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RANSOM, COLLABORATORS, CORRUPTION:
SINAI TRAFFICKING AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS
A Case Study of the Eritrean Migration System
from Eritrea to Israel

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Cover Photo Credit

The road from Shire to May Aini and Adi Harush refugee camps in northern Tigray, Ethiopia. Many Eritreans continue their journey from Ethiopia to Sudan where they may face abduction by traffickers.

Credit: Laurie Lijnders, Feinstein International Center, 23 October 2012.

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EACH MONTH THOUSANDS OF MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN FLEE ERITREA AS A RESULT OF GRAVE VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTED BY THE ERITREAN GOVERNMENT. Political oppression and religious persecution have led to the imprisonment or disappearance of thousands of citizens, as well as mass flight. Travelling via Sudan and Egypt, 36,000 Eritreans have made their way to Israel over the past six years. Most have gone through a well-organized network of people smugglers and human traffickers. Many initially contacted smugglers but were later deceived, held hostage for large ransoms, and physically abused. Others had no intention to come to Israel and were kidnapped in East Sudan to then be sold to Sinai traffickers who also abused them while they were held hostage for ransom. For the last two years, Israeli, Egyptian, and international human rights organizations have reported that increasing numbers of Eritreans have undergone severe torture and abuse while being held hostage for months at a time in the Sinai. Human rights organizations have documented the brutality of traffickers in the Sinai.¹ Eritrean asylum seekers have testified to gang rape of men and women, whipping, and various methods of torture, including burial in the sand, electric shocks, hanging by one's hands and legs, burning with hot-iron bars, and prolonged exposure to the sun.

This paper seeks to expand our empirical knowledge by describing and analysing the processes and actors, including Eritrean families both in the diaspora and in Eritrea, involved in the transnational networks supporting and enabling the smuggling and trafficking of Eritreans through the Sinai to Israel. We focus only on the Sinai route, although migration from Eritrea also occurs south to other parts of Africa, west through Sudan to Libya, and east across the Red Sea. The Sinai route actors include smugglers from the Rishaida tribe in East Sudan, Sudanese and Egyptian authorities, Bedouin smugglers in Egypt, and Eritrean collaborators who work with the traffickers as intermediaries. It is likely that similar smuggling – and probably trafficking – networks also exist for these other migration routes.

Methodology

The paper is based on 159 interviews with Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Israel, Egypt, and Ethiopia conducted by Feinstein researchers in 2012. We conducted 60 interviews in Tel Aviv, including ten ransom payers who were friends and relatives of Eritreans held hostage in the Sinai desert and who had gathered the money to pay for their release. In Cairo, FIC researchers interviewed 30 Eritrean asylum seekers. In Ethiopia, we conducted 69 interviews with Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa and in three refugee camps in the Tigray region of the country. The interviews were conducted by Feinstein researchers based in Israel and Egypt. One researcher travelled to Ethiopia to interview respondents in the refugee camps there. The researchers worked with interpreters chosen because of their experience and their respected standing in their communities. The interpreters were trained with the researchers. The sensitivity issues arising from our methods are discussed in the Annex.

Of the 158 respondents, 78% were male (123). Eritrean women are a minority in both Israel and Egypt and the number of women interviewed reflects this trend. Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 55 years old. Half of the respondents were between the ages of 23 and 31, while 23% were under 23 years old and 23% were over 31 years old.

Migration from Eritrea

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa, bordered by Sudan to the west, Ethiopia to the south, and Djibouti to the east. The capital city is Asmara, and the population, estimated at 5,792,984,² is comprised of nine recognized ethnic groups.³ The major languages are Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, and English. The Italian colonization of Eritrea started in 1885 and officially lasted until 1952 when the territory was federated to Ethiopia.⁴ Ethiopian Emperor Haile Sellassie's dissolution of the Eritrean parliament and annexation of the country led to the war for Eritrean independence. In 1991, talks with the Ethiopian government led to an agreement in which Eritrea would hold a UN-moni-

tored referendum on independence. From April 23rd to 25th, 1993, Eritreans voted in overwhelming favor of self-rule, and an independent state was declared on April 27th, 1993.

Eritrea is currently a single party state governed by the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which has been headed since the country’s independence by President Isaias Afewerki. Following Eritrea’s independence in 1993, the PFDJ was meant to serve as a transitional government until democratic elections were held. However, general multi party elections were postponed in 1998 due to the outbreak of war with Ethiopia. They have been indefinitely postponed since that time.

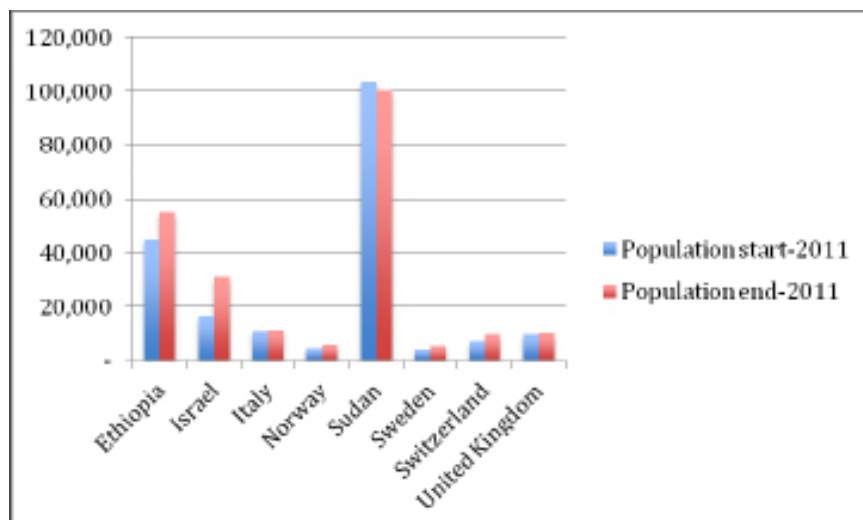
The Eritrean government deprives its citizens of their rights on a widespread and systematic basis.⁵ Opposition parties are banned and political opponents have been subjected to arbitrary detention for long periods, some for over 11 years. Other dissenters have been forcibly exiled from the country.⁶ Thousands of men and women are in arbitrary detention, for offences such as calling for reform, practicing a non-state religion, or trying to avoid mandatory and indefinite national service which often includes forced labor and sexual violence. Citizens who dare to criticize the government are subject to arrest,⁷ arbitrary and incommunicado detention, torture, and even death. Children begin military training as young as 14⁸ as part of their school curriculum. Those who do not show up for military training risk their family members arrest.⁹ Routine conscription round-ups (“*giffas*”) are conducted by police or military forces in workplaces, homes and on the street.¹⁰ Resisting such a roundup can lead to on-the-spot execution. Military offenses such as desertion, absence without leave and self-harming to avoid service can prompt “shoot to kill” orders and

