



**FROM ILLEGAL MIGRATION TO HUMAN  
TRAFFICKING: DANGEROUS JOURNEYS  
ACROSS THE HORN OF AFRICA AND  
THE ARABIAN PENINSULA**

**JULY 2024**

Free the Slaves (FTS) was founded in 2000 and has since committed itself to the mission of ending modern slavery. Today, FTS is widely recognized as a leader and a pioneer in the modern abolitionist movement. Through its work, FTS has assisted individuals in situation of slavery to regain their freedom, has helped officials to bring traffickers to justice, and has supported survivors to rebuild their lives and reclaim their future. To advance its mission further, FTS has developed a multi-dimensional strategy that rests on four main pillars: policy and advocacy, which sees FTS advocating for the reform of laws and regulations; engagement of local communities, whereby FTS provides training and resources to vulnerable communities; movement building, as FTS encourages collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and collective action within the anti-slavery movement; and continuous learning, whereby FTS actively engages in research projects that aim to inform responses and enhance understanding.

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# Glossary

**Country of Destination** -- The country that is a destination for migratory flows, either regular or irregular. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Country of Origin** - The country that is a source of migratory flows, either regular or irregular. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Country of Transit** - The country through which migratory flows, either regular or irregular, move. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Forced Migration** - A migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Horn of Africa** – The region in Eastern Africa that comprises Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. It is also possible to refer to a Greater Horn of Africa, which extends to Kenya, Sudan, and South Sudan. For the purpose of this report, “Horn of Africa” refers to Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

**International Migration** - The movement of persons away from their place of usual residence and across an international border to a country of which they are not nationals. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Irregular (or Illegal) Migration** – The movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Migration** - The movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State. [IOM, Glossary on Migration, 2019]

**Smuggling** - The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident. [Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air 2000]

**Trafficking in Persons** - The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. [Palermo Protocol, 2000]

# Introduction

Human migration and human trafficking have a long history in the Horn of Africa. As early as the twelfth century, the Horn of Africa was connected to the Middle East, the Arab Gulf, and South Asia by trade networks. Those trade routes soon became migratory routes as well, with peoples and goods moving across the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea. However, under Arab and European domination, the Horn was also connected with the rest of the world by the East Africa slave trade.<sup>1</sup>

The gradual illegalization of slave trading in the late 19th and early 20th century temporarily halted those movements of people. However, during the wars of colonial occupation in the 1930s (such as Italy's occupation of Ethiopia) and during the conflicts between Axis Powers and Alliance Powers in the 1940s (such as the British-Italian war in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea), many from the Horn of Africa embarked on migratory journeys to escape the violence of those struggles.

As the establishment of independent states in the Horn of Africa was often followed by instability, poverty, and ethnic violence, migration from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti continued well after the end of colonial rule. In more recent times, this has been further encouraged by the oil-driven economic growth of the neighboring Gulf monarchies, which have become an attractive destination for cheap and unskilled laborers from East Africa.<sup>2</sup>

It is on this background that an increasing number of East African nationals have decided to embark on migratory journeys that, passing through Yemen, have in the rich Gulf monarchies their intended destination.<sup>3</sup>

However, many of those migratory flows between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula are illegal in character, taking place beyond the routes and mechanisms allowed by countries of destination and countries of origin.

The reasons why many migrants have been choosing irregular channels of migration are mainly connected to the limited options for regular migration as well as the administrative challenges associated with those few options (e.g., strict exit-entry control procedures, limited issuance of travel documents, bureaucratic and administrative barriers).<sup>4</sup>

As East African nationals embark on irregular channels of migration and resort to migrant smuggling to reach the Arabian Peninsula, they often find themselves exploited by ruthless human traffickers along their journeys towards the Gulf monarchies. It is on this reality of exploitation that the present report will focus.

**Figure 1. Migration Routes**



Source: [Migration Policy Institute](#)

# From the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula: Numbers, Drivers, Patterns

Due to its location in the South-Western corner of the Arabian Peninsula and its proximity to the Horn of Africa, Yemen is regarded by most East African migrants as the preferred location to migrate to. All of them, however, intend to move onward to the richer Gulf monarchies.

The journey from the Horn of Africa through Yemen accounts for 40% of all migratory movements in the African continent and has seen a constant increase over the past few years. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of migrants hailing from the Horn and crossing the Gulf of Aden into Yemen nearly tripled, from 27,700 to 73,200. Those numbers grew even further in 2023, with 86,630 people migrating to Yemen from the beginning of January to the end of July. The peak, however, was registered in March 2023, when 20,020 arrivals were recorded, marking the highest figure ever.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the migrants who follow the Eastern route pass through Djibouti and Somalia, from where they cross the sea to reach the Yemeni coast. According to the latest data, in July 2023 9,500 migrants arrived in Yemen, mostly from Djibouti's coastal town of Obock (82%) and from Somalia's coastal town of Bossaso (18%). Of those migrants, it is remarkable that 98% were Ethiopians and 2% Somalis, which makes irregular migration along the Eastern Route de facto an Ethiopian phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, these patterns of migration have continued even in the context of the civil war that has engulfed Yemen over the past nine years. In fact, the deterioration of state authority in Yemen and the collapse of central government institutions, including border control agencies and the police, have led migrants to believe that it has become easier to pass through Yemen undetected and undisturbed.<sup>10</sup>

