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# Human Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea

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### Human Trafficking Connecting to Terrorism and Organ Trafficking: Libya and Egypt

*Mirjam Van Reisen & Meron Estefanos*

*I can't expect to be treated fairly in this country if I wasn't treated respectfully in my own country [Eritrea]. If my countrymen can't help me, no one can. Because the route we take is illegal, we can't do anything.*

(Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)

#### **Introduction**

This chapter looks at the connection between human trafficking, terrorism and organ trafficking with a geographic focus on Libya and Egypt. Since 2014, the political situations in Libya and Egypt have been evolving rapidly. With the overthrow of President Gadhafi in Libya in 2011, conflict between the militia and various fighting factions has resulted in civil war and great instability. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned in 2011 as a result of the 'Arab Spring' uprising. His successor, President Mohamed Morsi was replaced by General Abdel Fattahel-Sisi in 2013, the third president in as many years.

In both countries, new practices of human trafficking have emerged. In Libya, the new modus operandi involves state military alongside terrorism-related militia and organisations, with an increasing number of groups and factions jostling for power. In Egypt, there are concerns about the Egyptian government's collaboration with Eritrea on the deportation of Eritrean refugees. There are also reports of organ trafficking associated with the

trafficking of Eritrean and other refugees in Egypt (Mekonnen and Estefanos, 2011).

Following the overthrow of President Gadhafi in Libya in 2011, for a brief period, Libya provided a new route to the Mediterranean Sea for Eritrean refugees. However, in February 2015, Islamic State (ISIS) published a video in which Christian refugees were beheaded (Black, 2015), showing that it had gained foothold in Libya. The majority of victims shown in the video were later recognised as Eritrean or Ethiopian (Loveluck, 2015). Vice (2015) reported that hundreds of Eritrean migrants were being held in Libyan migrant prisons, as the country was increasingly becoming lawless (Vice, 2015).

Since the end of 2016, Egypt has provided a new route for the smuggling and trafficking of Eritrean refugees. However, crossing the Mediterranean Sea has become increasingly dangerous, with 4,913 people recorded as perished in 2016 (Missing Migrants Project, 2017). Because of the increasing difficulties that Eritrean refugees encounter in traveling to Europe, their safety in Egypt and Libya – or lack thereof – is becoming more relevant.

This chapter examines the new forms of human trafficking for ransom and related phenomena in Libya and Egypt. It follows the routes of Eritrean refugees to these countries from Sudan. It draws on direct testimonies from victims of human trafficking obtained in 2016 by journalist Meron Estefanos and by Mirjam Van Reisen. These interviews were carried out by Skype, by phone and face-to-face, and transcribed and translated. With regard to the description of the situation in Egypt (in relation to deportation of Eritrean refugees and organ trafficking), different channels of information have provided additional source materials. Testimonies collected by Africa Monitors, which collects information from Eritrean refugees on their experiences along the refugee routes in North Africa, are also analysed.

In this chapter, we limit the description to what is publicly available, given the sensitivity of the topic. All of the information published in this chapter has been cross-checked by the authors

through various independent channels. These checks have been carried out to minimise the risk of possible disinformation.<sup>26</sup>

The map in Figure 4.1 shows the two principle routes for Eritrean refugees from Sudan to the Mediterranean Sea, either through Egypt or Libya.

### **New routes from Sudan to Egypt and Libya**

In 2016, the Sudanese government started deporting Eritrean refugees back to Eritrea. Africa Monitors reports that round-up exercises for deportation include refugees legally registered, as their papers and ID cards are destroyed in the process (Africa Monitors, 2016b & 2016c). To avoid deportation, refugees are required to pay hefty sums of money (K, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Facebook Messenger, 10 January 2017) (see Chapter 3 on deportation from Sudan). To avoid being returned to Eritrea, many refugees moved on to Libya and Egypt. Africa Monitors reports that it costs around USD 7,000 to 8,000 per person to be smuggled from Eritrea to Sudan and around USD 1,500 to 2,000 per person from Sudan to Egypt (Africa Monitors, 2016d). According to Eritrean journalist Zecarias Gerrima, the current fee for being smuggled across the desert from Sudan to Egypt ranges from USD 800 to 1,000 per person (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 28 December 2016). The cost from Ethiopia to Khartoum is approximately USD 1,300; Khartoum to the Libyan coast USD 1,300; and across the Mediterranean Sea USD 2,200 (Interview, Q2 with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 17 January 2017; Gerrima, Z, personal communication, Van Reisen, Skype, 17 January 2017).

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<sup>26</sup> Given the severity of the issues discussed, the authors state their awareness of their responsibility to provide credible information in the public interest on the topics discussed. If the reader finds any information in this chapter that they believe to be false or wrong, s/he is kindly invited to bring this to the authors' attention.

