



The Struggle Far From Home: Yemeni Refugees in Cairo

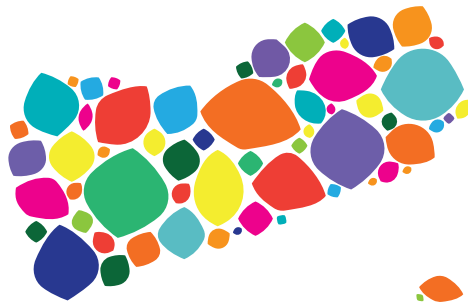
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Cover Photo : A Yemeni man sits on the pavement outside a Yemeni restaurant in Al-Douqi, Cairo on October 26, 2020. // Sana'a Center photo by Hisham Ghaleb



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INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, the devastating conflict in Yemen has created a debilitating economic and humanitarian crisis and displaced millions of Yemenis. While the vast majority of displaced Yemenis remain within Yemen — around 3.65 million^[1] — Yemenis who do seek safety abroad most often flee to countries across the Arab world, including Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti and Jordan, as well as to Malaysia.

According to the Yemeni embassy in Cairo, between 500,000 and 700,000 Yemenis live in Egypt, a significant increase from before the war, when approximately 70,000 resided in the country.^[2] However, just 9,200 Yemenis in Egypt are registered as asylum seekers or refugees with UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency.^[3] In total, Egypt hosts some 250,000 refugees and asylum seekers, from various countries, who are registered with UNHCR.^[4]

Egypt has historically played an important political role in Yemeni affairs and there has been a sizable Yemeni community in Cairo since the Yemeni revolution of 1962. Despite this shared history, many Yemeni refugees in Egypt struggle to make ends meet in their new home. They often face economic difficulties as work opportunities are scarce, and struggle to pay for medical care and their children's education.

This report shines a light on the economic and living conditions of Yemeni refugees in Egypt. It relies on interviews and conversations with about 20 Yemeni refugees in Cairo about their challenges and needs, and the support they receive from UNHCR and charity organizations. Pseudonyms are used for all of the Yemeni refugees quoted in this report to protect their privacy. The author is a Yemeni citizen who has been living in Cairo since 2017. She is a founding member of the Yemeni-run initiative for refugees in Egypt, *Wojood Community*.^[5]

1) Yemen Fact Sheet, UNHCR, August 2020, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Yemen%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20August%202020.pdf>

2) Author interview with Baleegh Al-Mekhlafi, spokesperson for the Embassy of the Republic of Yemen in Egypt, Cairo, October 6, 2020.

3) Egypt Fact Sheet, UNHCR, July 2020, https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Egypt_Fact%20Sheet_July%202020.pdf

4) Ibid

5) *Wojood Community* (مجتمع وجود) was founded by Yemenis in Cairo in June 2019. It distributes food baskets to refugees, provides financial aid for rent, and offers legal and psychological support services, among other activities.

A HISTORICAL CONNECTION

As a crossroads of commerce and culture in the Arab world, Egypt has long hosted a Yemeni community, the majority of whom reside in Cairo. This community grew after the northern Yemeni revolution against the ruling Imamate in 1962, which was supported by former Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Many Yemenis have been taught by Egyptians who traveled to Yemen to work in schools, and the approved curriculum in Yemen was the Egyptian curriculum until the 1980s. These historical and social factors contributed to the decision by many Yemenis to flee to Egypt during the current conflict.

Furthermore, it had been quite common for Yemenis to travel to Cairo for medical treatment, university studies or tourism prior to the ongoing war. Yemenis did not require a visa to enter Egypt and could stay indefinitely in the country without a residency permit.

Following the launch of Saudi Arabia's military campaign against the armed Houthi movement in northern Yemen in March 2015, Egypt required Yemenis to obtain an entry visa for travel, as well as a residence permit to remain in Egypt.^[6] Yemenis under 18 or over 50 years old were exempted from these requirements.^[7] Shortly after entry, Yemenis are granted renewable residence permits for a period of six months.^[8]

Despite the new visa and residency requirements, Yemenis continue to travel to Egypt, often to take up residence there. Often, Yemenis enter Egypt on medical visas, which require a medical report confirming they need outside care issued by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the internationally recognized Yemeni government.^[9] While some Yemenis are indeed in need of medical care in better-equipped hospitals than those in Yemen, others obtain the medical report without actually requiring medical treatment, in order to secure entry. Once Yemenis arrive at

6) Author interview with Baleegh Al-Mekhlafi, spokesperson for the Embassy of the Republic of Yemen in Egypt, Cairo, October 6, 2020. Egypt changed entry requirements for Yemenis on March 26, 2015.