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As per the reasons why East African migrants seek to reach the Arabian Peninsula, the main driver is economic need. Coming from countries in which decades of conflict and political instability have negatively affected economic wealth and development rates, the rich Gulf monarchies seem to offer opportunities for a prosperous and dignified life that do not exist back home. By reaching Yemen and continuing onwards to Saudi Arabia, Eastern African migrants hope to find job opportunities that will allow them to make a living for themselves and send remittances back home.<sup>12</sup>

However, economic reasons are not the only factor driving East African migrants towards the shores of Yemen. Other factors include climate change, climate-related natural hazards, violence, and conflict (especially against certain ethnic groups).<sup>13</sup> According to data released by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for the period January-June 2023, 3 million people throughout the Horn of Africa were displaced by droughts.<sup>14</sup>

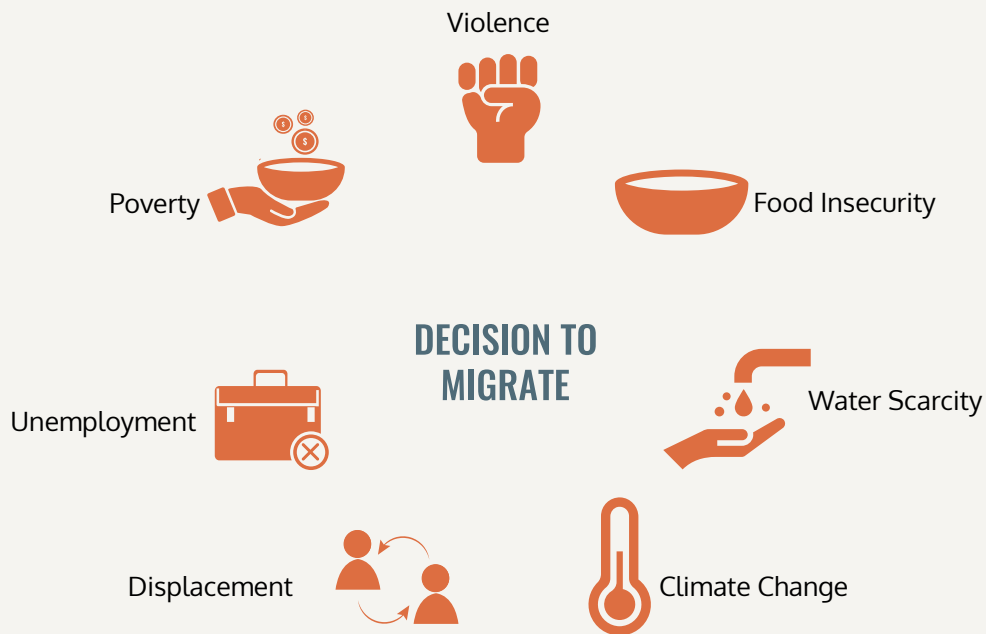
In Ethiopia alone, 27% of migrants who left the country came from drought-affected areas. Over the same period, 1.4 million people throughout the Horn were displaced by floods.<sup>15</sup>

In Ethiopia, a dramatic combination of ethnic violence and repeated droughts has had an adverse impact on the livelihoods of many, pushing a higher number of Ethiopians to seek opportunities elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Between the beginning of the conflict in northern Ethiopia in November 2020 and the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) between the government in Addis Ababa and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2022, it was especially Ethiopians of Tigrayan ethnicity that made their way out of the country.

In Somalia, the ongoing civil war between the government and the armed group al-Shabaab, as well as climatic events such as droughts and floods, have also driven increasing numbers of people to embark on migratory journeys.

Finally, another factor that is important to consider in the context of migration from the Horn of Africa – and that is related to the climate emergency and the continuous cycles of conflict – is food and water insecurity, which has been especially affecting rural populations.





## From Illegal Migration to Human Trafficking

Migrants from the Horn of Africa often resort to irregular routes to reach their intended destinations on the other side of the Gulf of Aden. Between 2017–2020, at least 400,000 Ethiopian migrants reached the Arabian Peninsula through irregular migration.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it was reported that in 2022 Saudi Arabia hosted 750,000 Ethiopian migrants, 60% of whom had travelled to the country through illegal means.<sup>19</sup>

Some reasons why migrants choose irregular pathways include the lack of valid identity

