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THE LACK OF POLITICAL SPACE OF THE ERITREAN  
DIASPORA IN THE ARAB GULF AND SUDAN: TORN  
BETWEEN AN AUTOCRATIC HOME AND  
AUTHORITARIAN HOSTS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

One third of Eritrea's citizens live in exile, and their government uses coercion, intimidation, and manipulation of patriotism to maintain financial flows from the diaspora through a rehabilitation tax and by delegating welfare responsibilities to its citizens abroad. Over one million Eritreans reside in Arab states, yet, we know little about their attitudes towards the homeland regime. Contrary to their compatriots in Europe and North America, they do not have political asylum and instead depend on work contracts for their residence permits. This makes them vulnerable to demands of transnational Eritrean institutions, which issue vital documents in exchange for fulfillment of financial obligations. The diasporic political space is doubly restricted, since authoritarian host states neither permit political activities, nor do they provide reliable protection from the Eritrean regime. This article explores the extent to which Eritreans in the Arab Gulf and Sudan can avert coercion by their home government, and how these states disempower diasporic contention.



INTRODUCTION

Eritrea has been under the rule of its un-elected President Isaias Afewerki, head of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) since de facto independence from Ethiopia in 1991. Due to continuous armed conflicts and political oppression, Eritrea has turned into a diasporic country, with one third of its population living abroad. Flight and emigration began during the mid-1950s and intensified during the country's struggle for independence from Ethiopia (1961–1991). Emigration decreased in the early years of independence, but a mass

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exodus began when the government introduced a mandatory national service in 2002, shortly after a border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia raged from 1998 to 2000. At present, approximately 5,000 Eritreans flee every month to join the diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Today, over one million Eritreans reside and work in Arab states. In contrast to diaspora Eritreans living in Europe and North America, very little is known about their opinions and their interaction with the Eritrean regime.<sup>3</sup> International media attention increasingly has focused on labor migration from Asia to the GCC states. However, few observers have described the plight of Ethiopian, Eritrean, and other East African migrants, who make up the bulk of the low-paid labor force as domestic workers in private homes, cattle herders on isolated farms, and unskilled laborers at remote construction sites.

This article compares the Eritrean diaspora in two member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Sudan. Sudan hosts the largest Eritrean diaspora community worldwide and has been a haven for Eritrean refugees since the independence struggle. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's labor market has attracted Eritreans for decades, and today more than 100,000 Eritrean nationals live in the kingdom. Qatar hosts a relatively small but growing Eritrean community, many of whom had previously lived in Sudan. Contrary to their compatriots in North America and Europe, Eritreans in the Gulf states are regarded as labor migrants and not eligible for political asylum. Sudan generally grants Eritreans refugee status, but does not ensure their safety from intrusions by Eritrean security agents and human traffickers. Beginning in 2016, Sudan deported hundreds of Eritrean nationals crossing Sudan en route to Libya.<sup>4</sup>

By comparing the different control mechanisms of the Eritrean regime in these three states, we expose the ability of its transnational institutions to adjust to different political environments. Consulates, embassies, and cultural associations, the so-called *mahbere-koms*,<sup>5</sup> serve as tools to control Eritrean citizens abroad. The lack of political space and social rights in these host countries facilitates the home regime's exploitation of its diaspora.

In spite of occasionally deploring the exodus and blaming it on hostile foreign powers, the Eritrean regime has developed sophisticated strategies of financially exploiting its citizens abroad. This exploitation manifests as a 2 percent diaspora tax on all categories of income. Additionally, the regime relies on Eritreans abroad to support their relatives at home, many of whom are prevented from

making a living as recruits of the decade-long national service. The tax is highly controversial among diaspora Eritreans who are split between supporters and opponents of President Isaias' rule.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the government makes use of different strategies to secure financial flows from all diaspora communities, irrespective of their political stance.

Our analysis relies on Johannes Gerschewski's analytical framework, which assumes that the stability of authoritarian rule rests on three pillars: legitimation, oppression, and co-optation.<sup>7</sup> We find that the Eritrean regime draws on these mechanisms by applying strategies of coercion, intimidation, and manipulation of patriotic feelings to make diaspora Eritreans pay either voluntarily or *nolens volens*. We demonstrate how Eritrea's transnational institutions attempt to legitimize the government by continuously indoctrinating Eritrean communities about alleged conspiracies against their homeland. We describe how they exercise oppression or coercion to make Eritreans comply with their demands, and we describe mechanisms of co-optation, such as providing education to Eritrean children in Saudi Arabia and Sudan.<sup>8</sup>

Eritreans in Saudi Arabia and Qatar are particularly vulnerable because their residence status depends on a work contract, which is only issued for holders of valid passports. Eritrean diplomatic missions are in charge of issuing such documents, and can exert pressure on migrants to comply with governmental demands. In contrast, Sudan grants refugee status to Eritreans but does not provide a secure environment, due to the presence of Eritrean security networks and the activities of human trafficking networks.<sup>9</sup> The political space of Eritreans in the three states is restricted in a twofold manner: first, the authoritarian governments of the host states do not permit political and civil society organizing, and second, they do not provide reliable protection from Eritrea's autocratic regime.

The article explores the extent to which diaspora Eritreans in three authoritarian states are subjected to the coercive activities of their home government, and the extent to which host state policies have been disempowering diasporic contention. Based on insights from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, we examine how the restrictive labor and residence laws of the GCC states contribute to the dependency of Eritrean nationals on the benevolence of their own government. Comparatively, we discuss the situation in Sudan, where Eritreans receive less pressure to secure their residence permits, yet, are subject to an integrated surveillance network by Eritrean security agents, especially in the eastern regions and in Khartoum.<sup>10</sup> Our work is

informed by six narrative Skype interviews conducted in 2016 with Eritreans who are currently living or have stayed for extended periods in one of our three focus countries. Three interlocutors are currently living in Saudi Arabia, two in Sudan, and one in Qatar. They have different educational backgrounds, ranging from university-educated to housewives without formal education, and an equal male to female ratio. In addition, information was gleaned from numerous conversations in Eritrea's capital, Asmara, with Eritreans who had worked in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and/or Qatar, and who had returned for good or were on temporary leave to visit their families. Collecting information from Eritrean labor migrants to Arab countries poses significant challenges because most of them are reluctant to share information with outsiders due to their vulnerability and fear of government surveillance. One of the authors belongs to the same sociocultural community as the migrants, and his familiarity with their living conditions and challenges facilitated access to the informants.<sup>11</sup>

The remainder of the article describes the origins of the Eritrean diaspora communities in Sudan and on the Arab Peninsula and the reasons for the current mass exodus from the country. We elaborate on the impact of the GCC states' restrictive labor laws on local Eritrean communities demonstrated by the examples of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and explore how the Eritrean regime profits from the authoritarian environment, where Eritreans are not entitled to refugee status. Subsequently, we analyze the situation of Eritreans in Sudan, where national security agents have infiltrated and exercise control over the main Eritrean residential areas. This is facilitated by close cross-border ethnic affiliations and by the cooperative relationship of the Eritrean and Sudanese governments. The conclusion highlights how repressive political environments of host states facilitate the control of citizens by autocratic political systems elsewhere. The authoritarian host states attempt to prevent migrant workers from engaging openly in political activities, however, the Eritrean authorities, their supporters, and regime opponents manage to engage in clandestine political mobilization.

