



**COMBATING TERRORISM IN YEMEN  
A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE**

**2010**

## **[COMBATING TERRORISM IN YEMEN]**

This report is the result of a recent initiative which aimed to rally Yemeni youth voices from all over the world to address the various challenges facing Yemen as they relate to the growing threat of terrorism and how to best deal with this threat from the viewpoint of those most affected by it.

## Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all our youth volunteers who provided us with their valuable support and assistance throughout the past few weeks. Without their support this initiative would have not been successful.

Thank you also to Donna Kennedy-Glans, Executive Director of Bridges Social Development, a Canadian volunteer based humanitarian organization based in Calgary, Alberta, for the encouragement and support provided since this initiative was nothing but an idea.

The support of the following organizations was also key to the success of this initiative:

- **Democratic School –The Youth Consultative Council**
- **SHAWTHAB Foundation for Childhood and Development**
- **Advisory Committee for Childhood and Youth**

## Contributions

This report was prepared by Ahmed Al-Awah, Rafat Al-Akhali, and Alaa Qasem. An Arabic version is also available and can be obtained by visiting our Arabic website at <http://resonateyemen.org/arabic>.

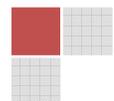
Copies of this publication are available from:

### **Resonate! Yemen**

[report@resonateyemen.org](mailto:report@resonateyemen.org)

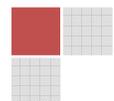
<http://resonateyemen.org>

Included in this publication are the opinions of over 200 Yemeni youth. The Resonate! Yemen team acknowledges the contributions of the Yemeni youth, including their permission to use their opinions in the creation of this report.



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## Executive Summary

Lately, Yemen has been the topic of extensive, mostly negative, news coverage, especially since the failed Christmas day terrorist attack on a U.S civilian airplane. As a result of the failed bombing attempt, the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has called a high-level international meeting in London on January 27 to discuss ways to assist Yemen in the challenges it is facing. Mr. Brown also announced that a new “Friends of Yemen” group would be established in the region to help prevent the Middle Eastern nation slipping into a failed state.

Given the international community’s renewed focus on Yemen, and the huge effect that the issue of terrorism and how Yemen deals with it has on the future of the country, the youth of Yemen, living in all corners of the world, would like the international community to hear their opinions on the issue of terrorism and how to most effectively deal with it from the viewpoint of those most affected by it.

To this effect, the Resonate! Yemen initiative was started. After three weeks of rallying Yemeni youth voices from around the world, this report will summarize the opinions of more than 200 participants on how to best deal with the issue of terrorism in Yemen.

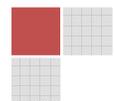
In general, the participants rated poverty as the top challenge facing Yemen in combating terrorism. The weak economy and very high unemployment rate lead to desperation and assist terrorist organizations with targeting youth by simply giving them a goal in life and the promise for a “better future”.

Another issue mentioned by the participants is the administrative and financial corruption within the government. The youth expressed their frustration with the rampant corruption in all levels of the government and the society as a whole. This level of corruption is seen as a major contributor to the poverty and the weak economy of the country.

Participants also believe that the role of the government in combating terrorism, or the lack thereof, has contributed to the challenges Yemen faces today. Specifically, the government’s inability to spread its sovereignty over a large portion of the country has given terrorist networks the freedom to penetrate the country’s borders and wander around freely, preaching a message of hatred and terror, equipped with misguided quotations from Islamic text to people with simple understanding of the religion.

On international assistance, an overwhelming majority of the participants in the initiative believe that Yemen needs the assistance of the international community to overcome its current challenges. However, most participants prefer that the assistance comes from Gulf countries, Arab countries, and Islamic countries. There is a general mistrust of the intentions of the west when offering assistance. The participants also believe that the most effective way to assist Yemen is through financial aid and technical assistance to the military.

In conclusion, given the overwhelming response of youth to this initiative it is clear that Yemen's youth are here, they want to help and they need to be heard.



## Introduction

### ***Background***

With an estimated 45% of its population living on less than \$2 a day, Yemen is the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country. According to the latest UNESCO estimates, almost 70% of Yemen's population of 23 million is under the age of 25.

In recent years, the Yemeni government has been facing an extended war with rebels in the northern governorate of Sa'ada combined with a growing separatist movement in the south. Capitalizing on the government's preoccupation with these issues, terrorist organizations linked to Al-Qaeda have intensified their activities in Yemen.