7) Mohammed Mekawy, "We publish the text of the agreement between Egypt and Yemen regarding the entry of Yemeni citizens to Cairo[AR]," Masrawy, July 7, 2015, https://www.masrawy.com/news/news_publicaffairs/details/2015/7/7/615524/-نشر-نص-الاتفاق-بين-مصر-واليمن

8) Ibid

9) Author's phone interview with an employee of Travels in the North, a Sana'a-based travel agency that arranges travel between Yemen and other Arab nations, September 8, 2020.

Cairo airport with a medical report, they are granted entry via a passport stamp, and must go to Egypt's mogamma, a civil services building, within one week to obtain their residency permit.^[10]

Many Yemenis who fled the war live in Egypt with residency permits and are not registered as refugees or asylum seekers in part because they want to retain the ability to return to Yemen at their convenience. It is often the poorest of Yemenis who choose to register with UNHCR in hopes of obtaining basic economic assistance. Notably, UNHCR does not routinely carry out refugee status determination for Yemenis in Egypt, unless they are to be considered for resettlement or their profile warrants extra examination.^[11] Due to this, most Yemenis registered with UNHCR are classified as asylum seekers rather than refugees. For the purposes of this report, all Yemenis who are registered with UNHCR are referred to as refugees.

Yemenis in Egypt come from across Yemen, as well as from different social classes and cultural backgrounds, and most reside in Cairo. Most of the community lives on the western side of the Nile river, in what is officially Giza, in the neighborhoods of Faisal, Ard al-Liwa, Mohandeseen and Al-Dokki. Fewer families live in areas further from the city center, like the suburb 6th of October City.

In addition to Yemenis, Egypt hosts UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum seekers from 57 other countries, most of whom are from Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia.^[12] In Egypt, refugees and asylum seekers are afforded the right to work, but to do so they must obtain work permits, for which there are administrative barriers.^[13] Refugees and asylum seekers also have access to Egyptian public healthcare, but some services in the public health system require payment.^[14] Yemenis, as well as Syrian, Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers, are permitted to study in Egyptian public schools at the same cost as Egyptian students.^[15]

10) Author's phone interview with Nageeb Hassan, leader of Yemenis in Egypt, a local Yemeni-run initiative to spread awareness among the Yemeni community about services available to them in Egypt, October 23, 2020.

11) Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen, UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

12) Ibid

13) Email correspondence with Christine Beshay, External Relations Officer at UNHCR Egypt, November 2, 2020.

14) Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen, UNHCR, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/10/ERP2021EN.pdf>

15) Ayat Al-Habal, "Al-Masry Al-Youm monitors the conditions of educational centers for refugees in Cairo: educational and psychological services for refugee and asylum-seeking children[AR]," Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 7, 2019, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1357761>

In February 2019, UNHCR stated that the number of refugees and asylum seekers registered in Egypt had increased by 24 percent over the past two years.^[16] The increase in the number of refugees coincided with funding challenges. UNHCR's Egypt operation was only 46 percent funded in 2019.^[17] By August 2020, the agency had received only 35 percent of its financial requirements for this year.^[18] UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi has said eight out of 10 refugees in Egypt could not meet their basic needs and were living "in desperate humanitarian conditions." He added: "These refugees require timely and adequate humanitarian assistance. Yet, right now we are unable to provide them with the bare essentials or maintain our core refugee protection programs in this country."^[19]

16) "80 Percent of Refugees in Egypt live in Miserable Humanitarian Conditions[AR]," United Nations News, February 28, 2019, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2019/02/1028002>

17) "Egypt Overview 2019," UNHCR Global Focus, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2540?y=2019#year>

18) "Funding Update 2020, Egypt," UNHCR, August 18, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/08/Egypt-Funding-Update-18-August-2020.pdf>

