Witness and Impact

SAM Rights & Liberties

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From Home to the Frontline

Child Recruitment Pathways and Their Use by the Houthi Militia in Light of the Recent Military Escalation in Taiz and the West Coast

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SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties

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About us

SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties

SAM is an independent, non-profit Yemeni human rights organization that began its activities in January 2016 and obtained a license to operate in December 2017. The organization aims to document human rights violations in Yemen, work to stop violations through advocacy in partnership with local and international organizations, raise human rights awareness through societal rights development, and hold human rights violators accountable in Yemen in collaboration with international mechanisms and human rights organizations.

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"The impact of armed conflicts is not limited to the physical destruction of infrastructure; it extends further to affect the most vulnerable groups, foremost among them children who are thrust into the furnace of battles through complex recruitment networks and systematic mobilization centers. This publication presents a human rights and field-based reading of the pathways of child recruitment and use in the Yemeni war in light of the recent military escalation in Taiz and the West Coast, tracing their tragedies between burning frontlines and the cruelty of loss and unknown fates."

Introduction: The War Re-Exposes Child Recruitment

The military escalation witnessed in Taiz Governorate and the West Coast during September and October 2026 has brought the issue of child recruitment back to the forefront of human rights concerns, following reports of minors present at military confrontation sites and among those captured by Houthi group. While attention turned to field developments and human casualties, the appearance of children in the context of combat and detention raised fundamental questions: How did these children move from schools and families to military camps and frontlines? Who recruited, trained, and sent them to fight? And what happens to them when they are injured or fall into captivity?

The issue goes beyond the mere presence of children bearing arms; testimonies reveal pathways that may begin with religious and political mobilization within the educational and social environment, passing through financial incentives and family pressure, and culminating in military training and deployment to the frontlines. Nor do these pathways end upon leaving combat; some children face detention and ill-treatment, or return to their families burdened with fear, trauma, and reintegration difficulties.

In this issue of the "Witness and Impact" series, SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties reviews three testimonies from children who stated they were recruited at an early age, and a fourth testimony from an individual whose age at the time of recruitment was not sufficiently established, alongside the testimony of a specialist who worked in child rehabilitation and reintegration programs during the period 2017–2025. The testimonies trace the stages of recruitment, training, and transfer to the frontlines, as well as the dangers and potential violations their subjects faced during combat and after falling into captivity, drawing upon previous UN and human rights reports to examine recurring patterns.

Two cases linked to Salw District in Taiz Governorate stand out, involving two children who stated they were recruited at the age of thirteen and subsequently transferred to military positions before falling into the hands of the opposing side. Their testimonies included allegations of beatings, threats, humiliation, and ill-treatment. Two other testimonies present recruitment pathways that began through cultural courses or local contacts, and then progressed to training in camps in Dhamar Governorate and other frontlines.

SAM places these cases within the context of the recent escalation without assuming that all recruitment operations occurred during it, or that the cases linked to Salw, Marib, or elsewhere took place on the West Coast. Establishing a direct link to the recent operations requires verifying the date of recruitment, frontline presence, and detention, which was not complete across all testimonies.

A Phenomenon Extending Across the Years of Conflict

UN and human rights data reveal the widespread continuation of child recruitment and use in the Yemeni conflict since 2014. The United Nations documented the recruitment and use of 3,034 children between April 2013 and December 2018, of which 1,940 cases were attributed to the Houthi group. In December 2022, UNICEF announced that the United Nations had verified the recruitment and use of 3,995 children by parties to the conflict between March 2015 and September 2022. Furthermore, the report "Militarization of Childhood," issued by SAM Organization and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor in February 2021, documented the recruitment of 10,333 children by the Houthis since 2014, within the scope and methodology of the report. These totals differ in their timeframes and documentation criteria and cannot be summed together, but they provide cumulative indicators of the scale of the phenomenon and its geographic and temporal reach.

Issuing Entity / Report	Documentation Timeframe	Announcement Date	Number of Children	Details and Methodological Scope
United Nations	April 2013 – December 2018	UN Data	3,034 children	1,940 cases attributed to the Houthi group (63.9%), and 1,094 cases to other parties (36.1%).
UNICEF (UN Verification)	March 2015 – September 2022	December 2022	3,995 children	Cases of child recruitment and use verified across parties to the conflict.
"Militarization of Childhood" Report (SAM & Euro-Med Monitor)	Since 2014 – February 2021	February 2021	10,333 children	Cases of child recruitment by the Houthis within the scope and methodology of the report.