## THE INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE AND FORCED MIGRATION TO ARAB COUNTRIES

Eritrea was an Italian colony from 1890 to 1941, when it came under British military administration. In the ensuing discussion of Eritrea's future, Orthodox Christians and Muslims (both roughly half of the population) were divided. Most Christians favored union with

Ethiopia due to their cross-border cultural bonds. On the other hand, the Muslim population feared marginalization under Haile Selassie's rule, which had proclaimed Orthodox Christianity as the state religion. Accordingly, the overwhelming majority of Muslims favored independence.<sup>12</sup> In 1952, the UN federated the country with Ethiopia and in 1962, Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea. Eritrean Muslims witnessed exclusion and marginalization under Ethiopian occupation, and in 1958, a group of Muslim intellectuals founded the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) or *Harakat al-Tahrir*.<sup>13</sup> In 1961, exiled politicians and students founded the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo, and launched a thirty-year independence struggle. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) established itself as a rival movement to the ELF in the mid-1970s and ousted the ELF from the field in 1982 over the course of the civil war.

The Ethiopian regime followed a scorched-earth strategy by bombing civilians with the aim of "drying up the pond in order to catch the fish."<sup>14</sup> This caused a mass exodus of Eritreans, and diaspora communities emerged in Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and other countries in the Arab world. These diaspora communities were majority Muslim, because Eritrean refugees with Christian background, whose numbers increased in the 1980s, tried to claim asylum in Europe or North America. It is estimated that during the British Military Administration (1941 to 1952) and during the Federation (1952-1962)<sup>15</sup> between 20,000 and 30,000 Eritrean Muslims left the country.<sup>16</sup> These numbers increased from half a million in the 1960s to one million during the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In 1994, almost 600,000 Eritreans were officially registered as refugees in Sudan.<sup>18</sup> This excludes substantial numbers of individuals who did not receive United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) support because they had settled among their ethnic communities and/or were able to make a living in urban areas.<sup>19</sup> Initial attempts to repatriate the refugees failed, and repatriation came to a complete halt after renewed war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the late 1990s.<sup>20</sup>

An estimated number of more than 150,000 Eritreans settled in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States as labor migrants.<sup>21</sup> During the independence struggle, many Arab countries sympathized with the ELF and considered it a pro-Arab movement fighting against Ethiopia. Thus, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries supported the liberation movement financially and by facilitating residence permits for Eritreans. Although they refrained from signing the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, "the Gulf countries and Saudi-Arabia in

particular, supported the Eritrean guerrillas from the 1960s to the 1990s on an ideological basis and allowed Eritrean refugees to enter and settle in the oil-rich countries using migration politics as an asylum policy by proxy.”<sup>22</sup> The ELF was even temporarily granted the status of *kafil*, (personal sponsor) for Eritreans who wished to settle in Saudi Arabia. In addition, residence permits could be obtained, free of charge, from the Ministry of Interior upon presentation of an ELF letter recognizing the applicant as Eritrean.<sup>23</sup> This generous policy facilitated the establishment of an Eritrean diaspora community in Saudi Arabia and other GCC states. However, the ELF almost exclusively arranged work contracts for female domestic workers, because young males were supposed to participate in the armed struggle instead of working abroad. Only those with family connections to the ELF leadership could join the Saudi labor market.

In 1977, the EPLF held its first congress and proclaimed a policy of self-reliance.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, it established itself as a transnational organization by founding mass organizations that spread the EPLF’s ideology among the refugees and mobilized them to financially support the liberation struggle.<sup>25</sup> After de facto independence in 1991, the EPLF, renamed People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, took over the government and opened embassies in countries with a significant diaspora population, including most Arab countries. The new government introduced a 2 percent diaspora tax on all categories of income by Eritreans residing abroad. Embassies and consulates issued clearances upon payment of the tax as a precondition for government services, such as the issuing of birth certificates, the renewal of passports, and the acquisition of property inside Eritrea. Diplomatic missions have kept meticulous records of all payments since 1992.<sup>26</sup> Initially, most Eritreans abroad paid the tax willingly to help with the reconstruction of their war-torn homeland. Contrary to Eritrean migrants in Europe and North America, Eritrean migrants to the Arab Peninsula have never had a choice in paying – their work permits depend on the possession of a valid passport issued by their home government, and accordingly they must pay the tax whether or not they support the government.

#### POST-INDEPENDENCE PATTERNS OF LABOR MIGRATION TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Eritrea severed its diplomatic relations with Sudan in 1994, and most Eritreans who had been active members or sympathizers of the former ELF were forced to migrate to GCC states because they could no longer

rely on the support of the Sudanese government and UNHCR. Simultaneously, they were not welcomed as returnees by the Eritrean government due to their perceived political disloyalty, and many feared arrest in case of their voluntary return.

In the aftermath of the devastating border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a political debate emerged. A group of high-ranking PFDJ officials (the "G15") challenged President Isaias Afewerki's position and demanded democratic reforms and elections. In turn, Isaias cracked down on reformers and journalists of the independent press and made them disappear behind bars.<sup>27</sup> He consolidated his rule by restraining political power to a small ruling elite of PFDJ cadres and military officers.

In 2002, the president tried to revive the revolutionary spirit of the independence struggle among the younger generation by introducing the so-called Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC), which extended the mandatory military and national service from eighteen months to an unlimited time period under the pretext of protecting national sovereignty.<sup>28</sup> This campaign has turned into an institutionalized system of forced labor and systematic societal militarization that forces Eritreans of productive age to serve the nation for a nominal pocket money.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the country has been turned into a state-controlled command economy with little space for individuals to make a living in the private sector.

Internal criticism of this policy was violently oppressed.<sup>30</sup> Although the regime has long lost its political legitimacy, life under military surveillance has prevented people from engaging in any form of protest. Since the introduction of the WYDC, hundreds of thousands of Eritreans have fled the country, despite shoot-to-kill orders at the borders. National service conscripts cannot leave legally without an exit visa, which is almost impossible to attain. In 2016, Ethiopia and Sudan officially hosted around 130,000 Eritreans each. The numbers of registered Eritrean refugees in Sudan have decreased, while their numbers continue to rise in Ethiopia. In 2017, UNHCR counted approximately 161,000 registered Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and 103,200 in Sudan.<sup>31</sup> This phenomenon of lower registration rates of Eritreans passing through Sudan may be explained by an increase in arrests and deportations by the notorious Sudanese security forces. These have increased sharply since the establishment of the Khartoum Process aimed at curbing migration to Europe, and hundreds of Eritreans have already been deported in 2017.<sup>32</sup> Refugees now tend to avoid registration in the camps, instead choosing to bribe Sudanese

officials in order to live and work secretly until they manage to continue their journeys towards Egypt or Libya.