19) "80 Percent of Refugees in Egypt live in Miserable Humanitarian Conditions[AR]," United Nations News, February 28, 2019, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2019/02/1028002>

SCRAPING BY

Unemployment rates among refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt run high.^[20] Unemployment in Egypt rose to 9.6 percent in the second quarter of 2020.^[21] Unemployment for sub-Saharan Africans, Iraqi and Yemeni refugees and asylum seekers was at around 25 percent in 2018.^[22] All foreigners, including refugees, must obtain work permits for employment in Egypt, a burdensome process with strict requirements.^[23] As a result, refugees and asylum seekers are mostly engaged in the informal sector.^[24] Yemeni refugees in Cairo who find work are often employed in Yemeni-run businesses, such as restaurants or shisha cafes, where they work informally. Many Yemeni refugees in Egypt are living in challenging economic conditions, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some suffer from accumulated debt and an inability to pay rent or secure basic needs, especially single mothers, the elderly and people with disabilities. Poor Yemeni families often live in Cairo's overcrowded, poorer neighborhoods, and large families will squeeze into compact apartments because they are unable to afford larger homes. While these families may have also suffered economic hardship in Yemen before the war, often they owned their houses in Yemen and found it easier to find employment. In Egypt, Yemen's strong community, familial and tribal social safety nets, which often help Yemenis survive immense hardship at home, either become obsolete or shift, creating an additional struggle in a new country.

Assessments conducted in 2018 by the organization Caritas found that the household spending of some 80 percent of refugees and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen fell below UNHCR's minimum expenditure basket threshold,^[25] an indicator of poverty.

20) Noha Sebaiee, "Strengthening Egypt's Refugee Programs," Middle East Women's Initiative, The Wilson Center, June 20, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/strengthening-egypts-refugee-programs-o>

21) "Egypt's unemployment rate rose to 9.6% in Q2 due to coronavirus - CAPMAS," Reuters, August 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-economy-unemployment/egypts-unemployment-rate-rose-to-96-in-q2-due-to-coronavirus-capmas-idUSC6N2F7014>

22) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

23) Ibid

24) Email correspondence with Christine Beshay, External Relations Officer at UNHCR Egypt, November 2, 2020.

25) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

In many cases, Yemeni families in strained economic situations borrow funds from friends and extended family in order to cover their needs or to pay for medical treatment. Some Yemenis are able to find assistance from Yemeni philanthropists in Egypt through word-of-mouth connections or local initiatives, like *Wojood Community* with which the author is affiliated, which bring needy cases to the attention of wealthy Yemenis.

The author spoke with Susan, a young woman from Sana'a who was living with her parents and three brothers in a difficult economic situation in the working-class Giza neighborhood of Faisal after five years in Cairo.^[26] Susan sells spices and henna to provide for her family but said, "We can barely get food and drink, and we eat meat or chicken very rarely."^[27] One of her brothers used to work at a clothing shop owned by Syrians and earned a small salary, which had helped the family pay rent and buy basic necessities, but he stopped working at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

Another Yemeni refugee living in a difficult economic situation was 54-year-old Abdullah, from Hudaydah.^[28] He has been living in Cairo for four years, alone on the outskirts of the city where rent is less expensive. Abdullah said that his landlord is understanding and allows him to be late on his rent — approximately US\$64 a month^[29] — which he often pays through small donations from friends and the Yemeni community in Cairo.^[30]

Abdullah is registered with UNHCR but receives limited support, despite his deteriorating health due to a stroke he suffered 14 years ago.^[31] In total, he said he had received two winter stipend payments from UNHCR of 600 Egyptian pounds each, approximately US\$38, and a single payment of around US\$6 during the COVID19 pandemic.^[32] Abdullah has approached the UNHCR's partner organizations for help in paying his rent or his medical bills, but has not succeeded. "I always go to them to follow up, so that they can reevaluate my case and help me. I am a 54-year-old man, and I have to pay for the taxis and make them wait for me [while I'm waiting at the organization's office] because it is hard for me to walk alone. Allah is generous and I pray I have a good ending."^[33]

26) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, July 11, 2020.

