

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of dots in various shades of gray and red, arranged in a pattern that suggests a map of the Middle East region.

# Waiting for the State, Relying on the Family

## Yemen's Youth in Peril

FES MENA Youth Study: Country Analysis Yemen

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- Given the weakness of the state, Yemen's youth are heavily dependent on their families. In the face of the current war and the deteriorating situation in terms of the economy, security, and health, youth are most concerned with the threat of poverty. Young people in Yemen are looking for educational and vocational opportunities, in order to support their families financially.
- While Yemeni youth are politically interested, they have little trust in formal politics, particularly political parties. Nevertheless, 82 per cent of young people in Yemen want the state to play a stronger role in their everyday lives.
- Of the Yemenis known by respondents to have emigrated, 80 per cent went to the Gulf region and only a minority to Europe. Although youth face a bleak future in Yemen, 71 per cent of them have no intention of leaving the country.



## Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Economic Situation</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Family and Values</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Political Participation and Attitudes</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>5. The Future of Yemeni Youth</b> .....	<b>10</b>

## 1. Introduction

With the 2011 protests of the so-called Arab Spring, Yemeni youth gained international visibility on an unprecedented scale, as they expressed their hopes for a better future and a »new Yemen«. Today, just six years later, the international press tells another story, with youth in Yemen being coined the »lost generation«. The failure of a transitional deal mediated by the United Nations (UN), elite infighting, and regional meddling led to the escalation of violence and an international military campaign in March 2015.<sup>1</sup> The current war has left over 18,000 people dead. With commercial trade, including that of food and medicine being restricted through a partial sea and air blockade by the Saudi-led military coalition, the Yemeni population is facing severe famine and diseases. The war has left state institutions fragmented – with the state having collapsed in many regions of the country – and militias seizing authority, if not already the case before the war.<sup>2</sup>

The study carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung analyses the responses of 808 Yemeni youth between the ages of 16 and 30.<sup>3</sup> It allows a look beyond individual case studies and narratives to grasp the young people's concerns and anxieties, as well as living situation, values, and political attitudes. The data were collected in different parts of Yemen during the war between May and July 2016, in the midst of the ongoing foreign military campaign and widespread violence. The survey was implemented in all governorates of Yemen with the exception of Sa'ada and al-Mahra. Situated at the north-western border to Saudi Arabia, Sa'ada is the stronghold of the Houthi movement, which has seized control of Sanaa and other parts of northern Yemen since mid-2014, rendering interviews in this area extremely difficult. Al-Mahra is located at Yemen's eastern border with Oman. Its population makes up only 0.5 per cent of the total population, which is why it was excluded.

1. Mareike Transfeld, Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation, in *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 1 (2016): 150f.

2. International Crisis Group, Yemen: A Humanitarian Catastrophe; A Failing State, 1 March 2017; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-catastrophe-failing-state> (accessed 28.6.2017).

3. This survey was part of a regional study covering eight countries in the MENA region. The regional results of the FES MENA Youth Study are published as: *Coping with Uncertainty: Youth in the Middle East and North Africa* (Saqi Books, London 2018). The regional and country-specific data is available at: <http://www.fes.de/lnk/youth-study>.

The results reflect young people's opinions at a very critical and unstable time in their lives. This article aims to show that youth in Yemen – in the past, but even more so in the present – have benefitted little from the state. Thus the traditional role of the family in Yemeni society has been strengthened, and the family is the most important institution in every aspect of their lives. Especially today, the family is the only security net that young people have in Yemen. Although youth share an overwhelmingly negative perception of formal politics, as a consequence of their observations and experiences with the government, they believe in the state as an institution, and demand that it play a stronger role in their lives. The main concerns youth have are related to their economic situation in the midst of the ongoing war.

