4Mi INFOGRAPHIC – AUGUST 2025

Smuggling routes to and through Yemen: mapping journeys, remigration experiences, and onward movement intentions

This infographic examines the routes undertaken by migrants along the Eastern Route from locations of departure in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti to arrival points along the Yemeni coast. Drawing upon 1,645 surveys with migrants in Lahj and Ta'iz in Yemen between April and June 2025, it highlights transit and landing points, decision-making about the route, interactions with smugglers, remigration experiences, and onward movement intentions to inform humanitarian and development actors working along the route.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION SITES:
Lahj (n=1,067)
Ta'iz (n=578)

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD:
14 April – 23 June 2025

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION:
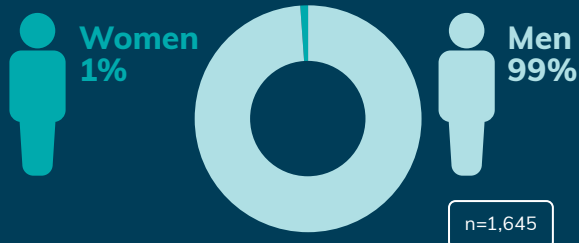Face-to-face interviews

SAMPLE SIZE AND CRITERIA:
1,645 migrants who arrived in Yemen in the last two years, who are 18 years old and older
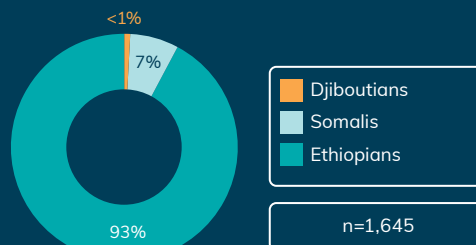
Background

- Despite Yemen's protracted civil war since 2014, it remains a key transit country for large-scale mixed migration along the Eastern Route, with an average of approximately 100,000 people migrating irregularly from the Horn of Africa to and through Yemen every year for more than a decade.[1]

- In addition to being the most travelled, the Eastern Route is widely regarded as among the most dangerous mixed migration routes originating from the African continent, in terms of migrants' exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation, often at the hands of smugglers and traffickers.[2]

- The Eastern Route, particularly the sea crossings to Yemen, is predominantly controlled by migrant smuggling and trafficking networks, distinguishing it from other migration routes where such networks may not exert as much influence and control over irregular migration.[3]

- In 2024, smugglers appeared to shift their coastal arrival points in Yemen from Lahj to Ta'iz and Shabwah to evade the Yemeni coastguard and a joint military campaign targeting smugglers.[4] Owing to challenges in accessing coastal arrival points in Yemen and in consistent standardised data collection in these locations, there has been a gap in in-depth comparative analysis of routes into Yemen.
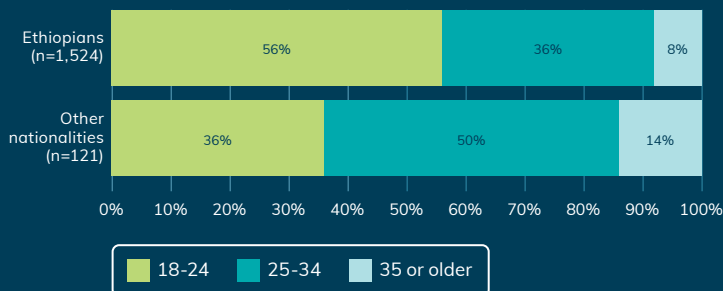
Respondents' profiles

Gender

Women 1%

Men 99%

n=1,645

Nationality

<1%

7%

93%

- Djiboutians
- Somalis
- Ethiopians

n=1,645

Age

	18-24	25-34	35 or older
Ethiopians (n=1,524)	56%	36%	8%
Other nationalities (n=121)	36%	50%	14%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Regions of origin of Ethiopian respondents

