



POLICY PAPER

Yemen: the implications of forced immobility

As Yemen enters its sixth year of conflict, the threat of Covid-19 has prompted the Saudi-led coalition to declare a unilateral ceasefire.¹ A de-escalation of violence would have been welcome in a country embroiled in the world's worst humanitarian crisis, but the ceasefire has been poorly implemented. More than 111,000 Yemenis have lost their lives since 2015, and around 85,000 children have died of starvation.²

The conditions in the country are such that significant cross-border movements might be expected, but comparatively few people have sought refuge abroad. Based on primary research with Yemeni refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), we find that *restrictive migration policies have aggravated the humanitarian crisis by exposing Yemenis to repeated internal displacement*. The country is home to more than 3.63 million IDPs, representing more than 10 per cent of the population.³ Not only are their human rights frequently denied, but their heightened vulnerability also undermines long-term prospects for durable solutions. This policy paper identifies four opportunities for the European Union to alleviate Yemen's humanitarian crisis and reduce the risk of repeated internal displacement.

THE FACTS

1. CONDITIONS IN YEMEN LEND THEMSELVES TO CROSS-BORDER MOVEMENTS

Beyond the sheer scale of internal displacement, three factors combine to make cross-border movements from Yemen seem likely.

The country is at war. Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi movement, has been fighting the government since 2004. The Arab spring protests of 2011 created a political and security vacuum into which it was able to extend its influence and control.⁵ Large territorial gains in 2014 prompted a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia to launch a military offensive the following year, marking the onset of the latest conflict.

A southern separatist movement known as Hirak also emerged in 2007, leading to sporadic clashes. Violence has flared several times since 2015, and the UAE's support for secessionist forces

METHODOLOGY

IDMC carried out 147 interviews with displaced Yemenis between May and September 2019. Eighty-seven were conducted with IDPs, 39 with refugees in Europe and 21 with refugees in Djibouti. The survey interviews, conducted using KoBoToolbox, were supplemented with qualitative data shared by the research participants. Respondents were identified through convenience sampling. The research is not representative, but it offers a useful snapshot of displacement in Yemen and beyond. The results of the study can be found in the report 'Even if they reopened the airports'.⁴



has complicated relations within the coalition. The main separatist group, the Southern Transitional Council, declared self-rule in areas under its control in late April 2020.⁶

The economy is failing. After five years of conflict, around 81 per cent of Yemenis live below the poverty line, and more than two-thirds of the country are food insecure.⁷ Coalition airstrikes have undermined subsistence and commercial farming, and shocks to the oil and gas industry have reduced the state's ability to import goods and products. Combined with land, sea and air blockades, these factors have caused prices to soar. At the same time, around 35 per cent of businesses have closed since the start of the war, decimating household incomes.⁸

There is a history of mixed migration. Yemen has experienced large-scale emigration to oil-producing Gulf countries since the 1950s.⁹ More than half of the country's active population was living abroad by 1991.¹⁰ The 1990-1991 Gulf war caused a shift in migration patterns in the region, and more than 731,800 Yemenis were expelled from Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Emigration, however, continues.

“Saudi Arabia is Yemenis’ necessary evil. Yemen is surrounded by desert and sea and the Horn of Africa. There is nowhere else to go for economic opportunities, so Saudi Arabia has been a destination for many.” – Yemeni refugee in Europe

Yemen has also received many immigrants. The country had a foreign population of around half a million at the time of the 2011 revolution.¹² More than 138,000 arrivals were recorded in 2019, the majority of whom intended to travel onwards to Saudi Arabia.¹³ There are thought to be around 276,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa in Yemen.¹⁴

2. RESTRICTIVE MIGRATION POLICIES LEAD TO FORCED IMMOBILITY

Border closures in neighbouring countries prevent Yemenis from seeking refuge abroad. Oman is building a wall.¹⁵ Saudi Arabia started building a border fence in 2003, and construction resumed after Ansar Allah took control of the northern Saa'da governorate despite disputes with borderland tribes.¹⁶ Saudi border police is receiving training from Germany to further secure the border.¹⁷ Since amending its labour law in 2013, Saudi Arabia has also increased deportations of undocumented migrant workers, many of whom are Yemeni. Nearly 600,000 people were returned to Yemen within a year of the amendment.¹⁸ Despite the ongoing conflict, deportations continue. There were more than 50,000 returns in 2019.¹⁹

Across the Gulf of Aden, Djibouti offers prima facie recognition for Yemenis able to undertake the perilous crossing. The country, however, has little to offer on arrival. With GDP per capita of just over \$3,000, Djibouti is far poorer than Oman or Saudi Arabia.²⁰ Economic opportunities are limited, particularly given the language barrier Yemenis face in a French-speaking coun-

try.²¹ The camp that houses the most vulnerable refugees sits on a patch of desert where temperatures average over 30°C.²²

