

CONSCRIPTION AND USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS AS A WAR CRIME BY THE HOUTHIS IN YEMEN

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Abstract. *This paper examines the alarming practice of child soldier recruitment by the Houthi movement in Yemen's ongoing armed conflict, highlighting the widespread and systematic nature of this war crime. The study focuses on the methods used by the Houthis to recruit children, some as young as eight years old, for both combat and auxiliary support roles. It delves into the devastating physical, psychological, and social consequences these children face, including injuries, permanent disabilities, and long-term trauma such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The objective of this research is to analyze the recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthis, framing these actions as clear violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights conventions, such as the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The methodology employs a qualitative approach, utilizing reports from international human rights organizations, UN documentation, and eyewitness testimonies to assess the scope of these violations. The study aims to raise awareness about the unlawful use of children in armed conflict by the Houthis and the broader societal impact on Yemen. The findings indicate that the Houthi movement systematically violates international law by conscripting and deploying child soldiers. In conclusion, the paper calls for urgent international action, including legal accountability, child protection policies, and comprehensive rehabilitation programs for former child soldiers.*

Keyword: Child Protection, Child Soldiers, Houthi Movement, War Crimes, Yemen Conflict.

ВЕРБОВКА И ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ДЕТЕЙ-СОЛДАТ КАК ВОЕННОЕ ПРЕСТУПЛЕНИЕ ХУСИТАМИ В ЙЕМЕНЕ

Аннотация. В этой статье рассматривается тревожная практика вербовки детей-солдат движением хуситов в продолжающемся вооруженном конфликте в Йемене, подчеркивая широко распространенный и систематический характер этого военного преступления. Исследование фокусируется на методах, используемых хуситами для вербовки детей, некоторым из которых было всего восемь лет, как для боевых, так и для вспомогательных ролей. В нем рассматриваются разрушительные физические, психологические и социальные последствия, с которыми сталкиваются эти дети, включая травмы, постоянную инвалидность и долгосрочные травмы, такие как посттравматическое стрессовое расстройство (ПТСР). Целью данного исследования является анализ вербовки и использования детей-солдат хуситами, представляя эти действия как явные нарушения международного гуманитарного права (МГП) и конвенций по правам человека, таких как Женевские конвенции, Конвенция о правах ребенка (КПР) и Римский статут Международного уголовного суда (МУС). Методология использует качественный подход, используя отчеты международных организаций по правам человека, документацию ООН и свидетельства очевидцев для оценки масштабов этих нарушений. Целью исследования является повышение осведомленности о незаконном использовании детей в вооруженном конфликте хуситами и более широком общественном влиянии на Йемен. Результаты показывают, что движение хуситов систематически нарушает международное право, вербуя и отправляя детей-солдат. В заключение в документе содержится призыв к срочным международным действиям, включая правовую ответственность, политику защиты детей и комплексные программы реабилитации для бывших детей-солдат.

Ключевые слова: Защита детей, Дети-солдаты, Движение хуситов, Военные преступления, Йеменский конфликт.

1- Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Yemen, which began in 2014, has been characterized by extensive human rights abuses, with the recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthi movement among

the most severe. Children as young as eight are being forcibly conscripted or manipulated into participating in the conflict, often through abduction, coercion, or ideological indoctrination. Once recruited, these children are placed in extremely hazardous roles, from frontline combat to logistics support, exposing them to life-threatening violence, physical injury, and deep psychological trauma.

This practice is not only morally reprehensible but constitutes a clear violation of IHL and various human rights treaties. This paper aims to analyze the Houthi movement's use of child soldiers through the lens of international legal frameworks, specifically the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the CRC, and the ICC. Each of these instruments prohibits the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 in armed conflict, defining such acts as war crimes. However, the continued exploitation of children by the Houthis highlights the failure of these legal mechanisms to deter or prevent violations in practice, particularly in conflict zones where law enforcement and accountability are weak or nonexistent.