ERITREA
SUDAN
YEMEN
Tigray 1%
3% Amhara
Afar
DJIBOUTI
<1% Benishangul-Gumuz
18% Dire Dawa
ETHIOPIA
Addis Ababa 1%
11% Harari
SOMALIA
Gambella
Central Ethiopia
South West
63% Oromiya
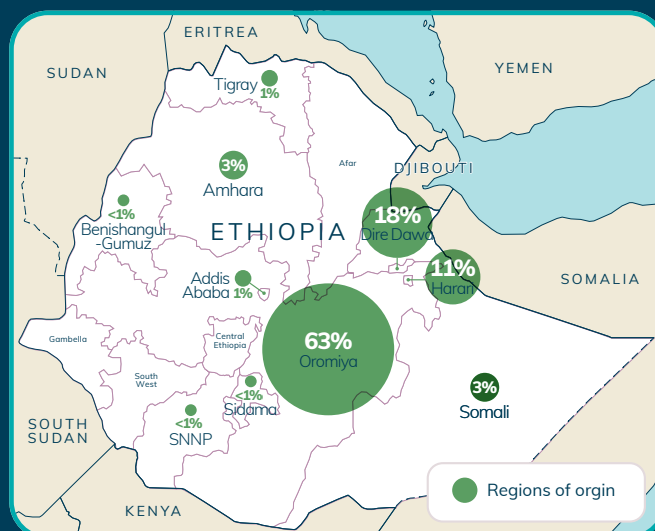<1% Sidama
SOUTH SUDAN
<1% SNNP
3% Somali
KENYA

● Regions of orgin

Note: The 4Mi sample is purposive. Data presented in this snapshot cannot be considered as representative of the full population.

Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC.

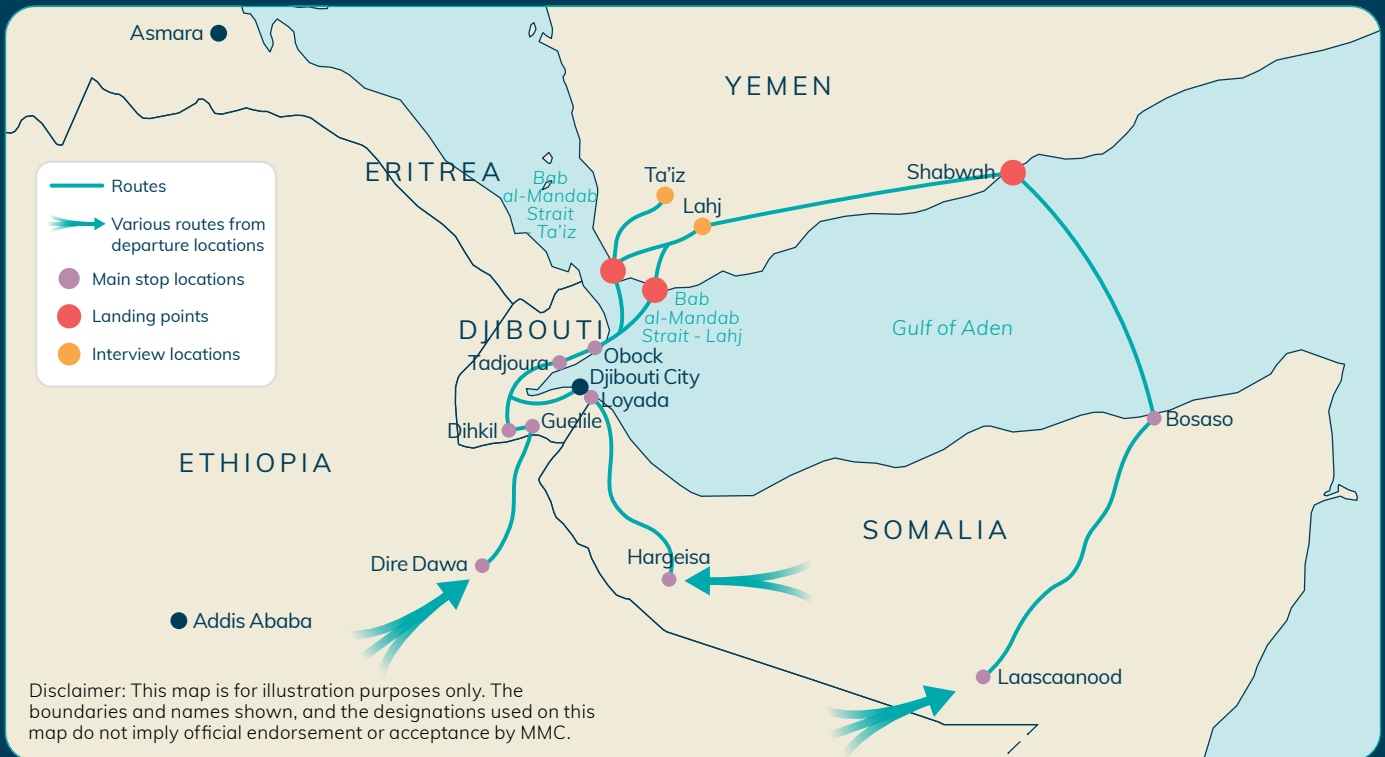1 MMC (2025). _Necessity rather than trust: Smuggling dynamics on the Eastern Route through Yemen_.
2. Ravenstone Consulting (2023). _Captive commodities: "This route is like a fire"_.
3. MMC (2025). _Necessity rather than trust: Smuggling dynamics on the Eastern Route through Yemen_.
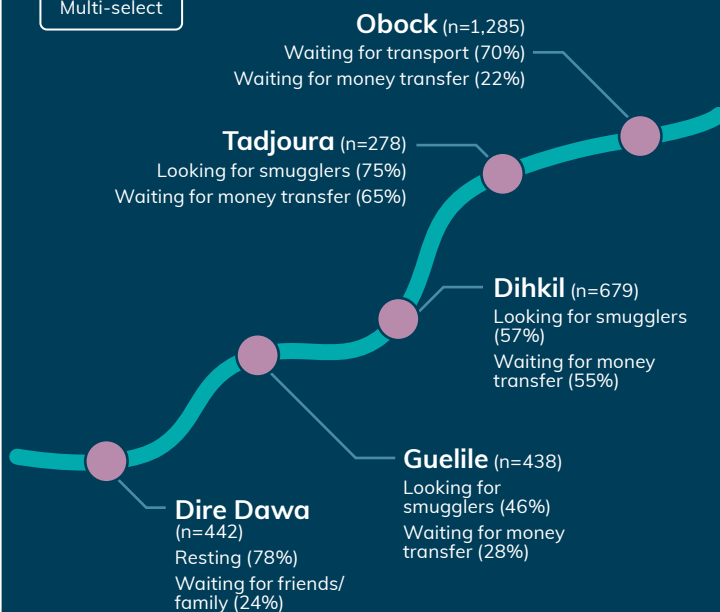4. IOM (2024). _Migration Along the Eastern Corridor (May 2024)_.

