

## AFRICA

# From the Horn of Africa to Southern Arabia: A Perilous Journey through War-Torn Yemen

SEPTEMBER 19, 2023

Throughout history, the Horn of Africa has occupied a prominent position in international migratory flows. As early as the twelfth century, modern-day Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti were connected to the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia by trade networks. Those trade routes soon became migratory routes as well, with people and goods moving across the Indian Ocean. However, under Arab-Muslim and European domination, the Horn was also connected with the rest of the world by the East African slave trade.

During the anti-colonial wars of the twentieth century, many from the Horn of Africa embarked on migratory journeys to escape the violence of those struggles. As the establishment of independent states was often followed by instability, poverty, and ethnic violence, outbound migration from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti continued well after the end of colonial rule.

Historically, migrants from the Horn of Africa looking for safety and prosperity abroad have primarily moved along three routes: the Eastern route that passes through Yemen and proceeds towards the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East; the Northern route that passes through Sudan, and either proceeds to Libya and on to Europe (Central Mediterranean Route) or to Egypt and Israel (Sinai Route); and the Southern route that passes through Kenya, Tanzania and further onwards to South Africa.

Migration towards Yemen from the Horn is thus an ancient phenomenon, an expression of the deep connection that has always existed between Eastern Africa and Yemen. While these migratory flows have existed for centuries, it was in the 1990s, in the context of the dramatic

political changes that took place in Ethiopia and Somalia, that increasingly [large numbers of migrants set on their way to Yemen](#).

For the past nine years, Yemen has been the theatre of a dramatic civil conflict spurred by the conquest of Sana'a by the Houthis, a Zaydi Shia armed group from the northern region of Saada. Since the war began, [many studies have focused on the migration of Yemenis to Africa](#), where many went in search of a safe place where to rebuild their lives. The reality, however, is that migratory flows have continued to take place (and perhaps surprisingly so) in the opposite direction as well.

## Numbers

The journey from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti through Yemen [accounts for 40%](#) of all migratory movements worldwide and has seen a constant increase over the past few years.

Between 2021 and 2022, the number of migrants hailing from the Horn and crossing the Red Sea into Yemen nearly tripled, from 27,700 to 73,200. Those numbers grew even further in 2023, with [86,630 people migrating to Yemen](#) from the beginning of January to the end of July. According to the latest data, in July [2023, 9,500 migrants arrived in Yemen](#), mostly from Djibouti's coastal town of Obock (82%) and from Somalia's town of Bossaso (18%). Of those, 98% were Ethiopian nationals and 2% Somalis.

The peak, however, was registered in March, when [20,020 arrivals were recorded](#), marking the highest figure ever.

## Reasons for migration along the Eastern Route

Due to its location in the South-Western corner of the Arabian Peninsula and its proximity to the Horn of Africa, Yemen is regarded by most Eastern African migrants as the preferred location to migrate to. Most of them, however, intend to move onward to the richer Gulf monarchies. Here, the most attractive destinations are Saudi Arabia, where the booming economy and the investments in [massive infrastructure projects](#) provide plenty of job opportunities for informal laborers, and Oman, [whose porous and poorly guarded](#) 294 km-long border with Yemen has made it an [appealing destination](#) for illegal migrants. The fact that the

South-Eastern Yemeni governorates of Hadramawt and al-Mahra have been traditionally neglected by Yemen's Coast Guard only adds to the attractiveness of the Omani option.

The main reason why Eastern African migrants seek to reach the Arabian Peninsula is economic need. Coming from countries in which decades of conflict and political instability have negatively affected poverty and development rates, the wealthy Gulf monarchies on the other side of the Red Sea seem to offer opportunities for a dignified life that do not exist back home. By reaching Yemen and continuing onwards to Saudi Arabia and Oman, Eastern African migrants hope to find [job opportunities](#) that will allow them to make a living for themselves and send remittances back home.

However, economic reasons are not the only factor driving Eastern African migrants towards the shores of Yemen. Other factors include [climate change](#) and climate-related natural hazards, violence and conflict (especially against certain ethnic groups), and [food insecurity](#). In Ethiopia, for instance, a dramatic combination of [ethnic violence](#) and [repeated droughts](#) has had an adverse impact on the livelihoods of many, pushing a higher number of Ethiopians to seek opportunities elsewhere. In Somalia, the ongoing [civil war between the government and al-Shabaab](#), as well as climatic events such as droughts and floods, have also driven increasing numbers of people to embark on migratory routes.

According to [data released by the International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#) for the period January-June 2023, 3 million people throughout the Horn of Africa were displaced by droughts. In Ethiopia alone, 27% of migrants who left the country came from drought-affected areas. Over the same period, [1.4 million people](#) throughout the Horn were displaced by floods.

### **The risks of the journey**

If many and diverse reasons drive Eastern African migrants towards Yemen and the broader Arabian Peninsula, many and diverse are also the risks. While the dangers for migrants who make the perilous journey from Sub-Saharan and Northern Africa to the shores of Europe through the Mediterranean Sea are well documented, the risks faced by Eastern African migrants making their way to Yemen through the Gulf of Aden are much less known.

While Euro-centric narratives in the media are certainly a reason why less attention is given to the Eastern Route vis-à-vis the Northern Route bounded to the European Union, this scarce attention is unjustifiable if one looks at the data. The Eastern Route, in fact, is one of the riskiest migration corridors in the world. These risks manifest in different forms, at three distinct points of the journey: along the way from the Horn to Yemen, when arriving in, or transiting through, Yemen, and upon crossing into the rich Gulf monarchies.

