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**GLMM**  
Gulf Labour Markets and Migration

## Irregular Migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf States

**Bina Fernandez**

**Chapter in the volume:**

***Skilful Survivals: Irregular Migration to the Gulf***

**edited by Philippe Fargues and Nasra M. Shah**

**BOOK CHAPTER**

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## About the Gulf Research Center

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# About the Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) Programme

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The Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) programme (<http://gulfmigration.eu>) is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit joint initiative of a major Gulf think tank, the Gulf Research Center (GRC - Jeddah, Geneva, Cambridge), and a globally renowned university, the European University Institute (EUI - Florence). GLMM provides data, analyses, and recommendations contributing to the understanding and management of labour migration in countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, engaging with all stakeholders.



## XIII

# Irregular Migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf States

*Bina Fernandez\**

**Abstract:** Migrants from Ethiopia to the Gulf States become irregular in five ways: entry through unauthorised border crossings, “overstayers” on temporary or tourist visas, entry through “free visas,” through irregular employment, and at birth, when children are born to irregular migrants. This chapter seeks to critically examine recent policy developments that have impacted irregular migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia. In October 2013, the Ethiopian government instituted a “temporary” ban on all migration to the Middle East, a ban that continues to date. This was widely considered a pre-emptive response to the imminent expulsion of over 163,000 undocumented Ethiopian migrants from Saudi Arabia in November 2013, after the expiry of an amnesty for undocumented labour migrants to correct their status. While the Ethiopian government ban and the Saudi crackdown had the effect of temporarily stemming the flow of irregular migrants across the Horn of African to Yemen during the early months of 2014, by the end of the year, there was a 40% increase in the number of irregular migrants reaching Yemen by boat, with the probable intention of moving on to Saudi Arabia to seek work. Around 80% (72,000) of these migrants are Ethiopian, and a significant number of them are circular migrants, including those

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who are returning after being deported. This chapter argues that the trends observed here are similar to patterns observed in other parts of the world; Ethiopian and Saudi Arabian policies intended to curb irregular migration have clearly had converse effects, and this is at the cost of migrants' journeys becoming more dangerous and expensive. The chapter calls for a new politics of migration that protects rather than illegalises and endangers the lives of migrants.

## **Introduction**

Within the Gulf region, the phenomenon of migrant “illegality,” “irregular” or “undocumented” status has recently attracted academic and policy attention (Shah 2009, 2014; RMMS 2014b) in line with increasing attention to the phenomenon at other global “fault lines,” particularly in the US, the EU, and Australia (Cameron 2013, Fekete 2003, Guerette and Clarke 2005, Cornelius 2005, Monzini 2007). The heightened visibility of the phenomenon is a by-product of, on the one hand, increasing cross-border mobilities in the “age of migration” (Castles and Miller 1998) and on the other, the tightening of border controls particularly for “undesirable” migrants in the Global North. “Irregularity” is produced by bordering practices of states, and unauthorised border crossings have become deeply politicised. As Anderson and Ruhs observe, “The contested nature of the adjectives attached to migrants ... undocumented, irregular, clandestine, non-compliant, unauthorized, trafficked, *sans papiers*, etc. – is an indication of the intensely politicised nature of claims to knowledge and analysis” (Anderson and Ruhs 2009: 175). In this chapter, I follow the use of “irregular” as the “least worst” of terms that are problematic in different ways (for extended discussions, see Schrover et al. 2008 and Koser 2010).

The construction of irregular migrants as a “problem” that needs to be “managed” emerged in the twentieth century as a feature of the nation-state based organisation of citizenship, in contrast to city based, or even empire based models of citizenship (Schrover et al. 2008, Mongia 2003, Torpey 2001). The primary state objectives for the “management” of irregular migration are control of the domestic labour market and welfare, and control over national security (particularly in the post 9/11 global anti-terrorist environment of increased surveillance). Framed through these objectives, borders are not just “lines crossed in the sand,” but inscribed through processes of documentation and surveillance. State border control is visible not only at the physical border crossing, but also in access to the labour market, services, and mobility within the state. A secondary stated objective of “managing” irregular migration is to prosecute traffickers and smugglers, and protect their victims.



Following de Genova (2002), this chapter is situated within a perspective that is critical of such stated aims of the law and seeks to denaturalise their nationalist assumptions. De Genova proposes the socio-historical analysis of the law as instrumental in the production of migrant “illegality.” Viewed through this perspective, we observe that while state laws controlling the entry of “undesirable” non-citizens to their territories may not achieve their stated objective of reducing the numbers of irregular migrants, they do achieve other desired consequences. One such useful and profitable consequence that has long been well-documented particularly in the context of Mexican irregular migration to the US is the creation of a legally vulnerable and therefore cheap and exploitable pool of labour (Bustamente 1972, Portes 1978, Sassen 1988). Moreover, state prerogatives and capacities to control the entry of non-citizens to their territories are increasingly a mode of signalling state authority, indeed their very “stateness.” However, these stated and unstated consequences of border controls are achieved at the cost of irregular migrants: increasingly restrictive border policies and practices around the globe have led to the increasing stigmatisation and criminalisation of irregular migrants (Lee 2005, Gerard and Pickering 2012), which has resulted in their exposure to greater costs, risks, and higher fatalities as they attempt ever more perilous border crossings (Carling 2007, Weber and Pickering 2011).