Explanatory Table (1): Documented Totals of Child Recruitment and Use in Yemen Across the Years of Conflict According to UN and Human Rights Reports Cited in the Report

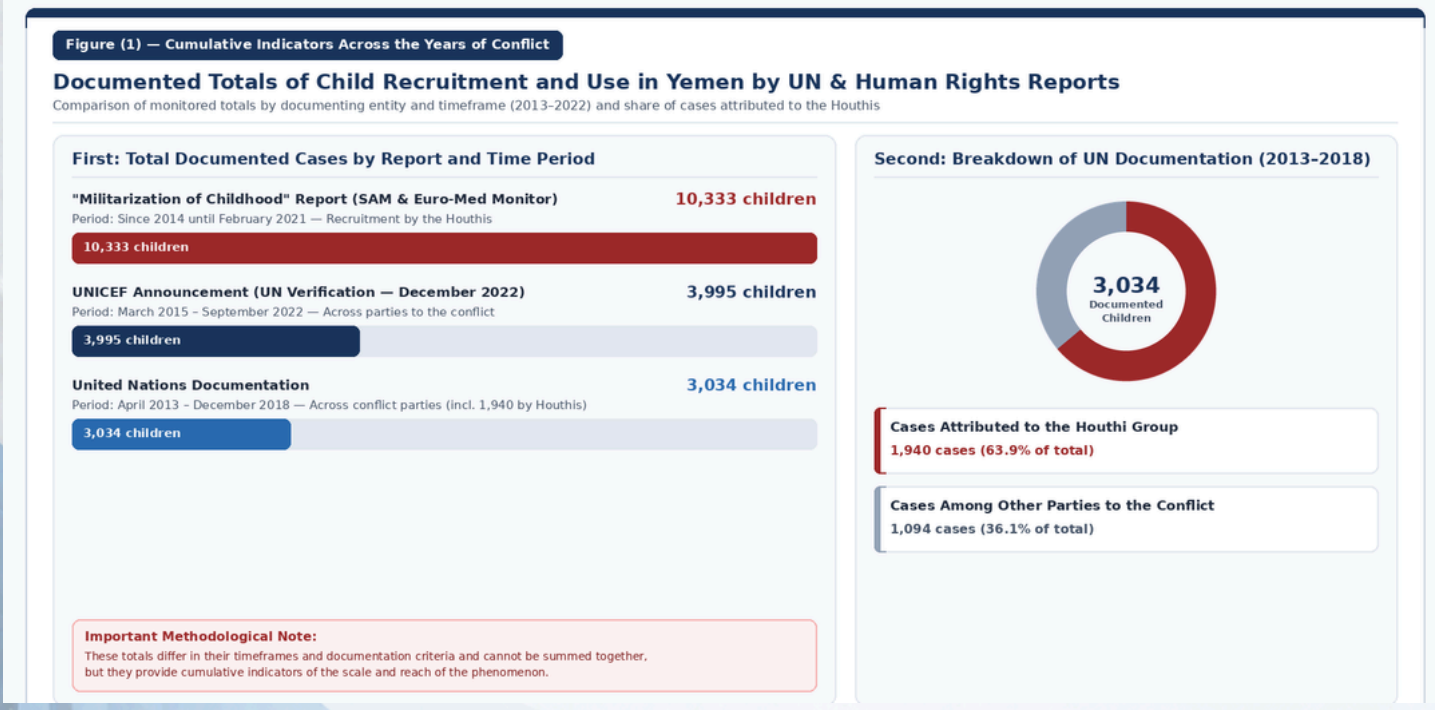


Figure (1): Comparison of Documented Totals of Child Recruitment and Use in Yemen Across the Years of Conflict (Totals differ in their timeframes and documentation criteria and cannot be summed together)

Preliminary data obtained by SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties during the third quarter of 2026 reveal alarming indicators regarding the scale of child recruitment in Yemen and their deployment in combat operations. The organization monitored 222 cases of children whose records indicate they were recruited and killed in the context of the armed conflict, attributed to the Houthi group and distributed across 16 Yemeni governorates. The largest proportion of cases was concentrated in six governorates: Dhamar (37 cases), Sana'a (34), Hajjah (33), Sa'ada (25), Ibb (24), and Amran (21), totaling 174 cases, which represents approximately 78.4% of the monitored cases.

Regarding age, age data was available for 147 children, including 69 children aged between 12 and 14 years, and 78 children aged between 15 and 17 years, while the ages of 75 other children could not be determined. The gravity of these findings lies in the young age of the victims and their wide geographic distribution, raising serious concerns regarding the recruitment of children and the endangerment of their lives. The organization emphasizes that these figures are partial and preliminary and do not represent the total number of recruited children, as they are limited to cases whose data reached the organization and were linked to fatalities, and do not necessarily include children who were recruited and remain alive. The organization continues to verify the details of the cases, the ages of the victims, and the circumstances of their recruitment and death, in preparation for completing their documentation and determining legal responsibilities.