## 2. Economic Situation

When Yemen's youth took to the streets to demand the fall of the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, economic factors were the main drivers of the protests. Youth criticised the widespread government corruption and the regime's patronage politics, which favoured personal connections over qualifications and thus restricted most young people's access to the job market. This sentiment was best expressed in the pictures shared on social media at the time, of young, unemployed Yemenis sitting on the protest squares around the country publicly presenting their qualifications: diplomas and certificates they had accumulated over the years. Most of the young people living in Yemen today were observers rather than participants in the protests. At the time, 37 per cent of the respondents were between 11 and 15 years of age; only 12 per cent, the majority which was male – 20 per cent male, 2 per cent female – had previously participated in a protest. Nevertheless, 56 per cent state that the events have changed their lives. According to 19-year-old Buraq<sup>4</sup> from Abyan, he »first thought that these uprisings were aiming to defeat the corruption in these countries to achieve development. However, we found that they only made things worse«. Six years after the beginning of the protests in 2011, young people in Yemen face the same – if not worse – challenges.

Generally, feelings of insecurity run high among youth. When asked whether they feel »totally secure« (10) or

4. Names of interview partners have been anonymized.



»not secure at all« (1), the average is 5.0. Youth feel most insecure with regard to the probability of armed conflict, their future professional career, and their economic situation. When asked about their anxieties – apart from those related to the security situation and violence – 73 per cent most strongly fear becoming poor, and 76 per cent see food shortages as an important change in their lives since 2011. When looking at the in-depth interviews, it becomes clear that young people see these insecurities as interlinked. Armed conflict has increased throughout the country, with 68 per cent of the respondents making

the 2011 events responsible for the widespread violence. Particularly since the start of the Saudi-led military campaign in 2015, youth have not only become more vulnerable to physical violence, but the job market has also been affected, with young people finding it increasingly difficult to find paid work. In the in-depth interviews, some youth reveal that they have lost their job or had to stop their education because of the conflict.

This affects their economic situation: 66 per cent rate their personal economic situation to be »rather/very

Table 1: »Talking about these events now, how would you judge the following statements?« (Values in percentages »agree«, rounding errors may occur.)

	Total	Male	Female
The events did not change anything	38	34	43
The events are continuing	91	93	89
The events were started by the youth and then hijacked by others	69	77	61
The events united the youth globally	35	35	36
The events were of great importance for myself	37	38	36
The events were enabled by the secular youth	47	52	41
The Muslim Brotherhood made the events happen	37	46	27
The Islamists are strengthened by the events	31	32	29
The events changed my life	66	66	65
With the events we are better off today	17	14	19
The events enabled Islamic solidarity to grow	25	25	25
The events brought the Arab people closer to each other	27	28	25
The events are responsible for widespread violence	75	76	73
International actors have supported Arab regimes too long	40	46	35
External actors instigated the events	64	73	54
International actors have worked long for the Arab regimes to fall	63	71	55
The US wanted to stir up the whole region	66	74	59

bad«, with 65 per cent not having a budget of their own, either from working, from their families, or other sources. Those who do not have an income of their own are either students (29 per cent), permanently not working (39 per cent), or are long-term unemployed (24 per cent). Males and those with a high level of education are most likely to have a source of income. In particular, this leaves young women and uneducated youth economically vulnerable. In terms of education, 57 per cent of the respondents either have a high or medium educational degree, whereas 30 per cent have a low degree (up to primary school), and 13 per cent are illiterate. The survey results reveal that the majority of those with high education who do have a job work for the state. Usually, positions within state institutions are given on the basis of patronage politics. This has long been part of the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's strategy to secure support within the population. Often those who work for the state don't have a proper position, but merely collect a salary.<sup>5</sup> Muhammad, a 27-year-old from Sanaa, pointed out that »no one gets a job unless you have a mediator, so most of the talented youth are unemployed while those people with no qualifications got jobs only because they have mediators«. This is confirmed by the survey results, as 50 per cent of those who work received the job through their families and 28 per cent found out about the job through friends. However, with 12 per cent of the youth stating that they work for the state, this generation's access to state salaries appears smaller than their parent's generation; a third of their fathers worked for the state. The majority of the youth who work are self-employed – either in agriculture, the service sector, or other work that does not require higher education (such as trade).

Yet, even those with a paying job are vulnerable: 72 per cent of them do not receive wages in case of sickness and, indeed, only 1 per cent of the respondents has health insurance. This, coupled with the fact that only 9 per cent of the youth have savings – mostly for security and emergencies – leaves young people in Yemen economically insecure. The debt carried by 28 per cent of the respondents is to individuals rather than to institutions, such as banks. In fact, only 2 per cent have a bank account. As a result of the complete absence of public

institutions that could secure the livelihood of vulnerable youth, even 59 per cent of the youth who have a budget of their own are financially dependent on their families.

