

## INFORMATIONAL BRIEF

SCHOOL FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS HOUTHIS STRATEGY TO USE  
EDUCATION FOR

# “CHILD RECRUITMENT AND INDOCTRINATION”

September 2023



### About the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+)

The goal of the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+) program is to increase recognition and protection of human rights in Yemen by empowering Yemeni civil society to champion justice and accountability through human rights documentation, reporting, and advocacy efforts. The YHRFL+ program is working to systematically document, preserve, corroborate, analyze, and report on evidence, obtained from a variety of sources, of human rights violations committed by all parties involved in the Yemeni conflict. Results of this analysis are summarized and presented in a series of investigative reports focusing on specific identified incidents of human rights violations. YHRFL+ also support efforts by Yemeni CSO partners to carry out strategic advocacy, community outreach, and victim and survivor engagement interventions locally and internationally.

### About Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition

The Justice4Yemen Pact is a coalition of human rights organizations and civil society actors that are united for the promotion and protection of human rights in Yemen. The coalition's mission is to advocate for the rights of all Yemeni people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. The coalition is committed to addressing the systemic human rights violations that have been plaguing Yemen through years of conflict and violence. The Justice4Yemen Pact works to empower Yemeni people to claim their rights, raise awareness of violations, and advocate for justice and accountability at local, national, and international levels. The Justice4Yemen Pact is guided by the principles of respect for human dignity, equality, justice, and non-discrimination. The coalition believes that by working together, its members can end impunity, provide meaningful support, and redress for victims, and contribute to a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for Yemen.

## Introduction

On January 10, 2023, the administration of the Khawla Girls' School in Mahwit suspended classes and forced students to attend a partisan festival supervised by local Houthi officials. During the festival students heard speeches that glorified Houthi leaders and ideology, demonized opponents of the Houthi movement, urged them to donate to the war effort, and to encourage their male relatives to sign up for military service.

The festival was described by Houthi media as a “faith identity” event—faith identity festivals have occurred in primary and secondary schools in areas of Houthi control since at least 2020. These festivals feature speeches, religious readings, plays, and poetry that are suffused with ideological, sectarian, and mobilizing content.

Faith identity festivals deprive children of their right to education by replacing class time instruction with indoctrination. These events foster hostility among ethnic and religious groups and inculcate a wartime mindset in children. Faith-identity festivals thereby violate various international legal instruments to which Yemen is a state party, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination; and Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. As the de facto authorities in control of an estimated 70-80% of Yemen's population and exercising a sufficiently government-like function over that population, the Houthis are obligated to observe these international instruments and protect the human rights of people living under their control.

Notably, faith identity festivals are only one component of a wider Houthi strategy to manipulate education in order to mold children into soldiers and loyalists.<sup>1</sup> Other components of this strategy include comprehensive changes to educational curricula, and summer camps that feature indoctrination and mobilization drills.

The following report is based on interviews with three sources with direct knowledge of the January 10, 2023 festival conducted by the Yemeni Coalition to Monitor Human Rights Violations (YCMHRV), as well as additional documentation by YCMHRV, and open-source research.

## Incident Summary

On January 10, 2023, Houthi officials, including the Director of Education for Mahwit City Directorate, supervised a partisan festival at the Khawla Bint al-Azwar Girls' School. Over 400 primary and secondary students attend the Khawla Girls' School located east of Mahwit city. The school administration had not informed students that the festival was taking place that day and compelled all students who showed up to school to participate—as well as teachers—effectively cancelling class instruction. Armed women from the all-female Houthi security force, the *zaynabiyat*, attended the festival. In addition to law enforcement and prison guarding duties, the *zaynabiyat* indoctrinate women and girls in Houthi ideology; girls are reportedly recruited into this force from schools, detention facilities, and from poor and Houthi-affiliated families.<sup>2</sup>

The Khawla Girls' School festival began at 8:00am and lasted until 11:30am, after which students were dismissed for the remainder of the day. The festival marked the birthday of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed and a key religious figure in Houthi ideology. During the festival Houthi officials, a school administrator, and a student gave speeches which:

- Glorified Houthi figures past and present,

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<sup>1</sup> “Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014; Detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen – A/HRC/45/CRP.7,” Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, September 29, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/A-HRC-45-CRP.7.pdf>. See paragraphs 260, 273, 277, 285-293

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, See paragraphs 189, 273-280

- Emphasized students' religious duty to obey Houthi teachings,
- Described those who oppose the Houthi movement as enemies of religion and of God,
- Urged students to donate to the war effort,
- Urged students to encourage their male relatives to sign up for military service.