Governorate / Category	Number of Cases	Percentage (of 222)	Age Distribution (of 222 Total Cases)	Monitoring and Documentation Notes
1. Dhamar Governorate	37 cases	16.7%	Category (12–14 years): 69 children (31.1%)	Highest concentration of monitored cases among governorates.
2. Sana'a Governorate	34 cases	15.3%	Category (15–17 years): 78 children (35.1%)	Ranked second among the top six governorates.
3. Hajjah Governorate	33 cases	14.9%	Total with identified age: 147 children (66.2%)	Ranked third among the top six governorates.
4. Sa'ada Governorate	25 cases	11.3%	Age could not be determined: 75 children (33.8%)	Ranked fourth among the top six governorates.
5. Ibb Governorate	24 cases	10.8%	—	Ranked fifth among the top six governorates.
6. Amran Governorate	21 cases	9.5%	—	Ranked sixth among the top six governorates.
Total of Top Six Governorates	174 cases	78.4%	—	Concentrates the largest share of monitored cases.
Remaining Governorates (10 others)	48 cases	21.6%	—	Distributed across 10 other Yemeni governorates.
Total Monitored (Third Quarter 2026)	222 cases	100%	222 children (147 age-identified + 75 undetermined)	Partial and preliminary figures linked to fatalities and attributed to the Houthi group.

Explanatory Table (2): Geographic and Age Distribution of Monitored Child Recruitment and Fatality Cases During the Third Quarter of 2026 (Total of 222 Cases Across 16 Governorates)

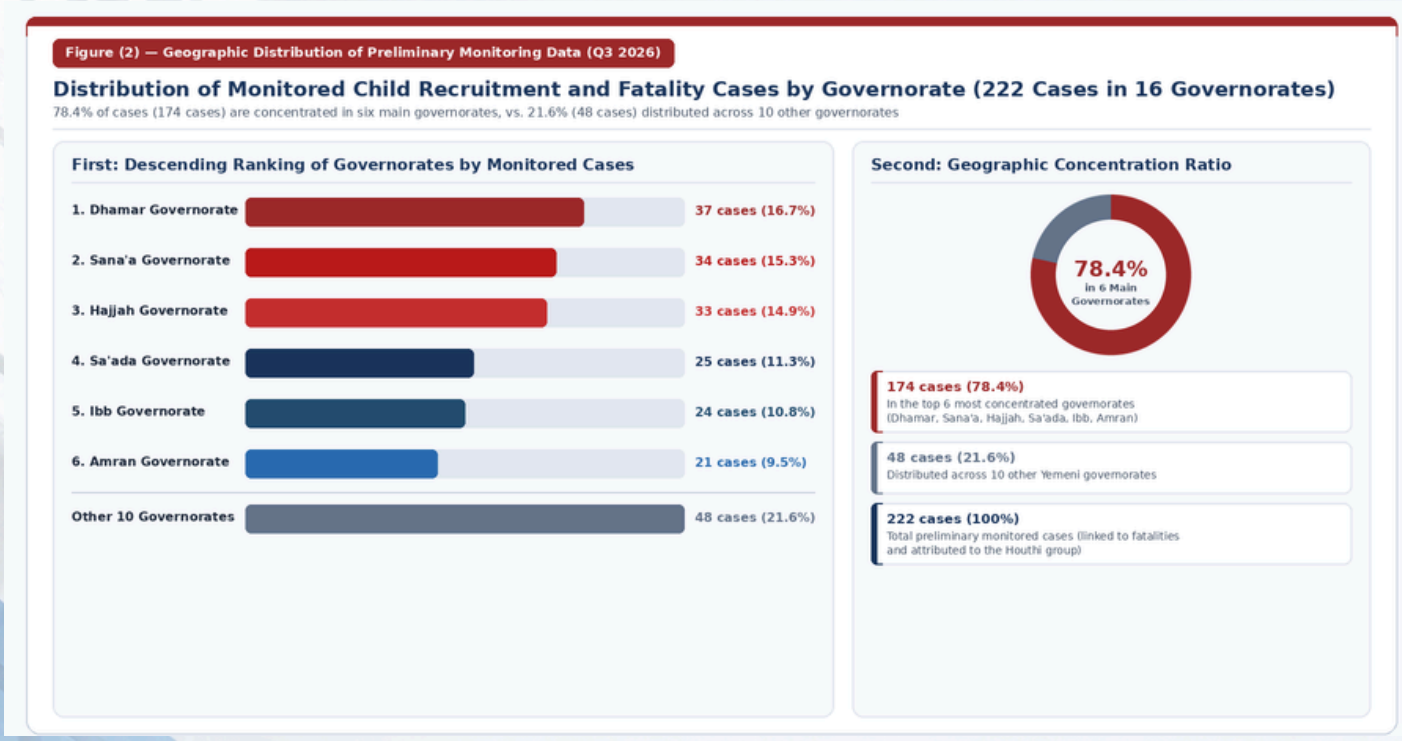


Figure (2): Geographic Distribution of Monitored Child Recruitment and Fatality Cases During the Third Quarter of 2026 (222 Cases Distributed Across 16 Governorates)



