

FIELD REPORT FROM YEMEN

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Aden is the balmy port city that was once a jewel in the British Empire. It's since lost much of its luster. Aden and Southern Yemen as a whole has been a center of discontent ever since North and South Yemen united in 1990.

In a poor neighborhood, a few young men and boys were standing on a corner around a foosball table. They were eager to voice their discontent.

One young man said, "These people around you, they neither go to school or they have their work. Most of the people here are below 30. They never go to finish their study and they don't work. They're just going around the area doing nothing."

Another concurred: "The situation is very bad. They're not happy about it. There [are] no opportunities for people from this kind of areas to have more education and more jobs."

In Yemen, the ongoing uprisings, chaos and violence stem from the country's staggering unemployment and massive levels of corruption. Young people with no work and little hope are easy prey for terrorist recruiters.

The U.N. estimates that the current population of 23 million can triple in the next 40 years. That's a recipe for disaster in a country plagued by 30% to 40% unemployment and that reality weighs heavily on the minds of Yemen's youth.

Eva is 16 years-old and is participating in a UNICEF program in Aden. She is attending training sessions to learn peer counseling so she can help advise her classmates to make better life choices. Eva represents a minority in the country. The average Yemeni has nine years of total schooling. She's planning on going to college even though she's not sure it will pay off. "I feel quite worried about my future because I don't know if I'll get a very good job or I'll just stay at home."

Gregory Johnson is a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton University who's conducted extensive research on and in Yemen. He says the prospects are dim for young Yemenis with and without degrees. Many young people have to leave school to try to earn money. They often end up with informal jobs and inconsistent work at best. Then they're unable to return to school. Johnson says that many young people spend their time sitting at home or simply wandering the streets.

"These are the individuals that are being specifically targeted by al-Qaeda, individuals who have become disfranchised in some way from the system. They feel that the system no longer provides for them any sort of a coherent and convincing narrative about what life is supposed to be like."

It's not just uneducated people who are being recruited by terrorists in Yemen. Mohammed Qubaydi, professor at Sana'a University and head of the Foreign Affairs Department of Yemen's ruling party, complains about the university system.

"[Our] weak educational system creates weak graduates. They are the input into our universities, so we get weak output from the universities. Unfortunately these graduates can't get jobs here – neither with the government nor with the private sector."

Professor Qubaydi presented a paper on this phenomenon back in 1999 in an attempt to send a warning that the country was creating a generation of graduates with little hope.

Yemenis stress the importance of giving young people hope and opportunity so they won't be tempted by terrorists. But people also acknowledge that given the litany of problems and obstacles in the country, this isn't something that can happen overnight – if it can happen at all.

Yemen's paltry oil supplies are predicted to run out in 10 to 20 years and when it does, so goes 70% of the country's revenue. It's unlikely that Yemen is going to create the millions of jobs needed and that's why there's broad agreement in the country that the immediate solution lies with Yemen's neighbors.

Johnson says that the Gulf countries view Yemenis as potential terrorists and don't want to give them jobs. So while exporting workers seems like the ideal solution, "It's also the step that's I think least likely to happen."

This is why many of Yemen's brightest young people are hedging their bets. "When you see what's the problems in your country you just say, I will work out of my country and I'll get good money."

– Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad