

## From the Horn of Africa to the Middle East: Human trafficking of Eritrean asylum seekers across borders

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### Abstract

Each month hundreds of men, women, and children flee Eritrea as a result of grave violations of human rights committed by the Eritrean government. Travelling across borders, an estimated 36,000 Eritreans have been smuggled to Israel over the past seven years. For 31 per cent of those interviewed for this research, their migration involved abduction and forced movement for extortion among other abuses. Migrants have been abducted in Eastern Sudan near the border with Eritrea and then sold to criminal gangs along the Sudan-Egypt border. The gangs forcibly hold the migrants captive in the Northern Sinai desert. Many who made the journey reported being held hostage and subjected to brutal treatment in Eastern Sudan and the Northern Sinai desert, including gang rape of men and women, whipping, and various other methods of physical and psychological torture. Although not a traditional trafficking scenario, this paper explores the phenomenon in relation to borders. Intricate trafficking networks have exploited refugee outflows from Eritrea, turning the area around the Sudanese side of the Eritrea-Sudan border into a breeding ground for abductions, aggravated smuggling, and trafficking. While crossing borders to claim asylum may facilitate some protection from abuses perpetrated by the Eritrean government, it has created a new set of challenges for Eritrean migrants who now must find protection and safety from kidnappers. While refugees must cross borders to find safety, those same borders create the circumstances for trafficking networks to operate. Unless the

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dynamics of those involved changes, human rights abuses such as extortion, torture and human trafficking in Eastern Sudan and Sinai are expected to continue.

**Key words:** Eritrea, refugees, human trafficking, abductions, Eastern Sudan, Northern Sinai desert, aggravated smuggling

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Each month hundreds of men, women, and children flee Eritrea as a result of grave violations of human rights committed by the Eritrean government.<sup>2</sup> Political oppression and religious persecution have led to the imprisonment or disappearance of thousands of citizens, as well as mass flight.<sup>3</sup> Travelling across many borders, an estimated 36,000 Eritreans have made their way to Israel over the past seven years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on research conducted from May 2012 to November 2012 by a team based in Israel, with oversight and leadership from the Feinstein International Center. The conclusions in this paper reflect the preliminary findings of the research project. A final report will be published at the end of 2013. To read more about the Feinstein International Center, see: <http://sites.tufts.edu/feinstein/>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘UNHCR: Eritreans continue fleeing to Ethiopia and Sudan’, 23 June 2013, *Sudan Tribune*, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article47043>.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, S Keetharuth, Human Rights Council, Twenty-third session, Agenda item 4, Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention, 28 May 2013, pp. 45–48.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Statistics of Foreigners’, Israeli Population, Immigration Border Authority, Ministry of Interior, May 2013 [in Hebrew], <http://www.piba.gov.il/PublicationAndTender/ForeignWorkersStat/Documents/560843new4.pdf>

The brutal violence inflicted on migrants during their journeys has been documented in several reports, the majority written by human rights organisations over the last four years: Amnesty International in 2013 and 2011,<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch in 2012,<sup>6</sup> Tilburg University in 2012,<sup>7</sup> Physicians for Human Rights-Israel in 2011 and 2010,<sup>8</sup> and the Hotline for Migrant Workers in 2012 and 2011.<sup>9</sup> These reports detail how abducted migrants end up in makeshift places of captivity near the Sudanese town of Kassala, close to the Eritrean border. Here, they are held captive and are forced to pay ransom money.<sup>10</sup> They are then, in most cases, transferred through a well-organised human trafficking network to the Northern Sinai desert where they are released only after ransom payments of up to USD50, 000.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, *Egypt/Sudan: Refugees face kidnapping for ransom, brutal treatment and human trafficking*, March 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR04/001/2013/en>; and 'Broken Promises: Egypt's military rulers erode human rights', Amnesty International, November 2011, pp. 41–46. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE12/053/2011/en/47be269e-b67a-42f4-835b-787f91044e04/mde120532011en.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Egypt: End Sinai nightmare for migrants', Human Rights Watch, 5 September 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/print/news/2012/09/05/egypt-end-sinai-nightmare-migrants>.

