

Migration from the Horn of Africa to Yemen: Not Just a Passing Phenomenon

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Muneer Binwaber is a journalist and documentary filmmaker. He holds a bachelor's in media (public relations). Binwaber has worked on a number of documentaries and articles about different topics in Yemen. He is interested in issues pertaining to Yemen, with a focus on foreign affairs and culture.



Brief Analysis

Though Yemen struggles with economic, political, and environmental issues of its own, more and more migrants are crossing the country's borders in hopes of a better life.

Migration across or into Yemen from the Horn of Africa is an ancient historical phenomenon, but its motivations and magnitudes have fluctuated with time. In recent decades, Yemen—due to its location in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and proximity to the Horn of Africa—has become a main transit point for those seeking the economic stability of wealthy Arab Gulf countries or seeking to reunite with relatives who have already immigrated.

Instability at home has also driven an increase in migration. Between 2021 and 2022, migrant arrivals in Yemen from the Horn of Africa nearly tripled from a total of 27,700 to 73,200. In 2023, these numbers are expected to rise even more. As of March 31, more than forty thousand migrants have arrived on Yemen's shores—roughly half of them arriving in the month of March, alone. These statistics demonstrate the attractiveness of migration from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, especially as political, economic, and environmental conditions worsen in the former countries.

In Ethiopia, for example, a [combination \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/19/tigray-tplf-war-against-ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-isnt-about-autonomy-its-about-economic-power/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/19/tigray-tplf-war-against-ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-isnt-about-autonomy-its-about-economic-power/) of ethnic violence and severe drought has significantly impacted the livelihoods of many and especially those who reside in the Tigray area. This deadly combination has pushed many Ethiopians to seek opportunities elsewhere. In Somalia, the ongoing civil war and consequent instability, as well as environmental issues including a devastating series of droughts and [floods \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/18/africa/somalia-flooding-displaced-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/18/africa/somalia-flooding-displaced-intl/index.html) have similarly caused hundreds of thousands of individuals to flee, sometimes to neighboring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia but also to the Arabian Peninsula.

Of course, Yemen has experienced conflict and turmoil of its own for more than a decade. Although political violence has [reached \(https://acleddata.com/2023/05/04/regional-overview-middle-east-april-2023/\)](https://acleddata.com/2023/05/04/regional-overview-middle-east-april-2023/) its lowest level since 2015 as a result of an unanticipated truce in Yemen in the fourth quarter of 2022 and the momentum of peace talks, violence is threatening to resurface and many concerns remain unresolved. Like the Horn of Africa, Yemen also suffers from severe environmental conditions; 2022 was [named \(https://www.yemenwatcher.org/post/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF-74-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88-2022\)](https://www.yemenwatcher.org/post/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF-74-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88-2022) one of Yemen's three driest years in the last four decades, and extreme weather events such as torrential rainfalls and floods have devastated infrastructure and livelihoods. Since the latter half of March, floods have [affected \(https://reliefweb.int/attachments/821b6eb8-5fcf-42fa-8062-1d1f83789681/AgroMet%20Bulletin_Template%20-%20Ar%20MA%20v2.pdf\)](https://reliefweb.int/attachments/821b6eb8-5fcf-42fa-8062-1d1f83789681/AgroMet%20Bulletin_Template%20-%20Ar%20MA%20v2.pdf) over 9,000 families in Yemen—contaminating drinking water, destroying sanitation networks, and creating an environment favorable to disease transmission.

Yet even with conditions far from ideal, Yemen remains an appealing entry point for immigrants, who apparently view the country as a better alternative to the situation at home. Increasingly, Yemen is becoming not just an in-between transit stop but a final location as Gulf countries enact stricter border control and increasingly turn away migrants.

Saudi authorities, for example, are both tightening their border policies and frequently cooperating with migrants' home countries to return them upon reaching the Kingdom's border. Since 2017, the Kingdom has been working to enact new labor regulations that limit the use of foreign labor on its territory. Between 2018 and 2020, the Kingdom returned 300,000 Ethiopian laborers.