detention for prolonged periods. Punishments are often imposed on the offenders’ families as well, placing them at risk of arrest, forced conscription, and economic sanctions such as fines or withdrawal of trade and business licenses.¹¹

Eritrean law states that able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 to 40 must perform eighteen months of national service, however a government act passed in 2002 extended national service indefinitely.¹² Those that desert are subject to heavy punishment if caught (or if they are returned to Eritrea as a result of deportation). This punishment can include persecution of their families. The military draft includes women, who are at risk of rape and sexual harassment.¹³ A female conscript reported “the military leaders can ask you for anything and if you refuse their demands then you can be punished. Almost every woman in the military experiences this kind of problem.”¹⁴ The situation has been widely documented (Connell 2013; Hepner 2012; Van Mirjam 2012).

One consequence of this political repression has been what Hepner calls “a hemorrhage of human capital” (Hepner 2012: 116). Thousands of Eritreans have left the country clandestinely, (departure is not permitted without permission which is rarely granted as citizens are expected to be doing military service) usually by crossing the border

Chart 1: Main countries of refuge for Eritreans, start- and end-2011



Source: UNHCR Statistical Tables 2011, Table 5.

into Sudan or Ethiopia, then journeying to other destinations. According to UNHCR, as of January 2012, 266,126 refugees and asylum seekers¹⁵ live outside of Eritrea, mainly in the countries shown in Chart 1.¹⁶ In each of these countries except Sudan, the number of Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees increased during 2011.

Eritrean Routes and Destinations, Sinai and Beyond

Most Eritreans cross the border into Sudan or Ethiopia, from where they travel south to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, especially South Africa, further west into Libya then north towards Europe, or north towards Israel. We explore the latter route in this paper.

Once in northern Ethiopia or East Sudan, the route often includes stays in refugee camps. As of August 2012, Ethiopia hosted close to 62,000 Eritrean refugees in Shimelba, Mai-Aini and Adi Harush refugee camps in the Tigray region,¹⁷ and in two refugee camps in West Ethiopia for Eritrean refugees of the Afar ethnicity.¹⁸ According to UNHCR, over 100,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers live in Sudan.¹⁹ As of November 2010, there were 75,572 Eritreans in refugee camps in East Sudan while the rest live in urban settings

in Jezeera and Sennar states and the capital city of Khartoum.²⁰

Map 2 depicts the migration routes Eritrean migrants take from Ethiopia and Sudan through Egypt to Israel. The map shows the proximity of the refugee camps to the Eritrean border. The zoom-out box in the bottom left corner represents locations where respondents were kidnapped and forced into the trafficking network. The map also shows the northeast of Sinai and the locations of the trafficking compounds. At these compounds, Eritrean refugees are abused and extorted to expedite the payment of ransom by their contact networks across the globe.

