# Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking

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# Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking

*Klara Smits & Mirjam Van Reisen*

**Chapter in: Enslaved**
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Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya

**From the book Series:**
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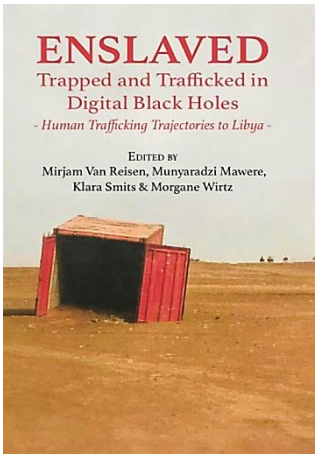


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## Chapter 9

# Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking[1]

*Klara Smits & Mirjam Van Reisen*

### Introduction: From the Sinai to Libya

*The trafficking trajectories taken by Eritreans to Libya are highly organised by a network of actors across the Horn of Africa. The practices described by the refugees and migrants who have taken these perilous journeys include recruitment by deception, fraud and force. Payments are extracted using torture while victims are detained in 'warehouses' and 'stores'. The purpose of these practices is clearly to exploit people who are vulnerable for financial gain and force them to engage in begging. This chapter argues that the practice satisfies the elements of the crime of human trafficking and that fulfils the elements that constitute human trafficking for ransom.*

The phenomenon of human trafficking for ransom first came to light in the Sinai desert in Egypt in 2009 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). This practice involved collecting ransoms from migrants and refugees[2] while torturing them on the phone to family members to 'encourage' them to pay. The victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were mainly Eritrean – 95%, according to an estimate published by Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken (2012; also see Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

'Sinai trafficking', as it came to be known, ceased for various

[1] The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the first author's PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

[2] In this chapter the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

reasons in 2014 (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). However, trafficking for ransom – using the same modus operandi as documented in Sinai trafficking – has emerged in (and on the road to) Libya (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017b). Human trafficking for ransom in Libya was first mentioned in a journal article in 2015 (Reitano, 2015) and in more detail in 2017 (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017b). The similarity between it and Sinai trafficking raises questions about whether or not some of the actors and networks from Sinai trafficking may have already been in place in Libya by the time reports on Sinai trafficking were first made and relocated the business after the lucrative trade in the Sinai dried up (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017b).

The expansion of human trafficking for ransom, from the relatively narrow location in the Sinai to the coverage of an entire region, might have been predicted. As far back as 2014, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) described how the routes, financial implications and presence of perpetrators had expanded in the North African region – and Europe – as human trafficking for ransom is lucrative and largely perpetrated with impunity. In order to counter this crime, it is first necessary to understand the modus operandi. The following section explores the gaps in the literature on human trafficking in Libya, focusing on the routes and the operations on those routes. It also sets out the research questions. This is followed by the methodology, findings, discussion and, lastly, a brief conclusion.

## Documentation of human trafficking routes

While the routes used in Sinai trafficking have been described extensively (see, for example, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017), only a few publications have described the trafficking routes of Eritreans to Libya. Reitano (2015, p. 9) noted that from 2012 to 2015 'people smuggling' in the region had become a structured and systematic phenomenon, but he also noted that more research was needed:

> *[There is] a chronic absence of either data or more qualitative assessments that would allow a better understanding of the nature of the drivers and motivations of migrants,*

*the routes of transit or the role of facilitators, or even the scale of the flow.* (Reitano, 2015, p. 9)

A report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) specifically identifies human trafficking networks operating from the Horn of Africa to Libya and involving Eritrean refugees.

As well as there being only a few publications on the trafficking routes to Libya, there are also lots of gaps in the description of these routes. For instance, Hajer is mentioned as a key transit hub in Sudan near the capital of Khartoum, from which mainly Eritreans are transported to Libya, but its precise location is not determined. The report by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) identifies this as the last point before refugees leave to Libya. Davy (2017) describes some of the key entry points on the border from Ethiopia to Sudan, namely, the towns of Metemma (in the Amhara region) and Humera (in the Tigray region). Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017b) describe routes from Sudan to Libya and briefly touch upon new routes to Libya from Sudan via Egypt, but these are not described in detail.

The operations on the route are also not described in any detail in the extant literature. Davy (2017) says that the drivers who transport people to Libya travel over the sand to avoid authorities and that refugees have reported encountering armed groups, which are referred to as Chadian or Egyptian. Kuschminder (2021) reports an increase in the amounts of ransom being collected from Eritrean refugees in Libya, but does not provide details about the routes that Eritreans use to cross the Sahara before entering Libya.

The degree of organisation of the routes from Eritrea through Sudan and other countries into Libya is also the subject of discussion. Ayalew found that:

*[…] unlike the official narratives, smuggling in these particular transition nodes [border towns such as Teseney and Kassala] lacks a centralized leadership or hierarchy. Certain 'pilots' and their connectors facilitate refugee journeys across a certain distance using specific skills needed to transit to specific locations.* (Ayalew, 2018, p. 6)

Conversely, the report by the Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016) stresses that the drivers "appear to be in close communication with each other, coordinating their operations and highlighting the seamless connections between the logisticians of the human smuggling trade across national borders in the Horn and North Africa" (p. 22). In the *Routledge Handbook of Human Trafficking*, Van Reisen *et al.* (2018) emphasise the collusion between trafficking networks, authorities, law enforcement and military apparatus in the organisation of the routes. Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017), Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017a), and Van Reisen *et al.* (2018) describe a high level of criminal organisation involving top military officials, such as the Eritrean General Manjus, among others. This is also confirmed by United Nations (UN) Security Council Monitoring Reports (UN Security Council, 2011; 2013; 2014; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). They identify a practice of human trafficking for ransom linked to other international crimes, such as the illicit cross-border trade in arms and people.

Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans and Mawere (2019) identify digital communication, and the control of it, as a key factor driving new forms of human trafficking of Eritrean refugees, enabled by 'black holes' in the digital landscape. As technological innovations are introduced, the power differential between potential victims and perpetrators of human trafficking increases, and this can be regarded as a factor in the rapid expansion and globalisation of human trafficking. Kidane (2021) has described the reliance of Eritrean refugees on digital communication; in the refugee camps she investigated in Ethiopia, she identified that a large number of Eritrean refugees had access to some kind of digital communication. To refugees trapped in a 'black hole' in the digital landscape – a location in which connectivity and access to information is restricted or controlled – a mobile phone is not just a tool for convenience and entertainment, but it "become[s] a trusted and integral part of the lives of refugees scattered across many geographical areas, keeping families in contact and transferring cash and information across various locations" (Kidane, 2021, p. 23).

There is confusion in relation to the terminology used to describe the phenomenon in the literature. Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit (UN, 2000; see also UN Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Human trafficking *for ransom* is further defined as the abduction, torture, extortion and/or killing of victims who are forced to beg to extract ransoms for their release (Van Reisen Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).[3] While the definitions of these terms – human trafficking and human trafficking for ransom – are fairly clear, their application in practices is varied.

Reitano (2015) and Ayalew (2018) refer to the practice as 'smuggling', while Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) and Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017a) refer to it as 'human trafficking for ransom'. Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) interviewed 34 Eritrean refugees in Italy who arrived between 2016 and 2017, but said that they were unable to detect 'trafficking routes'. These authors found that there was no active recruitment, deception or coercion of those interviewed at the time when they started their journey to Libya:

> *None of the respondents spoke of being actively recruited, that is approached and convinced to migrate, by smugglers or traffickers for migrating to Libya. From these respondents, it is evident that there was no deception nor coercion in the recruitment and planning of the migration, and hence it would be difficult to consider these migrants as victims of trafficking.* (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 218)

Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) conclude that refugees in Libya are, therefore, not victims of human trafficking, but rather of kidnapping and extortion, which they describe as a crime against humanity.

Other authors, such as Belloni (2016), describe Eritrean refugees in similar situations to those described by Kuschminder and

[3] For more details on the definition of these terms see Glossary of Terms.

Triandafyllidou, including encouragement from the community to migrate onwards from Sudan and Ethiopia and large-scale planning in which everyone in a community or refugee camp plans to leave. In addition, these authors say that Eritrean refugees are, to a certain extent, aware of the dangers before setting off to Libya (Belloni, 2016; Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020); therefore, they question the degree of 'deception' involved in the recruitment.

However, the findings of Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) appear to contradict the UN Security Council Resolutions, which have condemned the human trafficking of "hundreds of thousands of people" in Libya (see, for example, UN Security Council, 2015; 2018; 2020; 2021a; 2021b) and the findings of the UN, which has identified human traffickers, including from Eritrea, as perpetrators of these crimes (Jaura, 2018). The UN has imposed sanctions on six individuals in relation to this (UN Security Council, 2018). Subsequently, several arrests of perpetrators of human trafficking, which have also been named in other publications on this phenomenon, have been reported in the media (Ezega, 2020; Sayed, 2020; Girma & Hayden, 2021).

Mechanisms for the protection and rehabilitation of trafficking victims naturally rest upon the proper classification of the nature of the events and the determination of whether or not these constitute transnational crimes. Hence, it is important to identify whether the practices in, and on route, to Libya, constitute human trafficking.

Dearey (2018) argues that in order to identify victims of human trafficking, it is important to investigate the perpetrators and understand the level of organisation involved. This can be difficult, as victims may be reluctant, or afraid, to share their experiences. In relation to the reception of refugees in Israel, Rozen (2019) found that victims often have problems in presenting their experiences to the authorities and, therefore, their status as a victim of human trafficking is often overlooked. Hence, whether or not the phenomenon under study can or should be qualified as human trafficking is a relevant question.

It is clear that a more detailed description and understanding of the routes, modalities and facilitators of human trafficking for ransom in Libya is urgently needed to enable classification of the phenomenon. In order to contribute to this debate, the present study represents a case study of the routes that Eritrean refugees take into Libya. It examines the main routes by which Eritrean refugees travel from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, how, and by whom these journeys are facilitated, and the modus operandi on these routes. As well as the routes, this chapter looks at how the journey is initiated, whether or not extortion and torture for ransom occur on these journeys, the conditions while on route through the desert to Libya, the role of ICT during the journey, and the organisation of the networks responsible for the transportation of Eritrean refugees along these routes.

The main research question is: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya and does the practice constitute human trafficking?*

This is answered through the following sub-questions:

Sub-Q.1: *How are the journeys of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya initiated?*

Sub-Q.2: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya?*

Sub-Q.3: *What are the conditions on the route?*

Sub-Q.4: *How are payments made, where and to whom, and under what conditions?*

Sub-Q.5. *How are these routes organised (facilitators, networks, collusion of authorities) and what is the involvement of Eritreans (including Eritrean authorities) in this organisation?*

The next section presents the methodology used to answer these questions.

## Methodology

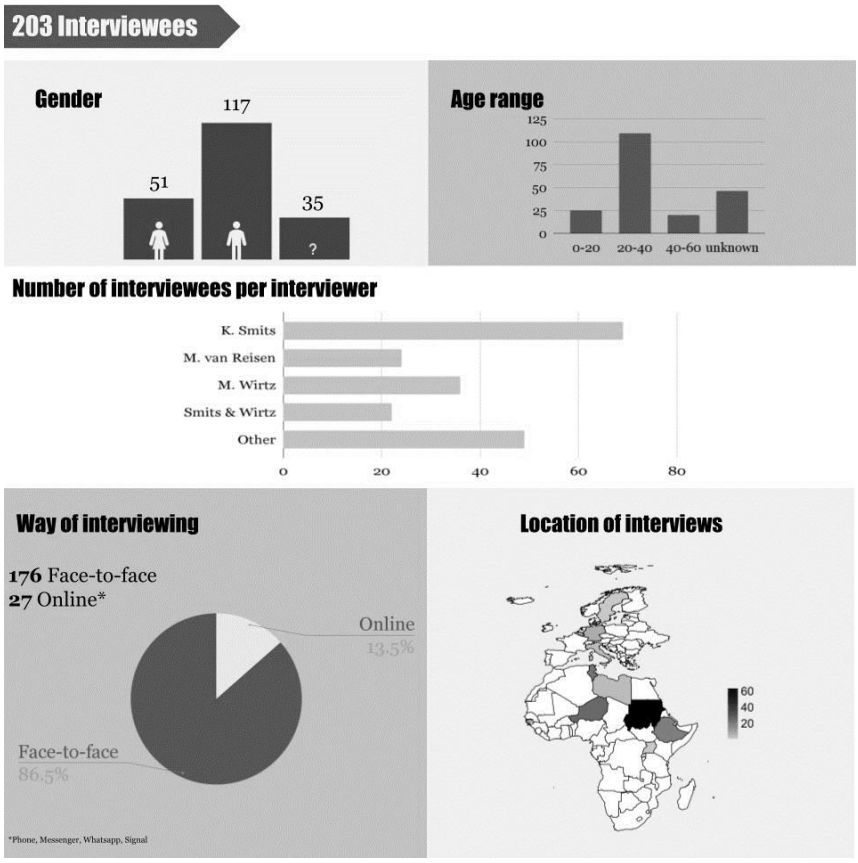
The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning this book can be found in Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma.*

The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork. Observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication, informed the background of this chapter. This material included reports, videos, social media posts, photographs and other information, collected and sent to us by resource persons in social media spaces and in personal communications, using participatory ethnographic research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) and netnography (Kozinets, 2017).

This descriptive and explorative case study investigates the routes and trajectories taken by Eritrean refugees, fleeing Eritrea and the Horn of Africa during the period starting from around the mid-2000s up to 2021. The large majority of the interviews analysed in this chapter were carried out between March 2019 and December 2021 by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits and Adoum Moussa. Interviews by Mirjam Van Reisen were conducted in small focus groups, and several interviews from her previous research have been re-used. The SDDI research includes 312 participants in interviews. This chapter has analysed a subset of these interviews, namely, all interviews with Eritrean participants (n=203) and, as a means of comparison, interviews a Sudanese participant (n=4), Somali participants (n=5) and a resource (n=1) person familiar with the journeys of Eritrean refugees. The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, and online.

The interviews were analysed using a coding-labelling strategy, focusing on the routes, facilitators, events and modus operandi reported on the trajectory from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya. A coding-labelling table was constructed to identify all locations, borders crossed, occurrences at these locations and payments made. The interviewees were also asked about the identities of the persons who transported them.

**Figure 9.1. Overview of interview statistics**[4]




[4] Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

The findings of this research are presented in the following sections: initiating the journey and the recruitment process; the routes to Libya; the conditions in the desert; the payments made, to whom, where and under what conditions; and the organisation of the trade, including the network, complicity of authorities and involvement of Eritreans.

## The start of the journey

The next section presents the findings on the circumstances at the start of the journey to Libya. This research looked at trajectories from Ethiopia or Sudan (the segments of the journey from Eritrea or Somalia are not included in this study).

### *Initiating the journey*

Many of the interviewees in this research reported initiating the journey to Libya themselves, in that they contacted someone to arrange their journey or took some other step to commence the journey.

> *He [the connection man] took me in a car to Khartoum. There I made contact with an Eritrean connection man. His name is Aman. I didn't pay him. We agreed that I will pay 1600 USD once arrived in the store in Libya.* (Interviewee 1007, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *In Sudan, you can find simply [find someone to take you to Libya], because you are talking.* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

However, the word 'initiation' may require further interrogation as it may hide a more complex reality. 'Initiation' by the migrants and refugees may be the result of circumstances designed to leave few or no other options.

All of the interviewees who reported planning to leave for Libya said that they had begun to think about this in the refugee camps in

Ethiopia and Sudan, or in urban areas in Sudan;[5] none of the interviewees for this book said they had made any such plan in Eritrea, when they were preoccupied with the challenge of leaving the country safely. Many refugees are prompted to leave from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, as the circumstance in these host countries is perceived as hostile and difficult. Particularly in Sudan, interviewees explained that the situation is impossible:

> *[...] After I came to Sudan, the situation was even worse. They ask you for identification and if you don't have the identification, they just arrest you, so finally I decided to leave.* (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2020)

Interviewees also described other reasons for moving to Libya, including fear of being forcibly returned to Eritrea, the inability to provide for their family, and fear of Eritrean government operatives.[6]

Moreover, a refugee who reports having 'initiated' a journey may have been compelled, misled, or deceived and during the journey may be abducted or sold (on). For example, a middle-aged Eritrean man explained:

> *[I found a smuggler] Just by people, asking. For the desert and for the sea, [he wanted] 4,400 [US] dollar. For all. […] I entered straight to Bani Walid [in Libya]. [...] I was locked up underground for 4 months, not seeing outside, anything.*

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[5] This description is correct for the period researched. After 2020, the situation for Eritrean refugees in urban areas in Ethiopia deteriorated and this may have impacted on the numbers leaving to Libya from urban areas (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, phone call, October 2021). Also refugee camps in Ethiopia were severely affected by the war in Tigray; two camps were destroyed in the war and the remaining two camps are suffering severely under war conditions, with little if any supplies reaching the camps (Schlein, 2021). Refugees have been relocated to other camps and some have left or tried to leave to other countries, including Libya.

[6] From 2020 to the time of writing, conditions for Eritrean refugees all over Ethiopia severely worsened, due to the presence of Eritrean intelligence, security and agents in Ethiopia, who keep watch on the Eritrean population, as well as the hate spread against Tigrinya-speaking populations in the context of the war against Tigray (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, phone call, October 2021). This has increased fear among the Eritrean population.

*He wanted another payment. He asked for 12,000 [US] dollar. I paid 4,400, then he want another time, [USD] 8,000.* (Interviewee 0012, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Another interviewee explained that the amount to be paid was changed when he arrived in Libya:

*I found [a smuggler] by friends. Those friends want to cross the desert, so I want to go with them. They tell us that the money is [USD] 3,800. But in Libya, they changed the number [that we had to pay]. [We paid] 3,800. And they take us to another place. And they ask us [USD] 1,700. The last, they sold us and they asked us [USD] 5,000.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

These quotes illustrate the experiences of most of the interviewees. Even though the journey may have been entered into willingly, the details of what would then happen during the course of the journey, especially in Libya, were not part of that agreement. In addition, some interviewees stated that promises were made about Libya, such as:

*The smuggler told us: when you reach Libya, you will work and you will collect money to leave to Europe.* (Interviewee 5003-2, Interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Hence, how the circumstances are perceived needs to be factored in when the start of a journey is being categorised in terms of a 'decision', 'initiation of a journey' or a 'plan'.

### *Perceptions of Libya before departing*

Many of the Eritreans interviewed revealed that they were somewhat aware of the dangers involved before they commenced their journey to Libya. The following conversation was held with a young Eritrean woman in the east of Sudan, living in an urban area, who had recently attempted to leave to Libya with a group.

*5003-1: I heard that there are many dangerous things on the road to Libya and in Libya itself, but at that time, I was not thinking about all these problems when I decided to go. [...] I heard that the Libyans deal with people in a very tough way. Some detain people and some beat them. And I also heard that the sea is very*

*difficult, that people die there. [...] I heard that the Libyans haven't got respect for people, especially for girls and especially for foreigners.*

*KS & MW: So, when you decided to go to Libya and you heard that, was there anything you did to protect yourself?*

*5003-1: No. […] No-one was thinking about those things. The main thing is how we can leave. I have not thought for a long time. Just, I heard that one girl from Wedsherify had reached Italy. The girls here are depending on the stories from Europe, people who are successful in reaching Europe, who are writing on social media or calling… So, we are thinking about when we reach it [Europe], not about the journey.* (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Even though the interviewee in the previous excerpt was aware of the dangers ahead in Libya, her objective was to reach Europe, spurred on by others who had succeeded in achieving this. Most of the research participants knew before leaving for Libya that they were embarking on a perilous journey. However, this did not prevent them from leaving, because, as one Eritrean refugee stated before returning to Libya for another attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea:

*Instead of living for nothing, you have to die for something.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Knowledge of the dangerous situation in Libya did not prevent this refugee from traveling to Libya. This raises another question: How do Eritrean refugees form their perceptions on the situation in Libya? This research found that most of the Eritrean refugees obtain their information from social networks, both offline and online, if and when they have access, as well as through Bluetooth shared by others. The information they access comes mostly from relatives or friends whom they trust. Refugees also obtain information about the routes from other refugees by word of mouth. In Eastern Sudan, at the border with Eritrea, interviewee 5003-1 showed that she was well informed about the weather conditions in the Mediterranean Sea. She explained:

*Two days ago, I was in the office of UNHCR. I heard someone speaking with the group: 'Now the road to Libya is very good, the sea is very good these days.' [We*

*talk about] what happens if we can go.* (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Her mother added:

*Youth and girls here chat, and they chat with people in Europe – on Facebook, and such. Those people also told them: 'Now the road is good, the sea is good…' People chat everywhere, in coffee places… This is one of the main issues everywhere, in Wedsherify, in Kassala.* (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

It is interesting to note that when refugees leave for Libya they usually do not inform their relatives. Departures are often quick and unprepared. Migrants and refugees simply grab an opportunity to leave when presented. A refugee in Belgium narrated the following:

*I attended a refugee community meeting. The situation made me very angry. I left. I did not tell my husband or my children. I only called them when I had reached Khartoum. Then I went on to Libya. I only spoke to them when I reached Belgium.* (Interviewee 3010, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, February 2016)

Her husband, who was interviewed in the refugee camp in Tigray, shared the following:

*She was very upset and the next day she left. She didn't tell me. I have been looking after the four children. The baby is very small. She wanted to arrange a better life for the family. She was courageous.* (Interviewee 3011, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, July 2015)

The refugee related that there was an agent operating in the camp who assisted her on the journey. Parents are also told by others that their children should leave to Libya:

*My neighbour is a big woman, but all the time she speaks to my mother: "Your daughter must go to Libya to work, to Khartoum, anywhere. Here [in the east of Sudan] the situation is very bad and you live in a very bad situation".* (Interviewee 5003-4, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

There is a wide social network that facilitates and encourages moving in the direction of Libya, compounded by circumstances in host countries, which are experienced as negative. Even though refugees understand that the situation in Libya is very dangerous, this information does not appear to have much influence on the initiation of the journey.

