



STORY

As War Rages, Yemen's Fathers and Sons Face an Uncertain Future

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BY ALEX POTTER



Shafai Saleh Hadi drives a friend's boat along the coast of Bir Fuqum, searching for fish with his sons. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

On a quiet Thursday afternoon in May, Yahya Abdullah sits cross-legged on the sill beneath a stained-glass window in Dar al Hajar, home to the last religious ruler of northern Yemen. From his perch in the palace-turned-tourist attraction, the 40-year-old guide and local high school teacher creates lesson plans for upcoming final exams. These would be the last tests before students break for Ramadan, a month-long religious observation practiced by Muslims and centered around fasting and prayer.



Yahya Abdullah sits with local children near a rocky trail in Wadi Dhahr. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

Usually Yahya brings his son, tutoring him in this very windowsill, paying particular attention to his English lessons. Back when Yemen still had tourists, visitors looked fondly at the father-son pair reading quietly together from illustrated language books. Now there are no foreign tourists and few local visitors, only the occasional family or couple from Sanaa looking to catch a whiff of mountain air in Wadi Dhahr, the region along a dried riverbed in the valley.

Putting down his papers, Yahya sighs, thinking of better times—the time before the war.

“We are exhausted now. I’m working hard for my children, but I’m putting in particular effort with my son,” Yahya says. “He’s 13 now. Before the war, he was only studying, but now I see him looking for work... looking to become a man.”



Salah (center) has lunch with his father, Yahya, and their family. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

The conflict in Yemen is now in its fourth year. The Houthis, a local political and religious group, took over much of the country

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/world/middleeast/houthis-reach-out-as-they-consolidate-power-in-yemen.html>) in early 2015, claiming they would root out corruption and bring a new “People’s Revolution” after a post-Arab Spring transition period failed. President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi fled

(<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-hadi-flees-to-aden-and->

says-he-is-still-president-iduskbn0lp08f20150221)—first south, then to Saudi Arabia —leaving in his place the wrath of an Arab and Western coalition that has mercilessly pounded Yemen's infrastructure, health facilities, businesses, civilian homes, and military locations with airstrikes.

The Houthis and their adversaries, including local loyalist groups and militias funded by the United Arab Emirates, now fight on multiple fronts (<https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen>) on the northern border, east of Sanaa in Marib, and in the southern city of Taiz. Departments at the United Nations have logged official civilian casualties at both 8,000 and 13,000, while other organizations have recorded different rates entirely

(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/yemen-the-forgotten-war/>).

Regardless, officials estimate the actual numbers are much higher

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-deadly-war-in-yemen-rages-on-so-why-does-the-death-toll-stand-still-/2018/08/02/e6d9ebca-9022-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d_story.html?utm_term=.6d3b4f52cb1a), noting the difficulty of accurate tracking in a war zone.

