



Where to next?

Eritrean displacement amidst shrinking spaces of refuge

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Acronyms

COR	Commissioner for Refugees (Sudan)
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
GoE	Government of Egypt
G5	Group of 5 Resettlement Scheme (Canada)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRRI	International Refugee Rights Initiative
KII	Key informant interviewee
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister (Uganda)
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
RRS	Refugee and Returnee Service (Ethiopia)
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
USCRI	United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

Summary and key findings

This summary refers to key trends described across two reports on the situation of Eritreans on the move. This report – ‘Where to next?’ – details the country-level changes in policy that have affected Eritrean mobility dynamics over the past decade, while the second report – ‘Shifting protection experiences of displaced Eritreans’ - analyses the key trends in how Eritreans have experienced and responded to these changes and provides recommendations based on findings from across the two. Together these reports examine how political, security, and policy changes across Africa, the Middle East, and Europe have systematically reduced Eritreans’ access to safe refuge, despite their continued displacement in significant numbers, while also undermining existing support systems.

They respond to the notion that **though Eritreans were among the largest groups reaching Europe via the Central Mediterranean route in the mid-2010s, by 2024, Eritrean arrivals had dropped by almost 90%**.

This was the case even though departures from Eritrea had not massively decreased.¹ Through interviews with displaced Eritreans and key informants (KIs), **this research seeks to understand how the dynamics of Eritrean mobility have adjusted to externalisation policies, shrinking spaces of refuge, and compounding regional crises**. It analyses the shifting conditions surrounding protection and access to livelihoods of Eritreans in different countries, the heightened risks of (im)mobility that result from this and suggests ways in which this population might be better supported. The key findings include:

- Shrinking spaces of refuge for displaced Eritreans have heightened this population’s vulnerability, for example, by **impeding their access to identity and travel documentation and to registration procedures** and through **destroying their livelihoods and local support networks**.
- **Shifting alliances in the region have affected Eritrean refugees**, particularly by disrupting their abilities to access asylum and safety in neighbouring countries and by heightening the risk of deportations back to Eritrea.
- **Protection needs in refugee camps are extremely high** throughout the Horn of Africa. Camps are increasingly sites of violence where international and national assistance are insufficient. Camps across Ethiopia and Sudan are characterised by limited access to health care, education, food, water and sanitation, and legal assistance. **The situation is likely to worsen given the cuts to the aid sector**.
- **Cities are increasingly the only sites where Eritreans may be able to access basic levels of safety, services, and legal support**, despite the risks of increasing deportations and arbitrary detentions. Project respondents attest to the growing importance of key cities across Africa (primarily Cairo, Kampala, and Addis Ababa and less so Juba, Port Sudan, and Nairobi) in the journeys of displaced Eritreans, as reflected in the growing numbers moving to these metropolitan areas.
- Outbreaks or escalations of violence across the Horn of Africa and North Africa, combined with stricter border policies, have **disrupted established migration routes and smuggling networks**,² leading to more predatory business models and undermining ‘service delivery’ in some areas.

1 With no reliable estimates of how many Eritreans are leaving the country, evidence suggests that fewer are departing from Eritrea due to insecurity in Ethiopia and Sudan. In November 2024, UNHCR noted that 20,000 Eritreans had entered Ethiopia so far that year (UNHCR (2024) UNHCR calls for the need for protection of Eritrean asylum seekers in Ethiopia) and that 6,704 Eritreans had entered Sudan (UNHCR (2024) [Sudan: Eritrean Refugees Overview in Sudan \(as of 30 June 2024\)](#)). That would be about 50% of the estimated 4,000-5,000 Eritreans said to be leaving their country on a monthly basis around 2012-16. Living conditions in Eritrea appear to have become harder due to the long-term economic effects of the strict COVID-19 lockdown in Eritrea and the involvement of the Eritrean government in surrounding conflicts.

2 In this report, we use the terms smuggling and trafficking in line with the definitions established by the Palermo Protocol of 2000.

- Despite the ongoing role of transnational networks to support Eritreans, the accumulated crises that Eritreans have faced across North, East and the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, and the lack of improvements in living conditions in Eritrea, are **straining systems of community support**.
- **Resettlement opportunities, particularly to Canada, have been a key factor behind Eritreans ‘staying put’** in certain spaces, and not embarking on more dangerous and expensive irregular, onward movements. Canada’s decision to suspend new registrations for private resettlement for at least 2024-2025 may affect Eritreans’ decision-making about what routes to take, as well as their livelihoods and living conditions in the places where they are currently waiting for this process.
- **Several factors led to the sharp drop in Eritreans crossing Mediterranean Sea** to Europe, including: a reduction in the number of Eritreans leaving their country; the extreme risks that Eritreans – perhaps even more than other nationalities - face in Libya, including due to inhumane detention practices, kidnapping and trafficking; a disruption of the smuggling networks – primarily those in Libya - that used to facilitate Eritrean onward movement; the high risks along previously used migration routes through Ethiopia and Sudan due to conflict; the opportunities offered by emerging places of refuge in the region, despite their significant challenges too; and the hope to access resettlement to a third country from those places, instead of embarking on costly and dangerous journeys. **This drop, however, is not likely to be permanent, as the root causes of Eritrean migration remain unchanged** and there are signs that the situation for Eritreans in key cities in the East, Horn, and North Africa is deteriorating while numbers are increasing and the opportunities for safe, legal onward migration remain very limited.

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A man walks at the Three-Country Point between Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Hamdayete, Sudan, 22 June 2021.



Introduction

With its position on the Red Sea, **Eritrea has been shaped by a rich history of migration between different regions and peoples.** Since the 1960s, it has experienced mass exodus due to war, violence, and a lack of freedom. The country's 30-year independence war with Ethiopia ended with the establishment of Eritrea as an independent state in 1991. After a few years of peace, Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a major war triggered by a border dispute between 1998 and 2000. Since then, a lack of political, civil, and socio-economic liberties and the militarisation of Eritrean society have resulted in massive numbers leaving the country.

Neighbouring Ethiopia and Sudan have been the major first countries of refuge for Eritreans during this period. Europe, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have at different points also received significant numbers of Eritreans escaping their country. In the first ten months of 2014, for example, approximately 40,000 Eritreans crossed the Mediterranean into Europe, making them the most represented nationality amongst all sea-crossings.³

In recent years, civil wars and violence have made large parts of Ethiopia and Sudan unliveable, while restrictive immigration regimes in Saudi Arabia and Israel, and externalisation policies in Europe, have made these destinations increasingly untenable. The number of Eritreans crossing the Central Mediterranean Route into Europe in 2024, for example, had dropped to 1,800.⁴ For those who had already settled in Sudan and Ethiopia, the destruction or closure of camps, increasing deportations, and changes to visa processes have necessitated that they move on, or face being forcibly removed. Unlike other populations facing the same regional dynamics, **many Eritreans have been unwilling or unable to return 'home' for fear of punishment or persecution. Their plight has been accurately summarised as 'unwanted and unprotected.'**⁵

Some trends of Eritrean mobility and displacement have confounded analysts. These include the fall in Eritrean departures from North Africa to Europe compared to a decade ago and compared to nationals of other countries,⁶ and the total absence of Eritreans on the so-called Eastern route from the Horn of Africa to Yemen, a route that has seen an average of 100,000 crossings annually, primarily of Ethiopians, for more than a decade.

This leads to the central questions that the two reports in this series ask: **Where are Eritreans going now? What are their experiences, and potential next steps, in these locations? And how might governments and international organisations better support displaced Eritrean given these new patterns of mobility?**

This first report highlights the drivers of secondary displacement amongst Eritreans who had made long-term investments in livelihoods, properties, and resettlement processes in initial places of settlement, and who, given this degree of stability established in exile, may have a different propensity for embarking on high-risk journeys than Eritreans who have recently fled their country of origin.⁷ It details how, **while many Eritreans have lived in situations of protracted displacement, a host of new challenges over recent years has significantly worsened their situation.** Given the well-documented, transnational character of Eritrean resilience, vulnerability, and mobility,⁸ these dynamics necessitate a renewed and reconsidered humanitarian, practical, and administrative focus on supporting this population, which must be informed by research into these shifting, and once again unsettled, journeys.

3 Frontex (2016) [Risk Analysis for 2016](#).

4 Ministero dell'Interno (2024) [Cruscotto Statistico Giornaliero Sbarchi. 2024](#).

5 U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) (2023) [Unwanted and unprotected: Displaced Eritreans caught by conflict, crisis, and cruelty](#).

6 Infomigrants (2024) [Athens pushing for EU help for a deal with Cairo to ease flows](#).

7 Jaeger, D. A., et al. (2010) [Direct evidence on risk attitudes and migration](#); Kiriscioglu, E., et al. (2024) [Migration aspirations in relation to border closures, employment opportunities and risk-taking attitudes: lessons from an online survey experiment](#).

8 Adujna, F., et al. (2022) [A matter of time and contacts: trans-local networks and long-term mobility of Eritrean refugees](#).

Methodology

Research conducted for this study consisted of:

- A desk review of recent literature on Eritrean displacement and mobility.
- Interviews with 35 Eritreans who left Eritrea, including seven who left in the wake of its 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia,⁹ and then experienced extended (often would-be permanent) stays in Sudan and Ethiopia¹⁰ before re-migrating internally in these countries or to third countries (see Annex for details).
- Interviews with 20 key informants—researchers; employees of humanitarian, human rights, United Nations (UN), and non-governmental organisations; and representatives of Eritrean community groups based in the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa, and Europe.
- Analysis of historical data from 4Mi survey responses.¹¹

All interviews were conducted online between July and November 2024. Interviews focused on socio-economic and demographic data, reasons for leaving Eritrea, pre-departure decision-making, experiences and means of support on route, locations of initial destinations, and the role played by transnational connections in mobility and daily survival. Eritrean interviewees were primarily identified through the researchers' personal networks and a conventional 'snowballing' approach. Some interviewees were asked to connect researchers with compatriots with whom they had lived in previous locations and who had re-migrated using different routes for part or all of their journey. This strategy facilitated the exploration of the variation in mobility experiences and the complexity and contingency within various trajectories.

The research focused on Eritreans who had reached a relatively safe city such as Cairo, Addis Ababa, and Kampala, as common destinations for former residents of camps across the region where insecurity and lack of assistance frequently prompt renewed displacement.¹² While no current residents of camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, or people in areas affected by armed conflict, were among the interviewees, respondents provided details about the living conditions and challenges (e.g., violence, kidnapping, and robbery) in such locations.

Limitations

While the researchers ensured that interviewees reflected a cross-section of displaced Eritreans in terms of gender, education level, age, marital/family status, and ethnicity, the sample cannot be considered representative. The experiences of the elderly and certain ethnic groups, such as the Afar,¹³ could not be fully explored. Additionally, the researchers' need to conduct interviews remotely, owing to time and resource constraints, restricted the pool of respondents to those living in cities with access to internet and who were likely to be better off than their compatriots in refugee camps in Sudan or Ethiopia or in conflict zones.

Ethics

All participants were provided with oral and/or written information about the project before we sought their consent to be interviewed. Researchers explained to participants the purpose of the project, how the interviews would be stored and used, how their anonymity would be protected, and how they could withdraw from the project or express concerns at any time.¹⁴ Eritrean interviewees were given reimbursements for their time and offered details about support organisations and services in their locations.

9 In 2018, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki signed a peace agreement that included an end to hostilities and a commitment to restoring trade and diplomatic ties (Otieno, D. (2019) [After making peace, Ethiopia and Eritrea now focus on development.](#))

10 Interviewees had spent 1- 42 years in locations of primary displacement and did not regard these as places of transit. In many cases they had put down roots by purchasing property, enrolling in education, establishing a business, bringing family members to join them, and acquiring a legal status. Some had pursued pathways to refugee resettlement.

11 [4Mi](#) is MMC's flagship quantitative data collection project. 4Mi surveys cover why people leave places of origin, the alternatives they explored, destination options, influences on decision-making, and other topics.

12 According to KIIs with UNHCR in North and East Africa, 80,000 Eritreans were living in Addis Ababa at the time, while 11,000 arrived in Kampala in the first six months of 2024. Another 8,000 had registered in Cairo in the first ten months of 2024. These figures are likely underestimates given the challenges Eritreans have faced in registration.

13 A 2023 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) highlighted the worsening situation of 57,000 Eritrean Afar refugees in Asayita camp in the Afar Region of Ethiopia who were being denied access to asylum (UNGA (2023) [Situation of human rights in Eritrea: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker.](#))

14 The project was granted ethical approval from the School of Social and Political Sciences' Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

Emigration from Eritrea – a brief history

From liberation struggle to border war

After Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea in 1962, following a decade of contested federation, significant numbers of Eritreans began to leave the country. Departures accelerated towards the end of the decade as secessionist insurgents fought Ethiopian forces. Many fled to newly established camps in eastern Sudan that still exist today.¹⁵ The 1974 overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie and the installation of a military junta in Ethiopia prompted a steady number of Eritrean refugees to flee. **Those with the means to do so travelled to Europe, North America, and the Gulf states to work, mobilise, and fundraise, becoming the early members of a diaspora that continues to shape migration pathways.** Armed conflict between rival Eritrean liberation movements was another emigration driver, and when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front prevailed over the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the 1980s, ELF forces retreated into Sudan. Some have remained there ever since, while others travelled north and to the Middle East. When Eritrea finally regained independence from Ethiopia in the early 1990s, many of these ELF fighters chose not to return to an Eritrea led by the EPLF's political incarnation, which is still in power to this day. This group of veterans is now one of the many factions that make up an Eritrean diaspora that is deeply divided along political, generational, and ethnic lines.¹⁶

During the early years of independence, hundreds of thousands of displaced Eritreans did return under the new government's encouragement. Their enthusiasm to contribute to the country's nation-building project was nonetheless tempered by the harsh conditions they faced there as a result of decades of conflict. Together with the early manifestations of the government's repressive tendencies, this prompted new departures.¹⁷ **The outbreak of a full-scale war with Ethiopia in 1998–triggered by a border dispute–again led to a large-scale exodus,** as well as the expulsion from Ethiopia of people deemed to be of Eritrean origin.¹⁸ Amid the Ethiopian army's final major offensive in May 2000, 90,000 Eritreans entered Sudan,¹⁹ joining 160,000 who had fled there during Eritrea's thirty-year war of independence.²⁰

Flight from conscription

Although a peace agreement signed in 2000 ended hostilities, Ethiopia's refusal to implement all its terms left the neighbouring countries in an antagonistic era marked by a high level of civilian militarisation and growing repression in Eritrea.²¹ A national service programme that previously entailed six months of military training followed by a year of civil service became an open-ended obligation for all citizens over the age of 18 to serve the state as soldiers, teachers, and labourers of different kinds. **The indefinite nature of national service, coupled with its harsh living conditions, widespread abuse and paltry pay, has been one of the main drivers of youth emigration from Eritrea.**²² At its height in 2012/13, this exodus, which included many unaccompanied minors determined to avoid being forced into the army at the end of secondary school, reached an estimated rate of 4,000 departures every month.²³

When Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signed an unexpected joint declaration of "peace and friendship" in July 2018,²⁴ border restrictions were lifted and large numbers of Eritreans crossed into Ethiopia unimpeded. Many chose not to register their arrival, preferring to stay amongst the local population or with other Eritrean refugees in the northern Tigray region, or to move onwards to Addis Ababa. But amid the improved bilateral relations, many of those who did want to register for asylum were confronted by a major shift in January 2020 when Ethiopia ended its previous longstanding previous policy of granting prima facie refugee status to Eritrean nationals. **This effectively prevented most Eritreans from obtaining refugee status in Ethiopia and thus left many with no access to essential services and protection.**

15 Kibreab, G. (2000) [Resistance, displacement, and identity: The case of Eritrean refugees in Sudan](#); Smock, D.R. (1982) [Eritrean refugees in the Sudan](#)

16 Hepner, T.R. (2003) [Religion, nationalism, and transnational civil society in the Eritrean diaspora](#); Hepner, T.R. (2015) [Generation nationalism and generation asylum: Eritrean migrants, the global diaspora, and the transnational nation-state](#).

17 Ambroso, G, Crisp, J. & Albert, N. (2011) [No Turning back: A review of UNHCR's response to the protracted refugee situation in Eastern Sudan](#).