This chapter discusses the irregular migration of Ethiopians to the Gulf, with a specific focus on Saudi Arabia. It argues that the trends observed along this migration trajectory are similar to patterns observed at other global flashpoints of irregular migration, such as between the US and Mexico, on the maritime borders of the EU in the Mediterranean, and on the maritime borders of Australia. The Ethiopian and Saudi Arabian policies intended to curb irregular migration have had converse effects, and this is at the cost of migrants’ journeys becoming more dangerous and expensive. The chapter calls for a new politics of the border that protects rather than endangers the lives of the people crossing borders. The chapter draws on empirical research I have been conducting since 2009 on Ethiopian migrant domestic workers to the Middle East. The research methods included qualitative, semi-structured interviews with migrants, government and NGO representatives, brokers and agents in Ethiopia, in Kuwait, and in Lebanon. Cumulatively, I have conducted over 100 interviews in different phases of this ongoing research. Irregular migration was a topic of the interviews, as a large number of initially regular Ethiopian migrants experience some form of irregularity at later stages of their migration trajectory; I draw on some of these accounts in this chapter. I also draw considerably on secondary reports monitoring Ethiopian migration conducted by

international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS).<sup>1</sup>

The chapter proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the primary modes of irregularity that are observable in the trajectory of Ethiopian migration. In the third section, I assess the calculus of risk, i.e., the balance of factors that influence Ethiopian migrants' decisions to become irregular migrants. Specifically, I examine the drivers of Ethiopian irregular migration to the Gulf using Cvajner and Sciortino's (2009) typology of irregular migration. The next two factors discussed within the calculus of risk are the dangers and the risks of deportation irregular migrants face. The fourth section examines the Ethiopian and Saudi Arabian governments' stated policies of "managing" migration and the unstated consequences of these policies. This is followed by the conclusion.

### **Modes of Ethiopian Irregular Migration to the Gulf**

Since the late 1990s, there has been a rising stream of migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf countries. The majority of regular labour migrants from Ethiopia are women employed as domestic workers. The primary destinations in the first decade of the 21st century were Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, although there was a steady stream of migrants that made their way to other Gulf countries, particularly the UAE. Since 2011, an agreement between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia resulted in a steep increase in the number of legal migrants to Saudi Arabia. In part, this increased demand from Saudi Arabia was a consequence of the ban on migration to Saudi Arabia imposed by the Philippines and Indonesian governments, following cases of abuse of workers from these countries. Thus, according to the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), the number of Ethiopian migrant workers that legally migrated to Saudi Arabia increased dramatically from 3,478 between July 2009 and July 2010 to over 100,000 in 2011, and in 2012 again to over 160,000 (RMMS 2014a). MoLSA further estimates that the regular labour migrants represent only 30%-40% of all Ethiopians in the Gulf, suggesting that the remaining 60%-70% (300,000-350,000) of Ethiopians in the Gulf countries have irregular status (*ibid*).

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1. The RMMS is a consortium of organisations operating in North Africa, including the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Labour Organisation (ILO), Danish Refugee Council, and others. Since 2011, RMMS has been monitoring the movements of peoples in the region - of refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants.

Irregular status can occur in a number of ways, and does not necessarily imply irregular entry. First, many Muslim Ethiopians travel to Saudi Arabia on Haj or Umrah pilgrimage visas. They enter legally, but overstay their visas and become irregular. Habiba, for instance, recounts that this was how she travelled to Saudi Arabia to join her sister, uncle and cousins who were already working there:

When you go out from here [Ethiopia] you will get a [Umrah] visa for one month and when you finish that month you can pay and add another month. I went there and I saw Makkah and Medina. Then I came to Jeddah, where I have a sister. Then all you have to do is not show your passport, and hide from the police... We went for Umrah and stayed illegally. My uncle is there legally but all the others who went with me are illegal (Interview, Addis Ababa, 2010).

Habiba was from the Wollo region of Ethiopia, and not from a poor family – her family owned two shops. Her reason for leaving at the age of 18 was that her family was pressuring her to get married. She worked in Jeddah for three years and said that her employment conditions were satisfactory. According to her, abuse and exploitation occurred “when you go on a [contract work] visa; but I could change my job any time I wanted and move. So they treated me well.” When she wanted to return to Ethiopia, she used the strategy that many irregular workers in Saudi Arabia use of giving herself up to the police. She spent 10 days in a detention centre and was deported back to Ethiopia. I interviewed her five years after her return, when she was processing a regular work contract for Kuwait, through a Private Employment Agency (PEA).

The second mode through which irregular status occurs is when migrants enter on legal work contracts, but become irregular if they exit their employment contract either to escape abuse or to seek better opportunities. Some women who exit their contracts regularise their status by getting their next employers to arrange for a transfer of sponsorship. Many, however, remain irregular, living and working as freelancers either as domestic workers, or taking up jobs in the service sector (hotels, restaurants, beauty parlours and shops). Although accurate figures for the numbers of migrant domestic workers who exit their contracts and remain irregular are difficult to ascertain, informal estimates suggest that 25%-30% of women exit their employment contracts for varied reasons and thus become irregular.

The third category of irregular workers is of those who enter on what is colloquially known as a “free visa.” This is the term that covers the ubiquitous practice of “visa trading” in the Gulf countries, where migrant workers pay rent

to a *kafeel* (sponsor) for sponsorship papers, but are “free” to work for any other employer. Technically, this is an irregularity, and if the migrant worker is caught, they can be deported. Although there are no reliable figures, my research suggests a large number of Ethiopians working in the Gulf do so on “free visas” which is corroborated by quantitative research in Qatar that also shows a high density of Ethiopians on “free visas” (Pessoa, Harkness and Gardner 2014). Ayesha, a young Muslim woman I interviewed in Addis Ababa went to Saudi Arabia first on a “free visa” that was organised for her by her husband and his relatives who were already living and working there. Ayesha worked freelance in a part-time job as domestic worker for three years, but was finally deported because the irregularity in her documents was discovered: “My husband had tried to cover for his friend’s wife. My husband’s and my papers were together, but when they checked they found out it was not me so they deported us” (Interview, Addis Ababa, 2010). Given the widespread practice of visa trading, “free visas” have not (until recently) been subject to high levels of monitoring, and this case of deportation was primarily because the documents were being used not just for one but for two women rather than because it was a “free visa.” At the time of interview in Addis Ababa in 2010, Ayesha had obtained a regular work contract and was ready to return to Saudi Arabia; it was unlikely that she intended to stay in this contract, rather the aim was to rejoin her husband who had already returned there through the overland, irregular route via Yemen.

A fourth mode of irregularity occurs when children are born to irregular and regular domestic workers. Pregnancy is prohibited under the regular domestic worker contract, and if a woman becomes pregnant, her employer may terminate her contract. Thus, even regular domestic workers who become pregnant (voluntarily, or as a consequence of rape) often choose to become irregular to avoid deportation. The children born under such conditions are without documentation of nationality and therefore often cannot access formal medical services or education. I have discussed elsewhere in greater detail the predicament of the women who find themselves with children, unable to leave the country, yet constrained in their ability to take on regular employment (Fernandez 2014).

The sea and land route via Yemen is the fifth mode of irregularity through physical border crossing. Irregular migrants from Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa who make border crossings follow the pattern of step-wise migration observed among migrants in other parts of Africa (Schapendonk and Moppes 2007; Cross 2009), travelling in stages over land from Ethiopia to the coast of Djibouti or Somalia, then crossing the sea to Yemen. From Yemen, many attempt to cross the

land border with Saudi Arabia or travel to other Gulf States.

While here too, estimates of the numbers of irregular migrants entering Saudi Arabia through these routes lack accuracy, three clear trends are discernible: the numbers of migrants from the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia) are increasing; Ethiopians constitute the majority of these flows; and third, men are more likely to embark on this trajectory. In 2012, 107,532 crossed the Arabian and Red Sea to Yemen, of whom 78% were Ethiopians. Cumulatively, between 2006 and January 2014, over 500,000 migrants from the Horn of Africa have made the crossing, and the number of Ethiopians who arrived in Yemen in this period was at least 334,000 (RMMS 2014b:34). According to UNHCR figures, the number of migrants irregularly arriving in Yemen from the Horn of Africa in 2014 stood at 82,000, as against 65,000 in 2013.

Estimates of the number of arrivals and Ethiopian arrivals in Yemen are illustrated in Figure 13.1. The majority of these arrivals do not intend to stay in Yemen, but aim to cross the land border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, or to travel to other Gulf countries, where wages are higher. Yet, as de Regt (2008) shows, Ethiopian migrants may stay on and seek work in Yemen too and may find multiple creative modes of manoeuvring around their irregular status.

### **The Calculus of Risk: Drivers, Dangers, and Deportation**

Migrants' entry into irregular status is almost always an exercise of agency, one that makes a considered calculus of risk. Weighing in the calculus are three sets of factors: the drivers specifically of irregular migration, the dangers of undertaking irregular status, and the ever present possibility of deportation. Overall, given the high numbers of Ethiopians that are irregular migrants, for the majority, it would seem that the drivers would appear to outweigh the dangers and the threat of deportation, both en route and at the destination. I outline the multiple influences within each of these three sets of factors.

The general drivers of irregular migration are similar to those of regular migration: people migrate to improve their lives and the lives of their families. As I have discussed elsewhere, the majority of young unmarried Ethiopian women who migrate as domestic workers are imbued with a very strong sense of responsibility for the economic welfare of their natal families which propels them to seek opportunities outside Ethiopia (Fernandez 2011). Families too put pressure on their children to migrate, given the ecological and demographic pressures on the land and the lack of local employment opportunities (Bezu and Holden 2014; Jones et al. 2014).

The visible migration success of friends, neighbours, and peers is another strong driver of migration. Other reasons for migration are varied: some seek to rejoin families (as in the case of Ayesha mentioned earlier), while a few may be political dissidents who seek to escape government surveillance. Overall, these drivers have produced and re-inforced a “culture of migration” where “migration is associated with personal, social and material success, and where migrating has become the norm rather than the exception. In this vein staying at home is associated with failure” (RMMS 2014: 21; quoting de Haas 2006: 5-6).

More specifically, the drivers of irregular migration systems can be usefully analysed using the typology of three trajectories identified by Cvajner and Ciortino (2009): atomistic, volume-based, and structural migration careers. They view these three systems as emerging along a (often overlapping) developmental continuum as migration trajectories consolidate. Atomistic careers are individual trajectories that are catalysed by unique combinations of contingent factors and are often descriptive of the experiences of migrant pioneers. More relevant for the analysis of Ethiopian irregular migration to Saudi Arabia are the two models of “volume-based” and “structural” migration described by Cvajner and Ciortino (2009). In the volume-based model, large-scale flows of irregular migration develop within a short period in response to three pre-conditions, all observable in the trajectory of the Ethiopian irregular migrant to Saudi Arabia. The first pre-condition is the existence of a large pool of potential migrants in the sending country. This pre-condition is met in Ethiopia which is the second most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa (estimated population of almost 93 million in 2013), with high levels of youth unemployment. Youth unemployment is estimated at 40% for the 15-24 age bracket and 22% for those above 25 (IOM figures based on the 1999 and 2005 Labour Force Surveys and the 1994 and 2007 Censuses). As discussed previously, this lack of employment opportunities increasingly pushes the youth to migrate (Bezu and Holden 2014; Piper et.al 2014).