### *The role of facilitators*

Facilitators play a key role when the journey begins and refugees are sometimes able to compare prices and discuss some details of the initial arrangements:

> *All Eritreans, they want to go to Europe, so you are talking. Who is the best, who is expensive, something, something. And [my connection man], he is an Asmara man. Thus, I'm going to [my connection man].* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Another interviewee added:

> *0017: Just I saw the picture [of my connection man], just the photo. I met him one time. [...] We met one time to discuss how to [do the journey], about money, how to pay the money and how to secure your life. He talked about his work.*
>
> *KS: And what did he tell you about the money? How did he say you should pay?*
>
> *0017: Okay, I said to the connection man, we can pay with Eritrean money. Because we have no outside money.* (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face July 2019)

The contact with facilitators is organised via trusted contacts. Sometimes people simply tag along with friends who also want to go to Libya:

> *I found [a connection man] through friends. Those friends want to cross the desert, so I wanted to go with them.* (Interviewee 0013, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The communication with a facilitator is easily arranged and there are no disincentives at that point to establishing such a connection.

Information about the routes to Libya and pressure to move to Libya is often presented as though it is chatter in the community, but can

come directly from traffickers (or smugglers) themselves, as explained in the following excerpt:

> *For example, some of those working with the connection man came to the area of the office of the refugees in Wedsherify camp. They are speaking with the people: still you are here, you will be here for a very long time. But, you have another solution – you can go to Libya.* (Interviewee 5003-4, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Thus, what appears to be information coming from members of a trusted community may in fact be from recruiters for the traffickers, tied to the trafficking networks in Libya. The information includes assessments of the conditions on the road, such as 'the road is good now', but also promises about how the journey will be paid:

> *The connection man told us: when you reach Libya, you will work and you will collect money to leave to Europe.* (Interviewee 5003-2, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

A doctor and refugee in Hamdayet reception centre in Sudan stated:

> *[…] they say "it's easy getting through this in Sudan [to Libya], and it's really cheap, so you can go easily" – they tell the young people, and they believe them.* (Interviewee 5013, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Traffickers can also contact refugees directly. An Eritrean woman explained:

> *I decided I wanted to go to Europe. The connection man collect and gather people on their own and they contact you and distribute [people into cars].* (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

There are many intermediaries in Sudan, who are part of the recruitment of refugees for the trafficking networks. Most of the Eritrean refugees interviewed found a connection to a trafficker to Libya in Khartoum. Traffickers are often found in the community, as Eritreans talk among each other and have their connections (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

The recruitment of refugees also takes place in refugee camps. Often these recruiters have inserted themselves into the communities and are part of where the refugees go to church or take part in other activities:

> *There are smugglers working, but in another way. They are doing something for our children like washing their brains. They are speaking about Libya: "It is a very nice country, you will lose your age [youth] here in Wedsherify". We are suffering from this now, many of our children want to leave now.* (Interviewee 5003, focus group discussion with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

> *The smuggler told us: when you reach Libya, you will work and you will collect money to leave to Europe. [...] He knows us in the church in Kassala. We know the roads and all the people here in the church.* (Interviewee 5003-2, focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Intermediaries are perceived as a threat by some refugees. A mother who was interviewed said that parents have a difficult time preventing their children from embarking on the dangerous journey to Libya, because of the influence of intermediaries, who are very influential. Furthermore, in Sudan, many fear being kidnapped by the Rashaida.[7] Information about them is prevalent in the refugee communities in Sudan. A woman living in Um Rakuba refugee camp, on the eastern border of Sudan, explained:

> *We hear about this. There are a lot of people doing [advertisements for migration to Libya]. But I don't know them, we don't know who they are. They are from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea. We also sometimes hear about Rashaida. They come here. And also, sometimes, the old people tell us: "Keep your children, maybe they are going to kidnap your child".* (Interviewee 5028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The traffickers also make use of people who want to travel to act as contact persons for others. These people are promised that they can

[7] The Rashaida are a tribe of ethnic Bedouin Arabs in the Horn of Africa (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashaida_people).

travel for free, if they collect several other people. Multiple interviewees testified to this practice:

> *In Shagarab, I found my friends and I found my near family [relatives]. … So I spoke to one smuggler to bring me to Khartoum. I have no money, so I made a collection of people to send me to Khartoum.* (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

> *There was one Eritrean boy, he came with us. He wanted to go to Libya. He planned everything and we felt that he is with us [so trusted him]. He was on the bus and controlled us. [...] The smuggler dealt with this boy as free. If he brings 9 or 10 others, he can go free.* (Interviewee 5003-2, focus group discussion with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Another form of recruitment is by involving relatives in other countries. In a case in which a girl was facilitated by human traffickers to travel from Addis Ababa to Kenya, the facilitation had been arranged by her own mother in Europe:

> *My sister left with friends with the help of facilitators. Our mother initiated the journey and had contact with the facilitators and she told us that those people will give you some help and she told us to stay close to them.* (Interviewee 7016, interview with [researcher][8], face-to-face, August 2022)

As shown in this section, the refugees sometimes take the initiative to find a trafficker and, at other times, the trafficker finds them – either directly or through intermediaries. The traffickers use a combination of tools, such as social media, spreading the word in refugee camps, or word of mouth through refugees or intermediaries, to recruit people, creating networks and trust. How this is set up is highly adaptable to different places and moments in time.

### *Kidnapping in Sudan and Ethiopia to Libya*

Several interviewees for this book reported that they were abducted in Sudan or Ethiopia and then trafficked to Libya. We refer to kidnapping here as a situation in which a person is transported when

[8] Name withheld due to security concerns.

they had no intention to leave a place and did not articulate any wish to do so. Three interviewees in this research stated that they were kidnapped from Sudan to Libya.[9] The kidnappings took place in August 2016, February 2017, and in an unspecified month in 2017. One interviewee reported having a family member who was kidnapped from Ethiopia to Libya in 2021 (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, September 2021). Two other interviewees stated that they had been kidnapped or witnessed kidnapping to the Sinai desert: one reported being kidnapped and taken to the Sinai desert in 2011 (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019), the other saw her sister being kidnapped in around 2012 (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021). In addition, another interviewee in this group (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021) experienced at least two direct failed kidnappings of her and her mother and siblings. The interviewee did not specify the date, but it was between 2010 and 2012:

> *I remember that they were trying to kidnap us. I went with my mother, sister and brother, we had the donkey, we were on the road. We heard someone near us say "there are four 'people'" [he used local dialect slang, 'cartona']. Then when my mother heard that, she spoke with the guy with the donkey and told him to stop here. We tried to leave, the guy with the donkey was very angry. It looked like he agreed with the guy trying to kidnap us. But we escaped fast from that area.* (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

In Arabic and Tigrinya, a '*cartona*' refers to a person who has an empty head ('empty carton'), who is 'crazy'. As she was warned, the family was able to escape being abducted (Interviewee 5003-2, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021).

Another interviewee explained that most trafficking to Libya is carried out in the same way as kidnapping to the Sinai was carried out. In relation to Sinai trafficking, at first, people wanted to go to Israel

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[9] Interviewees 1187 & 1011, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019; Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019

and started the journey voluntarily, but later realised that they were part of a trafficking operation. Eventually, people were abducted and kidnapped to the Sinai even though they had no intention to leave at all:

> *At first, we heard about the kidnapping outside the [refugee] camps [in Sudan] for the people who wanted to leave the camps by themselves. At first. But then, we heard about it inside the camp. At first they targeted people who wanted to leave, and some left – it was their choice. The smugglers were targeting those people. But for us, we are poor people and we don't have money to leave the camps. We didn't expect people to target us, because we haven't got anything. Despite this, they started to kidnap us [to Sinai] as well after that.* (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Refugees from Eritrea often ended up in the Sinai and Israel, even though they had not intended to go there. A resource person testified as follows:

> *Refugees were just ending up in Sinai and in Israel. They clearly stated that their dreams and aspirations when they left Eritrea were to settle somewhere in Africa. But then they were taken somewhere else, and they just ended up where they were. This was not the result of any decision-making or planning process. Where they found themselves was dictated by circumstances.* (Interviewee 3013, interview with Van Reisen, Face-to-Face, August 2022)

At the border of Sudan, in particular, tribes, including some members who identify as themselves Beni-Amer and Rashaida, are involved in smuggling and trafficking activities – of both goods and people. An interviewee confirmed this, in his story of kidnapping to the Sinai:

> *When we entered Kassala [Eastern Sudan], the Rashaidas, working in illegal ways, kidnapped us. All the people hold guns. They have knives. That is why I could not do anything.* (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to face, April 2019)

Another interviewee saw her sister kidnapped and taken to the Sinai:

> *I saw her with my eyes, they kidnapped her. They give her spray and then they took her. They were Rashaida. Five Rashaida came, with the driver. With the spray, you*

*fall asleep.* (Interviewee 5003, focus group discussion with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2021)

Kidnapping to the Sinai does not appear to happen anymore.[10] Although the Rashaida still appear to play a role in the smuggling and trafficking networks today, especially in relation to extortion in Sudan, which will be covered later in this chapter, their role is not as large or as open as it appeared to be in Sinai trafficking.