Smuggling and Trafficking

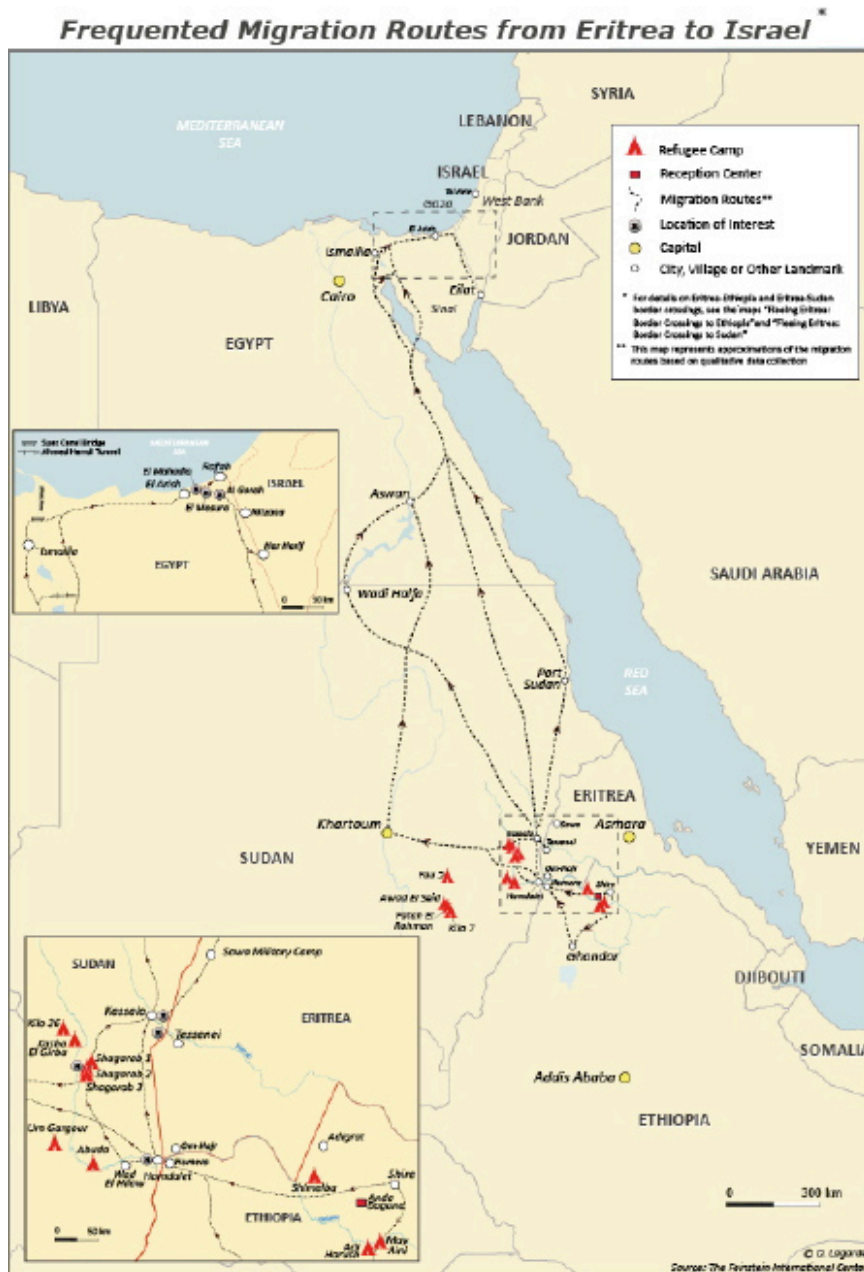
Some Eritreans use smugglers, others travel with friends, and others go alone. It is difficult to know what proportion of Eritreans make it to their destinations without using smugglers of any kind, but we believe it is small. The great distance (3000 km from Kassala to North Sinai) and desert terrain make it very difficult to travel without local knowledge. For most Eritreans it is necessary to hire someone to take them across the desert, and our research focused on the smuggling experience. Most Eritreans recruit a smuggler either in Eritrea or they travel to the border using their own local

Map 1: Routes taken from Eritrea



Note: This map is a rough approximation of the directions many Eritreans are headed.

Map 2: The routes to Israel



knowledge (including friends or other contacts) and then recruit the smuggler in towns or villages on either side of the Eritrean border, in Ethiopia or Sudan.

Not all Eritreans on this route are subjected to abuses and human trafficking. Based on their intentions and experience, Eritrean migrants can be grouped into those that intended to go to Israel and those who wanted only to flee Eritrea but had not begun any secondary movement outside of Sudan (Table 1). Of the group intending to go

to Israel, some paid an agreed fee to the smugglers and were (eventually) taken to the Israel border. We call this group category one. The experience of this group varied, but in general they had the least abusive experience. One respondent stated, "I stayed in Sinai for a week. I had to pay three thousand hundred US dollar. The treatment was okay."²¹ Another explained, "the food and water is not enough but nobody died, nobody make problem. It is not horrible."²² Such accounts attest to the existence of vastly different experiences of Eritreans in the Sinai desert.

Others had worse luck, and fell into the hands of traffickers, i.e. they were deceived en route and then extorted for ransom money while being subjected to abuse. We call this group category two. Category three comprises those who did not intend to go to Israel but were kidnapped in East Sudan and forced to travel to Sinai where they

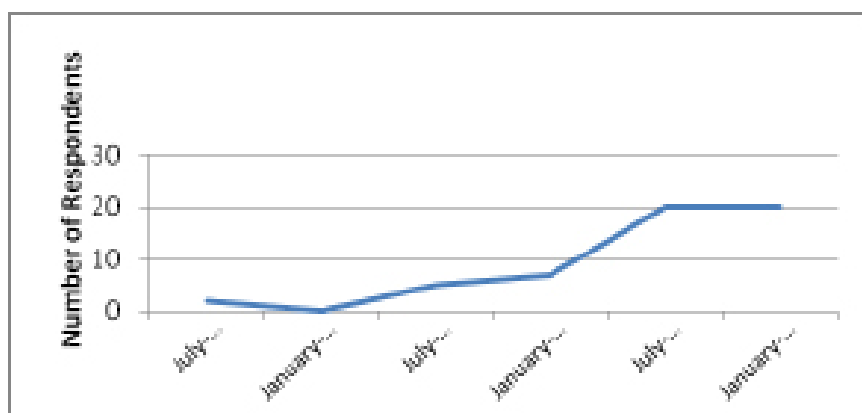
were held hostage for ransom by traffickers. Of 129 respondents we interviewed, just over half, 66, said they had not intended to go to Israel, but had been kidnapped and taken there against their will. We divided up our respondents into three groups, based on whether they had initially contacted smugglers or if they were kidnapped and taken against their will. In this paper, we apply the term smuggling to category one and trafficking and kidnapping to categories two and three.

Table 1: Three types of smuggling and trafficking experience

Category	Intention to Come to Israel	Payment	Abuse	Number of Respondents
One: Voluntary Travelers	Yes	Fee Agreed Upon and Paid	No	42
Two: Deceived Travelers	Yes	Initial Fee Agreed Upon and Paid, but Additional Payment in the form of Ransom was later Demanded	Yes	21
Three: Abductees	No: Kidnapped in Eastern Sudan	Ransom Demanded	Yes	66

Kidnapping is an expensive and dangerous activity, and profits are not guaranteed, so it may seem logical that traffickers would prefer category two to category three. However, external factors have led to an increased need for kidnapping. The number of Eritreans wanting to go to Israel has decreased since June 2012, when Israel began implementing the Prevention of Infiltration Law. This law mandates the automatic detention of individuals crossing irregularly into the country for a minimum of three years.²³ In addition, Israel has completed the Egypt border fence and is implementing tougher border management policies. These changes have led to a significant decrease in the number of individuals intending to travel to Israel.²⁴ As the Eritrean migrant supply dries up, traffickers resort to kidnapping to keep the income stream going. In line with this trend, the number of kidnappings experienced by respondents has increased over time, represented in the graph below (Chart 2).