The second pre-condition is the opening of employment opportunities in the receiving country. This is evident in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, where there is a strong structural demand for the kinds of low-skilled labour that Ethiopian men and women undertake. This demand allows for the rapid absorption of newly arrived irregular migrants into employment within weeks or often even days.

The third pre-condition for Ethiopian volume-based irregular migration is the relatively greater difficulty of access to other potential destinations. Other migration destinations for Ethiopians are the US, Europe, and South Africa. However, each

of these destinations is fraught with greater barriers to entry, higher costs, and/or longer, more difficult journeys. In comparison, Saudi Arabia and other destinations in the Gulf are more accessible through overstaying short stay visas, but also through clandestine border crossing.

The Ethiopian irregular migration trajectory also shows characteristics of the “structured migration career” described by Cvajner and Sciortino (2009). They differentiate the structured career from volume-based systems on three criteria: a well-established migration infrastructure, the existence of relatively strong social network ties, and linkages with legal flows of migrants. All three criteria are also observable in the trajectories of Ethiopian irregular migrants to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. The migration system of the *kafala* and its attendant system of “free visas” are a well-developed infrastructure of migration that regulate the entry, residence, and exit of both regular and irregular migrants. Social networks are essential to obtain these “free visas.” Anecdotal qualitative evidence from my research as well as quantitative research in Qatar (Pessoa, Harkness and Gardner 2014) indicates a high density of Ethiopians who obtain such “free visas,” suggesting that these are facilitated through the existing strong social ties and networks. The regular and irregular migration systems between Ethiopia and the countries are strongly inter-connected through the “legal” and “illegal” operations of intermediaries and social networks at both the origin and destination points (Fernandez 2013; see also Hertog 2010).

Another specific set of drivers influence the decision to undertake irregular migrant status, depending on the mode of irregularity. Ethiopians who entered Saudi Arabia with the required documentation but subsequently became irregular (either through lapsed visa status, or through exiting their work contracts) and those who entered through “free visas” often do so because they have better opportunities to earn higher incomes working in the informal economy. For instance, “freelance” domestic workers can work in multiple households or even informally in the service sector and earn between 2-3 times what they earn as contract domestic workers. This higher income is, of course, partially offset by the living costs they incur. An additional attraction is the greater personal freedom and mobility they attain. Unlike contract workers (both male and female) under the *kafala* in Saudi Arabia, the irregular migrant worker is not bound to a single employer and can change jobs. Particularly for women who were formerly contract domestic workers, it means basic freedom to move outside the four walls of their employer’s house, which they would have been prevented from doing previously. Paradoxically however, this relative freedom of mobility is offset by the increased vulnerability to exploitation (Pessoa,



Harkness and Gardner 2014) as well as by the condition described by Mahdavi of being an “immobilised migrant” (Mahdavi 2014): a condition of insecurity and fear of being reported, arrested, and deported.

In addition to the factors outlined, the drivers for irregular migrants who make the journey over land and sea are first, people who embark on the irregular route often do so because of the widespread belief that the brokers who facilitated irregular travel were cheaper and quicker. However, an RMMS survey found that both the cost and time taken to travel via the irregular route was often much higher than prospective migrants expected (RMMS 2014a). Survey responses of returnee migrants indicated that it took between two weeks to two months to reach their destination countries. The cost of travel can also be higher than anticipated, particularly for those who are new, or those who do not have pre-established contacts with brokers along the routes.

Finally, a gendered driver of irregular migration is that the opportunities for regular migration are very limited for men; consequently, the majority of irregular Ethiopian migrants to Saudi Arabia are men. Although the majority of women migrate through regular channels or through Haj/Umrah visas, a few women do travel the irregular route over land and sea. This is because until 2011, the government of Ethiopia restricted the operation of Private Employment Agencies to Addis Ababa. This meant that women from other parts of the country who wanted to travel through the regular route had to first go to Addis Ababa to arrange their paper work, which increased the time and expense of migration. It is therefore often more convenient for prospective migrants to arrange their travel through the socially embedded networks of brokers that operate to facilitate a steady stream of irregular migration via Yemen to Saudi Arabia (Fernandez 2013).

The dangers of irregular migration that migrants must weigh up in their calculus of risk are most evident in the fourth mode of irregularity – i.e., during the journey over sea and land via Yemen. Migrant support agencies operating in the region have documented the many dangers faced by Ethiopian migrants who travel to Saudi Arabia via Yemen: physical exhaustion, dehydration, sleep deprivation, starvation, death by drowning, degrading treatment and verbal abuse, sexual and gender based violence, moderate or extreme physical violence including torture, organ removal, and criminal kidnapping for ransom (Yitna 2006; RMMS 2014a; RMMS 2014c). Along the journey from Ethiopia overland to the coast of Somaliland or Djibouti, migrants risk physical exhaustion, starvation, and dehydration as they often walk long distances through the desert. Once they reach the coast, the next stage is a perilous sea journey to Yemen. Departures to Yemen used to be from Bossasso



in Somaliland, but are now more frequently from Obock in Djibouti due to the shorter sea journey. Capsized boats and drowning are a risk at this stage. Once they reach Yemen, migrants need to make their way overland to Haradh in North Yemen. At all stages, they are at risk of abuse and exploitation from the brokers and people smugglers; however, increasingly in the past five years, abduction and torture of migrants for ransom while they transit through Yemen has become widespread. There are reports of migrants' families being forced to pay up to \$2,000 for the release of their relatives.

An overview of the more severe dangers faced by migrants from the Horn of Africa, drawing on data from RMMS Monthly Reports (2011-2015) include deaths, torture, rape and sexual assault, kidnapping, and abduction. The cumulative number of deaths RMMS reported between 2011-2015 is 371; however, this may be an underestimate, as according to UNHCR, in 2013 and 2014 alone, the verified deaths were 179 and 223, respectively. Although the data are not always disaggregated by nationality, this reporting shows that deaths due to drowning are less frequent than the marked rising trend of high levels of torture, abduction, and sexual violence. An explanation for the lower level of migrant deaths suggested by RMMS is that

“a migrant’s life has increased in value (‘commoditization’), due to the evolving practice of kidnapping migrants for ransom, as well as subjecting them to extortion. Reports from migrants themselves suggest that significant numbers of (mainly Ethiopian) female ‘new arrivals’ in mixed migration flows are separated, abducted and often sold on to other criminals or directly to private ‘buyers.’ Some of these women are never heard of again, according to those who crossed to Yemen with them” (RMMS 2014a:11).

The third factor Ethiopian irregular migrants consider in their calculus of risk is deportation. Deportation is highly contingent on the administrative capacity and the economic and political imperatives of states to implement the expulsion of “unwanted” irregular migrants. Irregular Ethiopian migrants face deportation not only from the destination, Saudi Arabia, but also from the countries they may pass through en route – i.e., Djibouti, Somaliland, and Yemen. Although these are transit countries for the majority of Ethiopians, they periodically authorise deportations of Ethiopians (along with Somalis and Eritreans) if the numbers of irregular migrants are viewed as a local law and order problem and/or if the countries need to demonstrate control over border security and smugglers. Although data on deportations is patchy, Figure 13.2 represents an indicative listing of deportations since September 2011, showing that the numbers are large and frequent.

The deportation figures show that the single largest deportation of over 163,000 Ethiopians occurred from Saudi Arabia during the period November 2013–February 2014. Previously, periodic amnesties and deportations of Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia were relatively common, but smaller in number. While Ethiopians with irregular status faced the constant risk of imprisonment and deportation, like many irregular migrants in Saudi Arabia, they occasionally used these amnesties and deportations as an opportunity for a “free ticket” home (as in the case of Habiba mentioned previously).

However, since 2012 there has been a shift in the typical Saudi practice of deporting irregular migrants directly to their home countries. There were reports that Saudi authorities left irregular migrants stranded in the desert a few kilometres from the border with Yemen (RMMS 2014b: 49). These deportees were then forced to travel through the desert without food or water, and there have been many reported deaths in this border zone. Many Ethiopian irregular migrants became stranded in Haradh, a town in Hajja governorate of Northern Yemen, on the border of Saudi Arabia – either because Saudi Arabian authorities had deported them to the border and they were unable to make their way back home from there, or because they were seeking to enter but were unable to cross into Saudi Arabia. Assisted repatriation for such stranded migrants has been facilitated with the support of IOM and UNHCR, contingent on the availability of funds. In 2010, IOM set up the Haradh Migration Response Centre, and in 2011, its voluntary return programme helped 7,000 mainly Ethiopian migrants to return home (Zelalem 2012). Despite the ongoing needs of stranded migrants for assistance, the IOM programme was temporarily suspended due to lack of funds. The programme resumed in 2015 with financial support from the Dutch government, after the escalation of conflict in Yemen rendered large numbers of migrants vulnerable. In June and July 2015, nearly 900 Ethiopian migrants have been assisted to return (IOM 2015).

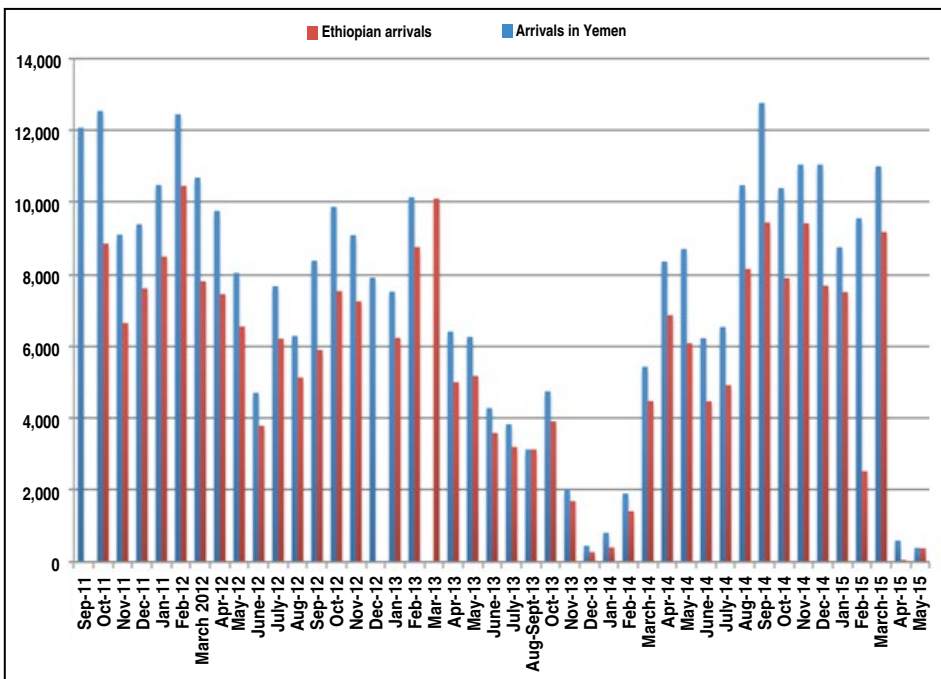
In contrast to previous deportations, the 2013–4 deportation signalled a major shift in the scale of operations to regularise the migrant population in Saudi Arabia. Under the Nitaqat programme, the Saudi Arabian government announced that all irregular migrants had to regularise their documentation or face expulsion. The initial deadline of May 2013 was extended to October 2013. Before the deadline, according to Saudi Arabian news reports, thousands of irregular migrants handed themselves in for voluntary deportation. After the deadline, by mid-November on average 20–80 Ethiopians were deported per day, and in December and January, these numbers increased dramatically. By the end of February 2014, 163,018 Ethiopians (100,688