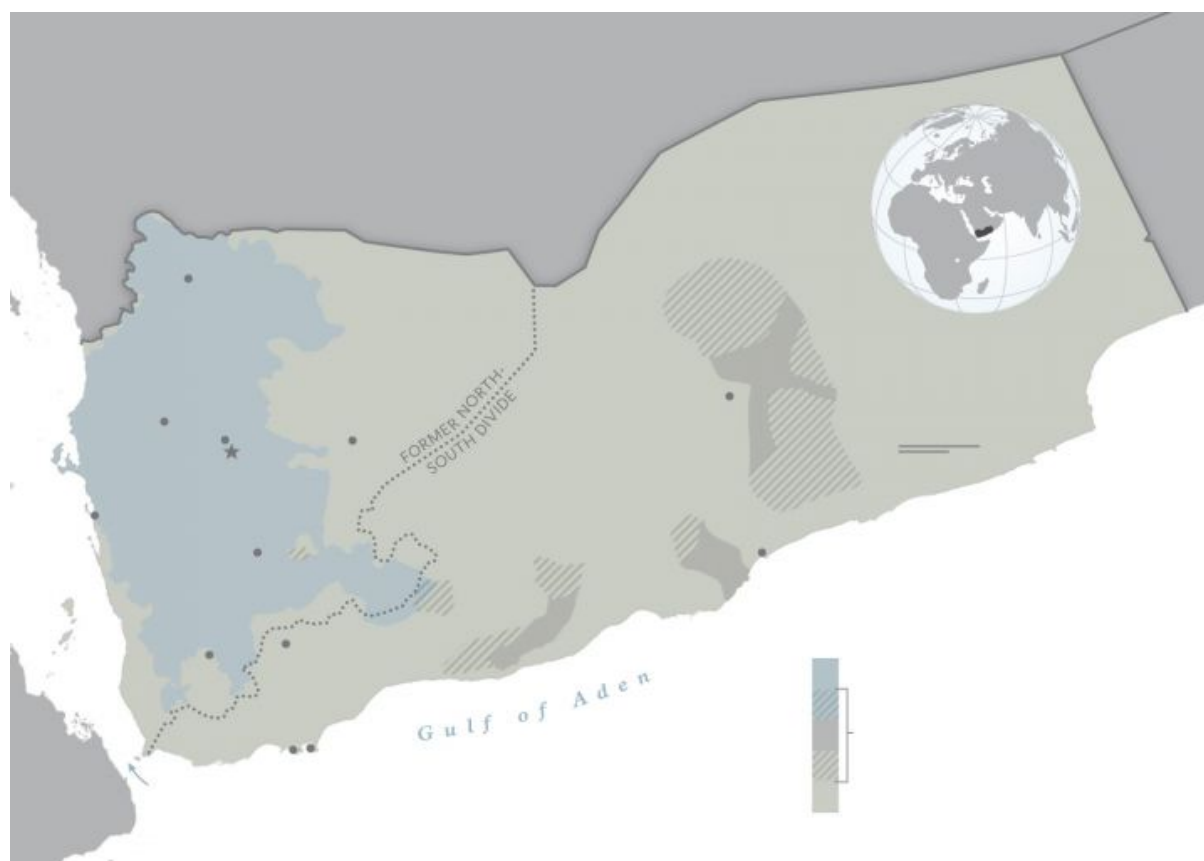


Image by Claire Trainor.

The conflict and accompanying economic crisis have placed a strain not only on Yemen's resources, but on its familial ties and relationships, particularly the relationships of fathers and sons. Fathers who could once easily provide for their families now struggle, and their sons are eager to take on more responsibility. Some fathers are happy to see their sons work. Others, like Yahya, would rather their sons study, even if it means losing out economically.

The Teacher: Jidr

Yahya isn't alone in his priorities. Hussein al Tawushi, the principal at the school where he teaches, pushes students to keep attending. "For us, education is life, not just a piece of paper," he says. "Fathers are helping out and taking on a lot of responsibility, more jobs, so their kids can study." The school adjusts for working students and even provides breakfast. As a result, they now see around 80 percent attendance rates—much greater than the 50 percent they expected.



gypsum designs in the center to one-story grey concrete structures at the outer edges. Despite his clean-pressed white robe and dignified gold-threaded belt

holding up his jambiya (a traditional Yemeni dagger), Yahya still lives on a teacher's salary. His simple but comfortable family home rests on the outskirts of town.

"My father was tough with me, and his grandfather before him," says Yahya, knocking on the iron door covered by a thick grey blanket. "It was a tribal way. They were strict, disciplining us and making us work, but I'm educated. I want to push my son in a different way."



Clouds roll over the mountains near the Dar al Hajar palace in Wadi Dhahr, Yemen. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

The door opens and Yahya's wife welcomes him with a smile. Thirteen-year-old Salah sits in the guest room, a sparse space with thin mats on the ground and a small TV, sitting on a cabinet in the corner. Salah's nose is in his English book. He looks up at his father, who sits down and begins reviewing a story of teenagers rescuing a cat from a tree. Salah shyly asks his father questions, sometimes in Arabic, and when prompted, in halting English. Leaning close together, the pair point to difficult words, pronouncing them until they declare it time for a pre-lunch hike.

They decide on a historic grave and burial ground, normally a route that takes a couple hours to complete, but Salah pushed the pace, bounding along the rock cliffs covered in thorny bushes. Joined by children from the village, neighborhood men eager for an adventure, and locals tasked with protecting the graves, Salah holds his father's hand as they start up the hill.

"My father is always teaching us; he doesn't let me wander far from home," he says, not losing breath, striding upwards.

“I want to be a pilot, maybe a fighter pilot in the military ... The boys who go to fight now? They’ll die without any benefit.” He concedes that all sides are corrupt in war, and when asked how he could join a military if all sides were corrupt, he and his father laugh together.

Yahya pauses on a rock during his walk back from the hike, surrounded by local children.

“Society is tired, but we adapt to the challenges of war. War hasn’t completely changed our relationship,” he says undecidedly.

Salah sits alone, comfortable taking his own space, a boy barely a teenager but on the verge of adulthood in Yemeni society. Yahya beckons for him to sit closer; Salah declines. Yahya looks unperturbed at the lack of affection.

“We have a saying here: One day he’s your son, the next day he’s your brother—so I do my best to treat him as my son and my brother.”



Shafai Saleh Hadi (left) laughs with local boys on the shore of Bir Fuqum. As a first-generation fisherman, he sees the job as a better route for his sons than attending school, since employment is incredibly scarce in Yemen. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

The Fisherman: Bir Fuqum

Many factors determine a Yemeni boy's upbringing: geography, between the highland north and coastal south; lifestyle, between rural families who farm and urban ones whose boys often run free; and economics, between those who can afford to prioritize education and others who find school a useless endeavor.

In Aden, Yemen's main southern port city, active conflict has abated, but the economic crisis remains. Educated men have difficulty finding work. Those who bring home a wage are often day laborers, since the government and private businesses are still struggling. This is why Shafai Saleh Hadi, a middle-aged fisherman, doesn't send his sons to school: He believes an education won't help them make a living.



anyone else. The people in the city are hungry, their sons are lazy and run around with out working,” he says, handing ends of string to his oldest son, Musa. The 14-year-old, hair highlighted blonde from life in the sun, smiles but comments only when nudged by his father.

“Fishing is fine. We make a living,” he says, nursing a foot cut by a sea urchin and wrapped in napkins and a plastic bag.



Musa throws a net into the ocean after spotting a school of fish. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

Shafai continues, “Our life and work is on the sea. I can teach my sons the trade, and they can provide for themselves. We’re poor in work, but we’re rich in life.”

Later that week, Shafai takes his sons, Musa, Isa, and Harun, out to sea. Since he can’t afford his own vessel, he rents a friend’s boat for the evening. Spotting the flutter of waves that marks a school of fish below, they toss out their nets and stomp on the boat, hoping to draw fish into their nets. Thirty minutes later, they pull in the last of the net—empty.

Though they have nothing to show, Musa steers the boat back to shore. He walks home with this father under the lights of sunset, ready to repeat the process of knotting and fishing the next day.

“This place is my home,” he says, pulling his shirt back on after swimming to shore from their anchored boat.

“I’d rather be fishing with my father than working in the city. It’s what I know.”



Fathi al Atef (right) and his son, Hamza (left), leave a restaurant in Aden after having lunch together. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

The Linguist: Aden

In Yemen’s few true cities, fathers often have trouble corralling their sons. In the village, they have land to work, stock to feed, and goods to sell. In cities like Aden, economic struggles go unnoticed by most youth, who play outside, cruise the borders of town, and seek out the best places to lounge. Many young men now carry weapons; they’ve joined the Emirati-backed Security Belt Forces, the Presidential Protection Forces, or any number of militias loyal to a variety of provincial power brokers. While some are shipped north to face off with Houthi-

allied forces in Taizz or along the coast in Hudaydah, the majority sit idle, occasionally falling prey to suicide bombers. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-37216876/yemen-hit-by-suicide-bombing-carnage-in-aden>)

Fathi al Atef, who speaks and teaches multiple languages, has dedicated himself to ensuring his son, Hamza, avoids the same path. The 14-year-old resembles his father physically—both tall and lanky with wide eyes and a smooth, thick head of hair—but their mannerisms couldn't be more different. Fathi is animated, gesturing with nearly every statement. He's eager to speak about anything, especially his son, in English, French, Arabic, and a smattering of German. Hamza is reserved and observant, his eyes saying what his mouth does not—rolling to the ceiling when his father says something embarrassing. He seems, however, to have picked up his father's humor.