If opportunities to seek international protection in the region are limited, Europe is all but out of reach. Three-quarters of the IDPs surveyed in Yemen said cost was a barrier to cross-border movement. A Yemeni refugee in Germany said those who had made it to Europe were the “rich and educated”. As a result of the clandestine nature of travel, journeys to Europe cost as much as \$26,000.²³ More than 300 Yemenis were refused entry at the EU's external borders between 2015 and 2018, mostly for lack of valid visas or travel documents.²⁴

Even for Yemenis able to enter Europe, there is no guarantee of international protection. The recognition rate of Yemenis in the EU is around 82 per cent, but more than 1,000 asylum applications had been pending for more than six months as of December 2019.²⁵ Yemenis lodged 10,425 applications in the EU between 2015 and 2019, but there were only 665 positive decisions in the same time period because of the long processing times.²⁶

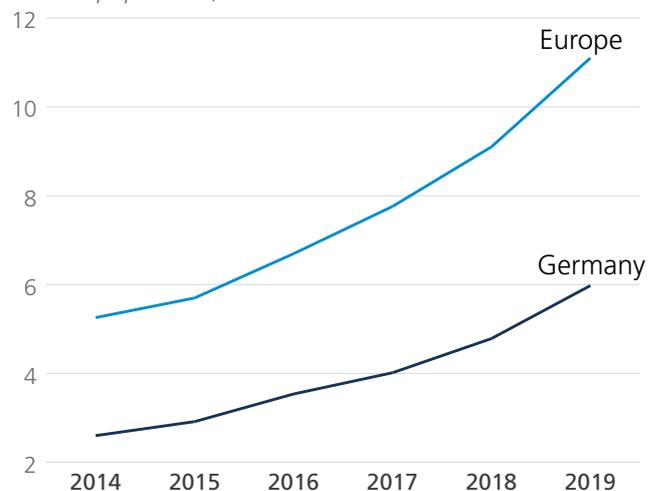
THE IMPLICATIONS

1. YEMENIS’ HUMAN RIGHTS ARE DENIED

- Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.²⁷

Few Yemenis are able to exercise their right to seek asylum. There are only about 354,000 refugees from Yemen in the Horn of Africa and neighbouring countries, and they are outnumbered by more than ten to one by the country's IDPs.²⁸ The number of Yemenis in Europe doubled between 2014 and 2019 to just over 11,000, most of them in Germany.²⁹ The figure, however, is strikingly low given the scale of the crisis in Yemen.

FIGURE 1: Yemeni citizens, in thousands
Yemeni population, in thousands



I Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.³⁰

More than 111,000 Yemenis have been killed since the start of the conflict, including more than 12,000 civilians. Coalition airstrikes are responsible for more than two-thirds of the civilian casualties.³¹

"I was sleeping at home with my wife and children when we heard an explosion that shook everything around us. We woke up terrified, not understanding what had happened. It was three in the morning and the bombing continued." – Yemeni IDP

Around 85,000 children have died of starvation since 2015.³² Around 17 million Yemenis require emergency food assistance each month, and some areas are at risk of famine.³³ About half of the IDPs interviewed for this study said they went hungry at least several times a month, and 10 per cent every day.

I No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.³⁴

There have been numerous reports of torture and sexual abuse in detention facilities controlled by both parties to the conflict.³⁵ One Yemeni interviewed in Europe was forcibly recruited in 2016 at the age of 19. When he refused to take up a weapon he was sent to jail, where he was severely beaten and abused until he managed to escape during an airstrike.

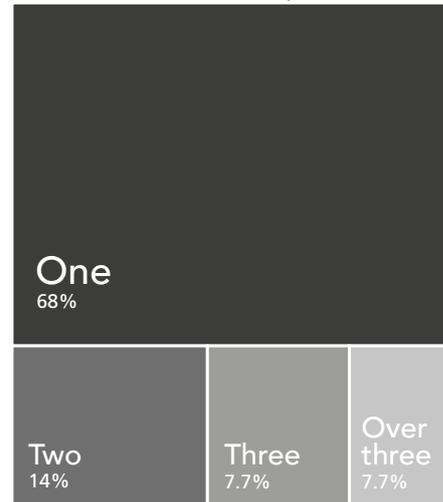
Yemenis have also been subjected to physical abuse in detention centres in Saudi Arabia ahead of deportation, in addition to overcrowding and inadequate conditions.³⁶

Covid-19 may be exposing displaced Yemenis and migrants to further protection risks, with reports of harassment by local communities and discrimination in access to health services.³⁷

2. HEIGHTENED VULNERABILITY UNDERMINES PROSPECTS FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Around 75 per cent of IDPs in Yemen who previously worked have lost their income as a result of their displacement.³⁸ Repeated displacement further erodes people's resilience and undermine households' capacity to adapt, including through loss of resources.³⁹ Around a third of the IDPs surveyed had been displaced more than once.