18 HRW (2003) [The Horn of Africa War: Mass Expulsions and the Nationality Issue](#).

19 UNGA (2000) [Report of the Secretary General: Assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa](#).

20 UNHCR (2001) [UNHCR Country Operations Plan 2002 – Eritrea](#).

21 Woldemariam, M. (2018) ["No war, no peace" in a region in flux: crisis, escalation, and possibility in the Eritrea-Ethiopia rivalry](#).

22 Hirt, N., & Mohammad, A. (2013) ["Dreams don't come true in Eritrea": Anomie and family disintegration due to the structural militarisation of society](#).

23 UNGA (2013) [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth](#).

24 The text of the agreement can be found in English at [Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia](#).

COVID and fresh conflict

COVID-19 lockdowns in the spring of 2020 saw refugee registration suspended altogether in Ethiopia and made everyday life even more challenging in Eritrea.²⁵ During this period, access to remittances, which make up the bulk of most household income,²⁶ and opportunities to supplement meagre military pay with private-sector work, were greatly curtailed.

The situation for Eritreans then worsened further with the outbreak of civil war between the Tigrayan authorities and the Ethiopian National Defence Forces in November 2020. Eritrea's direct military involvement in the conflict had significant domestic repercussions, including a dramatic expansion of forced conscription, with widespread roundups targeting not only young men but also older civilians and women for military and support roles. Inflation and shortages of essential goods made daily life increasingly difficult. As food, fuel, and electricity became scarcer, the cost of living soared, worsening conditions for an already struggling population. All these factors contributed to continued emigration from Eritrea even during the war in Tigray: in 2024, more than 20,000 Eritreans entered Ethiopia and over 6,700 entered Sudan.²⁷

As of the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea seem to be deteriorating again. **In early 2025, Eritrea reportedly issued a nation-wide military mobilisation directive and imposed restrictions on movement, which is raising fears of renewed conflict with Ethiopia.**²⁸

Photo credit:
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Looking north across Asmara, Eritrea, from
the tower of the Catholic Cathedral.



25 Vilmer, J-B. J. (2021) [Peace without freedom in Eritrea: causes and consequences of the Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement](#).

26 Belloni, M., Fusari, V., & Massa, A. (2022) [Much More Than Just Money: Investigating Remittances Across Time and Place in the Eritrean Context](#).

27 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR calls for the need for protection of Eritrean asylum seekers in Ethiopia, Press Release; UNHCR (2024) [UNHCR Sudan - Eritrean Refugees in Sudan Dashboard as of 30 September 2024](#).

28 International Crisis Group. (2025). [Crisis Watch](#).

Shrinking spaces of refuge

Countries are listed in chronological order of key policy developments (starting in 2010), a sequence which is mirrored by the experiences of several of this study's interviewees. Some interviewees, for example, had initially moved to Israel hoping to find refuge there before being forced to move onwards to Rwanda and Uganda. Eritreans who had lived in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) for decades were, after 2017, pushed to Ethiopia and Sudan in response to policy shifts in KSA, only to find themselves unable to remain there following events beginning in 2020. Individuals fleeing from Tigray to Sudan have since the civil war there began in April 2023 felt compelled to cross more borders in search of security and documentation. The series of crises and shifts presented below have hence translated into an **accumulated precarity for displaced Eritreans** that has seen their networks and coping strategies increasingly exhausted.

Israel

Eritreans largely began arriving in Israel from 2008 onwards. After first crossing the Egyptian Sinai through a route infamous for high levels of violent kidnappings and trafficking that primarily targeted Eritreans,²⁹ Eritreans would be processed by the Israeli Prison Service, before being bussed onwards, often to southern Tel Aviv, without clear rights or entitlements.³⁰ From 2008, UNHCR recommended that the Israeli government offer this population temporary group protection in the form of a 'Conditional Release Visa' that allowed them to remain in Israel until it became possible to deport them to either Egypt or Eritrea.³¹ While Eritreans had no formal access to the asylum system, UNHCR considered them to be under its mandate.

For its part, **the Israeli government has long regarded asylum seekers and irregular migrants, especially those from Eritrea and Egypt, 'non-removable 'infiltrators'**.³² As such they have no right to work or access to welfare services or non-emergency medical treatment, although their presence and employment are tolerated, not least to avoid this population becoming destitute.³³ Eritreans' access to employment has been facilitated by a high demand for migrant labour, where levels of pay are high enough for workers to send remittances abroad and to encourage friends and family to join them. While in theory Eritreans in Israel are at risk of receiving deportation orders, few deportations have in practice been carried out due to the lack of a returns agreement with Asmara and because of Israel's non-refoulement obligations under international law.³⁴

In 2010 Israel began building a fence on its border with Egypt to prevent Sudanese and Eritreans from entering the country. The fence was completed in early 2013, and quickly served its purpose, helping—alongside legislative changes (detailed below)—to slash the entry of Africans by over 99 percent, according to government figures.³⁵ **More recently, although the border wall with Egypt remains highly effective, a small number of Eritreans have entered Israel across the Jordanian border, raising the possibility of a new route for Eritreans and smugglers alike to expand.**³⁶

29 Yohannes, H. (2023) [Refugee Trafficking in A Carceral Age: A Case Study of the Sinai Trafficking](#).

30 Müller, T. R. (2012) [From Rebel Governance to State Consolidation: Dynamics of Loyalty and the Securitisation of the State in Eritrea](#).

31 The New Humanitarian (2008, August 11) [Eritrean asylum-seekers told to leave Tel Aviv area](#).

32 Ziegler, R. (2015) ['No Asylum for 'Infiltrators': The Legal Predicament of Eritrean and Sudanese Nationals in Israel](#).

33 Müller, T. R. (2015) [Universal rights versus exclusionary politics: Aspirations and despair among Eritrean refugees in Tel Aviv](#).

34 European Asylum Support Office (2019) [Eritrea: National Service, exit, and return](#).

35 From 9,570 in the first six month of 2022 to 34 in the same period in 2013. Miskin, M. (2013) [New Data Shows 99% drop in illegal entry](#).

36 This was raised by a KII representing a human rights organisation operating in Israel.

From 2010 onwards the Israeli government also began encouraging those Eritreans already within its borders to leave. In 2013, the government passed a new amendment to the 1954 Law for the Prevention of Infiltration that allowed the Israeli government to jail 'infiltrators' who entered the country after the amendment was passed, for up to a year. They were then routinely transferred to the Holot 'open' detention centre in the Negev desert unless they agreed to voluntarily return to their country of origin.³⁷

In 2014, the Israeli government began offering Eritreans who were detained at Holot the 'choice' between 'voluntary departure' to Rwanda, and later Uganda, with 3,500 USD of start-up capital, or indefinite detention in the Saharonim 'closed' detention facility.³⁸ In 2017, in a move that was later deemed unconstitutional by the Israel High Court, the government passed a law requiring that 20 percent of the salary of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers be withheld until these individuals left Israel.³⁹ This was **a clear attempt to dispel the image of Israel as a desirable place for African migrants to travel for work, while making conditions within the country so hostile that Eritreans saw their only option as to leave.**

Among the top routes out of Israel are legal resettlement to Canada via the 'Group of Five' scheme or other private sponsorship arrangements. In the year up to July 2024, 4,000 Eritreans were reported to have left in this way using Israeli travel documents.⁴⁰ These travel documents are issued when individuals have an onward destination to move to, but they do not contain any right of return. Since 2018, there have been anecdotal reports that more individuals are travelling to places such as Uganda to link up with families, and to pursue opportunities for onward mobility.⁴¹ This is because it is seen as easier and cheaper to pursue these options there, with Uganda's established system of brokers, relevant institutions, and lower cost of living than in Israel, and because for those individuals hoping to marry spouses from overseas, their partners would be unlikely to be granted visas to come to Israel to marry them there. Eritreans who have entered Uganda from Israel, however, either under their own volition or via the Israeli governments 'voluntary' scheme, report the challenges of accessing refugee status there due to the assumption that because they were not registered as refugees in Israel but lived as economic migrants, they have no ongoing protection needs.

In late 2023, the Israeli state again became hostile towards Eritreans following violent protests between rival groups of Eritreans in south Tel Aviv. In response, Netanyahu vowed to deport all "illegal infiltrators," whom he claimed had no right to be there.⁴² UNHCR responded by condemning 'acts of violence' within the Eritrean community, but also urging against detaining those involved in the violence without appropriate safeguards, and particularly cautioned against refoulement.⁴³ Eritrean asylum seekers currently living in Israel have also been caught up in the country's recent violence.⁴⁴

In June 2024, a landmark ruling by the Jerusalem District Court said that Eritreans who had fled forced military conscription should be recognised as refugees, paving the way for many of the Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel to be granted basic rights.⁴⁵ This ruling should be met with cautious optimism. Even when Eritreans were allowed to apply for asylum through refugee status determination (RSD) in 2013, the recognition rate had initially been 0.25 percent (compared with a 90+ percent recognition rate for Eritreans across EU+ countries at the time),⁴⁶ and has never exceeded 1 percent of applications.⁴⁷ This has meant that many of the Eritreans who have been able to enter and remain in Israel since 2008 have lived in a state of legal precarity, despite establishing and bringing up families there and contributing to the country's economy. The result has been a steady decline in the number of Eritreans in Israel - decreasing from 32,668 in 2014 to 16,264, in 2024⁴⁸ - as they have left the country through resettlement channels, to join family and friends in accessible third countries, and 'voluntary return' programmes to Rwanda and Uganda.

37 Ziegler, R. (2024) [The Prevention of Infiltration Act in the Supreme Court: Round Two.](#)

38 IIRI, Op Cit.

39 UNHCR (2020) [Israel Factsheet: September 2020.](#)

40 Interview with a KII representing a human rights organisation operating in Israel.

41 Ibid.

42 Al Jazeera (2023, September 3) [Israel's Netanyahu calls for deportation of Eritrean refugee 'rioters'](#) and PBS News (2023, September 3) [Netanyahu orders plan to remove African migrants after Eritrean groups clash in Israel.](#)

43 UNHCR (2023) [Israel: UNHCR deeply concerned at violent incident involving Eritrean asylum-seekers, urges restraint.](#)

44 BBC (2023, October 15) [Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel: 'Our second country is bleeding'.](#)

45 HIAS (2024) [HIAS celebrates legal victory for Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel.](#)

46 European Asylum Support Office (2015) [Latest Asylum trends – 2015 overview.](#)

47 Ziegler, R. (2015) Op Cit.

48 This data was obtained from [UNHCR Israel's page](#), though other [sources](#) estimate the number of Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel as closer to 20,000.

Libya

According to the IOM, there were more than 700,000 registered migrants in Libya in 2024.⁴⁹ This represents an increase compared to previous years, probably due to the displacement of Sudanese nationals. **Eritreans represent 0.4 percent of the migrant population in Libya, with almost 3,000 individuals.**⁵⁰ However, this is an under-estimate given that many Eritreans in Libya avoid or struggle to contact authorities and international organisations and others get detained and are not able to reach assistance agencies.

Since the fall of the Gaddafi regime, the country has been at war and divided between fighting factions with huge costs for Libyans and for resident and transiting migrants. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documents that migrants face arbitrary detention, torture, and kidnapping by authorities, militias, and traffickers. Mass graves of migrants have been discovered at the border between Libya and Tunisia and in other parts of the country.⁵¹

Reports by Amnesty International,⁵² HRW,⁵³ and other NGOs⁵⁴ have also repeatedly highlighted the cycle of abuse that migrants face in the country when they fall into the hands of authorities and traffickers. Migrants intercepted by Libyan coastguards in their attempt to reach Europe are returned to Libya,⁵⁵ detained under the supervision of the “Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration” of the Libyan government, if not directly forced in the hands of traffickers. In official detention centres, migrants are arbitrarily kept for an undetermined amount of time in inhuman conditions without access to sufficient food, water, sanitation, exercise, medical care, and legal assistance.⁵⁶ This pervasive abuse in official detention centres has been recognised by the European Council,⁵⁷ while being funded by the European Union.⁵⁸

“The Mission found that crimes against humanity were committed against migrants in places of detention under the actual or nominal control of Libya’s Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration, the Libyan Coast Guard, and the Stability Support Apparatus. These entities received technical, logistical, and monetary support from the European Union and its member States for, inter alia, the interception and return of migrants.”
(excerpt from The Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, March 2023)⁵⁹

Eritreans though appear to have been disproportionately affected by the current state of affairs. Eritreans, who have mostly seen Libya as a transit country,⁶⁰ are, for example, more likely to experience detention and exploitation than most other nationalities.⁶¹ Eritreans were reported to be overly represented in government controlled detention centres in Libya in 2019 constituting 34 percent of the total number of detainees (circa 1500 individuals),⁶² while representing less than 14 percent of those disembarked by Libyan coastguards in 2020.⁶³ MMC reported that migrants of East African origin were four times more likely to be detained than those from West, Central, and North Africa.⁶⁴ Eritreans, moreover, have reportedly been targeted by traffickers in Libya.⁶⁵ This is not only due to being Black, and the historical involvement of Eritrean indigenous troops - known as the ‘ascari’ - with the Italian colonial army in the suppression of the indigenous freedom fight.⁶⁶ Their connections with assumed wealthy diaspora has made them precious ‘commodities’.⁶⁷ **This matrix of factors has made Libya extremely dangerous for Eritreans, and might be**

49 IOM (2024) [Libya-Migrant Report 51 \(January – February 2024\)](#).

50 IOM (2024) [DTM Libya Migrant Report, Round 52, IOM, Libya](#).

51 UN OHCHR (2024) [“Peace and stability in Libya go hand in hand with human rights,” says High Commissioner](#).

52 Amnesty International (2020) [Libya: ‘Between life and death’: Refugees and Migrants trapped in Libya’s cycle of abuse](#).

53 HRW (2019) [No Escape from Hell. EU Policies Contribute to Abuse of Migrants in Libya](#).

54 See Leghtas, I. (2017) [“Hell on Earth”: Abuses Against Refugees and Migrants Trying to Reach Europe from Libya](#).

55 As of 27 July 2024, more than 11,000 migrants were intercepted and returned to Libya (IOM (2024) Op Cit, p. 25).

56 MSF (2023) [You are going to die here. Abuse in Abu Salim and Ain Zara detention centres](#).

57 Joint NGO Statement (2023) [The EU must not be complicit in the loss of lives at sea and in rights violations at Europe’s borders](#).

58 European Union External Action Service (2022) [EU-Libya Relations](#).

59 HRC (2023) [Libya: Urgent action needed to remedy deteriorating human rights situation, UN Fact-Finding Mission warns in final report](#).

60 MMC (2024) [Crossing borders, building livelihoods: The insecure economic lives of migrants in Libya](#).

61 MMC (2019) [What makes refugees and migrants vulnerable to detention in Libya? A microlevel study of the determinants of detention](#).

62 IOM DTM (2020) [Libya – Detention Centre Profile Generator](#).

63 Amnesty International (2020) [Libya: ‘Between life and death’: Refugees and Migrants trapped in Libya’s cycle of abuse](#).

