and increasingly militant, national narratives. Politicoreligious factions even succeeded in influencing the core curriculums of public schools in areas under their sway, all as part of their competition to control the country.

The most widespread and influential network of religious schools in Yemen began when the country was still divided. In the mid-1970s, North Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood established a network of "institutes of knowledge" (*maahed ilmiyyah*) that were religious in



nature and focused on teaching the group's interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. Despite their overtly religious orientation, these institutes were allowed to operate as public schools. They proved especially popular among the country's Sunni population, but also opened in areas dominated by Zaydi Shia, many of whom grew alarmed by this development.

In 2000, a decade after the country's reunification, the government sought to integrate the divergent educational approaches of public schools in North and South Yemen into a single state education system. The main target of Yemen's then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh was the Islah party, which is the name that Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood had given itself in 1990. Indeed, after defeating Southern separatists in 1994, Saleh turned his attention to Islah, the largest independent political force in the country. Rather than ban the party, he chose to undercut its base by having the state take over its schools, which were public and therefore—unlike religious schools—subject to government control. This was achieved in 2000 and weakened Islah considerably.

At the same time, a segment of the Zaydi community in the north began to take an interest in organized education. This interest was partly in response to inroads made by both Islah-run and Salafi-run schools in predominantly Zaydi areas, and it was fed by a feeling that existing Zaydi religious schools were not up to the desired standard and not worth the effort of attempting to take over and reorient. Before long, a Zaydi group called Al-Shabab al-Mu'min established unofficial weekend schools, after-hour study sessions on weekdays, and summer camps. This would hold great significance for the future, in large part because Al-Shabab al-Mu'min ended up being subsumed by the growing Houthi movement. Moreover, beginning in 2004, the Houthis engaged in a series of rebellions against the government that culminated in the current war. In increasing numbers, graduates of unofficial schools established by Al-Shabab al-Mu'min [have participated in these conflicts](#).

Finally, other groups, such as Salafis and Sufis, also had their own schools, having taken advantage of the loophole that allowed (purely) religious schools to operate without a license or oversight. The Salafis' most prominent school was the Saudi-sponsored Hadith Center in Dammaj, [whose students fought the Houthis in 2014 in an armed confrontation dubbed the Dammaj War](#). As for the Sufis, they operated mostly in the governorates of Hadramawt, Hodeidah, and Taiz. The Sufi movements were the exception to the Yemeni rule. Although they, like everyone else, indoctrinated their students, the indoctrination was rarely of the kind that vilified non-adherents. Additionally, the Sufis advocated obedience to the ruler of the day. Sufis thereby ingratiated themselves with Saleh, who had at various times supported virtually all other groups on the scene in a bid to pit them against each other and strengthen his grip on power. But Saleh settled on the Sufis as his most dependable ally after his divide and rule strategy backfired more than once. Beginning in 2000, many Sufi schools opened in urban areas with government backing, offering religious education that was consistent with Saleh's views and policies.

THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR

The politicization of education in Yemen lent itself to the militarization we see today. Political and religious differences continue to receive expression in clashing national narratives—which, if anything, have intensified—but are now also manifested on the battlefield. [If the motives of today's combatants are examined](#), one of the most important is [the indoctrination they have received in unofficial schools or learning centers](#). This kind of education inculcates uncompromising ideological convictions in students, who are then ushered into a job market devoid of jobs. Consequently, many of these fresh graduates end up joining the political or armed wing of the party or movement that operated their school. It is a vicious circle.

Moreover, the war has pulverized Yemen's state education sector. Never robust to begin with, and too often subject to pressures by powerful local actors, Yemen's state education sector is now in disarray. Owing to airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led Arab coalition or to Houthi attacks, hundreds of schools have been damaged in whole or in part. According to a report released by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2018, [more than 2,500 schools are completely out of service, with 27 percent of them having closed down, 66 percent having suffered damage, and 7 percent now used as shelters for displaced persons or commandeered by militias for their own purposes.](#) In areas controlled by government forces, some schools damaged by shelling have undergone renovation at the hands of government bodies amid much fanfare. But many locals view this renovation as more of a publicity stunt than anything else, if not simply because most of these schools continue to suffer from a lack of necessary equipment, much of which was destroyed in the shelling and was never replaced.¹ This disaster coincides with [the complete cessation of school construction across Yemen since 2011.](#)