Mapping routes across the Gulf of Aden
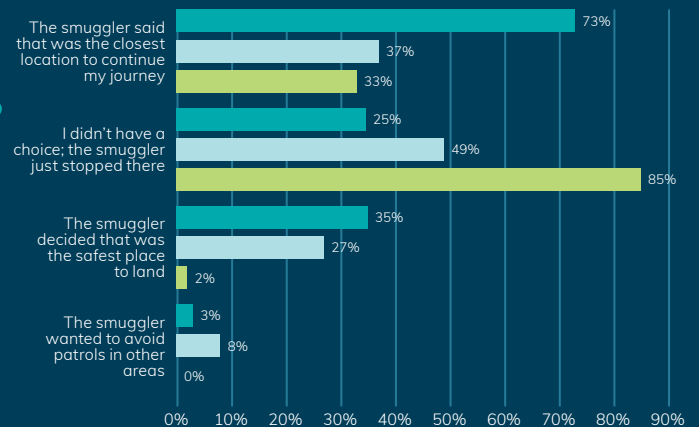
Mapping routes across the Gulf of Aden

Legend:
- Routes
- Various routes from departure locations
- Main stop locations
- Landing points
- Interview locations

Map labels: Asmara, YEMEN, ERITREA, Bab al-Mandab Strait Ta'iz, Ta'iz, Lahj, Shabwah, DJIBOUTI, Tadjoura, Obock, Djibouti City, Loyada, Bab al-Mandab Strait - Lahj, Gulf of Aden, Bosaso, Dihkil, Guelile, ETHIOPIA, SOMALIA, Dire Dawa, Hargeisa, Addis Ababa, Laascaanood

Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC.

