

Social impact monitoring project report: October 2023 to February 2024

OVERVIEW

This edition of the social impact monitoring project (SIMP) report considers two themes: the food security situation and its social impact on households and the effects of the attacks of the de-facto authority (DFA) in the north of Yemen (also known as the Houthis) in the Red Sea on people in Yemen. These themes are considered in terms of their social impact on the Yemeni people in general and, where possible, on the categories of people most affected.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This SIMP report identifies events and themes emerging in the Yemeni information landscape from October 2023 to February 2024, with a particular focus on those that had, or are likely to have, a social impact. Social impact is broadly defined as the effect of an action (or lack thereof) or event on people and communities. The SIMP report is a quarterly product, and the themes for each report are chosen based on a combination of factors, including the estimated significance of a theme's current impact (or potential impact) on people, the number of times a theme is mentioned in data and reporting during the period, the degree to which a theme is or is not covered by other analyses, and the apparent significance of any change relating to a theme. The themes covered each quarter are determined by joint analysis between the ACAPS Analysis Hub and other experts on Yemen. The regular report aims to enrich understanding of the different challenges the people in Yemen are facing in relation to protection concerns and basic needs.

This is the last SIMP report under the current project. In response to key dynamics in the Yemen context, the time frame for this edition has been extended by two months to include January–February 2024.

Limitations

The information available does not enable a categorical linkage between the social impact of key drivers and specific groups or categories of people particularly exposed to certain risks. Most information on social impact is qualitative, making comparing and aggregating

data across time and different areas of the country difficult. ACAPS has accounted for this constraint by analysing the information available and following up on or triangulating it through interviews with Yemeni experts, consultations with experts, and joint analyses.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this report is based on a monitoring of information sources during the period of interest (October 2023 to February 2024), including:

- relevant indicators logged in the ACAPS qualitative database for Yemen
- ACAPS' core dataset for Yemen
- a secondary data review of documents published within and outside Yemen
- qualitative data collection and analysis to deepen understanding of the initial findings through:
 - interviews with five context experts in Yemen (referenced as key informant interviews or KIIs)
 - a joint analysis session that included the extended ACAPS team and humanitarian analysts from other organisations (referenced as joint analysis meeting or JAM 18/03/2024)
 - online focus group discussions (FGDs) with ACAPS' contacts in Yemen (five men and four women) based in different parts of the country, including an initial discussion to help frame the food security issue from a social perspective and follow-up discussions to elaborate further and interpret observations.

Use of online focus group discussions in this report

In the absence of substantial recent information on the impact of food security on households, three online focus group discussions with Yemeni contacts from different places in Yemen consisting of five men and four women were carried out. The discussions were focused on asking the contacts to explain the food situation in their own households as well as what they knew about other households in their social circle from their own observations and the conversations they had with their neighbours and relatives. They were particularly asked to discuss what they knew about the households they considered to be vulnerable and struggling to meet basic needs or facing economic challenges.

ACAPS' Yemeni contacts frequently provide their own insights and observations to help inform the contextual backdrop to ACAPS reports. We then triangulate this data with any available secondary data sources. In the first FGD with the contacts from this report, it became clear that what people are eating is a frequent topic of discussion in Yemen. This enabled us to clarify some of the issues we were interested in understanding better by asking the contacts about their own household's food security as well as the food security of other households they knew well.

Security risks and long formal approval processes make data collection in Yemen very challenging and time consuming, it is therefore difficult to understand people's perspectives in a timely way. In addition, the context can change rapidly which means by the time a structured assessment is complete (including approval of questions and locations, then travel and data collection, followed by analysis), findings may not represent the current situation anymore. It is also not possible to get approvals for assessments in all areas of Yemen.

ACAPS uses conversations and FGDs with a range of contacts and experts to triangulate the secondary data available, to provide a human perspective on the themes covered, (in this case food security changes) and to deepen our understanding of these themes. This qualitative information cannot be considered representative or statistically significant. It should instead be read as a set of examples highlighting the experience of some Yemenis which may be indicative of wider patterns.

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Drivers of humanitarian needs with potential social impact, October 2023 to February 2024

THEME 1: THE WORSENING FOOD SECURITY SITUATION AND SOCIAL IMPACT ON HOUSEHOLDS IN YEMEN

Since September 2023, Yemen's food security situation has become an increasing concern. Continuing economic challenges that limit household purchasing power, together with the suspension of WFP food assistance to DFA-controlled areas, have increased concerns around the likely worsening of already high food security levels (WFP 05/12/2023; NRC 08/12/2023). Alongside published statements, discussions among humanitarian circles focus on how households are coping after over nine years of war, the associated livelihood challenges and economic contraction, and the likely impact of suspending food assistance (WB accessed 20/03/2024).