The research will use a qualitative methodology, sourcing data from reports by international human rights organizations, UN documents, eyewitness testimonies, and legal texts. This approach aims to provide a well-rounded analysis of the legal, humanitarian, and social implications of child soldier recruitment. The study will also evaluate the broader impact of these practices, which destabilize communities, erode familial structures, and trap children in cycles of violence and trauma. Survivors often face lifelong consequences such as PTSD, physical disabilities, and societal exclusion, all of which hinder their reintegration and development. Key research questions guiding this study include: How are children recruited by the Houthis? In what ways do these actions violate international law? What are the immediate and lasting effects on child soldiers? And what policy and legal measures can be implemented to prevent such recruitment and rehabilitate victims? Ultimately, this paper seeks to raise awareness of the Houthi group's systematic use of child soldiers and advocate for stronger international legal enforcement, improved child protection policies, and robust rehabilitation programs. Ensuring justice for these children is essential not only for their recovery but also for achieving lasting peace and stability in Yemen.

2- International Legal Framework of on War Crime

The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols (1949, 1977) form the backbone of IHL, providing a legal structure aimed at regulating the conduct of armed conflict and ensuring protection for civilians and combatants, particularly vulnerable groups such as children.

The Geneva Conventions include provisions for the protection of civilians during war and prohibit the recruitment and use of children in hostilities.

Protocol II, adopted in 1977, extends these protections to non-international armed conflicts, which are particularly relevant in situations like the conflict in Yemen. This protocol explicitly prohibits the recruitment of children into armed groups and mandates the provision of care and education for children in conflict zones (Dinstein, 2023). These instruments set clear standards for the humane treatment of children, ensuring they are not exploited as combatants or subjected to the atrocities of war. Alongside the Geneva Conventions, the CRC, adopted in 1989 by the UN, provides a more comprehensive framework for the protection of children's rights, including during times of armed conflict. The CRC establishes that children under the age of 15 should not be recruited into armed forces or armed groups, emphasizing their protection from violence, exploitation, and the devastating impacts of war (Arts, 2014; 287-300; Kilkelly, 2020; 6-12). The Convention stresses that States should refrain from actions that would endanger children's lives or subject them to military service in violation of their rights. The CRC is a universally ratified treaty, which means it has achieved near-global consensus on child protection in both peacetime and wartime, establishing the international community's commitment to preventing the use of child soldiers. However, despite this broad consensus, enforcement remains a significant challenge in conflict zones where state actors and non-state groups continue to violate the rights of children (Neagu, 2024; 578-585).

The ICC, which entered into force in 2002, further strengthens the legal framework for addressing child soldier recruitment. Under Article 8 of the Rome Statute, the recruitment or use of children under the age of 15 in armed conflict is classified as a war crime. The ICC is empowered to prosecute individuals responsible for such war crimes, including both state and non-state actors. The Statute is an essential tool for international justice, as it holds individuals personally accountable for grave violations of international law, including the use of child soldiers. The ICC provides an international legal venue to seek justice for victims of these crimes, ensuring that perpetrators are not only held accountable for their actions but also that international norms against the recruitment and use of child soldiers are reinforced (Alwheebe, 2024: 1261-1262). Together, the Geneva Conventions, the CRC, and the ICC create a comprehensive international legal framework designed to protect children from the horrors of armed conflict. These legal instruments aim to prevent the exploitation of children as soldiers and ensure that those who engage in such practices face legal consequences. However, while these frameworks provide a strong legal basis for child protection, their implementation has often been inconsistent, especially in regions experiencing prolonged conflicts like Yemen.

Despite widespread ratification of these treaties, child soldier recruitment continues to occur, highlighting the challenges of enforcing international law in conflict zones. Therefore, while the legal framework is robust, its effectiveness depends on the political will of states, the cooperation of international organizations, and the capacity of courts like the ICC to prosecute violators and hold them accountable (Arai-Takahashi, 2019: 28-31; Alwheebe, 2024: 1262-1269).

3- Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers by the Houthis

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthi movement in Yemen represents one of the most severe violations of IHL and children's rights (Hokayem, 2023: 167-176). Since the escalation of the conflict in Yemen, particularly after the Houthis seized control of the capital, Sanaa, in 2014, the group has consistently exploited children for military purposes (Cohn, 2014: 182-190; Ali, 2020). The Houthis have been accused of forcibly recruiting children, including those as young as 10 years old, into their ranks. Many of these children are taken from rural and impoverished areas where the reach of the state is limited, making it easier for the Houthis to target vulnerable populations. Children are often abducted from schools, homes, or markets, and many are coerced or manipulated into joining by being promised food, money, or protection. The recruitment process is often accompanied by propaganda and ideological manipulation, with children being told they are fighting to defend their families, religion, and country. This practice of child soldier recruitment is a direct violation of international conventions such as the Geneva Conventions and the CRC, both of which prohibit the involvement of children in armed conflict (Ryan, April 7, 2023; Rabeeah, 2025: 34).