Students were made to recite the Houthi chant called the *sarkha*: "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews, Victory for Islam."

The Houthis' website Ansarollah.com posted a short news report on January 10, 2023 highlighting that day's festival at the Khawla Girls' School.<sup>3</sup> The report noted that "the speeches emphasized that celebrating the birthday of Fatima the Radiant means reviving her values and morals, which makes the Islamic nation firmer and more cohesive in facing the false idols of the earth." The report continued: "the festival was organized within the *deepening faith identity program* in the context of field visits to girls' schools being implemented by the Education Office in the city and the Women's Cultural Bureau in the province." [italics added for emphasis].



Picture of the January 10, 2023 festival at the Khawla Girls' School with students holding signs with the *sarkha* written on them. Source: Ansarollah.com<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "A Festival with Speeches for the Students of Khawla [School] in Mahwit on the Occasion of the Birthday of Fatima the Radiant," Ansarollah.com, January 10, 2023, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/578139>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Faith Identity Programming in Houthi Schools

Primary and secondary schools in Houthi-held areas have put on festivals aimed at strengthening “faith identity” since at least late 2020.<sup>5</sup> Houthi officials attend and supervise these festivals,<sup>6</sup> which feature speeches, religious readings, plays, and poetry that are suffused with ideological, sectarian, and mobilizing content.<sup>7</sup>

In Houthi propaganda, Yemen’s enemies are waging a regular war on the country in conjunction with a “soft war” on Yemenis’ morals and religion, in order to make them easy to manipulate and control.<sup>8</sup> Faith identity is construed as a shield against this soft war and critical to Houthi military victory.<sup>9</sup> During faith identity festivals, children are instructed that their adherence to Houthi ideology – their “faith identity” – enables them to resist the enemy’s attempts to pervert their authentic culture and capture their country.

“We are now in a time in which there’s a thought invasion, a soft war, that strives to strip this people of their identity. Therefore, we strive mightily to strengthen faith identity in our children from a young age,” a teacher told the al-Maseera channel at a faith identity festival at the Read! School for Science and Technology on November 1, 2022 (right).<sup>10</sup>



<sup>5</sup> “The Yemeni Republic, Ministry of Education...”, Ibn Majid School, Facebook, December 16, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/IbnMajidschool/posts/pfbid031JZobEZGb9t8AUs2ELJD7Sih6PEp27eh1NRzcgca242t55tQBtv5EUUpA5HzQmzv8l>

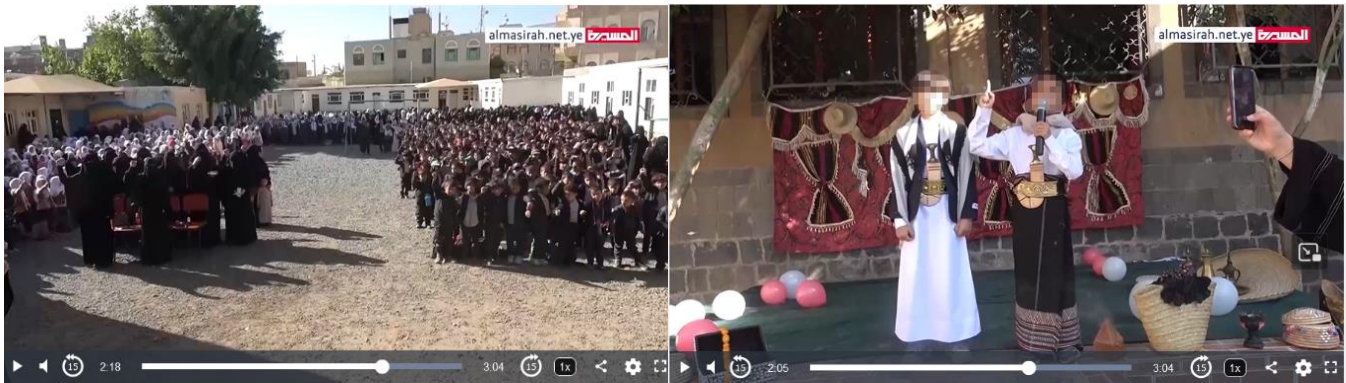
<sup>6</sup> “The Capital’s Schools Witness Educational Festivals to Strengthen Faith Identity,” Ansarollah.com, October 26, 2022, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/561109> ; “Schools in the Capital Organize Demonstrations to Strengthen Steadfastness and Faith Identity,” Ansarollah.com, December 25, 2022, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/574875> ; “Rabia’ al-Adwiya, Educational Interest and Attendance for the Festivals of the Strengthening Faith Identity Program,” The Education Office of the Capital Sana’a, YouTube, November 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNlfRtiwuzk>