When asked which institutions youth trust the most, the answer is the family: young people turn to their families when they are in need of money (68 per cent), in case of sickness (76 per cent), or other personal problems (61 per cent). Given the weakness of the Yemeni state and the high youth unemployment rate, young people's dependence on their families is unsurprising. Afrah, a 28-year-old from Sanaa, sums up the conundrum: »I feel very sorry that a man aged 20 or 25 years and still depends on his parents. I think the problem is not the youth but the state and the community that we live in, as there are no job opportunities; the increase of unemployment because of wars and bombings that made youth jobless and dependent on their parents«. Nevertheless, it is particularly young women who depend on their families (95 per cent), with 62 per cent of them permanently unemployed and 27 per cent of them students.

Only 6 per cent can financially contribute to their parents' income on a regular basis; 14 per cent can do so on an irregular basis. When asked to rate their family's economic situation, 50 per cent of the youth rate their situation as »very/rather bad«. However, when looking back at the time before the Arab Spring, 68 per cent state that their situation was »very/rather good«. The well-being of a family very much depends on the father's position. The largest group of the fathers work for the state (30 per cent), while others are self-employed in agriculture or other sectors that do not require higher education, but some sort of qualification. Most of the fathers are paid per month and receive on average 222 EUR. In case of sickness, only 27 per cent receive wages. Regarding the mothers, 95 per cent do not work for money and are thus dependent on their husbands, while 11 per cent of the fathers are unemployed. The fathers of 18 per cent of the respondents have passed away.

A certain level of security is provided through the possession of land: 98 per cent of respondents live in private housing, with 84 per cent owning the house; 38 per cent own agricultural land. While with 26 per cent a large section of the families are able to live self-reliantly – able to produce food for their own consumption – 74 per cent are fully dependent on mostly neighbourhood markets and grocers. Given the stark drop in food im-

5. Daniel Egel, Tribal Diversity, Political Patronage and the Yemeni Decentralization Experiment, PhD thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 2010; [https://www.cgdev.org/doc/events/Post-Doc%20Seminars/Daniel\\_Egel.pdf](https://www.cgdev.org/doc/events/Post-Doc%20Seminars/Daniel_Egel.pdf) (accessed 28.6.2017).

ports since 2015, it is not surprising that the respondents rated their access to food 5.8 on a scale from 1 = »not at all secure« to 10 = »totally secure«. However, a majority of the households do bake their own bread, with 66 per cent baking bread all the time, and 30 per cent both baking bread and buying it at the bakery. In addition, 95 per cent of the households have a stove.

### 3. Family and Values

Not only is the family the most trusted institution, but it also plays a central role in Yemeni society in general. When asked what aspects of life are most important to them, »engaging in a good family life« ranks amongst the most important aspects (9.1 out of 10). Of the youth questioned, 50 per cent are single and 43 per cent are married. Of those who are married, 77 per cent are between 26 and 30 years old, while 80 per cent of singles are between 16 and 20. This indicates that the typical age of marriage is between 21 and 25, as the survey results show that roughly half of this age cohort is married, while the other half is single.

The phase of youth does not end with marriage or at a certain age. This becomes evident when looking at the survey results, as 92 per cent of those questioned between the age of 16 and 30 consider themselves to be youth. The in-depth interviews reveal that respondents associate being young with being energetic; being able to contribute to the family, community, and country; moreover, they consider getting a good education followed by a job to be one of their responsibilities. In fact, when given a number of aspects and asked to rate their importance, they rated »being diligent, hardworking and ambitious« as important (8.3 out of 10). Many youth express shame when discussing their dependence on their parents. As Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi, Yemeni academic states, the status of youth is determined by one's relationship with the family, and whether one lives under the authority of parents or in-laws or not.<sup>6</sup>

