



THE SINAI CONNECTION

An Inside Account of the Human Trafficking Trade in Egypt

By Lina Attalah

When the police asked what was in the car, the driver said potatoes and tomatoes,” recounts Effrant, a young Eritrean man, describing how he’d been covered with a blanket in the pickup truck along with some twenty other refugees crossing from Egypt’s Eastern Desert to the Sinai Peninsula. He remembers shivering as he overheard the exchange, fearing his fate if the police discovered the pickup’s true cargo—human beings being smuggled en route to Israel. Today, he can sit back and tell the story of the most harrowing of experiences: making desperate, illegal border crossings in hopes of a better life in a distant land, only to be kidnapped and held ransom for a year by human traffickers. Listening to Effrant, I recalled a conversation I had with some Bedouin friends in the Sinai last year. Lamenting the government’s response to the boom in human trafficking, they pointed out a conspicuous anomaly: young Egyptians actually smuggling potatoes and tomatoes into the bordering Gaza Strip are arrested everyday, yet the lords of the trade in humans seem to be left alone.

The stories of Effrant and other African migrants are triumphs of the art of telling, spoken in a time and place where they savor their freedom as rarely before. Their stories also unfold a tale of a desert border region’s isolation and neglect, and a resulting descent into lawlessness that allows a trade in human trafficking to flourish.

By the count of Human Rights Watch, thousands of sub-Saharan asylum seekers and migrants have fallen victim to abusive traffickers and other criminals in the Sinai. The organization has called on the Egyptian government to use its increased law enforcement operations in the area to rescue victims of trafficking and end the abuses. The Israeli government says some 58,000 sub-Saharan African nationals have crossed into Israel via the Sinai.

◀ A Sudanese migrant held in captivity by human traffickers in the Sinai Peninsula, at an Israeli shelter, Tel Aviv, Feb. 16, 2012. *Oded Balilty/AP/Corbis*

Rights advocates say Eritrean migrants interviewed in Israel report having been subjected to serious abuses in the Sinai, including beating, whipping, branding, electric shock, being buried, exposed to the sun, sexual abuse, threat of execution, shooting, and threats of organ removal.

“A Good Type of Smuggling”

Illegality is a condition common to border regions everywhere. But the Sinai is unique for two reasons. Politically and socially, the Egyptian state has long viewed the inhabitants of the Sinai as outcasts. They are mainly Bedouin tribesmen who harbor grievances for discrimination and marginalization at the hands of the central government. They even fell under suspicion of holding dual loyalties during the fifteen years they lived under Israeli military occupation of the Sinai. The other reason is that the Sinai remains the frontier of an international conflict, thus allowing smugglers and traffickers to perform their criminal acts under the guise of political struggles. To the northeast of the peninsula, Gaza has been under a tight Israeli-enforced blockade since 2007, when the militant Hamas group took over the territory. In response, for many Egyptians as well as Palestinians the smuggling of food commodities, energy goods, humans, and arms into this open-air prison became a normalized act of illegality.

The irregular movement of humans across the 148-mile stretch of land between Egypt and Israel dates back to at least the 1990s. In an early manifestation of the problem, young women primarily from Eastern Europe were trafficked through the Sinai, having been lured to Israel with promises of jobs and then forced to become sex workers. The crossings of African migrants into Israel became a trend in 2005, after the Egyptian police killed twenty-eight Sudanese refugees during a protest outside the Cairo office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). African migrants began departing Egypt in waves, discovering the Sinai as a possible point of departure to Israel. A network of young smugglers began thriving in the Sinai, earning as much as \$300 per individual passage; serious money in a region with few job prospects for locals. Accordingly, no stigma became attached to the activities of these smugglers, who included children in their ranks, seen merely as guides using age-old Bedouin tracking skills to perform a service to people in need. “This is a good type of smuggling,” a smuggler once told me.