The toll the war has exacted on students is very high. Moreover, the trying economic situation has led to a reluctance on the part of parents to send their children to school, as many cannot afford the costs of transportation or even stationery, with some parents even putting their children to work in order for them to provide much-needed additional income for the family. In Houthi-controlled areas, parents must contend with the added burden of tuition costs, as the Houthis have turned public schools into a private enterprise. According to [a report released by UNICEF](#) in February 2021, more than 8 million Yemeni children require emergency education support, meaning they need a [“set of project activities that allow structured learning to continue in situations of emergency, crisis, or long-term instability.”](#) Two million children have no access to education at all. [This figure has jumped by 120 percent](#) since the 2015, when just under 900,000 students did not attend school. [Some local studies](#)

speak of an even higher figure, one nearing 3 million. [Since 70 percent of the country's population resides in the northern, Houthi-controlled areas,](#) the impact of the tragedy there is greater. According to the Houthis themselves, [400,000 children are added annually to the illiteracy list.](#)

Another chapter in the disaster is what Yemeni teachers are facing. To begin with, teachers have had to contend with intimidation and violence by armed factions—including raids on schools. But the most widespread problem is the irregular payment of salaries, described by UNICEF as [“one of the largest challenges”](#) to education in Yemen because it is driving more and more teachers to quit their jobs. Indeed, [nearly 4 million children are at risk of losing access to education](#) due to the declining number of teachers. The problem is most acute in the Houthi-controlled part of the country, which is home to more than 170,000 teachers, or two-thirds of the estimated number of teachers in Yemen. [These teachers have not received regular monthly salaries in nearly four years](#)—international aid agencies have on occasion stepped in to pay them—and many have quit in search of other ways to support themselves and their families. Replacing them will prove difficult. With no sustainable teacher training programs, [except for the few administered by select international agencies operating in Yemen,](#) any crop of qualified new teachers will remain numerically insignificant.

Accelerating the erosion in the quality of education is the phenomenon of increased factional control of schools and interference in their curriculums. On paper, the country's internationally recognized government, which is, in theory, based in the southern city of Aden but operates largely out of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, oversees education in the portion of Yemen that has escaped Houthi control. (The region in question lies in the southern part of the country and is home to approximately 30 percent of the country's population.) However, in certain supposedly government-controlled areas, a secessionist umbrella organization called the Southern Transitional Council (STC) is the real power



on the ground. For example, the STC is in control of Aden and [maintains its own diplomatic and military ties with the United Arab Emirates](#). As such, it has enjoyed near-free rein when it comes to reorienting schools and educational bodies in its areas.

In North Yemen, the cash-strapped Houthis have, as mentioned, converted the previously tuition-free state public school system into one in which they charge fees for enrollment. This has resulted in an exodus of students whose parents could not afford to make such payments. Alarming, the Houthis have changed some of the content of the curriculum in these ostensibly still-public schools. Most of the changes have affected grades one to six. [The most extensive modifications](#) were made to the subjects of Quranic studies, Islamic culture, Arabic, national education, and history. The changes were not limited to rewriting or adding material to better reflect the religious ideology of the Houthis but went so far as to promote their politics. Indeed, Houthi fighters killed in the war [are presented to students as role models](#). Even scientific textbooks have undergone modification, albeit generally of a more indirect sort. In mathematics textbooks, for example, [pictures of rifles have been inserted alongside math equations](#) in a clumsy attempt to make a subliminal impression on students.

If Houthi influence has increased in public schools located in the large swath of territory where the group is dominant, it is even stronger in the Houthis' own full-time day schools, which used to operate as weekend schools, after-hour study sessions, and summer camps. Here indoctrination is overt—beginning with the morning assembly, [during which students are required to chant Houthi slogans](#). The Houthis have also recently implemented what they call “[deepening faith identity](#)” through a series of measures, such as a prohibition on the mixing of genders in schools, the prevention of school parties (including graduation parties), and the replacement of entertainment-oriented songs and music with religious anthems and hymns endorsed by the group. On a regular basis, Houthi officials lecture

students on the jihad the group is carrying out against its opponents. Students in advanced stages of study receive even more intensive indoctrination in preparation for service in any number of capacities in the Houthi movement. [Such students are made to listen to the religious sermons of the movement's founder, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi](#), who was killed by government forces during the Saleh era in 2004 after months of armed confrontations.

Parties controlling areas under the nominal authority of the government have also impinged on education. In southern Yemen, the STC wrested control of the interim capital, Aden, from government forces in 2018. In October 2019, the STC launched the so-called Curriculum Management and Refutation Committee, with a view to reviewing and amending education so that it better conforms to their outlook. [According to the STC](#), this endeavor would identify “lessons that are extraneous, false, and programmed to Yemenize the south, replacing them with lessons that carry the southern stamp, identity, and history.” In parallel, the STC carries out [regular lectures and activities](#) in schools to promote its political objectives.