In line with the SIMP approach, this report looks at food security through a social impact lens, attempting to uncover how food security challenges are affecting individuals, households, and communities.

After nine years of war, living conditions have deteriorated for most, if not all, of Yemen's population. Hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition are at the forefront of the challenges Yemeni people are facing. Agriculture in Yemen only accounts for 15–20% of staple food needs and, although a critical livelihood sector, continually faces not only the impact of war but also pest outbreaks, drought, and flooding (WB 02/05/2023).

Approximately 70% of food in Yemen is imported, including 97% of cereals, and imported food accounts for 83% of the average person's diet. Although food prices are currently stable, Yemen's reliance on imported food makes the population highly vulnerable to price fluctuations (IOM et al. 22/06/2023). Several factors continue to erode people's purchasing power, including economic warfare between the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen (IRG) and the DFA, lack of adjustment in public salary payments in response to inflation since October 2018, and continued currency depreciation and volatility (IPC 05/02/2024).

The economic challenges portrayed in the literature were also emphasized by the discussions with contacts in Yemen and context experts. Specifying overall economic decline as one of the main factors aggravating their declining purchasing power (JAM 18/03/2024; FGD 13/04/2024). A common theme in all the discussions was that many people in Yemen struggle to meet a diverse range of basic needs, including food, health, rent, and utility services, such as water and electricity (FGD 13/04/2024; KII 07/03/2024). Reports and observations indicate that plenty of food is available in the market, but people cannot afford it (IPS 06/06/2023).

A recent IPC analysis indicated that, from October 2023 to February 2024, approximately 4.56 million individuals faced significant acute food insecurity, falling into Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels. This amounts to 45% of the population in IRG-controlled areas, where the IPC conducts its analysis (IPC 05/02/2024). There is no IPC analysis of DFA-controlled areas, where food assistance has been suspended.

A summary of current food assistance in Yemen

- Until 30 September 2023, 13 million people (9 million in DFA-controlled areas and 4 million in IRG-controlled areas) were receiving food assistance as part of the WFP programme.
- Between October–December 2023, food assistance was reduced to 8.8 million people (6.6 million in DFA-controlled areas and 2.2 million in IRG-controlled areas) (FEWS NET 19/01/2024).
- Since December 2023, there has been no food assistance distributed in DFA-controlled areas (WFP 05/12/2023).
- In-kind food assistance comprises a food basket containing flour or rice with tea, sugar, and beans. This assistance is equivalent to only 40% of the standard food basket, as insufficient funding has led to reduced rations from January 2022 (WFP 18/08/2023 and 22/12/2021). A standard WFP food basket is designed to provide each individual with a ration of 2,100Kcal based on general nutritional needs (WFP accessed 22/03/2024).
- Food continues to be distributed to 3.6 million (WFP 29/02/2024) people in IRG-controlled areas.
- WFP assistance makes up 80% of overall food assistance in Yemen, with other organisations providing the other 20% (KII 19/02/2024).

WFP food assistance to DFA-controlled areas was suspended for a number of reasons, mainly related to humanitarian funding cuts, which means that targeting processes should be reviewed. Subsequent discussions between the WFP and the DFA around implementing these targeting processes have stalled, however (WFP 05/12/2023).

Household food security: the impact of reduced humanitarian food assistance

Changes in household food consumption are both coping strategies for and indicators of food insecurity (Maxwell 12/1995). In conversations with participants in the FGD, discussions about household meals were interpreted with this in mind.

The focus group participants for this SIMP all said they had made changes to their food consumption patterns in the last three months. They also said that almost all the people in their social circles had also discussed making changes to what they eat or their eating patterns.

Generally, however, these changes were not perceived as noticeably worsening over the last three to four months, since the decrease in WFP food assistance, but instead as a gradual degradation that had occurred over the past nine years of war (FGD 13/04/2024; KII 05/03/2024).

The contacts and context experts indicated that the main challenge facing households who depend on food assistance in IRG-controlled areas relates to the lack of predictability of food assistance which makes it difficult to plan around and rely on. Whereas, in the DFA-controlled areas, it seems that the pause in food assistance has increased challenges obtaining enough food for economically vulnerable households (FGD 13/04/2024; FGD 10/03/2024; JAM 18/03/2024).