But it didn’t take long before those more benign passages inspired a nefarious network of human trafficking that funnels migrants and asylum seekers from various African nations across Egypt’s southern border and across the Eastern Desert to the Sinai. Here, in the Sinai connection of this transnational trade, the trafficking has spiraled into a trade of horror: migrants being flipped like commodities among traffickers, held to ransom, tortured, and even killed. The ‘luckier’ ones are merely arrested and deported.

The Trafficked

In a lavish villa set along the peach fields in the village of Mahdeya, a few minutes' drive from the Israeli border, twenty Eritrean migrants are silently gathered around a tray of rice, which they proceed to eat until the last grain. Hours earlier, they had been rescued from their traffickers after a year of captivity. Among them is a lone girl, now wearing a Bedouin dress, nervously avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Back at home, Zarai, 27, was a soldier, responsible for caring for his mother and three sisters. He decided to leave his hometown last year, and crossed the border into Sudan in search for a better life. On the way, he and other migrants were stopped by a group of Bedouin who belong to the Rashaida, the Arab tribe scattered across both Sudan and Eritrea. The Rashaida, he explains, started off by speaking to them nicely on the road and told them that for \$3,000 they would help them go to Israel. "When we said no, they took us by force," he says. "They had guns." He recounts how he was abducted, stuffed into a car with ten others, and driven for days in suffocating heat.

In the Sinai there began a cycle of extortion under torture. Zarai says: "They asked us for \$33,000. Our parents are very poor. We say we have no money. Then they tie our legs and hands and hit us with stones. Then they tell us if you pay the money we will let you go. They only gave us some oranges to eat and allowed us to wash our bodies three times in the whole year."

Effrant, who was transported in the same pickup, tells how he once dared respond to his traffickers. "We told them we didn't come voluntarily. They told us 'If you don't pay, you die. Choose between paying or dying.'" Both Zarai and Effrant began to imagine their ends. They witnessed the deaths of ten of the twenty others who shared their makeshift prison in a warehouse. They speak of torture that included being electrocuted, burned, and stoned. Eventually, after phone calls back to their parents pleading for money to be transferred to their kidnappers, Effrant and Zarai thought they had bought their way to freedom. But they were wrong.

Seeing no other way out, Zarai and Effrant plotted with the others. Says Effrant: "One evening there was heavy rain and no electricity. So one man broke the chain holding us and we ran away. Some stayed behind and some continued."

Effrant and Zarai were among those who continued to run. They encountered somebody who asked if they wanted to be taken to a police station, or to a Muslim sheikh. "We said we don't want the police, we want the sheikh," says Effrant. "And they brought us here."

Despite his ordeal, Zarai doesn't foresee returning to Eritrea. Assuming he manages to elude problems with Egyptian authorities and can exit the country with the assistance of UNHCR, he prefers to try his luck in Europe, and explains that this is a shared sentiment among all those who were rescued from the traffickers. Effrant too

will be looking for opportunities to travel to Europe or America for there is nothing for him back home, where he worked as a midwife nurse for meager pay. “No life, no marriage, no future,” he explains.

The Traffickers

One of the former traffickers in the Sinai, who calls himself Mohammed in our conversation, confirms that the “business of African migrants” started after the Sudanese massacre in Cairo in 2005. He believes that back then, he was a service provider and the service in question was that of smuggling, with no deception involved. “We coordinated with our agents in Cairo or Sudan,” he explains. “They send us a number of migrants and ask us to guide them to Israel. We earned \$500 per migrant.” Then the network started actively recruiting migrants from villages, coffeehouses, and other places, and the price increased. Mohammed’s voice hardens as he speaks, concealing more than he reveals. As his work as a human trafficker deepened, he felt as if there was a point of no return; no other economic activity in the Sinai could earn him as much money, not even his former work as a smuggler of ordinary goods into Gaza.

