



Arab
Reform
Initiative

THE NEW ARAB DIASPORA SERIES

THE LONG SHADOW OF WAR: MOBILIZATION DYNAMICS OF THE YEMENI DIASPORA SINCE 2011

Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of a regional comparative study on the role of diaspora in development that was supported by the Ford Foundation.

© 2021 Arab Reform Initiative. All Rights Reserved.



This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

Cover Image: Sana'a International Airport before the war, Sept. 2013

© Munzir Rosdi/Shutterstock

April 2021

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising and ensuing descent into protracted conflict, a new wave of Yemeni migration has transpired, marked by different sociopolitical profiles than previous waves of migration and the transformation in places of destination. As a result, existing Yemeni diaspora communities in countries such as the UK and the US have seen important changes in the economic and political make-up of their members, while new diaspora communities have emerged in countries heretofore largely off the radar of Yemeni migration. Importantly, these transformations in Yemeni migration are also a reflection of conflict dynamics, which pattern the destination of migrants but also the relationships within diaspora communities and their mobilization dynamics towards Yemen. This latest wave of conflict-motivated migration is characterized by the large number of intellectual and political elites; however, this has not necessarily translated into sustained political engagement or mobilization for the sake of peacebuilding and/or reconstruction. Looking at Yemeni diaspora communities in three countries of destination – the UK, Egypt, and Turkey – reveals how the space of freedom for organization that each country provides, as well as conflict dynamics back home, impact the nature and positionality of the particular community in question and shape the forms of and possibilities for diaspora mobilization.

Based on more than twenty interviews and a review of the activities of more than twelve Yemeni diaspora organizations working in UK, Egypt and Turkey, this paper assesses the political, cultural, and social roles that the Yemeni diaspora is trying to play both towards the diaspora itself and towards Yemen, and how these are impacted by the long shadow of the conflict in Yemen. While the UK diaspora does engage in political mobilization, this is marked by trends of polarization and the external intervention of parties to the conflict that seek to garner support for their cause through their diasporic communities. Meanwhile, for the Yemeni diasporas in Turkey and Egypt, the constrained civic space and fear of exacerbating internal frictions that mirror those back home has meant that mobilization is geared towards the provision of social services and culture activities rather than political remittances towards Yemen. Thus, while diaspora political organization in support of conflict resolution could in theory be possible, the characteristics of these diaspora communities, along with the political opportunity structures of host societies, have translated to a decreased overall capacity for political mobilization for the purpose of peacebuilding.

YEMEN: A History of Immigration and Emigration

This history of Yemen is marked by three great waves of migration. The first, following the collapse of the [Ma'rib dam](#) during the 5th century and provoking the decline of ancient Yemeni civilization, saw migration to different areas in the Arabian Peninsula, Levant, and North Africa. The second wave, which took place after the emergence of Islam during the 8th century, led to [migration](#) to Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Spain (Andalusia) in part due to the fact that Yemenis participated heavily in the Muslim armies that conquered those areas. The third great wave, that of modern migration, saw the [mass movement](#) of Yemenis to Gulf countries, starting in the mid-20th century and reaching its peak in the 1970s and the 1980s. Stemming from economic imperatives and the lure of far better paying jobs next door, this wave of mass movement differed from previous ones in that it was not a permanent resettlement but rather a displacement of workers who were expected to return. This modern migration was also marked by the emergence of economic remittances, which became a pillar of the Yemeni economy. It is estimated that more than 10 million Yemenis have settled in almost 40 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, providing US\$ 3.4 billion annually as [remittances](#) inside Yemen.