Three interviewees were kidnapped from Sudan to Libya. They had no intention of going to Libya, but were forced to and were ultimately trafficked for ransom. One interviewee described how he was kidnapped while working on a small farm in Sudan in February 2017:

*There are many smugglers. They passed us […] Shooting guns. We were afraid, but we were working. Then, at 9:30 p.m., suddenly the smugglers came. They kidnapped us with my friend […]. We left all our things in that hut. Even midway, I tried to escape from them. We tried to hide from them, but they had guns. They were many. They took us.* (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, month withheld for security reasons, 2019)

He described these specific kidnappers as Rashaida and Sudanese (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, month withheld for security reasons, 2019). The interviewee said that he was not aware where they were going:

*Some people said that we were going to Khartoum. Some people said we were going to Libya. We were afraid. For me, I was really, really afraid. Because I didn't have any plan to go to Libya. "Where are we going? Are we going to Libya? Are we going to Khartoum? Or what?" I was really confused. … When they told me we are going to Libya, I lost hope. I lost hope.* (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons, 2019)

The interviewee's friend who was kidnapped with him died in a car accident in the Sahara desert. They were not allowed to give him a

[10] Sinai trafficking ceased in about 2014, with the last known recorded incident in 2015 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

burial (Interviewee 1187, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, month withheld for security reasons, 2019).

Another interviewee was kidnapped from Kassala in Sudan in 2016 and brought straight from there to Libya:

> *0010: When we arrive in Sudan, we were caught by the traffickers there [Kassala]. And they asked for money. In Kassala.*
>
> *KS: Did they catch all three of you?*
>
> *0010: Yeah. All three.*
>
> *KS: How much money did they want?*
>
> *0010: They were asking for 13,000 of Sudanese [Sudanese pounds, equivalent to about USD 2,125 in 2016[11]].*
>
> *KS: These were also Sudanese people?*
>
> *0010: They were Sudanese people. After that we paid to enter Khartoum. Unfortunately, they took us to the Libyan traffickers. They put us in the smuggler's hands. [...] From Kassala they were Sudanese [drivers], then we reached maybe the Libyan lands, after that they were Libyan [drivers].* (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

In the excerpt above, the interviewee was caught, asked to pay money, but was then directly, and against his will, sold to traffickers who took him to Libya.

Interviewee 1011 described his long journey – how he was kidnapped from Kassala in the east of Sudan and taken to the Sinai, then imprisoned in Egypt and deported to Ethiopia. He finally made his way to Khartoum. There, in 2016, disaster struck again:

> *In Khartoum, I started working with an electrician. One day, when I finished work, a policeman caught me on the way home. He sold me to another person. That one is a Sudanese. On 7 August 2016, he took me to Libya through a group of other*

[11] The exchange rate used throughout this chapter was calculated via Oanda.com using the historic exchange rate.

*persons. In Bani Walid, he sold me to a guy called Kidane.* (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In these reports of abduction from Sudan to Libya, the kidnappers are Sudanese. One interviewee referred to a Sudanese police officer. Once in Libya, the interviewees were sold or transferred to Aziz (who is presumed to be Sudanese), Kidane (Eritrean) and Wedi Babu (Eritrean)[12] (for more on the head traffickers, see Chapter 11: "*You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*).

One interviewee, who was not personally a victim of kidnapping, said that the Sudanese authorities were involved in the kidnappings to Libya, working under an agreement with the Eritrean human trafficking organisation(s):

*0004: Some of them are smugglers, but some force you and take you to Libya.*

*KS: How do they kidnap people?*

*0004: The police stop you and they take you. But the Eritreans have made an agreement with them before that, and then they take you [from the police]. From the police station, they [the Eritrean traffickers] bring you to the cars. The traffickers have their own police officers that they work with.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The kidnapping and sale of people is reported by interviewees 5003-1, 5003-2 and 5003-3 (Focus group discussion with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021). One interviewee specifically explained that she overheard her landlord speaking of this:

*[…] we changed our house in Shagarab [refugee camp in Eastern Sudan]. We rented a new house. One day, I heard the owner when he spoke on the telephone. He was speaking about selling some girl. I was very surprised about that. When he got off the phone, I asked him, "What did you say about that?" He was very angry. He spoke with my mother: "Your girl is listening to me". So my mother was also very*

[12] Note, these names were given in the interviews and are alleged traffickers. The author makes no comment on whether or not they are in fact human traffickers, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

*angry with me. She said, "This way, this guy will not allow us to continue here in this house, so please be quiet and don't speak with him again".* (Interviewee 5003-3, interview with Wirtz and Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

### *Kidnapping as political retribution*

One interviewee reported that a family member of his was kidnapped from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa and taken to Libya directly to be tortured for ransom. The interviewee was forced to pay this ransom (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons). He describes how he was in touch with his family member, who was trying to find education in the city in order to make a living, and explicitly arranged that he would stay in Addis Ababa. Then, he received a phone call:

*Then suddenly, a bit over a week later, I got the call that he was in Libya. They let me hear his voice for a few seconds. The whole time he was there, they let me hear him twice. [...] I understood that he was captured by [human traffickers]. [...] He [the intermediary] said that "I shouldn't make this political" – that way, he let me know that it was because of my opposition to the regime in Eritrea that my [family member] was there now. [...] I came to the conclusion that Libya, at the moment, also is a prison camp for the Eritrean government.* (Interviewee 0021, interview with Smits, face-to-face, date withheld for security reasons)

The interviewee, who had been targeted before due to his political activism against the Eritrean government from within the diaspora, thus realised that his family member, had been kidnapped and held for ransom in Libya as retribution for his activism. The kidnapping occurred in 2021, a time when the influence of Eritrean intelligence in Addis Ababa was high (Interviewee 5031, interview with Smits, face-to-face, October 2021). The interviewee later learnt that the person who had called him to warn him not to make the situation political, the intermediary, had been killed.

## The routes to Libya

The journey from the Horn of Africa to Libya for Eritrean refugees can be roughly divided into two parts: the journey to Sudan and the

journey from Sudan to Libya. Once in Libya, the aim is to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

***Ethiopia to Khartoum, Sudan (gateway to Libya)***

For this part of the journey – from Ethiopia to Sudan – the interviewees reported starting from Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray or cities such as Mekelle and Addis Ababa. Most crossings by the interviewees were made around the Ethiopian border towns of Humera and Metemma. When Eritreans cross over into Sudan directly from Eritrea, they travel from the refugee camps or the border area in Eastern Sudan to Khartoum.


**Figure 9.2. Map of border towns Humera and Metemma used to cross from Ethiopia to Sudan**

(Source: Created by Klara Smits using FreeVectorMaps.com)

Interviewees reported using a combination of cars and journeys on foot to move from Ethiopia to Sudan. The payments for the crossing are made in Ethiopian birr or US dollars. Those who facilitate the journey are often called 'connection men' by the interviewees. Some refugees were taken to Sudan and stayed there for a few months, and

even years, before embarking to Libya. However, there were also some who reported that their facilitator for the Ethiopia-to-Sudan leg of the journey was connected to the trafficking networks in Libya.

> *From Metemma [in Ethiopia], I was going by foot. In the night, I started by foot. In the morning I reached Sudan. After, I went to Al-Qadarif, then Wad Madani, and then Khartoum. [My connection man] has somebody working in Khartoum. I made contact with him. I told him: "I want to go to Libya". I agreed with the connection man to pay USD 3,500 for the Sahara and the sea. But when I arrived in Libya, in Bani Walid, I met another connection man, Kidane, who is a big connection man and who knows all the people. His network goes from Eritrea to Europe – he said I have to pay USD 7,000. I agreed from Sudan to Italy to pay USD 3,500. He beat me.* (Interviewee 1009, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many of the Eritrean interviewees said they used 'connection men' as agents or middlemen, and that these were usually Eritrean or Ethiopian, to facilitate the crossing from Ethiopia to Sudan. During this part of the journey, interviewees reported being beaten and tortured to extract or speed up payment. Hajer was mentioned by nine interviewees as the stop where the payment is made; from there they travelled on to Khartoum:

> *We arrived in Hajer. I stayed in Hajer almost one month [and] three weeks because I could not pay the money quickly. The owner of that place is Bereket. The people working there are Eritrean. It is Eritrean people who were beating us. There are people from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia there. I paid the money in Hajer.* (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

The interviewee quoted above mentioned that Eritrean people are working in Hajer. Some other interviewees mentioned that Sudanese are also present in Hajer and involved in the payment of money there. More information about Hajer will be presented later in this chapter, in the section on payment and torture for ransom.

### *Khartoum to Libya ('the desert')*

The journey to Libya often starts from Khartoum (Sudan). The refugees are transported in small groups to a collection point to wait to travel across the Sahara desert with a larger group. Omdurman,

which is across the river Nile from Khartoum, is often mentioned as a central collection point, where people may stay for up to a week. From there, they travel on through the desert in pickup trucks or Lorries. One of the interviewees explained:

> *Refugees in Khartoum are collected in cars/pickups and brought to a place where they are put in trucks with many people, 800 persons in 6 Lorries, 30–32 people in pickups.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

He added that a Sudanese man drove the Lorry to the Libyan border where a Libyan driving a pickup took over. Hence, when arriving at the border with Libya, a transfer takes place: refugees change cars and drivers – often from a Sudanese driver to a Libyan driver.

> *We spent five days in the lorry driven by a Sudanese. After the truck, you come with the small car, at the border of Libya. There were 1,400 persons waiting at the border because of fighting with other people. The small cars [pickups] take 30–32 people. He would beat us. During the time when we were waiting, the car was not coming. Some people went back. [Crossing the desert took] two days by car speed. High speed. The driver was Libyan.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Kufra is a key Libyan city where the distribution of refugees takes place (more detailed information on locations in Libya can be found in Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*).

Some interviewees reported making payment and being tortured in Kufra; several other interviewees paid the money for their journey in Kufra without mentioning being tortured. Of the people who specified what they paid, most either paid what they agreed upon or had not made any agreement upfront. One interviewee had to pay a second time, and a larger amount than what they had paid the first time (USD 5,500) (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020). Others said that they did not pay there, but were taken to Brak Shati, Bani Walid, Shwayrif, or another location where people are brought for the purpose of payment and/or extortion.

After that, the interviewees reported that people are moved to a location close to the sea, like Sabratha, Misrata or Zawiyah.

Whereas Sudan is the place where most connections are made and deals struck regarding payment, the actual facilitation of those payments happens in Libya. The city of Kufra often functions as the first point of entry and is also the place where the interviewees report that they pay for the travel through the desert, or are directly distributed to other traffickers.