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthi movement in Yemen has been a persistent and growing issue from 2014 to 2025, with evidence showing widespread and systematic exploitation of children in the ongoing conflict. The 2014 period marked a significant shift in the conflict when the Houthis, who had already established a strong presence in Yemen, took control of the capital, Sanaa (Ali, 2020). This marked the beginning of large-scale recruitment efforts that targeted children, primarily from vulnerable and impoverished communities. Early reports highlighted the abduction of children as young as eight years old and the use of forced conscription, where children were either kidnapped or coerced into joining the group under duress.

During this time, many children were recruited from rural areas, which were often the most marginalized regions in Yemen, making it easier for the Houthis to exploit their situation (Abdulkader, 2023: 43-51).

By 2015 and 2016, the practice of child soldier recruitment became even more widespread, with reports from Human Rights Watch and UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) detailing the use of children in combat roles across Houthi-controlled territories (Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2024). The Houthis, alongside their allies, began forcibly conscripting children to participate directly in the fighting. The children were subjected to military training camps, where they were taught how to use weapons, participate in combat missions, and adopt the Houthi ideology (Al Dosari, 2020: 53-62). The year 2017 was particularly dire, with Human Rights Watch reporting that the Houthis had recruited thousands of children, some as young as 10 years old, and forced them into frontline roles. During this period, the children were not only used as fighters but also as spies, messengers, and human shields (Yuan, 2023: 217-224; Virginia Gamba, 15 April 2019). In some cases, children were even deployed in suicide missions or used in bombing attacks, showcasing the extreme nature of their exploitation (Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2024).

The years 2018 and 2019 saw an increase in the international spotlight on the issue of child soldiers in Yemen, with the UN monitoring and reporting the growing number of children being recruited by the Houthis. By 2019, the UNICEF report documented over 3,000 cases of children being forcibly recruited, a figure that only captured a fraction of the true scale. These children were often taken from their schools, homes, and local communities, where the Houthis promised protection and a sense of purpose in the conflict (UNICEF, 2022). Military training included indoctrination into the Houthi ideology, as well as intensive combat drills. By the end of 2019, it became clear that the recruitment of child soldiers was not only a widespread phenomenon but one that was becoming institutionalized within the Houthi movement (Aral, 2024: 134-143).

From 2020 to 2025, the issue of child soldier recruitment by the Houthis remained a persistent and urgent problem, despite efforts by international organizations to curtail this practice. According to Human Rights Watch by 2020, the number of child soldiers in Houthi ranks had surpassed 10,000, with children being recruited for a wide range of combat and support roles (Arab News, April 19, 2025). During this period, children were still being abducted and coerced, often with little to no resistance from the international community due to the complexity of the conflict (Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2024). The Houthi forces continued to use children in frontline combat, logistical support, and propaganda roles, and many were still subjected to intense indoctrination. Moreover, children were increasingly exposed to extreme violence, including bombings, gunfights, and explosive devices, which left a deep

physical and psychological impact. These children were frequently injured, some losing limbs or suffering from severe trauma, and the humanitarian crisis continued to deepen (Sheikh, 2022: 7-20; Nessa, 2024: 373-386).

By 2025, the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) reported a continuing trend of child recruitment by the Houthis, with the total number of child soldiers likely surpassing 3,000 (Virginia Gamba, 15 April 2019). Despite international condemnation and calls for accountability, the Houthi leadership showed little willingness to end the practice. Efforts to provide psychosocial support and rehabilitation programs for former child soldiers were grossly inadequate, and many children faced traumatization upon returning to their families due to the lack of resources and support systems. As the war in Yemen drags on, these children are caught in a cycle of violence, with many having no chance of escape from the horrors of war (Barltrop, 2025: 19-27; Senan, 2023).

