CHOICELESS DEPARTURES AND IN VOLUNTARY IMMOBILITY: FORCED MIGRATION FROM THE GULF STATES TO AFRICA
Choiceless Departures and Involuntary Immobility: Forced Migration From the Gulf States to Africa, September 2020

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Cover Image: An Eritrean import business in Kampala advertising beers and spirits shipped from Asmara in English and Tigrinya. Photo Credit: Hadnet Tesfom Habtemariam (2020).
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About the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI)

THE RIGHTS IN EXILE SERIES BRINGS TOGETHER PUBLICATIONS THAT FOCUS ON KEY ISSUES OF REFUGEE POLICY AND REFUGEE RIGHTS.

IRRI strives for a peaceful world where every person enjoys rights, security and dignity. We work towards promoting and protecting human rights in conflict and displacement. IRRI, founded in 2004, has vast experience and has distinguished itself in research in refugee and migration spaces across Africa; in advocacy at national, regional and international levels; in capacitation of marginalised communities enabling agency, and amplifying voices; and in management of consortiums and building of meaningful partnerships.

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We are registered as a non-profit organisation in the US and Uganda (www.refugee-rights.org).

About the Author

Dr Georgia Cole is a Chancellor’s Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. This research was completed during her Fellowship at the Margaret Anstee Centre for Global Studies at Newnham College, Cambridge. Her current research explores the dynamics and impacts of forced migration between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States. Through this, she hopes to contribute to larger debates about the roles that Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have played in responding to global patterns of displacement and in providing humanitarian support to those on the move.

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Views expressed and contained within this document are the responsibility of the author.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Acronyms</th>
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<tr>
<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<td>OPM</td>
<td>Office of the Prime Minister</td>
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<td>RSD</td>
<td>Refugee Status Determination</td>
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Background

States within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rarely feature in discussions about forced migration and refugees, not least because none of the states formally recognise refugees under the terms of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Within global statistics and reports on the admission and reception of forcibly displaced populations, the situation within these states is therefore notably absent. Millions of the foreign nationals living and working in the GCC States nonetheless originate from repressive or conflict-affected countries such as Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Syria and Eritrea, among others.

The number of individuals travelling from the Horn of Africa through Yemen to these locations has also, for the past three years, surpassed the number of individuals arriving in Europe across the Mediterranean. This weakens the alarmist and protectionist narratives pedalled by European politicians, who suggest that most African migrants and refugees head north in a bid to enter Europe via its maritime southern border. Not only do these narratives obscure the reality that the overwhelming majority of African refugees are hosted by other African countries, through both formal mechanisms and informal amnesties, it also ignores the fact that large numbers of African nationals, particularly from Ethiopia and Somalia, board boats bound for the Gulf in a bid to escape simmering ethnic tension, outright conflict and violence, and chronic under/unemployment in their countries of origin.

The Gulf States’ roles in accommodating displaced populations is not new, however. For decades, individuals from Eritrea – who form the focus of this report – have sought refuge in the Gulf States in response to foreign occupation, civil war, repressive policies and economic decline in their country of origin. Whether by boat across the Red Sea, or by plane from Khartoum or Asmara, tens of thousands of individuals have fled the economic and political turbulence of Eritrea by assimilating into the labour markets of major cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, and Riyadh and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Alongside establishing economic lives in these states, they have also built social ones: marrying, and raising and educating their children in these places. While never able to regularise their status as either refugees or citizens in Saudi Arabia, Eritrean families and individuals got by from year to year on their renewable work permits and iqamas, which are a form of residence permit that enables foreign nationals and their dependents to live within the Kingdom. Until a notable shift in policy a few years ago, the annual renewal of this iqama, which must be carried by individuals

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1 The GCC States are Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar.
4 Although “GCC countries are listed among the top aid contributors to humanitarian operations … they have been the most resistant to granting refugee status to individuals fleeing conflicts in the region. This position is consistent with the protectionist naturalization laws of these countries.” M. Yahya and M. Muasher, “Arab Horizons: Refugee Crises in the Arab World”, 2020, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/18/refugee-crises-in-arab-world-pub-77522 (accessed on: 8 July 2020).
at all times to avoid arrest and deportation, was considered an expense that individuals had to budget for, but could ultimately afford.

