

If strife increases, go to Yemen: Yemeni refugees and the problem of return |

Nathalie Peutz, Associate Professor of Arab Crossroads Studies and Anthropology,
New York University Abu Dhabi

Abstract

One of the central “problems” encountered by the refugee hosting regime in Djibouti is that Yemeni refugees do not stay put. Contrary to the UNHCR imaginary of an organized, sustainable resettlement and/or repatriation guided by an array of stakeholders (host and origin countries, UNHCR and partner NGOs, as well as refugees), many of the officially recognized refugees from Yemen have been returning to Yemen on their own accord, independent of any state or organizational assistance. This self-repatriation is facilitated by the proximity between the host and origin countries and by the refugees’ ability to navigate these Red Sea waters, both literally and figuratively. Yet, it is also a function of the refugees having given up on the international humanitarian regime and of the hardships of camp life. Nonetheless, Yemeni refugees in Markazi, Djibouti’s camp for refugees from Yemen, have returned to their homeland for a variety of reasons. Some (self) “repatriated” because they were lured back by the promise of Gulf state assistance or because they were bored, fed up, and giving up—insisting that there was “no future” in Djibouti for them or their children. Others returned indefinitely to pursue university studies, to join the army, or to marry. These refugees’ ability to envision, secure, and produce “a future” seemed more viable to them in war-torn Yemen than it did in their place of refuge—even if the path to that future involved crossing frontlines. Other refugees continue to return regularly to Yemen for short-term visits, despite being intent on retaining their refugee status. They return to see family, to attend weddings or funerals; they return following domestic troubles such as divorce, or fighting with their spouses; they return for medical procedures; to check on their homes; to earn money, to engage in commerce or to fish. This paper explores the many reasons that Yemeni refugees risk losing their refugee status—and even, in some cases, their lives—to return to the country from which they fled, despite the Djibouti government’s recent focus on their socio-economic “integration.” In doing so, it sheds light on the problem of integration—rather than return—and the (un-en) “durable solutions” embedded in UN’s Global Compact on Refugees.

Biography

Nathalie Peutz is a cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor of Arab Crossroads Studies and Anthropology at New York University Abu Dhabi. Her research and teaching focuses on migration and mobility, environmental conservation, extinction, and heritage in the Arabian

Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Her latest book, *Islands of Heritage: Conservation and Transformation in Yemen* (2018) examines the impacts of environmental conservation, development, and heritage projects in prewar Yemen by tracing their intersections in Yemen's Soqatra Archipelago, one of the most biologically diverse places in the world. Peutz is currently writing a book on Yemeni refugees and Ethiopian migrants in the Horn of Africa.