

## **Eritrean Refugee Crisis**

Examining the construction of multiple narratives to shape policy outcomes in the Eritrean refugee crisis, as well as the narratives that are ignored.

Jesse Schatz, Justin Nam, Ana Castillo James, Natasha “Sara” Lobo

### **I. BACKGROUND**

**Political Situation:** Eritrea became a state in 1991, after the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) fought a successful, three-decade long war of secession to break away from Ethiopia. Guerilla leader Isais Afwerki became the president, and the EPLF was transformed into the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice, which is currently the only legally sanctioned political party. Since independence, the military and ruling party have remained in complete control of the state. A draft constitution was ratified in 1997 but has never been implemented, and national elections (apart from the referendum for independence in 1993) have never been held. A UN Human Rights Council commission of inquiry stated in 2014 that the regime is best characterized as a “rule by fear.” Additionally, Eritrea continues to have hostile relationships with neighboring Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Sudan.

**Refugee Crisis Overview:** Five thousand Eritreans leave the country each month, making Eritrea one of the top producers of refugees. At present, a quarter million Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are living in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, receiving funding from foreign NGOs such as the UNCHR. However, foreign aid isn’t enough to supply the refugee camps with adequate necessities. Some of the refugee camps hosting Eritrean refugees in Eastern Sudan, for example, have hosted refugees for more than 40 years, and there isn’t enough aid to supply refugees with access to educational opportunities or proper healthcare facilities.

In 2014, there were a reported 80,000 Eritreans living in the EU. There are also approximately 33,000 Eritreans living in Israel. Eritreans are the most common refugees to travel across the central Mediterranean passage, going from North Africa to Italy to get to Europe. This is commonly considered to be the most dangerous border crossing in the region. Additionally, the Eritrean government has a “shoot on sight” policy at its border.

#### **Reasons people flee:**

-Forced conscription is the top reason cited by asylum seekers for leaving the country. The mandated 18 months of military or civilian service was extended in 2002 and is, in practice, indefinite. Adults report that they often serve into their fifties, while earning less than a subsistence wage. A UN commission of inquiry found that in the national service, “slavery-like practices are routine.”

-State coercion and the fear of being suspected of treasonous behavior. Arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial executions are routine.

-Restrictions on internal movement and freedom of speech, as the domestic media is controlled by the state.

*Background Links:*

<http://www.unhcr.org/5465fea1381.html>

<http://www.cfr.org/eritrea/authoritarianism-eritrea-migrant-crisis/p37239>  
<http://www.cvt.org/ethiopia>  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/eritrea/2015-10-26/out-eritrea>  
<https://www.irinnews.org/report/87300/eritrea-sudan-forgotten-refugee-problem>  
<http://fpif.org/afars-eritreas-forgotten-refugees/>

## II. ERITREAN STATE RESPONSES

**A Human Trafficking Problem:** At the UN Security Council this year, Eritrea urged the UN to help bring human traffickers to justice, citing smuggling groups as the reason people leave the country (rather than human rights abuses). The foreign ministry said in a statement that “the principle objective of this organized crime is to prevent Eritrea and its people from defending their sovereignty by dispersing and debilitating their human resources.” Human trafficking is constructed as a threat to national security and the sovereignty of the nation, a human rights issue that is divorced from the human rights abuses of the state. This helps to reaffirm the state’s moral standing in relation to the refugee problem.

**Continuing the Revolution:** International condemnations of Eritrea’s human rights abuses are viewed as part of a wider campaign to undermine the state. Foreign Ministry called the UN commission of inquiry on the abuses in the forced conscription service “totally unfounded,” part of a “politically motivated campaign to undermine the political, economic, and social progress the country is making.”

The rationale for maintaining a dictatorial regime is also part of a nationalist agenda that views strict measures as necessary to preserve the gains of the revolution. In early 2014, President Isaias Afewerki confirmed his lack of interest in an open society, saying “If there is anyone who thinks there will be a democracy or [a] multiparty system in this country...then that person can think of such things in another world.”