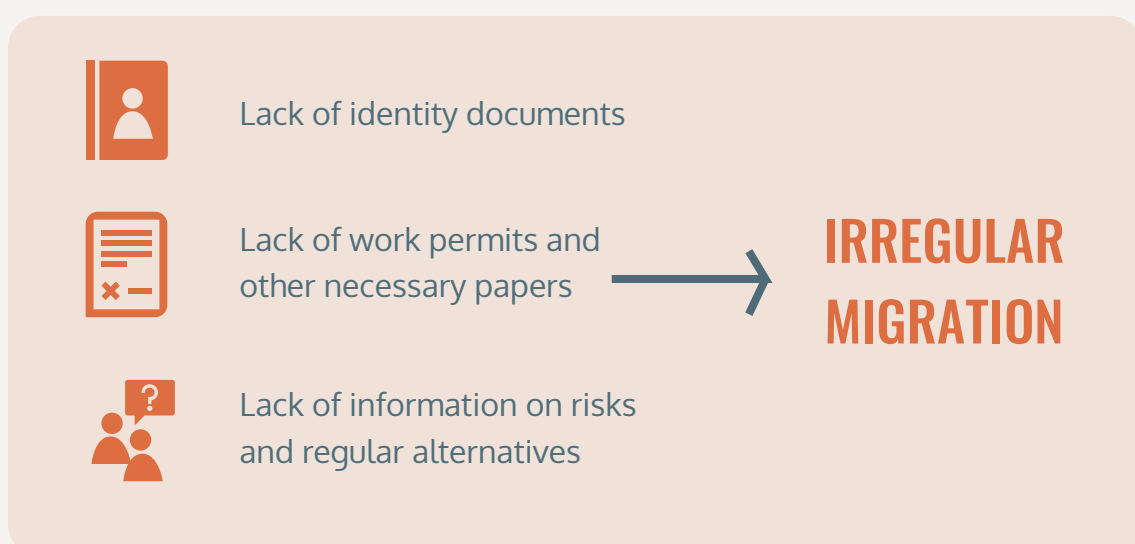
and travel documents (i.e., passports), which for many people it is difficult to obtain. This is especially the case for people from rural areas, who would have to travel to their nation’s administrative centre to obtain them. Other reasons are the lack of documentation needed to cross borders legally (e.g., work visa from the destination country), the lack of adequate information on the options available and the inherent risks, as well as the lack of knowledge on how to migrate through legal pathways.

Migrants who embark on irregular journeys typically rely on smugglers to reach the Arabian Peninsula, believing that the logistical support of smugglers is crucial to the successful outcome of the journey. Especially, they refer to smugglers to cross the Red Sea waters by boat from Djibouti or Somalia. Others rely on smugglers also before, to cross into Djibouti and Somalia and to navigate the challenges of residing in the coastal towns of Obock and Bossaso before the trip by boat can be arranged. Smugglers may also be sought afterwards, to travel throughout Yemen up until the border with Saudi Arabia and to cross onto the Saudi side.

As migrants opt for irregular pathways of migration and rely on smuggler for parts (or the entirety) of their journey, they find themselves particularly exposed to the risk of being trafficked and exploited. Last July, on the occasion of the International Day Against Trafficking in Persons, the IOM remarked that “an estimated 36.6 million people across Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti have been affected [by human trafficking]. Many migrants fall victim and prey to traffickers.”<sup>20</sup>

Among those, women and girls are the most vulnerable group, making up more than 70% of trafficking victims.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 3. Factors that push towards irregular vis-à-vis regular migration**



In this research, we aim to identify and discuss those individual and systemic factors that contribute to making East African irregular migrants vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers along their journey towards the Gulf.

The concept of vulnerability can be understood to mean that some people are more susceptible to (psychological, physical, sexual, etc.) harm due to exposure to some form of risk factors and due to the lack of sufficient protective factors.<sup>22</sup>

### Research Questions

**What factors determine the vulnerability of irregular migrants along the migration corridor from the Horn of Africa to the Arab Gulf?**

**What dynamics of human trafficking are observed along the Eastern Route?**

**How do smuggling and trafficking networks operate – and cooperate – along the Eastern Route?**

Following the vulnerability model developed by the IOM, we consider that risk factors and protective factors operate at different levels: individual (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, etc.), household (e.g., family size, socio-economic status, educational level, etc.), community

(e.g., natural hazards, social norms, etc.), and structural (e.g., governance, corruption, rule of law, etc.). As risk and protective factors overlap and intersect on those different levels, they determine either vulnerability or resilience, i.e., the ability to avoid, cope with, and recover from harm.

In the context of this research, it was decided to limit the focus of the investigation to those factors that operate – and intersect – at the individual and structural levels, contributing to shaping a reality of vulnerability for irregular migrants moving from the Horn of Africa to the Arab Gulf. Individual level and structural level factors, in fact, seemed to be the most relevant to explain how vulnerability is determined and shaped along the migratory journey.

While doing so, we focus on trafficking as observed at three distinct moments along the journey – when transiting through Djibouti and Somalia before crossing the Gulf of Aden, when transiting through Yemen upon disembarking in the Arabian Peninsula, when arriving in the rich Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia. In fact, while some studies have been produced on the trafficking of East African migrants in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the range, complexity, and intersection of trafficking experiences have yet to be aggregated and analyzed as a whole.

**Aims:** identify and discuss factors that determine vulnerability among irregular East African migrants, illuminate the many and different forms of trafficking to which irregular migrants are exposed, explore how migrant smuggling and human trafficking intersect and overlap.

**Method:** publicly available information from humanitarian organisations working in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen, think tanks, migration institutes, and news articles.

**Limitations:** most figures on irregular migration are likely to be underreported and there is a dearth of publicly available information on human trafficking.

We also aim to illuminate the many and different forms of trafficking to which irregular migrants – men, women, and children – are exposed in transit and destination countries. Here, we also draw attention to the fact that migrants may be trafficked and exploited more than once along the journey, and that the experience of being trafficked creates new physical, psycho-social, and/or economic vulnerabilities that increase the risk of re-trafficking.