64 MMC (2019) Op cit.

65 Van Reisen, M., et al. (Ed.). (2023). Enslaved: Trapped and trafficked in digital black holes.

66 Zaccaria, M. (2012). Anch’io per la tua bandiera. Il V Battaglione Ascari in missione sul fronte libico (1912).

67 Achtnich, M. (2022) [Accumulation by immobilization: Migration, mobility and money in Libya](#), MMC (2010) [A Sharper Lens on Vulnerability: A statistical analysis of the determinants of vulnerability to protection incidents among refugees and migrants in Libya](#).

part of the explanation for the strong decrease of the number of Eritreans entering and leaving from Libya, even during years when the numbers for many other nationalities increased.⁶⁸

KIIs and respondents further highlight that the journey to Europe via Libya had supposedly become harder since Eritrean smuggling networks were either dismantled⁶⁹ or had been transformed into much more abusive and exploitative systems of trafficking from 2017 onwards. At this time, the ‘success’ of the smuggling operations, which allowed the movement of thousands of individuals per year, attracted the attention of European law enforcement agencies which started to target human smuggling in Libya in collaboration with local authorities. One KII, who is an expert on smuggling and trafficking across the Horn of Africa and North Africa, suggested that some militia leaders felt that their political ambitions could grow by policing smugglers. Other militias instead wanted to eliminate competitors for a more lucrative business. This made the whole business much more difficult for Eritrean smugglers who could no longer rely on Libyan counterparts for protection and who had new rivals. As a result, the KII noted that “many [Eritrean smugglers] left to East Africa to continue their operations there”. **More predatory trafficking arrangements replaced Eritrean smuggling businesses in Libya that, albeit still violent in many ways, had previously commanded some level of trust within the migrant community.**

Amongst those smugglers who did stay in Libya, there was reportedly a “vicious turn in the business model”. As the KII elaborated, as the number of possible ‘customers’ started to reduce because of increasing risks in Libya from 2017/2018 onwards, **smugglers “moved from demanding money for movements to monetizing the migrants (e.g. detention, extortion, forced labour)”**. There was no longer an emphasis on maintaining a good reputation for repeat business, but on maximising revenue before smuggling networks collapsed. With smuggling networks transformed into coercive trafficking routes, “the numbers really dropped off as the danger levels increased”. Of note is that in a recent Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime report, smugglers operating on the border between Sudan and Libya said that they no longer saw many East African clients, including Eritreans.⁷⁰ While numbers of Sudanese had risen, **smugglers believed that the insecurity across Sudan had put Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis off taking this route.**

Saudi Arabia

During Ethiopia’s occupation of Eritrea, larger numbers of Eritreans began moving to Saudi Arabia.⁷¹ Many of these early arrivals thrived in the booming labour markets of Saudi Arabia, and either started families there or brought their families over from refugee camps in Sudan to join them. **The Eritrean population in Saudi Arabia continued to grow even after Eritrea gained independence as individuals fled economic decline, repressive governance, and violent confrontations within the country.** For communities based along Eritrea’s Red Sea coast, passage of people and goods back and forth across the sea has been fundamental to their economies.⁷² Up until 2018, the Eritrean government was also sponsoring individuals, allegedly sometimes through the issuance of false passports that would suggest that they were Muslim,⁷³ to travel to various Gulf States on bilateral labour mobility schemes.

By 2011, **the number of Eritreans within Saudi Arabia was reported to stand at 100,000.**⁷⁴ This population has never been able to regularise its status in Saudi Arabia as either citizens or refugees, given strict naturalisation laws restricting the former and the absence of a legal framework for the latter. Eritreans had nonetheless been able to live there for decades on renewable work permits and iqamas, which are a form of residence permit that enables foreign nationals and their dependents to live and work within KSA. An indicator of how politically and economically significant this community is, can be seen in the fact that the Eritrean government only supports two international Eritrean community schools, and both are in Saudi Arabia.

68 Frontex (2022) [Central Mediterranean](#).

69 Some of the Eritrean smugglers in Libya are currently on trial in the Netherlands as a result of an international investigation by The Netherlands, Italy, the International Criminal Court, Interpol and Europol, and partnership with Ethiopian authorities, Justiceinfo.net (2024) [Waiting for Eritrean human traffickers’ trials in the Netherlands](#).

70 Herbert, M. & Badi, E. (2024) [Sudan: Conflict drive mass refugee movement and fuels human smuggling](#).

71 Thiollet, H. (2007) [Refugees and Migrants from Eritrea to the Arab World: The Cases of Sudan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia 1991-2007](#).

72 Data collected through [MMC’s 4Mi survey](#) with Eritreans in Djibouti in July and August 2023 also evidences the continuing movement of Eritreans across the Red Sea to cities on the Yemeni coast, from where they then appeared to transit back to Djibouti. While a handful of these respondents were looking to move onwards to the United Arab Emirates, most were in Djibouti looking for resettlement opportunities to the United States, Canada, and other European countries.

73 KII with a refugee legal aid provider and researcher on Eritrean displacement based in Kenya.

74 Radio Erena (2021, February 16) [Eritreans in KSA: Struggle against All Odds](#).

Since 2017, however, the introduction of a swathe of new policies in line with KSA's 'Saudization' strategy has made life increasingly untenable for many Eritreans. In July 2017, for example, a 'Dependents' Tax' was introduced that required foreign employees to pay 100 Saudi Riyal per month (roughly 27 USD dollars) for each dependent listed on their iqama.⁷⁵ Every year this figure was increased by 100 Riyal per month, peaking at 400 Saudi Riyal (108 USD) per dependent in July 2020.

For many migrants in Saudi Arabia, these policies have had the intended effect, forcing them to either send their dependents out of the Kingdom and/or to relocate themselves. By midway through 2019, for example, it was reported that 22 percent of the country's international workforce had left the country in the preceding two and a half years.⁷⁶ Specific statistics on the impact of these policies on Eritreans is not available. Qualitative work with Eritreans in Uganda and Egypt suggests large numbers arriving to these countries who had been in Saudi Arabia for decades,⁷⁷ even if interviews with UNHCR representatives in both these destinations showed no awareness of the existence, or of any potential vulnerabilities, of this population.

Many Eritreans in these new locations have struggled financially, having exhausted their savings trying, but failing, to keep up with the increasing tax burden in Saudi Arabia. After decades in the country, several respondents mentioned having weaker diasporic connections to draw upon in this time of need. The generation that was born and grew up in Saudi Arabia has found adjusting to this new context of displacement particularly hard. They have struggled to navigate the asylum system, including in places like Uganda where there is an assumption that because they had lived for decades on their Eritrean passports in Saudi Arabia, and in many cases transited through Eritrea on route to Uganda, that they are not in need of asylum.⁷⁸

In reality, their situation exemplifies the complex and paradoxical nature of Eritrean citizenship and return.⁷⁹ The only way to live legally in Saudi Arabia is through a visa in an Eritrean passport because there is no system of refugee protection within KSA. As non-resident Eritrean citizens, they could then return to Eritrea for up to six months without being recruited into the mandatory national service scheme and while retaining their right to enter and exit the country. Should this non-resident status lapse, however, this population becomes exposed to the same risk of indefinite conscription and limitations on the freedom of movement from which so many Eritreans flee in search of asylum. As such, **this population's possession of an Eritrean passport and period of transit through Eritrea must not be seen as an indication of their willingness or ability to avail themselves of any protection from the Eritrean government.**

Europe

Overall, **Eritreans applying for asylum in Europe tend to receive international or subsidiary protection with an over 80 percent positive response rate to asylum claims across the EU in 2023.**⁸⁰ This follows the trend of the last decade in terms of recognition rates. However, **the number of Eritreans reaching Europe has declined since 2016.** They used to be the biggest group crossing the Central Mediterranean route with about 39,000 Eritrean arrivals registered in 2015. By 2022, this number had dropped to 2,100 with a similar number arriving in 2024 (up to the end of November).⁸¹ However, in the last few years, the number of Eritreans entering Europe through other routes has slightly increased. In 2023 about 1,700 Eritreans were registered by authorities in Greece using the Eastern Mediterranean route and in 2024, 2,133 Eritreans arrived in Greece through this route.⁸²

Despite this dramatic decrease, the number of asylum requests by Eritrean nationals started to pick up again in 2021 (see Figure 1). The gap between the decreasing number of Eritreans arriving to Europe by sea and the increase in the number of asylum applications can be explained in different ways: 1) as a result of administrative backlogs that characterise asylum systems across Europe, and that have grown after the forced pause on activities linked to COVID-19; 2) because a number of Eritreans enter Europe with legal visas before submitting an asylum application, though their numbers are unlikely to account for much of this gap; and 3) because of a growing number of Eritreans

75 Saudi Gazette (2024, March 5) [Al-Jada'an: Saudi Arabia is reviewing dependents' fee.](#)

76 FMT (2019, September 19) [1.9 million expats leave Saudi over high fees, slow growth.](#)

77 Cole, G. (2020) Op Cit.

78 Ibid.

79 Cole, G. & Belloni, M. (2022) [Return and Retreat in a Transnational World: Insights from Eritrean Case.](#)

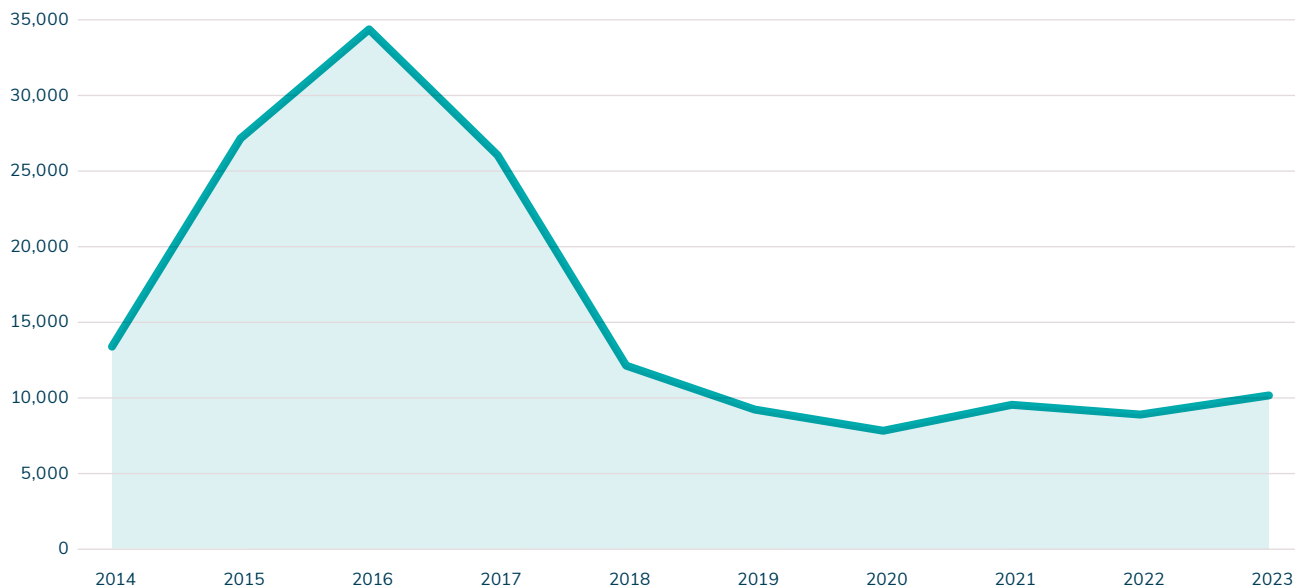
80 According to [EUROSTAT](#) there were 10,135 asylum applications by Eritrean nationals in 2023. 8,425 were granted some kind of protection in first instance decisions.

81 Ministero dell'Interno (2024) [Cruscotto Statistico Giornaliero Sbarchi, 2024.](#)

82 UNHCR (n.d.) [Operational Data Portal](#); UNHCR (2024) [Greece Sea arrivals Dashboard.](#)

who enter Europe through new routes and are not directly identified at the border. Only 1,300 Eritrean asylum seekers have arrived through humanitarian corridors from Libya since 2017 (with a few hundred more from other countries, such as Ethiopia), so their number cannot justify the gap.⁸³

Figure 1. First time Eritrean applicants for asylum across the 27 countries of the European Union



Source: [Eurostat](#)

In all cases, the number of Eritreans reaching Europe has halved since 2015. The reasons for this decrease may have several causes. Targeted state and non-state violence in [Libya](#) against people on the move, and Eritreans in particular who are seen as especially lucrative prey, are well known and may have reoriented Eritreans away from the Central Mediterranean Route. The cost of this route has become largely prohibitive, especially when other options (notably resettlement) exist, and resources of diaspora networks are increasingly strained by the many needs of newly displaced people.

Beyond Libya, decreasing arrivals to Europe may also be the result of increased arrests and deportations of migrants across North Africa. As a recent MMC report suggested “The low ranking of East African nationalities [...] may also indicate [that] more and more migrants are facing arrest and deportation in North Africa, as reported in light of the EU deals with Tunisia and Egypt”.⁸⁴ Finally, the launch of the private resettlement schemes to Canada and the United States has clearly featured in Eritrean’s decision-making as they see these legal options as a much safer way to reach sites of refuge than attempting the dangerous journey to North Africa and then across the Mediterranean to Europe. Given the suspension of these programmes in 2025, we may see new patterns of mobility emerging in the region.

83 UNHCR (2023) [Extension of humanitarian corridor to Italy offers lifeline to refugees and asylum-seekers in Libya](#).

84 MMC (2024) [Quarterly mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen](#).

Ethiopia

In January 2020, the Ethiopian Refugee and Returnee Service (RSS) stopped registering Eritrean asylum-seekers, due to security concerns related to the war in Tigray and closer ties to the Eritrean regime, thus providing individuals with no opportunity to apply for international protection against refoulement.⁸⁵ Before the war, there were about 170,000 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and some experts speak of 200,000 more who were not registered. Many of them crossed right after the peace deal in 2018 when Ethiopia stopped the prima facie recognition of Eritreans in the country. Some of them went straight to the cities. Others did not manage to register due to the backlogs of the applicants in registration centres in Tigray and the closure of public offices during COVID-19. **The resultant void of protection has persisted despite Ethiopia having drafted one of the most progressive refugee legislations in the world, in theory providing refugees with significant access to education, work, and free movement in the country.**⁸⁶

After the outbreak of conflict in Ethiopia in 2020 between the Ethiopian federal troops and the Tigrayan forces, the physical and legal situation for Eritreans within the country deteriorated. A report by Refugees International in March 2022 went so far as to say that 'Put simply, Ethiopia is no longer a safe country for Eritrean refugees'.⁸⁷

Several of the northern Tigray refugee camps that had been hosting tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees (over 95,000 Eritrean refugees lived in Tigray before the war, about 88,000 in the camps) were obliterated by Eritrean troops during a five-month period in which UNHCR had no access to them.⁸⁸ Refugees International reported that over 20,000 Eritreans had been dispersed from just two destroyed camps. As many sources have documented, **Eritrean refugees who remained in camps in Tigray became victims of both Tigrayan rebels, who saw them as aligned with an historical enemy that was once again threatening their political and territorial sovereignty, and Eritrean forces allied with the Ethiopian National Defence Force.**⁸⁹

In 2021, USCRI described the situation of Eritrean refugees in Northern Ethiopia as 'cornered by conflict' and in desperate need of resettlement to a third country.⁹⁰

Several respondents decried the extreme conditions in the region during the war. Desta left Eritrea in 2019 and was living in Shire until the war broke out:

"...there was no food in the town... Then we said we better go to camps rather than dying here in hunger. We went to Mai Aini. The conditions were worse in the camp. We then started to search for seeds in trees - that became our daily thing... It was not enough. We had to exchange our phones for food, but things were not changing. Finally, we decided to go to Addis".

Desta (23, Europe)

In the middle of the war in Tigray, authorities established a new camp called Alemwach in the Dabat area (Amhara region) for refugees escaping Tigray. However, the region was already unstable and animosity built up around the camp with locals feeling hostile to the expropriation of land to accommodate refugees. Moreover, the camp was built in inappropriate physical conditions and was affected by a major flood in July 2022. According to a source who spoke to the Voice of Nigeria, "the camp was built on unfavourable farmland, and the tents cannot withstand heavy rain and wind".⁹¹

85 UN OHCHR (2023, July 13) [UN experts urge Ethiopia to halt mass deportation of Eritreans](#).

86 Federal Negarit Gazette of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2019) [Ethiopia: Proclamation No. 1110/2019, Refugees Proclamation](#).

87 Miller, S. (2022) [Nowhere to Run: Eritrean Refugees in Tigray](#).

88 UNHCR (2021) [UNHCR reaches destroyed camps in northern Tigray](#).

89 Miller, S. Op Cit; HRW (2021) [Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray](#); UNHCR (2021) [Eritrean refugees in Tigray caught up in conflict](#).

90 Salazar, D. (2021) [Cornered by Conflict: Eritrean Refugees in Northern Ethiopia Need Resettlement in a Safe Third Country](#).

91 VON (2022, July 14) [Flood overtakes Eritrean Refugees Camp](#).

Most up to date sources at the time of writing estimate the population of Alemwach is about 21,000 people,⁹² though UNHCR officers note that the camp is under strain. The presence of international organizations in the camp has been scarce, as has aid of any kind. UNHCR does not have a continuous presence on site and participants felt they had nobody to seek protection from. Attacks on refugees are reported daily, including killings, robberies, and kidnappings.⁹³ According to respondents, ransoms to free refugees kidnapped from Alemwach range from 2,000 to 5,000 USD. Several participants reported that for five months, they did not receive any food rations due to the conflict around the camp. Access to schools, hospitals, and other facilities in the area has been absent or extremely sporadic.