Against a backdrop of conflict and rising discontent in the Arab Middle East, however, the Saudi government has intensified a number of initiatives to diversify its economy away from oil-dependency and to reduce unemployment among young Saudi nationals. Measures have included the introduction of several new taxes and fines to encourage businesses to preferentially employ Saudi nationals, and to ensure that foreign workers are left with few options but to leave the country. In this vein, in January 2018, a tax was levied on companies requiring them to pay 400 riyals per month per foreign worker. This followed a tax introduced six months earlier, in July 2017, that required foreign employees to pay 100 riyal per month (approximately $27) for each dependent on their iqama, including children. Both fees have increased annually,\(^5\) with the foreign employees ultimately responsible for covering the cost. Without an increase in wages to reflect this ever-increasing outlay, life in Saudi Arabia has quickly become prohibitively expensive for many of the country’s foreign-born workforce. Rulings to turn over certain professions exclusively to Saudi nationals, such as driving taxis and working as cashiers, have further reduced employment opportunities for foreigners. Quoting a Tigrinya proverb, one Eritrean man in Uganda summarised the Saudi government’s recent policies towards low-paid foreigners as follows: “Don’t tell them to leave, make them to leave.”\(^6\)

Statistics on the decline in the country’s expatriate workforce suggest that these policies have succeeded, at least from the perspective of the Saudi government. Between the first quarter of 2017 and the third quarter of 2018, official reports show that 1.1 million foreigners left Saudi Arabia.\(^7\) In the first quarter of 2018 alone, one investment firm reported that nearly 250,000 foreign nationals had lost their jobs due to the introduction of the expat tax, with the impact felt most acutely in the construction sector.\(^8\) Despite this, and perhaps not surprisingly given the fact that the vacated jobs are low-paid and largely low-skilled, there is little evidence that the changes have significantly reduced the unemployment rate of Saudi nationals.\(^9\) By midyear through 2019, the number of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia had nonetheless continued to fall, with a net decrease over the preceding two and a half years of 22%.\(^10\) All the Eritreans interviewed for this report noted the magnitude of the exodus, reflected in empty apartment blocks, boarded up shops and deserted streets. “When you’re heading to success, you go one by one”, said one Eritrean shop owner in Kampala, “but when you’re running away from trouble, you all leave together.”

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\(^5\) The cost for dependents was set to increase every July by 100 Riyal, with the annual total being paid by the sponsor of these dependents (the kafeel) when they renew the iqama.

\(^6\) Interview with an Eritrean man, 60s, Soya, Kampala, 28 January 2020.


The Plight of Eritreans Forced from the Gulf States to Uganda

This policy paper documents the situation of those who have recently found themselves pushed out of the Gulf States, and yet who have been unable to ‘return’ to their country of origin for reasons of political and economic insecurity. In the cases discussed here, and for reasons described in greater detail below, these individuals made their way to Uganda. While this report is based specifically on the situation of Eritreans, millions of individuals from across the GCC States have faced a similar fate, either due to mass deportations (as experienced acutely by Ethiopians in 2013 and from 2017 until now), or the growing unaffordability of life there. Obscured in most statistics about global and African displacement, their individual and community-level plight – and the unfolding situation of millions more like them who remain in the Gulf for now, but have limited prospects there in the long-term – will also present serious challenges to the countries of origin, third countries and the transnational networks with which they are connected. Further research would be needed to reveal the scope and experiences of similar populations, including those of other nationalities, across the Horn and East of Africa.

This report is based on background research and one month of interviews conducted between 21 January and 18 February 2020 with 40 Eritrean forced migrants in Kampala who had travelled both directly and indirectly from a GCC State. The vast majority of interviewees had come from either Riyadh or Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, though a small number had lived in Dubai. Of note is that all those we interviewed were Christian, which had significant implications for their experience within Saudi Arabia where the law is based on Sharia.11

Life in Saudi Arabia

People’s reflections on Saudi Arabia were immensely varied, informed by the different durations they spent there (whole lives, decades or a few years), their gender, age and religious profile, the jobs they undertook (domestic workers, drivers, house wives, managers, etc.), their legal status within the country, and the kafeel under which they served. For some, Saudi Arabia had been the place in which they came of age and built their lives, marrying and starting families there over several decades. One man in his mid-forties remembered it as a place of ample opportunities as well as recurrent challenges:

I grew up in Saudi Arabia. It’s a second home to me. Although the laws are bad and hard to cope with, it’s still home. I took their language as my own. I took their culture and traditions and made it my own and enjoyed it. I had my bad times there; I had my good times there. What’s bad is that there’s no law to support you. But I spent longer and did more in Saudi [Arabia] than in Eritrea.12