These years, from 2014 to 2025, demonstrate the systematic and entrenched nature of child soldier recruitment by the Houthis, and highlight the grave human rights violations committed by the group. The ongoing conflict, combined with the failure of international interventions to curb the recruitment, has resulted in a generation of Yemeni children being subjected to the most horrific forms of exploitation and violence. This trend underscores the urgent need for international action, including legal accountability, humanitarian aid, and protection mechanisms to safeguard Yemen's children from further suffering and exploitation (Adewumi, 2024: 110-126; Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2024).

4- Impact on Children

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthis in Yemen have had catastrophic physical and psychological consequences for the children involved (Haight, 2024: 1-5). Physically, many children suffer from life-threatening injuries due to their exposure to intense combat situations. Children as young as eight years old have been deployed in active battle zones, where they face dangers such as landmines, gunfire, and bombings. As a result, many children have sustained severe injuries, including amputations, spinal cord damage, and burns, leaving them permanently disabled (Ali, 2020). The psychological toll is equally devastating.

Children exposed to such violence often develop PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. The trauma of losing friends and family members, combined with the emotional weight of participating in or witnessing brutal acts of violence, often leaves these children emotionally scarred for life.

The harsh conditions they endure, including forced indoctrination and abuse, contribute significantly to long-term psychological distress, making it difficult for these children to function normally in society even after their release (Yuan, 2023: 217-224).

The long-term effects of child soldier recruitment extend well beyond the individual child, profoundly impacting Yemeni society as a whole. These children, once exposed to violence and deprived of their education, face significant challenges in reintegrating into their communities. Their limited access to education during their formative years means that many have no skills to build a stable future, contributing to a lost generation that is ill-equipped to contribute to the country's rebuilding (Sheikh, 2022: 9-15). Additionally, the psychological and emotional trauma carried by these children perpetuates cycles of violence. The normalization of violence within the younger generation increases the risk of future conflict, as these children grow into adults who may struggle to break free from the patterns of violence they were forced to adopt. This generational trauma also impacts families and communities, leaving a lasting burden on Yemeni society. As these children return home, they often find themselves alienated from their families due to the difficulties they face in overcoming their trauma (Abdalatif, 2021:22-27).

Further complicating the situation, there are significant social and economic consequences for the families of child soldiers. Many children are taken from impoverished communities, where families are already struggling to survive. The loss of a child to the conflict not only devastates these families emotionally but also impacts their economic well-being. Many children, once recruited, are the primary earners in their households, and their disappearance further entrenches the poverty of their families. In addition to the economic hardship, families are often left without support or resources to cope with the return of a child soldier, particularly if that child comes back physically injured or psychologically damaged. The lack of adequate rehabilitation programs for former child soldiers exacerbates the difficulties families face in trying to reintegrate these children back into everyday life (Dönmez, 2023: 85-93).

Survivors of the conflict and eyewitness accounts provide haunting testimonies of the realities children face in the hands of the Houthis. One survivor recounted how he was recruited at the age of 12, after being lured by promises of food and safety, only to find himself placed on the front lines where he was forced to carry weapons and fight. Another survivor spoke of the psychological abuse suffered during the months of indoctrination, where they were taught to view themselves as soldiers of a religious cause, only to later realize the horrors of war and the

deep personal cost (Reliefweb, 15 Feb 2021). Eyewitnesses have also reported seeing children who, after being released from Houthi control, were unable to reintegrate into their communities due to the deep trauma and stigmatization they faced. These firsthand accounts highlight not only the dehumanizing nature of child soldier recruitment but also the profound social rifts it creates, where children are not only victims of violence but also abandoned by their society when they try to return home. The stories of survivors emphasize the urgent need for international intervention and long-term rehabilitation strategies to address the physical and psychological scars that these children bear (Hasona, 2021).

5- Legal Analysis: A War Crime

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthis in Yemen constitutes a clear violation of international law, specifically under the frameworks that define war crimes. According to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, the use of children in armed conflict is prohibited under Article 77 of Additional Protocol I and Article 4(3)(c) of Additional Protocol II (Rasakandan, 2022: 230- 241). The ICC further defines the conscription and use of child soldiers as a war crime, under Article 8(2)(b)(xxvi), which criminalizes the enlistment or use of children under the age of 15 in hostilities. These instruments reflect the international community's commitment to protecting children from the horrors of war, recognizing their vulnerability and the need to safeguard their rights during conflicts (Arai-Takahashi, 2019: 28-31; Alwheebe, 2024: 1262- 1269).