Little is known about the living conditions of refugees living in the Afar region.⁹⁴ According to UNHCR there are 60,000 Eritreans living between the camps of Barahle and Aysaita.⁹⁵ These camps have suffered from limited assistance and services for decades. Barahle was affected by the war in 2022, and several people were relocated to a new camp in Serdo. A recent study by the International Institute for Environment and Development reported that: “Aysaita camp showed high levels of food insecurity, poor healthcare, and lack of adequate shelter...Economically, refugees in the Afar region, particularly in Aysaita camp, were significantly worse off than elsewhere, with higher levels of debt and limited savings”.⁹⁶ These findings are corroborated by respondents. One Afar respondent temporarily sought refuge from Dabat in the Afar region. Her family of 12 members had hoped to find some security and support among co-ethnic Afar but she reported that the community became hostile due to limited resources. This pushed them to leave again to reach Addis Ababa.

Amidst this gap in protection for Eritrean refugees, reports of arbitrary detentions and deportations have multiplied.⁹⁷ Some 403 asylum seekers were forcibly returned to Eritrea in June 2023. A KII working with an international organisation in Ethiopia noted, “this was preceded by incidents of mass arrest” and a drive in arbitrary detentions that lasted up to nine months. The KII reported that “in 2023, we have documented detention of 1,300 individuals. 600 refugees were detained in December alone. Eritreans are specifically targeted. In 2024 trends were similar. By the end of July another 300 refugees were detained in Addis Ababa”. Although sources spoke of a trend of incarceration in the capital, detentions are happening in other provinces that refugees are crossing in their attempts to leave the country, including on route to Sudan and Uganda. As one KII working for an international organisation stated: “Authorities are detaining them not because of suspicion of a crime, but because of a lack of documentation. When Eritreans are caught on the way to Uganda without any valid documentation, they will be incarcerated”. Detentions and deportations again increased in November and December 2024 and in the first months of 2025, in what has been seen as part of Ethiopia’s unhappy response to Eritrea’s ever closer ties to anti-Ethiopian regimes in Egypt and Somalia.⁹⁸

Despite this lack of protection in Addis Ababa, an increasing number of refugees are fleeing there from the violence in the Amhara and Afar regions. According to RRS there are 80,000 self-reported Eritreans in Addis Ababa, excluding the 7,000 refugees who are included in the UNHCR urban program, but numbers are likely much higher given the number of people who prefer not to register. Besides basic safety, respondents have sought opportunities to interact with international and national agencies and to follow up on their resettlement cases or other complementary pathways from the capital.

Continuing difficulties and delays with registering for asylum, and the increasing insecurity in the country, has driven many Eritreans out of Ethiopia. Although there are some reports of refugees traversing Sudan to reach Libya, this Northern route across Sudan has become more dangerous and less accessible due to the civil war. Instead, many respondents for this report had decided to move from Ethiopia to Kampala. A KII working with an international organisation in Ethiopia reported that they had witnessed an increasing number of people moving from Ethiopia to Uganda through irregular ways. As the journey costs around 2,000 USD, it has largely been respondents with some transnational support who have been able to pay for this journey.

92 UNHCR (2022) [Ethiopia Operation: Refugee Settlement Profile – Alemwach](#).

93 Harter, F. (2024) [Refugees in Ethiopia’s Amhara region continue to face almost daily attacks](#).

94 One exception is Feyissa, D. & Mohamed, D. (2020) [Afar regional report 2018–2019 refugee and host community context analysis](#).

95 UNHCR (2024) [UNHCR Ethiopia Refugees and Asylum-Seekers September 2024](#).

96 García Amado, P., et al. (2023) [Protracted Displacement in an urban world – Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia: building urban solutions](#).

97 OHCHR (2023) [UN experts urge Ethiopia to halt mass deportation of Eritreans](#).

98 BBC (2024, November 29) [Eritrean refugees describe police crackdown in Ethiopia](#) and ISW (2024, October 17) [Africa File, October 17, 2024: Egypt-Eritrea-Somalia Summit: Challenges with Tigray Peace Process](#).

South Africa

In the past 15 years, changes in policy in South Africa have reduced the asylum space and restricted refugees' rights, making their situation increasingly precarious.⁹⁹ The government has consistently claimed that a much larger number of refugees and asylum seekers reside within the country than officially registered, and that it does not have capacity to process them nor to provide protection.¹⁰⁰ A recent Department of Home Affairs' White Paper proposed South Africa's withdrawal from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 UN protocols, and researchers argue that the government has been deliberately working over the years to deter new arrivals of asylees and to create a discouraging environment for refugees and other African migrants.¹⁰¹ South Africa has thus seen decreased arrivals of asylum seekers, falling from 157,204 arrivals in 2009 to 18,104 in 2018.¹⁰²

The Southern route is a perilous path for refugees and migrants from across Africa seeking to reach South Africa.¹⁰³ People on this route face significant risks, including violence, trafficking, and exploitation, especially at border crossings where both smugglers and security forces may take advantage of migrants' vulnerabilities. In 2022, the discovery of graves containing Ethiopian migrants in Malawi underscored these dangers.¹⁰⁴ **Eritreans have also used this route to reach South Africa, where they are considered a relatively small refugee community, primarily involved in small businesses.** In the early 2000s, a larger number of Eritrean students were sent for scholarships from Eritrea, and the majority claimed asylum and stayed. Individuals have continued to arrive in small numbers since, though policies implemented during COVID-19 halted new documentation processes, and the country's adoption of a 'first country of asylum' rule has also led to a decrease in new arrivals.¹⁰⁵ Despite these restrictions, a small number of Eritreans, including those displaced by conflicts in Tigray and Sudan, continue to make their way to South Africa.

Tewelde, for example, left Eritrea in 2018 and was in Tigray until the war started, when he almost lost his life and ran to Addis Ababa. From Addis Ababa, he went to Juba in search of a job that he could not find. He decided then to move to South Africa despite him considering other alternatives such as going to Belarus and then entering into Europe via the Polish border. Despite the hard journey to South Africa, his main motivation was to escape life-threatening conditions and economic struggles in Juba. Unlike his fellow travellers, he avoided high smuggling fees by drawing on a relative in South Africa who connected him with contacts along the route from Juba to Zambia then Zimbabwe then finally across the border into South Africa.

Tewelde (29, South Africa)

Three of this study's respondents now living in South Africa are unregistered migrants. They spoke of finding conditions in the country better for securing work and to sustain themselves than previous host countries. South Africa has a non-encampment refugee protection regime that is meant to permit refugees freedom of movement and access to labour markets to foster self-sufficiency.¹⁰⁶ However, Eritreans' safety in urban areas remains precarious and worsening due to the South African Department of Home Affairs' recent intensified crackdowns on undocumented migrants with frequent roundups and deportations, despite the High Court's order not to detain those who intend to seek asylum.¹⁰⁷

Respondents recognised that obtaining legal documentation is crucial, not only for regularizing their stay, but also for moving legally onwards from South Africa. However, they struggled to access any opportunities to do so. This means that while South Africa is seen to serve as a stepping stone for Eritreans aiming to reach countries such as the US, UK, Canada, and EU nations, it can be challenging to pursue these opportunities. **Eritreans within the country attribute their desire to move on to the insecurity, xenophobic violence, and looting of migrant businesses by South Africans, which is a recurrent and much-publicised issue in the country.**

99 Crush, J. et al. (2017) [Benign neglect or active destruction? A critical analysis of refugee and informal sector policy and practice in South Africa.](#)

100 South Africa Department of Home Affairs (2024) [Final Gazetted White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection.](#)

101 Eghosa, E. J. (2020) [The securitization of asylum in South Africa: A catalyst for human/physical insecurity.](#)

102 Scalabrini (2020) [Asylum, Refugee and Migration Statistics South Africa.](#)

103 Anyadike, O. (2023) [From Ethiopia to South Africa: The human cost of a neglected migration route.](#)

104 CNN (2022, October 21) [Malawi police find more bodies near mass grave that contained 25 Ethiopians.](#)

105 GroundUp (2021, October 8) [Refugees who arrived after lockdown have no way to apply for asylum.](#)

106 Dass, S. et al. (2022) [State-Sanctioned Shrinkage of Space: Analyzing the Trend of Limiting the Right to Legally Work in South Africa for Forced Migrants.](#)

107 News24 (2025, February 25) [Seeking asylum, finding detention: Concerning trends at SA's Refugee Reception Offices](#) and Global Detention Project (2024) [South Africa: Challenging Abusive Detention Practices in Court.](#)

Sudan

For decades, and particularly since the 1960s, Sudan has been a second home for many Eritreans. This long-term Eritrean population in Sudan can be roughly divided into two groups based on geographical differences: those who have been in camps in Eastern Sudan for decades with no way of moving on, and those who have been in Khartoum and built lives for themselves. In their work for the Chr Michelsen Institute, Babekir and Aalen stress that Khartoum has long been a home or site of 'permanent refuge' for Eritreans, not simply a site of transit.¹⁰⁸ However, Sudan has also been a major transit point for large numbers of Eritreans who have been crossing the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe.

Even amid the civil war that broke out in Sudan in April 2023 between the Rapid Support Forces (the RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the country has continued to receive large numbers of Eritrean refugees. Over the course of 2023 and 2024, UNHCR reported respectively 8,664 and 6,704 new arrivals directly from Eritrea.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, between April 2023 and August 2024, 24,000 Eritreans entered Sudan from other neighbouring countries, including those fleeing the violence across the border in Ethiopia.¹¹⁰

Since April 2023, Khartoum has become inaccessible due to the widespread violence. The number of Eritreans in Khartoum reduced from 9,597 in January 2023 to 1,500 in June 2024.¹¹¹ Meanwhile the numbers in Kassala (Eastern Sudan) grew from 107,435 in January 2024 to 122,874 in June 2024.¹¹² As of June 2024, Eritreans made up 16.5 percent of the refugee caseload in Sudan, numbering 150,000 people. 84 percent of these were located in camps versus 16 percent out of camps.¹¹³

In Khartoum, challenges of security and safety for Eritreans nonetheless significantly ramped up a year or two before the civil war in Sudan began. Since the 2021 military coup in Sudan, there have been reports of increased round ups of Eritreans (though these have been a reality for Eritreans in the city for years);¹¹⁴ more harassment, extortion, and detention by police; and the ripping up of refugee cards.¹¹⁵ In the six months preceding the outbreak of hostilities in April 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea reported that 'the police and security services intensified immigration control operations targeting Eritreans in the capital, Khartoum.'¹¹⁶ Eritreans were detained on the grounds that they did not have valid documentation to live in Khartoum as opposed to refugee camps in Eastern Sudan, and charged disproportionately high fines to avoid detention or to secure their release. It was also reported in 2022 that Eritreans were 'being abducted in Sudan and taken to Libya where they are ransomed for an average price of 5,500 USD during which time they are tortured and abused.'¹¹⁷

Mounting limitations on the ability of Eritreans to move legally around Sudan thus predate the most recent conflict, particularly for those without asylum permits or who had asylum permits that only permitted them to live in camps. The latter group has always been the majority of Eritreans in Sudan given the Sudanese government's tight restrictions on refugees' access to urban areas.¹¹⁸ They have long faced a heightened risk of arrest as they require movement permits to cross state boundaries. Accessing these cards was made harder by long delays in RSD decisions. There are also geographical limitations on where individuals can register for asylum, which is known to cause smuggling and trafficking 'hotspots' around these areas because of the concentration of potential 'clients' for these services.¹¹⁹

108 Babekir, A. & Aalen, L. (2023) [Nowhere to run: The dilemmas of Eritrean refugees in war-wrecked Sudan](#).

109 UNHCR (2024) [Sudan: Eritrean Refugees Overview in Sudan \(as of 30 June 2024\)](#).

110 These statistics were provided in an interview with a UNHCR Representative based in the region.

111 UNHCR (2024) [Sudan: Eritrean Refugees Overview in Sudan \(as of 30 June 2024\)](#).

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Radio Erena (2015, June 12) [Sudanese government rounds up Eritreans in Khartoum](#).

115 University of Nottingham Rights Lab (2022) [Mounting Crisis: How Perpetrators are Exploiting the Current Situation in Ethiopia and Sudan for profit](#).

116 UNGA, A/HRC/53/20. Op Cit.

117 University of Nottingham Rights Lab, Op Cit.

118 UNHCR (2020) [Sudan Country Refugee Response Plan: January 2020 – December 2020](#).

119 University of Nottingham Rights Lab, Op Cit.

When the civil war began in April 2023, Eritreans' concerns about being individually targeted by law enforcement changed to a bigger question about how to leave Khartoum, and even Sudan, in the face of generalized violence. Kokob explained the hardships for refugees in Sudan prior to the war:

"After President Bashir was overthrown from power, life in Sudan become difficult and insecure. The Sudanese government stopped giving documents to refugees in 2019 and started to round up and deport them to their countries...The police blamed Habesha refugees for crime and other illegal things to make us an easy target. The people accepted that narration and they were supporting the police to persecute us. I was caught twice and paid 500 and 1,000 USD dollar for my release. ...Even if you paid and were released, they can come and charge you as undocumented or illegal, then you must pay again.

Then COVID-19 came, things got more complicated. We were even bothered to find basics. The remittances even became difficult to reach. The police harassment and exploitation were too much, and people started losing it, I know people who committed suicide...Many left for Libya without much thought... But I already started a sponsorship process to Canada and my family were constantly telling me to wait patiently. Then the war started, so we left".

Kobob (26, Kampala)

In the first weeks of the war, people were rushing to Kassala and getting attacked and extorted on the way.¹²⁰ They were robbed of their belongings at checkpoints by both sides in the war and some were killed. Those who have not been able to stay with relatives in towns found themselves pushed towards increasingly over-stretched and under-resourced refugee camps such as Um Gulja in Gedaref or Shagarab camp.¹²¹ UNHCR has proposed to relocate refugees to other camps in Kassala and Gedaref states, though experience from across the border in Ethiopia suggests that this may simply create new difficulties and challenges for displaced populations and humanitarian providers. Even though UNHCR has managed to provide some assistance to individuals within the camps, Eritreans have faced being kidnapped by traffickers or the Eritrean authorities and deported across the border back to Eritrea.

For those on the move, there is the danger that they will be sent back to Eritrea. A report by the Guardian in April 2023 found that 3,500 Eritreans had that month been forcibly deported by Eritrean authorities from Sudan back to Eritrea.¹²² Freweini, now in Kampala, explains how her and her sibling narrowly avoided this fate:

"Before we entered to Kassala, they stopped the bus in a checkpoint. They let the Sudanese jump off there. But they said Eritreans should go straight to Eritrea. However, people jumped off there and were running away. People forcefully took off from the bus, but the police caught many. They beat them and put them in the bus. Fortunately, we ran and hid, me, my brother and my cousin. They did not get us. But they took those people to Eritrea".

Freweini (23, Kampala)

For this reason, Eritreans have instead looked to divert their movements to other parts of Sudan, as well as South Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia. In research conducted by MMC in 2024 with Eritreans in Sudan, for example, 50 percent of respondents (n=172) said that they intended to move to another country within three months.¹²³ Some 21 percent were unsure what to do next and 22 percent planned to stay in their current location.

Though there is no breakdown by nationality, according to a KII from an international organisation supporting refugees in Port Sudan, 4,000 secondary displaced refugees allegedly arrived in Port Sudan shortly after the war broke out in Khartoum. They maintained that most of the Eritrean refugees in this population were absorbed by the existing Eritrean community in the city meaning that they had fewer protection and service requests for Eritrean refugees than other new arrivals. This also meant that there was very little knowledge of how this population was faring or what their plans were. Unlike refugees arriving from camp-based settings though, COR had committed to allowing

120 Babekir, A. & Aalen, L. Op Cit.

121 Babekir, A. & Aalen, L. Op Cit.

122 The Guardian (2023, May 7) [Eritrea accused of forcibly repatriating civilians caught up in Sudan fighting.](#)

123 MMC (2024) [4Mi Infographic: Routes, protection incidents and future intentions of people displaced by the Sudan war.](#)

Khartoum-based Eritreans – registered officially as urban refugees - to reside legally in Port Sudan by regularising their status in the city.¹²⁴

The same could not be said for those seeking to remain in Port Sudan who had moved there from the refugee camps in Sudan, and who were clearly struggling to access basic lifesaving support. As the KII working in Port Sudan elaborated:

“It is most likely that Eritreans who are there from the camps are there in an irregular manner and have more protection needs as they are irregular. But we can't include them in regular assistance mechanisms, e.g. community-based interventions, because that is not a service accorded to non-camp refugees. [The organisation] does not provide assistance beyond lifesaving assistance to Eritreans who should be in the camps as we try not to create a pull factor”.