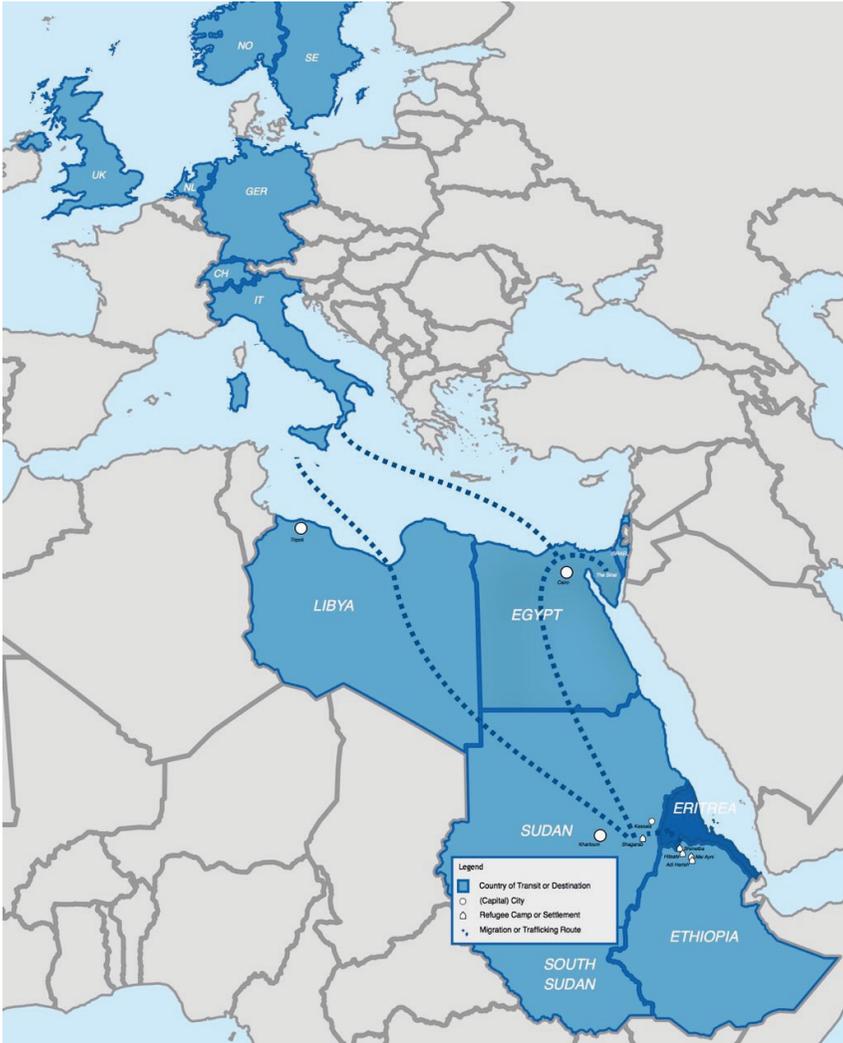


Figure 4.1. Migration routes of Eritrean refugees (Source: Lena Reim, 2017 – partially reproduced from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016, cited in Laub, 2016, and Amnesty International, 2013, borders may not be exact representations)

Gerrima has studied the new routes being taken by Eritrean refugees to the Mediterranean Sea and describes how they have emerged:

*As a transit stop for refugees planning to embark on a journey across the Mediterranean, most refugees head to Egypt, with plans to continue to Israel or Europe. From Alexandria, refugees are taken either to eastern Libyan towns like Benghazi or sail directly to Greece. The journey to Greece is more dangerous than the direct route from Libya because of the greater distance. People are more likely to die of hunger and thirst, and less likely to receive help from rescue ships. (Gerrima, Z, personal communication, Van Reisen, Skype, 28 December 2016)*

Africa Monitors (2016d), which follows the situation of Eritrean refugees on the routes in North Africa and publishes their experiences on their website, identifies that the route through Egypt has emerged as an alternative for Eritrean refugees, who are experiencing increasing difficulties in Sudan and Libya (see also Chapter 3):

*The illegal route of migration to Europe, which was in the previous years, through the Sudan to Libya since 2004 and until the year of 2013, turned to the Sudan-Egypt route, since the end of 2013, due to [...] the civil war and the proliferation of militias and armed gangs in Libya, since 2011. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

This chapter identifies the situations that refugees from Eritrea face in Libya and Egypt.

## **Deportation from Egypt**

Although a destination for Eritrean refugees for decades, Egypt is now one of the most dangerous places for Eritreans. Since the early 2000s, Egypt has deported hundreds of refugees in line with statements by the Eritrean government that Eritrean refugees are economic migrants who should be returned to their country (Amnesty International, 2008). In October 2016, the Egyptian Parliament approved a law to combat smuggling, which:

*[...] imposes prison terms and fines on those found guilty of smuggling potential migrants or acting as brokers or middlemen. It also imposes prison sentences on those who provide shelter to trafficked migrants, and gather, transport or otherwise facilitate their journey. (Hashem & Noueihe, 2016).*

Although the law also provides for the humanitarian treatment of migrants and access to health care and legal assistance, with special emphasis on women and children (Hashem & Noueihe, 2016), it has led to increased security measures. According to Africa Monitors, these security measures are affecting refugees' ability to reach Europe:

*...With the growing number of Eritrean refugees in Egypt in recent years, the number of those who managed to reach Europe [...] has seen a dramatic decline for several reasons, [...] including [...] [t]he intensive security measures, which were taken by the Egyptian authorities along its coastal lines with the Mediterranean Sea and particularly in the port-city of Alexandria, which [...] [has become] the main place in Egypt for illegal immigration to Europe across the Mediterranean. Hundreds of Eritrean immigrants have been arrested and detained by the Egyptian coast guards, while trying to reach Europe illegally as a result of the security measures. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

These security measures include the deportation of refugees from Eritrea, especially those who are not in possession of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee identity card or other legal documents (Africa Monitors, 2016a):

*These refugees were caught in different times by the Egyptian security forces [from 2015] [...] until the recent days. Some of these refugees are registered in the UNHCR office in Egypt and hold the yellow and blue refugee cards while others are arrested and put in prison before they register in the UNHCR. (Africa Monitors, 2016a).*

Eritrean refugees report experiencing difficulties in receiving documents from UNHCR, which, according to Africa Monitors, is a

deliberate policy to create obstacles for Eritrean refugees and make their trajectory to Europe more difficult:

*Many migrants have also been deported to Eritrea, for not possessing refugee cards or any other legal documents. [...] [There has been an] intentional delay of the UNHCR's office in Egypt, in offering Eritrean migrants the refugee asylum seeking cards. That delay, forced the migrants to miss the illegal migration season for this year, which led to the smaller numbers of Eritrean migrants, who tried to emigrate to Europe for fear of arrest and deportation by Egyptian authorities to Eritrea, for the lack of refugee documents. (Africa Monitors, 2016d)*

These refugees are identified as 'illegal' for crossing borders without the necessary papers (which they cannot obtain in Eritrea or Sudan): "Some of these refugees were caught while entering to Egypt by illegal means while others when sailing illegally to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, according to a member of the Eritrean refugee committee in Egypt" (Africa Monitors, 2016a).

According to Africa Monitors (2016a), by the end of July 2016, approximately 150 Eritrean refugees were in prison in Aswan, Alexandria, Algander and Portsaeed, including youth, women and children. Information received by one of the authors is that hundreds of Eritrean refugees are now awaiting deportation from Egypt to Eritrea (Anon., 2016, personal communication, unpublished documents received by Van Reisen, email, 14 January 2017). It seems that Ethiopia is no longer prepared to accept Eritrean refugees (Africa Monitors, 2016f), even if they have refugee cards from UNHCR.

If returned to Eritrea, the prospects for refugees are grim. The testimony of A illustrates this, as well as the circular migration and trafficking patterns that many Eritreans get stuck in. A fled from Eritrea to Sudan in 2007 and subsequently moved on to Cairo and Israel where he ran a successful business. In 2013, he was abducted from Israel (from Barsheeba) and brought to the Sinai through the high security fence:

*ME: You crossed a fence?*

*A: Yeah, they took me and went there. All their Sinai co-traffickers were there.*

*ME: There weren't any Israeli soldiers?*

*A: [...] Since when do they monitor who goes from the city into the Sinai? Maybe the other way around. They kind of work together, anyway. The people of the country work in that type of trafficking too. I was hearing about how they take [people] into the Sinai and Sudan and stuff like that, but I never thought that kind of thing would happen to me. [...] They took everything I had on me, including my gold jewellery. (Interview Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

A was kept in captivity in the Sinai and severely tortured until he managed to escape. He was then taken to a police post in Egypt, where he was arrested:

*There was also a wall with information about Eritreans, with the numbers of Dr Alganesh, the Eritrean embassy, and the Ethiopian embassy. I saw all that written up on the wall. I thought it was good. Then I told him [the policeman] my information – this number, this street, my aunt's phone number. I shared everything with him. (Ibid.)*

A was contacted by an official from the Eritrean embassy:

*A: I didn't have any news for about a month or so. After that month, I receive a phone call from this guy named Binyam or something, an Eritrean, he happened to work for the embassy.*

*M: Now, the guy who called you, Binyam, he was an employee of the embassy?*

*A: Yes. (Ibid.)*

Arrangements were then made for A to be returned to Eritrea. On the flight back, the victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were separated from ordinary passengers. At the airport, A's family was waiting, but he did not get to see them. He was immediately taken to prison where the officials had a file on him. A was accused of carrying out opposition activities in Israel:

*Yeah, the Eritrean embassy sent all the papers from Egypt, with the information, so they knew. So he asked me “then, when you were in Israel, what were you doing?” I told him I was working in the fields and I’m young, I don’t know about anything.*

*So he said “you were there with the ones badmouthing their country and government, you’re from that group”. Well, what could I say? The Israeli embassy knew what we were doing day-to-day, our work. They’d have no problem checking the information with them. They know who everyone is and can even say A with the hair like so? I mean, even by my restaurant, I heard that the freedom demonstration had passed by there. So then, problems came. I was really afraid then. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

A eventually escaped from prison and spent several months hiding in Asmara before fleeing to Ethiopia, Sudan and then Libya, where he ended up in the hands of ISIS.

### **Held by ISIS in Libya**

Some Eritrean refugees who try to reach the Mediterranean Sea by crossing the Sahara from Sudan to Libya end up in the hands of ISIS (Gebrekidan, 2016s & 2016b). In recent years, this route has become very dangerous because of the presence of armed groups. This section brings together testimonies from Eritrean refugees who were abducted by ISIS and armed groups in Libya.

In a recent report the UN expressed concern over the increasing interconnectivity between terrorism, militia, smuggling and human trafficking groups (also see Human Rights Watch, 2016):

*Armed groups, criminal gangs and networks, smugglers, traffickers have cooperated and competed in the smuggling and trafficking of migrants through Libya, while carrying out serious human rights abuses and violations against migrants. UNSMIL [United Nations Support Mission in Libya] has also received credible information that some members of State institutions and some local officials have participated in the smuggling and trafficking process. Exploitation and the buying*

*and selling of individuals have taken place frequently.* (UNMIL & OHCHR, 2016, p. 12)

In this same report by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNMIL) & the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN expressed concern that 4,000–7,000 migrants are being held in detention centres run by Libya’s Department for Combatting Illegal Migration (*Ibid.*).



Figure 4.2. Map showing the Libyan coast with Ajdabya in the east, south from Benghazi, Tripoli and Zuwara (Source: Google Maps)

In an interview with Meron Estefanos, two Eritrean refugees testified that they were abducted by an armed gang, possibly ISIS, while being trafficked from Sudan to Libya:

*I was caught on August the 8<sup>th</sup>; we were caught about two hours out of Ajdabya. Two armed men came and stopped us and were joined a little later by many armed fighters. There were 67 of us. We were in Abdella's place, but from different traffickers from Sudan. Those of us who had paid [the ransom] were the ones who*

*left. There were some underage boys and some girls too. (Interview, Estefanos with L and Y2, Skype, 21 January 2015)*

D2, an Eritrean refugee, describes how he came through Omdurman in Sudan to Libya. The trek from Omdurman to the Libyan Desert is especially dangerous:

*As you leave Sudan, in Omdurman, they hide you in lorries. The way they frisk you is so repulsive. I don't know if the government knows those armed Sudanese who frisk you. I didn't have any other option; I mean, I can't expect to be treated fairly in this country if I wasn't treated respectfully in my own country [Eritrea]. If my countrymen can't help me, no one can. Because the route we take is illegal, we can't do anything. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Eritrean (and other) refugees are badly exploited along the routes from Sudan to Libya, but have no other option given their vulnerable position. D2 explained that anything was better than returning to Eritrea, so he was ready to take the risk:

*[...] for me, I accepted everything because anything was better than the life I had in Eritrea. That's why I accepted it, but it was just as he [a fellow refugee who was interviewed] told you. Even those things that didn't happen to us personally, happened to those around us. I recall one instance of people having to bury their siblings who died because of hunger, thirst or torture. There were even times when the girls were raped in front of us. I can't imagine anything worse than that. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Money transfers take place after the refugees have crossed the Sahara to Ajdabya or Benghazi in Libya. D2 does not make a distinction between the money paid for crossing the Sahara and the money paid to the traffickers to be released, both of which he calls 'ransom':

*Ajdabya is also a place where money is transferred, for those who arrive there from the Sahara. It is a small city; there are a couple holding centres where one is held until they pay the money or the ransom. You're held there until you pay [...].* (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)

The refugees survive on what little money they receive from relatives and by sharing food. Among them are youth and young children. A describes the following:

*You ask them to send you money for tea time, you beg. [...] And if you board it to yourself, they [the other refugees] don't see you as a person. You eat by sharing, what else? Even from hunger, a person would wrap herself with a cover and cry. There were young siblings. Young kids. The ones I'm talking about in this period were young.* (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)

An anonymous Eritrean refugee explained how she was abducted outside of Ajdabya:

*The first time we were coming here from Ajdabya they caught us and loaded us on a truck. After we travelled for a couple hours, we were stopped by the police, and we saw them [the police] talk to them [the kidnappers]. As they were talking, one of the police came and recorded us on his phone. Then they sent us away. After travelling for about three hours, three Toyota pickups loaded with machine guns stopped us and a man covered in black wearing a mask boarded the truck and told us to get down. We saw a bunch of soldiers, some of them were Sudanese and Nigerians, and they told us to sit down. They told the Egyptians to separate and they started separating the Muslims and Christians. They told the others [Muslims and Egyptians] to board the truck and asked us [Eritrean Christians] for our ID cards.* (Interview, Estefanos with Anon., Skype and phone, 16 June 2015)

A friend of this refugee, H, described the journey and the money involved:

*For those of us who arrived from the Sahara, we were required to pay the amount either when we reach Ajdabya or Benghazi. We transferred money when we got to Ajdabya, we stayed there until the money was paid. I want to mention that in Ajdabya there's hunger, there's disease – there's everything there. All those bad things that could happen to a man happen to you there. Anyway, when we left, there were about 150 people together in one vehicle: Egyptians, Somalis, Eritreans and other African nationalities. But we [Eritreans] outnumbered everyone; we were 88 Eritreans, 2 people remained there who couldn't pay, 86 of us left the place. Out of the 86, there were 23 women. We were mostly from Adi Keih. A few of the people with us were from Mendefera and Agordat. [...] People saw us as we left and first we were found by the Libyan police. I don't know whose side they are on; I'm not sure if they are part of the government or the opposition, but they found us anyway. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

This group of refugees were then abducted and taken to what appears to be an ISIS-controlled area where they were split into groups of Christians and Muslims. H described what happened next:

*They held us for about 30 minutes and then we kept going. We got to this village called Ben Juwal. We went right through it and about 25 km from Ben Juwal (around 300 km from Ajdabya) we were found by ISIS; this was on the 2nd of June at around 10 pm. We were initially escorted by armed people flying a black flag, some of them wearing masks. Anyways, they asked us if we were Somalis. They spoke to us about what nationality we were; we didn't reply. They started asking us to form separate lines of Muslims and Christians. The Egyptians were Muslims so they got separated. Of us [Eritreans], five people said they were Muslim and they were separated from us. One thing I want to mention here is that [...] we Eritreans are a scared bunch; we have no guts and are used to being quiet. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

D2 and H found that they were with a much larger group, including minors. They decided to take a chance and jump off the truck to escape:

*It is true, there isn't anything worse than death – and death by knife is the worst. We shouldn't get on the car knowing that we are going to die. There were 23 women though, mind you, and most of those who were with us were underage. Even at that time, people were just divided. Some of us were rendered immobile, whereas some of us were really sick and incapable. Anyway, [pause] only the few who could think were like let's do something, but we couldn't decide. When we got on top of the truck, I was next to H. I told him that we'll die, but the choice of how to die is still open. I would rather die by bullet than by knife. With me at that time were my cousin and my sister. H's wife was with us. So we were not sure what to do because of them, but we decided that there wasn't anything to do so we just jumped. (Interview, Estefanos with D2, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Although they were shot at, D2 and H managed to escape:

*How could we wait until they put us to death? We prayed and then we decided to jump. We decided to jump leaving everyone behind. There was this guy called Merhawi, from Mendefera; D2 already decided to jump and we jumped. He jumped to the left and we jumped to the right. We fled as they fired bullets at us. I find it hard to believe that I survived; it was almost impossible given the amount of bullets that were being fired at us. We walked the whole night and hid the whole day the next day. And then, finally, we arrived in Ben Juwal. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

Later, there was an air raid and the other members of the group were also able to escape. D2 and H reported that ISIS are positioned to abduct people who cross through the Sahara: “They're basically located around the areas of Ben Juwal and Ajdabya, that's where they catch a lot of people trying to cross the Sahara” (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015).

D2 and H then moved to Tripoli where they waited for a possibility to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This holding place was also an ordeal without hygiene or food:

*Anyway, we had to get to Tripoli. We got together and we didn't want to take the same route, so we took a longer route around Ben Juwal. We got to this place called*

*Em Weli where we got on top of those Toyota pickup cars and set off. They just stacked us on top of one another. They don't even care if one is dying; they tell you death doesn't matter. Anyway, we got to Tripoli and were placed in this holding place waiting to set to sea. There's so much hunger there, the place is beyond dirty, infested with lice – everyone contracts some sort of rash. (Interview, Estefanos with H, face-to-face, 26 September 2015)*

According to one refugee, Q2, who travelled through Libya from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan in 2014, the main traffickers controlling the human trafficking are Eritrean nationals. She had paid for the journey through Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Eritrean handlers located in Khartoum in what is known as Asmara market. The alleged head of the human trafficking organisation in Libya, whom she knew as a child, is now a wealthy man, reportedly called Ismael Abderaza Saleh. According to various sources this Eritrean started his involvement in smuggling and human trafficking in Libya in 2005. He has residences in Libya and Dubai. Other Eritreans, working for him, such as Kidane, were involved in the day-to-day organisation and collection of the payments. He is also mentioned in a report published by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), where he is identified as Abdurazak Esmail – referring to the same person as identified above:

*Multiple sources in Sudan and Libya, as well as the Glauco 2 and Tokhla operations, identify Abdurazak Esmail, an Eritrean national, as one of the largest smugglers operating in Libya. Esmail has over the years cultivated extensive political connections to various security forces who control the management of detention centres once administered by the Libyan state. In addition to collecting money for the transfer of migrants and refugees across Libya and the Mediterranean, Esmail collects roughly \$4,000 for releasing migrants and refugees who may have been captured and placed in various detention centres, and providing them passage to Italy. Esmail has been based in Libya since 2006, but is known to travel internationally – notably to Dubai, from where he manages his financial affairs. During his frequent absences from Libya, Esmail delegates his Libyan operations to a local fixer known only as*

*“Jaber”, with financial operations co-handled by a Sudan- based accomplice known as “Hamed Omar”. (IGAD and Sahan Foundation, 2016, p. 19)*