Much of modern migration of Yemenis was also the result of various instances of civil conflict in the last 60 or so years; however, this did not translate to a massive political elite diaspora. The 1962 Republican revolution in the North of Yemen sent only the royal family to exile. Meanwhile, the independence of the South of Yemen in 1967, leading to the establishment of a Communist regime in 1968, resulted in the immigration of business owners (along with westerners and other foreigners) from Aden city, along with tens of sultans and tribal sheikhs and their families. Importantly, though, most of this elite were not politically active and did not try to oppose the sitting regimes, regardless of place of settlement. As Yemen was divided according to Cold War camps, the semi-capitalist Northern Yemen became host to opposition figures of the Communist South and vice-versa. Likewise, after reunification in 1990, a certain space for political opposition opened within Yemen, marked by the multiplication of political parties. And following the civil war of 1994, prominent figures of the Socialist Party left Yemen to the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UK. Yet, even then, as a space of freedom was left, the political opposition was possible through the political parties and media.

The onset of a new cycle of contention in 2011, followed by conflict in 2015, and the ensuing demographics of the diaspora and forms of transnational politics that have resulted, are thus quite new in the long history of Yemeni diaspora. While throughout the 20th century most Yemenis immigrated for economic reasons, the aftermath of the 2011 uprising saw a new

political factor resulting from the current war. This has changed the nature of the Yemeni diaspora, by creating not only new economic migrants but also a political diaspora that has actively sent political remittances towards the homeland. Indeed, the phenomenon of political elites and activists in diaspora actively participating in political mobilization is quite new in the Yemeni context. Yet this phenomenon is not uniform in nature: the destination of Yemeni migrants is both influenced by political ideology and affinity, but also has an important mediating factor in their forms of diaspora mobilization and organization. Exploring Yemeni diaspora groups in the UK, Egypt, and Turkey reveals demographic cluster formation in diaspora, but also how different political opportunity structures in host countries effect transnational mobilization.

YEMENIS IN THE UK: The Ebb and Flow of Mobilization

While the Yemeni diaspora population in the UK was estimated to be between 70,000-80,000 people as per the 2001 census, and while the Yemeni diaspora population in the UK was estimated to be between 70,000-80,000 people as per the 2001 census, and represents one of the oldest Muslim diasporas in the country, those who actively mobilize today, whether working for diaspora integration or trying to influence the British government policy towards Yemen, are members of the first generation. As visiting Yemen has become near-impossible as result of the current conflict, ties with Yemen are becoming weak or totally lost. The feeling among many in the second generation as expressed in interviews and informal discussions is that they are British more than Yemeni. This is combined with a shared view that Yemen, in this war, is becoming a helpless country. These factors have minimized interest in Yemen by those in the diaspora. Just as importantly, though, the war has divided the Yemeni diaspora in the UK in an unprecedented way and has created a widespread feeling of disappointment. While Yemeni diaspora political activism in the UK still exists, this is without a large degree of enthusiasm, especially among those from the North of Yemen.

The history of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK dates back to 1860 in South Shield, comprised of [seamen](#) who immigrated from the British colony in Aden city. Following World War Two, with Britain in need of workers, hundreds of Yemenis immigrated to work in British factories and settled in the industrial areas such as Sheffield, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. When the industrial economy retreated by the end of the 1970s, after the economic rise of Southeast Asian countries, Yemeni immigration decreased and some even returned to Yemen or indeed immigrated again to the Gulf States. Until the 1980s, few Yemenis immigrants were accompanied by their families; this trend began to change, however, in the 1970s as South Asians who had worked with the British colonial enterprise in Africa and

Asia settled in the UK with their families by the end of the 1970s, which encouraged Yemenis to do the same.¹ This trend towards family immigration also resulted from the low salaries and high costs of living in the UK.²

This shift in the nature of immigration from single men as non-permanent workers to families seeking more permanent resettlement led to significant changes within the Yemeni diaspora's concerns and priorities. The first Yemeni organization, the Allawia Society, was founded in the late 1930s by Sheikh Abdullah Ali Al Hakimi as a religious foundation designed to provide social services to the Yemeni community as well as spaces for gathering and meetings. The Allawia Society's importance declined with the rise of political struggle in Yemen, and in particular with both the republican revolution in 1962 in the North of Yemen that overthrew the Imamate and the start of the guerrilla war against the British colony in the South. During this time, Yemenis in the UK diaspora were quite active politically, and got involved with Arab Nationalist and leftist movements within the Arab Workers Union, established in 1961. Primarily active in Birmingham, the Union's main activities included fundraising for development projects in the homeland, organizing political campaigns in the UK, convening meeting for the Yemeni community, and holding literacy classes for members of the diaspora, among others.³