### ***Risks along the way***

The first set of risks is experienced by migrants as soon as they embark on the journey. Most migrants travel long distances on the Eastern Route by foot in conditions of extreme heat, which results in dehydration and exhaustion. It is not uncommon for migrants traveling on foot towards the Eastern African coast to die along the way due to inadequate access to food and water, which can last for days and even weeks.

While crossing Ethiopia and Somalia, migrants are also exposed to conflict violence (including interclan violence), risking to become the victims of crossfire. Many migrants also became stranded after being abandoned by smugglers while in transit through Djibouti, especially in the northern coastal area of Obock and the southern region of Dikhil, bordering Ethiopia.

Once migrants make it to the shores of Djibouti or Somalia, new risks emerge as they cross the Red Sea by boat. The boats used by smugglers to transport illegal migrants, in fact, are typically old and rusty vessels, highly inadequate for the journey. To make things worse, smugglers try to maximize their profit by overloading each boat well beyond its capacity. In those conditions, the risk of the boat capsizing is alarmingly high. The scarcity of food and water on board those boats, moreover, means that the suffering throughout the crossing is immense.

For women, finally, the journey on land and by boat is also made worse by the risk of rape. According to reports, in fact, many women on the migrants' boats were repeatedly raped by their smugglers, the captain, and the crew for the entire duration of the journey.

### ***Risks upon arriving into/transiting through Yemen***

---

Once arriving in Yemen, Eastern African migrants easily find themselves subjected to assault, torture, extortion, and human trafficking. As the nine-year-long conflict has led to the collapse of state authority in most of the country, very little mechanisms exist to support migrants upon arrival. On the contrary, migrants are typically awaited on the shores of Yemen by [ruthless smugglers and traffickers](#), eager to exploit them for their own material benefit.

Once traffickers get their hands on migrants – alone, scared, vulnerable, and fatigued by the journey behind – they load them into trucks and drive them to ramshackle compounds, often in isolated and remote areas or on the outskirts of villages. As state authorities are absent and corruption is ripe, trucks filled with migrants often make their way through military checkpoints, where a bribe is enough for the trip to proceed undisturbed. A positive exception was reported last August, when authorities in Lahij province [launched a security campaign](#) targeting illegal smugglers that led to the liberation of 450 African migrants who were held in smuggling shacks.

In those compounds managed by traffickers, migrants are forced to call home and ask their families for [ransom payments](#), which can amount up to \$2,000 (an impressive sum for impoverished families who had often placed their hopes in the migration of their close ones). While waiting for the payment to arrive – which can take months, as families might need to ask for the support of neighbors and friends – migrants are packed together in tin-roofed huts, deprived of water and food, and exposed to unhygienic conditions. While waiting in this limbo between life and death, women are once again exposed to the risk of rape by their captors, eager to exploit their victims in all possible ways. [Physical violence is also commonly reported](#) among African migrants captured by traffickers in Yemen.

What is relevant to note is that these dynamics are reported throughout Yemen, both in the government-controlled south and in the [Houthi-controlled north](#).

### ***Risks upon crossing/arriving into the Gulf monarchies***

Those who eventually make it through Yemen and cross into the rich Gulf Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, oftentimes face a reality that is even worse than what they left behind. For months, in fact, Saudi border guards have been systematically shooting and shelling

---

Eastern African migrants – all of whom unarmed and many of whom women and children – who try to cross the border that divides Yemen and the Saudi kingdom. According to the available figures, [Saudi border guards have killed](#) at least hundreds of Eastern African migrants (mostly Ethiopians) who tried to enter the kingdom between March 2022 and June 2023.

For those who manage to cross the border undetected by Saudi border guards, prospects are not as positive as it might have seemed from back home. Their status as illegal migrants, in fact, condemns them to a situation of vulnerability in which they are forced to accept any job available, no matter what the conditions. Most men find themselves working as [laborers in construction sites](#) in which they are not given protective gear, they earn a below-minimum wage, [engage in hazardous tasks](#), are denied the safety and protection that a contract affords, and are forced to work long hours, [up to 60 per week](#). Most women, for their part, end up [working as domestic servants](#), where they are often underpaid as well as verbally and physically abused. Very [similar dynamics](#) are reported for those migrants who make it into Oman or Qatar.

To this, [deportations are to be added up](#). In 2017, in fact, the government of Saudi Arabia launched a large-scale airlift operation to forcibly return irregular migrants to their countries of origin. [More than half a million Ethiopian migrants](#) have been deported from Saudi Arabia since 2017. From January to June 2023 alone, [39,200 migrants were forcibly returned](#). The risk of forced [deportation is high also in Oman](#), which has enacted strict immigration laws.

## Conclusion

As people from the Horn continue to embark on the perilous journey toward the Arabian Peninsula, there is an urgent need to address the multiple conditions that lie behind their decision to migrate. This will include supporting regional governments in their efforts to address the climate crisis, designing interventions aimed at strengthening the resilience of local communities (e.g., training in climate-smart agriculture), enhancing access to alternative and sustainable livelihood opportunities, investing resources in education in remote areas to build the skills of young generations, and ultimately addressing the combination of conflict and political instability.

However, responses should not only focus on the countries and regions of origin. Considering that addressing complex challenges such as the climate crisis, conflicts, and political instability requires extensive time and efforts, more immediate responses to the processes described in this article are also needed. Specifically, the international community needs to give greater consideration to the Eastern Route, which has largely been neglected among other global crises. As attention is paid to these migratory flows, efforts must be directed at urging the Gulf governments to abandon the use of indiscriminate violence against migrants and rather comply with their responsibilities towards under international human rights law. As wealthy Gulf countries are investing great efforts to improve their international image and enhance their position in the international system, the necessity of placing the protection of human rights at the heart of relations with those governments can no longer be overlooked.

---

*Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.*