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THE MUHAMMASHEEN: MOBILIZATION AMONG YEMEN'S MOST MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY

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About the Author

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Cover photo: SANAA, YEMEN - APRIL 11 : Makeshift tents are seen at Darwan refugee camp in Amran north of Sana'a, Yemen on April 11, 2018. (c) Mohammed Hamoud - Anadolu Images

April 2024

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The historical disenfranchisement Yemen's Muhammasheen face would still be invisible today, to the rest of the country and wider the world, if not for the community's own mobilization efforts in the past four decades.

Muhammasheen, meaning "the marginalized", is a contemporary term for a people whom the rest of Yemeni society had for generations untold referred to with names such as Al-Akhdam, "the servants" or Al-Abeed, "the slaves".

Despite centuries of recorded history in Yemen, this ethnic minority's dark skin has traditionally been denigrated by the rest of society as not belonging to the country, causing them to face caste-like ostracization, stigmatization, and denial of basic human dignity. Muhammasheen communities are often found in shanty towns at the periphery of Yemen's urban centers and in isolated rural areas. This exclusion from mainstream society, dispersion around the country, and the blurry definitions that define the group have made assessing their numbers difficult, with estimates ranging anywhere between 500,000 and 3.5 million.¹

In the 1990s, Muhammasheen who sought to better their community's situation began to be increasingly vocal and active in drawing attention to their plight and asserting their right to be regarded as full members of society. The powers that be have, by turns, attempted to oppress and coopt these initiatives, as well as exploit the Muhammasheen's vulnerable status, which has only been exacerbated by Yemen's ongoing civil war. The belligerent parties on all sides, for instance, have sought out Muhammasheen youth in their impoverished communities and lured them to fight on the frontlines with the promise of a paycheque.

At the national level, Muhammasheen advocacy is today as fragmented as the country itself. However, the drive within the group to better the community at large continues to gain momentum, as evidenced by the ever-growing number of local initiatives around the country, even as the goal of full citizenship remains a distant prospect.

The following paper examines the history and development of Muhammasheen-led activism in Yemen, and this marginalized community's struggle for self-empowerment.

1 Martha Colburn et. al, "Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhammasheen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2021, p.18-19, https://sanaa-center.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

From the Emergence of Muhammasheen Advocacy to the Ongoing Conflict

The first substantive policy action to address the historical disenfranchisement of the Muhammasheen arose in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, also known as South Yemen, before north and south merged in 1990 to form the unified republic. From the late 1960s until unification, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) ruled the south and attempted to impose an egalitarian social policy aimed at eliminating social and tribal hierarchies. While this policy had many flaws and was at times brutally enforced,² one notable outcome was that women and marginalized groups, including Muhammasheen, had greater access to educational facilities and job opportunities.³

The first appearance of an anti-racism movement explicitly advocating on behalf of the Muhammasheen came in 1990, when Muhammad Al-Qairaei, a Muhammasheen from Al-Torbah district in Taiz governorate, founded the Movement for the Defense of Free Blacks (MDFB). Al-Qairaei, then a member of the YSP's Central Committee, said in an interview with this author that while the YSP and other southern leftist groups supported the MDFB's formation, he saw it as important that the movement be established independently from traditional political parties. The MDFB was largely an informal gathering of like-minded Muhammasheen in Taiz in the early years, according to Al-Qairaei, and while individuals undertook their own awareness campaigns to try and shed light on the hardships the community faced, there was little in the way of collective action.

The 1994 Yemen Civil War, in which President Ali Abdullah Saleh's northern forces crushed a southern rebellion, saw the YSP's power and influence dissipate greatly. The socialists'

2 Rim Mugahed, "Tribes and the State in Yemen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 21 January 2022, p.21, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Tribe_and_the_State_in_Yemen_en.pdf

3 Tawfiq Al-Shanwah, "اليسار اليمني بين سطوة الأيديولوجيا وبراغماتية الدولة", The Independent Arabia, 18 December 2023, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/528436/-سطوبة-بين-اليسار-اليمني-تحقيقات-ومطولات-اليسار-اليمني-بين-سطوة-الأيديولوجيا-وبراغماتية-الدولة-2-2->

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support for the Muhammasheen movement weakened in turn.