Terrorist organizations have almost always recruited youth to carry out their operations. For example, only 1 of the 19 September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers was over the age of 30. The four London bombers were aged between 18 and 30. All of the Mumbai attackers were reported to be in their twenties.

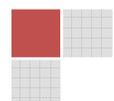
Based on these facts, it is our belief that any serious discussions about tackling terrorism should always involve youth representatives from the problem regions. It is with this reality in mind that a group of Yemeni youth living in Canada decided to start an initiative to lobby the international community to engage young people in the countries affected by terrorism. The initiative came to be known as Resonate! Yemen and it intends to show the world that Yemeni youth would like to be partners in finding solutions to address their country's problems.

### ***The initiative: Resonate! Yemen***

Lately, Yemen has been the topic of extensive, mostly negative, news coverage, especially since the failed Christmas day terrorist attack on a U.S civilian airplane. As a result of the failed bombing attempt, the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has called a high-level international meeting in London on January 27 to discuss ways to assist Yemen in the challenges it is facing. Mr. Brown also announced that a new "Friends of Yemen" group would be established in the region to help prevent the Middle Eastern nation slipping into a failed state.

Given the international community's renewed focus on our country, and the huge effect that the issue of terrorism and how Yemen deals with it has on the future of the country, the youth of Yemen, living in all corners of the world, would like the international community to hear our opinions on the issue of terrorism and how to most effectively deal with it from the viewpoint of those most affected by it.

Therefore, we decided to initiate a grassroots movement to collect the opinions of Yemeni youth on key questions regarding the issue of terrorism in Yemen.



## ***Why Resonate?***

The literal definition of resonance is: res-o-nance: n. “an excited state of a stable particle causing a sharp maximum in the probability of absorption of electromagnetic radiation”

It is our belief that our efforts are best reflected through the resonance phenomena especially when defined as follows:

**Resonate! Yemen:** “an excited state of Yemen’s youth participating in causing a maximum effect in the probability of absorption of their thoughts and ideas in the international community”

## ***Who We Are***

The Resonate! Yemen initiative started out with group of Yemeni youth living in Canada who wanted to rally the voices of their fellow Yemeni youth from around the world to reach out to the international community through the January 27 conference in London discussing the rising threat of terrorism from Yemen and how to deal with it. The hope was that by rallying enough voices of Yemeni youth around the world they would be able to draw enough media attention to Yemeni youth opinions on how to counter the threat of terrorism in our country. By creating media attention and reaching out to key partners they aimed to ensure that the collective message reach the January 27 London conference attendees.

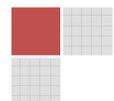
We also hope that media coverage of this initiative and other such initiatives would offset some of the negative coverage and attention that Yemen is currently receiving.

Since the start of this initiative Resonate! Yemen has reached more than 7000 Yemeni youth living in all corners of the world.

## ***Our Objectives***

In essence, the objectives of the initiative were to:

- Provide a transparent platform for Yemeni youth, across the globe, to offer their insights on the challenge of terrorism that Yemen is facing, and voice their opinions on what our fellow global citizens can do to help Yemenis respond to this challenge
- Attract the attention of the international community to the opinions of Yemeni youth on this matter, and aim to deliver these opinions to the attendees of the January 27 conference regarding Yemen which will be hosted by the British Government in London



## ***Our Approach***

To rally the voices of Yemeni youth from around the world we used various high-tech and low-tech methods.

On the high-tech side of things, we engaged various social media and viral marketing technologies. These include Wordpress.org blogging software to record the opinions of youth. The WordPress-based website generated 9000 views over the span of 9 days resulting in 120 unique participants with a total of 300 comments.

Facebook, a popular social networking website, was also used. Facebook was primarily used for global outreach. The initiative was broadcast to the 8 largest Yemen-related groups on Facebook explaining what the initiative is about and how members can get involved. Using Facebook we were able to deliver the message to over 7000 individuals (both Yemeni and non-Yemeni).

Another activity used to spread the message of this initiative was “social tagging”. Using Facebook and other instant messaging tools i.e. Microsoft’s MSN and Yahoo! messenger we encouraged Yemeni youth everywhere to download a poster image for the initiative and replace their profile pictures with the initiative’s poster. This helped spread the message to an even wider audience for which an exact count is hard to determine.

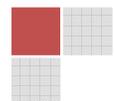
Standard mailing lists and e-campaigning technologies were also used to deliver the message of the initiative and explain how people can get involved. Our mailing lists include 1700 email addresses for Yemeni youth living all over the world.