Reasons for stopping: Top five locations

Multi-select

Obock (n=1,285)
Waiting for transport (70%)
Waiting for money transfer (22%)

Tadjoura (n=278)
Looking for smugglers (75%)
Waiting for money transfer (65%)

Dihkil (n=679)
Looking for smugglers (57%)
Waiting for money transfer (55%)

Guelile (n=438)
Looking for smugglers (46%)
Waiting for money transfer (28%)

Dire Dawa (n=442)
Resting (78%)
Waiting for friends/family (24%)

Why did you land in that specific location on the Yemeni coast?*

The smuggler said that was the closest location to continue my journey: 73%, 37%, 33%

I didn't have a choice; the smuggler just stopped there: 25%, 49%, 85%

The smuggler decided that was the safest place to land: 35%, 27%, 2%

The smuggler wanted to avoid patrols in other areas: 3%, 8%, 0%

Legend:
- Bab al-Mandab Strait - Ta'iz (n=917)
- Bab al-Mandab Strait - Lahj (n=639)
- The coast of Shabwah (n=86)

Multi-select

*Just **three** respondents reported reasons not related to their smugglers: the location was determined by someone they knew being there (1) or being forced ashore due to problems with their boat (2).

Key findings

- **Djibouti serves as the primary coastal departure point for routes to Ta'iz and Lahj:** 94% of the respondents used routes through Djibouti, mainly crossing at Obock. The main landing sites were the coasts of Lahj (56%) and Ta'iz (39%), while 5% of respondents had landed at the coast of Shabwah, though this likely stems from the data collection taking place in Lahj and Ta'iz and a lack of direct access to Shabwah.

- **Journeys were characterised by multiple stops and smuggler reliance.** Nearly all (99%) respondents reported making stops on their way to coastal departure points along the Gulf of Aden. Early stops, such as in Dire Dawa, were primarily for rest. As migrants progressed, they stopped in places like Guelile, Dikhil, and Djibouti City to look for smugglers and make money transfers to secure funds for the next stage of their journeys.

- **The choice of where to arrive in Yemen was overwhelmingly dictated by smugglers (99%).** Given the fact that most (79%) respondents reported being misled by their smugglers (see page 3), this highlights the potential for exploitation during the crossing and upon arrival, as migrants are compelled to surrender their agency to smugglers.
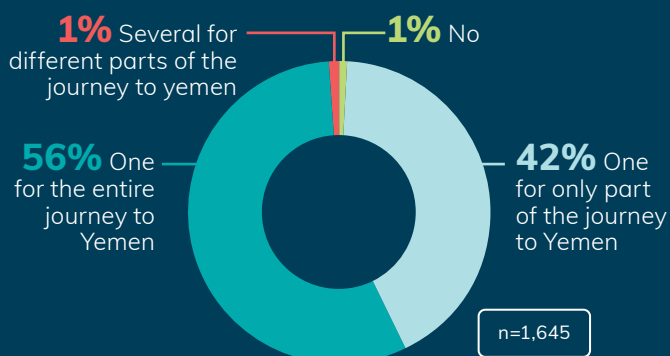
Perceptions of smugglers on the route to Yemen

99% of the respondents had used a smuggler.