“After 1994, with the YSP at its weakest state, it was unable to secure sufficient support for the activities of even its own organizations across the cities and governorates of the Republic,” said Al-Qairaei. “This kept its support for us limited to only its newspaper [Al-Thawri], through which we used to write.”

On July 19, 2001, spurred by the deteriorating human rights situation Muhammasheen were facing, Al-Qairaei was among 21 other Muhammasheen activists who had the MDFB officially registered with the state authorities. Their activities subsequently became more focused and deliberate, with a clear agenda to monitor and document human rights violations and racial crimes against Muhammasheen, to pursue legal prosecution against the perpetrators of these acts with the support of allied lawyers and legal advisors and creating awareness within the Muhammasheen community of the importance of obtaining a formal education. The movement also began expanding out from its bases in Taiz and Sana'a, establishing local branches in surrounding governorates.

The new, more active incarnation of the MDFB quickly raised the ire of President Saleh, who was prone to viewing any organization outside of his network of influence as a threat. Racism, and that MDFB was challenging a prevailing social hierarchy in which the Muhammasheen's place is squarely at the bottom, compounded the aggressive response, according to Al-Qairaei. The Saleh regime launched media campaigns to undermine the movement's legitimacy and intimidate its followers, with several members being murdered between 2001 and 2005, including two of the founders. Al-Qairaei said he himself was arrested numerous times during this period.

By 2005, the MDFB had expanded to include branches in both the northern and southern governorates, primarily Al-Dhalea, Taiz, Amanat Al-Asimah, Ibb, Dhamar, and Lahj, with its initiatives including efforts to identify the factors inhibiting Muhammasheen access to education and healthcare services and exposing systematic discrimination that denied dark-skinned people jobs and promotions within the civil service. Saleh then changed tactics and began establishing competing organizations to represent the Muhammasheen community, with the aim to fragment it. Indeed, the MDFB's general secretary would go on to found one of these competing organizations, Al-Mostaqbal, which along with the Al-Amal association became the two most prominent parallel Muhammasheen mobilization groups at that time.⁴

These parallel organizations also began competing for

4 Author interview with Mohammed Al-Qairaei, a Muhammasheen human rights activist and head of the Movement for the Defense of Free Blacks, March 12, 2024; author interview with the former MDFB general secretary and founder of the Al-Mostaqbal Association on March 14, 2024 (name withheld due to present security concerns).

funding. For instance, following Al-Mostaqbal's inception it received \$10,000 from the World Bank's Small Grants Program for capacity-building courses for its administrative staff. The association also widened its program base to include a gender focus, such as providing English training and sewing and knitting classes for women and girls. It also sought to establish a national network, staging consultative meetings in Taiz and Aden to draw in local Muhammasheen groups from around the country.⁵

Membership between the various Muhammasheen organizations remained fluid, however, and the lines between them blurred. In 2007, the 33 most significant Muhammasheen organizations around the country – including the MDFB, Al-Mostaqbal and Al-Amal – were brought together under the umbrella of the National Union of Muhammasheen (NUM), with Saleh supporting this consolidation.

“Saleh's regime focused on forming the National Union as a movement alternative to us,” said Al-Qairaei, “however, in the end it was formed from most of our existing organizations.”

Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party, as well as its main rival in the Yemeni parliament, the Islah party, both understood that there were enough Muhammasheen in particular key districts to sway the ballot. Come election time, GPC officials worked with NUM leaders to encourage Muhammasheen to register to vote and then offer incentives, such as a bag of rice or small amounts of money, to cast their ballot for the GPC's preferred candidate.⁶

In 2011, many members of the Muhammasheen community joined the Yemeni uprising that saw Saleh eventually step down. At the subsequent National Dialogue Conference (NDC), meant to bring together all of Yemen's rivaling factions to draw up a new social contract for the country, only one of the 565 delegates was from the Muhammasheen community, NUM President Noaman al-Hudhaif. Despite this, various NDC committees made recommendations to address the Muhammasheen's plight, including pledges to promote their socioeconomic and political integration and setting a 10% quota for Muhammasheen hires within the civil service and in leadership positions.⁷ To the great misfortune of Yemen and its people, the NDC process collapsed in early 2014, setting the country on course to civil war.⁸

5 Author interview with the former MDFB general secretary and founder of the Al-Mostaqbal Association on March 14, 2024 (name withheld due to present security concerns).