At the same time, we do not know how many Eritreans have recently moved to join the migrant labor force in the Arab Peninsula, but the Eritrean embassy in Sudan has sold thousands of passports to Eritrean refugees to enable them to work in the GCC states.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, Eritrean embassies issue passports to their fugitive nationals despite considering them traitors and deserters of the national service. Once Eritreans enter the GCC workforce, they become a reliable source of income for the Eritrean state coffers. Other Eritrean refugees manage to secure Sudanese nationality and acquire a passport through ethnic ties or simply by bribing Sudanese officials.

Most female Eritreans who reside in GCC states, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are employed as domestic workers, so-called "housemaids," while their male counterparts often find work in the service sector, namely in hotels, restaurants, shops, and supermarkets. A considerable number of them work as truck and taxi drivers. A minority, most of them low-skilled rural migrant workers who enter Saudi Arabia illegally through Yemen, are forced to work as animal herders in the rural areas of Jazan, Abha, and Asir because they lack the financial resources to find a *kafil*. These migrant workers are highly vulnerable due to their isolation in remote desert towns, and they face psychological and physical violence as well as deprivation of basic nutrition and health care. They are subject to overtime work, degrading living conditions in the desert, and severe limitations of their personal freedoms. They often do not receive a regular salary, and can be deported at will if their labor is no longer needed.<sup>34</sup> In Qatar, women mostly participate in the domestic work force, while a significant number of men are employed in the Qatari police force.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE VULNERABLE SITUATION OF ERITREAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE GCC STATES

The labor laws of the GCC member states, among them Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, are based on the *kafāla* system, a government policy intended to exert total control over temporary labor migrants. The *kafāla* system is rooted in longstanding customary practice, but is also partially codified in the respective labor laws of the GCC states. These laws require every migrant worker to have a *kafil* to stay and work in a GCC state. The *kafil* may work either as an individual or act as the head of a company or agency.<sup>36</sup> This system has



been persistently criticized by human rights organizations for facilitating conditions amounting to forced, even slave-like labor. The *kafil* has the full economic and legal responsibility for the labor migrant and acts simultaneously as his or her employer and guarantor.<sup>37</sup> This position includes far-reaching powers: workers cannot change their employer under the *kafāla* system. However, in Qatar workers can theoretically change their *kafil* after two years, but they need the consent of the original *kafil*, who often charges a significant fee.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the *kafil* can prevent workers from leaving the country or terminate the worker's employment contract, forcing the worker to face deportation.<sup>39</sup>

Female Eritrean domestic workers in Jeddah point out that the fate of Eritrean domestic workers in Saudi Arabia depends entirely on the goodwill of their employers who, at any time, can terminate their contracts. If workers fail to comply with their contracts or leave their workplace without permission, they must pay the cost of deportation to their home country. This puts workers in a vulnerable financial situation: fined by Saudi authorities for deportation expenses while often owing money to relatives and the recruitment agency.

Despite these grim prospects, many Eritrean domestic workers run away to escape mistreatment, sexual abuse by employers or other family members, and unbearable work conditions. One of the main reasons for running away is that the job description they received from the placement agent differs substantially from their actual work. Sadia describes that she was originally recruited as a babysitter, but she was forced to work as a cleaner and cook for a huge household without any experience in preparing Arab cuisine. She narrates:

I was mistreated by my sponsor's wife and by her adult children. I was beaten regularly, until my face was swollen. I had to wake up at midnight to serve the family members, who used to sleep the whole day and stay up the whole night. In the mornings, I had to get up early to do the housework, and I became completely sleepless, with no day off. I was not allowed to visit friends or relatives in the neighborhood.<sup>40</sup>

Bina Fernandez confirms that domestic workers consistently complain of economic exploitation, including non-payment or underpayment of agreed wages, working beyond the hours specified in the contract

without compensation, and coercion to work in more than one household or to do work not specified in the contract.<sup>41</sup>

The constraints produced by the rigid *kafāla* system have produced an informal parallel 'free visa' system, semi-legal but often preferred by Eritrean and Ethiopian migrant workers residing in the Gulf states. The 'free visa' system consists of a number of visas issued by state authorities to an employer for non-existent jobs. Consequently, the visas are sold to workers through a labor broker or by travel agencies involved in this business. Sponsors who participate in the labor visa trade often contact their employees indirectly through a *mandūb*, a person responsible for contact with migrant workers and obtaining and renewing free visas with substantial fees.<sup>42</sup> These fees are proportionate to the worker's income and may be influenced by the benevolence of the sponsor. Native Arabs reportedly often charge less than those of Sudanese, Yemeni, or Somali origin, who are making a living out of the 'free visa' trade.<sup>43</sup> The advantage of this visa is that the workers are not tied to a *kafil* but can change their employers in case of need; the disadvantage is the threat of deportation if detected by police while not employed by their legally required *kafil*.<sup>44</sup>

Eritreans who enter Saudi Arabia or Qatar on a visitor visa for one month, or on a hajj visa, may acquire the necessary *iqāma* (residence permit) and employment visa with the help of a *kafil* with the necessary contacts at the immigration authority. However, it is not possible to leave the workplace without the consent of the *kafil*. Runaway female domestic workers are particularly at risk of detention, physical and sexual abuse, or abduction by other migrants such as taxi drivers, who regard them as financial assets.<sup>45</sup> Eritreans in Saudi Arabia are particularly vulnerable because the Eritrean government does not protect its citizens' rights, financially exploiting them as long as they have work, but regarding them as traitors if they become jobless. Eritreans facing deportation due to a lack of appropriate papers often ask the Saudi authorities to send them to either Sudan or Ethiopia, because they may risk punishment for national service evasion and subsequent recruitment into the national army upon their return to Eritrea.<sup>46</sup>

It is not the intention of the paper to delve deeper into the widespread and increasingly well-documented abuse of migrant workers in the Gulf states in general. It is important to note, however, that Eritreans are particularly vulnerable to exploitation from both the repressive Eritrean regime and the repressive host states to which they flee. Unlike their fellow compatriots in Europe and North America,

Eritreans in the GCC states are unable to claim refugee status – a status that carries considerable rights and the ability to settle permanently in their new home. Eritreans living in GCC states are vulnerable due to their insecure residence status and are thus easily exploitable by both their sponsors and the Eritrean embassies and consulates.

#### HOW THE ERITREAN REGIME EXPLOITS ITS DIASPORA IN THE GCC STATES

The government has developed sophisticated mechanisms to exploit both the established diaspora (refugees from the former independence war) and the new refugees who escaped from the national service. Both groups are required to pay the two percent diaspora tax and to make additional donations.<sup>47</sup> Strong transnational ties ground the relationship of the PFDJ regime to its diasporic communities. Moreover, in the GCC states, the government flexes strong control mechanisms on migrant workers due to their dependence on consular services. Furthermore, workers face pressure to send private remittances to their relatives at home in the absence of sustainable income, lost to the prolonged national service of the breadwinners.