Certain sources of hardship were nonetheless similarly experienced across the different life histories. Independent of any shifts in politics or policies, the birth of children made life significantly harder for families, as mothers left the labour market and household expenses increased. Employment

11 Interviews were largely conducted in Tigrinya, with translation provided by two Eritrean research partners: one who had herself grown up in Saudi Arabia, and the other whose mother has resided there for seven years. These backgrounds set them up as invaluable linguistic and cultural interlocutors.
12 Interview with an Eritrean man, 40s, Kansanga, Kampala, 29 January 2020.
opportunities had also slowly dried up over the past 10 to 15 years. Many Eritreans lost their jobs as a result of the construction and completion of underground sewers in Saudi Arabia, as Eritrean men had previously had a near monopoly on the job of emptying the country’s septic tanks. New rules punishing employers and kafeels for exceeding their quota for the number of foreign-born workers that they can sponsor then resulted in further job losses, pushing more people towards irregularity and precarious employment.

The most pronounced inflection point in the situation of Eritreans in Saudi Arabia, however, came with the introduction of this new set of taxes in 2016/2017. Difficult lives at this point became impossible ones, as families in particular struggled to pay the fees necessary to appease their kafeels and renew their iqamas. Around this time, the Saudi government also changed its position on whether children who were not covered by valid iqamas could go to school. Whereas the Eritrean Embassy Schools in Riyadh and Jeddah (where most of the families we interviewed had sent their children) had previously admitted these children, the change in policy required them to start refusing admission to this demographic. With kids out of school either due to their irregular status or it being an increasingly unaffordable expense, and parents struggling to find work and to thus be able to pay the taxes, most respondents had begun planning their departure or actually leaving from 2017 onwards. They feared that any delay would push them further from being able to leave as the taxes automatically increased and the debts they accrued - which had to be settled with the kafeel before departure - became unassailable. In people’s rush to depart, personal belongings were often abandoned. Individuals said that with such large numbers of people leaving over the past few years, the market was flooded with household items and vehicles and there were fewer and fewer people to buy them anyway. As one woman said sadly of her parents, “they had been in Saudi [Arabia] for forty years, but they still left completely empty-handed.”

For many individuals we spoke with, their experiences in Saudi Arabia had thus followed a curve, beginning with hard but relatively successful experiences and ending with immense disappointment and frustration. When asked about why Eritreans migrate towards Saudi Arabia, one woman in her fifties summarised the situation,

> Let’s use past tense. People used to go to Saudi [Arabia] - there was money, but now you don’t get paid what you used to earn. …This side the Saudis are disturbing you to pay. The other side the Eritrean government is demanding 2% of your money or you can’t go back to your country.

Another woman, also in her fifties, lamented that “The way we had blessed Saudi, we are cursing it three times now what we had blessed it.”

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13 Interview with an Eritrean family, Kabusu, Kampala, 5 February 2020.
14 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 50s, Soya, Kampala, 25 January 2020. In this quote she refers to the Eritrean government’s practice of charging Eritreans in the diaspora two percent of their incomes in exchange for access to consular and embassy services, and the right to enter and own assets in Eritrea.
15 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 50s, Kabusu, Kampala, 30 January 2020.
**Involuntary Immobility in Saudi Arabia**

While respondents spoke of their hardship upon arrival in Eritrea and Uganda, most emphasised that their situation was less concerning than friends and relatives who remained “stuck” in Saudi Arabia.16  
“At least we are out”, one Eritrean woman in her 30s stressed. “It is a blessing to go out.”17 Those whose iqamas have expired and who are unable to pay the fees for their renewal, which includes the new tax on dependents, are unable to leave the country legally. Individuals and families in this situation have also often fallen behind on paying the 2% of their income demanded by the Eritrean Embassy, which is mandatory if individuals wish to depart to Eritrea. This has left them trapped in a vicious cycle whereby they are forced to extend their stay and thus either to accrue more debt, which individuals are increasingly unable to repay (given the taxes have been intentionally designed by the Saudi authorities to be largely unaffordable), or to live irregularly with all its potential dangers. The result is a population that is technically both unable to leave and unable to stay legally, leaving them in a state of extreme precarity. Establishing the number of individuals caught in this situation is almost impossible, but several interlocutors stressed that “There are too many to tell who this has happened to. They can’t renew their iqama because they can’t pay that money. They can’t find jobs so they’re stuck in Saudi.”18

Respondents spoke of friends who were caught in this double bind. Some were said to have actively sought arrest by the Saudi police in the hope that this would facilitate their deportation without them having to pay off debts that they knew they could never afford. Even this, however, was no guaranteed route to departure. The Saudi government could just as likely detain individuals caught with an expired iqama and only release and/or deport them once the taxes had been paid off in full. Others were hoping that there would be another amnesty period, during which the Saudi authorities allowed individuals to leave (and never return) without paying off their debts.