Finally, recognizing that trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants are two distinct crimes that frequently occur and overlap in the context of irregular migration, it is important to investigate this intersection in the specific context of the Eastern Route and understand how migrant smuggling networks and human trafficking networks sustain each other.

# Human Trafficking Upon Transiting in Djibouti and Somalia

The migration journey on the Eastern Route starts in Ethiopia, where migrants first reach the village of Galafi at the border between Ethiopia and Djibouti. They then cross the hot desert by foot to Djibouti, which is the main passageway to Yemen. A secondary route, through Bossaso in Somalia is also widely popular.<sup>24</sup>

While many migrants engage in this first leg of the journey independently, others rely on the services of smugglers. Here, it is noticeable that operations based in Ethiopia range from groups of criminal entrepreneurs and opportunists loosely linked to each other, to highly organized networks that operate across several countries.<sup>25</sup>

Upon entering Djibouti, migrants helped by smuggling networks move to the coastal town of Obock, where boat departures to Yemen are arranged. These criminal networks are mostly formed of Djibouti nationals, but many have links to counterparts in Ethiopia and Yemen.<sup>26</sup> Very similar patterns are observed in Somalia, where migrants entering the country are smuggled to the port city of Bossaso, which is the departure point for the Gulf. Here as well, smuggling networks are mostly run by Somali nationals.

As irregular migrants wait for the boats to take them to Yemen, they find themselves vulnerable to exploitation by trafficking networks.<sup>27</sup>

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Some of the most common forms of trafficking observed in Obock and Bossaso are sex trafficking (in which substances are often used as a means of coercion and control) and forced labor, particularly domestic servitude, forced begging, and peddling.<sup>28</sup> Migrant men are also victims of hazardous forced labor in construction sites, in manual jobs in the port facilities, and in other informal sectors of the local economy. Some of those men would be looking for job in order to collect the money needed to pay the crossing by boat into Yemen.

Migrant girls and women are especially vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation<sup>30</sup>. In Djibouti, they are predominantly exploited in bars, hotels, and nightclubs frequented by Djiboutian nationals as well as by foreigners who work in the shipping industry, in foreign military bases, and in transportation.<sup>31</sup> Some girls and women also fall victim to forced marriages with smugglers, who exploit them for financial gain and trap them in unending cycles of abuse.

Migrant children, for their part, are most commonly exploited in the worst forms of child labor, including forced street begging. According to a study by the Djibouti Ministry for Women and Families conducted in 2022 on 1,000 children forced to beg in Djibouti City, over 90% of them were from Ethiopia and Somalia.<sup>33</sup> Besides begging, migrant children are exploited in agriculture, construction, commercial sex, and domestic work.<sup>34</sup>

In Somalia, Ethiopian children of the Oromia ethnicity have also been exploited in forced bagging and petty trade.<sup>35</sup>

The vulnerability of East African illegal migrants to trafficking is determined by a variety of factors. At the individual level, the irregular status creates a situation of special

uncertainty, as migrants find themselves in the country against the law and cannot safely turn to the authorities in case of abuse and exploitation. In other words, the clandestine status of irregular migrants facilitates their exploitation and abuse by traffickers, prevents them from seeking support, and makes them invisible and irrelevant in the eyes of local authorities.<sup>36</sup>

The dependency of irregular migrants on smugglers to start, continue, and complete (successfully) their journey is a further factor that creates an unequal and imbalanced relationship in which one party has full control over another, and adds to the migrants' vulnerability. Moreover, if migrants incurred a debt to pay the smugglers for their services (which may include the costs of transportation, the costs of forging documents, and the costs of buying the connivence of border officials), they may easily find themselves in a situation of debt bondage, in which they are unable to simply walk away.<sup>37</sup>

However, systemic factors in Somalia and Djibouti are also important to explain vulnerability. Here, the weakness of the government, corruption, and poor governance particularly stand out.

Somalia is one of the most corrupted countries worldwide; government officers lack professionalism, training, and resources; and the State's law enforcement capacity is very much limited,<sup>38</sup> which is unsurprising if one considers that large swaths of central and southern Somalia are de facto controlled by al-Shabaab. The government has traditionally demonstrated minimal efforts on prosecution, protection, and prevention of human trafficking. While there have been nascent improvements to civilian justice systems and criminal investigation programs to address most crimes, the government continues to conflate human trafficking and migrant smuggling, hindering the effectiveness of its anti-trafficking efforts.

Additionally, the federal government in Mogadishu continues to lack a comprehensive legal framework to address human trafficking. Adding to this, law enforcement, prosecutorial personnel, and courts remained understaffed and undertrained and lacked capacity to effectively enforce anti-trafficking laws.<sup>39</sup> Under these conditions, smuggling and trafficking networks have been able to emerge and thrive.

In Djibouti, corruption is also widespread, with the secret police and security forces believed to be directly involved in human trafficking crimes.<sup>40</sup> In addition to that, a lack of resources and know-how also hinders the country's capacity to adequately address human trafficking.<sup>41</sup> For six consecutive years, the government did not report investigating or prosecuting trafficking cases and did not convict any traffickers, which contributes to creating a climate of impunity for criminals.