Gerschewski elaborates that authoritarian regimes stabilize their rule by applying the three pillars of regime stability: a mix of legitimation, suppression, and co-optation strategies. Legitimation may be gained through either ideological indoctrination or good economic performance. Repression includes oppression and/or violence to different degrees, and co-optation refers to the capability to tie important political and social actors to the regime elite.<sup>48</sup> To guarantee the stability of a given authoritarian system, the three pillars must be institutionalized. This means that citizens must have internalized the legitimating norms, oppositional actors are structurally prevented from revolting through institutionalized repression, and institutionalized co-optation implies a balanced interaction between the political elite and business and/or military elites.

The Eritrean regime applies these strategies not only within its borders but also uses its transnational structures to extend its control over diaspora communities. It makes use of a mix of legitimation and co-optation strategies, combined with coercion and oppression to exercise control over its expatriate citizens through the transnational political space. The government puts resources in maintaining mechanisms to control the diaspora by various means with the aim of

extracting funds, which amount to approximately one third of the state's budget.<sup>49</sup> These financial flows facilitate the state's economic survival and the persistence of the regime. Its cultural organizations, the *mahbere-koms*, operate under the umbrella of the embassies and consulates in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These community centers function as hubs of political mobilization: facilitating social control and extracting funds from Eritrean nationals during seminars, cultural events, and festivals.

Legitimation plays a lesser role in authoritarian host states than in liberal democratic states, where Eritreans are widely accepted as refugees and can cut all ties to their home government if they wish. Comparatively, Eritreans living in Saudi Arabia and Qatar not only need a sponsor for a work permit, but also a valid passport, which must be renewed.<sup>50</sup> To be eligible for Eritrean embassy and consulate services, Eritrean citizens need a clearance issued after the diaspora tax has been paid, for every year the person has spent abroad post-independence.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Eritreans in Saudi Arabia and Qatar have no chance to withhold the payment, even if they strongly oppose the regime. In 2017, the situation for Eritreans in Qatar became even more complicated amid the political feud between the Saudi Arabia-UAE coalition and the Qatari government. Eritrea sided with the Saudi coalition and downgraded diplomatic relations with Qatar, but at the time of writing Qatar has not voiced plans to deport foreign nationals whose home states have taken the opposing side in the ongoing conflict.

To understand the reaction of the Eritrean diaspora to the regime's taxation, it is important to highlight the diaspora community's heterogeneous aspects. Eritreans abroad mirror their homeland society in division along lines of ethnicity, region of origin, religion, and political opinion. A substantial segment of the established diaspora supports the regime, despite its notorious human rights violations, and takes pride in paying their dues to the government.<sup>52</sup> However, a growing number of Eritreans abroad oppose the regime because of its failed economic policies, strategy of societal militarization, and repressiveness. Regime opponents belong to either established opposition groups, among them supporters of the former ELF and EPLF dissidents, or civil society groups. These groups emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring and lobby for human rights, protection of refugees, and regime change in Eritrea.<sup>53</sup> Neither the political nor the civic opposition groups are allowed to organize in the

repressive GCC states, which do not permit any form of political organization among expatriate communities.<sup>54</sup>

However, Eritrean anti-regime activists meet privately, as reported by our informants, Mohammed Said and Abdalla Ibrahim from Saudi-Arabia and Amir Ali from Qatar.<sup>55</sup> Mohammed narrates that he has attended numerous meetings of diverse political opposition organizations and is an active member of the Lowlanders League (LL), a political movement that advocates for the rights of the Eritrean lowland population, most of whom are Muslims. Despite the restricted transnational political space, most opposition parties have representatives in the GCC states who meet periodically at private salons and clubs under the pretext of social and cultural entertainment, including fundraising events. At the same time, consulates and embassies attempt to monitor opposition meetings through their omnipresent agents.

Mohammed is well aware that his affiliation to the LL is known to the Eritrean security organs. He explains: "I've been trying to keep in touch with PFDJ representatives and I have never missed the cultural meetings organized by the local *mahbere-koms*. I even acted as local fund collector of the two percent diaspora tax in the Jeddah neighborhood where I live."<sup>56</sup> His example demonstrates the pressure from different angles. In addition to maintaining good personal relations with the Eritrean government agents, he must pay the tax and make regular donations to secure his residence permit, which depends on the validity of his Eritrean passport. On the other end of the political spectrum, the opposition group with which he sympathizes demands financial contributions for social service provision NGOs in Sudanese refugee settlements.

Both the embassy in Riyadh and the consulate in Jeddah host *mahbere-koms* that serve as meeting points for the Eritrean communities and offer leisure entertainment, such as bingo and card games. These centers are also used for seminars and celebrations, during which the communities are informed about the "objective situation in the homeland" where their contributions are needed for reconstruction and social welfare programs to benefit martyrs' families.<sup>57</sup> In some cases, diaspora Eritreans were pressured to take part in campaigns with the aim of improving the regime's international reputation: reacting to the 2015 report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, which recognized grave human rights violations perpetrated by the regime, the government initiated a petition for Eritreans abroad to declare that they left to seek better economic

opportunities, not due to political repression. The Eritrean diplomatic missions easily coerced Eritreans residing in the Arab gulf into signing because the migrants were dependent on the government's goodwill.

Those Eritreans who fail to show up regularly at their local *mahbere-kom* raise the suspicion of the authorities. An informant from Jeddah who had returned to Asmara to visit his wife and children, was warned by local community officials in his family's neighborhood.<sup>58</sup> It had come to their knowledge that he had failed to attend the *mahbere-kom* in Jeddah regularly, and they advised him to attend more frequently to avoid repercussions for his family in Asmara. The local administration (*memhedar*) provides families with coupons to buy food items from government shops such as oil, sugar, kerosene, and gas, and may withhold them at will.

In addition to these coercive methods, the Eritrean consular missions in Saudi Arabia can co-opt Eritreans by granting their children access to middle and secondary education at two schools run by the Eritrean government in Riyadh and Jeddah, respectively. The Saudi government does not provide education to children of migrant workers beyond the primary level, and migrant communities must establish their own schools, which are run according to the homeland curriculum. However, obtaining access to these schools requires proving exceptional loyalty to the regime and making extra donations on the occasion of national holidays, during fundraising seminars, and contributing to the martyrs trust fund. They also must pay substantial school fees, and attendance at the consulate's cultural events and festivities is compulsory for students.

Eritreans who live in Qatar are subjected to similar labor laws as in Saudi Arabia, which means they also require a *kafil* and a valid passport. However, there is a well-established Eritrean community in Qatar, including former ELF fighters who migrated to the emirate during the 1980s. This community is well-connected to the relevant Qatari institutions and can support newcomers in need. Between 2008 and 2010, there was an informal agreement between Qatar and Eritrea to hire domestic workers and truck drivers, who were needed in Qatar's burgeoning construction industry. These workers were handpicked by the Eritrean authorities, who chose government loyalists in their thirties who had completed or were exempted from the national service. The government provided them with the necessary travel documents, but under the condition that they transferred sixty percent of their salary to their personal account at the Eritrean Housing and Commerce Bank in Asmara.<sup>59</sup> In addition, they

had to pay the diaspora tax and make donations. According to Mohammed Osman, who witnessed these developments in Qatar, most of the workers could not manage to live with only forty percent of their salary due to the high costs of housing and consumer goods. Consequently, most of them fled to Kenya, Sudan, or Ethiopia because they feared returning to Eritrea would mean military conscription or imprisonment.

Beyond that, the Eritrean regime exploits the diaspora's feeling of moral obligation to support their relatives at home. The government does not provide any social security networks, and Eritreans trapped in the national service are unable to sustain their families. This increases pressure on the diaspora to send substantial private remittances to guarantee the survival of their extended families. Hence, Eritreans residing in the Arab gulf are under multiple pressures, not only from the repressive *kafāla* system, but also from their own government and their relatives at home, who expect financial support to survive. Few Eritreans who are forced to live under such circumstances find the passion and energy to engage in clandestine political movements to improve the situation in their homeland. They live sandwiched between the demands of an autocratic home regime and an authoritarian host, with no potential for political expression except for showing support to the regime.

#### THE LONG ARM OF THE ERITREAN REGIME IN SUDAN

Historically, Sudan had been a support center of the Eritrean resistance against Ethiopian domination. The ELM was founded on Sudanese soil in the 1950s and Sudan served as retreat area for both ELF and EPLF during the liberation struggle. Nonetheless, the Isaias government severed diplomatic relations in 1994 due to alleged Islamist infiltration efforts, but relations between the two regimes resumed in 2005 and have remained relatively cordial since. Eritrean security forces enjoy unhindered access to the eastern states of Sudan and have systematically infiltrated the cities Kassala, Port Sudan, Gedaref, and the surrounding areas with informants, among them members of the *Beja* community, and bribed Sudanese agents. Eritrea's secret service monitors all movements of Eritreans residing in these areas.<sup>60</sup>

Eritrean communities in Sudan differ in various regards, such as duration of stay, ethnic and religious affiliation, and social status. The first group is the established diaspora, which has existed in Sudan for up to sixty years. A substantial number of these long-term residents

have Sudanese nationality or enjoy dual citizenship – either through bribing Sudanese officials or because they belong to ethnic groups with cross-border affiliations such as the *Beja* and *Tigre*, which allows them to claim both nationalities.<sup>61</sup>

The second significant group of long-term refugees have remained in refugee settlements since their flight during the independence struggle, mostly those who lack cross-border ethnic networks. Over 100,000 Eritreans are registered as refugees with UNHCR and live in settlements in eastern Sudan, most of them in close vicinity to the Eritrean border. This group consists mostly of marginalized pastoralists and female-headed households living under dire economic circumstances. A majority have lived in this region for decades or have grown up in Sudan as second or third-generation refugees, but are still considered Eritrean nationals.

The final group consists of newly arriving younger refugees, who are fleeing Eritrea by the thousands every month to evade the national service, including large groups of unaccompanied minors. The majority of them plan to continue their journeys northwards through the Sahara Desert to Libya or Egypt, with Europe as their intended final destination. However, only a small segment of them reach European shores. Upon their arrival in Sudan, some register at the refugee camps and stay for a few months until they receive a document confirming their refugee status.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, they move on to the larger cities in the hopes of earning enough money to continue their journey towards Europe or other Middle Eastern countries. Some of the new arrivals hide in the large cities, if necessary bribing Sudanese police and security officers to stay outside of the refugee settlements until they manage to continue their journey with the help of smugglers. This group benefits from the large informal labor markets run by well-established Eritreans in Khartoum, Omdurman, Kassala, and Port Sudan.

The Eritrean government applies various methods to make Eritreans in Sudan contribute financially and to indoctrinate the communities ideologically, namely a mix of control and repression, co-optation, and legitimization. It runs schools, women's and youth organizations, and *mahbere-koms* in Eritrean-inhabited cities and towns with the permission of the Sudanese government. The embassy in Khartoum and the consulate in Kassala are charged with collecting the tax by coercion; many Eritreans in Sudan still have property in Eritrea or want to visit their families, which makes them likely to pay the levy. The Eritrean government agents also exert social pressure on the long-



term residents to attend cultural events, concerts, and political seminars, no matter if they live in cities, towns, or refugee settlements.

In recent years, newly arriving refugees from Eritrea have been able to buy a passport at the embassy in Khartoum in exchange for signing a letter of regret. In this letter refugees admit to being guilty of treason by evading the national service and pledge to pay the tax and accept any punishment upon their return to Eritrea. Many Eritreans who acquired a passport after signing this letter have moved on to the GCC states for higher-paying opportunities after buying a 'free visa' from agencies in Sudan. Similarly, many second-generation refugees have managed to migrate to GCC states after acquiring Sudanese citizenship or paying a high fee for a passport from Eritrea's diplomatic missions in Sudan. A number of these refugees use passports acquired from the embassy or from Sudanese authorities to enter Egypt legally, where they register at the local UNHCR offices and apply for resettlement. Some obtain domestic work after getting refugee status.<sup>63</sup>

Eritreans in Sudan have easier access to local labor markets than their compatriots in the Gulf States, because they do not need a *kafil*. On the other hand, there is a strong Eritrean national security presence on Sudanese soil, which prevents political activities directed against the Eritrean government. Known opposition figures are at risk of abduction by either Eritrean security personnel or Sudanese officials acting on behalf of the Eritrean government. Jamal Osman Hamid, a journalist running the opposition website *Adoulis* from Sudan was arrested in 2011, shortly after a visit of President Isaias to his Sudanese counterpart, Omar al-Bashir. Reporters without Borders stated that 300 Eritreans had been expelled to their home country during the same year without UNHCR intervention.<sup>64</sup> Reports about deportations have regularly appeared in the media since 2015,<sup>65</sup> and in early 2016, Sudanese authorities arrested two elderly Eritrean ELF veterans.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, there is a climate of fear and uncertainty in Sudan that reflects the oppressive atmosphere of the homeland: no one feels secure if he or she refuses to abide by the demands of the regime. Most groups refrain from open involvement in anti-government activities and grudgingly attend the PFDJ festivals and fundraising seminars in Sudanese cities. Their agency is limited to clandestine political mobilization under the cover of charity organizations in refugee settlements.

Even Eritreans with a relatively secure residence status fear the Eritrean security apparatus. Magnus Treiber interviewed an Eritrean military commander who deserted and lived in Khartoum as a refugee.

His words impressively describe the insecurity felt by many Eritreans, whether or not the perceived danger of deportation is legitimate:

We are always full of fear. In the mind you are not free. We can't do anything, we're just afraid. Secondly, if I go to Eritrea [in case of arrest] what is going to happen to my family? What is going to happen if I am deported? What is going to happen if they find me anywhere if I am alone? Yes, I am afraid. Ah, thank God ... I still don't face any charges, but in my mind I am not free. I am living in fear.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article provides background information about diaspora Eritreans whose living conditions have hardly been investigated by scholars of transnationalism or diaspora studies. It compares the living conditions and the political space of Eritreans residing in the GCC states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar and in Sudan. Based on Gerschewski's assumption that authoritarian regime stability rests on three pillars, we have analyzed the Eritrean government's strategies to extract considerable funds from its citizens abroad through applying mechanisms based on legitimation, coercion, and co-optation.

The regime attempts to maintain its legitimacy by portraying Eritrea as a heroic state, withstanding all types of international conspiracies, in order to justify the financial obligations imposed on Eritreans abroad. To control its emigrant population, the Eritrean regime has developed a surveillance system disguised under the umbrella of cultural community centers. Some citizens are co-opted by social services, such as education through expatriate schools. Unlike diaspora Eritreans in democratic countries, who are protected by their secure refugee status, their compatriots in GCC states are forced to pay tax to the regime to keep their legal residence status, which depends on a valid passport issued by the homeland authorities. Eritreans in Sudan are under less pressure in this respect, because most are registered refugees with UNHCR, or enjoy dual citizenship. However, Eritreans in both regions suffer from the lack of democracy in their respective host countries, which severely limit their political space. The authoritarian governments of the GCC states do not permit any open form of political activity, whether in regard to labor rights or in opposition to the home government. Sudanese authorities, on the other hand, are cooperating with Eritrean security forces, which have

established a close-knit surveillance system in the eastern regions and in Khartoum. They have been involved in the arrest and deportation of politically active Eritreans, which makes political activity extremely risky. Even apolitical Eritreans live under conditions of insecurity, mistrust, and fear. Therefore, many of them choose to attend pro-government meetings and festivals and pay the diaspora tax to avoid suspicion from government agents. Clandestine meetings constitute the transnational political space available to diaspora Eritreans for discussing the situation in their homeland.

In sum, the PFDJ government exercises stronger control over Eritreans in the GCC states and in Sudan compared to those residing in Europe and North America. Eritreans in the Arab gulf live under the pressure of two repressive systems, that of their host country and that of the transnational Eritrean polity. This has efficiently muted their voices to the extent that very little is known about the lives and political struggles of these communities, which make up more than half of Eritrea's diaspora population.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) Hamburg and International Law and Policy Institute (ILPI) Oslo for funding our participation in the SeSaMo Conference 2016 in Catania, Italy 'Migrants: Communities, Borders, Memories, Conflicts', where the foundation for this special issue was laid.

<sup>2</sup> "Eritrea Country Profile, updated June 2016," Reliefweb, accessed 14 April 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/eritrea-country-profile-updated-june-2016>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Markus V. Hoehne, Dereje Feyissa, and Mahdi Abdille, "Somali and Ethiopian diasporic engagement for peace in the Horn of Africa," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 1, no. 1 (2011): 71-99; Tricia Redeker Hepner, "Transnational governance and the centralization of state power in Eritrea and exile," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 3 (2008): 476-502; Khalid Koser, "Mobilizing new African diasporas: An Eritrean case study," in *New African diasporas*, Khalid Koser (London: Routledge, 2003), 111-23; Samia Teclé, "The paradoxes of state-led transnationalism: Capturing continuity, change and rupture in the Eritrean transnational field" (MA Thesis, York University, 2012), 32.

<sup>4</sup> "Sudan and Eritrea Crack down on Migrants amid Reports of EU Incentives," IRIN, last modified 25 May 2016, [www.irinnews.org/news/2016/05/25/sudan-and-eritrea-crackdown-migrants-amid-reports-eu-incentives](http://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/05/25/sudan-and-eritrea-crackdown-migrants-amid-reports-eu-incentives).

<sup>5</sup> The word *mahber* means “club” or “community center” in Tigrinya, Eritrea’s most common language; “kom” stands for “community.”

<sup>6</sup> Nicole Hirt, “The Eritrean Diaspora and its Impact on Regime Stability: Responses to UN Sanctions,” *African Affairs* 114, no. 454 (2015): 115–35; Nicole Hirt and Abulkader Saleh Mohammad, “By Way of Patriotism, Coercion or Instrumentalization: How the Eritrean regime makes use of the diaspora to stabilise its rule,” *Globalizations*, advance online publication, (March 2017), DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2017.1294752.

<sup>7</sup> Johannes Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Cooptation in Autocratic Regimes,” *Democratization* 20, no.1 (2013): 13–38.

<sup>8</sup> Informant, interviewed by authors, 2 January 2016. The Eritrean government continues to operate various elementary, middle, and secondary schools in refugee settlements as well as in cities such as Port Sudan, Kassala, Halfa, and Ghirba. These schools had been established during the independence struggle, and the Eritrean Ministry of Education continues to pay the salary of the teachers, although the curricula of these schools follow the Sudanese system to facilitate access to Sudanese and other universities in the Arab world. The schools serve as tools to co-opt the Eritrean diaspora youth in Sudan and to mobilize the students to combat opposition activities in the refugee settlements.

<sup>9</sup> Mirjam Van Reisen and Munyaradzi Mawere, eds., *Human Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era. The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of Eritrea’s security apparatus and its working mechanisms, see David Bozzini, “Low-tech Surveillance and the Despotism State of Eritrea,” *Surveillance and Society* 9, no. 1–2, (2011): 93–113.

<sup>11</sup> Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad is an Eritrean national who lived in Asmara from 1992 to 2011. He has been in regular contact with labor migrants to the GCC states and with Eritreans based in Sudan visiting their relatives in Eritrea.

<sup>12</sup> Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad, “Competing Identities and the Emergence of Eritrean Nationalism Between 1941–1952,” (presented at the proceedings of the 5th European Conference on African Studies, Lisbon, 26–29 June 2014).

<sup>13</sup> For details, see Jonathan Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” *Die Welt des Islams* 45, no. 2 (2005): 177–215, and Joseph L. Venosa, “Faith in the Nation: Examining the Contributions of Eritrean Muslims in the Nationalist Movement, 1946–1961” (MA Thesis, Ohio University, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> A reference to Mao’s saying that a guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea. See John Kifner, “After Rebels’ Gains, Ethiopia Vents Its Wrath on Civilians,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/30/world/after-rebels-gains-ethiopia-vents-its-wrath-on-civilians.html>.

<sup>15</sup> According to World Bank estimates, Eritrea had a population of 1.4 million in 1960.

<sup>16</sup> Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad, *The Saho of Eritrea: Ethnic Identity and National Consciousness* (Münster & Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2013), 289.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1980), 129; David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>18</sup> Gaim Kibreab, *Ready and Willing.... But Still Waiting. Eritrean Refugees in Sudan and the Dilemma of Return* (Uppsala: Life and Peace Institute, 1996), 57.

<sup>19</sup> Ethnic Beja, Habab, and Tigre are spread across the Eritrean and Eastern Sudanese territory and often hold dual nationalities.