Yet by the end of the 1970s, with the increasing trend of family immigration, this political activism decreased as members of the diaspora became more concerned with keeping their identity and customs. This demographic shift also coincided with an important political shift occurring throughout the Arab world. The decline of political liberation and independence movements, along with the rise of the political Islamic movements, saw a shift towards identity issues. As one interviewee explained, people became more concerned with their personal issues and distanced themselves from politics.⁴

As a result of these demographic and political changes, the Yemeni representative bodies in the UK also underwent changes. In 1986, the first Yemeni Community Association was established in Sheffield, and subsequently in many British cities that hosted the Yemeni diaspora such as Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester.⁵ Yet unlike earlier organizations, these associations were not concerned with politics in the homeland, focusing instead on providing social services for integration in the UK, such as legal advising, English language instruction for older immigrants, Arabic language instruction for children, and the building of mosques. Members of these associations were elected by the Yemeni diaspora and were funded by the British government, with only very small funds from the Yemeni government.

Over the past few years, and especially in 2010, this shift in focus from Yemen toward the UK was the result of both changing attachments within the diaspora but also funding constraints presented in the UK. On one hand, the importance of these associations had decreased as new generations were less

attached to the home country. Yet at the same time, attracting funding to maintain these organizations required a shift away from emphasis on Yemen. As explained by one interviewee, the decision to change the name of their association in Sheffield to "Aspiring Community Together" was undertaken as connecting their name to Yemen became a barrier to receiving greater amounts of money. Yet, he goes on to explain that "we should not confine our activities to the homeland, and we have to be more active and involved in British politics and economy, this specific thing can develop the community and integrate more with the British society."⁶

Southern Yemen Political Mobilization

The Yemeni civil war of 1994 between the Socialist party in the South and the government in Sana'a created a rift among the Yemeni diaspora in UK, and revived political activism in the diaspora. This was at least partially the result of new trends in migration provoked by the war: Yemeni migration for those from the South largely favoured the UK as a base for their opposition in exile due to the colonial history in the South of Yemen and the Southern diaspora that already existed in the UK,⁷ which rendered it an attainable destination for the most Southerners. In the aftermath, the seeds of Southern diaspora political mobilization that had been planted would become effective in subsequent years.

In 1997, the first Yemeni political opposition from exile since the 1960s was established. The National Front of the Southern Opposition, otherwise known as MOWJ, which was led by Abdulrahman al Jifri and funded by the Saudi government until 2000, succeeded in gathering constituents of the Southern diaspora to work for the establishment of an independent state, or at least to reform the path of Yemen's unity. Among their goals was to gather Southerners, raise awareness for the Southern cause, and try to lobby and influence the British government. This initiative did not last, however, and was totally closed in 2002 due to the drying up of [Saudi funding](#). In 2003, another Southern opposition organization was established in the UK, the Southern Democratic Assembly, or TAJ as it is known. This organization was popular among Southerners in the UK as was founded at the same time as the new secessionist movement in the South of Yemen emerged.⁸ And six years later, in 2009, another Southern organization was established, the South Yemen National Board,

1 Author interview, 10 October 2020.

2 Author interview, 22 October 2020.

3 Fred Halliday, "Yemeni Workers' Organizations in Britain", *Race and Class*, Vol.33 No.4, 1992.

4 Author interview, 10 October 2020.

5 Author interview, 22 October 2020.

6 Author interview, 22 October 2020.

7 Author interview, 22 October 2020.

8 Author interview, 16 October 2020.

headed by the first prime minister of the Yemeni unity cabinet, Haidar al Attas. This organization worked for the Southern cause, targeted the Socialists mainly, and called for reforming Yemeni unity rather than secession. Yet, this specific set of claims – focused on unity reform as opposed to secession – proved less popular than those of TAJ.