Challenges differentiating food security in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas

The limited information available on DFA-controlled areas, where the majority of the population resides, is a key challenge to understanding the humanitarian context in Yemen, meaning that informed assumptions are required to support programming for these areas. The key information available is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. food security differences between DFA and IRG controlled areas.

SELECTED INDICATORS	IRG-CONTROLLED AREAS	DFA-CONTROLLED AREAS
Population	5,350,000	25,390,000
Number of households receiving food assistance before cuts in December 2023	4 million	9 million
Number of households receiving food assistance since cuts in December 2023	3.6 million with reduced rations, equivalent to around 40 percent of the WFP full ration per each distribution cycle	0

SELECTED INDICATORS	IRG-CONTROLLED AREAS	DFA-CONTROLLED AREAS
Staple food price inflation	No price cap or controlling of commodities	DFA control of various food commodity prices since November 2022 (ACAPS 29/02/2024)
Exchange rate	YER 1,658 to USD 1	YER 527 to USD 1
Cost of minimum food basket (MFB) for an average household to meet nutritional needs	YER 130,997 (USD 79)	YER 48,979 (USD 92)

Source: FAO (accessed 25/03/2024)

Increasingly stretched food-related coping strategies

The Yemeni contacts and the context experts indicated that coping strategies are increasingly stretched due to the long-term economic stress that households are under. Households economic stress is the major contributor to food insecurity. Reduced social capital and shrinking humanitarian assistance are the two main reasons for why it is becoming increasingly harder for households to cope (FGD 13/04/2024; JAM 18/03/2024).

Perceptions of the household's food situation that emerged from the online FGDs are summarised in table 2.

Table 2. FGD participants' perceptions of the drivers and impacts of food insecurity.

DRIVERS OF INCREASED FOOD INSECURITY	MAIN IMPACTS ON HOUSEHOLDS	LESS FREQUENTLY MENTIONED IMPACTS
Household economic stress	Adjusting food consumption patterns, including:	Prioritising which family members receive food
Reduced social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reducing portion sizes reducing the number of meals eating less preferred foods 	Purchasing small amounts of food daily
Shrinking humanitarian assistance	Making money by whatever means possible, primarily by selling assets	

Household perceptions of key drivers of food insecurity

Reduced social capital and restrictions on informal community-based support

Conversations with Yemeni contacts and context experts for this SIMP report confirmed the findings of recent studies, indicating that one impact of the continuing war is deteriorating economic stability leading to reduced social capital (WB 13/09/2023; ACAPS 09/02/2024). As more households struggle to meet their needs, they no longer have the capacity to provide the social safety net they once could.

Social capital is a key feature of Yemeni society and provides a safety net for households in times of need (Mercy Corps 31/01/2022). Social capital has also enabled Yemenis to cope with needs both prior to and during the conflict (K4D 23/06/2017). Social capital is built and maintained through a range of activities, including mutual support for important milestone events and sharing, lending, borrowing, and repaying loans via cash or in-kind commodities (ACAPS 22/05/2022). If the challenges households are facing continue, how resilient social capital in Yemen will be over time is unknown. If people's economic challenges lessen, it is not clear whether important behaviours that build and maintain social connections will recuperate, if people will become supportive in different ways, or if such behaviours will begin to be lost entirely, marking a change in Yemeni society and culture.

Buying food on credit is important and linked to individual capital with community shopkeepers. According to context experts, many households have accumulated debts and are struggling to repay. Store credit has long been a reliable strategy in Yemen to obtain food while waiting for a salary to be paid. It relies on social capital which is built on a history of paying back this credit (JAM 18/03/2024). However, there are indications that the use of store credit as a backstop during times of limited cash flow is changing (JAM 18/03/2024).

Observations of contacts indicate that households who had not recently borrowed from community shopkeepers were unable to take on credit for three reasons (FGD 14/03/2024).

- They had failed to pay off a sufficient proportion of their debt, and the community shopkeeper had refused to give them further credit until they paid some back.
- The community shopkeeper knew they did not have an income source and would not be able to repay the debt.
- They were internally displaced, considered outsiders in the community, and did not have the shopkeepers' trust. At the same time, as they had no income source, there was suspicion that they might leave at any time.

From this, it is clear that households with little or no income are unable to use this coping strategy, even though they are the most in need.