male, 53,732 female and 8,598 children including unaccompanied minors) had been deported to Addis Ababa (IOM 2015).

Despite the dangers and the risk of deportation, a survey conducted by the RMMS (2014a) regarding the knowledge and attitudes of irregular Ethiopian migrants showed that prospective migrants are well aware of the risks of irregular migration. For example, more than 90% knew the risks of serious physical hardship, arrest, exhortation and robbery, and about 80% were aware of the risks of sexual abuse, including rape.

Thus, the calculus of risk is weighted towards the very strong drivers that encourage migrants to become irregular. Although the intensification of dangers to which migrants are exposed and the increased rate of deportation suggest the need for a different calculus of risk, clearly this has not produced any significant reduction in the numbers that continue to arrive irregularly in Yemen (Figure 13.1).

**Figure 13.1: Estimated number of Ethiopian arrivals at Yemen’s coast**



Source: Based on data from RMMS monthly monitoring reports.

**Figure 13.2: Deportations of Ethiopians**

Month	Forced Repatriations
September 11	Somaliland government announced forced expulsion of 80,000 Ethiopians. UNHCR estimates 20,000 actual deportations.
October 11	150 Ethiopian Oromo migrants were deported from Somaliland back to Ethiopia
December 11 January 12	20 Ethiopians were forcibly returned from Somaliland
March 12	277 Ethiopians to be returned from Yemen to Ethiopia via air evacuation
June 12	27 Ethiopians were forcibly repatriated by Somaliland authorities; 400 Africans (mainly Ethiopians) expelled by Yemeni authorities
September 12	Forcible deportation of Ethiopians (numbers unknown) from Somaliland
October 12	4,000 Ethiopians deported from North Yemen
May 13	4,329 Ethiopians deported from Yemen
July 13	137 unaccompanied minors returned from Yemen to Ethiopia
November 13 February 14	Continued expulsion of over 163,000 Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia
July 14	97 people (mainly Ethiopians) deported from Somaliland
December 14 - January 15	50 Ethiopians repatriated from Djibouti

Source: Data compiled from RMMS Monthly Reports.

## **The Politics of ‘Managing’ Irregular Ethiopian Migrants**

### *Ethiopia*

The Ethiopian government’s regulatory framework to manage the movements of its nationals out of the country is fragmented, operationalised through criminal laws against smuggling and trafficking, as well as labour proclamations regulating the activities of Private Employment Agencies. As I have discussed elsewhere, there is a blurring of distinctions between smuggling and trafficking in the prosecution of the law, and the government has weak enforcement capabilities against people-smugglers (Fernandez 2013). Paradoxically, amendments to the legislation regulating PEAs have been punitive and resulted not in improved “management” but an increase in the irregular flows of migrants.

Until recently, the Ethiopian government usually turned a tacit blind eye to the flows of irregular migration to the Gulf and other destinations, despite

pressure from Europe, the US, and international organisations to control smuggling (often ex-post relabelled trafficking) from Ethiopia. The government's strong dual incentive to ignore irregular migration is because it offers an alternative to the high levels of unemployment and because migrant remittances are a boost to local economies (Andersson 2014; Reinart 2007; Fernandez 2010); both incentives have the additional effect of easing the pressure of potential political discontent within the country.

The first ban issued by the Ethiopian government in May 2008 prohibited Ethiopians from travelling to Lebanon to work as contract domestic workers (*The Daily Star*, May 8, 2008). The ban was implemented due to the high numbers of reported deaths, suicides, and cases of physical and sexual abuse of Ethiopian women in Lebanon. Although regular migration was prohibited, the flow of irregular migrants to Lebanon continued, as women travelled to Lebanon via Sudan, Dubai, or Egypt.

The next and more drastic all-encompassing ban on migration from Ethiopia was put into force by the government in November 2013, a few days preceding the (expected) Saudi Arabian expulsion of irregular Ethiopian workers. Although the government initially expected around 30,000-50,000 Ethiopian deportees, it was completely unprepared for the unprecedented numbers of repatriated Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia. Many of the deportees arrived with possessions or funds, and some were physically and mentally ill (IOM 2014a). Resources for the deportees were mobilised with the support of the IOM, ILO, UNHCR, and other international and domestic NGOs. Six transit centres were established in Addis Ababa to receive the returnees who were provided with temporary accommodation, meals, medical services, and a \$50 transportation allowance to help them return home (ibid).

At the time of writing, the blanket ban on migration continues to be in force, and in a press release in October 2014, the Ethiopian National Taskforce Council for Illegal Migration announced that permanent jobs had been created for 54.1% of the 163,000 repatriates from Saudi Arabia and that the government plan was to encourage its youth to find employment within the country. The Deputy Prime Minister and head of the National Task Force Demeke Mekonen said: "Since the main pillar of this plan is to bring attitudinal change, we have to come up with society based mechanisms against the problem. So, if the society stands against illegal migration, we can have [a]strong force that can deter the problem" (Mohamedsani 2014).