<sup>7</sup> M Van Reisen, M Estefanos, and C Rijken, 'Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between life and death', Tilburg University, October 2012, [http://www.eepa.be/wcm/dmdocuments/publications/Report\\_Human\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_the\\_Sinai\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](http://www.eepa.be/wcm/dmdocuments/publications/Report_Human_Trafficking_in_the_Sinai_Final_Web.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> 'Hundreds of Refugees Held Hostage in Sinai Torture Camps Need Rescuing', Physicians for Human Rights – Israel and the Hotline for Migrant Workers, 30 November 2011, <http://www.phr.org.il/default.asp?PageID=183&ItemID=1176>; 'Hostages, Torture, and Rape in the Desert: Findings from 284 asylum seekers about atrocities in the Sinai', Physicians for Human Rights – Israel, 23 February 2011, <http://www.phr.org.il/default.asp?PageID=183&ItemID=915>; and 'Hostages, Torture, and Rape in the Sinai Desert: A PHR-Israel update about recently arriving asylum seekers', Physicians for Human Rights – Israel, 13 December 2010, [http://www.phr.org.il/uploaded/PHR-Israel\\_Information\\_Sheet\\_on\\_Refugees\\_Captive\\_in\\_Sinai\\_Dec13\\_2010\\_Final.pdf](http://www.phr.org.il/uploaded/PHR-Israel_Information_Sheet_on_Refugees_Captive_in_Sinai_Dec13_2010_Final.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> 'Tortured in Sinai, Jailed in Israel: Detention of slavery and torture survivors under the Anti-Infiltration Law (June-September 2012)' Hotline for Migrant Workers, <http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/TorturedInSinaiJailedInIsraelENG.pdf>; 'The Dead of the Wilderness: Testimonies from Sinai Desert', Hotline for Migrant Workers, February 2011, [http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/Testimonies\\_from\\_sinay\\_122010.pdf](http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/Testimonies_from_sinay_122010.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> These places of captivity range from a compound, hut, house, tent, to being tied to a tree or vehicle in a forest or the middle of the desert.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews conducted between May and October 2013.

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This article goes beyond this evidence and is based on 134 qualitative interviews conducted with Eritrean individuals in Israel and Ethiopia. Among the interviewees were victims of kidnapping, torture, extortion and captivity for up to a year in extortion compounds in Eastern Sudan and the Northern Sinai desert.

Aforementioned reports on the subject, as well as the testimonies gathered as part of this research, detail the extensive brutality and abuse experienced by Eritreans in extortion compounds in Sinai. Eritrean nationals have testified to gang rape of men and women, whipping, and various methods of torture, including burial in the sand, electric shocks, hanging by one's hands and legs, burning with hot-iron bars, and prolonged exposure to the sun while ransom money was extorted.

This paper sheds light on the role of borders in this abuse. Eritrean nationals are forced to flee across the Eritrean border into Sudan for safety from the brutal Eritrean government. Intricate trafficking networks have exploited this situation, turning the area around the Sudanese side of the Eritrea-Sudan border into a breeding ground for abductions, aggravated smuggling, and trafficking. While crossing borders to claim asylum may facilitate some protection from abuses perpetrated by the Eritrean government, it has created a new set of challenges for Eritrean migrants, who now must find protection and safety from kidnapers. While refugees must cross borders to find safety, those same borders create the circumstances for trafficking networks to operate.

Unless the dynamics of those involved changes, human rights abuses such as extortion, torture and human trafficking in Eastern Sudan and Sinai are expected to continue.

## Methodology

This article is based on 60 qualitative interviews conducted with Eritrean individuals in Israel<sup>12</sup> and 74 in Ethiopia. Respondents were chosen to reflect different times of arrival to Israel and Ethiopia in order to create a better understanding of how the migration has changed over the years. The 134 respondents had arrived in Israel and Ethiopia from several weeks to five years prior to their interview. Among these interviewees were ten ransom payers, who were friends and relatives of Eritreans held hostage in the Sinai desert, and had gathered the money to pay for their release.

The interviews were conducted in restaurants and interviewees' homes and lasted between one hour and six hours, with an average of two and a half hours. The researchers have only basic Tigrinya language ability and were therefore unable to communicate directly with the interviewees. The research was conducted with two interpreters chosen because of their experience and their respected standing in their communities. They underwent brief ethics training with the researchers.