One context expert, an economist and acute observer of Yemen's market environment, revealed that many small businesses are facing extreme economic pressure (KII 11/03/2024). Shops are closing for a combination of reasons, including too many customers with unpaid credit. This has exhausted and limited traders' capital to pay for new stock. After years of economic decline and challenges, an increasing number of shopkeepers can no longer keep their business afloat (JAM 18/03/2024).

Another part of Yemeni culture involves private companies and wealthy citizens supporting poor households by providing food baskets or cash. This is particularly true during religious festivals, such as Eid, but also occurs at other times. This practice has been curtailed in DFA-controlled areas by recent regulations dictating that all assistance goes through the DFA, which it then channels to selected people. Observations indicate that the DFA attaches conditions to the support it provides. For instance, the DFA has required several households to attend lectures or go to the front lines in exchange for assistance (JAM 18/03/2024; FGD 10/03/2024; KII 29/02/2024).

Shrinking humanitarian food assistance

As it is difficult to isolate the impact of decreasing food assistance from other challenges households face when trying to meet nutritional needs, understanding the direct impact of decreasing food assistance is challenging.

Contacts indicated that the absence of food assistance has made it more challenging for their household, and other households in their social network, to meet their basic nutritional needs (FGD 14/03/2024). It appears that even though households only received a partial food basket, the provision of a portion of staple foods allowed them to spend their own money on supplemental items and made a noticeable difference. As one participant said, "Although the food assistance was not sufficient, it helped many households to buy other food items such as vegetables and sometimes chicken depending on the earned daily wage." (FGD 14/03/2024) Another noted: "At least households didn't have to worry about the rent and providing other basic needs such as water, but [without the food basket,] households have to worry about food, basic needs, and rent." (FGD 14/03/2024)

Impacts of increasing food insecurity

Opinions on the degree to which notable change in food security could be observed in the last 3-5 months varied among Yemeni contacts and context experts. Some considered the food situation to have worsened notably in this period. Others felt that the food situation was very serious but had not dramatically worsened in the past 3-5 months as changes had occurred before this time and food security conditions now continue to decline gradually.

Experts and contacts discussed changes related to food quality and quantity. Some conversations mentioned changes in the quantity of staple foods being consumed, which stands in slight contrast to ACAPS' previous findings on changing food consumption patterns (JAM 18/03/2024; FGD 14/03/2024).

In previous ACAPS research on how households coped with challenges, which examined the period between 2022–2024, households reported the reduced consumption of complementary foods, including vegetables, fruit, dairy products, fat, and protein (ACAPS 22/05/2022; ACAPS 09/02/2024).

In conversations with contacts for this report, on the other hand, some contacts told ACAPS they reduced consumption of staple foods such as wheat flour and rice in their households. While it is important to be cautious not to make strong generalisations based on limited information, it is possible that some Yemeni households have begun limiting their consumption of staple foods because they cannot afford as much as they need. Some reported prioritising any type of food for children, older people, and sick members of their household (FGD 14/03/2024).

Increased selling of assets

Contacts told ACAPS that they had observed an increase of selling productive and unproductive assets. Their own household, or people they knew, had sold assets to pay for either healthcare costs, displacement, or to meet basic needs in general (FGD 14/03/2024). They also discussed that, with years of conflict and economic decline, many households they knew had nothing left to sell (FGD 14/03/2024). This was confirmed by context experts and indicates that household food insecurity is likely to be felt more acutely as the ability to sell assets as a coping strategy becomes no longer available (JAM 18/03/2024).

Several contacts mentioned that they knew of families which had sold land to cover basic needs (FGD 14/03/2024; KII 05/03/2024; JAM 18/03/2024). This is a new observation as land has a significant value. It represents a link to the village, the origins of the family, and their tribe. In previous studies land was only reported to be sold to cover costs associated with a major health condition, such as treating cancer (ACAPS 22/05/2022).