She explained how she was lucky in that the journey only lasted ten days on a Toyota pickup – which was fast. At night they stopped and slept under the pickup canopy. She described a Libyan Government Colonel, Saleh, came to inspect the bus in Ajdabya, mainly overseeing the transport arrangements. She said that the Toyota was a government car. Saleh paid the driver, provided the food and water, and provided the car. From Ajdabya, where she heard a lot of bombing, she was then transported in a container truck with over 140 people in a journey that took almost 20 hours. She explained that, in her view, all those arranging the trafficking were from the government:

*In Eritrea, they are from the government. In Sudan, was also a Colonel, he was from the government. They are not ordinary people. They phoned on their mobile phones with military. Then I had to give them my phone. [...] In Libya it was also the Libyan Government. The Colonel Saleh was from the government and we came in a car from the government. In Libya an Eritrean called Kidane arranges the boats. He checked the code I had to be allowed on the boat. He had a notebook with names and codes. I had received the code in Khartoum after my husband had paid the consul in Mai Ayni. He phoned Kidane to inform him about the code. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 17 January 2017)*

Q2 explained that the man in charge of her journey in Libya was an Eritrean, whom she knew well:

*In Libya the big man is Ismael Abderazza Saleh. He is Eritrean. He is my age, we used to play together. He is 35 years. [...] He began in 2006 to take Eritreans from Tigre. Now he is too much rich. He lives in Dubai. He is a BIG man. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 17 January 2017)*

When asked what precautions she had taken to protect herself on the way through Libya, Q2 explained how she had decorated her feet

and hands with henna so that she would be respected as a married woman. She was severely beaten up during the journey through Libya and attacked with a knife.

In another interview, the conviction is expressed that those in charge of the trafficking of human beings to the Sinai are now involved in human trafficking to Libya. This perception is illustrated in the following interview with E3, whose brother was kidnapped, first by Bedouins and then by ISIS, as he was travelling through Libya to reach Europe:

*E3: I was working two days a week; I was studying five days a week, so I didn't know what to do. And after two weeks, I heard that my brother was in Libya, but I didn't talk to him. But I heard that when they arrived in Libya, ISIS attacked them... they took about 150 people from them. So he was under ISIS for a week and a half. They just told us to pay the money and we didn't hear from him. I asked if I could talk to him, but no, I could not.*

*It was such a long way, he's 17. And you know how it must have been with ISIS, people forcing him to read the Quran... putting a gun to him... and you know... the same traffickers who used to be in Sinai are operating in Libya now. (Interview, Heisterkamp with E3, face-to-face, 27 August 2015)*

Further research is needed to investigate the hypothesis that those involved in the Sinai trafficking moved their operations from the Sinai to Libya. The interviews obviously do not constitute proof, but it is certainly a view that is broadly held by the victims of human trafficking, who believe that the human trafficking organisation organised operations from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Sinai and to Libya.

A refugee mentioned that he saw that a representative of the Eritrean Embassy in Tripoli assisted specific refugees who had been captured by the Libyan authorities while moving across Libya to Europe; and he believed this refugee was supported or sent to Europe by the PFDJ (personal communication Van Reisen with

anon., face-to-face, 2015). The IGAD report alleges that the Eritrean Embassy in Tripoli is involved in facilitation of human trafficking:

*Destabilisation in Libya has led to the withdrawal of international diplomatic presence, including African ambassadors from many of the irregular migrants' home countries. This has led to a situation where migrants are at risk of being detained indefinitely, because there is no communication at the diplomatic level to repatriate them. Nevertheless, one NGO official based in the region for a significant amount of time alleges that some remaining diplomatic personnel profit from the irregular migration routes, by charging "fees" to negotiate the release of people from detention centres. Two eyewitnesses appeared to corroborate these allegations when they reported that they have seen high-profile smugglers at the Eritrean embassy in Tripoli. (IGAD and Sahan, 2016, p. 13)*

The report published by IGAD made the allegation that (some) Eritrean members of the human trafficking and smuggling organisations do not fear persecution in Eritrea and rely on assistance from Eritrean diplomatic missions abroad:

*Some prominent Eritrean human smugglers appear to be unconcerned that their own government might take action against them. Before his arrest and prosecution by the US criminal justice system, Habtom Merhay made frequent trips to Eritrea. A number of known smugglers also appear to rely upon the services of Eritrean diplomats abroad. The Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat has noted that some Eritrean migrants are reported to have obtained Eritrean ID cards or passports at the Eritrean embassy in Khartoum because "a person who applies for a passport does not have to prove that their exit was legal". Several individuals interviewed for this study also reported visiting the Eritrean embassy in Tripoli during the course of 2015, despite having left their country illegally. (IGAD and Sahan, 2016, p. 29)*

Some alleged human traffickers or smugglers have been seen participating in visits of official Eritrean government delegations to Europe. The following is cited from the report:

*In February 2015, media reports in Italy surfaced concerning a Milan Flying Squad investigation that resulted in the arrests of a number of Eritrean smugglers. Among those arrested was Efreem Misgna, who routinely serves as an escort for Eritrean government and party officials when they visit Europe. In April 2012 he was included in the entourage of a senior official of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) arriving at Stockholm airport. (IGAD and Sahan, 2016, p. 29)*

Over 100,000 officially registered refugees from Eritrea have reached Europe through the Central Mediterranean route since 2009 (Frontex, 2016). The journeys are often interrupted by collections of bribes, ransoms or other money to 'facilitate' the journey. Mobile money is an important means through which these financial transfers are facilitated. Reportedly air transfers, with a value of hundreds of USD, are transferred - amongst others on the Zain mobile phone network in Libya.

It is estimated that the average cost paid by a refugee from Eritrea to reach Europe is USD 10,000, including ransom payments. The most conservative estimate of the total value of the human trafficking trade in Eritreans is over USD 1 billion. This amount could not be substantiated or triangulated; hence it should be interpreted as an indicative and conservative number provided by well-informed sources, given here as a very rough indicator to estimate the order of potential value of the organ trade and human trafficking in the North African region.