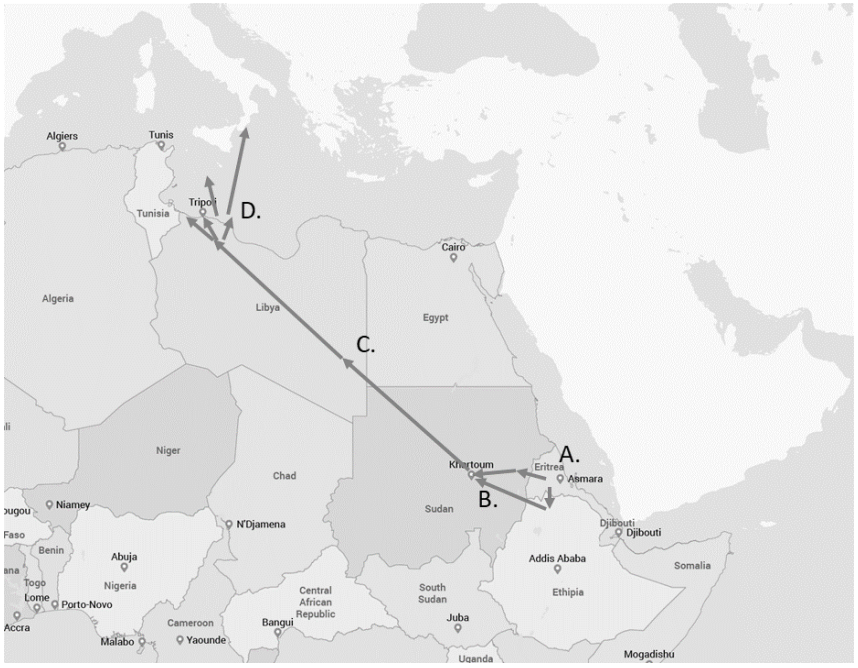


**Figure 9.3. Trajectories taken by Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia to Sudan and Libya**

(Source: Created by Klara Smits using FreeVectorMaps.com)

### *Variations in the routes*

There are variations on the main routes. For instance, an Eritrean interviewee reported that he had travelled to Libya from Egypt in a group, and had received the assistance of Eritrean facilitators:

> *After that, I went to Khartoum. I stayed almost five months in Khartoum. I was working during the day. After that, I went to Egypt by car with almost 20 people.*

*It was a pickup. My connection man was Eritrean. [...] I went to Assouan in Egypt. The trip took four/five days. Assouan is the place where I paid the money. I paid USD 650. [...] From Cairo, I started on the way to Libya. An Eritrean connection man took me in charge. I agreed with [him to pay] from Egypt to Italy: USD 3,000.* (Interviewee 1008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Other Eritreans reach Libya after they have been deported from Israel to Rwanda or Uganda as a 'third country option':

*In 2017, I moved from Israel to Uganda by plane. I didn't get papers to travel in Israel; that is why I left Israel. Because from Israel, they cannot deport me to Eritrea, that is why they deport me to Uganda. It is the immigration service of Israel that deported me there. The government of Israel does not give you a refugee card.* (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Many Eritrean refugees fled to Israel before the border fence was erected in 2013.[13] Several interviewees explained that they had accepted deportation to a third country. Unfortunately, they found that the protection measures in the third country promised to them by the Israeli government were not in place:

*I stayed only one week in Uganda, in Kampala. I was in a hotel. The government of Israel will pay money for one week in a hotel. That is why. After that, I got somebody, a connection man to bring me to South Sudan.* (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Another interviewee said:

*Forced to leave! Without anything, without money, without anything. And so I came out of Israel to Uganda. Without anything. I signed the paper. They told me they will pay for the hotel rent in Uganda, Kampala. They told me to stay in Uganda.* (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

[13] In 2013, a border fence was largely completed in the Sinai desert along the border between Egypt and Israel, making it difficult of refugees to enter Israel from the Sinai.

Among the interviewees, there were several who had been to South Sudan, either from Ethiopia or via Uganda, as part of their journey:

> *I came out of Israel to Rwanda, then to Uganda, Kampala, then to South Sudan, Juba, Khartoum, Libya, Mediterranean, Italy, and then here [in destination country].* (Interviewee 0003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Other routes used by refugees from Eritrea are not covered in this chapter. For example, some of those refugees take the southern migration route towards South Africa instead, or to Yemen in order to reach Saudi Arabia. Those routes all present their own unique and acute challenges, but they are beyond the scope of this book.

## Conditions on route across the desert

### *Transport*

The journey through the Sahara desert may last from days to months. Refugees usually do not know the name of the driver, and drivers may change throughout the journey. The drivers may be of different nationalities; some interviewees stated that from Sudan to the Libyan border their driver was Sudanese, but once in Libya the driver was Libyan (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019).

The cars that the refugees travel in are tightly packed in order to maximise the use of space. Most interviewees described the cars as pickup trucks, while some also spent parts of their journey in a Lorry. They reported that small pickup trucks were loaded with 30 to 60 people. An Eritrean woman travelling from Sudan, to Kufra (Libya) through the Sahara desert recounted there were so many passengers in the pick-up truck that people fainted. There was "no room to breathe" (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020). Another shared the following:

> *They put you in something like a pickup to carry you in the desert. From the desert they get a big car, like a big car that has a back. They put the people there. They take something big to cover the people. Like a big sheet of plastic […] So the cars are going. In that car we were about a hundred plus… But I don't know exactly the*

*number because the car… We were very, very full of people there. Women, men… We were very, very full there. Even kids are there.* (Interviewee 1043, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Refugees recalled the journey as tough, and were often without food, water or blankets for days:

*In the Sahara, we stayed three months. Even that situation, I never imagined in my life. Never. At that time, I didn't think that I would survive. For four days they left us alone in the desert, without food, without blankets. We were begging them: "Please, please, please", many times, but they didn't care. They hit us. They spoke bad words in Arabic. Even we had a car accident in the Sahara. My friend, his name was Mohammed, he died there. He died.* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face to-face, November 2019)

The drivers are described as reckless and driving fast. The majority of the interviewees mentioned that, in the Sahara, drivers did not stop if someone fell out of the vehicle and that the unlucky ones were left to die in the desert. One interviewee explained that they take the drug hashish so they can keep going, and they only stop when they want to:

*[...] We can see other people, they are dead, because the Libyan drivers are like crazy. They take hashish, so they can drive. If you fall down, they don't care. Just they stop if they want to stop, for praying or to eat.* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

Interviewees emphasised that the drivers do not care about people falling out of the vehicle. Some interviewees mentioned spotting dead refugees left in the desert:

*When we were travelling with the car in the Sahara, we saw a lot of bodies.* (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

One interviewee stated that many "call the desert an open grave, where people die" (Interviewee 6003, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019).

Those who are transported in Lorries face a different problem:

> *It was very difficult in the truck. If the truck stopped, it was hard. It was very difficult, because it was a crowded truck. If there was wind, we could breathe better. But if the car stopped, it was very difficult.* (Interviewee 1021, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Refugees reported sleeping under the vehicles at night:

> *It's complete desert, there is nothing that you can even drink and you just spend the days sleeping under cars. There is no description of it.* (Interviewee 1051, Interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Drivers need to bring enough fuel and be able to repair the vehicle if it breaks down. If the vehicle cannot be repaired, all those on board rely on other vehicles to take them along. If this does not happen, they die.

> *Unfortunately, the vehicle my nephew left in broke down in the desert. When they broke down, they had no breakdown service or anything, until they all died there. Even the driver died.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

Once on the road to Libya, the refugees suddenly find themselves cut off from the world, without really knowing where they are, how long the route will take, or what the conditions will be. In some cases, the drivers force them to cover themselves while in the vehicle. The journey to Libya through the desert is rough and hazardous. The extreme heat, crowdedness, violence and accidents cause deaths along the way. On this part of the journey, travelling in an unknown territory, the autonomy of refugees is very limited, as described in the next section.

### *Drivers are in control*

Once on the road, the drivers are in control of the refugees.

> *It is the Sahara. The desert is empty. Then, they put us in some place. Some others who are talking in Arabic tell them to tell us where we are going. [They say:] "We are going to Libya. We are taking responsibility for you. You are under our control".* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Once in the Sahara, migrants and refugees depend on the drivers' skill to get through the vagaries of the desert alive. The drivers can also be violent.

> *They [the drivers] torture you on the way. [...] on the way so many things happened; for example, there were people dying, our compatriots were dying, and when we told them, they just threw them, drop them from the car. They didn't do any burial rites for them, and, also, so many problems were happening to women, even rape.* (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

> *We didn't get water. There was too much sun. Some people died in the desert. The driver was hitting anyone who spoke too loud.* (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Water given to the refugees by drivers was often described as either too little or diluted with gasoline in order to prevent people from drinking substantial amounts:

> *Even they mixed the water with gas oil [...], because you cannot drink more. You can drink just small amounts. They can do that.* (Interviewee 0008, interview with Smits, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *Most of the drivers gave us water. Just something to eat. But not enough for a long journey.* (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, August 2019)

Women are exposed to sexual assault by drivers when travelling through the Sahara. A thorough analysis of the magnitude of this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of this chapter and is presented in Chapter 15: *"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya.*

### *Bandits and armed groups in the desert*

In the desert, competing groups fight for control over the refugees:

> *There are many traffickers in the desert. Those who have survived the fight, will take [what they want]. They fight over who gets to take the refugees.* (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Six interviewees reported experiencing (attempted) kidnapping by Chadian armed groups in the Sahara desert.[14] Of these six, four interviewees were indeed 'stolen' by the Chadian armed groups and two were successfully 'defended' by their traffickers. One interviewee explained the kind of violence that happens during such episodes:

> *One time they [traffickers who were transporting him across the desert] are fighting with Chad [Chadian armed groups]. They had many guns with them; many soldiers were fighting. When the smugglers [armed men] from Chad came, they were fighting for a little bit, maybe three hours. We were in there at the time, they were fighting. After that they [traffickers transporting him across the desert] were defended by the Libyans.* (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

The Chadian armed groups kidnap refugees in order to sell them to human traffickers. The traffickers Aziz (presumed Sudanese) and Abduselam[15] from Eritrea are mentioned in this context (see also Chapter 11: "*You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*):

> *The Chadians work with Aziz and Abduselam. In the Sahara, when we entered, the Chadian soldiers caught us and sold us. They do that! The Chadians, they travel in the whole Sahara. They will catch you and bring you to the human traffickers. This is mandatory. This is their job in the Sahara.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 29 June 2020)

> *The Chadian soldiers catch every person, every human. They ask all the people: "which connection man[16] are you going to?" "I am on my way to Aziz", for example. If you say that you are going to Aziz, they want money from Aziz. [...] They wear*

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[14] These six are interviewees 1023, 1027, 1054, 1059, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019–June 2020; and interviewees 0010, 0016, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019.

[15] Note, these names were given in the interviews and are alleged traffickers. The author makes no comment on whether or not they are in fact human traffickers, but is merely presenting what was said in the interviews.

[16] Here the 'connection man' refers to the top of the trafficking network and is used as a code to identify and sort migrants (see Glossary of Terms).