Figure (3): Age Distribution of Monitored Recruited Child Fatalities During the Third Quarter of 2026 (222 Children)

Case Study

These indicators acquire renewed significance in light of the findings of recent field monitoring conducted by SAM Organization in Al-Murbak village, Jabal Al-Lawz sub-district, Al-Tiyal District, Sana'a Governorate, where the organization's monitors documented five cases of children aged between 13 and 15 years. According to the information received, they were gathered or taken from schools and local centers affiliated with the Houthi group during the period from early September until October 16, 2026. The cases included three children taken from Qa'a Al-Sablah and Khalid bin Al-Walid schools, among them a 14-year-old child reported to have been transferred to the Marib front, and two 13-year-old children whose destinations remained unclear, one of whom was reported as having an unknown fate. Monitors also documented the taking of two other 15-year-old children from a local center of the group inside the village. The information included the name of a local individual reported to have supervised the recruitment, whose details the organization retains to complete verification of his role and responsibility.

The significance of these cases lies in their concentration within a single village over approximately six weeks, the link of three of them to two educational institutions, as well as the young ages of the children and the unclear fate of some of them. These findings provide an important field indicator of the continuing risks of child recruitment coinciding with the recent military escalation, raising questions about the scale of the practice in other hard-to-reach villages and districts, and the role of schools and local supervisors in transferring children to camps and frontlines. Although the five cases do not constitute a statistical sample that allows estimating the scale of the phenomenon at the national level, and proving military recruitment in each case requires verifying the nature of the enrollment and assigned tasks, they highlight the importance of moving from general totals to investigating local incidents and tracking the fate of children and the entities responsible for their recruitment and use.

Case Number	Age	Place of Taking / Recruitment	Monitored Destination / Fate	Timeframe and Supervision
Case One	14 years	Qa'a Al-Sablah and Khalid bin Al-Walid Schools	Reportedly transferred to the Marib front	Early September – October 16, 2026 (supervised by a local individual whose details SAM retains)
Case Two	13 years	Qa'a Al-Sablah and Khalid bin Al-Walid Schools	Destination unclear (reported as fate unknown)	Early September – October 16, 2026
Case Three	13 years	Qa'a Al-Sablah and Khalid bin Al-Walid Schools	Destination unclear	Early September – October 16, 2026
Case Four	15 years	Local center affiliated with the Houthi group inside the village	Taken from the local center inside the village	Early September – October 16, 2026
Case Five	15 years	Local center affiliated with the Houthi group inside the village	Taken from the local center inside the village	Early September – October 16, 2026

Explanatory Table (3): Breakdown of the Five Documented Cases in Al-Murbak Village (Jabal Al-Lawz Sub-district – Al-Tiyal District – Sana'a Governorate, Early September – October 16, 2026)

Children from the Frontline to Captivity

Yasser: "I Miss Going Home and Returning to My Family"

Yasser was thirteen years old, studying in the sixth grade of basic education, and living in a family of nine brothers whose father worked as a driver of an old car that had broken down. None of his brothers were associated with recruitment, according to his testimony, before a local supervisor known by the kunya "Abu Badr" contacted him, presenting fighting as a religious duty and speaking of financial sums and assistance for families.

Yasser stated that he went voluntarily and was not subjected to a direct threat, but he pointed to the influence of mobilization rhetoric and financial incentives, mentioning that he received approximately thirty thousand rials per month. He moved to a military site in Dhamar Governorate, believed to be within Anss District, where he saw other children whose ages he estimated to be between 12 and 16 years. According to his testimony, he did not complete an organized training course before being transferred to the Salw front in Taiz Governorate.

There, he carried a weapon and performed tasks related to checkpoints and observation. After leaving the frontline and reaching the Al-Aqroudh area, he fell into the hands of the opposing side and stated that he was subjected to beatings, threats, humiliation, and filming. When asked what he wanted, he did not speak of the war, but said: "I miss going home and returning to my family."

His account reveals a pathway in which economic need, religious mobilization, and local recruitment intersected, ending with the presence of a thirteen-year-old child on a military frontline before being subjected, according to his testimony, to violations after leaving combat. These incidents raise two separate responsibilities: the responsibility for recruiting and using him, and the responsibility for his treatment after falling into the hands of the other party.