Post-2011: Increased Political Mobilization, Increased Polarization

In 2011, with the popular uprising, the Yemeni diaspora became active in an unprecedented way. Yemenis from the North launched demonstrations and pressure campaigns to support the uprising, which was facilitated by a receptive environment given the great interest and attention of the British government and media on the MENA region. Yet this diasporic mobilization in favour of the uprising was not representative of the whole; on the contrary, the movement resulted in another division among the Northerners in the UK, particularly in Birmingham, as some of them favoured the Saleh regime. According to interviews, this division is in part a reflection of different political party affinities, and namely the division between those supporting the ruling General Congress Party and those ideologically affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood's Islah party.⁹ And while some Southerners were sympathetic with the uprising and participated in supporting major events, the majority had been too disenfranchised by unity with the North, dubious that radical reform for a fundamentally altered path of Yemeni unity could be possible.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in the early years after 2011, divisions were assuaged by hope for the future and a largely optimistic atmosphere.

The eruption of war in Yemen in 2015, however, created a new rift within the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, as well as a prevalent degree of political apathy. Profoundly aggrieved by the Houthi invasion of their region, Southerners in the diaspora became increasingly divided from Northerners and were active in organizing demonstrations to support the Saudi-UAE led coalition until the retreat of the Houthi forces from the South in July 2015.¹¹ On the other hand, while Northerners were divided according to their stances on the Houthi-Saleh coalition, the dominant feeling was that of disappointment: most Northerners were against both the Saudi-UAE led coalition and the Houthis at the same time. The result was political lassitude among the Northerners, who as such refrained from taking any action that could serve even inadvertently to strengthen one side of the conflict.¹² Yet, this political apathy was also the result of declined interest on the part of British media and the British government in the Yemeni situation, unlike in 2011.

In 2017, the establishment of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) led to huge Southern diaspora mobilization, including demonstrations to signal support and the spreading of STC propaganda. Importantly, this diaspora mobilization was encouraged by the STC. As the first important organized structure trying to represent the South, the Council established an office in London in 2019 following the visit of STC's president, Aidaroos

al Zubaidi, to the UK, at which time he made a specific call on the Yemeni diaspora base in Sheffield.¹³ However, this Southern mobilization has decreased over time as many Southerners started to oppose the STC, which they deemed not sufficiently firm in its opposition to the recognized government. In addition, a new division within the Southern diaspora in the UK emerged following the conflict in August 2019,¹⁴ as conflict dynamics within the South saw the emergence of pro- and anti-STC factions. Nonetheless, efforts on the part of the STC to influence diaspora mobilization continued. After the establishment of the STC office in London, another group, the [Friends of South Yemen](#) was formed with the aim to pressure [British policy](#) towards the South for the establishment of an independent Southern state in partial disagreement with the policies of STC. A similar group, the Labour Friends of Yemen, was established with a similar purpose, though this group also included Northerners and so did not take part in Southern divisions.

Interesting, this increased polarization has also taken on a cross-diaspora dimension. The Yemeni diaspora is networking with other sympathetic diasporas and receiving support from various other forms of solidarity, including participation in Yemeni demonstrations or assistance in reaching the British media or decision makers. The best example is the relationship between the pro-Houthis from one side and the Bahraini opposition and Shiite Iraqi diasporas from the other side. The Southerners find similar support from other diasporas such as the Kurdish, Sunni Iraqis, and Somalilanders who have participated in their demonstrations and events.