> *the soldier uniform. And this is why every person knows them. They move around the Sahara. All the Chadians, they move around the Sahara because of the selling and buying of people. [...] Also the Chadians, they work with the connection men. They have full details. Also the Chadian soldiers, first of all, they work for their country and secondly they work for their profit. If they don't have any work to do, they collect people coming from Sudan or from Libya at the border of Libya and at the border of Sudan.* (Interviewee 1056, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Other actors may also be encountered during the trip, who may try and bargain with the driver to get something, such as sex, from the migrants and refugees on board:

> *They try to speak to us or sometimes to 'trade' [sexual favours], you understand. [...] At that time in my journey. The connection man, my connection man, discussed with the thief person. He wanted to give them money. But after, that they stopped everything [it did not happen].* (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Drivers bring weapons with them. These weapons are also used to threaten refugees when, for example, drivers see (police or army) patrols and believe they will be arrested or killed:

> *In other words, they are afraid. So they threaten the refugees with a gun to get down.* (Interviewee 1001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2018)

### *Control over access to phones*

From the interviews it emerged that even before embarking on the road to Libya, refugees can lose their phones to traffickers operating between Ethiopia and Sudan (e.g., Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019) or to Sudanese police (e.g., Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019). However, in Khartoum, it is possible to again gain access to means of communication, after they separate from the smugglers/traffickers.

Once the refugees are on the road to Libya, the drivers may be in charge of communication with their families. One interviewee reported a smuggler instructing him as follows:

> *When the driver picks up the migrants to take them to Libya, when he arrives, he says: "Now, give your brothers' numbers, I'll tell him we've arrived". The migrants give the number, the driver calls.* (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)

On the road to Libya, through the Sahara desert, or at the first transit point, the interviewees reported losing their phones. Most refugees know that this is likely to happen and, therefore, do not take one on the journey, or they are told by the trafficker not to bring it.

> *I haven't got a telephone from here [Khartoum to Libya], but my friend has a phone. But [for me], I expected to give the phone to the connection man. Because he told us when you go, you will not go with the phone.* (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits & Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

This means that the refugees are not able to record details of their journey and are not able to call anyone, or otherwise receive or send information. Not having any means of communication or verification of their location, the refugees depend on the driver to tell them where they are, and this is usually only done once the traffickers have reached the place where the refugees have to pay. The refugee's family generally want to have confirmation that the refugee has indeed arrived before they pay the agreed amount for the journey (or the ransom), explained one interviewee. However, he also explains that this system can be exploited by the traffickers:

> *This year, many people are paying in Sudan for their journey. They say to their family: "we have arrived, so pay [USD] 6,500 for Sahara and sea", but they have not yet started [the journey to Libya]. Sometimes they say you are at the coast, and the boat is coming in 3–4 days, so better you pay quick, but actually you are [not yet at the coast].* (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone interview, November 2021)

This shows how loss of a telephone on route to, and inside of, Libya leads to a loss of control, including a loss of control over communication and payment, making the refugees vulnerable to

being deceived, abused and extorted. The first time they are able to call their families is when they are under the control of human traffickers (for ransom) to ask for payment to be made.

A key feature of human trafficking for ransom is that the extortion is conducted by phone, and the victim does not control the communication on the phone; the perpetrators of the extortion control what is communicated, when and to whom. Hence, the victims can be understood as a gated community – the gatekeepers are the human traffickers – and human trafficking for ransom takes place in what are known as 'black holes' in the digital landscape. This is elaborated on in Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration.*

## Payments for the journey

This section sets out the amounts paid for the different legs of the journey and where, torture and extortion on route in places like Hajer in Sudan, and, finally, payments made for crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

### *Amounts paid and where*

The majority of the interviewees paid for each part of their journey separately. Payments for other parts of the journey were also reported, mostly in relation to escaping from Eritrea, which many interviewees did by foot. Most of the interviewees made the journey from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya through a facilitator, and some agreed on a price before setting out, although this price often changed along the way.

For most interviewees, the journey from Ethiopia to Sudan – if they made this journey – was paid separately. However, some interviewees also indicated that they paid for the entire journey, the sea and the desert, once they arrived in Libya:

> *First I entered Sudan [starting from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia], and then he [the connection man/smuggler] sent me to Libya. When I entered Libya, I paid for*

*Ethiopia to Sudan. For Sudan, and for Libya, [I paid] together.* (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

*We pay in Libya. He [the smuggler] pays for travelling, for everything, he is paying for us. And, again, when we reached Libya they locked us in a room and asked us for the money.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Table 9.1 shows the range of payments made by interviewees for each stage of the journey to and inside Libya, as well as the average payment. Payments for the other parts of the journey are made part by part, or in some cases as a package deal. Some refugees had to pay more than once, as they were kidnapped and extorted multiple times. Others paid for 'the desert' and 'the sea' together. For the purpose of this table, those amounts were split.

**Table 9.1. Payments mentioned by the interviewees (2013–2019)**

| Journey segment | Payment made (range) | Average payment |
|---|---|---|
| Ethiopia to Khartoum (Sudan) | USD 200–4,700 | USD 1,640 |
| Khartoum to Libya ('the desert') | USD 1,200–3,800 | USD 2,055 |
| While in Libya (total ransoms paid)* | USD 1,500–7,500 | USD 4,095 |
| Libya to Europe ('the sea') | USD 1,500–5,500 | USD 2,358 |

Note: These data indicate the agreed amounts and additional amounts reported over the time period 2013–2019. The payments were prices paid for the journey. Payments that were made together for more than one part were split for the purpose of this table. The amounts have been calculated in USD, although some payments were made in Ethiopian birr or Sudanese pounds.

* This amount represents the additional money people had to pay beyond agreed amounts or payments directly tied to their journey.

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When embarking on the journey, refugees are given a code to identify who they should pay. This code is the name of the top level trafficker who organises the overall journey. These names are used along the route by those who are in charge of you during the journey to sort you into groups. It goes like this:

> *When I entered Bani Walid, the connection man waited for me there. In one compound they have four stores. Every connection man who will see you: "You are connection man from who in Sudan?" When you tell the name, he will take you. All of them are from Eritrea. My connection man was called Welid.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In general, payments were not made upfront, but only upon arrival in Libya (or another stopover on the route, such as Hajer). At these points, the refugees were asked to call their family to arrange payment. Some interviewees gave the phone numbers of a relative to the trafficker upon leaving Sudan, as a kind of 'guarantee', but others gave a number only in Libya, explaining:

> *You cannot [give the phone number of your family] like that, because if you gave him a number at that time [when you are still in Khartoum], he can do anything to you. So in Libya, they ask us a phone number and he can connect with your family.* (Interviewee 0017, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Having those phone numbers functions as a guarantee for the traffickers that they will get paid.

### *Payment and torture in Hajer in Sudan*

In some cases, trafficking for ransom takes place on the routes to Libya, particularly in Sudan. Most of the extortion takes place in Hajer

(also called Hajar), the coordinates of which are hard to establish with certainty. An interviewee for this book confirmed that it is close to Khartoum, and that it is in the desert:

> *Some of the smugglers captured us and kept us in Hajer. I remember the name Hajer, nearby to Khartoum. Hajer is a very desert place.* (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Many of the interviewees reported having passed through Hajer for the initial payment of their crossing from Ethiopia to Sudan. No interviewee stated that they paid for their journey to Libya here. Most arrive in Hajer from Ethiopia, although some of interviewees who have been to Hajer came directly from Eritrea.

A total of 13 interviewees named Hajer as a place where they were held on their journey. For other interviewees, it is likely that they were also held in Hajer, based on the description given, but they did not know the name of the place. The ransom payments made in Hajer ranged from USD 1,000 to 1,900, with most paying around USD 1,600. The earliest mention of being held in Hajer by the interviewees was in 2014 (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019) and 2015 (Interviewee 0015, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019), but the rest of the interviewees were there in 2016 and 2017.[17] Interviewees that paid quickly usually stayed there a few days. Those that did not pay immediately were there for around two-three months. Three interviewees were kidnapped and taken to Hajer, meaning that they did not have an arrangement to be taken to Sudan by anyone, as they were making their way to Sudan by foot without a facilitator. Conditions in Hajer are described as crowded:

> *I stayed two months in Hajer, the time to pay the money. In Hajer, we were 20/30 people together in a small room. They were beating the others, but not me because I was paying the money they requested.* (Interviewee 1015, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

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[17] Interviewees 0002, 0013, 0014, 0018, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March-July 2019) and interviewees 1003, 1008, 1012, 1013, 1015, 1024, 1054, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019 – June 2020)

Of the 13 interviewees who named Hajer, 7 reported being tortured to extract payment. The other 6 paid quickly and were able to avoid being tortured. It, therefore, appears that torture occurs in Hajer only when payments are not made quickly. In Hajer, torture to extract payment follows the same modus operandi as the one used in Libya: family members are called while victims are being tortured to encourage the family to pay:

> *There is a camp where the people who can't pay the money, they go to prison. So, I stayed in Hajer prison almost two months, to pay the money. We had no water to wash ourselves or to wash our clothes. We did not have enough food. A lot of people were ill. Some people hit your hands, hit your legs. Too many problems in Hajer.* (Interviewee 1024, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

> *They say, do you have family who can pay? You must pay 1,600 [US] dollars. I said "ohh…" – I called them [his family].* (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Relatives sell their possessions to pay the ransom amounts:

> *I stayed almost two months and two weeks in Hajer, because nobody paid for me. When I stayed there, nobody paid me money. That is why I called my family. My family sold houses and animals. They sold them. After, they sent me the money so that I could pay the USD 1,700. While I was calling my family to ask them to send me the money, I was beaten.* (Interviewee 1008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In addition, possessions are stolen from people in Hajer. Multiple interviewees reported this. Even after paying the money, possessions can still be stolen before reaching Khartoum:

> *In Hajer, I paid the money. I stayed two days and, after that, I reached Khartoum. We were a hundred in a truck to Khartoum. In the car and on the road they beat us, when we were tired. There was no water. They searched all of our body. If you have something in your pocket they will take it. I took ID and refugee cards. They left that. They took everything else: documents, pictures of family, money, cell phone, watch.* (Interviewee 1003, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Two interviewees were kidnapped for ransom in other places in Sudan. One interviewee was held by traffickers in Kassala. The

kidnappers were Sudanese, and asked for 13,000 Sudanese pounds (approximately USD 2,125). Afterwards, this interviewee was sold and taken directly to Libya (Interviewee 0010, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019). Another interviewee was kidnapped by Rashaida and held captive in 'Hafir' in Sudan:

> *We asked the nomadic people if it was Sudan. They informed us we were in Hafir. After that, we weren't afraid. We were in Sudan. There is no military in Sudan. But before we reached the village, the Rashaida caught us.* (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

This interviewee reported that members of his group were tortured by being left in the heat and beaten with a plastic stick. They had to call their family to pay 1,050 Eritrean nakfa (approximately USD 70).