Suhaib: His Father Took Him to the Camp at Age Thirteen

Suhaib was no older than thirteen when his father accompanied him to recruitment, according to his testimony. His education had stopped at approximately the second grade of primary school. He stated that his father, who is affiliated with the Houthi group, pressured him to join and took him to a camp within the Salw District area.

Suhaib spent approximately 55 days in the camp, where he estimated around one hundred children were present, and received training in the use of rifles, marksmanship, and physical exercises, alongside religious and political lectures addressing the war, jihad, and the "American and Saudi enemy." He mentioned two individuals by the kunyas "Abu Jibril" and "Al-Karrar," stating that they supervised the camp and training, though their identities and individual responsibilities have not yet been fully verified.

After returning temporarily to his area, he was transferred again with a group he estimated at around twenty people, including young individuals. He stated that they were informed they would work in rear positions, but were later transferred to frontline positions on the Salw front, where he carried a weapon and became exposed to the risks of direct combat.

Suhaib attempted to leave the position before falling into the hands of the opposing side. He recounted that he was subjected to severe beatings and felt his life was threatened, and he also described a lack of food and medical care during detention. When asked whom he wanted to return to, he chose his mother and expressed reservation about returning to his father due to his previous role in recruiting him. As for returning to combat, his answer was: "No."

This case illustrates how the family role can shift from protection to facilitating recruitment, leaving the child caught between family authority and military mobilization, and subsequently facing the dangers of combat and detention without any guarantee of a safe return to his previous life.

Cultural Courses as a Gateway to War

Mohammed: From Lessons to the Frontline

The recruitment of Mohammed, who stated that his age did not exceed sixteen, began through religious and cultural lessons and courses presented to him in his civilian environment. He stated that a person known by the kunya "Abu Qasim" communicated with him, and that the discourse he received spoke of "defending the homeland" and confronting "aggression," alongside a financial incentive estimated at around twenty thousand rials, without it being clear whether this was a regular salary or assistance.

Mohammed later moved to a camp where he received training in weapon use, movement, and deployment, alongside mobilization lectures. He was then transferred with a group to a frontline believed to be in the Sirwah area of Marib Governorate, where he was assigned to a military position to perform guard or combat duties.

His presence on the frontline ended following an attack on the position, with information indicating a possible injury to his leg or foot and his exit from the frontline or capture. The nature and date of the injury, the exact frontline location, and the detaining entity still require further verification.

This testimony reveals the child's transition through successive stages: cultural recruitment, religious and political discourse, a financial incentive, followed by military training and transfer to the frontline. It raises questions regarding what the child and his family were actually told about the nature of the activity and the final destination.

Nasser: Twenty-Five Days of Training Before Captivity

Nasser's testimony presents another pathway that began with local contacts which he stated persuaded him to join the Houthi group, without direct threats or financial compensation to his family according to his account. He was studying prior to joining; however, his age at the time of recruitment has not been conclusively established, and therefore his case cannot be counted among the confirmed cases of child recruitment before age documentation is completed.

Nasser was transferred to a camp in Dhamar Governorate whose exact name he did not know, where he spent approximately 25 days receiving training in using, disassembling, and reassembling weapons, alongside religious and cultural lectures and chanting the group's slogans. He mentioned the presence of others whom he described as children, without specifying their exact ages or numbers.

After training, he was transferred with a group to another frontline, and his testimony included a reference to Al-Bayda Governorate along the transit route. He stated that the mobilization portrayed fighting as defending the homeland and confronting those whom the organizers described as "ISIS and mercenaries," before he was assigned to a military position for guard or combat duty.

His presence on the frontline ended when the position came under attack. He summarized what happened by saying: "They attacked us and took us prisoners." The circumstances, duration, and entity responsible for his detention have not been sufficiently clarified.

What Do the Cases Reveal?

Despite differing circumstances of recruitment, the testimonies intersect in the transition from the civilian environment to military training, and then to combat positions. They highlight the role of family, local supervisors, cultural courses, and financial incentives in some cases, with varying levels of prior knowledge about the military mission and ability to withdraw.

They also reveal that falling into captivity is not an automatic end to dangers for children; new violations may arise from the entities detaining them. Evaluating each case requires distinguishing between the recruitment of the child, the task he performed, the circumstances of his exit from the frontline, and what he was subjected to afterward, without assuming that all cases underwent the same procedures or fell under a single command.