For the fourth consecutive year, the government also did not identify any trafficking victim. Despite participating in anti-trafficking trainings, prosecutors reportedly dropped trafficking charges and reclassified cases of trafficking as other crimes with lower penalties, and judges continued to use outdated versions of the penal code that did not incorporate updates from the trafficking provisions in the 2016 anti-trafficking law.<sup>42</sup>

# Human Trafficking Upon Disembarking in Yemen

East African migrants in Somalia and Djibouti rely on smugglers to cross by boat the Red Sea waters that separate the Horn of Africa from Yemen. Smugglers transport migrants in old vessels that are loaded beyond their capacity. Consequently, capsizing accidents and shipwrecks resulting in the death or injury of the migrants on board are tragically common.<sup>43</sup>

Those who manage to make their way to Yemen via boat often find themselves subjected to human trafficking upon disembarking in the country.

As the nine-year-long conflict has led to the collapse of State authority in most of Yemen, very little mechanisms exist to support migrants upon arrival. On the contrary, on Yemen's shores, migrants are met and captured by traffickers, who pay a fee to the smugglers to "buy" them and later exploit them for their own economic return. Significantly, this reveals the extent to which migrant smugglers and human traffickers coordinate with each other and sheds light on the dynamics whereby migrant smuggling can rapidly turn into human trafficking.

In other words, a very thin line seems to separate migrant smuggling and human trafficking across the Horn of Africa and the Arab Gulf, and the shores of south Yemen are one of the physical spaces in which this transition between crimes occurs.



In Yemen human trafficking seems to be mostly run by transnational criminal networks based in the Horn, especially Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti, with branches in Yemen.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, migrants who survived those dramatic experiences reported that Yemeni smuggling and trafficking groups always included Ethiopians, who were responsible for beating and torturing migrants, extort payments, and manage communications (both with the victims of trafficking themselves and with their families back home).<sup>45</sup> This confirms that, in recent years, traffickers have evolved into well-organized and highly efficient inter-regional networks.



Once Yemen's traffickers get their hands on migrants – alone, scared, vulnerable, and fatigued by the journey behind – they load them into trucks and drive them to ramshackle compounds, often in isolated and remote areas or on the outskirts of villages. As state authorities in southern Yemen are absent and corruption is ripe, trucks filled with migrants often make their way through military checkpoints, where a bribe is enough for the trip to proceed undisturbed.

This illustrates that the collapse of the government in Yemen has encouraged illegal migration and human trafficking in multiple ways. On the one hand, and as argued above, it has encouraged migrants to embark on the illegal journey, as they believe (or hope) that no state authority will be able to halt their movement. On the other hand, it has encouraged traffickers to expand their criminal enterprise, as they know that the enforcement of law and order is absent, and that money can easily buy the authorities' collusion.

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The absence of a law criminalizing all forms of trafficking and the government's conflation of human trafficking with migrant smuggling further hinder any efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking offenders. Article 248 of the penal code criminalizes slavery and prescribes sufficiently stringent penalties. However, Article 248 narrowly focuses on transactions and movement, and therefore does not criminalize many forms of labor and sex trafficking as defined under international law.

It has also been noted that due to discrimination there are significant barriers to care for migrants vis-à-vis Yemeni citizens. This, coupled with the government's conflation of trafficking and smuggling crimes, explains the government's tendency to penalize unidentified foreign trafficking victims during arrest and detention campaigns of migrants being smuggled through Yemen.<sup>46</sup>

Also in areas controlled by the armed group Ansar Allah in northern Yemen, traffickers are allowed to pass security checkpoints in exchange for a payment of up to 100 Saudi riyals per person.<sup>47</sup>

In the compounds managed by traffickers, migrants are forced to call home in Somalia or Ethiopia and ask their families for ransom payments.<sup>48</sup> While waiting for the payment to arrive – which can take months, as families might need to ask for the support of neighbors and friends or even sell belongings such as land and cattle – migrants are exploited in multiple ways. Men and women are typically exploited in forced labor, as domestic workers, in construction sites, in khat plantations,<sup>49</sup> and in ports. In many of those instances, traffickers reportedly collect the migrant's wages, subjecting them to debt bondage.<sup>50</sup>

Migrants are also forced into criminality, including transporting weapons and narcotics within Yemen. Women, moreover, are exploited in sex trafficking and in sexual slavery, with wealthy Yemeni men as clients.<sup>51</sup> Physical and sexual violence is also commonly reported among African migrants captured by traffickers in Yemen and is often used to urge families back home to rapidly send their payment, as well as to keep migrants emotionally and physically subdued.<sup>52</sup>

# Human Trafficking After Reaching the Gulf Monarchies

Irregular migrants arriving in Yemen will try to make their way north to the Yemeni-Saudi border, where they attempt to cross into Saudi Arabia. Some of them reach the border after enduring weeks and months of exploitation by Yemen's traffickers, which may come to an end if the family back home sends a ransom payment or if the traffickers do not see any economic value in retaining the person longer and decide to release her. Some others, reach the border after disembarking in Yemen and miraculously escaping traffickers. They may do so by paying Yemeni smugglers who bring them by car to the border or by running away and making their way towards the north on foot.<sup>53</sup>

It is on the Yemeni-Saudi border that a new ordeal begins for most migrants.