## **Beheadings by ISIS**

A, who was abducted from Israel to the Sinai and subsequently deported from Egypt to Eritrea (see earlier section on 'Deportation from Egypt'), explains that after he fled Eritrea for the second time, he went through Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya:

*I stayed there [in Sudan] for five days. At the end of five days, I left for Libya quickly. [...] For two months, we were there [in Libya]. [...] The ones who came*

*right before us and those who came right after us encountered a bad situation; they were beheaded [by ISIS]. Some folks who were beheaded were people we knew. Many of them [were people] who we knew. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

Given that A spent a long time in Israel, he knew the Eritrean community there well. This community includes many survivors of human trafficking in the Sinai. As described in Chapter 2 of this book, many Eritrean refugees left Israel ‘voluntarily’, where they are treated as illegal immigrants. From his testimony, it appears that A recognised several fellow refugees, whom he had known in Israel, who were beheaded by ISIS:

*There was one who was my Facebook friend, I’ll find him. He came from Israel and was beheaded. There was also a guy from Adi Keyih. He was also on Facebook. There were a few I knew in Sudan, in Ethiopia, who I knew in Israel, who were killed. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

According to A, approximately 80 people were beheaded or killed by ISIS, some of whom were able to escape. Among them were Ethiopians and Eritreans. Some he recognised from Israel; a number of whom were beheaded. In a subsequent incident, a group of 80 refugees were killed in Libya, including more Eritreans (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016).

Having experienced severe torture in the Sinai, where he had been hung, and months in prison in Eritrea, A found the situation in Libya a terrible ordeal:

*In Libya, I was bearing many things and, after what I went through, to me, it was very crippling to bear. Death is better than Daesh [ISIS]. After what I saw in the Sinai, Libya’s circumstances were heavy. Even for me, it was heavy. For me, I thought, from now on, I’ll never encounter something so bad again as what I escaped from. I had hunger, there was hunger. There were 1,500 or 1,800 people in one room all squished together; you sleep on top of each other. And the boat that you will use to cross, they would say tomorrow, day after tomorrow – just stringing you*

*along. Everything was a struggle. Why couldn't they just send us on a crappy vessel? Over there [in Libya], illness upon illness, diarrhoea and other illnesses. All squished together. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

ISIS fighters come from all over Africa, as described in the testimony of S:

*There were a bunch of fighters: Somalis, Nigerians, Sudanese, Tunisians and Libyans too. But we never were allowed to see them. Some spoke French. They lived around the courtyard we were held in. The Nigerians who were caught told us that they lived in a nearby area. There was one Sudanese guy guarding us like that – he's not a bad person, but he was also powerless to help us. He was a prisoner just like us I guess. He was armed, but I think he was being paid 250 dollars a month. We wanted to assault him at first, but then we decided against it as we saw that he was a prisoner too. (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype, 2016)*

A Muslim survivor who was abducted by ISIS said that people are treated differently depending on their religious affiliations. The treatment of Muslims is different from those of Christians. Christian women are forced to convert before they can get married to ISIS fighters. One anonymous female refugee interviewed questioned the extent to which the ISIS fighters were knowledgeable about Islam:

*They [ISIS fighters] are not Muslims, they wouldn't know. I don't think they know the details [of Islam], but they know a bit. Even the Egyptians [hostages] stopped them in their questioning because they [the Egyptians] seemed to be more knowledgeable about the Quran. They [ISIS fighters] only asked us when we should pray, what time and all that. Anyway, finally, the Libyan driver came back and took us away. But they [ISIS] took the Christians. We were left about 1 hour from this place where we were supposed to make a pit stop. (Interview, Estefanos with Anon., Skype and phone, 16 June 2015)*

## Women abductees held by ISIS

There has been little research done on the situation of women who are held by ISIS. This is partly because it is difficult to work with the abductees, who are traumatised and, therefore, reluctant to talk about their experiences, and also because they are difficult to contact. However, there are some recent publications based on testimonies of survivors (Gebrekidan, 2016a & 2016b). More research and analysis is required in the future.

The situation of Eritrean women and girls in Libya is especially difficult. A explained that they have to take precautions as they cannot expect to avoid sexual violence along the way:

*The sad thing is that every girl who sets out for Europe should take it as acceptable that they might get raped. It is a regular thing to see the girls take either the anti-pregnancy shots or carry condoms on them. These things are taken for granted and people are willing to undergo such an ordeal. The main reason, of course, beyond the things that happen en route to Libya, is the dictatorship in Eritrea. This would never have happened if it wasn't for the things that happen to people in Eritrea. This is what happens in Libya. (Interview, Estefanos with A, face-to-face, 2016)*

From the interviews conducted for this chapter, it appears that the groups abducted by ISIS are relatively large. S counted 68 in her group. S and her friend were abducted in Ajdabya, but escaped:

*They [ISIS] were keeping us under lock and chain. We were captured a few miles out of Ajdabya. We figured that we had been caught by ISIS when we saw a bunch of soldiers armed and happy at seeing us. They obviously must have thought we'd make great wives. There was this guy called Alemayo who was doubling as a translator. He said that they wouldn't do anything to us so long as we told them our names and religions. We were all Christian except for this one girl [...]. She was off the truck at first saying she was a Muslim, but she got scared and came back to us. She said she was Christian and got back with us saying she wanted to be with her sisters. They kept moving us around during this time. One of the days when they*

*were going to move us, we ran to the other Eritrean girls who were there before us and they told us that we only needed to pretend that we were changing our religion. (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype and phone, 2016)*

From the testimony of F, it appears that this group of women and girls were 'bought' by ISIS:

*When we were caught, we were somewhere in the Sahara Desert. We were the only ones in that area – our holding cell was the only house for miles. But later we were hit by an air raid, so they [ISIS] transferred us to a populated place. They recorded everything, our names, ages and religions. [...] We spent three days in the place they took us to. They kept locking us up and we asked him [their captor] what we were doing there. He told us that he had bought us [...]. "I can do anything to you now", he told us. We begged him and then he said that he bought us for marriage and that one will remain with him and the other two will be married to other men. He told us that if we dared to run away he'd return us to where we were first held. [...] we managed to run away from him. (Interview, Estefanos with F, face-to-face, 27 June 2016)*

From the testimony of another refugee, Y2, it appears that the main purpose of capturing the women was for them to be married to ISIS fighters:

*When they [ISIS] first found us, we were around a checkpoint. And we thought they were going to escort us at first. We didn't recognise them as they were wearing civilian attire. So, after we travelled for a bit, they stopped the trailer, got the men down, and they started putting handcuffs on them. Then they asked everyone what religion they belonged to? They asked us if we were Orthodox [Christians] or Muslim? We told them we were Orthodox Christians. Three others were Muslims, so they let them go. They kept us in captivity. They took us to the group of 86 [Eritreans already held by ISIS]. We saw female shoes and we knew there were other women. The guard kept telling us that we were going to be on our way soon enough, right after we saw the Amir. There was an air raid after three days and they transferred us to a rural area, we spent about five months there. They told us to become Muslims, but we wouldn't agree. We kept asking them to let us go and*

*the Amir finally came and asked us how we didn't seem to know who they are. We said we didn't know him and were willing to pay him to let us go. He laughed it off saying that he would give us money himself, and that he had no need for our money. Then he announced that they were ISIS. After he told us we broke the window and tried to run away, but we got stopped. We asked the guard not to tell on us and the guard agreed and told us to just capitulate [convert to Islam]. So after we heard that the 86 arrived, we agreed to become Muslims. We started fasting so they would believe us. After teaching us for two months, we were transferred to the city where we were received by an elder who kept us locked up. When we asked him what he wanted with us he told us that he had paid to marry one woman and was going to gift us to other men if he wants. We couldn't sleep at first when we heard the news, so one day, right after they went to pray, we tied the bedsheets together and escaped through the window. (Interview, Estefanos with Y2, face-to-face, 21 January 2015)*

F explained how they were forced to convert to Islam. F was held in a place with 22 other women and girls:

*They [ISIS fighters] asked us why we left [Eritrea]. We told them that we came to this country to work and we were held for three or four months and that we wanted to go back to our country. He [the ISIS guard] didn't say anything, he just locked us back in the cell for four days, after which he let us out. [...]. They kept telling us to become Muslims. We didn't accept it for about three months, but then we capitulated and they started teaching us about Islam, the Quran and Sharia law. Then we were able to run away while they were teaching us. (Interview, Estefanos with F, face-to-face, 27 June 2016)*

S and her friend were held in a place with a large group of other women. Those who were not Muslim were locked up and some were told that they would be killed.

*All of us were in the same place, about 56 people. It was a huge courtyard. They started showing us their propaganda videos. They forced us to watch the videos of them slaughtering people. If you are Muslim, but you don't know how to pray, they slaughter those people. They kill everyone; the videos were from all over. [...] Our*

*days were hard, we cried all the time. We were worrying nonstop. We couldn't eat or drink, but we always managed to tell ourselves that we might get out. We were not together with the others until we converted to Islam. Then we were able to exchange thoughts – the classroom was a meeting place too. They say that they [ISIS] don't kill children and women; women are considered property, nothing more nothing less. The lives of ISIS captured women are always in the hands of whosoever they assign you to. (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype, 2016)*

S and N2, two of the women held captive by ISIS, can still list the names of the girls and women that they were with, as they had promised to remember their names and get information back to their families, if they managed to escape.

N2 mentions the solidarity among the women as an important way for them to survive the situation: “Those of us who were there were taking care of one another and loved and helped each other like sisters” (Interview, Estefanos with N2, Skype and phone, 21 February 2016).

From other interviews, it is clear that separation is the thing that these women and girls fear the most and that their priority is to remain connected to the group so that they can draw support and strength from each other. When the women and girls are married off against their will it is hard in many ways – including because they are isolated and separated from their group. In the testimonies some refugees tell of being supported by Libyan nationals when they escape.

What stands out from the stories of the women and girls held captive by ISIS is that they are: forced to convert to Islam; forced to marry ISIS fighters; and expected to render sexual services.

## **Organ trafficking in Egypt**

Since 2010, concerns have been raised about the connection between human trafficking for ransom and organ trafficking. In 2012, UNHCR Chief, Antonio Guterres, said that there have been reports that some migrants in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula were being

"killed for the traffic of organs" (BBC, 2016). A 2013 review of the human trafficking cycle in the Sinai (2013) reported the following:

*An Eritrean opposition official on Friday told Sudan Tribune that if relatives fail to raise the money the children either are tortured to death or will be subjected to organ harvesting such as to the extraction of kidneys. (Tekle, 2013)*

In 2016, a people smuggler told Italian prosecutors that those who could not repay their debt were sold to the organ traffickers (McKenna, 2016). In recent months the Egyptian police have arrested some of those allegedly involved in the trade, as described in the following BBC report:

*Egyptian authorities have arrested doctors, nurses and professors suspected of being involved in an international organ trafficking ring. The arrests of at least 25 people on Tuesday also included organ buyers and middlemen, the country's Administrative Control Authority said. Authorities also found "millions of dollars and gold bullion". It is illegal to purchase organs in Egypt, but poverty drives some to sell their body parts. The Administrative Control Authority, a powerful anti-corruption body, claimed the network targeted on Tuesday was "made up of Egyptians and Arabs taking advantage of some of the citizens' difficult economic conditions so that they buy their human organs and sell [them] for large sums of money". (BBC, 2016)*

The Egyptian trade has now been comprehensively documented (Columb, 2016). Unfortunately, the criminal sanctions introduced to curb this illegal trade have only pushed it underground (Columb, 2016) and have not deterred Egyptian surgeons from performing operations: "Should a transplant professional (surgeon) suspect that an organ has been donated illegally there is no legal duty to report this to the relevant authorities" (Columb, 2016, p. 15). The article adds that surgeons turn a blind eye to the fact that some refugees give up body parts against their will and some brokers threaten donors with big fines if they don't go ahead with removal. "Undocumented African migrants arriving in Cairo, desperate for cash, told [...] that

sex workers were offered as a ‘sweetener’ before or after removal of their organs” (Esslemont, 2016).

Eritrean refugees trafficked for ransom in the Sinai are told that they will be killed or their organs harvested for sale if they cannot afford the ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). In early 2016, an Italian court in Sicily was informed about the practice by Nuredin Wehabrebi Atta, an Eritrean smuggler who was caught by Italian authorities in 2014. The smuggler was given a shorter prison sentence and witness protection in exchange for sharing vital trafficking intelligence, which enabled Italian authorities to crack down on a smuggling ring that extended between Europe and North Africa. In his statement to investigators, the smuggler told Italian prosecutors that he “was told that the people who can’t pay are given to Egyptians who kill them to take their organs and sell them in Egypt for USD 15,000” (ANSA, 2016). “The Egyptians come equipped to remove the organ and transport it in insulated bags”, he stated (*Ibid.*) In June 2016, it was reported that 38 people, mostly Eritreans and Ethiopians, were arrested in connection with this illicit activity (Latza Nadeau, 2016).