### *Paying to cross 'the sea'*

Libya is not perceived as an end destination by Eritrean refugees. Even though their initial objective may be to reach 'the desert' (Libya), their end objective is to reach 'the sea' – the crossing to Europe. This part of the journey is sometimes negotiated in tandem with crossing the Sahara desert; the refugees in those cases agree to pay for 'the desert' and 'the sea'. The interviewees are expected to pay when they get to Libya. One interviewee shared the following:

> *KS: How much did he want for your journey over the desert?*
>
> *0012: For the desert and for the sea, 4,400 [US] dollars. For all.*
>
> *KS: Did they say to pay that in Libya?*
>
> *0012: Yes.*
>
> *KS: Did you call your family for the money?*
>
> *0012: Yes.*
>
> *KS: Where did you go in Libya?*
>
> *0012: Bani Walid. I entered straight to Bani Walid.* (Interviewee 0012, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

Another interviewee added:

> *Only for desert, the price was USD 1,600. After I paid for the desert, I paid for the sea – it was USD 2,200. When you enter Libya, you pay the money.* (Interviewee 1007, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

Although some refugees end up paying what they agreed upon, the payments are always accompanied by the threat of torture or actual torture. In addition, the prices agreed upon may arbitrarily change in favour of the traffickers, or refugees may have to pay again to another trafficker. Therefore, the line between payments and ransoms is thin. Interviewees frequently indicate being 'sold' after they pay:

> *In Shwayrif, I paid for the sea. The man is Libyan, but he works with an Eritrean smuggler in Khartoum. First, we paid the money to an Eritrean: USD 2,200. After that, a Libyan and an Eritrean were fighting about money. The Libyan fights with an Eritrean smuggler. So, he cut the line. If he cut the line, we are with the Libyan people. Another man took us, a Libyan. We paid another time for the Libyan, to take us to the sea. Another USD 2,200. […] He sold us. We went to Bani Walid again. So we paid for the sea again USD 3,300. After that, he sent us to the sea. But police caught us on the road to Tripoli.* (Interviewee 1006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

> *We agreed on USD 3,800 to go from Sudan to Italy. I arrived in Bani Walid. I was in a store[18] [place used by the traffickers to hold and sort people]. The chief of that store is Welid. He is Eritrean. I paid him two times because the first connection man, Alex, took the money in Bani Walid. After that, Welid said I have to pay again. Walid asked me 3800 USD.* (Interviewee 1013, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In Libya, payments are extorted while refugees are tortured, or threatened with torture:

> *From the Sahara we immediately arrived in Kufra. They brought us to a very crowded warehouse with many persons from different smugglers. I stayed there two*

[18] The terms 'prison', 'warehouse', 'house', 'hangars', 'store', 'farm', and 'credit house' are all used by migrants and refugees to refer to the places where they are sequestered and tortured for ransom (see Glossary of Terms).

*months. They were beating me. We had no food and no water. People were beaten there because of money. (*Interviewee *1022, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)*

A Somali refugee interviewed was one of the quickest to arrange the payment – he paid after just five days, but he was still tortured and they refused to release him even though payment had been made:

*[…] they are beating, using electric shocks to you until you pay the money. Sometimes they are making us work as a slave in their farms. You pay money… Someone like me, I paid immediately, but the problem… My family, they sold their house. Immediately. I told them, they saw the video call where they are using electric shocks to me and the guns to me. And after that, we sold our house. They pay money for me, everything within five days and after that they refused to release me.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

One interviewee paid for the 'sea' part of the journey upon arrival in Italy. He paid for the three stages of the journey mentioned here – once in Hajer, once in Libya and once in Italy.

*0002: I had to pay in Khartoum. And once in Italy, again*

*KS: How much did you pay in Italy?*

*0002: [USD] 2,300*

*KS: So in total you paid… [USD] 1,700 in Hajer, [USD] 3,000 in Libya and [USD] 2,300 in Italy, so you paid three times.* (Interviewee 0002 interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

More information about the extraction of payments and ransoms under torture can be found in Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*. Most of those interviewees for this chapter did not make it to the Mediterranean Sea, or if they did, were returned by Libyan Coast Guard when they tried to cross.

## The organisation of trafficking to Libya

### *Interconnected networks*

An interviewee for this book suggested that the networks that traffic people to Libya are indeed interconnected, although this may not always be obvious to the refugees:

> *The big names have a very good network, starting from Ethiopia. They collect people from camps and cities. They bring them to Hajer to pay for Ethiopia to Sudan. Then they take you to Khartoum and leave you there. After that, you can find a house. You can continue with the same network or change to another smuggler.* (Interviewee 0022, interview with Smits, telephone, November 2021)

Other interviewees confirmed that they did not see the journeys as separate, but as a part of a broader network:

> *All places, starting from Ethiopia up to Libya, there is a smuggler. Every town that you reach, there is a smuggler who is dealing with this one who is staying in Ethiopia. They are paying them.* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

There are indications that such networks start as far back as Eritrea:

> *In Sudan, I met people who took the car from Asmara to the border and no-one stopped them – 100 per cent, this means that officials are involved.*[19] *I have not met the people trafficking from Eritrea to Ethiopia, only heard about it.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The connections between the networks appear to be well organised. From the perspective of the interviewees, most indicated that they observed these interconnections, but were not sure if the full journey was organised by one or more individuals.

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[19] It is illegal to leave Eritrea without a visa, and visas are nearly impossible to get. There is a shoot on sight policy at the border for anyone trying to cross. (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). Hence, this interviewee is pointing out that if someone is able to cross the border without being stopped (or shot), they must have the involvement of officials.

***Complicity of authorities***

An interviewee in Ethiopia mentioned that the traffickers had made a deal with the border guards in Ethiopia to allow them to cross the border between Sudan and Ethiopia:

> *The traffickers make sure that people can cross the river. Also, we don't have papers, so the traffickers help with that, or else you can be stopped by the police. [...] The traffickers make an agreement with the guards. Sometimes you have to wait, even 2 or 3 days, until the guard that you have an agreement with returns.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

For most crossings from Ethiopia to Sudan, avoiding the police was the main objective. This included travelling by car, but often actually crossing the border on foot and at night:

> *I walked from Ethiopia to Sudan, sometimes walking, sometimes car. Sometimes shooting [being shot at].* (Interviewee 0007, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

The interviewee in the above excerpt reported that the Ethiopian police shot at their car when they passed a checkpoint, but they got away unharmed. Others said that they were arrested by Ethiopian police during their crossing.

According to a number of interviewees, smugglers in Sudan have connections with the security forces and were afforded certain liberties in their business:

> *From Khartoum to Omdurman [on the West side of the Nile, just opposite to Khartoum], there is a post [control post], but they didn't ask you [for papers]. They just take money, the police that is. There are contacts.* (Interviewee 0011, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

There are reports that drivers and the refugees they transport are sometimes arrested. Some refugees who were arrested on route to Libya were forcibly transported back to Eritrea. After being deported to Eritrea, interviewees reported that they were forced to re-join national service (often after spending time in prison):

> *When we started the way to the desert, the government of Sudan arrested us. After that, we returned to Khartoum. After Khartoum, I was deported to Eritrea. [...]*

> *They had a group of soldiers for me, I was mixed with other Eritrean soldiers. After eight days, I escaped again. I didn't want to stay there.* (Interviewee 1007, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In Sudan, there are more stories about the complicity of police with traffickers, as well as abuse by the police. Five interviewees directly experienced abuse by police in Sudan, particularly in Khartoum.[20] This included beatings, destroying their refugee card, asking for money for their release and being threatened with return to Eritrea. In addition, the Sudanese police stole items, including communication devices like mobile phones:

> *The Sudanese police caught us, took our mobile phones and arrested us. We had to pay 400 [Sudanese] pounds [USD 70] to get out. I stayed in the prison for one month. I could not take a shower, we could not lie down at the same time. There was very little space. I was beaten in prison.* (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

In one focus group discussion, interviewees reported having witnessed the deportation of six Eritreans to Eritrea by Sudanese security forces at a border checkpoint in 2021. The others, including another focus group of women in the same location, were threatened with return to Eritrea (Interviews 5017 and 5018, focus group discussions with Smits, face-to-face, July 2021).

One interviewee was sold by a Sudanese police officer to a trafficker and taken to Libya (Interviewee 1011, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019). Other interviewees did not directly experience this, but witnessed such connections. One interviewee stated that police raided Hajer, but deliberately allowed the traffickers there to get away (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019). Another interviewee explained how the police in Khartoum play a role in the kidnapping of people to Libya. He had lived in Khartoum for two years, but was unable to work out of fear of being arrested

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[20] Interviewees 0004, 0017, interviews with Smits, face-to-face, March-July 2019; interviewees 1008, 1011, 1024, interviews with Wirtz, face-to-face, April-November 2019

again. This interviewee said that the Eritrean traffickers have agreements with the police and that if you are stopped by the police you may be handed to the traffickers (Interviewee 0004, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019).

### *Involvement of Eritreans in the trafficking network*

Most Eritrean interviewees who can name their traffickers usually say that they are Eritrean. Some of those involved are Sudanese, but working with Eritreans for translation:

> *I stayed in Hajer almost one month three weeks because I could not pay the money quickly. The owner of that place is Bereket. The people working there are Eritrean. It is Eritrean people who are beating us. There are people from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia there.* (Interviewee 1012, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

In all interviews, the interviewees were asked about the nationality of their trafficker, or the nationality of the persons working with them. The interviewees could recognise them as Eritrean by a number of traits, most of all their ability to speak fluent Tigrinya, the main language spoken in Eritrea, their names and other cultural specifications, recognisable to the refugees:

> *I don't know him. He wears Arab clothes, white clothes. He looks like the Arab people, but he's really not. He is from Eritrea. He speaks good Tigrinya.* (Interviewee 0001, interview with Smits, face-to-face, March 2019)

Collectively, the interviews sketch a clear image of the involvement of Eritreans on the routes during each stage of the journey. This includes the routes in Ethiopia and Sudan, which are covered in this chapter. The traffickers who were named frequently as operating in Libya are described extensively in Chapter 11: "*You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*).