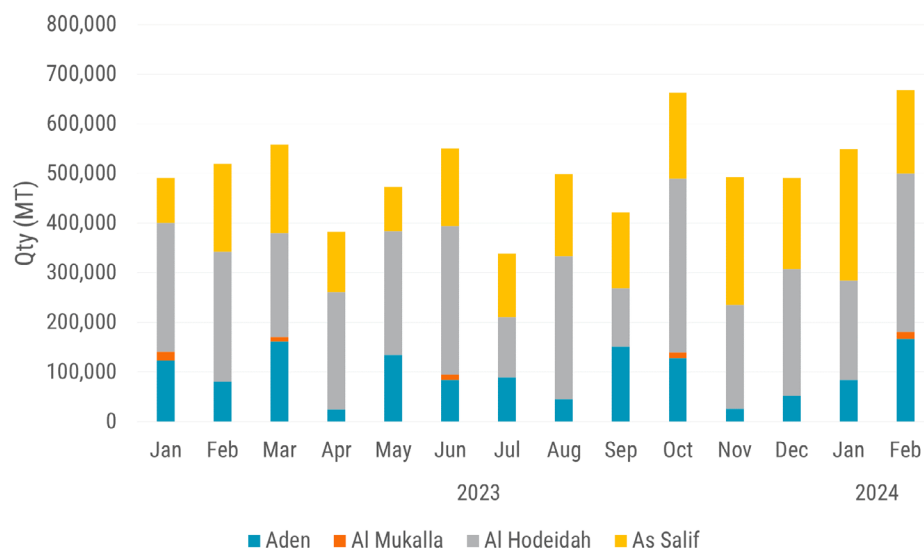
THEME 2: THE IMPACT OF DFA ATTACKS IN THE RED SEA ON THE YEMENI PEOPLE

Since 19 November 2023, the DFA has launched attacks against Israeli and Israel-bound ships in the Red Sea, proclaiming a campaign of solidarity with the Palestinian people against Israel's continuing war on Gaza (AJ 15/03/2024). On 12 January 2024, in retaliation to the DFA attacks, the US and the UK conducted military strikes in Yemen, targeting areas under DFA control. On 17 January, the US classified the DFA as a 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist' (WH 17/01/2024). This designation ascribes the global 'terrorist' label without including sanctions for providing material support, potentially minimising impediments to aid for Yemeni civilians (Politico 16/01/2024).

Other analyses continue to track shipping in the Red Sea, particularly the pipeline of imports into Yemen (ACAPS accessed 19/03/2024). There are also many analyses covering the attacks, retaliation, and the United States' designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organisation. In this report, we seek to unpack how DFA attacks, and the subsequent retaliation and designation are and could have a social impact in both DFA and IRG-controlled areas.

Impact on food imports and prices in Yemen

Figure 1. Food imports to Yemen by port (January 2023 to February 2024)



Source: ACAPS

Although many households in Yemen are struggling to maintain adequate food consumption, there is no evidence that the events in the Red Sea are a contributing factor. These attacks have prompted a shift in global shipping routes, as vessels avoid the area and opt instead for longer journeys via the Cape of Good Hope, leading to increased voyage times and costs. Food prices in Yemen, however, have remained unaffected.

As at February 2024, the cost of the MFB in IRG-controlled areas increased by only 4% compared to February 2023, from YER 125,439 to YER 130,997. In DFA-controlled areas, the MFB cost decreased by 13% compared to February 2023. The cost reduction in DFA-controlled areas is attributed to currency appreciation, the implementation of price caps, and reduced fuel prices.

As at 29 February, there had been no significant changes in import flows, especially in Red Sea ports. The graph below illustrates that, between November 2023 and February 2024, food imports showed regular volumes in line with the 14-month average.

Social impact

Although we are unable to link the Red Sea attacks to households' food security challenges, the attacks and reactions from the international community have affected Yemenis in other ways and raised concerns about further impacts in the near future. While finding concrete evidence of these impacts is difficult, as they largely relate to people's perceptions and observations and some have yet to occur, ACAPS discussed with context experts what they see and hear in the populations around them. People highlighted four main impacts:

- stalled peace talks and fear of conflict re-escalation
- concerns about increased displacement and its knock-on effects
- loss of fishing livelihoods in Al Hodeidah
- reinvigoration of the DFA movement through alignment with the Palestinian cause.

Stalled peace talks and fear of conflict re-escalation

Since the truce commenced in April 2022, there have been continuous bilateral talks between the DFA and Saudi Arabia seeking an end to the conflict in Yemen. These negotiations seem to have stalled since the DFA attacks in the Red Sea began (ACLEL 17/01/2024; SCR 29/02/2024). Although no conflict settlement has been reached, tensions remain, and clashes still occur, the truce did decrease civilian casualties by 33% (Protection Cluster Yemen 01/2024). Even since the truce expired in October 2022, the situation has remained relatively calm (RAND 13/12/2023). FGDs with context experts found that there is fear among the population that

attacks in the Red Sea could be an indicator of the DFA seeking to provoke a re-escalation of hostilities, which would result in further displacement, casualties, and economic crisis (JAM 18/03/2024; FGD 10/03/2024).