When the term »youth« is understood in this manner, the importance of marriage and having a family for one's progress in life becomes clear. Given that 91 per cent of the respondents state that one needs a family to live a

happy life and 89 per cent saying one needs children, it is not surprising that 56 per cent of the unmarried respondents are anxious about remaining unmarried and single; and 60 per cent state that it has become more difficult to find a partner in recent years. Two reasons for this from a male perspective are that women have become too demanding and insist on higher financial security. From a female perspective, the main reason is that it has become difficult to find a partner because men are increasingly poor and cannot take care of a family (72 per cent). Furthermore, 18 per cent of male respondents say that women no longer accept traditional roles, while 10 per cent of the female respondents say that men do not accept educated women. Having a partner that they can trust ranks very high amongst the aspects of life important to youth, with an average score of 9.2 out of 10. Indeed, in contrast to the Yemeni tradition of arranged marriages, youth highly value being able to choose their partners themselves, rating this aspect of life on average with 8.0 out of 10.

The majority of the youth (65 per cent) live with their parents and are thus under someone else's authority. While this reflects young people's financial dependence on their families, it also reflects the centrality of family within the Yemeni society, as a Yemeni household is not traditionally restricted to the nuclear family. On average, the household in which youth live encompasses 8.7 people, which by far exceeds the regional average of 5.6. While nearly all unmarried youth live with their parents, it is not the norm that moving out of the parental home and establishing a household of their own comes with marriage; 23 per cent of those who are married live with their parents, which is particularly true for males. While 50 per cent of married males live in their parental home, only 3 per cent of married women do so; 89 per cent of married women live with their partner.

Traditionally, when a young man gets married in Yemen, his wife moves into his parent's house, because the eldest son in particular is expected to assume the role of head of the household; this is why the number of women who live with their parents is lower. For a Yemeni woman, marriage often means leaving her parent's house. This is further clarified when looking at the question of who heads the household. As the majority of males and unmarried youth live in their parents' house, the majority of these groups (62 per cent of males and 80 per cent of unmarried youth) also state that their fa-

6. Abdulsalam Al-Rubaidi, The concept of *shabab* in Yemen, in *Yemen Report* 45, nos. 1/2 (2011): 122f.



ther is the head of the household. This includes 31 per cent of married males (as opposed to 2 per cent of married females), who state that their father is the head of the household. The majority of married females (75 per cent) state that their husband heads the household; indeed 63 per cent of married men consider themselves to be head of the household and 65 per cent of those who are married have a separate household for their own family. However, the fact that the males' fathers play a tremendous role as head of the household and given the large portion of youth who live under the authority of the father – despite marriage – underlines the slow transition from youth to adulthood. Yet it also underlines the patriarchal nature of Yemeni society, with 51 per cent of the sample stating that their father is the head of the household. Only 4 per cent of women state that they are the head of the household themselves, and 10 per cent of all respondents state that their mother is the head of the household; 20 per cent state that their mother is in charge of daily affairs in the household, while 13 per cent of females state they are responsible for the daily tasks themselves.

The fact that the majority of the youth would raise their own children exactly the same way or about the same way as they were raised by their parents shows that the majority of youth conform to the traditions and norms with which they were raised. When asked how important »paying attention to the codes of honour and shame« are in the lives of the youth, they rated it on average at

9.4 out of 10. This also includes gender roles and religious norms. Nevertheless, 29 per cent would raise their children »differently« and 9 per cent would raise their children »very differently«. Especially those with higher education (50 per cent) and those living in small (49 per cent) or big cities (48 per cent) would raise their children differently. Certainly, the educational gap between generations can be an explanatory factor when it comes to the question of how children should be raised. Only 28 per cent of the respondents have a father with high (20 per cent) or medium (8 per cent) levels of education. The majority of the fathers are illiterate (40 per cent).

On a more general level, only 34 per cent assess the relations between the generations to be harmonious within the country; 55 per cent of the respondents are fairly or very anxious about seriously falling out with their parents although 76 per cent of them find the relations between generations within their family to be harmonious. The centrality of the family is again expressed by the youth when they were given a list of groups out of which they chose family as the one they feel most attached to (9.6 out of 10). In second and third place are their religious community (8.5 out of 10) and the people of their region. When asked how religious they are, the youth rated their religiosity on average at 8.1, whereas the perceived level of religiosity increased slightly when compared with five years earlier. The majority (48 per cent) do not have any visible signs of religiosity, such as a prayer bump. This is particularly true for men (88