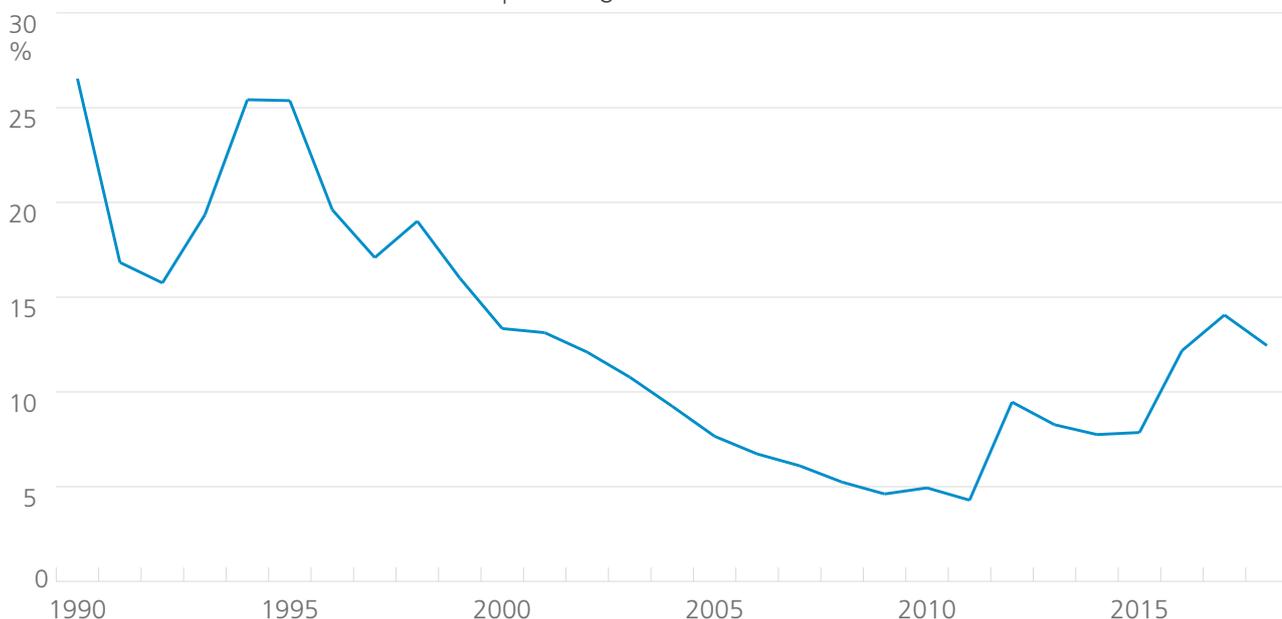
FIGURE 2: Number of displacements



Restrictions to cross-border movement also reduce remittances, which accounted for more than a quarter of Yemen's GDP before the mass expulsions of the early 1990s.⁴⁰ Migrants' remittances are one of the most important sources of finance for development in low-income countries, far exceeding foreign direct investment and aid.⁴¹

Billions of dollars in remittances are believed to have mitigated Yemen's food security crisis, though it is still considered the worst in the world.⁴² There are concerns that continued deportations from Saudi Arabia could have "catastrophic economic

FIGURE 3: Personal remittances received as a percentage of GDP



Source: World Bank

and humanitarian consequences for Yemenis”, contributing to further insecurity and long-term armed conflict. Already, the loss of income and remittances caused by Covid-19 is having a direct impact upon the most vulnerable households.⁴³

At an individual level, the loss of remittances increases people’s vulnerability to repeated displacement. Research participants who had been displaced more than once cited poverty as a significant trigger, second only to conflict. Many other IDPs have been evicted because they were unable to afford their rent. Anecdotally, among research participants, none of the three IDPs who received remittances before their displacement had been displaced more than once.

The small number of Yemeni refugees also means less human capital returning to support post-war reconstruction. Returnees’ potential to support development in their countries of origin has been widely demonstrated, particularly when they have accrued savings and skills during their time abroad, supported via investments in their health and education.⁴⁴ Few of the refugees surveyed said they wanted to return to Yemen, but those who do are driven by a desire to help rebuild the country. As one refugee in Germany put it: *“If we’re not going to fix it then who will?”*

WAYS FORWARD

We have outlined four complementary approaches the EU could explore to alleviate Yemen’s humanitarian crisis and reduce the risk of repeated internal displacement.