Charity and Cultural Work as Remaining Signs of Diaspora Unity

Despite political divisions, it is worth noting that all of those who were interviewed agreed that these multiple divisions do not exert influence on social relationships within the Yemeni diaspora. Indeed, all interviewees confirmed that the social relationships among Yemenis in the UK diaspora are not affected by political divisions, unlike other Arab communities. To this point, they still gather normally at events like marriages or funerals, although they agreed that the sense of unity and harmony was much better in the past. The banning of qat¹⁵ in the UK six years ago is in fact cited as one of the principal factors negatively affecting the diaspora. Qat sessions were regarded as prime opportunities for more regular social gatherings; importantly, though, they were

⁹ Author Interview, 20 October 2020.

¹⁰ Author Interview, 23 October 2020.

¹¹ Author Interview, 23 October 2020.

¹² Author Interview, 20 October 2020.

¹³ Author Interview, 23 October 2020.

¹⁴ Helen Lackner and Raiman Al-Hamdani, Raiman, "War and Pieces: Political Divides in Southern Yemen", European Council on Foreign Relations, January 2020, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/war_and_pieces_political_divides_in_southern_yemen/

¹⁵ Qat, also known as khat, is a plant that releases an amphetamine-like high when chewed.

also informal forums where different political opinions were freely exchanged. These venues thus allowed for members of the diaspora to remain connected despite political differences and to be more aware of one another's perspectives. Now, Yemeni gatherings are irregular and there is a notable absence of constant discussion, which has led to some misunderstandings and deepened disagreements.

Nonetheless, Yemeni diaspora organization in the cultural sector was and remains today an active field of collective action. For example, the [British-Yemeni Society](#) that was founded in 1993 by prominent Yemeni politicians, intellectuals, British academics, and ambassadors is a charity organization that receives its funding from the British government and Yemeni businessmen. It publishes an annual academic journal on Yemen and issued a book about Yemen, titled *Why Yemen Matters*, and remains active today. Likewise, while the interest in intellectual activities has decreased in recent years given the war, a few diaspora organizations working on cultural issues have continued to be established, such as [Tamadon](#), which was established in 2017 and aims to raise issues related to Arab culture targeting the Yemeni diaspora.

Similarly, despite the increased political fractures, one remaining field where the UK Yemeni diaspora is still able to work together is in charity efforts. Sheffield's community, for example, regularly sends donations to Yemen, reaching up to 200,000 pounds.¹⁶ Donations are also collected regularly by different UK-based Yemeni diaspora organizations, and mainly by Mercy Relief and Saba Relief, or even from the community associations (Saba Relief, for example, collects donations mostly from other Muslim communities such as the South Asian community in the UK for an annual income of almost 2.2 million pounds). These donations are distributed all over Yemen regardless of the region. Adding to their donations, Yemenis in the UK continue to provide remittances for their extended families in their home country. Despite such efforts, though, the impact remains limited because of numerous access obstacles imposed by both the Saudi-UAE coalition as well as the Houthis, in addition to travel restrictions which prevent the monitoring of donation distribution.¹⁷

YEMENI DIASPORA MOBILIZATION IN EGYPT:

Limitations in Scope and Size

Egypt has long been a preferred destination of Yemenis seeking residence abroad (albeit with only rare cases of asylum), study opportunities, and in some cases business abroad, and this trend has only continued since the outbreak of the current conflict in Yemen. Since the 1930s, and thanks to the shared language and easy access, Egypt has been the preferred higher-education destination of upper-class Yemenis, a trend that only increased in the 1960s following the Egyptian military intervention in

Northern Yemen. Indeed, the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt has always been sizeable and relatively integrated in Egyptian society. It is also diverse and includes students, businessmen, intellectuals, politicians, and millions of visitors for tourism, medical care, and other purposes. Indeed, by the 1980s, some significant businesses were owned by Yemenis in Egypt, including the Coca Cola Company and some food products factories.