Table 2: »What about your attachments to different groups. Do you feel attached to ...?« (Scale from 1 = »not attached at all« to 10 = »totally attached«)

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Your national community	7,6	7,6	7,7
Your religious community	8,5	8,4	8,5
The Arab Nation	6,0	6,0	6,0
Your tribal community	7,5	7,9	7,1
The people of your region	8,4	8,8	8,0
Your family	9,6	9,7	9,5
The young people around the world	3,6	4,0	3,0

per cent), as opposed to women who wear the hijab or niqab. In addition, 85 per cent of the youth believe religion is a private matter, yet, 74 per cent of them believe that Islam should play a larger role in daily life; »believing in God« (9.8) and »spreading the message of Islam« (9.2) rank among the most important value-related aspects in the youths' lives.

#### 4. Political Participation and Attitudes

Youth in Yemen display a rather high degree of interest in politics, with 30 per cent saying they are »interested« or »very interested«. This is not surprising given Yemen's civil society and political party landscape, which – despite its weaknesses – has been quite vibrant since the early 1990s when compared to many other MENA countries. Since 1993, Yemen has regularly held parliamentary, local council, and presidential elections.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is also unsurprising that 47 per cent of the respondents, rather than merely being interested in politics, would consider participating in elections in the future, with 35 per cent already having done so in the past. Not all respondents appear to share the same understanding of what »interest in politics« entails. Young people based in small cities are a case in point. Those residing in small cities, as opposed to large cities or rural areas, seem to be least interested in politics (10 per cent). Yet, 33 per cent have participated in protests in the past and would consider doing so again.

Assuming that participating in protests goes hand in hand with a certain degree of political interest, the results suggest that the overall number of youth who have an interest in politics is likely more than 30 per cent. Against the backdrop of the country's conservative social norms, it is not surprising that men (34 per cent) appear to be slightly more interested in politics than women (27 per cent), with the gap widening when it comes to seeking information on politics and political activism. Males and those with high levels of education (36 per cent) are most likely to actively inform themselves on politics.

Face-to-face communication is the main source of information for youth in Yemen. This is also linked to the Yemeni culture of »Qat sessions«, in which Yemenis

consume the mild stimulant Qat for an extended period, and converse and exchange information on topics including politics, religion, or developments in the community.<sup>8</sup> While genders are segregated, both men and women participate in such sessions, often together with family and friends. Institutions in general, and the media in specific are – in contrast to the family – less trusted. Face-to-face communication is followed by television (53 per cent) and radio (43 per cent) as sources of information for young people. The Internet or mobile technology is used only by 18 per cent and 17 per cent respectively, though this figure is higher in big cities where 45 per cent of youth use the Internet to inform themselves. Those with higher levels of education also rely much more on mobile and Internet technologies and less on face-to-face communication (72 per cent).

Beyond their political interests and the active search for information, political engagement and activism generally appear to be of little significance to Yemeni youth. On a list of 28 aspects of personal life that are important to respondents, »engaging for politics« scored second lowest (4.5 out of 10), just above »pursuing my own agenda, even if against interest of others« (4.1 out of 10). Young people see the main reasons for their limited activism in the lack of opportunities, restrictions imposed by their families, and the fact that only strong men have a say. The latter is related to a generally negative perception when it comes to formal politics. For instance, 27-year-old Muhammad from Sanaa claims that »99 per cent of the political life is lies. [...] The politics that we listen to in the radio are for the parties and the government and all of them are lies and untrustworthy«.

A similar view is also expressed with regard to the events of 2011: 58 per cent of the respondents agree that the events were started by youth and then hijacked by others. The in-depth interviews echo the widely spread perception of the youth representing the »good«. This opinion is reflected in the statement of 27-year-old Fatima from Taiz: »Youth should be involved in all public and country affairs, opinions and activities. Youth should have a decent position since they are the dynamic group in the community; if they are in a good position then the whole nation is in a good position, and if they are not the whole nation will not be in a good position«. This

7. Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

8. Lisa Wedeen, *The Politics of Deliberation: Qat chews as public spheres in Yemen*, in *Public Culture* 19, no. 1 (2009): 59f.

stands in stark contrast to the perception respondents have of the established political parties and movements that were later accused of having »hijacked the revolution«. Additionally, there is an overwhelming perception of local politics being driven by the interests of external actors: more than half of the respondents believe external actors instigated the events of 2011, that international actors have worked long for the Arab regimes to fall, and that the United States wanted to stir up the whole region. The UN, which oversaw the implementation of the so-called GCC agreement that initiated a transfer of power and provided for a transitional roadmap, is among the least trusted institutions in Yemen (23 per cent).