Saudi border guards, in fact, have been systematically shooting, killing, and raping East African migrants who try to cross the border that divides Yemen and the Saudi kingdom. According to the available figures, Saudi border guards have killed at least hundreds of East African migrants (mostly Ethiopians) who tried to enter the kingdom between March 2022 and June 2023.<sup>54</sup>

**For those who cross the border undetected by Saudi border guards, prospects are not as positive as it might have seemed from back home. Their illegal status condemns them to a situation of vulnerability in which they are forced to accept any job available, no matter what the conditions.**

For those who cross the border undetected by Saudi border guards, prospects are not as positive as it might have seemed from back home. As noted above, their illegal status condemns them to a situation of vulnerability in which they are forced to accept any job available, no matter what the conditions. Having experienced a dangerous crossing by boat and a dramatic journey through Yemen, other conditions of vulnerability - being unaccompanied, loss of financial means to smugglers and traffickers, psychological and physical exhaustion - may have only heightened.

On the Saudi side of the border, smuggling and human trafficking are controlled by decentralized networks that cooperate closely with their counterparts in Yemen.<sup>55</sup>

Most men find themselves working as laborers in construction sites under conditions of exploitation: they are not given protective gear,<sup>56</sup> they earn a below-minimum wage, engage in hazardous tasks,<sup>57</sup> are denied the protection that a contract affords, and are forced to work long hours, up to 60-70 hours per week.<sup>58</sup>

Most women, for their part, end up working as domestic servants,<sup>59</sup> where they are often underpaid or unpaid and are forced to work on average 115 hours per week. In many cases, employers also subject migrant domestic workers to verbal and physical abuses and threaten of reporting them to the police, which will imprison and deport them. Moreover, it has been reported that when migrants enter the kingdom with the help of smugglers, the latter often make arrangements with Saudi employers to receive the salaries of migrants directly, especially in the domestic work sector.<sup>60</sup>

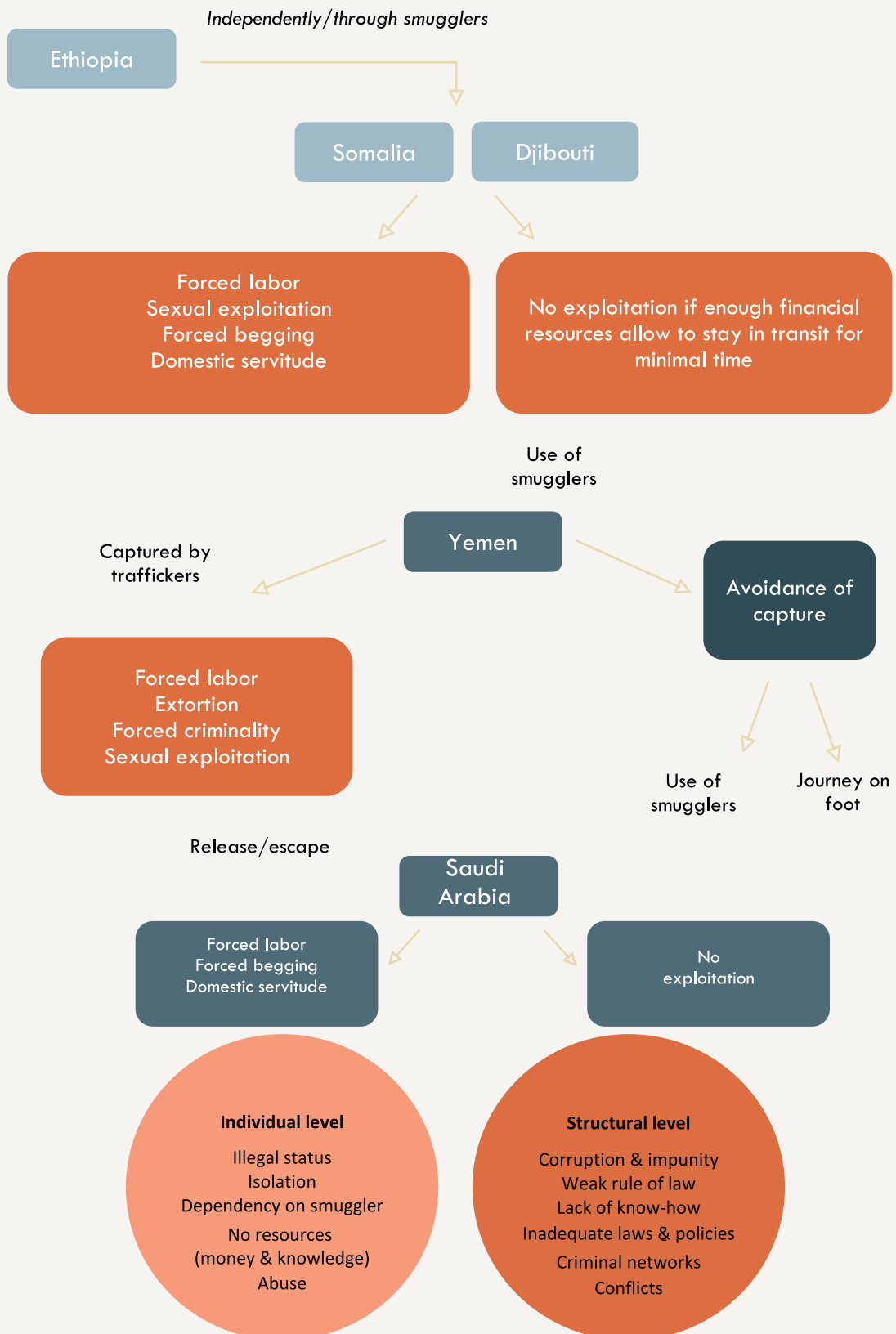
Children crossing the border illegally are exposed to the risk of exploitation in forced begging, into which they are recruited by traffickers who run organized begging rings. This form of exploitation, while observed throughout the year, becomes especially prevalent during the holy month of Ramadan and the Muslim pilgrimages of Hajj and