Saudi Arabia's policies are part of a larger global movement—also including the West—where authorities are ramping up border control to keep

immigrants out, often employing the narrative that migrants should remain closer to their countries of origin in order to return home sooner and restore the normal relationship between the individual and the state. As a result of this narrative, in-between countries such as Yemen—often low- or middle-income and suffering from crises themselves—are saddled with an immigrant population that they cannot support. According to the UNHCR, these low- and middle-income countries now [house \(https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/#:~:text=Low%2D%20and%20middle%2Dincome%20countries%20host%2074%20per%20cent%20of,per%20cent%20of%20the%20total.\)](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/#:~:text=Low%2D%20and%20middle%2Dincome%20countries%20host%2074%20per%20cent%20of,per%20cent%20of%20the%20total.) 74% of the world's refugees and other persons in need of international protection.

In southeast Yemen, the implications of this phenomenon are already clearly visible. The governorates of Hadramout and al-Mahra, for example, have been popular destinations for migrants heading to Oman, according to an [assessment \(https://reliefweb.int/attachments/69184106-8174-4d53-805f-9ef905219b58/IOM_Eastern-Corridor-Migrant-Situation_31032023.pdf\)](https://reliefweb.int/attachments/69184106-8174-4d53-805f-9ef905219b58/IOM_Eastern-Corridor-Migrant-Situation_31032023.pdf) from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), due to the shortage of checkpoints along the border and the relative stability and acceptance of immigrants in these communities. However, as Oman's immigration restrictions become more stringent at the border and as public services such as the health sector deteriorate across the country, immigrants forced to stay in southeast Yemen are left particularly vulnerable. This pattern is likewise playing out in other parts of the country.

Some migrants are able to find work, contributing to Yemen's vital agricultural and livestock industries and in other informal positions. According to a group of migrants I encountered on the shores of the Shabwa Governorate several years ago, these migrants and others found employment in the [Qat fields \(https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2314808X13000031\)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2314808X13000031) in northern Yemen. These migrants had intended to come to Yemen, rather than pass through to a third country, and were motivated by the experiences of friends and relatives already in Yemen. They explained that many African immigrants were working in the fields and pastures across the country, though no figures exist detailing how many African immigrants or refugees are actually employed in Yemen's agriculture sector.

Yet even the trip is dangerous, and some undergo horrific ordeals just to get to the peninsula. In fact, [reports \(https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-yemen-ap-top-news-international-news-gulf-of-aden-476e15db8b77486e9d157b33f9494b22\)](https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-yemen-ap-top-news-international-news-gulf-of-aden-476e15db8b77486e9d157b33f9494b22) show that smugglers have subjected African migrants in Yemen to assault, torture, extortion, and other crimes, including human trafficking. In a war-torn country, very little infrastructure exists to deal with these abusers or support these migrants upon arrival.

Angela Wells, the Director of Media and Communications in Yemen for the IOM, said in an interview that the organization is working with local authorities and urging them to fulfill their responsibilities to migrants under international humanitarian law and human rights law, which require non-discriminatory and humane treatment of all migrants regardless of race, nationality, or origin.

Like many experts who have advocated for the integration of immigrants and refugees into the job markets of the nations where they settle, Wells argued that African migrants should be given full access to paid work in Yemen by removing existing barriers and preventing exploitation of the migrants based on their status and needs. This arrangement would not only avoid harmful alternatives such as repatriation—in which migrants likely face more risks, including confinement in camps where their rights are consistently violated—but it would also alleviate strains on host communities by contributing to the development of local economies.

Of course, Yemeni authorities cannot do this alone, especially as they face their own internal crises. As such, international organizations play a critical role in facilitating the development of a sustainable immigration infrastructure in Yemen. These organizations will in turn require the support and cooperation of government partners, who can provide both the funds and the diplomatic maneuvering to establish a safer, more humane system.

At the same time, the conflicts and crises in the countries of origin of these migrants need to be seriously addressed at the international level. If countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and others hope to stem the influx of migrants across their own borders, they must do everything possible to reduce violence and mitigate the effects of climate change in critical zones such as the Horn of Africa. ❖

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