Testimony	Age and Education at Recruitment	Recruitment Channel and Financial Incentive	Camp, Duration, and Type of Training	Frontline and Assigned Tasks	Circumstances of Exit, Detention, and Alleged Violations
1. Yasser	13 years — 6th Grade of Basic Education (family of 9 brothers; father is a driver of a broken-down car)	Local supervisor ("Abu Badr"), religious mobilization rhetoric + ~30,000 rials/month and family assistance	Military site in Dhamar Governorate (likely Anss District); saw children (12–16 years); did not complete an organized course	Salw front (Taiz) — Carried a weapon and performed tasks linked to checkpoints and observation	Reached Al-Aqroudh area and fell into the hands of the opposing side; allegations of beatings, threats, humiliation, and filming
2. Suhaib	13 years — Education stopped at approximately 2nd Grade of Primary School	Pressured and accompanied by his Houthi-affiliated father (no financial sum mentioned)	~55 days in a camp within Salw District (~100 children; supervised by "Abu Jibril" and "Al-Karrar"): rifles, marksmanship, physical training, lectures	Informed they would work in rear positions, then transferred with ~20 people to frontline positions in Salw and carried a weapon	Attempted to leave and fell into the hands of the opposing side; allegations of severe beatings, life threats, and lack of food and medical care
3. Mohammed	Did not exceed 16 years — Civilian environment	Religious and cultural lessons and courses via "Abu Qasim" + financial incentive estimated at ~20,000 rials	Training camp: weapon use, movement and deployment, and mobilization lectures	Transferred with a group to a frontline likely in Sirwah (Marib) to perform guard or combat duties	Frontline presence ended following an attack on the site, with reports of a possible leg or foot injury and exit or capture
4. Nasser	Age at recruitment not conclusively verified (was studying prior to joining)	Local contacts and direct persuasion without direct threats or financial payment to his family	~25 days in a camp in Dhamar Governorate: weapon use, disassembly, and reassembly, lectures, and chanting slogans (with children present)	Reference to Al-Bayda Governorate along the transit route; assigned to a military position for guard or combat duty	Site came under attack and he was taken prisoner ("They attacked us and took us prisoners")

Explanatory Table (4): Comparison Matrix of Recruitment, Training, Combat, and Detention Pathways Across the Four Reviewed Testimonies

Schools: From Learning to Preparation for Combat

The testimonies reviewed by SAM indicate that child recruitment does not necessarily begin inside military camps, but may originate in schools, cultural centers, and community activities, where repeated opportunities exist to reach pupils and influence their thoughts and behavior. Some testimonies show the transition of children from lessons and activities presented as educational or religious to military training, while others reveal the role of family and local supervisors in this transition.

A specialist who worked in child rehabilitation and reintegration programs during the period 2017–2025 stated that information he received from children points to a central role played by some school principals and Houthi-affiliated supervisors in recruitment. He described three stages linked to educational levels: the first begins from the third to the sixth grade, focusing on indoctrinating children with ideas and mobilization rhetoric; the second covers the sixth to the ninth grades, during which children are encouraged to convey what they have received to their families and friends and participate in activities; the third extends from the ninth grade to the end of secondary school, where, according to his testimony, some older students are directed toward military training and combat.

The specialist added that some recruitment operations include promises to secondary school students of obtaining high grades or passing without full compliance with examinations in exchange for joining the frontlines. He also spoke of communication between some school principals—whom he said the group appointed in place of former principals—and local supervisors and neighborhood heads ('Aqils) to arrange the transfer of students to military camps.

This testimony intersects with the account of Mohammed, whose recruitment began through religious and cultural courses before his transfer to training and then the frontline. It is also consistent with information reported by Human Rights Watch in February 2024 regarding the recruitment of children from schools and cultural activities in the context of mobilization linked to the war in Gaza, and the transfer of some of them to military camps and sites.

These testimonies help explain how the educational environment can be transformed from a framework for protecting the child and developing his capabilities into a channel for his recruitment, when mobilization activities are coupled with actual mechanisms for transferring him to military formations. However, participation in a cultural or summer activity does not, in itself, constitute proof of recruitment, nor is the classification described by the specialist sufficient on its own to establish a uniform organizational policy across all schools.

Verifying these practices requires collecting independent testimonies from students, families, and teachers, and reviewing school records, activities, principal appointment decisions, and any instructions related to transferring pupils, while identifying the individuals who handled recruitment, communication, and transport.

These pathways acquire particular importance in the context of the recent war, with the disruption of education, displacement of families, and decline in income sources. Such conditions may increase the vulnerability of some children to recruitment, but they do not prove new recruitment without case-specific evidence, nor do they absolve armed actors of their responsibility under the prohibition against recruiting and using children.