## Terminology

Depending on the circumstances, the terminology 'smuggling', 'aggravated smuggling', and 'trafficking' can be used to classify the experiences of the migrants.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, all migrants were smuggled. For some, that included abuses amounting to aggravated smuggling, while for others the abuses amounted to trafficking.

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<sup>12</sup> Regarding the interviews conducted in Israel, about 20 per cent of Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel are women, and of 60 respondents interviewed in Israel, 14 were women (23%). Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 54. Over half (36) were age 18 to 29 and the rest were between the ages of 30 and 50.

<sup>13</sup> For additional information on the *UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, see: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CTOC/>. Sudan, Egypt and Israel have signed and ratified the Convention; Egypt and Israel have signed and ratified the Trafficking Protocol, while Sudan is not a party to it; Egypt accepted but did not sign or ratify the Smuggling Protocol, while Israel and Sudan are not parties to it. This information can be found as part of the United Nations Treaty Collection database: <http://treaties.un.org/>.

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The term ‘smuggling’ is defined in the *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air* (Smuggling Protocol) as, ‘the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident’.<sup>14</sup>

Many Eritrean nationals interviewed as part of the research paid smugglers in order to facilitate their entry from Eritrea into Sudan and from Sudan to Israel. Some respondents in the research paid an agreed fee and were (eventually) taken to the Israel border without being exploited or significantly abused. One respondent stated, ‘I stayed in Sinai for a week. I had to pay three thousand US dollars. The treatment was okay.’<sup>15</sup> Another explained, ‘The food and water is not enough but nobody died, nobody make problem. It is not horrible.’<sup>16</sup> Such experiences do not amount to ‘aggravated smuggling’ or ‘trafficking’.

Others are abused by their smugglers and sold against their will between smuggling groups. Some of these experiences can be classified as ‘aggravated smuggling’, and other experiences meet the definition of ‘trafficking’. Aggravated smuggling, according to the Smuggling Protocol, includes circumstances ‘[t]hat endanger, or are likely to endanger, the lives or safety of the migrants concerned; or that entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants’.<sup>17</sup>

While most cases of abuse along the migration route classify as aggravated circumstances of smuggling, not all experiences can be classified as trafficking. The term ‘trafficking’ as defined by the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*

<sup>14</sup> For the full text of the *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air*, see: [http://www.uncjin.org/Documents/Conventions/dcatoc/final\\_documents\\_2/convention\\_smug\\_eng.pdf](http://www.uncjin.org/Documents/Conventions/dcatoc/final_documents_2/convention_smug_eng.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Male, 28 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 8 September 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Female, 21 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 9 September 2012.

<sup>17</sup> For the full text of the *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air*, see: [http://www.uncjin.org/Documents/Conventions/dcatoc/final\\_documents\\_2/convention\\_smug\\_eng.pdf](http://www.uncjin.org/Documents/Conventions/dcatoc/final_documents_2/convention_smug_eng.pdf)

(Trafficking Protocol), can be broken-down into three elements: 1) recruitment, 2) by means of threat or use of force, and 3) for the purpose of exploitation.<sup>18</sup> Those abused during the journey meet the first two criteria of this definition, as they were recruited and harboured by force often via many of the mechanisms outlined in the definition, including coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or abuse of power.

In order for individuals to meet the definition of trafficking, their experience must also fulfill the third criterion of the definition, 'for the purpose of exploitation'. While Eritrean asylum seekers are significantly exploited during the journey and the period that they are held hostage, it is less clear if they were recruited *for the purpose of* exploitation. Our research shows that Eritrean asylum seekers were exploited for ransom money, to expedite the payment process, or to intimidate other hostages into paying more quickly. This type of exploitation does not exactly match examples of exploitation given in the Protocol.

Researchers at Tilburg University classified certain experiences along this migration route as trafficking by categorising the Sinai abuse as 'forced begging'. The International Labour Organization's Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (1930) defines forced and compulsory labour in Article 2(1) as: 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'trafficking' is defined by the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, as: 'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs'.

<sup>19</sup> For the full text of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No.29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour, see: [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C029](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029).

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Our research findings describe a situation in which migrants are forced to beg close friends and family for large amounts of money. As the amounts demanded are often more than their close friends and family can pay, Eritrean captives are abused to pressure them to beg relatives and acquaintances all over the world to contribute to their ransom payment. For close to five decades, Eritreans have been fleeing Eritrea and establishing diaspora communities in developed countries. Eritreans in the diaspora often contribute to the money demanded for a release from the extortion compounds in the Northern Sinai desert. Captives who do not have connections abroad often see their families forced to beg for money or sell their belongings such as jewellery, property and livestock for their release.

The researchers at Tilburg University point to the recent EU Directive which expands the definition of human trafficking to include forced begging.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the EU Directive (2011/36) states:

In order to tackle recent developments in the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings, this Directive adopts a broader concept of what should be considered trafficking in human beings than under Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA and therefore includes additional forms of exploitation. Within the

<sup>20</sup> M Van Reisen, M Estefanos and C Rijken, 'Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between life and death', Tilburg University, October 2012, pp. 79–80, [http://www.eepa.be/wcm/dmdocuments/publications/Report\\_Human\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_the\\_Sinai\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](http://www.eepa.be/wcm/dmdocuments/publications/Report_Human_Trafficking_in_the_Sinai_Final_Web.pdf). While researchers at Tilburg University accurately point to forced begging as a practice similar to slavery, they also argue that abuse in Sinai is also a form of 'debt bondage', a practice similar to slavery in international law, which meets the definition of exploitation in accordance with the Protocol. However, their report does not give the full definition of debt bondage, and does not explain in detail how the experiences in Sinai meet the definition. According to the *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*, debt bondage arises from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services. This is not applicable to the experiences in Sinai, as Eritrean asylum seekers do not pledge services to their captors. For the full text of the Supplementary Convention, see: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SupplementaryConventionAbolitionOfSlavery.aspx>.

context of this Directive, forced begging should be understood as a form of forced labour or services as defined in the 1930 ILO Convention No 29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour.

As many of the abuses perpetrated in Sinai are for the purpose of exploitation in the form of forced begging, we can apply the Protocol definition of trafficking to these situations.

The bulk of this paper addresses exploitative migration situations involving abduction and extortion. All migrants were smuggled. For some, that included abuses amounting to aggravated smuggling, while for others the abuses amounted to trafficking. As described above, we are applying the human trafficking framework to the situations involving abduction and extortion and talking about migration facilitators engaged in these practices as traffickers.

### Human Trafficking Networks across Borders

According to the respondents in our research, individuals and groups involved in trafficking networks work out of Eastern Sudan, in the border area with Eritrea. Eritrean travellers reported either approaching migration facilitators or being abducted in Eastern Sudan; such initial interactions in most cases included contact with the members of a tribe called Rashaida. In our research, 31 per cent of the respondents were abducted in Sudan and forcibly taken into Sinai and they had no intention to come to Israel.

Even though kidnapping is often considered a stereotypical and media-driven image of trafficking, in Eastern Sudan abductions are a common reality for Eritreans crossing the border into Sudan.

Our research showed that increased incidents of kidnapping can be correlated with the tightening of asylum policies in Israel. In June 2013, Israel began implementing amendments to the Prevention of Infiltration Law, which mandates the imprisonment for at least three years of those irregularly

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crossing into Israel from Egypt. Certain prolonged imprisonment influenced the migration decisions made in Ethiopia and Eastern Sudan with Eritreans hesitant and often purposely making decisions not to hire smugglers to travel to Israel. In order to continue receiving high sums of money via ransom, those involved in the trafficking networks started abducting migrants and forcibly moving them to Egypt's Northern Sinai desert.

According to 18 different interviews conducted as part of the research, the different groups involved in the kidnappings include: certain members of the Rashaida tribe, Eritrean collaborators working with smugglers, Sudanese locals, and elements within the Sudanese law enforcement authorities. Regardless of which actor carried out the actual kidnappings, all respondents reported that they eventually ended up with members of the Rashaida tribe.<sup>21</sup> It was these Rashaida individuals who then sold them to members of Bedouin tribes in Sinai.