In total using technology for outreach has helped Resonate! Yemen in a span of two weeks reach over 7000 Yemeni youth all over the world.

Given the difficulty in reaching Yemeni youth in a country with minimal infrastructure and relatively few Internet subscribers, several low-tech methods were also used for outreach in Yemen. Specifically, it was decided that partnerships with local youth organizations would be the most effective way of reaching a maximum number of youth with the limited time in hand (2 weeks). The organizations would in turn solicit feedback from their members and university students using hard copy printouts of the Resonate! Yemen initiative’s material.

Successful partnerships were made with 5 local NGOs working in the field of youth development and representing over a 1000 youth in Yemen. These organizations are:

- **Democratic School – The Youth Consultative Council - Sana’a, Yemen:** The council works to encourage the spirit of voluntary work among youth and provide them with opportunities to be part of the civil society and engage in social work. The council consists of representative members from different NGOs, political parties, unions and youth organizations. The members of the council develop and present studies and recommendations for how to address matters of national interest. Website: <http://www.dsyemen.org/yuong4.PHP>



- **SHAWTHAB Foundation for Childhood and Development – Sana’a, Yemen:** SHAWTHAB is dedicated to protecting children’s rights and supporting the role of families in the development of children. In order for it to achieve its mission, the organization has set a number of goals which include, but are not limited to, investing in child development, supporting each child to survive, grow and develop and protecting children from any harm or abuse. Website: <http://www.shawthab.org>
- **Advisory Committee for Childhood and Youth – Aden, Yemen:** The advisory committee works on facilitating and encouraging the participation of children and youth in building and developing their local communities. The committee also works on supporting the role of NGOs, the private sector and the government in implementing both the national and international policies for improving the conditions of childhood and youth in Yemen.
- **The National Forum For Human Rights – Hodeidah, Yemen:** The forum was started by a group of youth lawyers and activists in the governorate of Hodeidah as a civil initiative working in the field of raising legal and judicial awareness and offering legal consultations in the field of Human Rights protection. Website: <http://www.nationalforum-hr.org>
- **Assembly of future generations of youth – Aden, Yemen:** The assembly focuses on raising awareness on the role of youth in the overall development of Yemen. Through various training activities, the assembly aims at engaging the youth to participate in issues of national importance.

Press releases were also sent out to local and international media and the initiative was successfully covered by 11 news websites. A full list can be viewed on our website under the newsroom section of both the English and Arabic websites.

## ***The Questions***

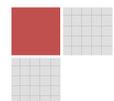
To solicit the opinions of Yemeni youth, Resonate! Yemen focused on the following questions:

***Question 1: In your opinion, what do you think are the main challenges facing Yemen in its effort to combat terrorism?***

***Question 2: Do you think Yemen needs assistance from the international community to deal with the issue of terrorism? If so, which countries should be involved in assisting Yemen? What kind of support should these countries offer to Yemen (military support? political support? financial support?..etc)***

***Question 3: Regarding terrorism in Yemen, do you have any opinions or thoughts you would like to bring to the attention of the international community?***

The questions were drafted based on their relevance to the January 27 conference in London where several countries will be discussing the main challenges facing Yemen and the nature of assistance required to ensure Yemen’s resolve over the challenges it faces.



## Our Findings

### ***The Challenges***

The participants in this initiative rated poverty as the top challenge facing Yemen in combating terrorism. The weak economy and very high unemployment rate, 35% according to the latest estimates by CIA World Fact book, lead to desperation and assist terrorist organizations with targeting youth by simply giving them a goal in life and the promise for a “better future”. These terrorist organizations also target the youth by providing financial support that many people in Yemen desperately need.

The high unemployment and poverty rates also make daily survival a priority for the majority of the Yemeni population, leaving individual responsibility towards matters like combating terrorism almost non-existing.

Seen as a direct result of poverty, the high illiteracy rate, 45% according to the latest UNESCO estimates, coupled with the weak educational system in Yemen leave the youth vulnerable to terrorist organizations who can easily manipulate them.

Another issue mentioned by the participants is administrative and financial corruption within the government. The youth expressed their frustration with the rampant corruption in all levels of the government and the society as a whole. This level of corruption is seen as a major contributor to the poverty and the weak economy of the country. Corruption compromises the ability of the government to use financial assistance from other countries effectively.