<sup>7</sup> “From the Faith Identity Festival #Sana’a Advanced Schools,” Sana’a Advanced Schools, Facebook, November 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=494658742592931> ; “Faith Identity Operetta and Juma’a Rejjeb at the Durub al-Majid Modern Schools,” Ali Al-Ansi, YouTube, February 14, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c3UUclHjmg>

<sup>8</sup> “Text of the Speech of the Revolution’s Leader During the Inauguration of the Yemeni Faith Identity Program at the Great Mosque in Sana’a,” Saba.ye, December 19, 2019, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3082178.htm> ; “The Soft War and Destroying the Youth,” Ansarollah.com, February 6, 2023, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/583741> ; “The Soft War: A Tool of Thought Invasion to Destroy and Eliminate the Islamic Identity,” Ansarollah.com, June 17, 2023, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/609326>

<sup>9</sup> “Faith Identity...A Direct Connection to Yemen and an Honest Dedication to Defeating the Enemy,” Ansarollah.com, December 31, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/305200> ; “Faith Identity Between Yemenis’ Greatness and the Designs of the Enemy,” Ansarollah.com, December 24, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/303373>

<sup>10</sup> “Houriya Hassan – Strengthening Faith Identity in Public and Private Schools,” Al-Maseera, January 11, 2022, <http://www.masirahtv.net/post/222678/%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9-07-04-1444-%D9%87%D9-01>



Scenes above from the November 1, 2022 faith identity festival at the Read! School for Science and Technology: children chant the sarkha (left) and deliver a speech (right). Source: Al-Maseera.<sup>11</sup>

Footage from a faith identity festival in October 2022 at the Modern Ishraq Schools provides an example of the sectarian incitement typical of festival speeches, in this case delivered by a boy:



“The Jews think...they are targeting our souls and morals and honor before they target our land and country. They want to turn us into empty vessels with no soul, no life, no security, no seriousness.”

Source: YouTube<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Strengthening Faith Identity Event at the al-Binin Branch,” Modern Ishraq Schools, YouTube, October 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxwpoCtRsNE>

## Multifaceted Strategy to Manipulate Education for Child Recruitment

Houthi authorities' organizing of faith identity festivals since 2020 demonstrates that they continue to pursue a strategy of manipulating education to further child recruitment efforts, detailed by the UN's Group of Eminent Experts in its September 2020 report.<sup>13</sup> The GEE identified a "common modus operandi for Houthi incitement to violence, child recruitment activities and propaganda in schools," including weapons displays, radio and video speeches encouraging enlistment, courses on sectarian ideology, requiring students to chant the *sarkha*, and cancelling regular courses for ideological activities. Houthi authorities "specifically targeted schools because of their large audiences of children, who were deemed more accepting of Houthi ideology and were potential future recruits," the GEE noted.

The GEE also found that Houthi authorities targeted educators who opposed such activities with threats, firings, and financial sanctions. Authorities exploited teachers leaving the profession due to irregular salaries to appoint volunteers who readily advanced indoctrination and recruitment in schools. During the recent teachers' strike in Houthi-held areas over unpaid salaries, as reported by the Justice4Yemen Pact,<sup>14</sup> authorities arrested strike participants, threatened to reduce school hours, and ramp up the use of volunteer educators,<sup>15</sup> which could accelerate the ideological takeover of schools around the capital where the strike has gained traction.