Umrah, when great numbers of people visit the kingdom from abroad.<sup>61</sup> The risk for children of falling victim of forced beginning is especially acute when they enter Saudi Arabia unaccompanied.

This situation is made possible by a series of systemic factors in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government, for instance, does not consistently screen vulnerable populations (e.g., illegal migrants arrested for violating the country's migration rules) for trafficking indicators, which means that many trafficking crimes affecting illegal migrants in the kingdom go unreported and unaddressed.

Moreover, the Saudi government's failure to adequately prosecute trafficking crimes and seek appropriate penalties for convicted traffickers undercut efforts to hold traffickers accountable, weakens deterrence, and increases potential security and safety concerns. The government also does not consistently screen vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators, which may easily result in the inappropriate penalization of some victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, typically immigration.<sup>63</sup>

**Figure 4. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking along the Eastern Route**



# Conclusion

Countries in the Horn of Africa are greatly affected by migration, posing especially as countries of origin and countries of transit for migrants. Many factors shape the migratory movements out of the region, including low levels of economic development, lack of job opportunities, conflicts and ethnic violence, climate change and the related loss of livelihoods, as well as food and water insecurity.

Movements from the region are largely irregular and rely on well-organized and wide-reaching smuggling networks. As such, they are associated with many risks for the migrants that set on those journeys, including the risk of human trafficking. Vulnerability to human trafficking is further heightened by the limited capacity of regional governments to adopt adequate anti-trafficking laws and policies, enforce existing legislation, train officials, and properly prosecute traffickers and trafficking networks.

It is also noticeable that smugglers and traffickers have increased their cooperation, especially in war-torn Yemen. On top of this, collusion between smugglers, traffickers, and state officials is not uncommon and is a further element that leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitation.

Along the Eastern Route, trafficking mostly takes the form of forced labor, including

hazardous labor, sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and child labor, including hazardous child labor and the worst forms of child labor, such as commercial sexual exploitation, forced begging, and involvement in illicit activities. As noted in other areas of the world,<sup>64</sup> the longer migrants spend on the road, the more likely they are to be trafficked and to undergo multiple trafficking experiences. This is caused by the fact that migrants become more desperate for a way forward, after multiple setbacks, and run out of money as a result.

Considering the reality of human trafficking to which illegal migrants crossing the Gulf of Aden are exposed, there is an urgent need to address the multiple conditions that lie behind their decision to migrate. Countries of origin in the Horn of Africa (predominantly, Ethiopia) will need to offer more and better (i.e., safer and more straightforward) channels for regular migration, inform migrants about the risks of irregular migration and – even more importantly – about legal alternatives available to them, screen returning migrants for indicators of human trafficking and refer survivors of human trafficking to service providers, increase efforts to investigate and prosecute alleged smugglers and traffickers, and expand training for government officials on how to recognize and respond to suspected cases of trafficking.

However, responses should not only come from the countries and regions of origin. Specifically, countries of transit (i.e., Somalia, Djibouti, and Yemen) and countries of destination (i.e., Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies) should strengthen their commitments to fight human trafficking and should comply with their responsibilities towards migrants under international human rights law. They should also fight corruption among police officials, who are often part of the problem rather than the solution, and improve border control with particular attention devoted to migrant protection.

As countries of destination are typically in need of low-skilled migrants to sustain their economic growth and fill those jobs that their nationals are unwilling to do, they should introduce more regular options for migration in order to decrease migrants' dependency on smugglers and their risk of becoming victims of trafficking. In this regard, bilateral

agreements between countries of origin and countries of destination have proved to be a first step in the right direction.

For its part, the international community needs to give greater consideration to the Eastern Route, which has largely been neglected among other global crises and, especially, vis-à-vis the Northern migratory route running from Africa to Europe. Moreover, the international community should exert greater pressure on the Gulf monarchies. As wealthy Gulf countries are investing great efforts to improve their international image and enhance their position in the international system, the necessity of placing the protection of human rights at the heart of relations with those governments can no longer be overlooked. In addition, it is important to inform migrants about the risks of irregular migration across the Gulf of Aden and raise awareness on regular migration channels, where those are available.



# Recommendations

## → For Countries of Origin in the Horn of Africa

- **Offer more and better (i.e., safer and more straightforward) channels for regular migration.** Specifically, lift bans (if any) on overseas migration, establish regulations for recruitment agencies, set minimum age requirements for migration, educate migrant workers before departure on the risks of migration and avenues for receiving help, and cooperate with destination countries to ensure that workers are protected from exploitation when they arrive.