27) Ibid

28) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, June 27, 2020.

29) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, October 7, 2020.

30) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, June 27, 2020.

31) Ibid

32) Ibid

33) Ibid

Despite these stories of hardship, some Yemeni refugees have been able to find and create work opportunities. Some women have begun working from their homes, hairdressing, cooking and delivering food and sweets to others within the Yemeni community, and to Egyptians as well. For example, Tahani, a divorced Yemeni woman who came to Egypt in 2018 and lives with her sister and her two daughters, makes pastries from her home that she sells for a small income. Tahani also receives a small food stipend from UNHCR for her and her children. “The income is basic, but it helps my life to continue,” she said of her earnings from baking.

Other women make handicrafts like jewelry, baskets and small bags, as well as perfumes and incense, and often arrange purchases over the internet. Some young men have been able to find jobs, often in Yemeni-run restaurants, shops and shisha cafes. A small number of Yemenis work with charity organizations, but obtaining this kind of job is difficult as it requires experience and English fluency.

UNHCR and its partner organizations provide financial assistance to Yemeni refugees, prioritizing the most vulnerable, such as female-run households, elderly people and those with medical disabilities.^[34] In 2018, Egypt was one of UNHCR’s 10 largest operations for cash-based assistance.^[35] This assistance is meant to cover basic living expenses, and at most, is around US\$115 a month per family.^[36] According to UNHCR, funding limitations have meant that some in need of aid are not receiving it.^[37] Just 21 percent of registered refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt received monthly cash assistance in 2019, and resources are relatively more scarce for non-Syrian refugees compared to their Syrian counterparts.^[38] As of fall 2020, 16 percent of Egypt’s refugee population was receiving monthly cash assistance.^[39] In addition, UNHCR provides winter stipends to vulnerable refugees.^[40]

34) “Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen,” UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

35) “2016-2019 UNHCR Implementation of the Policy on Cash-based Interventions,” UNHCR, October 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/5dde6fod4>

36) “Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen,” UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

37) “Egypt Needs and Response, Unmet Needs, 2019,” UNHCR Global Focus, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2540?y=2019#-year>

38) Ibid

39) Email correspondence with Christine Beshay, External Relations Officer at UNHCR Egypt, November 2, 2020.

40) Ibid.

SCHOOLING IN A NEW COUNTRY

Since 2013, the Egyptian government has allowed Yemeni children to study at Egyptian schools for the same fees as Egyptian students.^[41] Prior to that, Yemenis could not study in Egyptian public schools unless one of their parents was awarded a scholarship to study at an Egyptian public university.^[42] The first Yemeni school was established in Egypt in 2017, and Cairo currently hosts three private Yemeni schools, which teach a Yemeni curriculum.^[43]

Still, a significant number of Yemeni children in Cairo are not enrolled in school.^[44] This is for several reasons. Sometimes children withdraw from education to try to help their families earn money. As well, some families are unable to pay school fees, between \$10 and \$12 a year.^[45] Yemeni families tend to be quite large and some parents are unable to afford to send all of their children to school. Also some children's education was interrupted by war and travel, and they did not return to their studies, either because they did not want to be held back a year or two, or because of the difficulties of navigating life in a new country.^[46]

Additionally, it is not unusual for families to have lost documents such as birth certificates and education records in Yemen, which prevents parents from enrolling their children in school. While the Yemeni embassy in Egypt issues new birth certificates to its citizens, school records must be obtained from Yemen,^[47] and these documents are required for Yemeni children to enroll in Egyptian schools.

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- 41) Ayat Al-Habal, "Al-Masry Al-Youm monitors the conditions of educational centers for refugees in Cairo: educational and psychological services for refugee and asylum-seeking children[AR]," Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 7, 2019, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1357761>
 - 42) Author's phone interview with Aref Al-Azizi, Yemeni community leader in Egypt and head of the Yemen Saeed Initiative, a pro-refugee local effort, September 14, 2020.
 - 43) The Yemeni private schools are Yemen International School, Modern Yemeni School and Saba International School.
 - 44) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>
 - 45) "Education minister announces public school fees, exempted groups," Egypt Independent, September 12, 2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/minister-of-education-issues-public-schools-fess-names-of-exempted-groups/#:~:text=Egypt's%20Minister%20of%20Education%20Tarek,high%20school%20students%2C%20and%20LE170>
 - 46) Author's phone interview with Mohammed Atef, director of local Yemeni-run initiative, Take My Hand, I Have the Right to Learn in Egypt, October 12, 2020.
 - 47) Author's phone interview with Aref Al-Azizi, Yemeni community leader in Egypt and head of the Yemen Saeed Initiative, a pro-refugee local effort, September 14, 2020.