Two additional features of the Houthi strategy to manipulate education for indoctrination and child recruitment include summer camps and comprehensive curriculum changes at primary and secondary levels. The following graphics, taken from reports by Yemeni fact-checking platform SidqYem, illustrate these summer camps and curriculum changes in action:



عروض في فعاليات اختتام الأنشطة الصيفية بمحافظة صنعاء. المصدر: هنا المسيرة.



صعدة أختتام أنشطة المراكز الصيفية بعرض كشفي. المصدر: هنا عدن التي يديرها الحوثيون

Activities at Houthi summer camps in Sana'a (left) and Sa'ada (right).

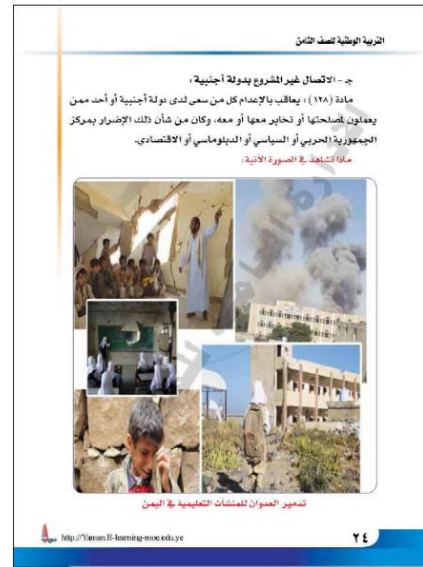
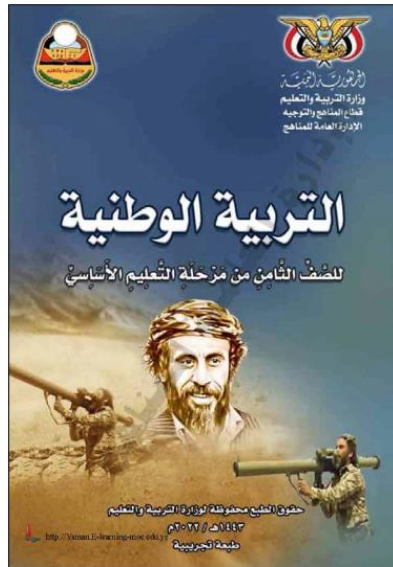
Source: SidqYem<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014; Detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen – A/HRC/45/CRP.7," Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, September 29, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/A-HRC-45-CRP.7.pdf>. See paragraphs 260, 273, 277, 285-293

<sup>14</sup> "Joint Statement on the International Day to Protect Education from Attack," Justice4Yemen Pact, September 9, 2023, [https://justice4yemenpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Justice4Yemen-Pact\\_International-Day-to-Protect-Education-from-Attack\\_En.pdf](https://justice4yemenpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Justice4Yemen-Pact_International-Day-to-Protect-Education-from-Attack_En.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Curricula and Activities at Summer Camps in Houthi-controlled Areas," Sidq, Google Drive, December 16, 2022, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bb7LpXMT41JAq7RYnjNPxf1UZEjEY3ol/view?fbclid=IwAR0jc-os-0\\_qtkqrQ8LqXH8ThnXsiF9STe3H9oYoFqzKz1Y1tudfuE293HI](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bb7LpXMT41JAq7RYnjNPxf1UZEjEY3ol/view?fbclid=IwAR0jc-os-0_qtkqrQ8LqXH8ThnXsiF9STe3H9oYoFqzKz1Y1tudfuE293HI)



Comprehensive changes to the 8th grade National Education curriculum: 1) the new cover features deceased Houthi military commander Hassan al-Malsi (left); 2) a lesson was added on “the importance of defending the homeland” with your money, life, and by reporting on infiltrators (center); a lesson was added on “betraying the homeland and its punishment,” specified as execution (right). Source: SidqYem<sup>17</sup>



The cover of the 3rd grade Arabic language curriculum for 2022 featuring a student donating to the wartime front. Source: SidqYem<sup>18</sup>

In 1st grade Quranic Studies class, the phrase “those who have evoked God’s anger” is interpreted to mean “the Jews, and all who follow and support them,” (left); in 2nd grade Quranic studies class, a picture of Houthi soldiers above the caption “From the Quran I learn jihad in the path of God” (right). Source: SidqYem<sup>19</sup>