Chart 2. Number of Kidnapped Respondents over Time



Of our respondents in categories one and two (those who intended to travel to Israel), most said they had thought carefully about their journey, weighing the difficulties and dangers – including the possibility of being held hostage in Sinai – against the prospects for a better future in Israel. Most respondents said they had not chosen Israel as their first destination

but elected to go there when other alternatives were deemed too expensive or unfeasible. Many were aware of the risks associated with their choice, yet felt the risk was worth it.

Payments

The Sudan-Egypt-Israel smuggling and trafficking network is a lucrative business. Of the 158 respondents who spent time in Sinai, 103 could remember the amount of money requested or demanded by smugglers and traffickers. According to their accounts, this totaled \$2,156,700 USD, an amount significantly larger than \$1,222,635 USD, which was actually paid by these respondents. Some respondents were able to escape from their captors and others were eventually allowed to pay less than the initial amount demanded.

As shown in Table 2, the third category is the most profitable for the traffickers. These numbers also need to be understood with the dimension of time incorporated. As the extortion for ransom in Sinai became more common, the smugglers and traffickers demanded more money. Chart 3 below shows the changes in money requested and demanded over time.

Table 2: Amount of Money Requested or Demanded in Sinai by Category

Category	Intention to Come to Israel	Payment	Abuse	Average Amount Requested or Demanded
One	Yes	Fee Agreed Upon and Paid	No	2,442 USD
Two	Yes	Initial Fee Agreed Upon and Paid, but Additional Payment in the form of Ransom was later Demanded	Yes	19,780 USD
Three	No: Kidnapped in Eastern Sudan	Ransom Demanded	Yes	30,334 USD

a significant increase in the number of kidnappings. This is possibly because the implementation of the Prevention of Infiltration Law and the near completion of the Egypt-Israel border fence in 2012 meant the number of African migrants coming to Israel declined and fewer people contacted smugglers who could be sold into the trafficking network. It could also

The graph indicates that the amount requested or demanded dramatically increased between 2010 and 2011. The amount varies with the category of the respondent, and over time as shown in the next graph (Chart 4).

mean that it was easier to kidnap Eritrean nationals in East Sudan than to trick those who had initially contacted them to be smugglers or it could mean that the traffickers in Sinai preferred to purchase

For category one respondents (those smuggled from Sudan to Israel without experiencing extortion or abuse), the price increased between 2007-2012 from 1,383 to 3,271 USD. However, while the total payment more than doubled over these six years, the payment stayed relatively low compared to the other categories. Category two respondents (where the relationship turned abusive and additional payments were demanded in the form of ransom) also saw an increase over the years. There were no respondents in category two (or category three) in 2007, as trafficking in the Sinai had yet to really begin.

We found no respondents in category two for 2012, the same year that we saw

Chart 3: Average Payment Requested or Demanded in Sinai

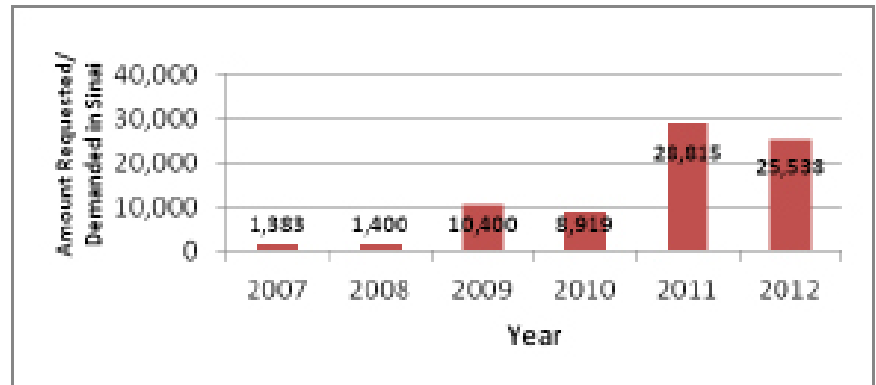


Chart 4: Average Amount of Money Demanded or Requested per Person over Time by Category

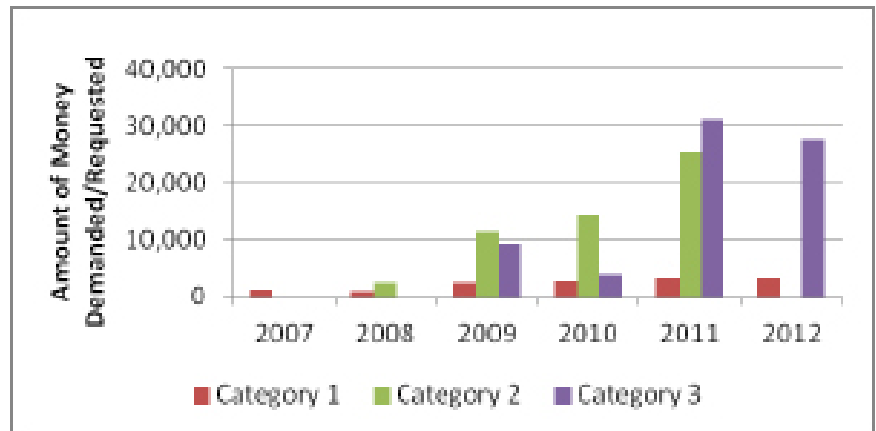


Chart 5: Amount of Money Demanded by Number of Respondents

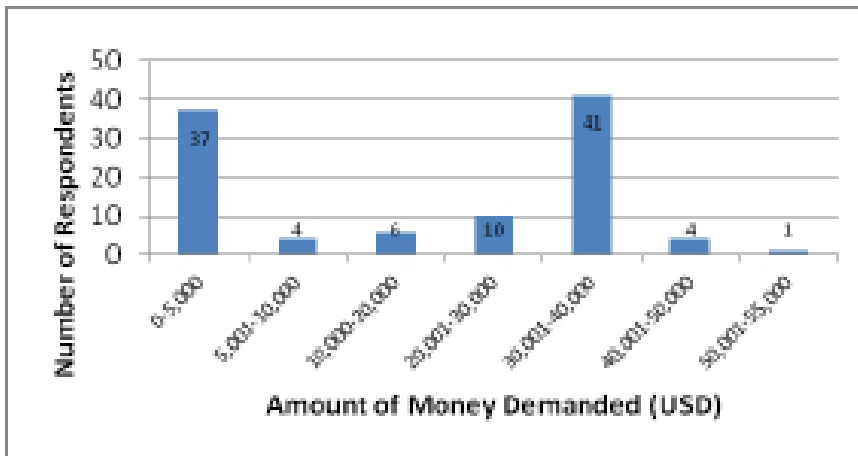
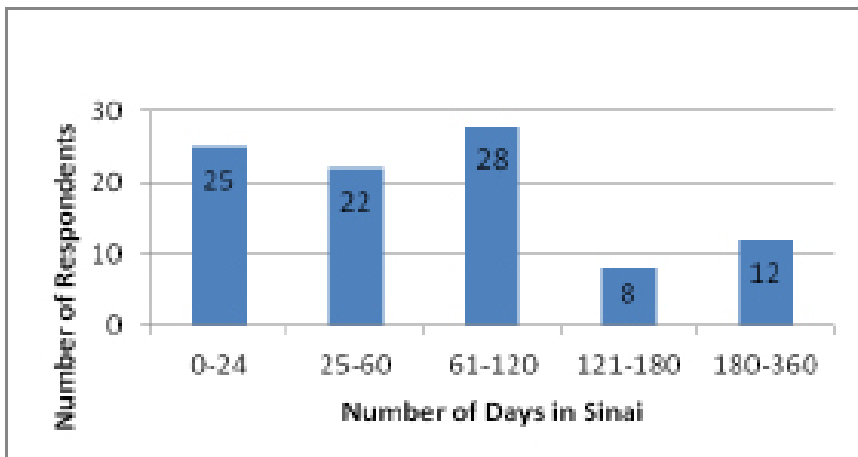


Chart 6: Days in Sinai by Number of Respondents



kidnapped individuals from Rishaida traffickers rather than those who had initially contacted smugglers.

Category three respondents (who had no intention to come to Israel but were kidnapped in East Sudan) were a relatively rare phenomenon until 2011. In 2007 and 2008, there were no kidnapped respondents. In 2009 and 2010, there were two respondents each year. But in 2011 and 2012 the number of kidnappings increased, with 26 respondents in 2011 and 16 in 2012. The ransom amounts paid by individuals in this category during these two years was quite high, 31,133 USD and 27,850 USD respectively.

Each of the three categories represents a different financial incentive for the smugglers and traffick-

ers. According to our respondents' reports, those in category one paid the least amount of money in Egypt: 31 of 42 respondents in category one mentioned the amount of money they paid and this averaged to 2,273 USD. The second category was more profitable because of the ransom money paid in Egypt. 20 out of 21 respondents in category two that mentioned the amount they paid in Egypt, paid an average of 14,977 USD per person.

The breakdown of the amount of money by number of respondents is shown in Chart 5.

The average amount of money demanded by smugglers and traffickers was 20,968 USD. The amount demanded ranged between \$US700 and 53,000. Most respondents (41) were asked to pay between 30-40,000 USD, and 37 respondents were expected to pay less than 5,000 USD.

Time spent in Sinai represents a good indicator of extortion. Of our 158 respondents, 95 spent some time in Sinai and could remember the number of days they were there. The average time was 83 days, close to 3 months. The time spent ranged from one day to 360 days, or close to a year. The breakdown can be seen in Chart 6.

While 25 of the respondents spent less than 24 days in Sinai, 70 respondents spent anywhere from one month to almost a year held captive in the desert. The average payment in Sudan was less both because the ransom demanded was smaller and because not everyone is forced to pay in Sudan. The

average payment was 1,857 USD in Sudan and 11,347 USD in Sinai.

The paying of ransoms has significant implications for the trafficking market. The higher and more often the ransoms paid, the more the price of a kidnapping victim increases. As profits rise, the market grows, and it is possible – although we have no evidence – that more serious actors will become involved. It is imperative that the ransom market be obstructed, but this is a difficult dilemma. Who among us would refuse to pay the ransom for our relative? Meanwhile, the appeal of both organized and opportunistic kidnapping spreads, as more actors become involved, as we discuss below

Actors in the Trafficking Chain

As shown in Map 2, kidnapping generally occurs in East Sudan, a notoriously poor area, where kidnapping is a livelihood for many different groups. All our interviewees who had been kidnapped eventually passed through the hands of smugglers from the Rishaida tribe. Others groups included Eritrean collaborators working with smugglers, Sudanese locals from the area, and Sudanese authorities. Most of those kidnapped were abducted near the Eritrea-Sudan border, as they searched for the refugee camps.²⁵ According to one respondent: “when I went a bit far from the camp, Rishaida gunmen came and took two or three people... Around 150 meters from the camps I was kidnapped... they took us towards Kassala.”²⁶

In East Sudan, local Sudanese engage in opportunistic kidnapping as Eritreans attempt to locate the refugee camps and then sell them to Rishaida traffickers. One respondent said:

When we reached Sudan two men from the Hedareb tribe offered us something to drink. They were talking on the phone and forced us with a sword to go with them. We were scared and decided to run away ... Five minutes from that place we start to run, the maybe five or six Rishaida come in a land cruiser and they took me to Kassala ... They sold me to Rishaida.²⁷

Corrupt Sudanese authorities and police also make money, either by selling kidnapped migrants to traffickers or by receiving bribes from kidnappers. According to one respondent:

Our plan was not to come to Israel ... [but] to go to Sudan and work there. When we arrived in Kassala, the police told us we were being taken to Shagarab ... they covered our eyes and chained our legs and ... told us we had to pay ... 3 thousand dollars. They said if we didn't pay, they would kill us.²⁸

Another respondent explained how the Sudanese army is involved in kidnappings:

Nobody can save you in Kassala because the Sudanese army is ready and the Rishaida can control them because they pay them... Some soldiers from their base went down and ask us where we came from and told them our stories and we thought that the system was that the soldiers when they see you they have to take you to the refugee camp but they called the Rishaida and the Rishaida came and took us.²⁹

Eritrean migrants were held for various periods of time in East Sudan either while they arranged for ransoms to be paid or while the Rishaida smugglers gathered enough people to sell to the Bedouin traffickers.

As Eritrean migrants get sold along the chain, the price increases. One respondent told us how he was kidnapped by a Sudanese man who sold him to the Rishaida for 400 USD. The Rishaida transferred him to Bedouins but he did know how much money changed hands. In Sinai, this respondent's family paid 28,700 USD to the Bedouins to secure his release.³⁰

In both Sudan and Sinai, the money is not transferred directly to the location where the individual is being held. Instead, families and relatives collect money and then transfer it or physically hand it over to collaborators working with the traffickers in a variety of urban centers including Cairo, Tel Aviv, Beersheba, and various places in Saudi Arabia.

One individual describes how he paid for his release from being held in Sudan:

The Rishaida came and took us to a tent. We were held there for a month. They told us if you pay five thousand US dollar then we will be released. They told us that they will kill us if we didn't pay. He told us to send the money to Saudi Arabia. I sent the money to a person that I know in Saudi Arabia from Israel. He has collaborators, like people of his – representatives in Saudi Arabia

– and the person that I know paid him. He told him to come to a market place in Saudi Arabia. Then after he gave the money, and the Rishaida person confirmed that he received the money, we were released.³¹

Being released in East Sudan often meant the Rishaida sold the migrants to Bedouin smugglers who moved them through the Sinai desert. The Rishaida are based in Sudan, Eritrea, and the Arabian Peninsula, but not in Egypt.³² The Rishaida-Bedouin network is not well understood by the Eritrean migrants (or by outside researchers). Our respondents said they encountered several different smuggling groups between Sudan and Egypt, but no clear picture emerged of when the smugglers shifted from Rishaida to Bedouin.

Eritrean migrants were transported in some combination of boats, pickup trucks, lorries, water-tankers, buses, and cars. Accidents related to overcrowding cars and trucks are common. One respondent said they were forced to hide in an over-packed fertilizer truck.

We were received by Egyptians at the border between Egypt and Sudan. Then a boat, then another car transfer, then another transfer. Then at the last they boarded all two hundred people in a tank for fertilizer. It had some open air from the top. At the top floor Sudanese and at the bottom floor. Eritreans. Then the first floor broke down. One girl died ... and the boy died when he reached Sinai because he was injured. You can't believe if you don't experience it yourself.³³

Another individual describes how they were transferred in a water-tanker:

In Egypt we traveled in a lorry, then we were moved to a water-tanker. The smugglers put 160 people inside the tank. There was a lot of suffocation and one person died while we were traveling. During the three months that I was forced to work with the smugglers we often heard that five to six people would die when traveling in the water-tanker. The smugglers use tankers because they are closed. We traveled with this tanker from Cairo all the way to the desert.³⁴

Unlike the Sudanese authorities, who appear to be involved in all aspects of the trafficking, Egyptian authorities seem to be less directly involved in the trafficking, but were complicit as a result of bribery by the Sinai smugglers and traffickers.

Many respondents said they saw bribes being paid. According to one respondent, “One prisoner who escaped went to the police, and the Bedouins came and took him from the police. I don't know if they paid, but he was taken back.”³⁵ Other accounts tell of corruption by Egyptian border guards. After release from the compounds in Sinai, migrants are brought to the Egypt-Israel border where the Egyptian border patrol often shoots at them as they try to cross into Israel. Several respondents said the smugglers would bribe the Egyptian soldiers not to shoot. One respondent explains, “The smugglers made an agreement with the Egyptian soldiers at the border. We saw them speaking at the border, they were very close to us. One of the smugglers is a soldier and first he left us and we stayed with one guard and he came back and then took us, so I would say that he paid. If they paid the soldiers, they just leave you.”³⁶ For those who paid smugglers for safe passage to Israel, bribing the Egyptian soldiers is a part of the deal.

Not all Egyptian authorities are corrupt and many migrants are caught when they cross checkpoints or are stopped by Egyptian patrols. Others manage to escape from the trafficking compounds and are picked up by Egyptian authorities, or are caught at the Egypt-Israel border. Those that are caught are detained for months at a time in Egyptian prisons or police stations. Many are deported back to Eritrea or Ethiopia.

The journey from Sudan to Egypt reflects two distinct and contradictory patterns. On the one hand, the smugglers appear not to place much value on the lives of their human cargo. Many respondents discussed the injuries and deaths that occurred because of over-packed vehicles, which could have been prevented had the smugglers arranged for additional vehicles. On the other hand, the smugglers go to great lengths to hide their cargo, especially for the segment from Cairo into Sinai where checkpoints and military patrols are common. However, some respondents reported being transported in canvas-backed lorries for the entire journey from Sudan into Egypt, which suggests that being spotted was less of a concern for certain smugglers perhaps because of more widespread corruption of Egyptian authorities.