The Houthi recruitment of children blatantly violates these provisions, as well as international human rights law, including the CRC, which mandates that children be protected from participation in war and armed conflict. The Houthis have systematically abducted, coerced, or manipulated children, often as young as eight, to serve as combatants, spies, and messengers, exposing them to extreme violence and exploitation. These actions violate multiple aspects of the CRC, particularly the prohibition of using children in combat and the obligation to protect children from all forms of abuse. The Houthi group's actions are thus not only a breach of customary international law but also an affront to the basic principles of child protection enshrined in global treaties (Reliefweb, 15 Feb 2021; Knights, 2024: 9-16).

Despite the clear violations of international law, there has been limited accountability for the Houthis regarding their recruitment of child soldiers. While the UN and human rights organizations have documented and condemned the practice, prosecution and enforcement mechanisms remain weak (Farhat, 2022: 2014-2021).

The ICC has jurisdiction over crimes committed by parties to the Rome Statute, but the Houthis have not been formally prosecuted due to Yemen's non-ratification of the statute. This leaves the Houthis largely immune from international legal action, underscoring the importance of strengthening international efforts to hold perpetrators accountable. The lack of accountability impedes justice for the children affected and sends a dangerous message that such abuses may go unpunished. However, continued advocacy by international human rights bodies and pressure on states to support the ICC's mandate is essential in ensuring that the Houthis face justice for their actions (Serr, 2017: 357-369).

6- Conclusion

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Houthi movement in Yemen stands as a grave violation of IHL and a profound human rights tragedy. Thousands of children, some as young as eight, have been forcibly conscripted, coerced, or manipulated into joining the front lines.

Deprived of their right to safety, education, and a peaceful childhood, these children are exposed to extreme violence, trauma, and exploitation. Many return physically and psychologically scarred, grappling with PTSD and social isolation that hinder reintegration into civilian life. This brutal practice not only dehumanizes children but threatens the future of Yemen, as it deprives a generation of the opportunity to grow, learn, and lead. Although legal instruments such as the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the CRC, and the ICC explicitly prohibit child soldier recruitment, enforcement remains weak. Yemen's non-ratification of the Rome Statute has shielded perpetrators from prosecution, fostering a climate of impunity. Despite well-documented evidence of abuses, meaningful accountability remains elusive. To address this crisis, the international community must move beyond condemnation and act decisively. This includes pressuring the Houthis to end child recruitment, reinforcing international legal mechanisms, and supporting comprehensive rehabilitation for former child soldiers. Advocacy efforts by organizations like UNICEF and Human Rights Watch must be matched by concrete international action. Only through sustained pressure, legal accountability, and humanitarian support can we begin to reverse the damage and offer Yemen's children hope for a safer, more just future.

7- Suggestions

1. **Strengthen Monitoring and Documentation:** Increase efforts to monitor and document the recruitment of child soldiers in Yemen, utilizing technologies such as satellite imagery and on-the-ground reports from survivors and local organizations to ensure accurate tracking of violations.

2. Establish Child Protection Coalitions: Form coalitions of international organizations, governments, and NGOs dedicated to child protection in conflict zones, collaborating to create a comprehensive and unified strategy to address child soldier recruitment.

3. Pressure Regional Actors: Apply diplomatic and economic pressure on countries that support or enable the Houthi movement, using tools like sanctions and trade restrictions to limit the group's ability to recruit and exploit children.

4. Increase Legal Accountability: Advocate for greater legal accountability through the ICC, encouraging Yemen and other nations to adopt measures to prosecute those responsible for the recruitment and use of child soldiers under international law.

5. Expand Education and Vocational Training: Launch large-scale education and vocational training programs aimed at providing children in Yemen with alternatives to joining armed groups, focusing on long-term reintegration and community empowerment.

6. Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs: Focus on providing comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former child soldiers, including psychological support, education, and social reintegration into their communities to ensure they can lead productive lives outside of conflict.

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