



## Yemen and the Horn of Africa - Roundtable Summary

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### **Tom Cargill**

Welcomed everyone to the meeting. He introduced Ginny who is a freelance journalist. She has lived in Yemen for the last 12 months.

### **Ginny Hill**

Since 1991 Yemen has offered automatic refugee status to people coming from Somalia. The UN say there are 84,000 refugees in Yemen but the Yemeni government thinks it is more like 300,000 many of whom are unregistered. There is a very high fatality rate on the boats that bring people over, people die when boats capsize, they are packed so tightly that people often suffocate, there have also been cases reported where the Yemen Coastguard have fired on the boats. The refugees are mainly Somalis but recently there has been an increase in Ethiopians travelling on the boats. The boats come into Bir'Ali, which is in a lawless part of Yemen, and far from the UNHCR refugee centre, they approach at night time and the refugees are pushed into the water near the coast. Yemen is the poorest of the Arab states with around 40% unemployment so it is hard for them to absorb the huge numbers of refugees.

In October Ginny made a documentary and saw 500 people arrive in one night near Bir'Ali. Since the film came out the UN have decided to upgrade their facilities. The smuggling is seasonal and will resume in September.

The refugees leave from Bosaso in Puntland which is a Darod heartland so during the big exodus from Mogadishu the mainly Hawiye refugees were very uncomfortable. The price of passage to Yemen has now risen to \$100 a trip from \$50 so it is a very lucrative trade, this money seems to either be going to fund the war or is being controlled by the Diaspora.

After the fall of the ICU in January there was a fear that Islamic radicals would be pushed into Yemen, and in October a Yemeni and a Somali were arrested for supplying arms but the fear hasn't materialised, there are many ex-ICU fighters, but not really Islamic radicals. Yemen tried to take the lead in negotiations after the fall of the ICU in February. Three leaders from the moderate wing of the ICU arrived in Yemen, followed by Sheik Shariff, there was a hope they would be able to negotiate with Yusuf but he would not recognise a distinction between moderates and hardliners. Shariff is now in Eritrea and the opening for Yemen to be a constructive player in negotiations seems to have closed.

**Q.**

Are the traffickers also responsible for bringing arms in?

**GH**

The UN reports in 2005 and 2006 cited Yemen as the main supplier of arms. The government were open in supplying arms to the TFG. There was also an unofficial trade supplying the ICU. The Yemeni government's buyback programme seems to just be inflating the price of arms. The UN still says that Yemen is the main source of arms to the Bakara arms market.

**Q.**

Who are the Ethiopian refugees?

**GH**

They tend to come from the north of Ethiopia. They travel to Addis and pay brokers to take them all the way to Saudi Arabia, but they are dumped at the Somaliland

border and must make the rest of the journey alone. There are still only a few people like this so they aren't getting much attention internationally. They are in a very bad situation when they get to Bosaso. Once they arrive in Yemen they are not automatically given refugee status.

**Q.**

Why is there so little international attention paid to this issue?

**GH**

Western embassies are aware of what is happening but have only begun to look at the issue over the last 12 months. The British and Americans are trying to train up the coast guard but often their interventions seem to increase deaths.

**Q.**

The most important thing is to try and alleviate the situation from inside Somalia.

**GH**

People often make this trip several times. Yemen has a problem in that if they institutionalise the recognition of Somalis as refugees they may encourage more to come but if they scrap the policy then there will be a lot of discontent.

**Q.**

Most people escaping are from minority clans because their clans are not armed and they don't feel safe in Somalia.

**GH**

It seemed to me that in Bosaso many people were from the larger clans.

**Q.**

We need to work out what is causing this situation and how it can be stopped? Bosaso is under Puntland control so Yusuf has a lot of influence there. The US and NATO could control the Gulf of Aden if they tried. So the trade could be stopped.

**GH**

People are making a lot of money out of this trade and Bosaso is a small place. It is a natural place to leave from as it's a working port. The smugglers have informers within the police and Puntland administration. There are 3 or 4 boats leaving a week

so that \$30-40,000 which is a lot of money in a post-conflict situation. Dubai are investing a lot in the region and are exploring for Hydrocarbons.

**Q.**

Ultimately the cause is the lack of a functioning state. How can we create a structure that allows Yemen to be more involved in Somalia's future instead of leaving it just to Ethiopia? We need to Involve Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the Somali process. Of course Ethiopia will need a security guarantee.

**GH**

The rebellion in northern Yemen will have distracted the government from the Somali case. Yemen has been cooperating with the US since January over managing the ICU moderates. Sheik Sheriff was not a free guest in Yemen, now he has gone to Eritrea Yemen has a lot less leverage. Yemen can not sustain the current refugee situation, Somali refugees are viewed as competition for the limited number of jobs available in Yemen.

**Q.**

All the countries in the region suffer from the Somali situation but can do very little because of US support for the TFG.

**Q.**

There is an assumption that the US and Ethiopia are always working very closely together but they are not quite as close as many assume.

**Q.**

What is the Yemen-Ethiopia dynamic?

**Q.**

Before the Ethiopian invasion there was a regional coalition against Eritrea so in the last 2-3 years Ethiopia and Yemen have had quite good relations. The recent amnesty for the ICU has been rejected by Sheik Shariff who wants to know who will pardon the TFG.

**GH**

American optimism in January was based around the belief that with Shariff in Yemen a deal could be done, but without his involvement the TFG have a major

legitimacy problem. How sustainable will it be for Ethiopia to stay in Mogadishu in the long term?

**Q.**

We don't need to concentrate on the courts as an institution; they were just a means to an end. There is a lot of hatred toward the Ethiopians now, but if they can successfully negotiate with the Hawiye then perhaps something can happen.

**Q.**

Yemen has its own reason for wanting Somalia to be destabilised. The Socotra Islands just off the Somali coast may have oil and Yemen will be better able to exploit that if Somalia is unable to challenge their ownership of the islands.

**Q.**

Somaliland, Puntland and the warlords all had good relations with Ethiopia. It is only after the ICU that the religious aspect has emerged.

**GH**

No one in Yemen was that worried when Ethiopia invaded. The idea of a Christian force invading a Muslim country is not a big issue. Yemen's official position is that it backs Yusuf.

**Q.**

The Muslim world is powerless to do anything about Somalia. Iran has condemned the invasion and is prepared to mediate.

**Q.**

Until recently Egypt and the Arab countries supported the idea of a unitary Somalia while Ethiopia preferred the federation model. Ethiopia will always need a friendly government in Somalia.

**GH**

Yemen is scared that Somali instability could spill over into Yemen. They want a stable Somalia.

**Tom Cargill**

Thanked Ginny for her presentation and everyone for their contributions.

END