6 Martha Colburn et. al, “Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhammasheen”, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2021, p.47, https://sanaa-center.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

7 Aisha Al-Warraq, “The Historic and Systemic Marginalization of Yemen's Muhammasheen Community”, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 4, 2019, <https://sanaa-center.org/publications/analysis/7490>

8 Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, “Federalism in Yemen: A Catalyst for War, the Present Reality, and the Inevitable Future”, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, p.12-13, https://sanaa-center.org/files/Federalism_in_Yemen.pdf

The War's Impact on Muhammasheen

In 2014, armed conflict in Yemen's north expanded into a civil war, followed by a regional military intervention in 2015 that continues until this writing. Today, the country is divided into zones of control whereby Ansar Allah, known as the Houthis, a fundamentalist Zaydi Shia militia, has established totalitarian rule over most of the north. An array of fractious forces opposed to the Houthis, under the banner of the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG), nominally controls the rest of the country. As a consequence, violence and social fission has displaced millions of people while the ruptured economy has sent millions more into destitution, amounting to one of the largest humanitarian crises of the modern era in a country that was already one of the world's least developed before the conflict.⁹ The Muhammasheen, already the country's most marginalized social group, have endured a disproportionate share of this hardship.¹⁰

A 2015 UNICEF survey found that in Muhammasheen communities poor household living conditions were widespread, with high levels of poverty combined with low levels of literacy and school enrollment and low healthcare access.¹¹

"Just one in five people [surveyed] aged 15 or over could read or write and only two in four children aged 6 to 17 are enrolled in school, though the [Yemeni] average is nearly twice this figure," according to the report, adding that: "Although one-third of the country's citizens receive Social Welfare Fund cash transfers, this drops to just one-fifth of Muhammasheen households. This is particularly worrying as only one in ten have income generating sources such as livestock, transport, sewing machine, etc."¹²

In 2022, ACTED (Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development) and IOM, surveying Muhammasheen households in 14 various districts in IRG (Internationally Recognized Government) areas, showed that 37% lack

enough money to provide food for the family, 49% of children cannot attend schools, and 80% of households cannot cover the costs of accessing health care.¹³ The lack of safe housing has also been identified as a critical need.¹⁴ Notably, the few credible statistics regarding Muhammasheen that have emerged since the beginning of the conflict have come from IRG-controlled governorates, as the Houthi authorities have strictly regulated and restricted the activities of NGOs, activists, and researchers in areas the group controls.¹⁵

Compounding these woes is that the beneficiary selection process for aid distribution often discriminates against members of the Muhammasheen community. International aid is frequently disbursed by local partner organizations, with the enormous humanitarian need of the Yemeni population, in general, creating fierce competition to get on distribution lists. Muhammasheen human rights activists have reported that it is common for local aid distribution networks to deprioritize or remove Muhammasheen from distribution lists.¹⁶

The community's increased vulnerability has had profound impacts on Muhammasheen individuals. For women and girls, anecdotal evidence suggests an increased risk of harassment, abuse, sexual and gender-based violence, and early marriage. For men, the dire economic situation and the inability to generate income have left them vulnerable to exploitation by armed groups.¹⁷

In the south, armed groups such as the Security Belt and the Giants Brigades have regularly recruited Muhammasheen youth with the promise of a monthly salary.¹⁸ In the north, the Houthis have infused similar recruitment efforts with a socio-religious element through the creation of the Ahfad Bilal Organization (the Grandchildren of Bilal Organization).