1. INVEST IN HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

The EU has allocated more than €440 million (\$478 million) in humanitarian aid to Yemen since the outbreak of conflict in 2015.⁴⁵ As of December 2019, however, the humanitarian response plan was only 83 per cent funded, leaving a gap of \$710 million. The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation and the European Commission have donated nearly \$160 million, but this represents less than a sixth of the amount provided by Saudi Arabia, the largest donor.⁴⁶ The UN Refugee Agency’s operations in Djibouti are only 16 per cent funded.⁴⁷

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union has committed to supporting most affected countries in need of health support. This should include Yemen, where the health system has effectively collapsed under the strain of Covid-19.⁴⁸ Given their specific vulnerabilities, IDPs, refugees and migrants need to be included in national Covid-19 humanitarian response plans.

Civil society in Yemen and the region also needs to be better supported. Community-based organisations are on the front lines of response, but often lack the capacity and resources to fill gaps in assistance and basic services and may be exposed to additional risks. Although community-based organisations face many of the same access challenges as international agencies, the localisation agenda gains further pertinence given the movement restrictions caused by Covid-19.



Looking at the remains of his former relatives house and farm in Sana'a, Ali recalls the air strike incident and says "five girls got injured and the little child, sadly, died". Photo © UNHCR/Shohdi Alsofi, June 2019

Parallel efforts to support Yemen's development are welcome. The EU has provided €323 million in development assistance since 2015. This includes a €79 million funding package adopted in November 2019 to sustain public services and develop livelihood opportunities.⁴⁹ For these efforts to be sustainable however, more investment in peacebuilding is needed.

2. DEMONSTRATE SUSTAINED COMMITMENT TO PEACEBUILDING

The EU is actively engaged in peacebuilding activities in Yemen, and has allocated €8.8 million for the Peace Process Support for Yemen project implemented by the German development agency GIZ. The project is intended to improve local civil society capacities for peace, including among women and young people.⁵⁰ The EU has also provided €3 million in support of local peacebuilding initiatives through the Berghof Foundation.⁵¹

At the same time, however, arms supplied by European states to Saudi Arabia and the UAE have supported the coalition's military intervention. The UK and France were the second and third largest providers of arms to Saudi Arabia after the US between 2014 and 2018.⁵² Some individual European states have taken steps to limit their arms exports, but no such restrictions have been put in place at the EU level despite reported violations of international humanitarian law by the coalition.⁵³

The European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights has argued that continued arms exports are illegal, and has called for the International Criminal Court to investigate European arms manufacturers.⁵⁴ A harmonised approach to arms exports at the EU level is needed to uphold high standards across member states and demonstrate sustained commitment to peace.

3. ADVOCATE FOR YEMENI MIGRANTS IN THE REGION

Deportations and loss of remittances threaten to further destabilise Yemen's economy and aggravate the humanitarian crisis. EU member states should encourage Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to exempt Yemenis from labour nationalisation campaigns, provide those who are undocumented with the opportunity to regularise their status and refrain from deporting them. This is particularly important given the economic consequences of Covid-19 and the increase in protectionism the pandemic is likely to cause.

Such an initiative could echo the 1965 Casablanca protocol on the treatment of Palestinian refugees in Arab states, by offering Yemenis freedom of movement and full residency and work rights.⁵⁵ It would help to ensure that remittances continue to flow back to Yemen, preventing further economic collapse and mitigating the risk of repeated displacement. The same approach should be adopted for refugees and asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa, who face similar vulnerabilities and abuses in GCC countries.

4. FACILITATE ACCESS TO INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION WITHIN THE EU

The European parliament proposed in December 2018 that the European Commission allow people seeking international protection to apply for a visa at an EU embassy or consulate in their country of origin. This would establish a safe entry pathway for people to apply for asylum in the EU without having to resort to irregular means.⁵⁶ Such a humanitarian visa system is complicated in Yemen by the paucity of consular services. Only three EU member states have representation, all of them in Sana'a.⁵⁷ Providing consular services in other locations such as Aden could improve avenues for regular migration. So would reopening the airport in Sana'a.

Alternative pathways to international protection could also be expanded. A European resettlement scheme has been in place since July 2015 to provide legal and safe pathways for refugees to enter the EU.⁵⁸ Member states have pledged more than 30,000 resettlement places for 2020, but refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and countries along the Central Mediterranean route will be prioritised.⁵⁹ The European Commission, which is expected to call for an increased resettlement effort in its New Pact on Migration to be presented early this summer, could consider pushing for more resettlement of Yemeni refugees from Djibouti and review how the scope of the resettlement framework may include IDPs.

Increasing access to international protection for Yemenis affected by the country's conflict would not only uphold their rights. It would also increase the human capital available for post-war reconstruction, which in turn would support the EU's investments in peacebuilding and development.

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Cover photo: A woman surveys her shelter at a hosting site for internally displaced persons in Aden, Yemen, after heavy rain caused extensive damage on 25 March 2020. Photo © UNHCR/ Essam Adduais, March 2020

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