In the wake of the 2015 war, Egypt has received a huge wave of Yemeni migrants. The population is now estimated to be 500,000-700,000 residents in addition to thousands of other visitors annually, though only 9,200 Yemenis in Egypt are registered as refugees with UNCHR.¹⁸ This represents a considerable increase, as the number of Yemeni residents in Egypt before the war did not exceed 70,000.¹⁹ At the beginning of the war, Egypt issued visa restrictions for the first time, marking a significant break with the past when Yemenis could visit without a visa and live in Egypt without a residency permit. A few months later, though, the government reversed course, easing the procedures for obtaining visas through the furnishing of a medical report proving the need to seek medical care in Egypt – a source of important revenues for the Egyptian healthcare sector. These medical reports can be easily obtained in Yemen, regardless of health condition, and as a result Egypt is once again the most accessible country for Yemenis, and in particular for those who live in Yemen (the visa process remains difficult for Yemenis who live outside the country). In addition to this, the residency procedures have become easier and more systematic, requiring renewal once every six months or even annually. As such, Egypt has become a constant hub for thousands of Yemenis who are fleeing the war or the Houthi suppression, and in particular politicians, intellectuals, and journalists.

Yet, despite the long history of the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt, mobilization and diaspora organizations have been relatively insignificant. A major exception was the Yemeni Student Union in Egypt was politically active following the Egyptian revolution in 1952 and even played a major role in the Yemeni opposition against the Imamate regime in the North and the British colony in the South,²⁰ conducting activities such as the organization of demonstrations, raising awareness about the Yemeni cause in the Egyptian media, and meeting with Egyptian officials to support the Yemeni movement in the North and South. This notwithstanding, it was only in 2006 that an association of the Yemeni diaspora was first established, though its purpose was less directed towards the homeland than the provision of social services for members of the diaspora. With the onset of the war however, and the problems that have been posed to Yemenis living in Egypt, new forms of diaspora mobilization have

¹⁶ Author interview, 22 October 2020.

¹⁷ Author interview, 25 October 2020.

¹⁸ Author interview, 28 October 2020.

¹⁹ Qabool Al-Absi, Qabool, "The Struggle Far from Home: Yemeni Refugees in Egypt", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 2020, available at <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/12286>

²⁰ Sadiq Muhammad Al-Safwani, "The Establishment of Yemeni Student Missions in Egypt in the 1930s", (Arabic), *Arabian Humanities*, Vol.12, 2019.

emerged. When the war erupted on 26 March 2015, and flights to and from Yemen were suspended, thousands of Yemenis were [stranded in Egypt](#) yet without the funds necessary to live there. This crisis continued for two months, during which time neither the Yemeni embassy nor the Egyptian government was able to find a solution. In their place, Yemeni students in the Egypt diaspora collected donations from Yemeni businessmen and assisted in providing a monthly stipend to those stranded and in need.

From this spontaneous civic and community-oriented mobilization other forms of diaspora mobilization emerged. The organization Mubadara, established during the COVID-19 crisis for example, provides services to Yemeni refugees, including job training and psycho-social support. Likewise, the Yemeni publishing house Arowqa, established in Cairo in 2010, has increased its activities and publications and has become more focused on Yemen, benefiting from the increase in Yemeni intellectuals present in the diaspora in Egypt.²¹ Similarly, another Yemeni cultural institution was founded in Egypt in the wake of the war, Sabaa for Culture and Art, creating a bookshop specialized in Yemeni books in addition to sponsoring and supporting Yemeni artists and artisans who have settled in Egypt since 2015.²²

This limited number of Yemeni diaspora organizations, and their highly restricted scope, is demonstrative of the important restrictions to civic space in the Egyptian context. Mubadara, for example, operates without official permission as a result of high costs of registration, working instead under the cover of the Sudanese organization Ahlam or UNCHR.²³ Indeed, working under the cover of other organizations is a well-utilized manoeuvring strategy for Yemeni associations given the difficulty of obtaining permission for their civic activities. Other organizations, such as Al Mashhad Al Yemeni and the organization Women's Voices of Peace Network have carved out space through obtaining permits from the Yemeni government to operate abroad, although these still face limitations in terms of operational capacity.