All the respondents using smugglers relied on them to transit across borders.
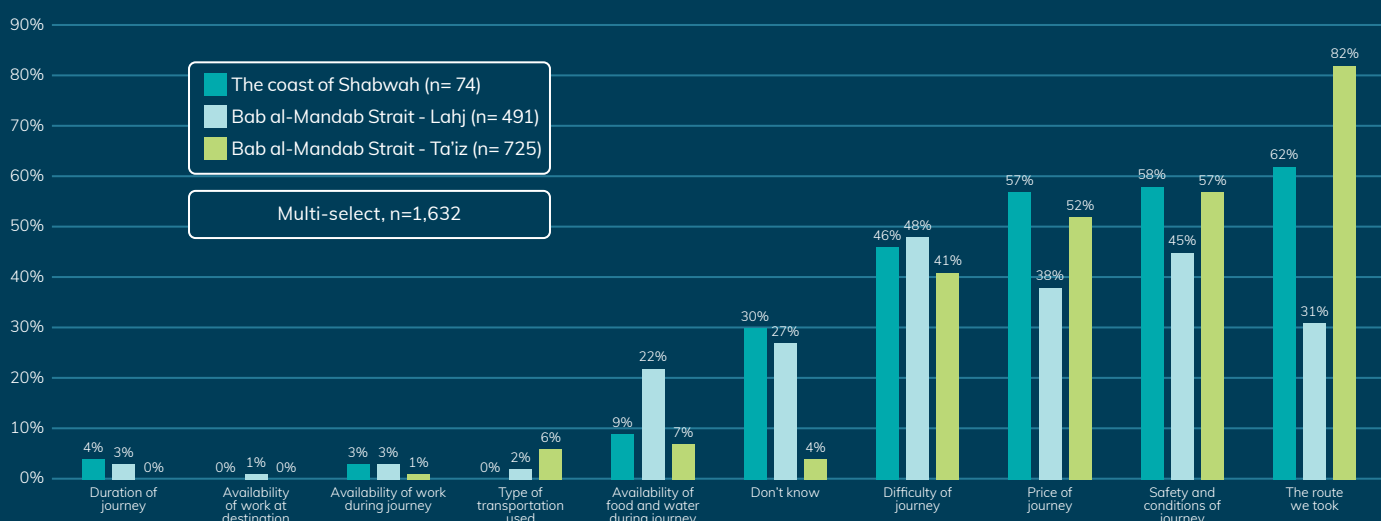
Did you use a smuggler?

1% Several for different parts of the journey to yemen

1% No

56% One for the entire journey to Yemen

42% One for only part of the journey to Yemen

n=1,645

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The smuggler/s I used helped me in achieving my goal of moving to another country"

| 4% | 7% | 25% | 51% | 13% |

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

n=1,632
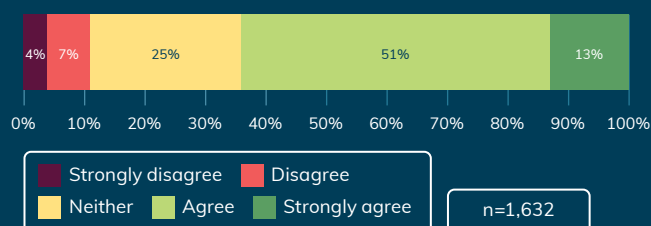
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler/s"

| 18% | 61% | 18% | 3% |

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither
- Disagree

n=1,632
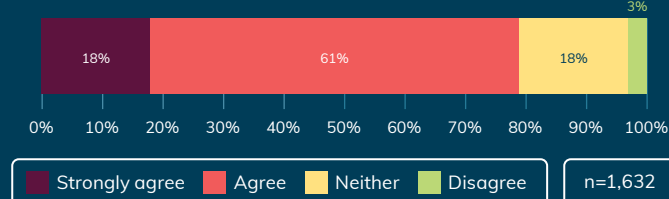
In what ways did you feel your smuggler or smugglers intentionally misled you about the journey?

Legend:
- The coast of Shabwah (n= 74)
- Bab al-Mandab Strait – Lahj (n= 491)
- Bab al-Mandab Strait – Ta'iz (n= 725)

Multi-select, n=1,632

Category	The coast of Shabwah	Bab al-Mandab Strait – Lahj	Bab al-Mandab Strait – Ta'iz
Duration of journey	4%	3%	0%
Availability of work at destination	0%	1%	0%
Availability of work during journey	3%	3%	1%
Type of transportation used	0%	2%	6%
Availability of food and water during journey	9%	22%	7%
Don't know	30%	27%	4%
Difficulty of journey	46%	48%	41%
Price of journey	57%	38%	52%
Safety and conditions of journey	58%	45%	57%
The route we took	62%	31%	82%

Key findings

- **The use of smugglers was nearly universal** among respondents and underscores the lack of legal pathways for migrants seeking work and livelihood opportunities abroad and the difficult overland and sea journeys, which require the knowhow and resources of smugglers to traverse and avoid detection from authorities.

