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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Yemen: A Humanitarian Crisis

Abdulaziz Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed

A Lecturer in the Department of English,

Albaydha University - Yemen

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

The Department of English and Modern European Languages,

University of Lucknow.

E-mail: azizrefai2018@gmail.com

Abdulkafi Abdullah Ghaleb Al Refai

A Lecturer in the Department of Arabic,

Albaydha University - Yemen

A Research Scholar at the Department of Arabic and Eastern Studies,

University of Lucknow.

E-mail: abdulkafialrefai@gmail.com

Abstract

The recruitment of child soldiers in Yemen represents one of the most harrowing humanitarian crises of the 21st century. As the country's civil war enters its tenth year, armed groups, including the Houthi rebels, continue to exploit children as young as 10 years old, forcibly recruiting them into military roles. This systematic exploitation is fueled by a combination of ongoing conflict, economic devastation, and the deliberate targeting of vulnerable communities. The consequences of this crisis are far-reaching, affecting not only the children themselves but also the future stability and development of Yemen. This article delves into the recruitment tactics, the lived experiences of child soldiers, the long-term implications of this crisis, and the efforts being made to address it.

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Introduction:

The crime of recruiting children in armed conflicts remains one of the most terrible crimes notorious to humanity in modern times. Child recruitment is one of the most dangerous crimes affecting children's lives, causing severe damage to their mental, physical, and social health, in addition to destroying their future and depriving them of their basic rights. Moreover, it creates distorted generations due to their involvement in combat in armed conflicts that know only fighting and destruction. For this reason, international law and human rights give significant attention to prohibiting child recruitment and protecting their rights. Despite the numerous international efforts made in this regard, the phenomenon of child recruitment is still widespread in many areas of armed conflicts.

The use of child soldiers in Yemen is one of the most heartbreaking humanitarian crises of 2024. Armed groups, including the Houthis, are systematically recruiting children as young as 10 years old into military roles. This widespread issue is driven by Yemen's ongoing civil war and the extreme economic struggles many families face. Recruitment networks prey on vulnerable children through schools, social media, and local communities, using financial incentives, coercion, or intimidation to lure them in. Over a six-month investigation in Yemen's conflict zones, shocking evidence was uncovered about the scale and complexity of these recruitment efforts. Armed groups run around 6,000 training camps in Houthi-controlled areas, where children are put through rigorous military training and psychological indoctrination. These children endure harsh physical drills, ideological brainwashing, and social isolation, making it nearly impossible for them to resist or escape. The consequences of this crisis go far beyond the immediate harm to these children. The long-term effects trauma, interrupted education, and societal breakdown pose a serious threat to Yemen's future. However, there is still hope. Programs led by organizations like K.Srelief (31), and the International Labor Organization have made significant progress in rehabilitating former child soldiers and preventing further recruitment. These efforts focus on providing economic support, mental health care, and education to tackle the root causes of recruitment.

This paper explores the grim reality of child soldier recruitment in Yemen, highlighting the tactics used, the daily struggles of these children, and the ongoing efforts to break this cycle. It underscores the urgent need for global cooperation, stronger enforcement of laws, and continued support for at-risk communities to end this humanitarian tragedy and safeguard Yemen's next generation.

The Context: Yemen's Civil War and Economic Collapse

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Yemen's civil war, which began in 2014, has created a perfect storm for the exploitation of children. The conflict pits the Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, against the internationally recognized government, backed by a Saudi-led coalition. The war has devastated the country's infrastructure, economy, and social fabric, leaving millions in poverty and displacing over 4 million people (UNICEF, 2023). With limited access to education, healthcare, and basic necessities, families are often left with no choice but to send their children to work or, in the worst cases, allow them to be recruited by armed groups.

The economic collapse has been a significant driver of child recruitment. According to the World Bank (2023), over 80% of Yemen's population lives below the poverty line, and unemployment rates among youth are staggeringly high. Armed groups exploit this desperation, offering financial incentives to families in exchange for their children's service. In some cases, children are promised salaries, food, or protection for their families, while in others, coercion and intimidation are used to force compliance.

Recruitment Tactics: How Children Are Targeted

Armed groups in Yemen employ a range of tactics to recruit children, often preying on their vulnerability and lack of alternatives. Recruitment networks operate in schools, mosques, and local communities, using a combination of persuasion, manipulation, and force. Social media platforms have also become a tool for recruitment, with groups using targeted ads and propaganda to lure children into their ranks.