Though incremental improvements in the legal frameworks or administrative procedures for forced migrants in the GCC countries are announced periodically, it remains hard to assess what impact, if any, these changes have in practice. In Qatar, for instance, Law No. 11/2018 on Organising Political Asylum was adopted in September 2018 to set out the first set of regulations and procedures for seeking asylum within the Gulf States.19 While praised for being a pioneering piece of legislation, human rights organisations have expressed concern that the law is intended to cover only a narrow population of political asylees, that it offers limited protection to asylum seekers, and that many of the institutions needed for its successful operation have yet to be formed.20 Greater access to affected populations and transparency in government reporting within these states would help determine the success of similar policies, as well as aid in the identification of ongoing protection gaps.

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16 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 20s, Buziga, Kampala, 26 January 2020.
17 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 30s, Kansanga, Kampala, 6 February 2020.
18 Interview with an Eritrean man, 40s, Kansanga, Kampala, 16 February 2020.
Transit through Eritrea

The overwhelming majority of interviewees who had secured their exit from Saudi Arabia travelled directly to Eritrea on a ‘white paper’ that permits their entry to the country as diaspora citizens. They spent anywhere between a few days and several years there, staying with relatives, friends or in rented accommodation before moving on. Chronic unemployment and forced conscription within Eritrea were largely responsible for this onward movement.

For me to go back to Eritrea, there’s no work. And if I go back permanently, the government will try to send me to the military. And I don’t want to go. If it was in my hands, I would take the other ones living there out of that country too because it’s too hard.21

Given its absence of employment opportunities, another Eritrean complained that “Asmara was just for crying.”22 Even for those who had money saved from jobs in the Gulf States and who were hoping to invest in alternative ventures in Eritrea, the country’s highly restrictive business environment thwarted their plans:

My plan was to go to Eritrea for good. I had money for [buying] a truck and to make a living there but I couldn’t. Nobody can. I shouldn’t be out [of the country] at this age. I wanted to be in my country but what is there to do. I shouldn’t be out now but in my country there is nothing. So I cannot be happy.23

Parents spoke of wanting to leave Eritrea before their children were enrolled at Sawa, the country’s controversial military training academy, where all students are sent for their final year of school. Avoiding this required moving onwards within six months, after which their diaspora status would transition into resident’s status. The latter meant the replacement of the 2% diaspora tax with the requirement for both parents and eligible children to serve in national service. As several parents admitted to having initially left Eritrea to escape national service, their desire to save their children from the same fate was clear. One woman said,

...now we have left our country because they would steal our children [and take them] to the military. If a bullet is going to eat that child [gesturing to her son], I will bring him here, not stand and watch them do that. So I brought him here.24

Amongst the younger generation who had spent their whole lives in Saudi Arabia, moving to Eritrea felt like displacement rather than return. Marked out by their accents, behaviour, dress and even skin tone (some maintained), young Saudi Arabian-born Eritreans struggled to adjust to the culture and schooling back in Eritrea. They expressed relief at having left Eritrea to Uganda. While recognising the financial hardships their families faced there, they welcomed Kampala’s connectivity, multiculturalism and freedom after the relative stagnation of Eritrea.

21 Interview with an Eritrean man, 40s, Kansanga, Kampala, 16 February 2020.
22 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 50s, Soya, Kampala, 3 February 2020.
23 Interview with an Eritrean man, 70s, Kansanga, Kampala, 20 February 2020.
24 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 50s, Kansanga, Kampala, 20 February 2020.
Situation in Uganda

Almost all respondents had travelled to Uganda for two main reasons, relayed to them by Eritrean friends and acquaintances back home and during their journeys. The first was that Uganda was a relatively secure place, the police did not aggressively check your documentation, or deport you if you were found without it, and Kampala was considered a peaceful and safe city compared to Juba, Khartoum and Addis Ababa. The second was that Uganda had more work opportunities, which almost nobody had found to be true in recent years, although the community recognised that Uganda had a more permissive labour market than Eritrea. By far the most common complaint about people’s situation in Kampala was that there were simply no jobs, causing individuals to scrape together rent, living expenses, and ideally school fees from relatives overseas and occasional employment in the city. Positive perspectives about Kampala were that nonetheless schools taught in English and that people could openly practice Christianity, which was particularly welcomed by those who had spent decades repressing their faith in Saudi Arabia.