In the areas controlled outright by the government, a similar situation prevails in public schools. The government is weak, and its Ministry of Education is divided, making students vulnerable to political recruitment by factions within the government camp. Despite the dismal state of the government's Ministry of Education, it improbably claims to administer education in all governorates, including those run by the Houthis. The reality on the ground tells a different story, as do the unpaid salaries of public school teachers in Houthi-controlled areas.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Education in Yemen, at least insofar as it is understood in the traditional sense, has collapsed. The worst aspect of this collapse is reflected in the fragmentation and

politicization of the country's educational system. Whether in the north or the south, in Houthis, government, or STC-controlled areas, students go to school, attend classes, and move between educational levels, but emerge with little in the way of a bona fide education. Indeed, many of those who graduate **remain functionally illiterate**. The educational institutions fail to prepare students to interact with a Yemen whose existence does not revolve around conflict. At the same time, these institutions do not prepare them for educational systems abroad. Education in much of Yemen today serves to advance the politicoreligious agendas of warring parties in need of ideologically committed recruits as well as cannon fodder.

To alleviate the situation, concerned parties would do well to adopt a dual-track approach. The first step is to establish a new school under the auspices of a consortium of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) that are politically unaligned, already operate in Yemen, receive funding from abroad, and can obtain more of such funding. This consortium would secure the services of seasoned educators to draw up a curriculum that consists of core general education subjects and does not stray into politics and religion. To help ensure as much, teachers assigned to implement the curriculum would undergo a stringent vetting process. The consortium could model its school, which would not charge tuition fees, on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools in Palestinian refugee camps. The politically unaligned nature of the INGOs would make it less difficult for them to obtain authorization from the powers on the ground to establish and run the starter school. This could best be achieved in government-controlled governorates such as Hadramawt, Mahra, or Shabwa, where the security situation is stable and coordination with local authorities is relatively easy. And with ordinary Yemenis increasingly aware that the quality of education in their country has plummeted, many would leap at the opportunity to send their children there. It would not take long for this proposed starter school to become the envy of Yemenis near and far, which would in turn

facilitate obtaining authorization to open more such schools, perhaps in other areas, a process that would lead to the creation of a new educational sector.

A second step, which would complement the first, is for the proposed INGO-sponsored consortium to pursue alternatives to traditional in-classroom education. In recent years, the worldwide emergence of digital learning has created theoretically unlimited opportunities for marginalized communities. (In this regard, it is worth mentioning that certain private schools in Yemen, which tend to cater to the country's upper class and well-off foreigners, have **made successful use of e-learning during the coronavirus pandemic**.) Establishing an online schooling platform would extend education to thousands of Yemeni students beyond those who can attend traditional schools—whether those already in operation or those that would be operated by INGOs in the future. Indoor facilities outfitted with computers and internet access are essential for the success of such e-learning centers but would require fewer personnel and less funding than traditional schools. (Internet infrastructure in Yemen is relatively poor, but INGOs can make use of low-speed internet, which is widely available, or even satellite internet, which their backers can provide.) Technical and other staff, drawn from the local population, would work on site, whereas teachers could lecture from other areas of the country or even from outside Yemen. This might ultimately make it easier to penetrate areas controlled by the Houthis, who are disinclined to allow traditional schools unaffiliated with them to operate in their midst but may find e-learning centers less intrusive.

Such a dual-track approach is tailored for a country that may yet witness several more years of conflict. Indeed, most of the rounds of negotiation between the warring sides have failed to yield tangible results, and any sort of resolution, even a partial one, seems more elusive than ever. Consequently, a quick end to the fighting is not a realistic prospect. As the political stalemate drags on, and as armed clashes continue and sometimes intensify, the educational sector suffers further. It is all the more

pressing, then, to pursue an initiative that protects students and ensures their education even in the midst of war. Carving out a new, independent educational sector in Yemen, a portion of which takes advantage of the potential of remote learning, would increase the chances of the project's success. And success would ensure that an entire generation of Yemenis is not denied the basic right of education. Ultimately, it would also present a model of nonideological education that many Yemenis may well deem worthy of emulation, thus contributing to a change in the country's educational landscape.

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NOTES

- 1 Interview with a teacher based in Aden in southern Yemen on August 24, 2021. The interview was conducted via telephone.

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