9 Sarah Vuylsteke, "When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Humanitarian Response is Failing Yemen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 27, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid>

10 Aisha Al-Warraq, "The Historic and Systemic Marginalization of Yemen's Muhammasheen Community", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7490>

11 "UNICEF Yemen Situation Report, January 2015", UNICEF, February 20, 2015, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/unicef-yemen-situation-report-january-2015>

12 Ibid.

13 "2022 Yemen Muhammasheen Community Profile - Survey conducted with Muhammasheen populations in IRG-controlled areas of Yemen", ACTED, IOM, NRC, March 23, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/2022-yemen-muhammasheen-community-profile-survey-conducted-muhammasheen-populations-irg-controlled-areas-yemen-2022>

14 Martha Colburn et. al, "Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhammasheen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2021, p.33-35, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

15 Maggie Michael, "Yemen's Houthi rebels impeding UN aid flow, demand a cut", Associated Press, February 19, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-yemen-ap-top-news-international-news-week-end-reads-edb2cad767ccbf898c220e54c199b6d9>

16 Martha Colburn et. al, "Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhammasheen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2021, p.37-38, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

17 Martha Colburn et. al, "Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhammasheen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2021, p.31-32 & p.39-40, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

18 Author interview with Muhammasheen activists from Aldhalea and Shabwah, March 14, 2024 (names withheld due to present security concerns).

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In Islamic beliefs, Bilal ibn Rabah was a former slave of African descent who became one of Prophet Mohammed's most trusted companions and was the first muezzin, the one who calls Muslims to pray. The attraction for some of the Muhammasheen who have joined has been the elevated social status implicit in the name.¹⁹

"When Houthis announced Ahfad Bilal, there was an appeal to feelings, but the idea and intentions were not to integrate Ahfad Bilal and defend their rights," a Muhammasheen activist who lives in a Houthi-controlled area told this author.²⁰ Indeed, the vice president of the organization has boasted about providing dead and wounded recruits for the war effort on a Houthi-affiliated media outlet.²¹

National-Level Paralysis and Infighting among Anti-Racism Movements

Civil society organizations in Yemen have generally been hard-pressed to remain active and effective during the war. For Muhammasheen groups, there are the added challenges of advocating for a community that is ostracized and socially discriminated against. However, efforts have continued.

On the local level, ongoing Muhammasheen-led anti-racist mobilization efforts span a diverse spectrum of activities, with many activists from the community also working within national and international organizations to assist and protect the various vulnerable groups in Yemen.²² Most locally organized initiatives technically fall under one of the two main umbrella organizations, each associated with a side in the civil war – in Houthi areas it is the Ahfad Bilal Organization, and in IRG areas in the NUM. However, a Muhammasheen activist who spoke with this author said that local groups

tend to maintain a great deal of autonomy and self-direction.²³

The umbrella organizations are generally known for their paralysis in terms of Muhammasheen advocacy. The NUM, for instance, which as of 2019 had grown to encompass some 80 Muhammasheen CSOs,²⁴ claims to be pursuing legal remedies for the Muhammasheen situation but has shown little results. One activist detailed that in 2018 and 2019 he and a team monitored and documented human violations against Muhammasheen, submitted a report to the NUM, but received no reply and the report was never published.

As for the Ahfad Bilal Organization in the Houthi-controlled areas, "there is still activity to demand the rights of Muhammasheen, but only through writings on social media (Facebook). In the field there is nothing significant," said an activist from Al-Dhalea governorate.²⁵

At the end of 2022, a group of young Muhammasheen activists tried to establish a new national initiative to advocate for Muhammasheen and restore confidence that had waned in the broader movement due to the community's fragmentation. Dubbed the 'Shared Destiny Forum', its goal is to establish a collective media front and unify the public discourse. The initiative rallied many emerging youth figures who sought to mobilize around their collective desire to assert and protect the rights of Muhammasheen. When the idea was pitched to the NUM there was internal resistance, with suspicions that the forum was affiliated with the Yemeni Socialist Party. The Yemeni government's Office of Social Affairs and Labor later claimed it had been "informed" that the forum was an attempted coup against the NUM supported by "unknown parties".

"Unfortunately, it was aborted before it was born," said Fawzi Al-habashi, an activist from Taiz. "This is because the National Union launched smear campaigns against us and claimed that the initiative is a distraction of efforts, even though we have a clear vision with youthful will and based on nothing more than volunteer work."

He added that "every time we try to restore the activity, disagreements arise between movements defending the rights of the Muhammasheen, with these internal disagreements weakening the voice of the cause."

¹⁹ Author interview with Muhammasheen activist in Houthi-controlled area, March 14, 2024 (name withheld due to present security concerns).