An Australian radio station broadcast the following report based on interviews with Eritrean refugees living in Melbourne:

*Samson Habtemariam was 26 years old when he fled Eritrea, hiding in a truck. He had been imprisoned for more than a year, then held under house arrest, accused of cooperating with opposition forces. [...]. Habtemariam told SBS how tribal leaders ordered them all to pay a ransom of more than USD 30,000 or they would lose their kidneys. “They told us that they would sell one kidney for USD 25,000 and two of our kidneys for USD 50,000.” (Weldegiorgis, 2014)*

In Eritrea, sudden wealth is associated with the lucrative human trafficking trade: “In the summer of 2013, graffiti was painted on the house of two colonels in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, which read: ‘You built this house with the kidneys of our children’” (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken, 2014, p. 52). A refugee who lived several years

in Mai Ayni refugee camp between 2010 and 2014 told the following story:

*There was a lady, the aunt of a child, who had been abducted to the Sinai and was tortured for ransom. There was no money to pay the ransom. The child was killed. The aunt asked the trafficker, who was living next to her. Why did you kill the child of my sister? He explained they took the organs. (Interview, Van Reisen with Q2, face-to-face, 17 January 2017)*

According to a confidential and well-informed source who has been investigating organ harvesting for many years, the organ harvesting includes Eritrean victims. These are often difficult to identify as (some) Eritrean refugees use Sudanese passports in an attempt to avoid statelessness. A source explains it succinctly:

*I would like to inform you, many Eritreans who live in Egypt have a Sudanese passport; they buy it, it only costs USD 25, and the traffickers in Egypt use them to get their organs. (Anon., personal communication, with Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017)*

This source explained that the recent operation to arrest a ring of professionals engaged in organ trafficking in Egypt has only arrested the smaller ‘fish’. The documentation suggests the potential involvement of Eritrean traffickers in smuggling and trafficking for this purpose. The suggestion provided by this source is that high-ranking Egyptian military and security officials are also implicated in the trade, but were not arrested. The source suggests that the organ trafficking trade would be worth a minimum of USD 200 million for the period 2011–2016. (Anon., personal communication and unpublished documentation with/received by Van Reisen, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter describes new practices related to the human trafficking of Eritrean refugees that have emerged in Egypt and Libya

since 2014. These practices – which include organ trafficking, beheading, forced conversion and forced marriage – must be seen in the context of the desperate journeys that Eritreans embark on to escape Eritrea and to avoid deportation from Sudan and Egypt. This chapter is largely based on the testimonies obtained from resource persons and refugees who travelled these routes.

The testimonies reveal how Eritrean refugees are crisscrossing between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya in search of a safe place. This is well illustrated by one testimony of an Eritrean refugee who was abducted from Israel and brought to the Sinai, from where he was deported back to Eritrea. In Eritrea he was imprisoned, but was able to escape and flee through Ethiopia (where he was also imprisoned) to Sudan and Libya, where he was captured by ISIS. He now lives in Germany.

Eritrean refugees feel threatened by the prospect of deportation from Egypt to Eritrea, where they are marked as having left the country illegally. This fear of harassment and deportation adds to the vulnerability of Eritrean refugees and is driving up the costs associated with their survival. Such costs include bribes, ransoms, smuggling costs, and general expenses for survival. There is increasing evidence that organ traffickers are exploiting such vulnerabilities, with refugees being forced to give their organs.

Since 2011 when organ trafficking was first associated with human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, more and more evidence has become available about organ harvesting, including from Eritreans. In 2016, the Egyptian authorities arrested members of an alleged ‘organ trafficking ring’. However, informed sources indicate that the arrests made do not include high-ranking military and security officials who have been implicated in the trade. The potential connection between human trafficking for ransom from Eritrea and the organ trafficking trade deserve further investigation.

The situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya is presented based on new testimony collected mainly by the co-author of this chapter, Meron Estefanos. The interviews evidence the extremely brutal treatment of the refugees, whose vulnerability is exploited as they

arrive in Libya at the end of their dangerous journey through the Sahara. In Ajdabya, Eritrean refugees are expected to pay for their transport and it is significant to note that the distinction between such ‘payments’ and ‘ransoms’ is not always clear. The reality is that exploitation is so inherent in the smuggling context that, in Libya, the Eritrean refugees assume that their freedom is held as collateral for the payment. In this way, such transactions can be equated with ransoms – at least this is the reality as it appears to the refugees.

That this is a matter of life and death becomes absolute when the Eritrean refugees are confronted with the beheading of those who have fallen into the hands of extremist groups such as ISIS. The number of people who have suffered this fate cannot be deduced from the relatively small number of interviews conducted for the purpose of this chapter, but the testimonies indicate that at least hundreds of Eritrean refugees are held by such groups. One Eritrean refugee from Israel was recognised fellow Eritreans he had known in Israel as among those beheaded by ISIS in Libya.

Although Eritrean refugees are among other nationalities, Eritreans seem to be more substantial in number. From the testimonies, it seems that Eritrean refugees believe that sexual violence against women is unavoidable on these journeys. Rape and sexual violence seem to have been ‘normalised’ and men and women accept that the girls ought to take precautions to at least not get pregnant.

In Libya, Eritrean refugees are sorted according to religion and gender. The women are forced to convert to Islam and marry ISIS fighters. In one testimony, the refugee understood the objective of their capture to be for the women to bear children to ISIS fighters.

The human trafficking networks include Eritrean nationals operating across Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. Embassies from Eritrea are alleged to help in the facilitation of the smuggling in these countries. Eritrean refugees have become a valuable commodity throughout the North African region. The human trafficking trade in refugees is an important element that drives the economy. Mobile money (such as airtime

transfers) facilitate the payments. Linked across the region between Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya, the Eritrean refugees are traded as priced commodities: the most conservative estimate of the total value of the human trafficking in trade in Eritreans is over USD 1 billion.

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