- **Inform migrants about the risks of irregular migration across the Gulf of Aden.** However, because research has shown that knowledge of the risks does not typically deter migrants from wanting to undertake irregular migratory journeys, information about the risks needs to be accompanied by practical information on alternatives to the irregular journey, such as legal and safe migration channels and/or occupational opportunities in the country of origin.

- **Consistently screen returning migrants (regular and irregular) for indicators of human trafficking and refer survivors to service providers,** according to the government's recently established directory, and increase protection services for returning migrants who are victims of trafficking.

- **Expand anti-trafficking training to all levels of government,** including regional officials outside of Addis Ababa, on implementation of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification and the national referral mechanism (NRM) to refer all victims to appropriate care.

- **Continue to increase efforts to investigate and prosecute alleged smugglers and traffickers,** including for both transnational and internal trafficking crimes, and seek adequate penalties for convicted smugglers and traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. Here, cooperation with counterparts in other regional countries seems crucial to identify and dismantle regional criminal networks.

- **Continue to increase training for police, prosecutors, judges, and immigration officials,** to improve understanding of the differences between human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Training should also be extended to Ethiopian embassies abroad, including in Gulf countries, to ensure that they have the capacity and the tools to identify victims of human trafficking (regardless of whether they have regular or irregular status).



## → For Countries of Transit in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula

- **Strengthen commitments to fight human trafficking.** In Yemen and Somalia, for instance, the absence of a law criminalizing all forms of trafficking and the conflation of human trafficking with migrant smuggling continue to hinder the governments' efforts to investigate instances of trafficking and prosecute trafficking offenders. In Djibouti, judges continue to use outdated versions of the penal code that do not incorporate the provisions contained in the 2016 anti-trafficking law. In the countries of transit considered in this report, more should be done to effectively prosecute, protect, and prevent human trafficking.
- **Comply with responsibilities towards migrants under International Human Rights Law (IHRL).** According to IHRL, all migrants, regardless of their status, are entitled to the same international human rights as everyone else. States have an obligation towards migrants to respect their human rights (i.e., refrain from human rights violations), protect their human rights (i.e., prevent human rights violations), and fulfill their human rights (i.e., take positive measures to ensure those rights).

- **Fight corruption among police officers and government officials,** who are often complicit with migrant smugglers and human traffickers and accept to ignore cases of human trafficking in exchange for payment. In Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remain significant concerns that inhibit the government's law enforcement action.
- **Improve border controls,** with particular emphasis on migrant protection, and ensure border guards and police are adequately trained to proactively identify potential victims of trafficking. This is an especially acute need along Yemen's coast, where human traffickers typically wait for migrants to disembark and bring them under their forced control upon payment to, and coordination with, migrant smugglers.
- **Psycho-social treatment for victims is paramount for their healing process,** especially given that a large portion of the sample has been exposed to multiple forms of trafficking along the way. It is recommended that psycho-social support be offered in transit countries more systematically, and more thought be put into how to target these profiles so that they can receive the support they require along the way.

## → For Countries of Destination in the Arabian Peninsula

- **Strengthen commitments to fight human trafficking.** Saudi Arabia, for instance, has demonstrated increasing efforts to combat human trafficking. However, the government does not consistently screen vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators, does not sufficiently prosecute trafficking crimes, and does not seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers. The kingdom should invest more efforts in prosecuting, protecting, and preventing human trafficking within its borders.
- **Comply with responsibilities towards migrants under IHRL.** As noted above, according to IHRL all migrants, regardless of their status, are entitled to the same international human rights as everyone else. States have an obligation towards migrants to respect, protect, and fulfill their human rights.
- Recognizing that migrant workers are necessary to sustain economic growth in that they are ready to fill in some of those jobs that the domestic population is unwilling to perform, **introduce more regular options for migration** in order to decrease migrants'

dependency on smugglers and their risk of becoming victims of trafficking. In this regard, bilateral agreements between countries of origin and countries of destination have proved to be an effective first step in the right direction.



## → For the International Community

- **Offer support to countries in the Horn of Africa** when it comes to climate action, economic development, and conflict resolution. Specifically, support national governments to set realistic and achievable targets as well as to mobilize and manage the human and financial resources needed to achieve those. Examples in this regard include, but are not limited to, providing youth with training in business and entrepreneurship, civic leadership, and public management; planning interventions that aim to increase access to health, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene services; and reducing current barriers to trans-regional and trans-national trade.
- **Give greater consideration to the Eastern Route**, which has largely been neglected among other global crises. While Euro-centric narratives in the media are certainly a reason why less attention is given to the Eastern

Route vis-à-vis the Northern Route bound for the European Union, the continuation of this pattern is unjustifiable and unsustainable.

- **Exert greater pressures on the Gulf monarchies** with respect to the protection of human rights in their territories. As wealthy Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates, and Qatar are investing great efforts and resources to improve their international image and enhance their position in the international system, the protection of human rights should be placed as a condition for relations with those governments.

- **Support research aimed at tracking patterns of vulnerability - and changes thereof – along the Eastern Route.**

Encouraging solid and updated knowledge on human trafficking dynamics along the Eastern Route is of great importance to develop targeted and effective protection solutions.

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