

How Yemen's Deteriorating Education Sector May Prolong the Conflict

by [Abu Bakr Al-Faqih \(/experts/abu-bakr-al-faqih\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abu Bakr Al-Faqih \(/experts/abu-bakr-al-faqih\)](#)

Abu Bakr Al-Faqih is a Yemeni writer and translator who has contributed to a number of articles and press reports.



Brief Analysis

As Yemen's devastating war drudges into its fifth year with no end in sight, Yemen's public sector continues to deteriorate at alarming rates within the conflict zone. The already weakened state of the public sector, especially education, is expected to worsen in the near future. While the plight of Yemen's educational sector has seemed secondary to other challenges plaguing Yemen, such as lack of access to basic food and medicine, this is a sector that cannot be ignored without grave consequences. If Yemen's youth do not have adequate access to educational opportunities, they are more likely to turn to the violent groups that surround them for education and employment, aiding in the growth of extremist groups in the country and threatening to further prolong the conflict.

In October of last year, United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) warned that the ongoing war in Yemen would force more than **2 million** (<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-year-starts-yemen-2-million-children-are-out-school-and-another-37-million>) Yemeni children out of school and drastically cut teacher salaries—leading to the collapse of the education sector in these areas as well as threaten an entire generation's future. UNICEF additionally warned of the heightened risk to Yemeni children in the form of child labor or recruitment into armed groups on the frontlines of the battlefield. With the new school year, these **prognostics** (<https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/joint-statement-dire-situation-teachers-yemen>) have proven to be correct. Yet this dilemma has yet to receive appropriate international and local community response. The decline of the education sector in Houthi controlled areas, though devastating, is not surprising. It is an expected result of the continuing conflict and the repercussions of war on the country's overall infrastructure—though this sector suffered long before the outbreak of the conflict.

The majority of Yemen's teachers work in Houthi-controlled areas. These teachers continue to face intensely challenging conditions. Teachers' salaries remain unpaid, and many researchers are concerned about the likely financial and psychological ramifications of the conflict on teachers and their students. Reports of suicide and filicide have escalated, **presumably as result of unpaid salaries and lack of job opportunities** (<https://theirworld.org/voices/yemen-youth-ambassador-teacher-on-life-for-school-children-in-conflict>). This new phenomenon within the education sector has shocked Yemeni society and illustrated the extent of the damage on the education system as a whole. Yemeni commentators have also described these instances as setting a "dangerous precedent" for the future.

On the other side, the Saudi-led coalition has been accused of violating international law and halting the educational aspirations for thousands of children. Since the start of the war, more than 2,500 schools (<http://www.protectingeducation.org/news/yemen-war-leaves-harsh-impact-education>) are no longer operating, either due to destruction, closures, or requisition for military use. Saudi-led (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35071200>) coalition forces have also carried out air-strikes targeting schools and other educational facilities still in use. Similarly, Houthi rebels have been accused of using educational facilities as weapons depots, secret prisons to arrest and torture dissidents, as well as recruitment and training facilities. Saudi Arabia has also been accused of using child soldiers (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-childsoldiers-exclusive/exclusive-overruling-his-experts-pompeo-keeps-saudis-off-u-s-child-soldiers-list-idUSKCN1TJ25H>) from Sudan to defend its southern border and engage in fierce battles against the Houthis, along with similar accusations (<https://www.dw.com/en/child-soldiers-used-in-yemen-civil-war-report-says/a-49606125>) that Houthi forces have used child soldiers from Yemen as well.

The effects of deteriorating educational opportunities on Yemen's younger generation are also visible, especially through low university enrollment rates in Houthi-controlled areas. This is particularly pressing since there appears to be a concerning number of Yemeni students who express interest in joining dangerous armed groups. Students' willingness to join these groups arises from a profound feeling of hopelessness and a lack of perceived alternatives. These groups offer a sense of belonging and the promise of payment. Considering the grim economic and educational state of Yemen, a large number of students have been motivated to join the ranks of these armed groups based on financial promises.

Exploitation of the education system to attract Yemen's younger generation into the battlefield bears serious consequences for Yemen's future. The students and children that join the group's ranks, imbued with its ideology, will further fuel the ongoing war. A collapse of the education sector in the Houthi controlled areas—accounting for the majority of Yemen's population—can only serve the interests of armed groups and extremist organizations in the country.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the international community and the Yemeni government combine their resources to end the teachers' salary freeze and address the issues of access to education as soon as possible. While the Yemeni government is struggling with the many basic challenges faced by its citizens, it cannot forget to prioritize the future of Yemeni children by ensuring there is adequate educational infrastructure.

In terms of the conflict itself, the international community, and particularly the United States, must place maximum pressure on both Saudi Arabia and the Houthis to abide by international laws that criminalize the use of children in armed conflict, as well as publicly condemn Saudis' attacks on educational facilities. External and internal steps directed at saving Yemen's educational system from collapse are vital. Only when teachers are able to do their jobs and educational facilities and children are not targeted will Yemen's youth be able to choose receiving an education over joining armed groups. ❖

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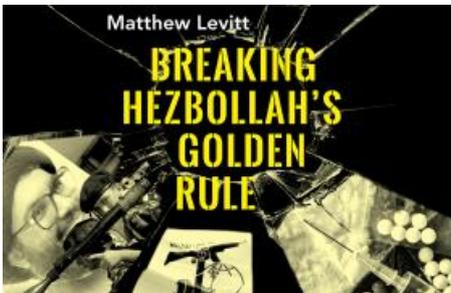
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