<sup>20</sup> For details, see Kibreab, *Ready and Willing*, 1–3; Mohammad, *The Saho of Eritrea*, 318–21; Nicole Hirt, *Eritrea zwischen Krieg und Frieden. Die Entwicklung seit der Unabhängigkeit* (Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 2001), 175–82.

<sup>21</sup> Saudi authorities conceal the nationality breakdown of their foreign workforce. See “Demography, Migration and Labour Market in Saudi Arabia”, No. 1/2014, *Gulf Labour Markets and Migration*, accessed 1 February 2016,

[http://gulfmigration.eu/media/pubs/exno/GLMM\\_EN\\_2014\\_01.pdf](http://gulfmigration.eu/media/pubs/exno/GLMM_EN_2014_01.pdf).

According to the Consul General of Eritrea in Dubai, 3,000 to 4,000 Eritreans lived in the UAE in 2003, 60 percent of whom were female, see Afkar All Abdulla, “Eritreans make their presence felt in UAE,” *Khaleej Times*, 13 September 2003, <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/eritreans-make-their-presence-felt-in-uae>. Qatar hosts an estimated 8,000 Eritreans, many of whom had acquired passports from the Eritrean embassy in Sudan. The Eritrean regime counts on them as payers of the 2 percent tax, see Saleh “Gadi” Johar, “A Wretched Eritrean in Qatar: Reportage,” *Awate*, 31 May 2012, <http://awate.com/a-wretched-eritrean-in-qatar-reportage>.

<sup>22</sup> Helene Thiollet, “Migration as Diplomacy: Labor Migrants, Refugees, and Arab Regional Politics in the Oil-Rich Countries,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 79 (Spring 2011): 103–21, 113.

<sup>23</sup> Thiollet, “Migration as Diplomacy,” 114.

<sup>24</sup> Dan Connell, *Against all Odds. A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville, Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1997); Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1990); Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Tricia Redeker Hepner, “Transnational Governance and the Centralization of State Power in Eritrea and Exile,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 3 (2008): 476–502; Gaim Kibreab, “The Eritrean Diaspora, the War of Independence, Post-Conflict (Re)-construction and Democratisation,” in Ulf Johansson Dahre, ed., *The Role of Diaspora in Peace, Democracy and Development in the*

*Horn of Africa*, Research Report in Social Anthropology 1 (Lund: Lund University 2007), 97–115; Nadje Al-Ali, Richard Black, and Khalid Koser, “The limits to ‘transnationalism’: Bosnian and Eritrean Refugees in Europe as Emerging Transnational Communities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 578–600; Khalid Koser, “Mobilizing new African diasporas: An Eritrean case study,” in *New African Diasporas*, ed. Khalid Koser (London: Routledge, 2003), 11–123.

<sup>26</sup> Personal observation by both authors.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Connell, *Conversations with Political Prisoners* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 2005); Kjetil Tronvoll and Daniel R. Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State. Human Rights and Development in Eritrea* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014), 75–91.

<sup>28</sup> The term “Yikealo” refers to a wise and knowledgeable person – denoting the fighter generation who struggled for independence. “Warsay” means heir or follower – referring to the young generation who are supposed to go through similar experiences.

<sup>29</sup> Gaim Kibreab, “Forced Labour in Eritrea,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no.1 (2009): 41–72; Nicole Hirt and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad, “‘Dreams Don’t Come True in Eritrea’: Anomie and Family Disintegration due to the Structural Militarisation of Society,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 1 (2013): 139–68.

<sup>30</sup> UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea*, UN Document A/HRC/29/42 (2015), accessed 27 January 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx>; Tronvoll and Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State*.

<sup>31</sup> UNHCR Ethiopia, accessed 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/ethiopia.html>; UNHCR Sudan, accessed 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/sudan.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, “Over 100 Eritreans deported by Sudan, others jailed: U.N. deeply concerned,” *Africa News*, 14 September 2017, <http://www.africanews.com/2017/09/14/sudan-s-mass-deportation-of-eritreans-un-deeply-concerned/>; Matt Broomfield, “EU pays Sudan blood money to stop migrant routes” *The New Arab*, 9 October 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2017/10/9/eu-pays-sudan-blood-money-to-stop-migrant-routes>; Nicole Hirt, “Eritrean Refugees, the Pawns of European Interests,” *GIGA Focus Africa* No. 2 (July 2016), <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publication/eritrean-refugees-the-pawns-of-european-interests>.

<sup>33</sup> Information gathered from informants in Sudan and the GCC states; see also, Saleh “Gadi” Johar, “A Wretched Eritrean in Qatar: Reportage,” *Awate*, 31 May 2012, <http://awate.com/a-wretched-eritrean-in-qatar-reportage/>; “Promoting Educational Opportunity for Anti-Regime Eritrean Youth,”

WikiLeaks-Public Library of US Diplomacy, cable dated 5 May 2009, [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASMARA146\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASMARA146_a.html).

<sup>34</sup> Information derived from decade-long observations by Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad, who interviewed large numbers of relatives and acquaintances working in various regions of Saudi Arabia, including the Jazan area. See also H el ene Harroff-Taval and Alix Nasri, *Tricked and Trapped: Human Trafficking in the Middle East* (Beirut: International Labor Organization, 2013), accessed 28 January 2016,

[http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS\\_211214/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_211214/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>35</sup> Mohammed Osman, Eritrean journalist and interpreter residing in Qatar, interviewed by author, 23 January 2016; Amir Ali (pseudonym), accountant residing in Qatar, interviewed by author, 25 January 2016. Both informants confirmed that considerable numbers of Eritreans have been recruited into the Qatari police force during the past seven years.

<sup>36</sup> For details, see Silvia Pessoa, Laura Harkness, and Andrew Gardner, "Ethiopian Labor Migrants and the 'Free Visa' System in Qatar," *Human Organization* 73 (Fall 2014): 205–13; Malit T. Froilan and George Naufal, "Asymmetric Information under the *kaf ala* Sponsorship System: Impacts on Foreign Domestic Workers' Income and Employment Status in the GCC countries," *International Migration* 54, no. 5 (2016): 77–90.

<sup>37</sup> "Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar Ahead of FIFA 2022," Human Rights Watch, 12 June 2012,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/06/12/building-better-world-cup/protecting-migrant-workers-qatar-ahead-fifa-2022>;

Amnesty International, *The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar's Construction Sector Ahead of the World Cup* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2013), [https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/the\\_dark\\_side\\_of\\_migration\\_-\\_spotlight\\_on\\_qatars\\_construction\\_sector\\_ahead\\_of\\_the\\_world\\_cup.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/the_dark_side_of_migration_-_spotlight_on_qatars_construction_sector_ahead_of_the_world_cup.pdf);

Harroff-Taval and Nasri, *Tricked and Trapped: Human Trafficking in the Middle East*. [http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS\\_211214/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_211214/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>38</sup> Mohammed Osman, interviewed by author, 23 January 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Heather E. Murray, "Hope for Reform Springs Eternal: How the Sponsorship System, Domestic Laws and Traditional Customs Fail to Protect Migrant Domestic Workers in GCC Countries," *Cornell International Law Journal* 45 (2012): 461–85.