1. Financial Incentives

In a country where 2.2 million children suffer from acute malnutrition (UNICEF, 2023), the promise of a steady income or food is a powerful motivator. Armed groups offer families small sums of money or basic necessities in exchange for their children's service. For many families, this is seen as a survival strategy, even if it means sacrificing their children's futures.

2. Ideological Indoctrination

The Houthi movement, in particular, has been accused of using ideological indoctrination to recruit children. Through schools and religious institutions, children are taught to view the conflict as a holy war, framing their participation as a religious duty. This psychological manipulation makes it difficult for children to resist recruitment and creates a sense of loyalty to the group.

3. Coercion and Intimidation

In some cases, armed groups resort to outright coercion. Families are threatened with violence or displacement if they refuse to hand over their children. Children themselves are often abducted from their homes or while traveling to school, leaving families powerless to intervene.

4. Social Isolation and Peer Pressure

Once recruited, children are often isolated from their families and communities, making it difficult for them to escape. They are subjected to intense military training and ideological lectures,

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which reinforce their dependence on the group. Peer pressure also plays a role, as children are encouraged to recruit their friends and siblings, creating a cycle of exploitation.

The Lives of Child Soldiers: A Daily Struggle

The daily lives of child soldiers in Yemen are marked by violence, fear, and deprivation. Children as young as 10 are forced to undergo rigorous military training, often in harsh and unsanitary conditions. They are taught to handle weapons, plant explosives, and participate in combat operations, tasks that are both physically and psychologically demanding.

1. Harsh Training Regimens

Training camps, particularly those run by the Houthis, are designed to break down a child's resistance and instill obedience. Children are subjected to grueling physical drills, sleep deprivation, and punishment for disobedience. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2023), many children suffer from injuries, malnutrition, and untreated illnesses as a result of their training.

2. Psychological Trauma

The psychological impact of serving as a child soldier is profound. Children are exposed to extreme violence, including the killing of civilians and fellow soldiers. They are often forced to commit atrocities themselves, leaving them with deep emotional scars. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, which can persist long after they leave the battlefield.

3. Lost Childhoods

Perhaps the most devastating consequence of child soldier recruitment is the loss of childhood. Instead of attending school, playing with friends, or dreaming of the future, these children are thrust into a world of violence and exploitation. Their education is disrupted, and their prospects for a normal life are severely diminished.

The Long-Term Implications of Child Recruitment

The recruitment of child soldiers has far-reaching implications for Yemen's future. Beyond the immediate harm to the children themselves, this crisis threatens to perpetuate cycles of violence and poverty, undermining efforts to achieve lasting peace and stability.

1. Trauma and Mental Health

The psychological trauma experienced by child soldiers can have lifelong effects. Without proper rehabilitation, these children are at risk of developing chronic mental health issues, which can hinder their ability to reintegrate into society. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of unemployment, substance abuse, and involvement in criminal activities.

2. Disrupted Education

The disruption of education is another significant consequence. Children who are recruited into armed groups miss out on years of schooling, leaving them ill-equipped to contribute to their

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communities or the economy. This lack of education perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits Yemen's ability to rebuild after the war.

3. Societal Destabilization

The widespread use of child soldiers also undermines social cohesion. Communities that have been torn apart by recruitment struggle to rebuild trust and unity. The presence of former child soldiers, many of whom are traumatized and lack support, can further exacerbate tensions and hinder reconciliation efforts.

Efforts to Address the Crisis

Despite the grim reality, there are efforts underway to address the recruitment of child soldiers in Yemen. International organizations, local NGOs, and government agencies are working to rehabilitate former child soldiers and prevent further recruitment.

1. Rehabilitation Programs

Organizations such as KSrelief and the International Labor Organization (ILO) have implemented programs aimed at rehabilitating former child soldiers. These initiatives provide psychological counseling, education, and vocational training to help children reintegrate into society. For example, KSrelief's rehabilitation centers offer a safe space for children to heal and learn new skills, giving them a chance to rebuild their lives (KSrelief, 2023).

2. Prevention Efforts

Preventing further recruitment is a key focus of intervention programs. By addressing the root causes of recruitment—such as poverty, lack of education, and social instability—these initiatives aim to create a safer environment for children. Community awareness campaigns, school-based programs, and economic support for vulnerable families are among the strategies being used.

3. International Advocacy

The international community has also played a role in addressing this crisis. Organizations such as UNICEF and Human Rights Watch have documented cases of child recruitment and called for accountability. The United Nations has imposed sanctions on individuals and groups involved in the recruitment of children, though enforcement remains a challenge.