There are barriers to Eritreans leaving the country, despite their desire to do so, including closed border crossings and widespread insecurity. Border crossings between Gedaref in Sudan and Amhara in Ethiopia, for example, have been intermittently closed due to localised conflict dynamics. Even when Eritreans enter the Amhara region, they have reportedly been at risk of targeting by the Fano militia as potential Tigrayans or Tigrayan sympathisers. Tigrinya-speakers from Eritrea were thus anecdotally reported to have concerns about leaving Sudan into Ethiopia, and thus preferred routes that took them to either Egypt or South Sudan.

The path for those hoping to head to South Sudan has been affected by outbreaks of violence between the SAF and RSF in Sinar State that have closed the main transport arteries south. As a GITOC report published in October 2024 stated, ‘While this may discourage some movement, it is unlikely to curb it completely and may instead encourage the emergence of networks that can circumvent restrictions or partner with security and military actors to move refugees and migrants.’¹²⁵ Meanwhile the Egyptian government has ramped up security along its border with its southern neighbour. The GITOC report suggests that this more militarised policing of the border began before the war, albeit principally in response to smuggling and irregular migration from Sudan, but that there had not been any explicit focus on reducing all migration across the border until the conflict broke out in Sudan. One impact of this shift, as the report notes, is that **‘tighter security along the Sudan–Egypt border has reportedly increased the risks for smugglers. This, combined with a sharp spike in demand for movement, has reportedly pushed up the price of crossing.’**

The conflict has thus resulted in new and recalibrated smuggling networks in Sudan as well as the drying up of others with almost no Eritreans reported to be attempting the journey from Sudan through to Libya, and a dearth in effective policing against trafficking. As one Sudanese researcher quoted in the GITOC report explained, ‘Law enforcement is busy with the war, and human smugglers are exploiting the lack of surveillance along the border.’ There are also reports of trafficking routes being taken over by RSF and SAF-affiliated groups, who have used them to extort more money from Eritreans while offering a less ‘reliable’ service in the process.¹²⁶ This situation has also left victims of human trafficking with no recourse to protection.¹²⁷

124 Interview with a KII working for an international organisation supporting refugees in Port Sudan; A similar drive to regularise the status of those experiencing secondary displacement to River Nile state is planned, and with COR recently operational again in Khartoum, there is a hope that refugees there can start to be (re)registered as well.

125 Herbert, M. & Badi, E. Op Cit.

126 BBC (2024, July 1) [I recognized my sister in video of refugees captured in Sudan war.](#)

127 Interview with a KII working for an international organisation in Sudan.

Enduring and emerging spaces of refuge

A number of urban locations have become more relevant in the displacement and mobility of Eritreans over the last decade as opportunities in previous destination countries have markedly shrunk as outlined in the previous chapter. Most recently, **Eritreans fleeing conflicts in Tigray and Sudan have found their way to Egypt, Kenya (albeit often as a transit country), Uganda, and South Sudan.** Often these countries are not seen as final destinations but as springboards for further legal mobility such as to Canada and the USA through resettlement and private sponsorship schemes. While these “spaces of refuge” allow refugees to access some degree of safety and protection, Eritreans still face challenges in terms of protection, assistance, and access to services.

Beyond the key trends identified in this chapter, respondents spoke about Eritreans entering Israel through Jordan; entering the United States through higher education channels; travelling to Poland via Belarus having initially travelled to Russia on passports obtained in Dubai; travelling to Angola to get work with Portuguese-speaking companies that would second them to Brazil from where they would travel up through Central America to the United States; and moving to Zambia, Angola, and South Africa where Eritrean businessmen were recruiting co-nationals. **When one route closes down, others spring up in its place as demand will not abate while desperation remains or increases.**

Egypt

Numerous reports have documented the horrific conditions endured by Eritreans who were either abducted in Sudan and taken to the Sinai desert to be tortured for ransom, or who were kidnapped there for the same reasons while on route to Israel.¹²⁸ These instances appear to have decreased since the opportunities to access Israel via this route largely shut down in 2014. It is likely no coincidence that as the option of transiting Egypt to reach Israel diminished, and the number of sea departures to Europe reduced in the second half of the noughties, that the numbers of Eritreans in Egypt began to rise. Eritreans only began applying for asylum in Egypt in more significant numbers from 2016 onwards. At the end of 2023, Egypt hosted 32,175 Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees. By 8 October 2024, this number had risen to 40,000.¹²⁹

Respondents and KIIs suggest that, **at present, Eritreans are mainly looking for safe, regular routes out of the country, ideally through resettlement sponsorship programmes facilitated by those in the diaspora.** Few are moving overland to Benghazi and Tripoli or other disembarkation points for Europe on the Libyan coast, as the heightened dangers of these routes have made them less popular. KIIs working with and for international organisations in Egypt noted that the Egyptian government arrests Eritreans and other nationalities attempting to enter Libya, though they do not release figures on the numbers being detained on the border.

Since 2016, the introduction of anti-smuggling laws and investments by European governments to support the policing of Egypt’s maritime borders¹³⁰ have meant that the country is no longer a major conduit for sea departures to Europe, including among respondents for this report, though the number of certain nationalities – particularly Egyptians – boarding boats to Greece remains considerable.¹³¹ Large sums of money have been invested in successfully preventing onward mobility from the country, while humanitarian programmes to support the long-term security of displaced populations within the country’s borders remain relatively underfunded.¹³²

The situation of Eritreans in Egypt has always been precarious. Until recently, UNHCR has been responsible for the registration, documentation, and RSD of asylum-seekers and refugees within the country,¹³³ to the benefit of Eritreans given the Egyptian government’s scepticism towards asylum claims on the grounds of national service-based persecution. A KII working with an international organisation suggested that the government views the situation within Eritrea as one of ‘bad governance’ rather than serious human rights violations.¹³⁴ Egypt’s new asylum law, which was

128 Van Reisen, M. et al. (2012) [Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between Life and Death.](#); HRW (2014) [“I wanted to lie down and die”: Trafficking and Torture of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt](#); Yohannes, H. (2023) [Refugee Trafficking in A Carceral Age: A Case Study of the Sinai Trafficking.](#)

129 UNHCR (2024) [UNHCR Egypt Fact Sheet – October 2024.](#)

130 European Commission (2024) [Joint Press Statement on the occasion of the official visit of Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson to Egypt](#); MMC (2024) [A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt strategic and comprehensive partnership.](#)

131 Infomigrants (2024) [Athens pushing for EU help for a deal with Cairo to ease flows.](#)

132 Interview with a KII who has worked with and studied Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt for over a decade.

133 UNHCR (2024) [Egypt: April 2024.](#)

134 Interview with a KII who has worked with and studied Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt for over a decade.

approved by the Egyptian Parliament in November 2024 and transfers control over the RSD process to the Egyptian Government, could lead to reduced protection for Eritreans. Several organisations have also expressed concerns that the new asylum law allows ‘for the arbitrary detention of asylum seekers and refugees solely on migration grounds, unduly restricts the right to seek asylum, and enables unlawful returns without procedural safeguards.’¹³⁵ There are further protection risks for Eritreans who were born in Israel as the GoE supposedly refuses to process their papers and issue them residency or registration documents. This group is hence a priority for UNHCR’s resettlement efforts in Egypt because they are otherwise extremely vulnerable to deportation.

The GoE provides the identification documents that regulate and legalise Eritreans’ stay in the country. This includes a six-month renewable residency permit provided to registered refugees and asylum seekers. Whereas it reportedly used to take two to three days to translate registration with UNHCR into a yellow card to legalise stays through the Egyptian government, it is now reported to take over a year.¹³⁶ UNHCR can provide individuals with an appointment letter to show that they will be registered for asylum soon, but this letter does not afford them much, if any, protection from arrest. Though there is a legal window during which Eritreans can register at UNHCR and obtain their Egyptian ID, roundups and arrests during this period are said to be relatively common.

A KII with knowledge of the asylum system within Egypt said that as Sudanese are being prioritised for registration through UNHCR, the situation has become even more precarious for Eritreans, many of whom also recently fled Sudan, who struggle to access registration appointments. Respondents in Cairo felt that the asylum system is currently oriented towards Sudanese. As one respondent, Mahri (49, Egypt) stated: “Here in Egypt, we [Eritreans] are not considered refugees. Sudanese are considered the only refugees”.

Mahri, who is now in Cairo, having been displaced from Khartoum with his wife and four children, recounted several examples of Eritreans who had both appointment letters and yellow papers (asylum seeker forms) from UNHCR, but who had been detained. Another respondent, Ghenet, who is 24 and also entered Egypt from Sudan, said she did not feel safe despite having an appointment SMS from UNHCR proving that she has attempted to register, but not yet been given a time slot: “If I am caught, the fate is to be deported, because many are deported already...and as the round ups are intensified now in our neighbourhood, I am really scared”. Ghenet was rounded up and detained a month after she spoke with us. Halim, who was displaced from Sudan, also testified to the increasing problems with registration and deportation in Cairo:

“People complain about long appointment dates for a year or two and...with round ups that the government does, people don’t know what to do. I have an asylum seeker’s card and I have my interview scheduled for next month. Two weeks ago, one of my relatives left the house to get something in the shop and she was rounded up and taken to Eritrea. If you don’t have documents, you have to go back. Imagine she came all the way to Egypt just for her to be taken back”.

Halim (31, Cairo)

The GoE has been accused of detaining and deporting many unregistered Eritreans despite the known challenges that refugees face in accessing the refugee registration process,¹³⁷ which delays their ability to access documentation to legalise their stay in Egypt.¹³⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur has hence raised concerns with the Egyptian authorities about the detention of Eritrean asylum seekers within the country for extended periods of time without recourse to legal representation or access to asylum procedures,¹³⁹ and condemned the general conditions of reception and treatment of Eritrean refugees by the GoE.¹⁴⁰

The challenges that Eritreans face in obtaining refugee status suggests that UNHCR’s figures on the number of Eritreans within the country is an under-count as some remain unable to access the registration processes. Unlike Sudanese and Syrian refugees, however, who have other routes to remain in Egypt based on pan-Arab agreements, the only way for most Eritreans (aside from the wealthy who can access investment or business visas) to remain within the country is through this backlogged asylum route.

135 Amnesty International (2024) [Egypt: President al-Sisi must reject new asylum law which violates refugee rights](#).

136 Interview with a KII who has worked with and studied Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt for over a decade.

137 Global Detention Project (2024) [Submission to the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families 39th Session 2024 Egypt: Urgent Appeal concerning Egypt’s Responses to Humanitarian Crises in Sudan and Eritrea](#); OHCHR (2022) [Egypt: UN experts condemn expulsions of Eritrean asylum seekers despite risks of torture, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance](#); HRW (2022) [Egypt: Forced Returns of Eritrean Asylum Seekers](#).

138 Interview with a KII who has worked with and studied Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt for over a decade.

139 UNGA, A/HRC/53/20. Op Cit.

140 UNGA (2022) [Situation of human rights in Eritrea: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea](#).

There is said to be significant class divides among Eritreans in Cairo. One KII working with Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo stated that new arrivals using smuggling networks from Eritrea through Eastern Sudan to Egypt were mainly youth with “completely empty hands” and hence end up in ad hoc accommodation or sleeping on the streets. At the other end of the spectrum are wealthier long-term Eritrean residents and individuals relocating from Saudi Arabia to Egypt with some remaining savings. While there are support mechanisms that link these groups, particularly through faith-based organisations, they remain relatively siloed.

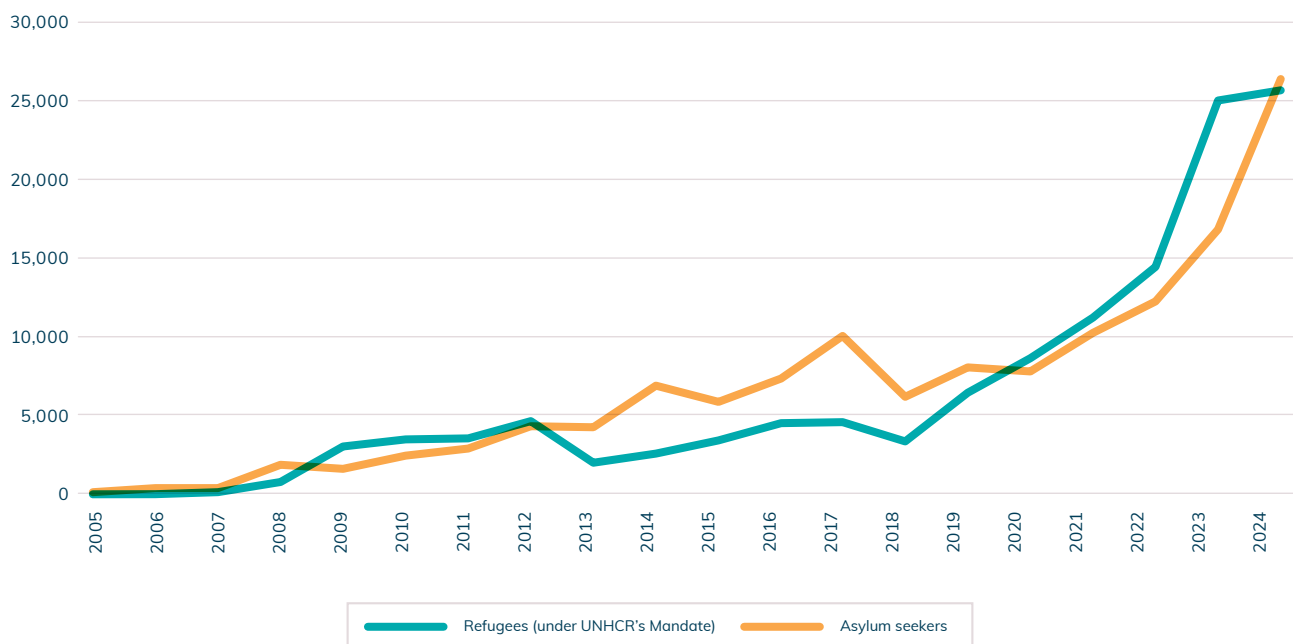
Despite more recent challenges with registration backlogs and round ups, KIIs and respondents in Cairo suggest that **the government has been relatively accepting of large numbers of Eritreans who have arrived in the past few years, allowing an economy of services and consumer goods for Eritrean refugees to spring up.**

This is despite an increase in the number of refugees in Egypt by 150 percent, straining services and the GoE's ability to host such large numbers. In this context, the continued lobbying and presence of UNHCR and other refugee supporting organisations within the country appears to be critical for preventing the government from stopping new arrivals from registering and ultimately deporting them. The latter is a concerning dynamic given the increasingly close relations between Egypt and Eritrea seen throughout 2024.

Uganda

There was no significant movement of Eritreans to Uganda until the late 2000s when the number applying for asylum increased.¹⁴¹ The majority of the 150,000 urban refugees currently in Uganda are thought to be Eritreans. **There are several explanations for why Uganda at that point became a preferred destination for Eritreans.** It is seen as generally safer than other cities in the region and was, in the 2010s, seen as more affordable than neighbouring capitals such as Addis Ababa and Juba. Refugees live relatively free of government harassment and prejudice in Kampala. There is freedom of religion and high tolerance of Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity, which has burgeoned amongst Eritreans in the past 20 years. Education from primary to university levels is for the most part in English, which aids its accessibility. Finally, individuals can access the asylum system in Kampala as well as Embassies for most major resettlement destinations do allow them to pursue a process from there.¹⁴² From 2018 onwards, Eritreans from Israel were also being sent directly to Uganda by the Israeli government within their ‘voluntary departure’ scheme.

Figure 2. Eritreans with different protection statuses in Uganda (2000-2024)



Source: UNHCR's [Refugee Data Finder](#)

141 IIRI (2018) [Eritrean refugees in Kampala and the Ugandan asylum system](#).

142 Jourdan, L. (2020) [Living in a Limbo: Eritrean Refugees in Kampala](#); Cole, G. (2018) [Questioning the value of 'refugee' status and its primary vanguard: the case of Eritreans in Uganda](#).