<sup>40</sup> Sadia (pseudonym), interviewed by author via Skype, 12 October 2016. She was deported from Jeddah to Sudan by the Saudi authorities upon her request, to avoid being recruited into the national service or being imprisoned upon her return to Eritrea. She currently lives in Kassala. Additional information is derived from several conversations with women deported from Jeddah between 2009 and 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Bina Fernandez, *Essential yet Invisible: Migrant Domestic Workers in the GCC in Gulf Labour Markets and Migration*, European University Institute and Gulf Research Center, GLMM-EN-4/2014 (2014),

[http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/32148/GLMM%20ExpNote\\_04-2014.pdf](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/32148/GLMM%20ExpNote_04-2014.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Pessoa et al, "Ethiopian Labor Migrants and the 'Free Visa' system in Qatar," 205-7.

<sup>43</sup> Information derived from conversations by Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad with various informants who worked in the region.

<sup>44</sup> Pessoa et al, "Ethiopian Labor Migrants and the 'Free Visa' system in Qatar," 207.

<sup>45</sup> Communication with Eritreans residing in Saudi Arabia who witnessed such abductions, see also Harroff-Taval and Nasri, *Tricked and Trapped; "As If I Am Not Human: Abuses against Asian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia"*, Human Rights Watch, 7 July 2008,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/07/07/if-i-am-not-human/abuses-against-asian-domestic-workers-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>46</sup> Personal observation, Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad, who witnessed that deportees were taken directly to prison upon their arrival in Eritrea and later sent to the Sawa military training camp.

<sup>47</sup> These meetings are called *Mekhete* in Tigrinya and their history dates back to the independence struggle. Whenever the government concludes that the nation is under stress, it calls for *Mekhete* or "national rebuff" meetings to raise funds from the attending diaspora members.

<sup>48</sup> Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability," 22-25.

<sup>49</sup> Tekie Fessehazion, "Eritrea's Remittance-Based Economy: Conjectures and Musings," *Eritrean Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (2005), 168; Kibreab, "The Eritrean Diaspora," 103-4; David Styan, "Discussion Paper: The Evolution, Uses and Abuses of Remittances in the Eritrean economy," Eritrea's Economic Survival Conference Proceedings (London: Chatham House, 2007), 13-22.

<sup>50</sup> The Eritrean government does not extend passports for more than two years to charge frequent renewal fees and to ensure the loyalty of the affected nationals, who live in constant fear of not having their passports renewed.

<sup>51</sup> Many Eritreans, especially women, enter Saudi Arabia as hajj pilgrims and hide with relatives until they find an illegal job in the black market or until they manage to get a contract through a guarantor (*kafil*), who employs them as housemaids without official working contract. If they are lucky to find a guarantor who offers them an official contract, they must leave the country and apply for an entry visa from Sudan. The Eritrean consular missions in Sudan provide them with a passport against the payment of a fee that



corresponds to the amount of two percent of their previous earnings while she was working in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>52</sup> Hirt, "The Eritrean Diaspora and its Impact on Regime Stability."

<sup>53</sup> Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Eritrean Opposition Parties and Civic Organisations* (Oslo: NOREF Expert Analysis, 2015), <https://noref.no/Publications/Regions/Africa/Eritrean-opposition-parties-and-civic-organisations>.

<sup>54</sup> Freedom House ranks Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan as 'not free,' see "Freedom in the World 2015," Freedom House, accessed 1 February 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2015/table-country-ratings>.

<sup>55</sup> All names have been changed due to security concerns. Mohammed Said (interviewed 28 January 2016) studied computer science in India and has been working as computer technician in Jeddah since 1988, while Abdalla Ibrahim (interviewed 29 January 2016) worked and lived in Jeddah from 1974 until his retirement in 2014. He started working as a cook in restaurants in Jeddah. Amir Ali (interviewed 25 January 2015) arrived at Qatar in 2010 coming from Sudan and has since been working as an accountant at a small business enterprise.

<sup>56</sup> Mohammed Said, interviewed by author over Skype, 28 January 2016.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, shabait.com, the official website of Eritrea's Ministry of Information; "Eritrean nationals in Jeddah commemorate Martyrs Day," 19 June 2015, <http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/20021-eritrean-nationals-in-jeddah-commemorate-martyrs-day>.

<sup>58</sup> Interview by author, 30 January 2016.

<sup>59</sup> The owner of an account at the Housing and Commerce Bank is only allowed to withdraw his money in Eritrea's currency, the *Nakfa*, at the official exchange rate of 1 USD: 15 *Nakfa*, while the *Nakfa* trades at the black market at a rate of approximately 1USD: 30 *Nakfa*. Most of the affected workers had borrowed hundreds of thousands of *Nakfas* in order to pay for the ticket, the medical exam, and other expenses, and the exchange of their income at the official exchange rate made it impossible for them to pay their dues.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with ELF veteran fighters who have been living in Kassala, Sudan since 1981 (names withheld for security reasons), interviewed by author.

<sup>61</sup> Personal observation, Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad.

<sup>62</sup> For an assessment of the situation of Eritrean refugees in Sudanese camps, see "Eritrea - Sudan: A forgotten refugee problem," IRIN News, 3 December 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/87300/eritrea-sudan-a-forgotten-refugee-problem>. Since the time of the report, the situation has deteriorated due to an increased influx of refugees and soaring numbers of abductions of refugees by human traffickers, including Eritrean officials.

<sup>63</sup> Information acquired from different Eritreans residing in Sudan and in Egypt between 2012 and 2017.

<sup>64</sup> "Detained Eritrean journalist faces possible forced repatriation from Sudan," RSF - Reporters Sans Frontières, 28 October 2011, [http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/204794/309885\\_en.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/204794/309885_en.html).

<sup>65</sup> See for instance: Katherine Perks and Mohamed Badawi, "32 Eritreans at risk of forced return from Sudan," African Center for Justice and Peace Studies, 1 June 2015, <http://www.acjps.org/32-eritreans-at-risk-of-forced-return-from-sudan-2/>; "UN refugee agency warns Sudan over forced return of Eritrean asylum seekers," United Nations News Centre, 4 July 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48206#.Vrn1qln1LR8>.

<sup>66</sup> The latest event matching the pattern of cooperation of the Eritrean regime with Sudanese police forces is the arrest of two ELF veterans, Hussein Khelifa and Abdelah Hamdoi in Kassala. They were arrested by Sudanese authorities for unknown reasons and held at an unknown location. See Gedab News, "Hussein Khalifa and Abelah Hamdoi arrested in Sudan," *Awate*, 2 February 2016, <http://awate.com/hussein-khelifa-and-abdelah-hamdoi-arrested-in-sudan/>.

<sup>67</sup> Magnus Treiber, "Grasping Kiflu's Fear: Informality and Existentialism in Migration from North-East Africa," *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 1, no. 2 (2014): 15–16, <https://edu.uhk.cz/africa/index.php/ModAfr/article/view/135>; Interview by author, Khartoum, March 2011.