The Need for International Collaboration

Addressing the recruitment of child soldiers in Yemen requires a coordinated and sustained effort from the international community. This includes:

- **Strengthening Legal Frameworks:** Enforcing international laws that prohibit the recruitment and use of child soldiers is essential. Perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions.
- **Providing Financial Support:** Donor countries and organizations must increase funding for rehabilitation and prevention programs to ensure their long-term sustainability.

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- **Promoting Peace:** Ultimately, ending the recruitment of child soldiers requires a political solution to Yemen's civil war. The international community must redouble its efforts to broker a lasting peace agreement.

This study constitutes a significant scholarly effort to examine the primary factors contributing to the recruitment of children by the Houthi movement within the context of the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The findings demonstrate that child soldier recruitment is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a confluence of economic, educational, cultural, social, and political factors. The gravity of this issue underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions across these domains.

The research engaged a purposively selected sample of 55 individuals, including intellectuals, activists, and politicians, whose insights were gathered through a structured questionnaire. Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify and rank the factors influencing child recruitment. Among the five categories assessed, educational deficiencies emerged as the most significant contributor to the phenomenon, followed by economic hardship and political instability. Social disintegration—marked by the erosion of familial structures, weakened community support systems, and the ineffectiveness of human rights organizations—also plays a crucial role. The collapse of tribal authority has further exacerbated children's vulnerability, rendering them susceptible to militia recruitment. Additionally, the cultural normalization of armed participation within tribal traditions has been exploited by militias to pressure children into combat roles under the guise of preserving tribal honor.

The aggregate findings indicate that no single factor operates in isolation; rather, it is the interplay of these dimensions that fuels the ongoing recruitment of children into armed groups. Nevertheless, educational deficiencies were identified as the most decisive factor, highlighting the sector's critical role in conflict mitigation.

Based on these findings, the study offers several recommendations. Most notably, urgent and comprehensive interventions are required in the domains of education and economic reform. There is an immediate need to rehabilitate the educational infrastructure, including the reopening of schools, colleges, and universities, and the provision of regular compensation for teachers. Such measures must be supported by both the Yemeni government and international human rights organizations. Economic reforms should prioritize access to basic necessities—such as food, shelter, healthcare, and personal security—to reduce the socioeconomic incentives for recruitment.

Despite receiving lower mean scores, political, cultural, and social factors still exert a significant influence on child recruitment. For example, sectarian and tribal pressures were found to play a role in motivating children to join armed groups. In this regard, political accountability must be strengthened through the enforcement of national legislation and international legal frameworks. Specifically, the Yemeni government should ensure the prosecution of militias involved in child recruitment through referral to the International Criminal Court.

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Furthermore, cultural and traditional institutions must be mobilized to support child protection initiatives. These institutions should actively counteract indoctrination efforts and ideological manipulation, advocating instead for values that uphold the dignity, safety, and rights of children. Overall, the study calls for a coordinated, multisectoral response to combat the systemic exploitation of children in armed conflict and to foster a future grounded in justice, education, and sustainable peace.

Recommendations

In response to the research's outcomes, it is critical to include the following recommendations for Yemeni kids, family members, society, and the national and global communities.

1. Children in Yemen, like those elsewhere, require protection from zealots, radicals, and sectarian militias that exploit them as a tool for oppression and abuse.
2. Yemeni youngsters should be aware of ideological and sectarian groups attempting to enlist them in the civil conflict and proxy war.
3. Parents, safeguard your children against zealots, radicals, and sectarianism.
4. In Yemeni community, kids today become men of future. As a result, community bears duty toward the safety and stability of Yemen's future by preventing them from becoming involved in conflict.
5. The Yemeni government prioritizes the security of the state, economic growth, and the distribution of authority throughout the country while safeguarding children. It is the government's job to serve children with healthcare, schooling, and protection by strengthening the educational system and increasing national naturism. It is the duty of the government to implement Yemeni clauses and regulations relating to protecting children from armed enlistment.

Conclusion

The recruitment of child soldiers in Yemen is a grave violation of human rights and a stark reminder of the devastating impact of war on children. While the situation remains dire, there is hope in the form of rehabilitation programs, prevention efforts, and international advocacy. However, much more needs to be done to protect Yemen's children and ensure they have the opportunity to grow up in a safe and stable environment. The international community must act decisively to end this humanitarian tragedy and safeguard the future of Yemen's next generation.

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