This negative perception of politics is reflected in the type of political engagement youth are involved in, with only 8 per cent being active in a political party. Indeed, political parties belong to those institutions trusted the least by the respondents; nevertheless, 13 per cent would consider joining a political party in the future. Most youth are active through their schools or universities (49 per cent of activists), and the educational system is amongst the institutions they trust most (35 per cent). This is surprising, especially given its partial collapse since the beginning of the international military campaign in 2015, which has targeted schools, amongst other civilian infrastructure. Almost a quarter of the active youth are active in youth organisations and associations, which organisations were likely founded in the context of the Arab Spring protests. Of the active youth, it is particularly the highly educated and males who enlist in them.

Despite the high levels of religiosity amongst respondents, of those who are active, 14 per cent are active in religious institutions. Additionally, 17 per cent state that they »frequently« engage for their religious convictions; 29 per cent trust religious institutions; and 30 per cent admit »limited trust« in them, and indeed this is reflected in the in-depth interviews. With regard to the modes of activism that respondents would consider engaging in, participating in elections and boycotting goods rank the highest, followed by protesting: 16 per cent of respondents would consider participating in a demonstration, with 12 per cent already having done so in the past. In contrast to protesting, participating in elections and boycotting products are acceptable and even expected modes of political engagement. Protests have become

frequent in some parts of the country since 2005, but only after 2011 did large parts of the population start participating in them.

In contrast to the narrative told by the international press on the historic protests, any political activism involving Internet technology ranked very low. A third of the respondents use the Internet; only 6 per cent have Internet access at home, the majority access the Internet via smartphones. Only a small share use social media for political mobilisation (10 per cent) or to oppose political positions (8 per cent) or discussions. Twice as many use the internet for religious mobilisation or discussions. The majority uses social media to keep in contact with friends and family (83 per cent), to organise meetings with friends (48 per cent), and to share music and videos (52 per cent).

Similarly, when it comes to the field of activism, respondents direct their activities towards society rather than politics – for example to support old and vulnerable people (17 per cent do so frequently) or youth (14 per cent). Interestingly, many are active for a better and cleaner environment (15 per cent). Fewer are active in politics, with only 5 per cent stating they frequently engage for social and political change, while 10 per cent state that they are active for gender equality. Generally, male respondents are more politically active and more likely to become politically active than females. In terms of political activism, with the exception of participating in elections and boycotting goods, female respondents have only been minimally active. This is due to the strict social mores enforced within Yemeni society – 59 per cent of the female respondents state that their families do not allow them to become politically active.<sup>9</sup> Afrah, a 28-year-old from Sanaa states that she was interested in becoming politically active, but »the Yemeni community and my family don't encourage women to be involved in such field or in political parties and institutes. Right now the only thing that I have sufficient knowledge about in politics and is available for me is voting in elections«.

The fact that families are also an obstacle to youth when it comes to political participation again reflects the centrality of the family within Yemeni society. Yet, social

9. Nadia Al-Sakkaf, Yemen's women and the quest for change: Political participation after the Arab revolution, in Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (Eds.) Perspective, 2012; available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09434.pdf> (accessed 28.06.2017).

institutions, such as the family or tribe, are trusted the most by youth. Yet although tribes, which in many areas of the country fulfil state functions – such as the provision of security, as well as law and order – receive more trust from youth than most state institutions listed in the survey, youth overwhelmingly demand (82 per cent) that the state play a stronger role in their everyday lives. Only 6 per cent want it to play a smaller role. This appears odd given that Yemen has never had a strong state and that government and parliament are trusted only by 15 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. The low level of trust is also reflected in the in-depths interviews, as in the following by 18-year-old Bushra from Abyan: »I don't trust the government because it should take care of people's affairs but it doesn't. The government only works for some groups and it becomes useless and helpless relating to security and stability provision«. This demonstrates that the high demand for a state reflects young people's belief in the state as an institution, rather than their lived experience with it. Less than half of the respondents believe the state can provide them with rights, such as the security of basic needs and the absence of violence. Afrah, a 28-year-old from Sanaa sums up young people's demands: »We want institutions that are dominated by laws, not by individuals«.