The Ransom Network

The purpose of the abuse and extortion in the Sinai desert is to expedite the payment of ransom by the contact networks of Eritreans held hostage. All Eritrean nationals can expect to pay money in Sinai. One respondent describes the vastness of the network needed pay the ransoms: “In every corner of the world they have representatives who receive the money.”³⁷ How the payments work depend on the location of the families members. According to one respondent, “If you have a family member in Israel and the money is in Israel, it goes to those in Sinai. If you have family in Eritrea and the money is from Eritrea, it goes to the ones who are in Sudan. My family in Eritrea paid the money. My family sold some of their livestock and some of the gold of my mother.”³⁸

Many respondents said that those known to have family members in the US, Europe or Israel, were expected to pay higher ransom amounts and were treated worse. The smugglers had a system to determine which hostages had such connections:

They ask when you arrive in Sinai, all those who can send four thousand tomorrow, I will send you to Israel. He does this just to see if you have a family member in Europe, in America, in Israel. You think that you will be sent soon. So you call to different family members around the world to get them to pay for you. But he is really exploiting you to understand how many family members you have outside of Eritrea, to exploit you a lot after he sold you, for resale.³⁹

The payment system in Sinai reflects both the complexities of the trafficking rings and the transnational networks that gather the money to pay for the hostage’s release. The payment system is complicated by the lack of status of many Eritreans in various countries as well as the oppressive dictatorship affecting those living in Eritrea. One respondent explained how he arranged the money to pay for the release of his brother:

We paid 35,000 USD for the release of my brother. I contributed 2,500 USD. We sent the money to Eritrea through an uncle in the USA. I gave the money to someone in Israel. This person has a relative in the USA, and the one in the USA has a relative in Eritrea. The rest of the ransom-money came from Eritrea. My father sold his

apartment. The money was enough for the release of my brother.⁴⁰

Eritrean Collaborators as Transnational Intermediaries

Both in Sudan and in the Sinai desert, Eritrean collaborators are very much involved in the smuggling and trafficking. Some Eritreans choose to get involved whereas others are forced to work as translators, and even to torture their fellow hostages. One respondent describes this system, he explains, “One Eritrean was forced to translate. He was one of the people who was kidnapped in Sudan. They used their guns to tell him to beat people. On the other hand, there are other people who cooperate with them for the sake of money.”⁴¹

In East Sudan, Eritrean collaborators work with the Sudanese authorities, locals, and Rishaida in an intricate network of smuggling and people trafficking. In Sinai, traffickers rely on the Eritreans as translators and intermediaries. The extent to which these individuals collaborate with the traffickers when it comes to torture and abuse varies from individual to individual. In addition, Eritreans around the world are involved in facilitating ransom payments, either for the money or because they are forced to be complicit in order to release a relative.

In East Sudan, Eritreans collaborators are involved in different ways: some act independently, kidnapping Eritreans and then selling them to the Rishaida, while others work with the Rishaida and/or with the Sudanese authorities. Some of these Eritreans actively decide to join this business while others are recruited by the Rishaida community. One interviewee describes how Eritreans recruited by the Rishaida work:

Their job is to find [new arrivals] in Hamdad [town on the Eritrea border]. When you cross the border ... you think these are good people [who] might help you. They say yeah, I can help you, come and have a rest here. Then they go and go call for the Rishaida. And then the Rishaida come and take you.⁴²

Eritrean collaborators sometimes work with complicit Sudanese authorities. One interviewee explains how he was kidnapped:

There was an Eritrean with the Sudanese police. He spoke fluent Tigrinya and he told us that you don't have to worry because the Rishaida will take you to Israel ... Then the Rishaida started to threaten us with their guns.. We asked the Eritrean, 'why do you have to sell us? You are Eritrean like us.' He said to us: 'why risk yourself? Just go to Israel' ...⁴³

Another respondent had a similar experience,

... there was an Eritrean with the Sudanese soldiers ... He told us that you are going to Israel, you don't have to worry. We told him we don't want to go to Israel, it is not our plan ... Then the Rishaida threatened us with guns and two beat us with a stick.⁴⁴

A few respondents told of Eritrean collaborators who were initially coerced into cooperating with the traffickers, but then perpetrated violence beyond what they were coerced to do. According to one interviewee,

This Eritrean collaborator came to Sinai to go to Israel, but he didn't have money and because he spoke Arabic they made him stay there for translation. He was very cruel. Sometimes, Egyptians would order him to do it, sometimes he would do it alone. He would torture people, hang them beat them, he would make them speak to their parents while he was beating them with a chain... He was even more cruel than the Bedouins.⁴⁵

This view was repeated by another interviewee, who described the Eritrean collaborator working with the traffickers in Sinai: "He's a very criminal person. He was kidnapped himself. He wasn't like a smuggler... He was only there for 2 weeks. He killed four people."⁴⁶

Many Eritrean interviewees described how they pleaded with the Eritreans involved in the trafficking, invoking a sense of brotherhood. For the Eritreans working with the traffickers, these words had little effect. However, not all Eritreans in the smuggling business coerce individuals. A few of our interviewees mentioned smugglers who brought people from Eritrea to Sudan but did not sell people.⁴⁷

One of our respondents was forced to work with the traffickers as a translator. He describes his experience,

When we arrived to the Sinai, I made a mistake [and told] the smugglers I speak Arabic ... The smugglers told me that to earn enough money I have to translate for them from Arabic to Tigrinya ... I had no intention to collaborate with the smugglers, but I was forced to stay and work for them... In the end I need to save my life, so I was forced to accept the job.⁴⁸

This pattern is quite common; the Sinai traffickers rely on the Eritreans as translators and intermediaries.