Perhaps just as importantly, and as in the UK, the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt faces divisions that are regional and political, which has hampered its ability to organize and mobilize, with the difference being that those in Egypt lack the margin of freedom that allows for these divisions to exist. As a case in point, the Yemeni Student Union has been mostly disabled and elections have stopped functioning since 2011²⁴ for fear of triggering internal disagreement as a result of different political or ideological stances with regards to the conflict.

THE NEW YEMENI DIASPORA IN TURKEY:

Ideological Cohesion, Limited Organization

While prior to 2015 only few Yemeni students received

scholarships to study in Turkey, the country since the outbreak of war has become an important migration destination. In a very short period, Turkey has welcomed thousands of Yemenis fleeing the conflict and Houthi oppression. This has included Yemeni businessmen and ordinary people who previously lived in the Gulf countries but who ultimately preferred to settle in Turkey in light of recent restrictions on Yemeni investors and immigrants in the GCC. As a result, Turkey is now home to at least 30,000 Yemenis, including 4,500 university students.²⁵

This fast resettlement of Yemenis to Turkey has been accompanied by the emergence of new media channels and organizational structures. There are currently three Yemeni TV channels that broadcast from Istanbul, funded primarily by Qatar. The oldest, Belqess TV, owned by Nobel laureate Tawakkol Karman, was established in August 2014 with its primary broadcast center in Sana'a. However, pressure from the Houthis forced the channel to transfer most of the staff to Istanbul in February 2015, and by March of that year the office in the Yemeni capital was forcibly shut. The channel has been granted official permission to work from the Turkish government, given that it pays taxes, employs Turks, and – importantly – does not interfere in the politics of the Turkish government.²⁶

In addition, since 2015, two important Yemeni associations have been established, the Yemeni Diaspora Association that organizes meetings for Yemenis and provides social services for Yemeni residents and the Yemeni Student Union Association, which was consolidated from eight smaller and separate student unions following the eruption of the war and the rapid increase in the size of the Yemeni student body and is active in organizing cultural and social events and providing services for Yemeni students. Financially, both of them rely on member dues and the donations of businessmen. Interestingly, there is no regional division within the Yemeni Student Union, except for an attempt from the students of Hadramout, who tried (and failed) to establish an independent union.²⁷ Yet, while there is no regional division present, there is a distinct hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Union, which is demonstrative of the ideological leanings of the majority of Yemenis in Turkey. The only real challenge facing the absolute Brotherhood hegemony is an independent movement not affiliated with any political party and representing mostly liberal secular students who present themselves as the new republicans. This movement, which is currently becoming popular in the North of Yemen and is considered part of the struggle against the Houthis, intersects with another popular discourse calling to revive the national

21 The publishing house owner believes that the intellectual atmosphere in Egypt has deteriorated since 2013, due to the feeling of fear and disappointment. This stands in contrast to the situation during 2011–2013 when the feelings of optimism and freedom were dominant. Author interview, 23 September 2020.

22 Author interview, 30 September 2020.

23 Author interview, 23 September 2020.

24 Author interview, 28 October 2020.

25 Author interview, 30 October 2020.

26 Author interview, 28 October 2020.

27 Author interview, 31 October 2020.

identity and connect Yemen to its pre-Islamic roots. While this independent movement cannot win the student union elections due to its poor organizational abilities compared to the Brotherhood, it has succeeded in establishing some cultural clubs, such as Fikr and Al-Iklil, which have organized several cultural conferences focused on historical and identity issues.