²⁰ Author interview with Muhammasheen activists from Taiz, March 14, 2024 (name withheld due to present security concerns).

²¹ بمناسبة يوم الصمود الوطني.. سياسيون في محافظة ذمار لننقف" مكتوفي الأيدي وسنواصل الصمود والعطاء للجهات", September 26 Net, April 4, 2022, <https://www.26sep.net/index.php/newspaper/26inter-view/34766-2022-04-03-23-37-08>

²² "Getting Connected to Build Peace in Yemen", Preemptive Love/Search for Common Ground, September 21, 2023, <https://preemptive.org/blog/getting-connected-to-build-peace-in-yemen/>

²³ Author interview with Muhammasheen activists from Aldhalea and Shabwah, March 14, 2024 (name withheld due to present security concerns).

²⁴ Martha Colburn et. al, "Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhammasheen", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2021, p.41, https://sanaa-center.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

²⁵ Author interview with Muhammasheen activists from Al-Dhalea governorate, March 11, 2024 (name withheld due to present security concerns).

Small Initiatives with Outsized Impacts

Fragmentation and dysfunction at the national level of Muhammasheen mobilization efforts has prevented high-level, coordinated advocacy for the community. Despite this, anecdotal evidence suggests that both small groups and individual activists are continuing to pursue grassroots initiatives to address the myriad needs of this marginalized population. A brief survey of such efforts from around the country reveals the differing local circumstances Muhammasheen face, as well as uneven progress in countering the social norms that marginalize the community.

The Better Life Association for Peace and Coexistence in Taiz

While able to attend school growing up in the countryside of Taiz governorate, Fawzi Mahyoub Al-Habashi said he and other dark-skinned people were regularly subjected to racism and bullying by peers, teachers, and school officials, often including physical assaults. He said that his first attempts at advocating on behalf of Muhammasheen came while attending Sana'a University, where he sought to carry out human rights awareness campaigns, but received little support and his studies limited the time he could commit. Al-Habashi graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science and returned to Taiz in 2016, following the outbreak of the war.

Upon his return, he said there had been a notable decrease in the level of racism he encountered, which he attributed to the emergence of many groups that sought to defend the rights of Muhammasheen. He and other activists in Al-Maafer District then began pursuing initiatives to further these gains and support peaceful coexistence between marginalized communities and the wider society. These included awareness campaigns in schools, as well as debate and discussion groups with parents, principals, and local authorities, with the aim of having racist behavior prohibited.

These initiatives led Al-Habashi and the other activists to establish the Better Life Association for Peace and Coexistence in 2023. The association has both continued its previous activities and expanded into programs to assist displaced Muhammasheen families and raise awareness among the community about the importance of asserting their human rights.

Al-Habashi said the association includes different groups, consisting of roughly 40% Muhammasheen, 30% displaced peoples, and 30% from other marginalized communities. The association also formed a partnership with Oxfam for projects advocating for the rights of Muhammasheen communities.

An Activist and Human Rights Defender in Shabwa Governorate

The term akhdam, meaning slave, is still commonly used to refer to Muhammasheen in southern areas of Yemen, according to Ismail Al-Najjar, an activist and human rights defender from Shabwa Governorate. Al-Najjar, born in 1978, holds a bachelor's degree in Arabic language, is a teacher employee by the Ministry of Education, and is the president of the Qaderoon Foundation for Development and Peacebuilding, which aims to help integrate Muhammasheen into the wider society.

Appealing to Islamic equity principles, he said he has regularly used social gatherings, such as weddings and other celebrations, as a platform to discuss racist practices towards Muhammasheen and advocate for recognition of the community's basic human rights. Among the social norms he has fought against is the custom of Muhammasheen being forced to sit outside of the tents to eat while the rest of the guests dine inside. Al-Najjar said his advocacy led him to some local notoriety, facilitating him being invited to speak on the radio regarding Muhammasheen issues and the local authorities encouraging him in his activities.