As discussed above, these abductions often take place along the Eritrea-Sudan border. In order to understand the kidnappings, we closely evaluate the geography and social implications of Eastern Sudan. The region of Eastern Sudan refers to the three Sudanese states that border with neighbouring Eritrea: the states of Gedaref, Kassala and Red Sea. Marking the split between the flatlands and deserts of the west and the mountainous areas of the east, where the border with Ethiopia and Eritrea lies, Eastern Sudan is considered a geographical frontier in itself. The region suffers from underdevelopment and social and political marginalisation. It is one of the poorest regions in the country.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International confirmed the involvement of these different actors in their March 2013 report, Amnesty International, *Egypt/Sudan: Refugees face kidnapping for ransom, brutal treatment and human trafficking*, March 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR04/001/2013/en>.

<sup>22</sup> J Young, 'The Eastern Front and the Struggles against Marginalization', Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies, May 2007, p. 8.

The smugglers and traffickers who live in the borderlands of Eritrea and Sudan exploit the unique locational ambiguity by building their lives and livelihoods around the resources that the border offers. In this case, the border area offers a constant flow of Eritrean migrants, who continue to cross the border as refugees fleeing the brutal Eritrean dictatorship. Such a circumstance provides structural conditioning for kidnapping and trafficking. As the border inherently structures refugee flows out of Eritrea and into Sudan, the border also structures human trafficking out of Eastern Sudan.

As found in our interviews, in some instances, Eritrean collaborators, local Sudanese and elements within the Sudanese authorities abducted Eritreans near the border area as they attempted to locate the refugee camps. If migrants are not intercepted by law enforcement authorities who transfer them to an asylum seekers' guest house in Kassala before being transferred to the refugee camps, they try to locate the refugee camps or urban settings on their own. The border area lacks a secure first point of contact for migrants entering Sudan and it is during this time that they are most at risk. In Hamdayet, a border town along the Eritrea-Ethiopia-Sudan border, a reception and screening centre has been established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to establish a safe passage to the refugee camps. Another location for a second reception centre is currently being discussed.<sup>23</sup> For those unable to secure safe passage to such centres, they remain vulnerable to the trafficking networks present in this border area.

### *Rashaida Kidnappers*

Our respondents detailed that members of the Rashaida group participated in abductions and extortion amounting to aggravated smuggling or trafficking from Sudan into Egypt. Respondents who were kidnapped recounted abduction directly

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews with former UNHCR staff in Sudan, July 2012.

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by members of the Rashaida community or by others, such as people from the local Hedareb tribe or elements within the Sudanese authorities, who sold them to Rashaida individuals. It is important to note that not all Rashaida are involved in smuggling and trafficking refugees from Eastern Sudan.

Traffickers from the Rashaida tribe are the common thread involved in the abductions of Eritrean asylum seekers among our respondents, and it is therefore important to understand the background surrounding this group. While the majority of the tribe resides in Sudan, some inhabit the northern province of Naqfa in Eritrea. They constitute a distinct ethnic group within Sudan and Eritrea, with political connections and interests in both countries. The norms and culture of the Rashaida are much more similar to the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia as opposed to other nomadic groups in Eastern Sudan.<sup>24</sup>

The Rashaida tend to travel freely in the region ignoring political borders between States. They descend from the Arabic-speaking Bedouins who migrated from coastal towns in Arabia and sailed across the Red Sea and into Africa in the late 1860s. As we see below, there are multiple factors that enable their travel without restrictions.

First, the Rashaida's relatively recent migration to Africa meant they did not own tribal lands and many worked in camel pastoralism, a field which requires frequent travel across borders. Since the demand for camel meat in Sudan is low and the only big camel market is in southern Egypt, young men travelled with their surplus camels to Egypt in order to sell them.<sup>25</sup> This is still an on-going practice. The selling of

<sup>24</sup> R Perdue, A Salih, 'Cultures of the Middle East, Project paper The Rashaida Bedouin', 16 March 2008, p.1, [http://campusweb.howardcc.edu/salih/culture/Arabic\\_2-7\\_Robert\\_Perdue-Rashayyida\\_Bedu.pdf](http://campusweb.howardcc.edu/salih/culture/Arabic_2-7_Robert_Perdue-Rashayyida_Bedu.pdf); Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2012: Eritrea. 2012*, <<http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-eritrea>>.