- **Nearly all respondents used just one smuggler** to travel from locations of departure to locations of arrival along Yemen's coast, aligning with past MMC research on the Eastern Route.[5] This stands in contrast to other routes where multiple smugglers are commonly used, particularly as migrants transit multiple countries. This may stem from the relative ease of transiting countries in the Horn of Africa independently, up to the sea crossing, for which smugglers are necessary. It is likely that to move onward through Yemen from locations of interview to their final intended destinations, respondents will engage additional smugglers.

- **A complex relationship between migrants and smugglers exists along the Eastern Route.** Smugglers were described as criminals by 54% of the respondents, while 43% described them as businesspersons or service providers. In addition, while 64% agreed that smugglers helped them to achieve their goal of migrating, 79% also felt they were intentionally misled. This echoes findings from a previous MMC report, which showed smugglers as both perpetrators and service providers.[6]

- **Respondents reported widespread deception by smugglers** and most cited multiple ways in which they were misled. Findings did not vary considerably by route, with the exception of respondents arriving in Ta'iz more often reporting deception about the specific route taken, while those arriving in Lahj slightly less often cited instances of being misled overall. Given that respondents who arrived in Ta'iz mainly reported doing so because their smuggler claimed it was the shortest route (see page 2), this may indicate that respondents had expected to arrive in Lahj, which is a shorter sea crossing from Obock (Djibouti), the most common departure point.

5. MMC (2025). Ibid.

6. MMC (2025). Ibid.

Remigration journeys along the Eastern Route

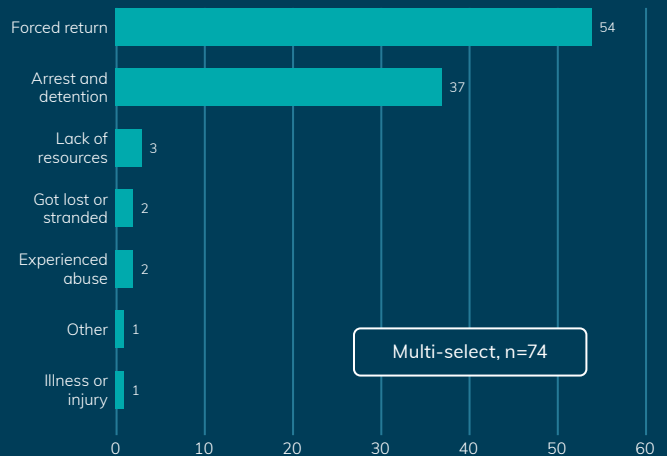**13%** of respondents had migrated using a similar route before*

85% of the 176 respondents who were remigrating had reached their intended destination before

82% of of the 176 respondents who were remigrating had used a smuggler for their previous journeys

*Questions on remigration were added after the start of data collection, and were available to 1,322 respondents.

Respondents who had previously migrated but *had not* reached their destination: Why did you not reach your intended destination?

Reason	Value
Forced return	54
Arrest and detention	37
Lack of resources	3
Got lost or stranded	2
Experienced abuse	2
Other	1
Illness or injury	1

Multi-select, n=74

(x-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60)

Respondents who had previously migrated and *had* reached their destination:

How did your most recent return happen?