When asked what type of political system youth preferred, the majority advocate a democratic system (24 per cent). In contrast, systems based partially or fully on an Islamic system/Sharia are wanted by 18 per cent and

17 per cent respectively. While some rights inherent to liberal democracies are important to the youth – such as freedom of opinion (8.0 out of 10), freedom of movement (7.9 out of 10), and basic rights for minorities (7.6 out of 10) – the youth prioritise the absence of violence (8.8) and the security of basic needs (9.4). The freedom to elect political leaders (6.6 out of 10) and freedom of assembly (5.2) rank the lowest. And indeed 21 per cent envision the rule of a strong man as the desired political system. Generally in the Middle East, the rule of a strong man often comes in the form of military rule. Surprisingly, 32 per cent of the youth trust the military. This appears odd given the fragmented and highly politicised state of the Yemen military today. Marwan, a 31-year-old from Taiz states that he trusts »the army strongly as they can control the situation and they can put out all these conflicts. We pray to God to help them so that they meet our expectations«. In contrast, only 6 per cent trust militias, which today control different parts of the fragmented country.

## 5. The Future of Yemeni Youth

Given the grave insecurities with regard to their personal safety and the economic situation that young people in Yemen are facing today, it not surprising that when looking to the future, they prioritise having a good job (37 per cent) over marriage (34 per cent) and good family relations (22 per cent). In particular, the in-depth

Table 3: »How important for your life is ...«

(Average values. Scale from 1 = »not important at all« to 10 = »totally important«)

	Total	Male	Female
Absence of violence	8,8	8,9	8,7
Security of basic needs	9,4	9,5	9,3
Basic rights for minorities	7,6	7,8	7,4
Freedom of opinion and speech	8,0	8,4	7,4
Freedom of assembly	5,2	5,7	4,6
Freedom to elect political leaders	6,6	7,2	6,0
Freedom of movement	7,9	8,2	7,5



interviews reveal the anxieties young people have. Muhammad, a 27-year-old from Sanaa, states that »it is important that youth get job opportunities to have their own income so they can get married and have their own life. The job is first of all to achieve everything«. And when asked what the government should do to improve the situation, all youth in the in-depth interviews emphasise that the government should create job and educational opportunities for youth. In contrast to the economic and political situation, it is the family and religion that provides stability to youth. Nevertheless, 38 per cent of the youth have witnessed violence, 19 per cent have suffered from hunger, and 65 per cent are afraid that armed conflicts will threaten their livelihood and their family. Yet, 71 per cent say that they will definitely not emigrate to another country; only 2 per cent state that they will emigrate, and 19 per cent are considering emigration. The European countries respondents consider most are the United Kingdom (23 per cent), France (17 per cent), and Germany (15 per cent). Moreover, 16 per cent of respondents already have a family member who has emigrated; the majority of them are based in the Gulf countries. Because these family members send money back to Yemen, 81 per cent of the youth who have family abroad – and consider this fact important

– feel that they have profited. Although young people in Yemen face an uncertain future, they are reluctant to leave the country.

Yemeni youth look with great concern to the future. With state institutions having collapsed in many parts of the country and the Yemeni population being affected by the continued violent conflict and lack of resources – including food, medicine, and fuel – the situation for young people is unlikely to improve. What this generation of Yemenis demands most is education and job opportunities, because these are the ways for them to contribute to the well-being of their families and communities. Particularly given the reluctance of Yemeni youth to emigrate, it should be a priority to enable them to continue their education in the country and to create job opportunities. This will not only ensure that young people can contribute to their communities at home, but will also help prevent the of radicalisation of young males and the forced marriages of underage girls. The conflict has already exacerbated the already dramatic situation of child marriages and child soldiers in Yemen; families turn to these arrangements in order to generate income, but education and job opportunities could help counteract these trends.



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