<sup>25</sup> I Kohler-Rollefson, B Musa, M Achmed, 'The Camel Pastoral System of the Southern Rashaida in Eastern Sudan', Commission on Nomadic Peoples, November 1991, <http://www.tearfund.org/webdocs/Website/Campaigning/Policy%20and%20research/East%20Sudan%20Analysis%202005.pdf>.

surplus camels turned out to be the closest link of Rashaida to Egypt.

Second, many Rashaida have multiple citizenships, further assisting in their ability to travel. It is not possible to know which of them is Eritrean and which is Sudanese. Some members of the community are citizens of both, or indeed may be citizens of Saudi Arabia or Yemen.<sup>26</sup> Their structural positioning in the region, created by their multiple nationalities and movement across borders has furnished their role as facilitators of the irregular and involuntary movement of Eritrean migrants, which often includes aggravated smuggling and trafficking.

Third, the rocky political history and the recurrent changes in power in the region have prompted Rashaida to frequently cross the border between Eritrea and Sudan. Members of the community move between Sudan and Eritrea whenever they need to escape political and economic pressures.

One respondent stated: 'The Rashaida in Eritrea are living close to the western border, and they have dual citizenship of Eritrea and Sudan. And these are the people who bring things, property from Sudan to Eritrea without any tax. First, the Rashaida, they don't believe in centralized government. They don't have laws because basically they don't live in cities so they cannot match with the law in the city. They cannot abide by law. They don't abide the law.'<sup>27</sup>

While a variety of actors are involved in the kidnappings, all respondents we interviewed who had been kidnapped ended up in the hands of someone from the Rashaida tribe.

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<sup>26</sup> S Pantuliano, 'Comprehensive Peace? Causes and consequences of under-development and instability in Eastern Sudan', NGO paper, September 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Male, 34 years old, Tel Aviv Israel, 20 August 2012.

### *Colluding Elements within the Sudanese Law Enforcement Authorities*

In addition to the Rashaida, the Sudanese authorities are also involved in the kidnappings. Describing their involvement, one respondent said: ‘Our plan was not to come to Israel...[but] to go to Sudan and work there. When we arrived in Kassala, the police told us we were being taken to Shagarab...they covered our eyes and chained our legs and...told us we had to pay...three thousand dollars. They said if we didn’t pay, they would kill us.’<sup>28</sup> The individual is then sold to people from the Rashaida tribe who later transfer him/her to the Bedouins in the Sinai.

Sudanese law enforcement authorities who are involved in the kidnapping and selling of migrants are located in security posts in the border areas. Their location along the remote border, with no constant overview by superiors and little payment, makes them prone to involvement in illegal activities, such as profiting from the irregular cross-border movement.<sup>29</sup>

### *Eritrean Collaborators*

Eritrean collaborators collude with some Sudanese authorities and Rashaida in an intricate network of smuggling and people trafficking. One respondent recounted: ‘There was an Eritrean with the Sudanese soldiers....He told us that you are going to Israel, you don’t have to worry, and then we told him we don’t want to go to Israel, it is not our plan....And then the Rashaida started to threaten us with their guns and two Rashaida came and beat us with a stick.’<sup>30</sup>

Sinai traffickers rely on the Eritreans as translators and intermediaries. The extent to which these individuals collaborate with the traffickers when it comes to torture and abuse varies from individual to individual. Some Eritrean

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, Male, 25 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 12 and 13 July 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews with former UNHCR staff in Sudan, July 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Male, 24 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 23 September 2012.

collaborators choose to get involved, and others are forced to work as translators, and even to abuse their fellow hostages. A respondent described this system:

One Eritrean was forced to translate. He was one of the people who was kidnapped in Sudan. They used their guns to tell him to beat people. On the other hand, there are other people who cooperate with them for the sake of money.<sup>31</sup>

Some collaborators were initially coerced but then perpetrated the violence beyond what they were forced to do:

This Eritrean collaborator, he came to Sinai to come to Israel, but he didn't have money and because he speaks Arabic they made him stay there for translation. He was very cruel. Sometimes, Egyptians would order him to do it. Sometimes he would do it alone - torture people, hang them, beat them....He was even more cruel than the Bedouins.<sup>32</sup>

While the roles of the Eritrean collaborators differed between respondents, in the vast majority of cases at least one Eritrean collaborator was involved.