Concerns about increased displacement and the knock-on effects

There are two main factors driving concerns about further displacement: the resumption of active conflict and rumours that the DFA aims to move large numbers of people from key Red Sea locations to further its attacks (FGD 10/03/2024). As at March 2024, these were only rumours; there was no evidence to substantiate them. Still, such rumours cause fear that affects people.

People in different parts of Yemen, context experts explained, are concerned that a renewed conflict will lead to increased displacement, which will inevitably result in increased accommodation costs overall (FGD 10/03/2024). This perception is the result of previous experiences over the last nine years. When the conflict escalated in Yemen, there was a surge in displaced households, increasing rental costs (UN-Habitat 07/08/2020). Throughout the conflict, rent has increased dramatically in locations to which people have been displaced; Ma'rib, for example, has seen rents increase to around seven or eight times what they were at the start of the war (SCSS 01/06/2023).

Discussions with context experts indicated that concerns were heightened as at March 2024 because people were finding it more difficult to meet their basic needs than at other times during the conflict, as a result of low purchasing power, and had already exhausted most, if not all, of their coping strategies (JAM 18/03/2024; FGD 10/03/2024).

Loss of fishing livelihoods in Al Hodeidah

The Red Sea conflict has resulted in substantial losses for those dependent on the sea for their livelihood. According to the IRG information minister, 60% of fishermen in Al Hodeidah have lost their jobs as a result of the attacks, as it is too risky to fish in the area. Approximately 300,000 people are employed by the fishing industry in Al Hodeidah governorate (Sheba 03/02/2024; The New Arab 15/04/2024). Fishermen are exposed to gunfire, shelling, drones, missiles, and sea mines planted in the area (Sheba 03/02/2024). While some fishermen continue, they are prohibited from sailing into areas abundant with fish; they are only allowed to fish near the shore, where far fewer fish are found (The National 21/02/2024).

By February 2024, the authorities in Al Hodeidah had registered 40 missing fishermen in the past two months (Sheba 03/02/2024; The New Arab 15/02/2024). Anecdotal evidence indicates that such events have stoked fear in other coastal areas, such as Abyan and Aden, and that owners of larger fishing boats, in some instances, have relocated as far away as Hadramawt and Al Maharah governorates (The National 21/02/2024; FGD 10/03/2024).

The fishing community in Al Hodeidah has previously faced risks as a result of the conflict. When fighting escalated in 2015, fishing along the coastal areas was restricted, displacing many fishermen from Al Hodeidah to other coastal areas, such as Abyan, Aden, and Hadramawt governorates (NRC 14/08/2019; Elayah 05/2019). Although displaced fishermen were safer from the conflict, competition over livelihoods led to tensions between the fishermen and host communities. Recent escalations in the Red Sea have triggered similar concerns among some communities, who fear facing another influx of IDPs competing for increasingly scarce income sources. Competition over livelihood opportunities and the addition of an unfamiliar cohort can change the dynamics of a place and how safe people feel, even resulting in social tensions (JAM 18/03/2024; FGD 10/03/2024).

Reinvigoration of the DFA movement through alignment with the Palestinian cause

It has been suggested that the DFA is using the war in Gaza to mobilise public support for itself, refocusing people's collective attention in DFA-controlled areas and subduing discontent (USA Today 07/02/2024; SCSS 12/01/2024). While all factions in Yemen support Palestine, the DFA has been actively encouraging large-scale demonstrations in favour of Palestine. DFA actions in the Red Sea are also very visible and disruptive and have been noticed around the world, increasing its popularity (MERIP 24/01/2024; SCSS 12/01/2024).

The DFA also uses the Palestinian cause to persuade recruits, including children, to join the war effort in Yemen. Since the war in Gaza began on 7 October 2023, human rights organisations have found a significant increase in child recruitment (HRW 13/02/2024). While all parties to the conflict in Yemen have been accused of child recruitment, the DFA has been the recent focus of such concerns.

Since November 2023, the DFA is said to have recruited 70,000 new fighters. Exactly how many of these recruits are children (mainly boys) is not known, but most are aged between 13–25, with hundreds, or even thousands, under the age of 18 (HRW 13/02/2024).

The recruitment of children into armed groups, which propagate the idea that they are protecting their communities, is a grave violation of children's rights and international humanitarian law. Raising children within a conservative or radical ideological environment, exposing them to severe violence, and subsequently having them commit cruelties deprive them of healthy development and impair their integration as fully functioning members of society (Schauer and Elbert 03/2010; UN accessed 21/03/2024).