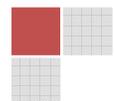
Participants also believe that the role of the government in combating terrorism, or the lack thereof, has contributed to the challenges Yemen faces today. The government’s inability to spread its sovereignty over a large portion of the country has given terrorist networks the freedom to penetrate the country’s borders and wander around freely, preaching a message of hatred and terror, equipped with misguided quotations from Islamic text to people with simple understanding of the religion. *“A...challenge is that many places are not under government control which makes it a heaven place for the Al-Qaeda.”*, says one participant.

Failed government policies and lack of long term planning and strategies to deal with the issue of terrorism were also listed as areas where the government of Yemen can improve. This affects the trust that young people have in their government’s credibility, and therefore discourages them from participating in any government efforts to combat terrorism.

Finally, the lack of coordinated and well planned media campaigns by the government against extremist ideologies continues to be a concern for a lot of the respondents. If Yemen is to overcome the challenge of terrorism, the extremist ideologies preached by terrorist will need to be combated with moderate Islamic views lectured by credible figures from the religious establishment.

### ***On International Assistance***

An overwhelming majority of the participants in the initiative believe that Yemen needs the assistance of the international community to overcome its current challenges. However, most participants prefer



that the assistance comes from Gulf countries, Arab countries, and Islamic countries. There is a general mistrust of the intentions of the West when offering assistance.

On the nature of the assistance, most participants believe that assistance should be in the form of financial assistance. Interesting enough the participants emphasized the need to establish measures to shield the assistance from the corrosive nature of corruption. The goal should be to ensure that financial assistance is delivered to the projects and areas that it's destined to.

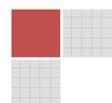
On the role of the international community, most of the participants believe exerting political pressure on the Yemeni government to decisively deal with rampant corruption that is slowly eating away at the country's stability will provide the greatest impact on ensuring that Yemen continues as a viable state.

Another issue of common concern was the need to resolve the internal political issues in both Sa'ada and Southern Yemen. It is believed that without a quick and satisfactory resolution that addresses all parties involved the events will lead to further de-stabilization of Yemen making the country a more appealing haven for terrorist organizations.

With regards to military intervention, Yemeni youth expressed their concern and absolute refusal for any direct military intervention by foreign countries. Such intervention would provide terrorist networks enough tools to further recruit youth to fight "foreign occupation" and carry out terrorist attacks.

However, a large number of participants highlighted the need for further training and support for the military forces and intelligence operations in Yemen both financially and technically. This can be done by equipping Yemen with the latest technology available to combat terrorism. *"For the past ten years at least, Yemen was not allowed to have any modern gear, arms, tactical equipment, or any of the needed elements for the [war] against terrorism... [however,] Yemen was being asked specially in the last 5 years to seriously fight Terrorism within its borders, and at the same time being banned to have the suitable [gear to perform the task]...in addition to these needs, there is an important need of training to Yemeni law enforcements."*, says one participant. Without these equipments and the sufficient training required to operate these equipments, Yemeni forces had and still have a challenge in restricting the movement of terrorists to and from the country.

Finally, supporting NGOs in the field of raising the education and awareness levels of the Yemeni population, not only in cities but in the rural areas as well, was another area mentioned by a few of our participants. Given the level of education among Yemenis in general, it is believed that focusing on improving access to education and increased anti-terror campaigning can help to severely reduce the pools of recruits available to terrorist networks.



## ***Other Issues***

Several other issues raised by some participants of the Resonate! Yemen initiative include:

- Lack of justice from the government and unfair treatment of people
- The widespread control of tribes and tribal alliances
- Abundance of weapons in citizens' hands
- Western policy on Middle East affairs is seen as being biased against muslims
- Media coverage of extremists only and the lack of coverage of moderate voices
- Death of civilians in air raids targeting suspected terrorists reduces support for government anti-terrorism efforts
- Falling astray from the peaceful teachings of Islam
- Influence of misguided religious and tribal leaders
- Lack of social programs for youth

## **Conclusions**

Given the sheer interest expressed by the participants of this initiative, it is clear that Yemen's youth want to be involved in addressing their country's challenges in dealing with terrorism. With nearly 70% of Yemen's population under the age of 25 it only makes sense to ensure that the voices of youth in Yemen are solicited, heard and acted upon.

We hope the "Friends of Yemen" group will work on engaging youth in their future plans for our country. Yemen's youth are here, they want to help and they need to be heard.