Applying for asylum in Uganda

When asked about their plans for the future, particularly if this involved staying in Kampala, interviewees for the most part deferred to asylum as their next step, seeing it as a potential gateway either to resettlement or to some sort of material support. They also asserted that as Eritrean citizens fleeing or avoiding a repressive regime, they should be granted international protection. Interviewees also voiced their immense and understandable frustration with the Ugandan government’s Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures. Despite changes in staff and official assertions that procedures had been reformed and professionalised in recent years, every step of RSD had a price tag. Registering for asylum at the Old Kampala Police Station involved parting with tens of dollars; securing refugee status at the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) allegedly cost hundreds in bribes. People thus registered for asylum because that is what they had been advised to do, particularly in the absence of many alternative mechanisms to regularise their stay in Uganda.25

In this way, the asylum seeker status has been transformed into a temporary protection status for Eritreans within the country. Only a small percentage of those who apply for full status will ever receive it, but, in the interim, the application process serves to regularise their position within Uganda and to keep alive the small hope of a future “process to outside”. Some were navigating this system for the second time, after their first asylum claim was either rejected or had expired following five years of renewals without a decision. Most were pragmatic about what gaining refugee status might mean for them in the long-run though: "Even if we had the full status, there’s nothing we can do with it. We left Saudi [Arabia] poor and we stay poor in Kampala. In Kampala, there’s no hope for a better tomorrow.”26

For the Eritreans arriving in Uganda from Saudi Arabia, however, there is an added layer of uncertainty over how to approach the asylum process. All those we spoke to had been advised to deny that they had spent any time in Saudi Arabia on the grounds that this made them economic migrants and not refugees. They had been told by Eritrean brokers, translators and friends, as well as allegedly by staff

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25 Currently, Uganda does not grant citizenship to refugees.
26 Interview with an Eritrean woman, 40s, Wakaliga, Kampala, 10 February 2020.
within the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM),\textsuperscript{27} that any onward migration for economic reasons was grounds to invalidate all claims to asylum. One impact of this was significant distress for those individuals who could not reconstruct an accurate narrative of life inside Eritrea after decades in the Gulf. One woman queried,

\begin{quote}
Why do the Eritreans keep saying that we’re not from Saudi [Arabia]? Why can’t we say that? The trouble in Saudi is bad...When they [the RSD officers] are telling you to say things like where my daughter is born in Eritrea, I don’t know Asmara, so what can I say? So they ask where she was born and I say Halibet. They ask where her problems were diagnosed? I say Halibet. Everything I have to answer: Halibet. Because I know nothing else. Why can’t I say Saudi when it’s worse there for people?
\end{quote}

When asked why Eritrean friends and neighbours told her to conceal that fact, she replied,

\begin{quote}
I don’t have the courage to ask why they say this. I just do what they say. When the interpreter at OPM asked where I came from, I said I came from Saudi [Arabia] and they said I shouldn’t say that so I just say “no, no, I’m from Eritrea”. I panicked and said that, but then I can’t even tell the hospitals apart in Eritrea.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

A large number of those who left for Saudi Arabia had nonetheless left Eritrea as refugees, either during the liberation struggle in the 1970s and 1980s or subsequently, and moved onwards to the Gulf upon registering the dearth of economic opportunities in Sudan. As one man questioned, “we went to Saudi because we could not wait as refugees in Sudan. We couldn’t wait for money – where was it going to come from?”\textsuperscript{29} Their onward movement from Sudan on marriage or contract visas, or other unregistered means, should thus in no way be seen to invalidate their original claims for persecution, particularly when this has been compounded by the discrimination many of them suffered as Christians in Saudi Arabia. One young woman stressed this population’s continued and ongoing need for international protection: “We are still refugees. We didn’t get citizenship in Saudi and our government is still creating problems for us.”\textsuperscript{30}

It is also wrong to assume that because the majority of these individuals paid 2\% of their income to the Eritrean government while in Saudi Arabia, and departed the country to return to Eritrea, that either of these acts constitutes re-availment of the protection of the country of their nationality.\textsuperscript{31} Most individuals paid their 2\% at the Eritrean Embassy in Saudi Arabia solely to be able to renew their work permit and iqama, which depends on having a valid passport, and so that their children would be able to attend the Eritrean school. “We don’t like to give them [the diaspora taxes]”, said one father of six, “but you have to by force.”\textsuperscript{32} Of those who had encountered difficulties within Saudi Arabia, none had none to the Eritrean Embassy as a source of diplomatic or financial support. Upon leaving