KIIs referred to Uganda as a place where you could “park yourself” and as a “holding pen” from which displaced Eritreans could plan their next steps. For some, Kampala is an important place of transit, from where they can process paperwork for resettlement. In recent years, it has become a key location for family reunification and gatherings, given Eritreans are able to gain visas to enter the country for several-month stays, and onward migration through international marriages, which used to occur in Sudan and Ethiopia but are now safer and easier to arrange in Uganda. Individuals are also arriving on planes directly from Eritrea, particularly women and the elderly, to seek asylum and medical care because of a lack of specialist treatments in Eritrea and the inability to travel to Khartoum for these services since the outbreak of conflict.¹⁴³

For others, **it is a location for long-term stays, providing a location where those fatigued from repeated displacement can stay in relatively secure conditions.** Family members in the diaspora were supposedly encouraging their previously dispersed relatives to congregate in Kampala, and to start businesses there, to avoid sending more remittances to individuals spread across multiple different countries. One KII living and working as a human rights activist in Uganda noted that it had also become a destination for Eritreans who were disgruntled with the high living costs and restrictive, often racist, migration policies in Europe and North America. They were said to be buying plots of land to farm, investing in real estate, and starting enterprises given the lower costs and higher rate of return on investment compared to their previous places of residence.

Eritreans reside in Uganda with a variety of, and sometimes multiple, legal statuses. Eritreans may have refugee status in case an opportunity arises for resettlement while retaining an Eritrean passport. This passport does not necessarily provide them with any protection or support from the Eritrean government, but it makes it much easier for them to access employment visas, and hence work opportunities, in other countries (South Africa, the UAE, Zambia and Angola were mentioned by respondents).¹⁴⁴ To retain the capacities and investment potential of this population, however, the Ugandan government has opened an office in Kampala specifically for Eritreans to provide them with information about how to register a business in Uganda and about what rights they have within the country.

Eritreans arriving in Uganda have nonetheless faced challenges, including in having their asylum claims recognised by the Ugandan government. While the first arrivals to Uganda, who tended to submit claims based on religious or political persecution, had higher success rates,¹⁴⁵ more recently, Eritreans had struggled to be granted refugee status. Concerted lobbying from UNHCR in recent years has both reversed this declining trend, meaning that recognition rates for Eritreans are back at approximately 98 percent,¹⁴⁶ and pushed to clear the backlog of Eritrean claims through an expedited system, given the largest number of unprocessed asylum applications in Uganda are from Eritreans.

Eritreans arriving from Israel and Saudi Arabia have also noted the challenges of having their asylum claims accepted by the Ugandan Office for the Prime Minister (OPM), which handles applications for refugee status within Uganda. They cite being told that in their previous countries of residence they were, and thus remain, economic migrants. Such a position is both unsupported by international refugee law and fails to recognise that Eritreans in both locations were either explicitly or effectively barred from accessing asylum.

These situations have contributed to corruption within the asylum system. Respondents reported being asked for money by translators and informal brokers as well as staff.¹⁴⁷ The going rate for refugee status at OPM in 2024 was said to be around 1200 USD if individuals did not want to wait multiple years to hear back on their claims. With many Eritreans travelling to Uganda expressly to capitalize on an opportunity for resettlement elsewhere, they are often willing to pay for refugee status as just another cost associated with an onward ‘process’. Furthermore, Eritreans have been associated with wealthier transnational connections, which makes extorting them appear more valuable.

Respondents noted that the growth in the Eritrean population in Kampala was also creating problems. One interlocutor said that monthly rents that were roughly 80 USD in 2022 were now 325 USD. Landlords capitalised on the fact that Eritreans had access to remittances and their desires to live in particular parts of the city, such as those close to Eritrean Orthodox and Pentecostal Churches, and in Eritrean-only compounds. Food and water costs in Eritrean-majority areas were said to be at least double the prices in other parts of the city, which also pushed Ugandans out of these neighbourhoods. As such, the general cost of living for Eritreans in Kampala is thought to have risen nearly five-fold since before COVID-19.¹⁴⁸

143 KII living and working in Uganda as a human rights activist supporting displaced Eritreans.

144 Ibid.

145 Cole, G. (2018) Op Cit.

146 Statistics from a KII working for an international organisation in Uganda.

147 Cole, G. (2018) Op Cit.

148 KII living and working in Uganda as a human rights activist supporting displaced Eritreans.

As Eritreans living in Kampala as urban refugees are not entitled to support from UNHCR, this has made life extremely hard for those with no access to remittances. They must support themselves in a job market that is insecure and low paid. Respondents felt that the increasing stresses associated with price inflation, compounded by the trauma that most Eritreans have experienced to reach Uganda, have contributed to several recent and tragic suicide cases in Kampala.

As expected, the growth in the Eritrean population has also turned Kampala into a major, and lucrative, hub for smugglers. They are facilitating both overland travel to locations such as Libya and access to passports that enable travel to places in Europe via routes that respondents noted took individuals first through Russia, Belarus,¹⁴⁹ the UAE, and Turkey.

The desirability of Kampala as a place of refuge is reflected in the fact that the country saw 11,000 new Eritrean arrivals in the first half of 2024.¹⁵⁰ A large number of these were thought to be Eritreans from Khartoum who could not easily relocate within Sudan after April 2023. The Ugandan government has sought to connect their files in Uganda to their refugee status in Sudan, however, to provide them with automatic recognition upon arrival in a process that respondents considered to have been relatively successful. The situation for those within this group who were already under a resettlement process in Sudan, however, is less clear. There are allegedly up to 12,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians who were in the resettlement pipeline to Canada in Khartoum who are now in Uganda trying to establish how they can re-activate the process.

The Ugandan government has been relatively tolerant of recent arrivals, including through issuing a government directive that no Eritreans should be deported. There are small indications that discontent is rising, however, with parliamentarians raising questions about whether the country can continue to accommodate Eritreans at the rate that they are arriving and in the context of them reshaping parts of Kampala's urban economy.¹⁵¹ This raises the need for international organisations to continue lobbying on behalf of this caseload to keep protection space in Uganda open, and to show the broader Kampala community how they stand to benefit. Initiatives such as the World Bank's Uganda Support to the Municipal Infrastructure Development Program and the Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project, through which the World Bank channelled roughly one billion USD to Uganda's refugee hosting districts,¹⁵² provide potential blueprints to support this agenda.

South Sudan

South Sudan has been a key destination for Eritreans looking for work for at least the past decade, particularly since the country gained independence in July 2011. This paved the way for investment and development to enter the country, and Eritreans travelled to South Sudan to secure lucrative contracts with humanitarian organisations who had flooded into the newly independent country. Their workers required hotels, restaurants, transport, and goods that Eritrean businesspeople were quick to provide, leveraging their transnational contacts to establish new supply chains.

Worsening insecurity and civil strife from the beginning of 2014, however, combined with limited social services (particularly healthcare and education) and a tough climate changed its desirability as a destination for Eritreans. Research conducted in Kampala in 2017-2018 revealed that families responded to these changing conditions by splitting up: mothers and children were sent to stay in more stable and secure settings like Kampala, while husbands remained in South Sudan to earn money to support their family outside of the country.¹⁵³ Young, single Eritreans also appeared to be attracted to the 'danger money' that was available in Juba during more volatile periods. While those in Uganda and surrounding countries would apply for asylum, those in South Sudan tended to reside there using either their Eritrean passports or informally.

More recently, Eritreans are increasingly travelling to South Sudan, despite widespread intercommunal violence and a humanitarian crisis,¹⁵⁴ and investing in long-term infrastructures that suggest a commitment to community-building in Juba, if not the whole country. In July 2024, for example, the Eritrean Orthodox Church completed a 2 million USD church in Juba as a 'gesture of peace, stability and development in the country.'¹⁵⁵ In the opening ceremony, the

149 BBC News (2024, April 27) [Poland minister denies 'pushback' of pregnant Eritrean woman at border.](#)

150 KII working for an international organisation in Uganda.

151 The Observer (2024, February 28) [A case for refugees: regardless!](#)

152 World Bank (2024) [Enhancing inclusive growth and resilience with support to Uganda's development-focused refugee approach.](#)

153 Cole, G. (2018) Op Cit.

154 HRW (2024) [World Report – South Sudan: Events of 2023.](#)

155 African press (2024, July 29) [Eritrean Orthodox Christians inaugurate \\$2 million church in Juba.](#)

representative for the Eritrean community in Juba stated that 'The Eritrean community are building the church to this size because of the trust they have for this land', indicating their desire to consolidate their position there. Multiple South Sudanese Ministers have praised Eritreans' contributions to development efforts in the country and encouraged their engagement.¹⁵⁶

Outside of Juba, and since the outbreak of fighting in Sudan, Eritreans have faced challenges in moving freely throughout the country. Numerous reports have documented the situation of Eritreans who had arrived at Paloich airport in the north of the country in April and May of 2023 having fled from Sudan and become stranded there. Acting South Sudanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Deng Dau Deng told the BBC that Eritreans had been given the same instructions as other foreign nationals (e.g. Somalis, Ethiopians, and Ugandans), which was that their embassies should take responsibility for repatriating them as they were banned from taking onward flights to Juba.¹⁵⁷ This created specific difficulties for Eritreans because the Eritrean government did not take responsibility for repatriating them to Asmara, and there have been no reception facilities for Eritreans in South Sudan. Eritreans who had made their way to Juba found themselves being sent back to Paloich on flights with nowhere legally or safely to go.¹⁵⁸ This underscores the vulnerability of Eritreans when they have no protective authority to turn to. Respondents detailed the dangerous, expensive, and fragmented journeys of Eritreans travelling from Sudan to Juba. This has included travelling by boat from Malakal to Bor, and then overland to Juba, to avoid being refused admission onto planes in locations such as Paloich. Others registered with IOM in camps in Renk in northern South Sudan but quickly paid immigration authorities and smugglers to move on to Juba, and from there to Kampala or elsewhere.

Tekle (21, Kampala), for example, managed to board a cargo plane in Paloich to Juba but was arrested by police along with the other Eritreans on board the flight. His description of being detained, being sent back to Paloich, and finally reaching Kampala highlighted the multiple challenges of Eritreans seeking to transit the country. These include: the lack of protection provided by the Eritrean government, which only offered to support them in Juba if they agreed to return to Eritrea; experiences of extortion and deception at the hands of smugglers and Eritrean hotel owners who inflated prices for the growing numbers of Eritreans; unreliable and fragmented smuggling networks; and the overextension of transnational networks as family overseas and in Eritrea become exhausted by the constant demand for money to 'unlock' the next stage of his journey.

Kenya

Reports of Eritreans being intercepted as they transit Kenya towards Uganda or along the Southern Route¹⁵⁹ suggest an increase in the number of Eritreans since 2018 both moving through and staying in Kenya on a longer-term basis. As of April 2024, there were 3,583 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers registered in the country.¹⁶⁰ That said, the majority passing through Kenya will not register, as registration happens largely in the refugee camps in northern Kenya, and results in individuals being expected to remain within these spaces, which several KIIs said that most Eritreans were unwilling to do.

The process of transiting through Kenya is reported to be extremely insecure and heavily influenced by collusion between Kenyan law enforcement and brokers.¹⁶¹ Several KIIs and respondents spoke of how police routinely arrest and detain individuals looking to cross the border between Ethiopia and Kenya, and that there are almost no protection-sensitive mechanisms in the region to ensure that people can apply for asylum if they would like to, to identify victims of trafficking, or to coordinate repatriation efforts as needed. Kenyan police instead take Eritreans to courts in border areas on charges of illegal entry,¹⁶² often before individuals have been given the 30 days they are legally entitled to make themselves known to the nearest reception centre or government administrative office.¹⁶³ While the courts have been told that they should contact the Department of Refugee Services to assess whether individuals have asylum claims or not, this safeguard is frequently skipped and Eritreans are not always identified as asylum seekers, particularly when there are concerns about whether they have been complicit in smuggling operations.

156 Ibid.

157 BBC (2023, May 22) [Sudan conflict: The Eritrean refugees caught between two crises](#).

158 Ibid.

159 For examples, see reports in MMC (2024) [MMC Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen QUARTER 3 2024](#); MMC (2023) [MMC Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen QUARTER 4 2023](#); MMC (2021) [MMC East Africa & Yemen QUARTER 4 2021](#).

160 UNHCR (2024) [Kenya: registered refugees and asylum-seekers \(as of 30 April 2024\)](#).

161 East African Herald (2023, October 10) [Kenyan police officers found trafficking 13 foreigners](#).

162 Garowe Online (2023, September 12) [Eritrean refugees arrested in Kenya, facing repatriation](#); The Star (2023, December 1) [63 Eritreans arrested in Wajir for being illegally in Kenya](#).

163 Republic of Kenya (2021) [The Refugees Act, 2021](#).

One repercussion of this policing dynamic at the border has been the growth of a smuggling economy centred around prisons in Nairobi where Eritreans are held. Eritreans can only be released from prison to UNHCR or the Department of Refugee Services, which rarely have immediate capacity to receive them. Eritrean smugglers have stepped in to bribe their release from police custody, at a reported cost of roughly 2,000 USD, before putting them on buses to continue their journeys to the Ugandan or Tanzanian borders. Several police officers in Nairobi are currently on trial for a prison break in July 2024 involving 12 Eritreans who were supposedly supported 'by insiders' to escape.¹⁶⁴ One KII providing legal aid and research to support displaced Eritreans summarized the perversity of this situation:

"People have to move, right? And so, if they have to move, we either allow a situation where little bits of criminality become an international criminal syndicate, or we try and cut off this business model and respond holistically and reinstate the previous process where we do have agencies, government and non-government organisations at the border [with Ethiopia and Uganda] to work with communities. Otherwise, we currently have a system where arresting Eritreans in Kenya is a "business" – the "arrest business" between the police and brokers".

In December 2023, the Horn of Africa Civil Society Forum sent a petition to the Kenyan Commissioner for Refugee Affairs 'to uphold the rights of asylum seekers entering Kenya to avail themselves of their right to apply for asylum and to be accorded protection from persecution for being in the country illegally as guaranteed under international law and the 1951 Refugee Convention'.¹⁶⁵ The report notes that Sudanese and Eritreans are being charged 'as being unlawfully in the country...even though many of those so charged are already registered as refugees either in Sudan, now a war zone, or in Ethiopia, also a country impacted by multiple conflicts.' They note that refugees taken to the Joint Refugee Centre have been taken from this place both willingly by smugglers and unwillingly by traffickers, highlighting the precarity of Eritreans in Kenya.

The routes used by Eritreans transiting through Kenya on route to Uganda and Southern Africa are extremely dangerous. Respondents spoke of a "sea crossing" (Lake Turkana) in Northern Kenya where people have drowned.¹⁶⁶ In early October 2024, there were reports of seven Eritreans drowning when a boat of migrants capsized whilst trying to cross a river in Northern Kenya. The authors of this report have been sent footage of the dangers of this passage.

Crossing from Kenya to Uganda presents further challenges. The brother of one KII who had been in the Eritrean military for 20 years said that the boda boda ride across the Ugandan border, with three people crammed on each motorbike, was the most treacherous journey he had ever been on. One respondent spoke of a river near Kapenguria, close to the border with Uganda, that their convoy was forced to cross in adverse weather conditions. Three individuals drowned in the flood waters. Respondents also spoke of being forced by smugglers to undertake large stretches of this journey on foot without adequate food and water, which heightened their vulnerability to robbery by armed militias in the borderlands of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. This route is made more dangerous because it is used to smuggle other contraband across the borders, and so the movement of people is caught up in the dangerous economies that surround these other flows.

There has been little empirical research conducted on the situation of Eritreans who remain in Kenya. One KII supporting displaced Eritreans suggested that Eritreans had fewer social resources and networks in Kenya, which meant greater challenges in navigating asylum and resettlement processes despite Embassies in Kenya being generally larger than in Uganda. A new Directive from Kenya's Ministry of Interior requiring refugees to surrender their passports and any other legal travel documents, or risk losing their refugee status and being deported, may make it less desirable for Eritreans to remain in Kenya.¹⁶⁷ The same KII stated that they regularly hear stories from Nairobi-based Eritreans about the slow pace and dysfunction of international organisations. This perception drives corruption as individuals are more likely to pay bribes for services based on the (wrong) assumption that there may be no other way of securing them.