A difference between Shabwa and other parts of the country, particularly the north, according to Al-Najjar, is that most of the population is dark-skinned. As a result, discrimination against Muhammasheen is less of a racial issue and based more on origins and perceived ethnicity. Across the south in general, Al-Najjar says those Muhammasheen who grew up under Yemeni Socialist Party rule before the country's unification, such as himself, benefited from the party's more egalitarian social policies that allowed many to attain higher education degrees and integrate more into the wider society. He contrasts this group with the waves of Muhammasheen that came to Shabwa following the 1994 civil war, primarily from the northern coastal governorate of Hudaydah, who are generally denigrated as a servant class and socially excluded.

Al-Najjar said that he has begun to notice that racist social norms against Muhammasheen have been receding. Among the things he points to is that now, when there is a death in the Muhammasheen community, people from outside the community will come to pay their respects, something previously unheard of.

Social Exclusion and Institutional Racism in Al-Mahra

Fatima Hasan is a lawyer from Aden who today lives in Yemen's eastern-most governorate of Al-Mahra. While during her studies in Aden, she says she faced discrimination in the university community, and at times even from people she perceived as close friends, Hasan said the situation facing Muhammasheen in Al-Mahra is far more dire. There, she says Muhammasheen are effectively cast out of urban centers, forced to live in slums on the periphery, and children are denied any chance at an education. She contrasted that with Aden where, while racism was common, Muhammasheen were still able to attend school along with other Yemenis.

As a lawyer, she also sees institutional racism in Al-Mahra. As an example, she described one case in which two men were accused of theft, one from a local tribe, the other a Muhammasheen. The prosecution had evidence incriminating the man from the tribe, but no direct evidence against the Muhammasheen. Regardless, the Muhammasheen was held in prison and beaten, while a sheikh from the tribe was able to mediate the other man's release. The Muhammasheen remained in prison until the trial, at which point the judge ordered him released due to lack of evidence.

Hasan said that in being a lawyer, she is able to live a better life than most Muhammasheen, though she is still regularly subjected to racism. She points to examples in her workplace, where she has been derided in the prosecution office, taunted by colleagues who call her Harafeesh (a Mahri name for Muhammasheen), and has had potential clients drop her once they discover she is Muhammasheen.

The Family Solidarity Association, from Ibb to Aden

Beginning in 2000, Salem Al-Musayyab and his wife began convening regular reading and writing classes for school-aged Muhammasheen who were otherwise unable to access formal education in the Meshrafah area of Ibb governorate. This eventually led him to founding a small CSO called the Family Solidarity Association that aims to help struggling families obtain basic day-to-day needs.

Salem says that while he early on recognized the importance of education and would try to help peers locate basic supplies like notepads and pens to complete their classes, there was general ambivalence in the Muhammasheen community

towards schooling, creating another barrier to improving their circumstances. His education ended at high school, as he was unable to afford university and his family did not value it as an option.

In 2022, he says his social media activism led to the Houthis threatening him, after which he fled to Aden, where he and his wife continued their civil society activities for Muhammasheen in the Zahraa Khalil displacement camp in Aden's Dar Saad area. For income, he works as a guard at a private university in Aden, and from time to time he sells juice or tea on the streets.

Looking Ahead: The Long Struggle against Racism

Yemen already faced an immense array of social, political, economic, and security challenges prior to the war, which have since metastasized during the conflict. The Muhammasheen community, the country's most marginalized, faces an even more daunting future than the general population. The prospects of Muhammasheen mobilization being able to bridge the general fragmentation in Yemeni society today is also bleak.

That said, there continues to be steady growth of independent local initiatives across the country advocating on behalf of the community. This suggests a strengthening base for collective action and presents a potential vector for positive change. As does the increasing networking between these local initiatives, led by a younger generation of activists that is less inclined to entrench themselves in traditional political rivalries, and more savvy with working at the intersection of advocacy, policymaking, international outreach, and social media influence.

The clearest opportunities to help further Muhammasheen efforts to attain social equity and inclusion would likely involve investing in these local initiatives to build their institutional capacities and sustainability and strengthening the networking between them. Care would have to be taken to ensure these efforts were streamlined and avoided creating artificial competition and rivalry between groups. Efforts should also involve fostering constructive communications between Muhammasheen groups and other civil society organizations and the local authorities. This broader network of allied initiatives would almost certainly help support efforts to document the impact of the civil war on Muhammasheen, address human rights violations against them, and help facilitate economic opportunities and promote the social inclusion of this marginalized community.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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