### *From the Rashaida to the Bedouin Traffickers*

The network of traffickers from the Rashaida, Bedouin, and Eritrean communities as well as the transfers of ransom payments transcends the Egypt-Sudan border. While the Rashaida are based in Sudan, Eritrea, and the Arabian Peninsula, they lack a presence in Egypt.<sup>33</sup> Close to the Sudan-Egypt border, Eritrean migrants are sold from members of the Rashaida tribe to people of Bedouin origin. Eritrean

<sup>31</sup> Interview, Male, 39 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 23 September 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Male, 20 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel 12 and 13 July 2012.

<sup>33</sup> For more details on the Rashaida tribe and the role of many of this group in smuggling, see: UNHCR, *Refugees and the Rashaida: Human smuggling and trafficking from Eritrea to Sudan and Egypt*, March 2013, ISSN 1020-7473, retrieved 15 April 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5142d9692.html>.

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collaborators represent an essential part of this trafficking pathway.

Eritrean migrants find it difficult to differentiate between Rashaida and Bedouin traffickers. One respondent explained:

In some areas they are called Rashaida and in others Bedouins....They are people who do not have any recognized or settled place. For the Bedouins, some are in Egypt, some Israel, and other places. Same with the Rashaida.<sup>34</sup>

Such confusion between the groups was common among respondents. While every respondent we interviewed mentioned that they were taken by several different smuggling or trafficking groups along the journey from Sudan into Egypt, there was not a clear picture by most respondents of exactly when the facilitators shifted from Rashaida to Bedouin.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, the traffickers also have an intricate network of individuals who collect ransom money from Eritrean family members around the globe. Agents working with the traffickers have contacted families in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, as well as across Europe and the United States. Transfers are conducted in-person as well as via international money transfer agencies like Western Union. Like in Sinai, both Eritrean and Bedouin collaborators are involved with facilitating ransom payments.

The actors involved in smuggling and trafficking, whether in the transfer of funding or the transfer of people, come from a variety of backgrounds. Their work transcends borders and facilitates the human rights abuses of Eritrean asylum seekers as they journey onwards to seek refuge and a better life elsewhere.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, Male, 34 years old, Tel Aviv, Israel, 20 August 2012.

<sup>35</sup> While most respondents did not know when smugglers shifted from the Rashaida tribe to Bedouin groups, few respondents did point out that the transition seemed to have happened at the banks of the Nile River. Additional research is needed to confirm this trend.

## Conclusion

Understanding the actors involved is essential in drawing conclusions on how to bring trafficking in this region to an end. First, the security situation in Eastern Sudan must be improved, making it more difficult for traffickers to kidnap Eritreans. The Sudanese government must crack down on Sudanese authorities who are complicit or actively participate in the kidnappings. At present, it seems unlikely that the government in Khartoum will address this security challenge. International agencies active in the area, such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), should pressure the Sudanese government to implement comprehensive strategies to address security concerns in Eastern Sudan. The African Union should play an important role in developing a mechanism through which the governments of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt can combat kidnapping and human trafficking in the region and develop law enforcement mechanisms through which human traffickers and their collaborators can be held accountable.

Second, the Egyptian government should liberate the captives held in the Sinai trafficking compounds and hold those responsible accountable. The Egyptian government should address the problem of Egyptian authorities collaborating with smugglers and traffickers. Following the revolution in Egypt and this summer's recent events, the eyes of the world are on Egypt. The international community, in particular the Arab League, must ensure that ending the abuse of refugees in Eastern Sudan and the Northern Sinai desert are on the forefront of Egypt and Sudan's political agenda.

Lastly, the global community of Eritreans must mobilise around the issue. If Eritrean families stopped paying ransoms, the business would no longer be lucrative for the extortionists in Eastern Sudan and Sinai. Of course, this solution is impossible to implement at the individual level. Who among us would refuse to pay a ransom for a loved one? The Eritrean community can, however, pressure those who collaborate with the smugglers and traffickers and make it more difficult to

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act as intermediaries — an essential aspect of the functioning trafficking network.

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