A man talks to a young girl in Aden, Yemen. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

When asked about their relationship, Fathi says, “I cannot express my words of happiness to describe how I feel about my son.”

Hamza says, “He is very bad,” and pokes Fathi in the ribs. In turn, his father tells him to button up his shirt and reaches across the table.

Their relationship is one rarely seen publicly in Yemen. More common, especially in times of crises, are bonds built nearly entirely on deference and respect. But Fathi believes in treating his son as his equal, trusting that this will bolster Hamza’s resolve for the future.

“Between fathers and sons there is a need to create a relationship, a mutual understanding for the future... Even though he’s my son, I treat him like my friend. We can talk frankly about things,” Fathi says.

He continues, declaring his opinion about the state of humanity in Yemen during the war, “To be a man is to behave in a humanitarian way. If you want respect, behave kindly, be honest. This is what I teach my son.”



Hamza waits for a table before lunch. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.



Rasheed al Suwaidy shows a urologist the fistula on the stomach of his son, Mohammad. The condition causes Mohammad to have trouble urinating, often soiling his clothing, and Rasheed can't afford the surgery necessary to fix it. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.

The Caretaker: Hajjah

According to the London School of Economic's Middle East Centre

(<http://www.lse.ac.uk/middle-east-centre>), over 70 percent

([http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84177/1/hill_yemen%27s%20urban-](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84177/1/hill_yemen%27s%20urban-rural%20divide%20workshop%20proceedings_2017.pdf)

[rural%20divide%20workshop%20proceedings_2017.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84177/1/hill_yemen%27s%20urban-rural%20divide%20workshop%20proceedings_2017.pdf)) of Yemen's population live in rural areas. For most of these families, even simple health care facilities are often two hours away. Children suffering from malnutrition or chronic health conditions suddenly become a burden rather than a possible contributor. Still, many fathers give up everything for the sake of their sons, even when there's no solution to be found.

In Hajjah, a mountainous province five hours northwest of Sanaa, Rasheed al Suwaidy holds his eight-year-old son's hand, guiding him through the cramped hallways of Jumhuri Hospital. He's looking for someone, anyone, who can help them.

Mohammad, silent and hip-high, looks up at his father, a shy man in a borrowed camouflage jacket and a baby-blue head wrap. An acrid smell follows the boy and urine coats the front of his grey robe, causing those nearby to give him a wide berth and drawing comments about his need for a bath. Mohammad was born with a post-urethral valve, which makes urination difficult. When he was young, doctors rerouted his urethra to a fistula just beneath his belly button.

Rasheed is desperate to help his son.

"He's been like this since birth, and they said when he turns this age they could fix him. But we don't have the money."



Mohammad walks through the grounds of Jumhuri Hospital, where he and his father went in search of surgical care for Mohammad's fistula. Image by Alex Potter. Yemen, 2018.



Rasheed borrowed money from neighbors to travel the eight hours from his village in the mountains. The village, Garreh, which means “explosion” in Yemeni Arabic, is four hours from even the simplest health care facility. Hajjah is under Houthi control and has been bombarded by airstrikes since the start of the conflict. In the distant province with no port, poor families are struggling to provide the basics for their children, much less raise them the way they would have before the crisis.

Sitting in front of the urologist, who tells him once again he'll need at least 225,000 Yemeni Rial (U.S. \$900) for the surgery, plus the cost of travel to the capital, Rasheed looks deflated. He wipes Mohammad's lips—the boy had just covered his face in blue ink from a pen he'd found on the floor.

“I would do anything for my son. But I can barely afford to feed all of us. We have eight girls and three boys. We’re a poor family. It hurts me to see him like this, people shunning him because of his smell. I want him to grow up happy and have a normal life, but this is really difficult.”

Walking out of the hospital, Mohammad pushes open the hospital’s green doors for his father, looking up and reaching for his hand. Rasheed leads the way through the streets, hoping to get enough money for one more day in town, one more day to give his son a chance.



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