\textsuperscript{27} The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) is responsible for refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda.
\textsuperscript{28} Interview with an Eritrean woman, 50s, Soya, Kampala, 3 February 2020.
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with an Eritrean man, 50s, Kabuuusu, Kampala, 31 January 2020.
\textsuperscript{30} Interview with an Eritrean woman, 20s, Kansanga, Kampala, 7 February 2020.
\textsuperscript{31} These acts should thus not be seen as fulfilling any of the Cessation Clauses contained in Article 1C of the 1951 Convention.
\textsuperscript{32} Interview with an Eritrean man, 50s, Kabuuusu, Kampala, 31 January 2020.
Saudi Arabia by plane, however, the only real option with an Eritrean passport was to return to Eritrea. Furthermore, while this population may be Eritrean nationals, the Eritrean government interprets its responsibilities very differently towards resident and diasporic citizens. Individuals who return as ‘diaspora citizens’ are exempt from national service unless they settle more permanently within Eritrea. This ‘diaspora citizenship’ status thus affords them certain exemptions from the more repressive diktats of the Eritrean government provided they temporarily transit through the country. If they instead return to the country more permanently, they would become resident citizens, vulnerable to certain forms of repression and mistreatment experienced by other long-term residents.

Implications for ‘return’ from the Gulf States

Official accounts of departures from the Gulf suggest individuals ‘return’ to their country of origin, but for those who fled those locations 20 to 30 years before, they are rarely returning to the conditions or situation they left. For those who travelled to Uganda via Eritrea, they mainly transited through Eritrea’s capital after finding themselves unable and/or unwilling to return to their original villages or ‘homes’ after decades spent overseas. In Asmara and its surrounding towns, they experienced first-hand the acute shortages of housing and jobs due to tight restrictions on construction and private enterprise. From there, individuals and families carried on to Khartoum, Cairo, Addis Ababa and Kampala, seeking any place where they could build a legally and financially secure existence, be it through the asylum system or other channels. ‘Return’ to Eritrea was thus the first move in a series of new migrations and displacements. People expressed their exhaustion at this life of upheaval and involuntary relocations,

_Where do you want us to go? We are just like the bird who circles around until they find a place where they can build their nest to stay. For now, we are just circling... We didn’t come to Uganda to be comfortable. We ran away from our debt in Saudi Arabia that we couldn’t pay. We couldn’t pay medical bills. We are avoiding that situation. To lead a life like this is not easy._

The transplantation of these individuals and families from the Gulf States to countries of origin or third countries has triggered a significant shift not only in their own economic situation, but also in that of their wider communities. Most respondents admitted that they would only send money back to Eritrea or family/friends elsewhere intermittently, mainly because of the expense of family life in the Gulf States and, more recently, due to the hike in taxation. They had nonetheless largely been able to support themselves in Saudi Arabia. The same could not be said of their situation in Uganda. Almost all those we interviewed in Kampala depended on money sent from relatives elsewhere, mainly those in North America and Europe but also, on occasion, from individuals who were still earning in places like Juba, Dubai or Addis Ababa. Shifts in the fortunes of migrant workers in the Gulf thus ripple through the transnational networks of care and support that fill the void created by over-stretched and/or repressive governments.

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33 Individuals suggested that Muslim Eritreans from the Gulf travelled to Egypt and Sudan due to linguistic and cultural affinities, while Christian Eritreans made their way to Ethiopia and Uganda. There are no figures currently available for determining the number of Eritreans in each location.

34 Interview with Eritrean woman, 50s, Busiga, Kampala, 31 January 2020.
While this study has focused on Eritreans, these taxes and changes have affected all expatriate populations in the Gulf, albeit with the worst impacts felt by low-paid workers whose families live with them. Nepalis, Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, Filipinos and Ethiopians have been hit hard. Workers may have initially sought to send their families out of Saudi Arabia in order to minimise the dependents’ tax, but increases in the expatriate tax have meant that many have now been forced to join them.35 Some of these populations will have originally entered the Gulf States having fled conflict, violence and persecution in their country of origin. Their experiences of ‘return’ following forced departure from the GCC countries may not only involve exposure to a significant risk of further persecution, but also precipitate further rounds of displacement similar to the movements of Eritreans discussed above. To predict and mitigate against this occurring, shifts in the economic fortunes and policies of major migrant-receiving states must be more closely connected to past and ongoing incidences of forced migration.