A Yemeni refugee, Abu Ali, explained that two of his two daughters could not resume their education because they did not have the paperwork or birth certificates required to enroll in school. He said the documentation was burned during an airstrike which destroyed their home in Sana'a.^[48] One of Abu Ali's daughters has cerebral atrophy, and he has been unable to pay for her treatment as well as new paperwork and school fees. Abu Ali said: "Food comes first. I pray that they can go to school, but what can I do to get the papers? Where would we get them from? We do not have money, and I hope Allah helps us."^[49]

Some Yemeni children have been held back a grade due to interruptions in their studies as a result of war and travel. Some of these students refuse to attend school because of the social stigma of studying with younger classmates.

While Yemeni students enrolled in Egyptian public schools pay the same tuition fees as Egyptians,^[50] Yemeni parents often have difficulty paying for private classes; supplementary private tuition has become an important part of the Egyptian education system and is often considered necessary for students to keep pace with studies.^[51] These private sessions are an additional financial burden for families. For example, a Yemeni mother of three from Taiz governorate, Um Abdelrahman, said she receives a scholarship from Catholic Relief Services Egypt, which provides funding for her children to enroll every school term, but it is not sufficient to cover tuition fees, books and private tutoring.^[52]

"Education is difficult here," Um Abdelrahman said. "If I do not pay for private tutoring, the teachers will make life more difficult for my children, so I must pay." Her children still attend school but to do so, the small family barely ekes by, a situation experienced by many Yemeni families.^[53]

Some Yemeni children enroll in Sudanese or Syrian schools, which are more expensive than Egyptian public schools but not as costly as private schools or Yemeni schools. While Syrian schools follow the Egyptian curriculum, Sudanese schools teach the

48) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee who resides in Cairo, June 30, 2020.

49) Ibid

50) Ayat Al-Habal, "Al-Masry Al-Youm monitors the conditions of educational centers for refugees in Cairo: educational and psychological services for refugee and asylum-seeking children[AR]," Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 7, 2019, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1357761>

51) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

52) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, July 7, 2020.

53) Ibid

Sudanese curriculum. If they can afford to, Yemeni refugees may enroll their children in these schools because they are less crowded than Egyptian public schools.

Three Yemeni schools have opened in Egypt in recent years, two in Mohandeseen and one in Al-Haram. These schools are not accredited by the Egyptian Ministry of Education, but do have accreditation from the Education Ministry in Yemen.^[54] Naturally, Yemeni children find it easier to become acclimated at Yemeni schools as the teachers and curriculums are Yemeni. These schools, however, cost considerably more than public schools. Yemeni schools are considered private schools and relief organizations do not give financial assistance to refugees for private schools. The schools provide scholarships for poorer Yemeni families to help offset the cost of tuition, but these are limited in number.

Om Saleh, a Yemeni refugee and single mother who enrolled her son in a Yemeni school, received a discount on tuition from the school administration, but she is no longer able to pay the remaining tuition. "I enrolled my son in the school because it is a Yemeni school and he wanted to have Yemeni classmates, and they gave me a discount. Now, I do not have the money to pay for it, and I have to pay the remaining tuition so he can continue to study for the second term, or he will have to drop out."^[55]

Khadijah, a Yemeni refugee living in Ard al-Liwa, came to Egypt in April 2018 for medical treatment along with her four children and remained in the country, registering with UNHCR.^[56] Her husband is missing in Yemen. All of Khadijah's children have dropped out of school because she is unable to pay for their tuition and other school expenses, like books and stationary. "There is no mother who does not want her children to study and work to improve their future and their lives. I did everything I could, all of this is for them. I am their mother, their father, their sister, everything. All praise be to Allah, but I could not pay their tuition."^[57]

Scholarships are provided by UNHCR and other organizations for some refugee children's studies that cover approximately 40 percent of education costs.^[58] Some 48,400 children received these grants in 2019.^[59]

54) Author's phone interview with Nadia Al-Awadi, director of Saba International School, October 10, 2020.

55) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, November 30, 2019.

56) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, July 10, 2020.

57) Ibid

58) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>

59) "48,400 children benefited from UNHCR education grants in 2019," UNHCR Global Focus, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/egypt>

EGYPTIAN HOSPITALS

After North Yemen's revolution in 1962, Yemenis began traveling to Egypt for medical care with increasing frequency. It was a relatively easy process as Egypt did not require visas for Yemenis at that time, and also was one of the cheaper options for treatment abroad. Cairo's hospitals generally provided better medical care than those in Yemen.

That tradition has continued during the war. Yemenis come to Egypt for treatment of chronic illnesses, like cancer or liver disease, that Yemen's beleaguered hospitals are ill-equipped to treat. Yemenis injured by war and fighting also use Cairo's hospitals for treatment. Travel to Egypt via a medical visa is one of the most common paths for Yemenis to reach Cairo since the new visa restrictions were imposed.

After arriving in Cairo, many Yemenis who seek medical care register with UNHCR in hopes that their treatment will be paid for by the UN. Asylum seekers and refugees have access to public healthcare in Egypt but this is not free and services like surgery, chemotherapy and dialysis can be costly.

Some Yemeni refugees who need medical help but cannot afford it say they are unable to access such help from UNHCR or charity organizations. In some cases, refugees lack awareness of what aid is available to them or do not meet criteria set by aid organizations to qualify for assistance.

Henan fled to Cairo in 2017 with her husband who needed two surgeries for gastrointestinal problems.^[60] They are registered with UNHCR, but say they did not know which organization to approach for help to pay for the surgeries. They paid for the treatment themselves, at a cost of nearly US\$1,500.^[61] Later, Henan's husband took the medical file to Caritas' office seeking financial aid to pay for further treatment, but an interview scheduled in June was canceled due to COVID-19 concerns and the couple say that they have not succeeded in rescheduling.^[62]

Safaa, a Yemeni refugee from Sana'a, fled to Egypt in 2018 and is registered with UNHCR. Safaa suffers from painful rheumatoid arthritis but cannot afford medicine.^[63] She said

60) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, October 16, 2020.

61) Ibid

62) Ibid

63) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee woman in Cairo, October 20, 2020.

UNHCR told her to approach Caritas for medical support, but that Caritas had said they could not help if she was still able to walk and not reliant on a wheelchair.^[64]

Some Yemeni refugees resort to seeking assistance from individuals and wealthy Yemeni businessmen for treatments like chemotherapy. Others never receive the treatment they need because they cannot afford it and cannot find anyone to pay for it.

Still, UNHCR and its partner organizations fill a vital gap in the health care needs of many refugees. For example, Caritas provides primary health care for refugees through several urban clinics,^[65] while Save the Children offers maternal health services and helps children access health care.^[66] UNHCR works to improve the Egyptian public health care system and make it more cost-effective for refugees and asylum seekers.^[67] Saint Andrew's Refugee Services, a refugee support program at Saint Andrew's Church in downtown Cairo, provides medical counselling to try and connect refugees with the medical support they need.^[68] Yet for health care services, refugees must follow-up with organizations on their own, a bureaucratic process that is often daunting and burdensome.

For example, Fathy, a 21-year-old Yemeni refugee who has been in Cairo since 2018, said he had sought support from UNHCR, Save the Children, Caritas and finally Saint Andrew's Church for medical problems stemming from an amputated leg.^[69] He said that Save the Children had given him a prosthesis in 2018, Caritas had provided financial support of US\$62 a month for a limited time in 2019, and, most recently, Saint Andrew's Church had connected him with a doctor, but he is still unable to afford the treatment he needs.^[70]

A few UNHCR partner organizations provide psychological support services to refugees, as do local initiatives like Wojood Community, with which the author is affiliated. While some Yemeni refugees access these services, it is not customary in Yemeni culture to seek help for psychological needs and some still are hesitant to seek these services due to negative stigma.