As part of its plan, after the initial relief provided to the deportees, the Ethiopian government announced that it aimed to create alternate employment

opportunities locally, in the regions they came from. However, during fieldwork in the two villages of Assela and Debra Birhan in October 2014, it was apparent that the actual support was largely limited to awareness raising and facilitating credit linkage support for the deportees and other prospective migrant youth.

In support of the Ethiopian government's efforts to raise awareness about the dangers of irregular migration, in 2014 the IOM organised a travelling street theatre production of a play titled *Mutach* (meaning "The Last One") that toured rural areas in migrant sending areas of Wollo, Tigray, Jimma, and Oromia. IOM Ethiopia, in partnership with the government and civil society, has also launched an initiative to engage Ethiopians in discussions on the dangers of irregular migration besides local alternatives to migration through "community conversations" in five high-risk migration regions, including Oromia, Tigray, Amhara, SNNPR National Regional States and Addis Ababa City Administration (IOM 2014).

Further, the Ethiopian government has entered into dialogue with the Saudi Arabian government on managing labour migration. In an effort to engage in bilateral discussions on labour migration (and other key issues such as investment), an Ethiopian delegation was invited by the Shura Council (legislative institution) of Saudi Arabia to visit between December 26, 2014 and January 2, 2015 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). The Ethiopian Speaker of the House of People's Representatives, Abadula Gemedo, told the Shura Council that the Ethiopian government

aimed to create a nation-wide movement against illegal migration through various educational and sensitization programs. He said Ethiopia had banned the recruitment of workers to the Middle East for the time being to thoroughly analyze the problems of illegal migration and curb human trafficking. He stressed Ethiopia's resolve to make the process of foreign employment free of intermediaries who had actually been responsible for human trafficking under the guise of legal migration. He said the Ethiopian Government had identified poverty and unemployment as main push factors for illegal migration and therefore it believed that job creation in Ethiopia had become a major step in preventing human trafficking and illegal migration, adding that "Ethiopia is witnessing positive changes; we are creating more than two million jobs every year." The two sides also discussed the rights of Ethiopian workers in Saudi Arabia. [Saudi Arabian] Minister Adil Faqih noted that a draft labor agreement had been drawn up between the two ministries of labour. He stressed the need to speed up the signing and ratification process

to put in place effective mechanisms to safeguard workers' rights. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015)

Notwithstanding the ban, the awareness raising measures, and bilateral negotiations, my field research in two migrant sending regions of rural Ethiopia (Kormageffia in the Debre Birhan region and Oda Dawata in the Oromia region) conducted in October–November 2014 showed that although the public and official discourse indicated people's awareness of the ban, there was tacit acknowledgement that people were continuing to migrate irregularly. Indeed, as we see in Figure 13.1, the ban clearly had only a temporary dampening effect (between November 2013 and February 2014) on the numbers of Ethiopians arriving in Yemen irregularly. At the time of writing, the escalation of the conflict in Yemen has resulted in an almost total halt to the numbers of irregular Ethiopian migrants making the sea crossing to Yemen. Indeed, the flows of people are in reverse, as Yemeni refugees are crossing over to the coast of Africa, fleeing the conflict in Yemen.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Migration systems in Saudi Arabia (like elsewhere in the Gulf) are recognised for the restrictive system of migrant sponsorship known as the *kafala*, high ratios of migrants to nationals, and restrictive barriers to the long-term settlement of migrants. Migrant workers predominantly from Asia and Africa and the MENA countries constitute over one-third of the Saudi national population, and Bel Air's review of news reports suggest that up to 5 million of these are irregular migrants (Bel Air 2015:7). The high level of irregular migrants in Saudi Arabia is largely due to visa trading and the "free visa" system. The degree to which "free visas" prevail is indicated by the estimate that over seven million migrant workers (nearly all the regular migrants) corrected their status during the amnesty period and more than one and a half million changed their status entirely (Walker 2013).

The analysis of the situation of irregular migrants in Saudi Arabia is necessarily linked to the examination of policies affecting the labour market for regular migrants and nationals. The Saudi Arabian labour market is characterised by a dual, segmented structure, with the majority of nationals concentrated in the public sector, while migrants (regular and irregular) are concentrated in the private sector. Following the Arab Spring, the Saudi government initiated the policy of "Saudization," to redress the burgeoning problem of high youth unemployment in the country, which was viewed as a potential political tinderbox (de Bel Air 2015; Ramady 2013). The government began to implement Saudization in 2013 through



the instrument of the “Nitaqat.” The aim of Nitaqat is to create more jobs for young Saudi nationals, through a combination of inducements and punishments that force companies in the private sector to comply with strict quotas for the employment of Saudis.

Achieving the Saudization objectives are a formidable challenge, for multiple reasons (detailed in Ramady 2013, Sadi 2013 and other commentators); most relevant to the situation of irregular migrants is the relatively rigid and segmented structure of the labour market. As Shah (2008) has argued for the Gulf more generally, the consequence of this segmented structure is that Saudi nationals prefer to work in the public sector because of the higher wages, greater security of employment, and lower work demands. A major shift in the cultural expectations and sense of entitlement of Saudi nationals would be necessary for genuine Saudization to occur (Sadi 2013), failing which there would be a negative impact on productivity (Ramady 2013). Third, even if private sector jobs become more desirable to them, Saudi nationals are extremely unlikely to accept triple-D (“dirty, difficult and demeaning”) labour – typically in the agriculture, construction, and personal and household services sectors. Thus, notwithstanding the policies of Saudization or similar policies of nationalisation of the labour force in other Gulf receiving countries, the unwillingness of nationals to undertake such labour leads to a persistent structural demand for expatriate labour in these sectors.