## Discussion

Several aspects of the routes of Eritrean refugees to Libya, described previously in the literature, were confirmed by this research, such as the key entry points on the border from Ethiopia to Sudan, namely,

the towns of Metemma (in the Amhara Region) and Humera (in the Tigray region) (Davy, 2017). Similar to Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016), many interviewees in this research also reported travelling through Hajer in Sudan (see sections on 'The routes to Libya' and on 'Payments for the journey', in particular the sub-section on 'Payment and torture in Hajer in Sudan'), although in contrast to the report by Sahan Foundation and IGAD ISSP (2016), which found Hajer to be the last stop-over before Libya, most of the interviewees spent time in Khartoum and travelled to Libya from Khartoum.

While many interviewees reported choosing to contact 'connection men' in Sudan, they may have been heavily influenced by agents of the traffickers in the refugee camps and communities. Other interviewees reported having no intention of travelling to Libya, and being kidnapped while at work or arrested by the police and handed over to the traffickers. Hence, in contrast to Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020), this chapter finds that active recruitment by traffickers does take place, although it often happens through trusted intermediaries, and may, therefore, not appear to be recruitment at first. From the interviews, it appears that the refugees lack alternatives. The evidence gathered in this research indicates that the first element of trafficking may in fact be satisfied: the recruitment of the victims.

This is contrary to Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou's (2020) analysis. There are two possible explanations for why Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) did not find any active recruitment and influence: perhaps they did not ask the questions that could have revealed the influence of agents of traffickers in refugee camps and urban areas, or perhaps such influence has increased in the years since 2017 (the interviews of Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou were conducted between 2016 and 2017, so their interviewees would have been in Ethiopia and Sudan earlier than that).

Migrants and refugees are transported from Ethiopia to Khartoum in Sudan (unless they entered directly into Sudan), then to Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. They are often passed through different hands: connection men in Khartoum, drivers, holding places

(like Hajer and in Libya), and different warehouses in Libya while waiting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This is often done by force, fraud or deception. Furthermore, agents working to recruit refugees spread information such as 'the roads are good now', encouraging refugees to travel. In addition, the payments agreed upon often change and the conditions under which those payments are extracted in Libya are not disclosed, which is deception. Hence, the second element of trafficking is also satisfied: the transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception.

There are various ways in which refugees can get in touch with a trafficker. Three were identified in this research: through a friend or other personal connection, through intermediaries, and directly through the trafficker himself. Despite connecting with 'smugglers' through trusted networks, all interviewees did end up in the hands of traffickers who subjected them to forced payment, in other words, trafficking for ransom. Even if payment amounts were agreed upon beforehand, the conditions under which they were extracted still constitute force. Payments for the different parts of the journey are made separately, averaging USD 1,640 for Eritrea or Ethiopia to Khartoum, USD 2,055 for 'the desert', and USD 2,358 for 'the sea'. Refugees and migrants were also extorted for ransom while in Libya – on average USD 4,095 – often by multiple traffickers. Hence, the third element of trafficking is also satisfied: the aim of exploitation for profit.

While this chapter uses the term 'payments' for agreed-upon prices that were paid, it could be argued that all such payments are 'ransoms', or money extorted to secure the release of a prisoner. This is because the payments described by the interviewees were always extracted under the threat of torture, if not direct torture; all interviewees were imprisoned when the payments were demanded; and, in a large number of cases, payments were either not agreed upon ahead of time, were increased arbitrarily, or the interviewees were forced to pay multiple times to the same or different traffickers. It could be argued, therefore, that simple payments under such conditions are never voluntary and that, at the point where refugees arrive in Libya, they

are unable to change their mind or negotiate payments in any way. The only way for them to be released is for their families to pay for their release – thus, the payment constitutes a ransom.

Thus, the definition of human trafficking on this part of the journey is fulfilled in relation to each of the core elements for the majority of the interviewees. Therefore, the trajectories from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, as well as the extortion in Libya, can and should be classified as human trafficking, as is already the case in classifications used by the UN (UN Security Council, 2018), and seen as such, correctly, by law enforcement agencies.

This research also indicates that there is a network operating, possibly across all parts of the route investigated. However, the degree of interconnectedness between the networks from Ethiopia to Sudan and from Sudan to Libya should be further studied. Several interviewees suggest a greater connection across all of the different elements of the journey, with some having paid for the whole trip in Libya, while others were 'free to choose' a new facilitator in Khartoum, or travel onward with the same facilitator.

In this study multiple examples were recorded of collusion between facilitators and authorities, confirming the earlier findings of Van Reisen *et al.* (2017); Van Reisen & Estefanos (2017a) and Van Reisen *et al.* (2018). In this study we found evidence of the following: authorities turning a blind eye and/or taking bribes at checkpoints; arresting and selling migrants/refugees to traffickers; and creation of a culture of fear through arrests and returns.

The interviews indicate that the phenomenon of kidnapping at the very start of the trafficking still occurs (as it did in Sinai trafficking). This shows that it remains profitable to take refugees against their will. In the case of trafficking in the Sinai desert, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) also describe that recruitment slowly shifted to kidnapping as the ransom prices increased. In this chapter, Sudanese are involved in all reported cases of kidnapping. This is similar to what Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2017) described: that the Sudanese ethnic Rashaida were operating under Eritrean

General Manjus. These cases indicate the linkages between such kidnappers in Sudan with Eritrean and Libyan perpetrators.

The facilitators are in any case interconnected by money transfers and logistical arrangements. The money extracted from the refugees and from relatives facilitate all of the actors involved in the various locations on the routes, including the drivers, the intermediaries, and the officials. Building on the work of Van Reisen & Estefanos (2017a) who provide detailed descriptions of money flows in human trafficking in Sinai, further tracing of these financial flows may reveal the organisation of the criminal organisations thriving on the profits and controlling the trade.

## Conclusion

This chapter looked at the following question: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya and does the practice constitute human trafficking*? To answer this question, a series of sub-questions were asked. The first sub-research question was: *How are the journeys of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya initiated?* It appears from the interviews that the victims are in fact recruited by 'connection men' while they are in the refugee camps and the urban areas of Sudan and Ethiopia. Although the interviewees often reported initiating contact with these people to 'facilitate' their journey across the desert, they were also approached by traffickers, either directly or indirectly, through intermediaries or their own friends and personal contacts. These people plant the seed and encourage people to embark on these dangerous journeys; they make agreements that are often not kept once in Libya, with prices changing and increasing. They 'package' the information as coming from trusted members of the community. They are active in communities, churches and refugee camps. They use social media and word of mouth, creating networks and trust. This set up is highly adaptable and fluid. It is argued that this constitutes deception under the definition of human trafficking. As well as recruitment through deception, there is also recruitment using force, with some interviewees reporting being kidnapped and forcefully taken to Libya.

The second sub-research question asked: *What are the routes used to transport Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya?* Once recruited, the migrants and refugees are then transported through the desert to Libya. The routes taken can be broken into several main parts: Ethiopia to Khartoum in Sudan, across 'the desert' from Khartoum to Libya, and across the Mediterranean Sea, referred to by the refugees as 'the sea' (note the journey from Eritrea, which is often the point of origin for the interviewees in this book, is not covered in this chapter). The refugees are transferred at points like Hajer (Sudan) and Kufra (Libya), and harboured in trafficking 'warehouses' and 'stores' along the way. There are also variations in these routes; one refugee reported coming to Libya from Egypt, others were deported from Israel to a third country like Rwanda or Uganda, before embarking on the journey to Libya.

In relation to the third sub-research question – *What are the conditions on the route?* – it was found that while on route through the desert the drivers who work for the traffickers are in control of the refugees and complicit in their abuse. Refugees are stuffed into pick-up trucks or Lorries without enough food or water and travel at dangerous speeds across the sand to reach Libya. Accidents, such as falling out of the car, are common and many die on this route. Women are regularly raped by drivers or traded with others for use for sex. Another risk is being kidnapped by the roaming Chadian armed groups, who sometimes fight with the traffickers for 'control' of the refugees, in order to (re)sell them.

Control over information plays an important role in the trafficking of refugees along the routes. Although refugees often have a phone in refugee camps before they commence the journey to Libya, they lose access to the device on the route to Libya (interviewees reported either not bringing it with them or it being stolen). By creating 'black holes' in the digital landscape, the traffickers are in control of the information exchange, which means that they can ensure that the refugees do not give any information to family, the media or the authorities. The refugees are also not able to record any details of their journey, such as by taking photographs, hampering investigation

of the crime. The loss of this tool is an important aspect of the control that the traffickers have over the refugees during their trafficking trajectories.

The fourth sub-research question looked at: *How are payments made, where and to whom, and under what conditions?* On the routes to Libya, payments are made for segments (the 'desert', and then the 'sea'), as well as for the whole journey. Although payments are usually agreed before the journey commences, the amounts often change after the refugees arrive and the refugees find themselves forcefully detained until they arrange payment. The process of extracting payment through torture is prevalent, at points of transit as well as when they reach their destination in Libya. Due to the arbitrary nature of payments, the situations of imprisonment and the threats and torture under which the payments are extracted, the authors of this chapter argue that all payments can be classified as 'ransoms', as they are sums extracted from family and communities in order to secure the release of a prisoner. The traffickers in Sudan, particularly in Khartoum, are connected to those in Libya. The refugees do not usually pay the complete amount for the journey when they are in Sudan. Rather, the payments are done by their family members once they arrive in Libya. The networks are connected and cooperate, and they are part of a larger network.

The fifth sub-research question asked: *How are these routes organised (facilitators, networks, collusion of authorities) and what is the involvement of Eritreans (including Eritrean authorities) in this organisation?* From the interviews, the connections between those involved in the transportation of migrants and refugees to Libya appear to be well organised – from initiation of the journey (recruitment and kidnapping), through to travel through the desert, receipt in Libya and, finally, the journey over the Mediterranean Sea. There are many actors involved: facilitators, drivers, connection men, smugglers, guards and traffickers. Most of the interviewees observed interconnections, but were not sure if the full journey was organised by one or more individuals. In addition to the network being highly interconnected, the interviewees reported the involvement of the

authorities. In Sudan, interviewees told stories about the complicity of police and border guards with traffickers. The crossing of borders and travel through the desert is facilitated by military personnel.

So, in answer to the main research question: *Do the practices described in this chapter constitute human trafficking?* It is concluded from the interviews that the elements of trafficking are all present – namely, recruitment; the transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception; and exploitation with the purpose of generating profit. Therefore, this phenomenon qualifies as human trafficking. The findings of this study indicate that this highly lucrative form of human trafficking – human trafficking for ransom – which was initially identified in the Sinai, is now well established in Libya. Hence, there is a possibility that this form of human trafficking could spread to other parts of the region, or may have already done so. With the current instability in the Horn of Africa, there is serious concern that human trafficking for ransom may increase in volume and spread to more geographic locations.

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**Author contributions**

Klara Smits wrote the initial version of this chapter and is author of sections of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen is author of sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Letizia Storchi contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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