For their part, Houthi media outlets and officials regularly characterize the education sector as a wartime front.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “Changes to Educational Curricula in Houthi-Controlled Areas; From Grades 7 to 9, Followed by New Changes to Grades 1 to 6” Sidq, February 25, 2022, <https://sidqyem.com/?s=37>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Changes to Educational Curricula in Houthi-controlled Areas,” Sidq, Google Drive, June 2021, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/17sT\\_NUj9dSeJKhI3JnHSS5vkL204Qj-4/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/17sT_NUj9dSeJKhI3JnHSS5vkL204Qj-4/view)

<sup>20</sup> “The Educational Front Infuriates All the Enemies and Zionists,” Ansarollah.com, May 10, 2023, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/602481> ; “The Educational Front in Yemen...7 Years of Legendary Steadfastness,” Ansarollah.com, August 14, 2021, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/453120>

## Apparent Breaches of International Law

As the de facto authorities in control of an estimated 70-80% of Yemen's population and exercising a sufficiently government-like function over that population, the Houthis are obligated to observe international instruments to which Yemen is a state party and protect the human rights of people living under their control.

### Undermining understanding, tolerance, and friendship

Yemen is a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), all of which stipulate that education should promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among nations, religions, and ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup>

The content of the January 10, 2023 Khawla Girls' School festival, as well as other faith identity festivals in primary and secondary schools, indoctrinates children with sectarian ideology. The official Houthi chant is a recurring feature of these festivals and embodies the spirit of the events: "God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews, Victory for Islam." These festivals clearly contravene the relevant articles on education in the ICESCR, CRC, and ICERD.

### Wasting classroom time

The partisan festival at the Khawla Girls' School replaced a day's worth of classroom instruction with ideological, partisan, and mobilizing content that had no apparent educational value. The festival, and other faith identity festivals held during school hours, deprive children of their right to an education as specified in the ICESCR and CRC.<sup>22</sup> In addition, while Yemen did not vote on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is subject to customary international law which includes the right to education as a fundamental human right.

### Preparing children for war

Children who attended the Khawla Girls' School festival were exhorted to donate to the war effort and encourage their male relatives to enlist. These mobilizing messages are common in faith identity festivals, which are, in turn, only one part of a multifaceted Houthi strategy to manipulate education for the purpose of child recruitment. This Houthi strategy has borne fruit, with the UN reporting in January 2022 that 2,000 children recruited by the Houthis died in fighting over the previous year and a half and that children as young as seven were being taught to clean weapons and evade rockets.<sup>23</sup>

The recruitment and usage of child soldiers is one of the six grave violations against children in armed conflict and contravenes international human rights and humanitarian law. In particular, Yemen has ratified the 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Protocol stipulates that States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure those under 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities, and that armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a country should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities anyone under 18.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, prohibitions on child recruitment can be found in Rule 136 of Customary International Law, Article 4 of Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, and Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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<sup>21</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Article 13 ; Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 7; Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29.d

<sup>22</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Article 13; Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29

<sup>23</sup> "Hundreds of Houthi rebel child soldiers dead in Yemen war – UN," BBC, January 30, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-60190484>

<sup>24</sup> Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, Articles 1 and 4

## Recommendations

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To the  
**Houthi authorities:**

- Cease the organization of faith-identity festivals which replace valuable classroom time with ideological, sectarian, and mobilizing content, thereby violating various international legal instruments to which Yemen is a state party.
  - Uphold the commitment made through the Action Plan signed with the United Nations in April 2022 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of all children in armed conflict, including in support roles.
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To the  
**UN Agencies and INGOs working on education in Yemen:**

- Expand at-home alternative learning opportunities for children in areas controlled by the Houthi authorities. This could help offset the use of classroom time for indoctrination that aims to mold children into future soldiers and loyal partisans.
  - Monitor the use of ideological, sectarian, and mobilizing content in educational materials, and take appropriate steps to help bring these materials in line with international standards.
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To the  
**Yemeni NGOs working on human rights documentation and advocacy:**

- Expose the most egregious examples of Houthi authorities injecting sectarian, ideological, and mobilizing content into the educational sector, to bring the international community's attention to this dynamic.
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## Contact

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