Eritrean nationals in the diaspora are involved in facilitating ransom payments across the globe. The traffickers employ an intricate network of Eritrean individuals in many countries who collect ransom money for a small profit. Agents working with the smugglers contact families in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Israel as well as across Europe and the United States. Other Eritreans are forced to pick up ransom money from other families as a precondition for the release of their own relative in Sinai. Eritrean intermediaries thus become an essential part of the transnational trafficking network.

Conclusion

Our paper describes the processes and actors involved in the trafficking network engulfing the Eritrea migration system. We focused only on the route through the Sinai to Israel, but migration from Eritrea also occurs south to sub-Saharan Africa, west through Sudan to Libya, and east across the Red Sea. The Sinai route actors include Rishaida smugglers in East Sudan, Sudanese authorities, Bedouin smugglers, the Egyptian authorities, and Eritrean collaborators. It is likely that a similar smuggling – and probably trafficking – network exists for these other migration routes.

One of our clearest findings concerns the implications of paying ransoms for the trafficking market. The higher and more often the ransoms paid, the more the price of a kidnapping victim increases, and the more organized and opportunistic kidnapping spreads. As profits rise, the market grows, and it is possible – although we have no evidence yet and this is no more than speculation – that more serious actors will become involved. It is imperative that the ransom market be obstructed, but this is a

difficult dilemma. Who among us would refuse to pay the ransom for our relative? While some voices from the worldwide Eritrea diaspora are addressing the issue,⁴⁹ finding ways to stop paying the ransoms will be important.

Other actions on the arts of state and international organizations will bring these abuses to an end. Most importantly, if the political repression, persecution and economic dispossession perpetrated by the Eritrean regime ceases, the supply of migrants for smugglers and traffickers would end. While the abuses in Eritrea continue, thousands – particularly young people – continue to flee the country. Eritrea is a little known country, rarely appearing in mainstream news media, in the West or the Middle East. At present, there is little external pressure on the regime, publicly at least.

Second, the security situation in East Sudan could be improved, making it more difficult for traffickers to kidnap Eritreans. The Sudanese government must crackdown on Sudanese authorities that are complicit or actively participating in the kidnappings. At present it seems unlikely that the Khartoum government will address this security challenge. International agencies active in the area, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Office

for Migration (IOM), should implement comprehensive strategies to address security concerns in East Sudan.

Third, the Egyptian government could liberate the hostages held in the Sinai trafficking compounds and hold accountable those responsible. The Egyptian government should address the problem of Egyptian authorities collaborating with smugglers and traffickers. Following the Revolution in Egypt, the world eyes are on Egypt, looking for signs of human rights and democracy. Yet despite this tendency, the rights of African migrants including asylum seekers are not high on the agenda for reform. The international community must ensure that ending the abuse of refugees in Sinai is on the forefront of Egypt's agenda.

Lastly, the global community of Eritreans must mobilize around the issue. If Eritrean families stopped paying ransoms, the business would no longer be lucrative for the traffickers in Sinai. Of course, this solution is impossible to implement at the individual level. Who among us would refuse to pay a ransom for a loved one? But the Eritrean community can pressure those who collaborate with the smugglers and traffickers and make it more difficult to act as intermediaries – an essential aspect of the functioning trafficking network.

Endnotes

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29. Interview, Female, 30 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 02 October 2012.
30. Interview, Male, 27 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 20 July 2012.
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39. Interview, Female, 30 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 02 October 2012.
40. Interview, Female, 23 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 20 September 2012.
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44. Interview, Male, 24 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 23 September 2012.
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Annex: Interviewing about Abuse – Seeking to Be Sensitive

The people we interviewed often had difficulties expressing their experiences of violence and humiliation in the desert camps, and exposure to death during the journey. The researchers had to be mindful of these difficulties and we sought to build a relationship based on trust. We allowed the interviewees to decide when to speak and when to be silent. We were confronted with the ethical question as to whether the process of telling their story might be harmful to the narrators. Researchers can record the stories of victims of violence, but it is not in their power to alleviate or redeem their suffering. Whereas narration might cause harm to some, for others it is a manner in which past and present are linked and past experiences are given a place in their life histories.

When discussing the vulnerability and suffering of these individuals, we felt that it is vital not to present them purely as passive victims, but to highlight their agency, both during the journey and when seeking to make sense of such experiences after arriving in Israel. Therefore, each interview started with a brief explanation of the project and emphasized that we cannot offer anything in return other than a listening ear. We explained that the interviewee would be in charge of the conversation and should feel free to say when they did not want to answer questions, and that there were no good or bad answers.

To gain more insights from psychologists who work with refugees in Israel, we consulted experts to prepare us for interviewing people who experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, extortion and humiliation before arriving to Israel. These consultation

meetings taught us how to warn people before the interview of what was to come. We warned interviewees that some questions might bring up some bad feelings, emotions or bodily responses: “The questions that I am going to ask you might bring up difficult experiences. I want to make you aware that you might feel physical symptoms in your body, such as stomach pain or headache. To go through difficult experiences can cause stress. You might be fine with the process of recalling past experiences, but some are not. We are in this process together and whatever happens is okay.” By saying so we hoped to help the interviewee through any difficulties as they recalled experiences in Eritrea and during the journey. We sought to acknowledge our respondents’ pain by saying: “This must be really hard” or “I can see your pain” or “I try to understand what you are going through” or “I can see how hard this is. Even if I did not experience it myself I can imagine how hard it is.” “I am here with you, I am in this with you” or “I am not here to judge you.”

We were told that when speaking about torture, it is sometimes better to mention some things and have the interviewee nod instead of speaking out loud. For example: Were you beaten? Starved? Tortured? Raped? We learned that it is always best to start with less difficult experiences. These consultations taught us the importance of bringing the interviewee back to reality and out of past experiences at the end of the interview. We were taught that simple questions asked at the end of the interview can help with this come back to reality such as: How do you feel? What will you do tomorrow?

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