The structural demand for and unsustainability of the mass deportation of unskilled labour is evident in the ensuing unskilled labour shortage that necessitated a halt in the expulsions. Tirunesh was a young Ethiopian woman who had been living and working in Saudi Arabia for 12 years without papers. She had entered initially on an Umrah visa, and overstayed. When the deportations in Saudi Arabia began, she voluntarily gave herself up, as she wanted to return to Ethiopia on a “free ticket” as others had. However, she said that by the time she gave herself up, there was an acute shortage of domestic workers as a result of the mass deportations, and the Saudi authorities were unwilling to deport her:

We asked them to send us back home, but they refused and told us to go back to work, they said domestic workers are needed in the country. So I paid for myself [to return to Ethiopia]. When we came back, we were too many (Interview, Debre Birhan, October 2014).



## **Conclusion**

Ethiopian regular and irregular migration to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf is characterised by circular migration. There are strong drivers for this trajectory on both the Ethiopian and Saudi Arabian ends, but the absence of any possibility for settlement in these countries pushes the migratory system into a high volume, circular organisation. When regular migrants complete their contracts, they often seek to return on another contract. Irregular migrants who are deported will also seek to return – either to another Gulf destination, or to the same country, but through irregular entry. Over the past two decades, a significant formal and informal infrastructure to facilitate regular and irregular migration has developed in Ethiopia that is plugged into the (longer-established) apparatus organising migrants in the Gulf. Strongly socially embedded networks of migrants and migrant intermediaries are critical to the functioning of these networks. Here, it is useful to draw on Cvajner and Sciortino’s argument that:

...different types of social networks will react to policy changes in different ways. It is consequently the interaction of networks and policies that help determine their respective roles in activating further inflows. Changes in immigration controls interact with network strategies, creating an environment where some possibilities are positively selected while others are discouraged. As well as the specific contents of policies, it is likely that the timing of policies and also the anticipation by the migrants of their medium-term stability will also prove to be important factors (Cvajner and Sciortino 2009: 222).

I have shown in this case how state policies to “manage” or “control” migration have complex and often contradictory goals. We saw this with the Ethiopian government responses which were a mix of protection of its citizens, responding to international pressure to control trafficking and smuggling, encouragement of remittances by its nationals abroad, and the tacit acknowledgement that migration provides an important economic alternative as well as a political safety valve in a context of high unemployment. While the prohibition on migration currently in force is sustained by a nationalistic rhetoric of creating sufficient domestic employment, there is a mismatch with reality, and consequently, the numbers of Ethiopians exiting the country through the irregular route has seen no significant decline post the ban.

A similar mismatch is observable in the context of the Saudi Arabian government's Nitaqat policy. Ostensibly the goal is to create employment for Saudi nationals and curb visa trading, with the consequent expulsion of irregular migrants. However, given the likelihood of a continued structural demand for the low-skilled labour performed by Ethiopians and other irregular migrants in Saudi Arabia, how then do we account for the fact they were a large proportion of the over 800,000 migrants who were deported from Saudi Arabia after the expiry of the amnesty period in 2013? Although only preliminary assessments of the impact of Nitaqat are available (Ramady 2013, Sadi 2013, Alsheikh 2015, de Bel Air 2015), drawing on Hertog's (2010) incisive sociological analysis of mechanisms through which rents of visa trading are distributed in the Saudi economy, it is likely that in addition to Saudization, an unstated underlying objective of the Nitaqat is the re-structuring of the states' informal channels for the distribution of resources from rents. The ultimate beneficiaries of this high-stakes re-ordering of the Saudi economy are perhaps not yet identifiable. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the immediate, stringent by-product consequence of Nitaqat for irregular migrants is likely to be the exacerbation of their vulnerability to exploitation by employers, rather than any real reduction in the demand for the unskilled labour typically engaged in by Ethiopian irregular migrants.

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## SKILFUL SURVIVALS: IRREGULAR MIGRATION TO THE GULF

The Gulf States are among the most sought-after destinations by global migrants. Part of this migration is irregular, due to five main causes: entering without a proper visa; overstaying after a visa or residence permit has expired; being employed by someone who is not the sponsor; absconding from a sponsor; and being born in the Gulf to parents with an irregular status. The treatment reserved for migrants in an irregular situation marks out the Gulf States. Arrest and detention are widespread practices in spite of constitutional guarantees against arbitrary imprisonment. Staying without a proper visa or absconding from a sponsor is regarded as a criminal act, and foreign nationals who commit such acts are detained in the same prisons as common law criminals with no clear right of recourse. Domestic workers, most of whom are women employed by private households and, therefore, not protected by labour laws which in the Gulf apply only to businesses, are particularly subject to arbitrary sanctions and jail.

Lived experiences suggest that migrants may not see their irregular status as being disastrous. Many, in fact, are willing to perpetuate this situation, despite their awareness about possible arrest, jail term, and deportation. A theme that emerges repeatedly in interviews indicates the lack of options open to migrants elsewhere, including their country of origin. Migrants in an irregular situation learn to negotiate the formal and informal spaces and systems they encounter. Most irregular migrants seem to share one characteristic: resilience. As their stay in the Gulf lengthens, they gather enough capacity to exercise their agency to achieve a skilful survival in the face of adversity. A wide-ranging system of mutual benefits constituting win-win situations for varied actors enables and perpetuates irregular migration.