Mohammed is understandably uneasy about providing details of his trade, and particularly about the use of torture. He speaks more confidently about his eventual decision to quit the business. “I used to have six phone lines to coordinate with my agents in different places,” he tells me. “One day I decided to break all these SIM cards and to stop this work completely. I put it behind my back and moved on.”

It wasn’t because of pressure from the authorities, but rather a fear of the growing influence of hardline Islamists in the area. A couple of miles away from where we were sitting in his village of Muqataa is “the mosque of the mujahedeen,” as the locals call it. Salafis and jihadis have been gathering there since the revolution in 2011. Anyone passing by avoids looking at the mosque in fear of attracting unwanted attention from the worshippers.

According to Mohammed, social rejection—or “tribal pressure”—also played a part in his decision. “We used to be shunned by society,” he explains. “If you are a trafficker and you go to buy a pack of cigarettes from a kiosk, the vendor pretends they don’t have any and asks you to leave.”

The State

Sheikh Mohammed, who safeguarded Effrant, Zarai, and the other Eritreans after their escape, is exploiting tribal pressure in his work to combat human trafficking—a responsibility the Egyptian government should assume but has not. A thin Muslim preacher in his late twenties, Sheikh Mohammed is renowned in Egypt and beyond in the circles of migrants and international organizations that support them. His villa in Mahdeya has become a well-known destination for migrants who manage to escape from their

traffickers, or those migrants voluntarily released by their abductors. He provides them with protection until UNHCR can intervene in the cases. Seated in his *miqaad*, the courtyard of a traditional Bedouin house, and surrounded by other Bedouin sheikhs, he explains: “This is all new to us and we all got shaken by it. We had to do something.”

For Sheikh Mohammed, doing “something” means preaching into a microphone at the mosque about the sins of trafficking. He says that as a result, some traffickers have voluntarily stepped forward and repented, and quit their lucrative trade.

Asking the sheikh whether he coordinates with the Egyptian police turns out to be a *faux pas*. “This is a tribal society,” he says. “You cannot threaten members of your tribe or another tribe using the security. We only use social pressure.” Although Sheikh Mohammed reveals little of his past, many of his religious colleagues consider the state security apparatus to be a force of oppression rather than a protector of citizens. The persistence of arbitrary arrests—especially after a string of terrorist attacks in South Sinai in recent years—underpins this local perception. Hence, Sheikh Mohammed’s work is done outside the scope of the state until UNHCR arrives to handle the migrants’ cases. Nor does the government seem inclined to step in. As Sheikh Mohammed says: “The state’s reaction? Zero. The security? Zero. They know everything. They have the traffickers’ names. But the issue doesn’t matter to them, especially that there is no harm for Egypt.”

Others in the *miqaad* explain how the police have no incentive to confront the traffickers, who are heavily armed. “If a lower ranking policeman dies in combat with the traffickers, his family would receive a couple of thousand pounds in compensation,” says one man. “It’s not worth it.”

The posture of North Sinai security officials ranges from “total denial that anything is happening to a reluctant admittance that things were happening,” says Gerry Simpson, senior refugee researcher and advocate for the refugee program at Human Rights Watch. “There’s a huge amount of information on torture and Egyptians are not doing anything about it.” A security advisor to the North Sinai Governorate I interviewed last year said brashly that the government’s policy is to deport migrants and refugees. He did not seem familiar with non-refoulement, an international law concept that forbids the rendering of a victim of persecution to a state that persecutes them.

According to Human Rights Watch, sub-Saharan nationals are detained for lengthy periods in police stations across the Sinai. It says the Egyptian authorities prevent them from seeking asylum through UNHCR. Human Rights Watch has, since 2008, documented cases where Egypt has forcibly returned Eritrean refugees, registered asylum seekers, and would-be asylum seekers to Eritrea. Eritrea’s repressive regime requires citizens up to the age of fifty to serve perpetual military service, so asylum seekers sent back to the country face desertion charges. Little wonder then that Effrant worried about being discovered by the police, even as he was being forcibly smuggled under blankets by his kidnappers.