64) Ibid

65) Caritas Egypt, <https://www.caritas.org/where-caritas-work/middle-east-and-north-africa/egypt/>; "Information For Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Egypt," UNHCR Egypt, April 2013, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5267a1d9b.pdf>

66) "What we do," Save the Children, Egypt, <https://egypt.savethechildren.net/what-we-do>

67) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/10/ERP2021EN.pdf>

68) "Psychological Services," Saint Andrew's Refugee Services, <http://stars-egypt.org/ps/>

69) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, October 16, 2020.

70) Ibid

SATISFACTION OF REFUGEES WITH UNHCR SERVICES

For Yemeni refugees in Egypt, understanding which services are available to them and how to obtain them has proven, at times, difficult and time-consuming. Some Yemeni refugees told the author they found themselves waiting in queues for hours in hopes of receiving aid only to discover they must come back the next day, that they did not have the correct paperwork or that they were ineligible for the services available. This has created frustration among many Yemeni refugees, which is often directed toward UNHCR and aid organizations.

A Yemeni refugee, Om Farouq, told the author about her husband's experience trying to obtain medical attention for a herniated disc.^[71] He had gone to a hospital, where he was told he had to renew his medical paperwork at Caritas to receive complementary care. Then, after waiting for several hours at a Caritas clinic for the new paperwork, he was told that his papers were in order and did not need to be renewed.^[72] Out of frustration, he has not returned to the hospital nor a Caritas clinic.

Furthermore, the majority of the Yemeni refugees in Egypt with whom the author spoke feel that their cases are not taken as seriously as other nationalities, particularly those of Syrians and Sudanese refugees. In rare cases, refugees are granted permanent resettlement to third countries such as the United States, Canada and European states. Globally, Syrian, Congolese, Afghan, Somali and Eritrean refugees were among those most commonly put forward for resettlement by UNHCR in 2019, while in Egypt, most refugees put forward for resettlement were Syrian, Sudanese and Eritrean.^[73] Just 4,000 refugees were resettled from Egypt in 2019 — mostly Syrian and Sudanese. It is extremely rare for the UNHCR to put forward Yemeni refugees for resettlement, and this compounds the sentiment among Yemeni refugees that their plight is overlooked. Moreover, UN programming for Syrian refugees is larger than for all the other refugee populations combined,^[74] while Syrians make up about half of the refugee population in Egypt.^[75] This has led to an inequality in services provided to non-Syrians.^[76]

71) Author's phone interview with a Yemeni refugee in Cairo, October 17, 2020.

72) Ibid

73) "Resettlement data," UNHCR, Accessed November 24, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-data.html#_ga=2.228668316.1675819511.1606217908-1062629028.1604999992

74) "Egyptian MFA, UN in Egypt Launch Response Plans to Support Refugees and Asylum-Seekers," UNHCR Egypt, October 6, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/16261-egyptian-mfa-un-in-egypt-launch-response-plans-to-support-refugees-and-asylum-seekers.html>

75) "Egypt UNHCR Fact Sheet," September 2020, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Egypt%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20September%202020.pdf>

76) "Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers From Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Yemen," UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2019/05/EgyptResponsePlan2019EN-1.pdf>



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the International Community:

- Increase the number of refugee resettlement admissions and ensure that selections are based on need for international protection, regardless of nationality.
- Increase funding to UNHCR in Egypt and ensure that existing funding commitments are met.

To UNHCR, INGOs and NGOs:

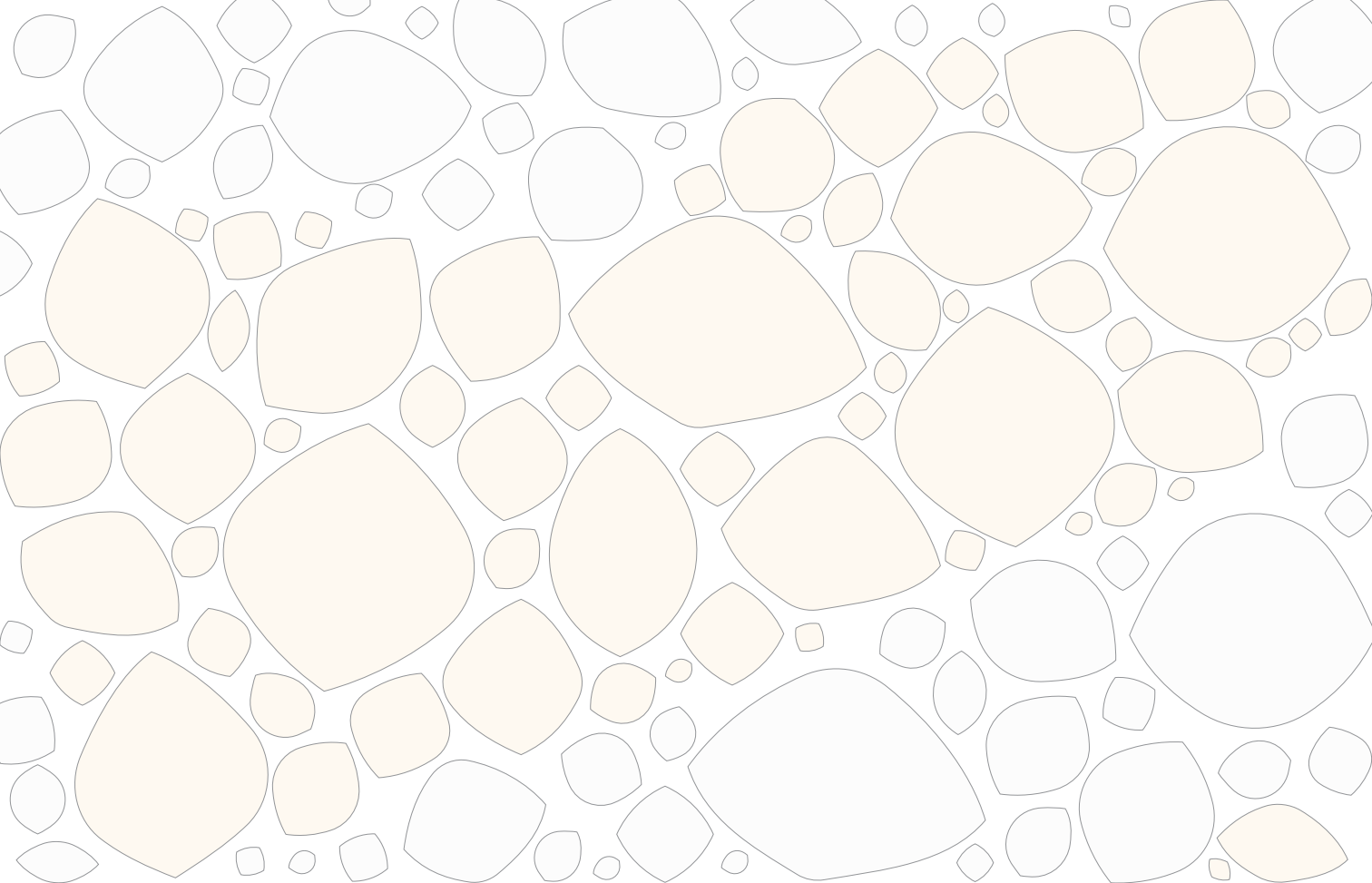
- Increase support available to Yemeni refugees, focusing on the following areas:
 - Financial assistance to pay for needs such as basic living expenses, medical treatment and school fees;
 - Livelihoods support such as microfinance loans and training to support refugee-run microenterprises and home-based businesses;
 - Protection services for at-risk refugees;
 - Scholarships to assist Yemeni refugees to access higher education.
- Ensure that eligibility criteria to receive assistance are inclusive of those most in need.
- UNHCR should ensure that Yemeni refugees in need of international protection are included in submissions for resettlement to third countries.

To Yemeni Community Leaders and Activists:

- Conduct advocacy to increase international attention to the plight of Yemeni refugees in Egypt and to increase assistance and resettlement opportunities for Yemeni refugees.
- Raise awareness among Yemeni refugees about their rights and available support and assistance programs;
 - This could be achieved through workshops led by local initiatives and community leaders, or through events during which members of aid organizations present services available to the Yemeni refugee community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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