164 CBS News (2024, August 21) [Kenya police suspected of helping alleged "psychopathic serial killer" Collins Jumaisi escape from jail.](#)

165 Petition received by Department of Refugee Services, 4 December 2023. Shared with authors privately.

166 Standard Media (2023, December 28) [Bodies of five foreign nationals found floating on Lake Turkana identified.](#)

167 Hiran Online (2024, October 12) [Kenya orders refugees to surrender passports by October or face deportation.](#)

Dubai

The latest figures, albeit a decade out of date, suggest that there were almost 18,000 Eritreans living in Dubai in 2015.¹⁶⁸ As it is impossible to attain an entry visa for Dubai on a Convention Travel Document, all of these individuals would have travelled there and regularised their status through their Eritrean passports.¹⁶⁹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that many individuals entered the country on work visas obtained from Sudan in the pre-2018 period and then, when the Eritrean Embassy opened in Ethiopia in 2018, a large number were said to have gone there to sign the apology form and obtain a passport before applying for a work visa from the UAE embassy in Addis Ababa.¹⁷⁰

Dubai has been described as an option primarily for wealthier Eritreans, who are able to pay the 8,500-9,000 UAE Dirhams (2,314 – 2,450 USD) to get their basic residency status. **There is a population of long-term Eritrean residents composed mainly of businesspeople and investors who have achieved self-sufficiency within the country.** They exist alongside a more transient population who travel to the UAE hoping to become long-term residents but fail to do so, or who have shorter term ambitions to earn capital that can be remitted or invested elsewhere. Those who cannot establish themselves in Dubai often end up returning to places like Kampala, Cairo, or Addis Ababa after a few years, having struggled to stay financially afloat in the strong Emirati economy. They rely on capital from relatives overseas to cover the initial costs of an Eritrean passport, visa, rent, and identifying a business or employment opportunity, but then never recuperate those costs.¹⁷¹

There are also Eritreans who travel to the Gulf only to facilitate their onward travel to other destinations, be this through legal resettlement channels or emerging smuggling routes. Transnational church networks, for example, have been active in supporting individuals to resettle to Canada from the UAE through the 'Groups of 5' scheme. Respondents also spoke of Dubai as the first step on elaborate smuggling routes into Europe via Belarus and Turkey and into the United States via Mexico.

Given Eritreans' mobility to the UAE through legal channels, it is unlikely that their ability to reside there will be withdrawn. Emiratisation policies have also charted a much less aggressive course compared to the Saudisation policies discussed above. From a protection perspective, **one of the primary concerns for Eritreans in the UAE is that their failure to renew their work visas will result in them being deported to Eritrea,** rather than the country from which they originally accessed their Eritrean passport and Emirati visa.

Resettlement

UNHCR resettlement programmes

Resettlement represents a durable solution for a small minority of Eritreans. While there were 17,390 submissions for resettlement of Eritreans from 2020 to July 2024, only 8,343 departed for resettlement.¹⁷² Of these, the majority moved through a UNHCR sponsored resettlement scheme from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. A thousand Eritreans were also resettled through the Emergency Transit Mechanism from Niger during this period, averaging roughly 200 per year and making up over 50 percent of all refugees resettled from the country, and a thousand others from Rwanda, including those who had similarly been relocated there from Libya through the Emergency Transit Mechanism. Almost 900 refugees were resettled from Israel between 2020 and 2024, primarily to the United States. The fact that UNHCR only resettled 39 individuals from Uganda over the same period provides some indication as to the unlikelihood of this 'process' facilitating Eritreans' departure from Uganda unless they find a private sponsor.¹⁷³

168 United Nations Population Division (2015) [Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by Destination and Origin](#).

169 KII based in Dubai conducting research with displaced Eritreans.

170 Ibid.

171 Ibid.

172 UNHCR. [Refugee Data Finder](#)

173 Bespoke statistics were obtained using searches in [UNHCR's Refugee Data Finder](#).

Figure 3. Top countries of asylum from where Eritreans have been resettled (January 2020-July 2024)

Country of Asylum	Number of Eritreans resettled 2020 – July 2024
Ethiopia	2,160
Sudan	1,218
Egypt	1,204
Niger	1,050
Rwanda	1,009
Israel	883
Uganda	39
All	8,343

Source: [UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder](#)

Figure 4. Top destinations for UNHCR sponsored resettlement of Eritreans (January 2020-July 2024)

Country of Resettlement	Number of Eritreans resettled 2020 – July 2024
United States of America	2,607
Sweden	1,922
Canada	1,484
Norway	604
Germany	457
France	389
All	8,340

Source: [UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder](#)

State-supported private resettlement programmes

Beyond these statistics, however, and **of greater numerical significance, are the state-supported private resettlement initiatives operating in Canada and newly launched in the United States.** Many Eritreans' desire to access these schemes, or to reactivate resettlement claims that were disrupted due to the breakdown in humanitarian systems across Sudan and Ethiopia, were primary determinants of respondents' decision making, and made cities particularly desirable destinations because people could more quickly access all the services needed to create and then capitalise on an opportunity for resettlement.

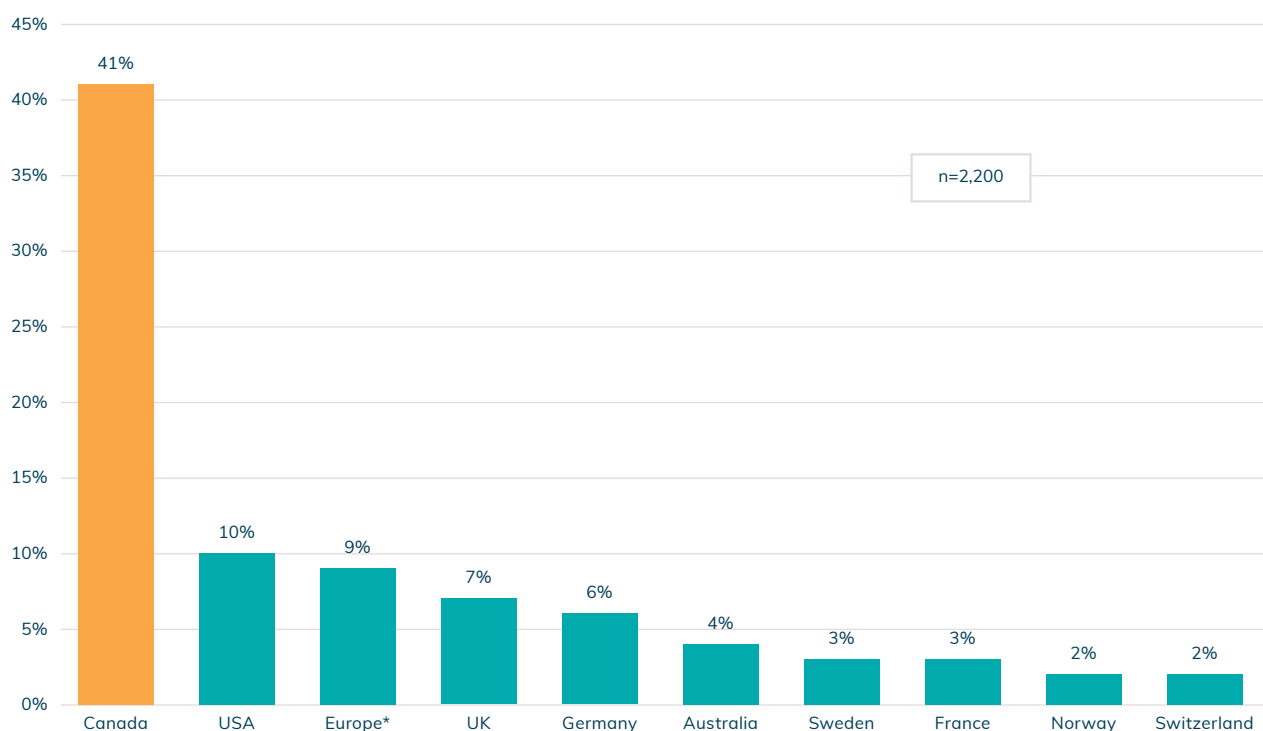
Kokob, for example, started his private process to Canada while he was in Khartoum. When the war there broke out, he stayed in the city longer than many of his peers – and at significant personal and physical expense - in the hope that he could push through his resettlement process. When it became clear that this would be impossible, he spent around 3,000 USD on smugglers to take him to Kampala so that he could continue the process from there. At the time of our interview, he was awaiting a flight to Canada.

Kobob (26, Kampala)

The **groups of five (G5) resettlement scheme** allows any group of five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents to sponsor a refugee from overseas to resettle in Canada.¹⁷⁴ Between January 2015 and August 2024, 43,800 Eritreans entered Canada through this route, making them the largest group being privately resettled to Canada.¹⁷⁵ Over the same period, 4,480 Eritreans came through government-assisted resettlement programmes to Canada, indicating the sheer strength of community mobilisation to support Eritreans.

The success of this pathway is also reflected in respondents' assertions that **Canada is the preferred destination for Eritreans**. Moreover, within MMC's 4Mi data gathered with Eritreans from 2021 - 2023, the popularity of Canada is clear; 39% of 2,200 respondents stated Canada as their preferred destination. The suspension of the G5 scheme for at least a year from 29 November 2024 to 'help prevent further growth in the application inventory, with the goal of achieving shorter and more predictable processing times for applicants and for sponsors'¹⁷⁶ will likely have ramifications for the decision-making of Eritreans, as well as the living conditions for those awaiting resettlement or who had pinned their hopes on this possibility.

Figure 5. Eritreans' responses to: 'What is your preferred destination?' (Top 10 preferred destinations)



Source: [MMC 4Mi data](#)

In 2023, the **then US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken introduced a new resettlement route into the USA to complement the work of resettlement agencies. This route – named Welcome Corps – has thus far primarily enabled sponsorship groups to support individuals** selected by the American government to enter the US.¹⁷⁷ The second stage of the scheme launched in December 2023 and enabled these same groups to resettle refugees that they have selected, laying the groundwork for community-based resettlement efforts similar to those seen in Canada. With just 100 refugees of any nationality arriving in the United States during the programme's first year, despite the more than 15,000 Americans volunteering during this period to resettle more than 7,000 refugees, the scale-up may take time.¹⁷⁸ However, the Welcome Corps programme is suspended at the time of writing (March 2025) as soon after starting his second term, **US President Donald Trump signed the Executive Order "Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program," suspending all case processing of refugee admissions to the United States.**

174 Government of Canada. [Groups of five](#).

175 Government of Canada. [Groups of Five: about the process](#). Marginally fewer Syrians came through this route (43,300 individuals), but notably Eritrea has never received the same degree of humanitarian coverage or support as the Syrian refugee 'crisis'.

176 Government of Canada (2024) [Temporary pause on intake of refugee sponsorship applications from groups of five and community sponsors](#).

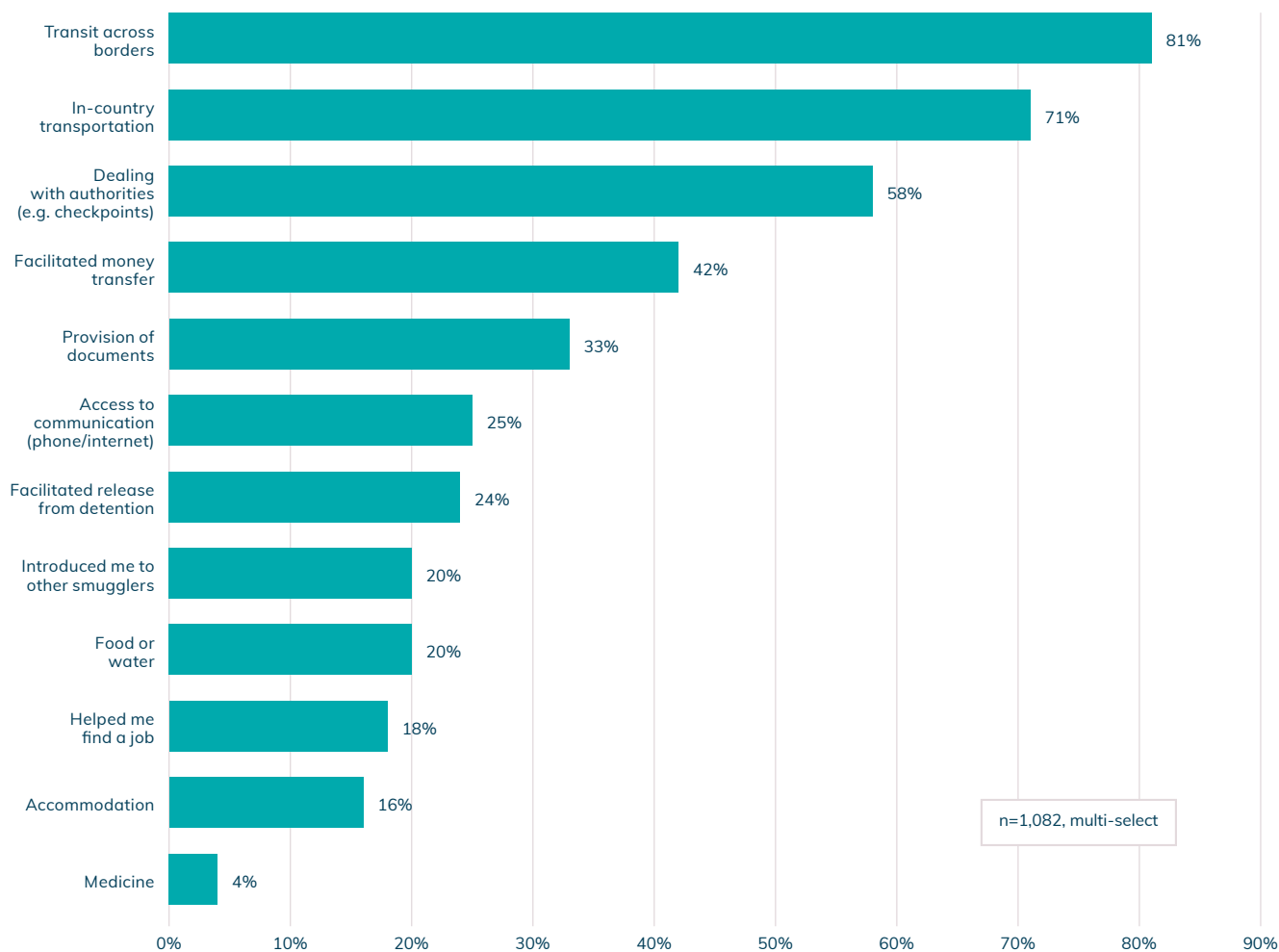
177 US Department of State (2023) [Fact Sheet – Launch of Welcome Corps- Private Sponsorship of Refugees](#).

178 US Department of State (2024) [Welcome Corps: First Year of Refugee Private Sponsorship a Big Success](#).

Shifts in smuggling networks

The overwhelming majority of the journeys described by Eritrean respondents experiencing secondary displacement and mobility were enabled by a variety of middlemen, guides, drivers, smugglers, and other 'service' providers (hereafter smugglers). This is in line with data collected via MMC's 4Mi survey. Some 1,862 Eritreans were interviewed from 2019 - 2024 across Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia and the majority (58 percent) used a smuggler at least once in their journeys. The survey also shows the variety of services provided by smugglers on the way.

Figure 6. Eritreans' responses to: 'What services did the smuggler provide you with?'



Source: [MMC 4Mi data](#)

The services, operational locations, and modus operandi of smugglers with whom our respondents interacted greatly differed. Rather than speaking about established networks or singular routes, for example from Addis Ababa to Kampala, many respondents highlighted a patchwork of loosely connected actors exhibiting varying degrees of professionalisation and coordination.¹⁷⁹ Different geographic areas and "crossings", be they within or between countries, showed different dynamics due to the volatility of the political and security situations. Respondents mentioned Eritreans, Ethiopian Tigrayans and Amhara, Sudanese, and Libyans involved in these networks.

179 Belloni, M., & Tshabalala, X. (2019). On the key distinction between trafficking and smuggling: Views and implications from the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa; Ayalew Mengiste, T. (2018) [Refugee protections from below: Smuggling in the Eritrea-Ethiopia context](#).