It is nonetheless worth stressing two points about the treatment of migrants within the GCC States. First, the mistreatment of migrants there in part appears more visible – and thus more easily critiqued - because it is geographically present within these states’ territories and is thus more directly linked to state policy, principally the kafala system. While many European governments view low-skilled migrants with the same degree of disregard, mechanisms of extra-territorialised border control and outsourced migration management distance them physically and causally from the suffering they sanction and fund. Second, through their labour migration channels, the Gulf States have historically proved more permissive, accessible and/or desirable to certain individuals fleeing countries in the Horn of Africa and South East Asia than restrictive refugee camp environments in neighbouring countries or opportunities within Europe. Despite a longstanding conflict and chronic food insecurity, for example, Yemen hosted 276,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country in 2019, especially from Somalia and Ethiopia. Though “protection space for refugees and asylum seekers was impacted by anti-migrant rhetoric leading to a rise in arrests, detentions and restricted movements,”36 accounts that focus purely on abuses committed within these states ignore the roles that they have and do play in accommodating forced migrants.

This case study further highlights that the key to assisting forced migrants may not be found in either ‘return to’ or ‘reform of’ the country of origin, particularly in cases where generations of displacement have resulted in significant populations residing (semi-)permanently in third countries. Shifts in employment for Eritreans in Israel, South Sudan and the Gulf States are indeed causing large numbers of these individuals to seek refuge in other African countries as they remain unable and/or unwilling to return to their country of origin. Assistance to these sites of departure and arrival, not the country of origin or traditional spaces of asylum, may prove more beneficial to the forcibly displaced. Crude statistics on return migration can therefore conceal important and widespread patterns of onward movements. Alongside contributing to the potential misallocation of funds and resources, this feeds into a misplaced optimism that these ‘return’ movements constitute a durable solution for displaced populations and takes the pressure off the search for more innovative solutions that respond to these individuals’ actual movements.

36 Ibid.
The General Situation Regarding the Impact of COVID-19 on Eritrean Forced Migrants in and from Saudi Arabia

Though this report was researched and written before the outbreak of Covid-19, the pandemic is likely to affect the dynamics discussed above in several ways. Unemployment rates across the Gulf States have inevitably soared, and multiple reports document that even those with work have struggled to claim salaries as employers withhold them in order to reduce outflows. Migrants have almost no access to dispute resolution or justice mechanisms in order to challenge this mistreatment. The fiscal stimulus packages that Gulf governments are providing to protect domestic firms during the economic downturn have been primarily designed to protect the jobs of Gulf citizens, not foreign workers who have been fired, underpaid or forced to take unpaid leave. In states like Saudi Arabia, this may expedite nationalisation policies, resulting in even fewer jobs for migrant workers in certain sectors in the long-term, particularly those that are better paid. Governments in countries of origin will have to adjust to the potential loss in remittances, and these workers will have to find economic opportunities elsewhere, which are unlikely to be in their countries of origin.

Unable to pay for rent and basic living costs, migrants in the Gulf have found themselves evicted from properties or trapped in increasing cycles of debt. Despite recognising that their financial situation may be even more precarious if they return to situations of lockdown and economic recession in their countries of origin, large numbers have requested repatriation. Governments like those in India, Pakistan and Ethiopia have struggled to keep up with the demand for these flights, not least because of the logistics of arranging quarantine facilities for all those who return, and many migrants have been unable to afford the additional costs of these journeys and two weeks in isolation. The result is a growing number of migrant workers who are, like the Eritreans described above, ‘stuck’ in the GCC States, without the means to either support themselves in situ or to return home. Some Gulf governments have provided visa amnesties for these populations so that they do not become illegal but others have taken to deporting foreign nationals, without in all cases undertaking adequate checks to ensure that they are not exporting COVID-19 in the process. This may further overwhelm under-resourced health systems in these migrants’ countries of origin. For migrants from countries where the borders have been fully closed, such as Eritrea, or who cannot repatriate to their country of origin out of a continuing fear of persecution there, they have no option but to wait out the pandemic in the Gulf.

