Houthis indoctrinating children in Yemen 'with violent, anti-Semitic and extremist material'

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Three million Yemeni children living in areas under Houthi control are being indoctrinated with education material filled with violent, anti-Semitic propaganda, an official from the Yemeni Teachers Syndicate has told the Telegraph.

Yahya Al-Yinai, the union’s head of media, said he had documented hundreds of changes to the teaching curriculum by the Iran-backed group, which since 2014 has fought a war against the government of Yemen.

The group has also replaced nearly 90 percent of school principals with pro-Houthi figures, he told The Telegraph.

Iran is overseeing the changes, he said, accusing Tehran of pursuing a "policy of cultural colonialism" by trying to introduce the "ideology of the Khomeinist revolution in Yemen through public education."

The Houthis emerged from northern Yemen in the 1990s and were named after their original leader Hussein al Houthi, who returned from time in Iran inspired by the Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

[Officially known as Ansar Allah, the Houthis](https://archive.vn/o/sSCdu/https:/www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/11355168/Yemen-crisis-Who-are-the-Houthi-rebels.html)today control an area of Yemen in which two-thirds of the population lives, including the capital Sanaa.

The group’s worldview is reflected in its slogan, which translates as, “Allah is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam,” which was officially adopted after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Houthis say the slogan is not to be taken literally. "We do not really want death to anyone," a spokesperson for the group said in 2014. “The slogan is simply against the interference of those governments.”

Nonetheless it is being taught to children, alongside lessons encouraging them to fight the “tyranny of the Jews”. A spelling exercise seen by The Telegraph asks students to write out the sentence “Israel is my enemy”.

An issue of the pro-Houthi magazine Jihad, which is aimed at children, shows a photo of a young Yemeni girl lying on the ground next to a school bag and exercise books, apparently dead. The caption reads: “She was killed on her way to school by an airstrike of the Saudi aggression.”

“The graphic nature of the material really took us aback,” said Marcus Sheff, who heads an Israel-based research, policy and advocacy organisation which produced a [recent report](https://archive.vn/o/sSCdu/https:/www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Review-of-Houthi-Educational-Materials-in-Yemen_2015-19.pdf) reviewing Houthi educational material.

The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) report argues that the rebels have made education a core pillar of their campaign to increase their influence and that their teachings illustrate why they are resistant to peaceful conflict resolution.

In the material reviewed, “peace is explicitly dismissed as a form of ‘capitulation’, and people who advocate for it are framed as fools, cowards and even traitors,” said Arik Agassi, the organisation’s COO.

This helps explain why the Iran-aligned group continues to fight, despite the best efforts of a Saudi-led Arab coalition.

In March, the Houthis rejected a Saudi-proposed ceasefire because it did not include lifting a blockade on Houthi-controlled areas. That air and sea embargo has been criticised for contributing to Yemen’s[near-famine conditions](https://archive.vn/o/sSCdu/https:/www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/yemen-brink-famine-five-million-people-face-extreme-hunger-un/), which the United Nations describes as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Instead the group, which the US and other Western powers call an Iranian proxy force receives weapons from Iran, has increased attacks across the border into neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

Houthi educational material is suggestive of Iranian influence, according to IMPACT-se.

“A lot of these ideas do come from Iran, there’s no question about it,” said Mr Sheff.  “This extreme idea of us and them, this Manichaean idea of the universe, and the final battle that will be fought at the end and will result in victory and paradise. That’s a Shiite Iranian view.”

The changes made to the curriculum are part of a broader Houthi strategy to instil their ideology across society, according to Nadwa Al-Dawsari, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute.

“Beyond the curriculum, the Houthis have used schools as a means to recruit and indoctrinate children,” she said. “In a lot of rural areas, the schools are closed and all students are learning are lectures by Hussein Al-Houthi, the founder of the Houthi movement, who was inspired by the Iranian revolution.”

An official in the Houthi education ministry did not respond to requests for comment but the rebels have repeatedly blamed the Saudi-led air campaign for [exposing Yemen’s children to violence](https://archive.vn/o/sSCdu/https:/www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/11/17/civilian-toll-spiking-yemen-ngo-warns/).

Mr Sheff says the Houthi education materials represent some of the more egregious violations of UNESCO standards of peace and tolerance in current Middle Eastern curricula that he has reviewed in 25 years of research.

“There are usually at least some restraints that other extremist states put on themselves with relation to their education materials but the Houthis seem to have no red lines,” he said. “The closest we have seen to being this is extreme is ISIS materials.”