Peoples' experiences with these smugglers were almost always mixed, as has been widely reported in the literature. [4Mi data](#), for instance, shows that over 60 percent of Eritreans interviewed across East and North Africa agreed with the statement "smugglers helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country". At the same time, 40 percent felt smugglers intentionally misled them. Instances of deceit, abandonment, robbery, and violence were ubiquitously recounted, but respondents also spoke of smugglers' generosity and reliability. One respondent, for instance, told us about the support provided to her by a smuggler who had assisted her in crossing from Keren in Eritrea to Kassala, Shagarab, and then Khartoum in Sudan:

"There are many types of smugglers; some treat you badly, while others are more humane. That's why I mentioned the smuggler who brought us [to Khartoum] was quite nice. They provided us with food and dried fruits...In every town we stayed in, the smugglers paid for our accommodation, and we would spend the night there. Once we reached the camp, the smugglers had nothing to do with us; we were on our own. We didn't mention their names, but luckily one of the brokers knew people living in the camp and connected me with them. They took me in, let me stay with them for two weeks, and cared for me while I was ill because there was no hospital in the camp. They provided all the medication to the people around me and instructed them on how to give it to me. I have vivid memories of when I was being hospitalized, but later I learned that the smuggler paid for some of the bills".

Ruta (31, Addis Ababa)

While all services and actions connected with the illegal passage of international borders are labelled in policy analysis and media reports as smuggling, it is important to account for the continuum of family, community, and peer practices that enable the crossing of borders and that have little to do with 'criminal networks'. These are often solidarity practices that allow people to move when mobility is the main strategy for survival.¹⁸⁰ Kibrom's story of moving from Tigray to Addis Ababa when the war broke out illustrates how travellers negotiated opportunities for themselves and others despite increasing movement controls, and how what is normally considered as a 'smuggling service' is instead sometimes a generalised practice that can be performed by refugees as an act of assistance and not necessarily by 'professional smugglers':

"To travel to Addis, I withdrew money from my account when the banks opened. Many Eritreans were left behind because of money. Additionally, it was not easy to pass checkpoints to Addis for Eritreans at that time. They were telling us to go back to refugee camps. I used the main road through Kobbo to Addis Ababa. In my first attempt, they sent me back. Then I tried again, and this time I met one of the guards in private and explained to him my conditions. He understood me and let me pass with a small amount of money. Later, I helped many Eritreans by connecting them with that check point guard and they were passing the checkpoint paying him".

Kibrom (27, South Africa)

In recent years, and like all the local and transnational networks supporting onward mobility from the region, smuggling networks have evolved. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, corroborated the impact of conflicts on smuggling in May 2024, stating that: 'Armed conflicts and insecurity in the region have forced Eritreans to shift from the traditional routes and transit through new and lesser-known areas. This situation has pushed an increasing number of asylum-seekers to resort to smuggling networks and has compounded their vulnerability to trafficking in persons and kidnapping.'¹⁸¹

The **'overall deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in the Horn of Africa'**¹⁸² has thus both pushed more Eritreans towards needing smugglers to facilitate their journeys and heightened the risks for people procuring these services as violence and shifting political alliances have disrupted well-rooted smuggling networks (see section on Libya). Prior to outbreaks of violence in Ethiopia (pre-November 2020) and Sudan (pre-April 2023), relative stability in the systems had coincided with smugglers' wanting to retain their 'market' through a long-term emphasis on reliability, reasonable prices, and a good reputation.¹⁸³ Two KIIIs with extensive expertise on smuggling and trafficking in the region spoke of how such networks had collapsed with the start of the wars, including because the smugglers

180 Zhang, S. X. et al. (2018) [Crimes of solidarity in mobility: Alternative views on migrant smuggling](#).

181 UNGA, A/HRC/56/24. Op Cit, para. 72.

182 Ibid, para. 72

183 Belloni, M. (2019) The Big Gamble: The migration of Eritreans to Europe.

themselves had fled parts of Sudan and Ethiopia that they considered too dangerous or unpredictable to operate in and because their access to capital had dried up with telecommunications blackouts and restrictions on the ability of 'clients' to access capital.

Across the interviews, it was clear that **the demand for smugglers had expanded as legal routes had been shut down in the context of instability, conflict, and border enforcements**. Numerous respondents detailed how regular mobility within countries and across borders in the Horn of Africa has been curtailed by both fighting taking place around main roads and because of the emergence of new military controls. Checkpoints were said to have proliferated across Sudan and Ethiopia to limit the movement of populations into areas controlled by other groups, making journeys that were previously straightforward now extremely complicated. This reduced the options for regular, and more affordable, transport links, which, even if it did not necessarily push individuals towards smugglers, had made their journeys longer and more expensive. In Sudan, for example, it is estimated that 90 percent of road travel has stopped due to insecurity and the unaffordable price of petrol.¹⁸⁴ Tesfom, a 37-year-old refugee who had lived in Khartoum since 2014, described how a regular journey before the war from Khartoum to Egypt was extended by these new stops:

"I left from Khartoum to Atbara. We used a bus. There were checkpoints and searching at every point. It was too much, I was frightened. I had nothing that they could take, but I have seen soldiers take earphones from the ears of people - imagine an earphone?! If they have money or gold, they take it without any question. In Khartoum, it was the opposition who were robbing people. Then, out of Khartoum, the government soldiers did the same thing. It took us three days [to get from Khartoum to Egypt]"

Tesfom (37, Egypt)

The inability to access necessary funds had also curtailed the ability of many respondents to move. In Khartoum the conflict significantly disrupted infrastructures and communication, which meant that those who had money tied up in bank accounts or assets were left immobilised, while remittances dried up as senders overseas had no way to reach family members in Sudan as cash transfer agencies closed or stopped functioning.¹⁸⁵ Lete described the stress of being in the diaspora trying to support family in Khartoum at this time:

"When the war started, communication was cut - we did not know whether our relatives were alive or not. We had no idea how they were going to escape from the war. More than that, it was very hard to send them money. All the banks were closed. My family was using the cash they had in their hand. It was very stressful. More than the war, we were also asking what are they going to eat if they finished their money?"

Lete (30, Norway)

One Khartoum-based KII researching recent displacement dynamics in Sudan said that this had particularly affected larger families who had lived long-term in Sudan and did not possess the technical and bureaucratic knowledge to transfer the large amounts of cash needed to pay various brokers to get family members out of the country safely. Access to funding has been even more debilitating for families with young children or elderly parents who are far less able to cover large distances (e.g. to places like Kampala) or dangerous conditions (e.g. across the desert to Egypt) and for whom the cost of travelling is multiplied by the number of people who need to move.

The disruption of smuggling networks has also led respondents to approach unknown entities to transport them from A to B. In South Sudan, respondents spoke of having travelled from the Sudanese border to Juba in largely ad hoc and unprotected ways as they could not find smugglers from within the Eritrean community to support them. The networks they did use were fragmented, less experienced and exploitative. In the absence of smuggling networks with a vested financial interest in their safe passage, Eritreans were more exposed to extortion by armed groups and local communities (see the section on South Sudan).

184 Africanews (2024, August 13) [In Sudan, war has brought transport to a standstill](#).

185 NRC (2024, May 13) [Joint statement: Telecommunications blackout in Sudan](#); Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker (2023) [The Banking System during and after the War](#).

At best, 'new' smugglers were less experienced operators in conflict-affected locations and had not established themselves in the market, leading to confrontations with other competitors. Freweini is now in Kampala. She fled from Khartoum to Kassala, then to Metema and Addis Ababa. After staying two months unregistered in Addis Ababa, she decided to go to Kampala on a route through Kenya and described her journey as follows:

"They took us in boda to cross the border to Moyale...The bodas before us crossed the check point, they were running fast, then before we crossed the checkpoint, they lowered the bar to stop us, then we hit the bar and fell hard. We had speed, I lost consciousness for a while when we fell and broke my arms and bruised everywhere. Then the police took us, but the broker negotiated with them and paid money. They searched us and took everything. Then the police let us go, however, another group with boda wanted to kidnap us. It was like a movie. The boda driver was telling us to hold him strong, not to fall. He said I will leave you if you fall. They were rival groups. About seven bodas were following us and wanted to snatch us... There was speed and the road is rough. Yooooo ... it was like a movie. Then we reached a place where our transporters had guns and made the rivals escape".

Freweini (23, Kampala).

At worst, new smugglers were thriving off the collapse of an established market by intentionally deceiving their clients. This included examples of selling them on to human traffickers in locations such as Libya regardless of these Eritreans' preferred destinations. One KII conducting research with Eritreans displaced by the conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan spoke of how 'new', non-Eritrean smugglers had different ways of negotiating with 'clients' and different cultural expectations of how transactions would be carried out, such as when and how payments would be completed. This further heightened Eritreans' vulnerability as previous exchanges with certain major players had followed more predictable 'codes of conduct.' Relatedly, because these new actors' networks and knowledge were less extensive, journeys appeared more fragmented as each smuggler operated over a shorter route, drawing on more localised experiences and contacts.

KIIs and respondents shared stories of smuggling routes being taken over by traffickers. As highlighted in the case of Libya, for instance, EU anti-smuggling policies have connected with shifting power dynamics among militia groups in the country leading to the systematic detention and trafficking of Eritrean nationals and other migrants on the move. A KII researching trafficking of Eritreans in Libya from 2014 - 2021 reported that they had seen a clear evolution in that Eritreans who had previously remained in Libya for a maximum of one month were, by the end of their research, instead caught for years in an endless spiral of abuses fuelled by Libyan detention centres and traffickers collaborating to make money through ransoms.

Photo credit:

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Children in Hamdayete, a city in Sudan hosting Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees. Hamdayete, Sudan, 22 June 2021.



Conclusions

Policy makers have been interested to understand why the number of Eritreans crossing the Mediterranean Sea and arriving in Europe has dropped off since the early and mid-2010s, when this population constituted the largest number of sea arrivals to Europe's southern shores. While this may seem a straightforward question, the answer is far from simple. This is not least because there has been a disproportionate reduction in Eritreans crossing the Mediterranean compared to other nationalities, showing that this change does not only lie in EU externalisation policies or treacherous conditions in Libya.

The most plausible answer is that a combination of many factors led to the sharp drop in the number of Eritreans crossing Mediterranean Sea to Europe, including: a reduction in the number of Eritreans leaving their country; a disruption of the smuggling networks – primarily those in Libya – that used to facilitate Eritrean onward movement; the extreme risks that Eritreans – more than other nationalities - face in Libya; the high risks along previously used migration routes through Ethiopia and Sudan due to conflict; the opportunities, despite challenges, offered by emerging places of refuge in the region, especially in cities; and the hope to access resettlement to a third country from those places, instead of embarking on costly and dangerous journeys.

This landscape is nonetheless unlikely to remain stable for several reasons: the root causes of Eritrean migration remain unchanged as conditions in Eritrea have not improved, and rather worsened; the closure of legal resettlement schemes is likely to push Eritreans on riskier irregular pathways; assistance and access to protection in North, East and the Horn of Africa has dramatically deteriorated in the last five years with conflicts and reduced humanitarian budgets; and authorities in the region, at national and municipal levels, are beginning to question how many more displaced people they can absorb. Respondents for this research repeatedly reported a lack of basic assistance and safety in camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, arbitrary detentions and deportation in cities, and increasing challenges with registering their asylum claims in the region.

For all these reasons, and in the context of a diaspora network that continues to support displaced Eritreans despite accumulating crises (see 'Shifting experiences of displacement' report), **it is likely that Eritreans will continue to seek new routes to reach safety in the region and beyond**. If met with increasingly restrictive migration and border policies along migration routes towards Europe, this could push people to undertake more dangerous journeys and create a further market for abusive smuggling and trafficking operations.

A more humane and rational approach would be to invest in both legal pathways and opportunities in the region that address the challenges outlined above. The private resettlement scheme offered in Canada provides a commendable model that harnesses the resources of citizens to support safe movement, but there are a range of other complementary legal pathways for mobility that governments in Europe and the Middle East should consider expanding or simplifying, including family reunification, work permits, and study visas. As the humanitarian and security situation in camps across the region continues to deteriorate, **greater support should be channelled to key cities** across the North, East and Horn of Africa to support displaced Eritreans' access to documentation, services and livelihoods, and to the authorities and organisations who are receiving and accommodating them.

Secondary displaced Eritreans also face a growing range of intersecting factors that are compounding their increasingly vulnerable position in the region and that require addressing in any humanitarian programming designed to support this population. These factors – including the impacts of shifting regional political allegiances, challenges in accessing relevant documentation, and overstretched diaspora networks - are discussed further in the second report in this series. The second report also contains the policy recommendations deriving from considerations raised throughout the two reports.

Annex I. Table of Eritrean Respondents

No.	Gender	Age	Ethnic background	Location of Interviewee	Location of previous residence	Full displacement history after leaving Eritrea	Year they left Eritrea	Current legal status
1	M	33	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa	2015	Registered
2	M	40	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Tigray - Amhara - Addis-Ababa	2018	Unregistered
3	F	58	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Shimelba - Shiraro - Adi Harush - Dabat	2015	Unregistered
4	M	32	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Sudan - Dabat	2013	Unregistered
5	F	23	Afar	Addis Ababa	Mai Aini, Tigray	Tigray - May Aini- Dabat- Afar camps	2009	Unregistered
6	M	26	Kunama	Addis Ababa	Shimelba, Tigray	Shimelba - Sudan - Dabat	2000	Unregistered
7	M	35	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Ethiopia - Uganda	2017	Resettled Canada
8	F	31	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia -Uganda		Unregistered
9	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan - South Sudan - Uganda		Registered
10	M	40	Saho	Cairo	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia	2015	Registered
11	F	30	Tigrinya	Addis Ababa	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia	2021	Unregistered
12	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Juba, Khartoum	Sudan - South Sudan - Uganda		Registered
13	F	31	Tigrinya	Addis Ababa	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia		Registered
14	M	31	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan - Ethiopia - Uganda		Registered
15	F	31	Tigre	Cairo	Khartoum	Sudan - Egypt	2021	Registered
16	M	38	Tigre	Cairo	Khartoum	Sudan - Eritrea - Egypt	2017	Registered
17	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia - Uganda		Registered
18	F	23	Tigrinya	Kampala	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia - Uganda	2018	Registered
19	M	30	Tigrinya	Kampala	Addis Ababa	Sudan - Ethiopia - Uganda		Registered
20	M	49	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Engurgur - Egypt	2009	Registered
21	M	24	Tigrinya	Kampala	Shire, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Uganda	2017	Registered
22	M	31	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Juba - Uganda	2016	Registered
23	M	24	Bilen	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Madani - Metemma - Addis Ababa - Uganda	2021	Registered
24	M	27	Tigrinya	South Africa	Mekelle, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Juba -South Africa	2017	Undocumented
25	M	21	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Sudan- Juba - Uganda	2022	With Police, not UNHCR
26	F	23	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Kassala - Metemma - Addis Ababa - Uganda	2018	Registered
27	M	20	Tigrinya	Addis Ababa	Shire, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa	2019	Unregistered
28	M	29	Tigrinya	South Africa	Humora, Tigray	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Juba - South Africa	2018	Undocumented
29	F	27	Tigrinya	Kampala	Khartoum	Khartoum - Kassala - Eritrea - Uganda	Born in Sudan	Refugee status
30	F	30	Bilen	Europe	Khartoum (not secondary displaced)	Sudan - Europe	2007	Obtained citizenship
31	F	24	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Egypt	2022	Undocumented
32	M	67	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Kassala - Eritrea - Khartoum - Egypt	1982	Refugee status
33	M	37	Tigrinya	Cairo	Khartoum	Khartoum - Egypt	2014	Refugee status
34	M	23	Tigrinya	Europe	Khartoum	Khartoum - Libya -Europe	2022	Asylum-seeker
35	M	23	Bilen	Europe	Tigray/Khartoum	Tigray - Addis Ababa - Shagarab - Khartoum - Libya - Europe	2019	Asylum-seeker
36	M	27	Tigrinya	South Africa	Khartoum	Khartoum - Juba - South Sudan - South Africa	2021	Unregistered
37	F	22	Tigrinya	Tripoli	Khartoum	Khartoum - Libya	2022	Unregistered



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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