Military Camps: Specialized Training and Mobilization for War

Weapons Training and Military Tasks

Following the recruitment stage, some children move to camps where they receive military and mobilization training of varying duration and type. Suhaib described training that lasted approximately 55 days at a camp in Salw, which included the use of rifles, marksmanship, and physical exercises, while Nasser spoke of a 25-day course in Dhamar, during which he received training in weapon use, disassembly, and reassembly, alongside mobilization lectures. Yasser, meanwhile, stated that he did not complete an organized military course before being transferred to the frontline.

The rehabilitation specialist provides a broader description of the nature of these camps based on the accounts of children with whom he worked; he stated that some were assigned to specialized training that included the use of offensive weapons, planting landmines, and digging trenches, as well as logistical tasks, reconnaissance, and intelligence gathering. His testimony indicates that some children are prepared for military roles that go beyond direct combat, with varying tasks and associated risks.

The 2021 report "Militarization of Childhood" listed sites it stated were used to receive or train children, including Camp 48 in the Al-Sawad area of Sana'a, Hamza Camp in Ibb, and other sites in Sa'ada, Dhamar, and Sana'a. This information pertains to the period of the previous report and does not establish the continued use of those sites for the same purposes during the recent escalation.

The testimonies raise questions regarding who determines the type of training, how children are assigned to tasks, and who issues decisions to transfer them to the frontlines. These are essential elements for examining individual responsibility for prohibited recruitment and use, particularly when involving children under the age of fifteen.

Mobilization: When Children Go to Fight an Enemy They Did Not Find

The camps are not limited to military training; according to the testimonies, they also include religious and political discourse that portrays participation in the war as a duty and presents various parties as enemies that must be confronted.

The rehabilitation specialist recounts that he asked a group of children who arrived at the reintegration program about their reasons for going to the frontline; they replied that they went to fight America and Israel, but did not find them at the positions where they fought. He added that some children repeated similar phrases before some of them acknowledged, during rehabilitation sessions, that they had received instructions on what to say.

This testimony intersects with what Suhaib mentioned regarding lectures that addressed the "American and Saudi enemy," with Nasser's testimony stating that mobilization organizers told them they would confront "ISIS and mercenaries," and with Mohammed's account of courses that presented fighting as defending the homeland.

These testimonies point to the importance of investigating the content of the discourse directed at children, the extent of their knowledge of the true nature of the tasks and the parties they would face, and the role of indoctrination in shaping their perceptions. Some testimonies also reveal a discrepancy between the task communicated to the child upon recruitment and the task he subsequently performs; Suhaib stated that he was informed he would work in rear positions before being transferred to frontline positions.

The military use of children is not limited to bearing arms, but may include guard duty, reconnaissance, and transporting ammunition and supplies—tasks that may expose them to direct danger and require independent examination of the nature of their connection to hostilities.

Khat, Shammah, and Pills: Effects Beyond the Frontline

Allegations of Using Mind-Altering Substances

The testimony of the rehabilitation specialist included alarming information regarding the exposure of some recruited children to substances they said affected their awareness and behavior while in camps and on the frontlines. He explained that mobilization within some groups begins with khat sessions, followed by the use of shammah (smokeless chewing tobacco), before progressing, according to the accounts of some children, to the consumption of unknown substances or pills.

The specialist relayed from children that they used to find pills at the bottom of drinking water containers, while others spoke of types of shammah known among them by local names such as "Al-Awkar" and "Al-Hout." He also mentioned that some children described pills they said were given to them before attacks, which they referred to as "courage pills."

In one of the most prominent accounts he relayed, a child described his condition during an attack, saying: "I am drugged and disoriented; I see them like ants, and I could step on them with my feet," adding that when he regains awareness, he breaks down and cries. The account describes a disturbance in perception and emotion, but cannot, on its own, establish its medical cause or prove the consumption of a specific substance.

The specialist noted observing cases of tension, anxiety, and difficulty adapting among some children returning to their families, while speaking of the desire of some to return to the camp where, as they described it, they feel a sense of calm. He also pointed to the possible use of stimulants or narcotic substances, and heroin was mentioned as part of his interpretation of what the children recounted.
SAM treats this information as serious allegations requiring an independent medical and documentary investigation; the available materials do not include laboratory test results, medical records, or samples proving the type of pills or shammah or their link to the described behavioral changes. Nor is it permissible to conflate the use of khat and shammah with the administration of unknown drugs or substances without the children's knowledge, or to assert the existence of a systematic drugging practice before completing the evidence.

An investigation requires identifying the descriptions of the substances, the circumstances of their consumption, and the individuals who provided them, and enlisting specialists in pediatrics, toxicology, and mental health, while ensuring the confidentiality of testimonies and protecting children from stigma or danger.