5% I returned voluntarily on my own, taking the same route as I came

3% I returned voluntarily through an IOM assisted programme

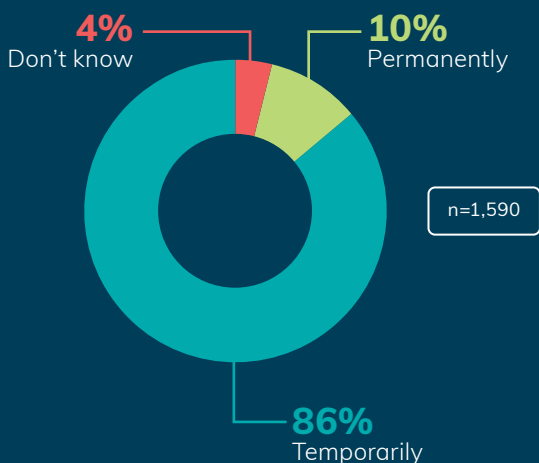**92%** I was forced to return by the host government
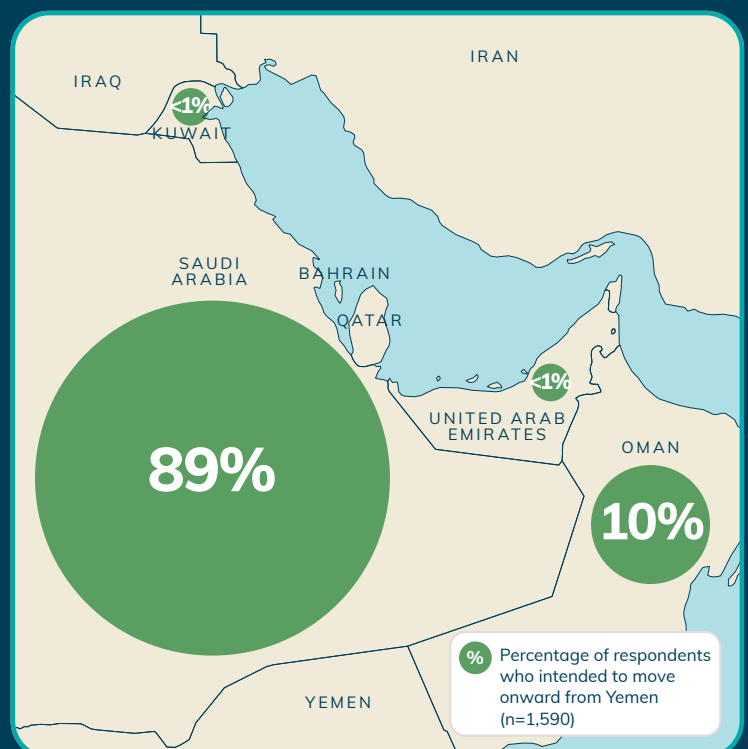
n=150
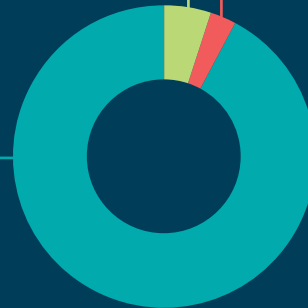
Onward movement intentions and aspirations

97% of respondents had not reached the end of their journey

Do you intend to stay at your destination permanently or temporarily?

4% Don't know

10% Permanently

86% Temporarily

n=1,590

What is your intended destination?

IRAQ · KUWAIT **<1%**

IRAN

SAUDI ARABIA **89%**

BAHRAIN

QATAR

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES **<1%**

OMAN **10%**

YEMEN

% Percentage of respondents who intended to move onward from Yemen (n=1,590)

Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC.

Key findings

- **13% of respondents had previously migrated along the Eastern Route**, with most using smugglers and reaching their intended destinations.
- **Forced returns is a key challenge for irregular migrants on the Eastern Route.** Among those who did not reach their intended destinations (n=74), being forced to return (54) and being arrested and detained (37) were the main reasons.
- **97% of respondents had not reached the end of their journey at the time of interview**, with the majority aiming to reach countries farther afield in the Arabian Peninsula, specifically Saudi Arabia (89%), Oman (10%), the United Arab Emirates (<1%), and Kuwait (<1%). Respondents will likely continue to rely on smugglers, given the harsh terrain and heavily controlled borders of these intended destinations.
- **Respondents' migration strategies were largely temporary (86%)**, with just 10% expressing a desire to stay permanently, suggesting that respondents may once again contract smugglers for the return journey or else turn to their embassies or IOM to facilitate their return. Owing to the irregular status of all respondents, they are highly vulnerable to detention and deportation in destination countries, or to trafficking and exploitation, which would leave them trapped and unable to return.

Mixed Migration Centre

DRC DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK

4Mi data collection

4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migration and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

mixedmigration.org

@mixedmigration

@Mixed_Migration

mixedmigration-centre

Subscribe to our newsletter

info@mixedmigration.org