Faith-based organisations assisted with iftar meals for the most vulnerable Muslims during Ramadan, and networks of NGOs exist within the countries, but it is unclear how far-reaching their efforts are, including whether they are assisting Christian communities who claim to be systemically marginalised by these states’ Islamic governments and civil societies. Several governments in the region have made healthcare and COVID-19 testing free for foreign workers. Uptake has nonetheless

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been limited due to low levels of trust in public authorities amidst a concern that it may lead to the identification and subsequent deportation of unregistered migrants.\textsuperscript{40}

Respondents in Uganda have flagged similar dynamics, whereby unregistered forced migrants hesitate before approaching health facilities due to fears that this will reveal their existence to authorities or because they have no way of paying the fees. Remittances from relatives and friends in the Gulf have shrunk at the same time that the economy in Uganda has contracted even further under the pandemic-related lockdown, resulting in additional pressures on contacts elsewhere in the world to send through money. More so than any governments or international humanitarian organisations, members of the diaspora and co-nationals overseas have thus constituted and funded the COVID-19 response architecture in these locations. International organisations and governments are increasingly recognising and adjusting to the fact that refugee and migrant-led organisations must be key partners in COVID-19 response plans, with the hope being that this will catalyse a lasting shift in how humanitarian efforts are designed, implemented and managed in the future.\textsuperscript{41}

### Improving the Situation of Forced Migrants in and from the Gulf States: Recommendations

Interviews with Eritreans who had travelled to Uganda after life in the Gulf States became unaffordable provide some pointers as to how this population’s situation might be improved in Kampala, and across other locations in Eastern Africa. The most transformative, but ultimately unlikely, reforms would be to end indefinite national service and other repressive state practices in Eritrea, and to end the kafala system of migration control in the GCC States. The research findings nonetheless also point to a number of areas for policy advocacy that are more incremental, but equally necessary:

**To the GCC States**

- Grant more amnesties for the ‘involuntarily immobile’ migrants who wish to leave the Gulf States but cannot do so without first paying off their iqamas and taxes;
- Strengthen labour rights for migrant workers, including through greater enforcement of punishments for employers who abuse their employees;
- Ratify and domesticate international refugee and migrant instruments, and establish a regional legal framework for the protection of forced migrants and refugees, which should be domesticated within national laws. In the interim, GCC States should adopt overarching policies, practices, and administrative safeguards that enable forced migrants and refugees to live lives of dignity, free from religious, ethnic and other discrimination;
- Develop immigration policies that are sensitive to the presence of refugees and forced migrants within labour markets in the GCC States, and that prevent the deportation or return of individuals to countries where they are at risk of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;

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\textsuperscript{41} For a recent discussion on this, see “Without recognition, without assistance: Refugee-led responses in urban contexts”, Panel discussion organised by the Refugee Studies Centre, available at: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hilfkMKFRS4}
- Provide transparency around, and greater effect to the legal frameworks or administrative procedures for forced migrants in the GCC countries, e.g. Qatari Law No. 11/2018 on Organising Political Asylum, adopted in September 2018. Greater access to affected populations and transparency in government reporting within these states would help determine the success of similar policies, as well as aid in the identification of ongoing protection gaps;
- The Saudi Government should stop levying discriminatory forms of taxation that disproportionately target long-term migrants with resident families;

To the Government of Uganda

- Conclusively investigate the persistent allegations of corruption within the country’s refugee management system, including during refugee status determination (RSD) procedures, and strengthen anti-corruption initiatives to address it;
- Introduce alternative legal statuses to regularise the position of forced migrants within the country in quicker, more efficient and less expensive ways than individualised RSD procedures;
- Recognise that individuals who have spent time in the Gulf may have valid asylum claims related to why they left their country of origin, and continuing reasons for why they are unable or unwilling to return there, and acknowledge that the onward movement of Eritreans from their first country of asylum, should in no way be seen to invalidate their original claims of persecution;
- Embrace the Country’s commitment to Pan-Africanism and ‘African solutions for African problems’ to remove exclusions from protection for such forced migrants, and further extend its obligations under Africa’s free movement agenda;

To UNHCR

- Work with the Ugandan authorities to ensure that refugee status determination (RSD) procedures are conducted according to international standards and are accessible, transparent and free of corruption;
- Continue working with GCC countries to strengthen respect for refugee and migrants’ rights and the rights of other people of concern. This includes monitoring migrant populations and labour market policies in major migrant-receiving states, such as the GCC States, to ensure that forced migrants and refugees within these countries do not face untold hardships and are not returned to countries where they may face persecution or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment;

To the African Union

- Conduct studies that realistically reflect on, and provide data and concrete analyses on refugee and forced migration movements, to enable appropriate policies, responses and resource allocation by Member States;
- Based on the studies, propose updated continental law and policy provisions for appropriate responses by Member States to the shifting dynamic of forced displacement in Eastern Africa and the Continent as a whole.