Beyond the Frontline: Captivity and Psychological Impacts

The effects of recruitment do not end with the conclusion of the military mission. Children who exited the frontlines described fear, anxiety, nightmares, and difficulty returning to family life, alongside the fear of re-recruitment. The rehabilitation specialist explained that some children arrived at reintegration programs repeating phrases they had learned during mobilization, requiring time and specialized support to be able to express their experiences more independently.

This suffering is evident in the account of Yasser, who asked to return to his family, and in the case of Suhaib, who chose his mother and expressed his refusal to return to his father due to his role in recruiting him. These testimonies do not constitute a psychological diagnosis, but they reveal needs related to safety, recovery, and the restoration of family ties.

The rehabilitation specialist also spoke of procedures to assist children who exited combat or fell into captivity, including communicating with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to help reach families, and enrolling some children in rehabilitation programs that lasted approximately three months. This information pertains to the cases he handled during his tenure and does not mean that the same procedures were followed with all detainees.

The testimonies of Yasser and Suhaib regarding beatings, threats, humiliation, and poor detention conditions raise allegations that require an independent investigation; the responsibility of the entity that recruited the child does not negate the responsibility of the detaining entity for his safety and humane treatment. Furthermore, returning a child to his family does not achieve full protection if he remains vulnerable to re-recruitment or is deprived of education, treatment, and psychosocial support.

Responsibility for Recruitment and Detention, and Avenues for Accountability

Legal Characterization

Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict prohibits armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a state from recruiting or using in hostilities persons under the age of eighteen, under any circumstances. Neither the consent of the child nor that of his family lifts this prohibition.

Furthermore, conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen—whether compulsorily or voluntarily—into armed forces or groups, or using them to participate actively in hostilities, constitutes a war crime in non-international armed conflicts under Article 8(2)(e)(vii) of the Rome Statute, whenever the elements of the crime are met. Recruiting children aged between fifteen and seventeen by armed groups remains prohibited under applicable rules, even though the war crime characterization in the Rome Statute requires that the child be under the age of fifteen.

The testimonies of children who stated they were recruited at the age of thirteen require investigating the facts that may satisfy the elements of a war crime, including establishing the child's age, the recruiting entity, the nature of the military task, and the role of the individuals who carried out recruitment, training, transfer, and use.

Conversely, Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions obligates parties to the conflict to treat persons placed hors de combat humanely, and prohibits torture, cruel and degrading treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity and physical integrity. Children retain special protection guarantees during detention, regardless of the entity that recruited them or their previous role in combat.

Consequently, allegations relating to beatings, threats, humiliation, filming, and ill-treatment require investigation and determination of responsibilities independently of the crime of recruitment, while ensuring that detained children are not used in propaganda or subjected to coercion or defamation.

Key Findings

The testimonies reviewed by SAM demonstrate diverse pathways for child recruitment, encompassing the family and educational environment, local supervisors, cultural courses, and financial incentives, followed by transfer to military camps and positions. The testimony of the rehabilitation specialist points to the gradation of some mobilization operations according to educational stages, and to the training of some children in specialized military tasks—information that requires further investigation to determine its prevalence and those responsible.

The testimonies also include allegations of the use of unknown substances that may affect awareness and behavior, allegations of ill-treatment of children after falling into captivity, and descriptions of psychological and social impacts that persisted among some after leaving the frontlines. The available evidence is insufficient to conclusively determine the nature of the alleged substances, diagnose psychological disorders, or establish the liability of specific individuals.

The cases show that a child's presence on the frontline may stem from pathways that began long before his arrival at the combat site. Therefore, the appearance of children during the recent escalation does not, by itself, determine the date of their recruitment, nor does it permit drawing a new total or attributing all cases to the West Coast without verifying their dates and locations.

SAM's Recommendations

SAM Organization calls upon the Houthi group to immediately cease the recruitment and use of children, end the exploitation of educational institutions and cultural activities in recruitment, disclose all children associated with armed forces and groups, facilitate their safe exit, and refer them to specialized protection and rehabilitation mechanisms.

It also demands that all parties and relevant authorities account for all children who fell into captivity or detention during recent operations, ensure their humane treatment, enable specialized humanitarian agencies to access them, and conduct an independent investigation into allegations of beatings, torture, humiliation, coercion, and poor detention conditions.

The organization recommends investigating the pathways of recruitment, training, and transfer to the frontlines, determining individual responsibilities based on evidence, and conducting a specialized medical investigation into allegations concerning the administration of narcotic or mind-altering substances to children, while protecting children and witnesses.

SAM emphasizes the necessity of expanding rehabilitation and reintegration programs, ensuring education, psychosocial care, and family reunification, and establishing arrangements that prevent the re-recruitment of children after their return to their families.

Witness and Impact

SAM Rights & Liberties

SAM Rights & Liberties