Despite the low degree of formal organization, the Yemeni diaspora in Turkey is in general anti-Houthi and pro-government, which has created a solid common ground despite minor disagreements. Consequently, collective mobilization is possible, as seen in the large demonstration that was organized against the UAE, particularly when it stood with the STC forces against the government's army that was targeted by an Emirati air strike in August 2019.²⁸ Nonetheless, several important obstacles face the new Yemeni diaspora in Turkey. Firstly, the difficulties of learning the language has hindered integration in general and created gaps between parents and their children who are learning Turkish in school.²⁹ Secondly, the Yemeni embassy has been without an ambassador since 2017, as a result of the tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia/UAE, which has harmed the interests of the Yemeni diaspora in Turkey and increased the difficulty of obtaining visas and residency permits.³⁰ Such obstacles have a negative impact on the diaspora's mobilization capacity by diverting resources and energy to issues related to resettlement as opposed to political organizing towards Yemen.

CONCLUSION

The distinctions between the Yemeni diasporas in the UK, Egypt, and Turkey are apparent and reflect the different circumstances in which they arose, yet they also demonstrate quite different patterns of mobilization and organization. In comparing these diasporas and the forms of collective action they undertake, it is possible to grasp how sociopolitical characteristics, afforded spaces within host societies, and conflict dynamics back home interact to shape mobilization opportunities and constraints. In the UK, where the diaspora is old and had become largely integrated into British society, with most benefiting from British citizenship, there is a diverse Yemeni community that reflects the long history of immigration to the UK and the multiple motivations for immigration. While the war has posed a real challenge for this diverse diaspora in threatening its tranquillity, the democratic atmosphere and the strong relationships between members have enabled the diaspora to weather the negative consequences of the war and the divisions it has provoked at the social level. Yet at the same time, the political divisions that exist thanks to this diversity, and space provided for political mobilization, have created new forms of polarization, especially given different mobilization capacities that favour the Southern secessionist cause through the STC's efforts towards instrumentalizing the UK diaspora.

This contradicts the case of the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt, also characterized by diversity yet marked by the absence of a democratic atmosphere which obstructs the possibility of managing internal disagreements but also the space for political organizing. As a result, diaspora associations and the student union have failed in organizing elections and other actions to avoid producing internal conflicts that mirror dynamics in Yemen. What is more, the political authoritarian system does not provide work opportunities, whether on the political, cultural, or social level, though Yemenis have succeeded relatively well in implementing some form of workarounds to organize in Egypt. Nonetheless, diaspora organization is more limited to either cultural activities or the provision of services to those in Egypt. As for the situation in Turkey, the relatively new diaspora that has emerged as a direct result of the current conflict is heavily dominated by one political group. Thus, while the space for organization and mobilization is greater than in Egypt, there is a lack of any kind of diversity due to the pull-and-push surrounding Yemeni migration to Turkey.

Historically, the Yemeni diaspora has played a vital role in supporting the home country by raising funds to finance development projects or providing support to the national movements that struggled against the Imamah in the North or the British colony in the South. In the face of today's conflict, while different diasporas communities are trying to support Yemen through charity work, the unprecedented divisions along with constrained operational space have decreased their capacity to play a role in promoting peace or finding political solutions. Importantly, this has been the result not only of divisions within the diaspora communities themselves, which act as an obstacle to organization or coordination, but also the result of different policies of host countries. Nonetheless, as Egypt hosts a large part of the Yemeni political and intellectual elite, and as it remains the best place for diaspora Yemenis to meet with those still inside the country, it could be a suitable place for coordination between different Yemeni factions interested in working towards peace. Such a possibility, though, would be dependent on the Egyptian government's willingness to host such meetings. Thus, while opportunities do exist for the Yemeni diaspora to play a greater political role in the resolution of conflict, this is dependent both on overcoming internal divisions and also on granting a civic space that is free from external intervention.

28 Muhammad Abdul Malik, "The Yemeni Community in Turkey Demonstrates to Denounce the Practices of the UAE in their Country"; (Arabic), Al-Jazeera, available at: <https://bit.ly/3sDbwCH>

29 Author interview, 30 October 2020.

30 Author interview, 28 October 2020.

ABOUT 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.



contact@arab-reform.net
10 Rue des Bluets, 75011 Paris
+33 1 48 06 93 06
www.arab-reform.net