**Relationship to the Diaspora:** The Eritrean diaspora is one of the most closely policed diasporas in the world. The Eritrean state forces emigres to pay a 2% income tax (called the Recovery and Reconstruction tax), and thus economically benefits from the Eritrean community abroad. The state also benefits from remittances sent back to Eritrea, and coerces emigres to pay the 2% tax by threatening to deny consular services. There is also a fear of retribution on family members remaining in Eritrea if these fees are not paid.

*State Narrative Links:*

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/eritrea>  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/eritrea-blames-migrant-exodus-human-trafficking-150731053318736.html>  
<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jun/09/eritrea-diaspora-tax-uk-investigated-metro-politan-police>  
<http://www.shabait.com/>  
<http://www.shabait.com/editorial/press-release/20658--press-release>

<http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/19961-press-statement>

### III. FOREIGN GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Foreign governments acknowledge the human rights abuses in Eritrea, but also support the narrative of asylum seekers as economic migrants, which strengthens the Eritrean government's claim that the reason people leave is primarily economic. The EU has allocated over 200 million dollars to help the Eritrean government with economic projects. This implies that if the economic conditions in Eritrea improve, the flow of refugees will stop. Individual governments have also taken action to classify Eritrean refugees as economic migrants. The Danish Immigration Service has issued a (since discredited) report claiming that political conditions in Eritrea have improved to an extent that they would no longer be deemed refugees. Other states in Europe also commonly deploy Islamophobic rhetoric to frame Eritrean refugees as a terrorist threat.

**Ethiopia:** Ethiopia's nationality law proclamation No.378/2003 grants citizenship back to Eritreans who move back to Ethiopia. Ethiopia's commitment of accepting Eritrean refugees is politically motivated, as the Ethiopian state attempts to undermine economic and political stability in Eritrea. Eritreans living in Ethiopia still face discrimination and hostility in Ethiopia. One of the minority communities in Eritrea that frequently seeks refuge in Ethiopia is the Afar ethnic group.

**Sudan:** Typically seen as a transit country for Eritreans trying to reach the EU, European governments have offered 1.8bn in order to stem the flow of refugees from Sudan to Europe. Following South Sudanese independence in 2011, Sudan enacted the New Sudan Nationality Act, stripping many Christian Sudanese of their citizenship due to their Southern Sudanese Heritage. Although not Sudanese, this new law has led to increased discrimination against Eritrean Christians living in Sudan. Eritrean refugee Gideon Tesfazion summarizes the effects of this new law, "After July, the situation will be worse and worse for Eritreans. We look like them, we act like them. However, Sudanese are scared of us. Then, because we are refugees, some people in the administration ask us for money with no true reason." This discrimination is especially felt by new refugees to Sudan who cross the border with an ambiguous status. According to Amnesty International the EU's financial backing of Sudan has done nothing to stop the flow of Eritrean refugees through Sudan to Europe.

**Israel:** African asylum seekers often imprisoned after crossing the border from Egypt to Israel. Israel uses the Prevention of Infiltration Law (drafted in the 1950s to stop Palestinian refugees from returning to Israel) to detain African asylum seekers. The Israeli state's goal is to make the lives of Eritreans living in Israel so miserable that they leave voluntarily and other asylum seekers are deterred. Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai said that as long as Israel cannot deport them to their home countries, it should "lock them up to make their lives miserable."-Human Rights Watch

*Foreign Government Responses Links:*

<http://italia2014.eu/media/3785/declaration-of-the-ministerial-conference-of-the-khartoum-process.pdf>

<http://ardc-israel.org/en/content/refugees-israel>  
<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.649688>  
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2016/01/16/special-challenges-eritrean-refugees-face-in-europe/>  
<http://fpif.org/eritrean-israel/>  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/europe-is-trying-to-rid-itself-of-the-eritrean-refugee-crisis/>  
<http://italia2014.eu/media/3785/declaration-of-the-ministerial-conference-of-the-khartoum-process.pdf>  
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/4b7cee7b18.html>  
<http://www.voanews.com/content/britain-denmark-criticized-for-turning-away-eritrean-refugees/3084525.html>  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/02/sudan-dont-strip-citizenship-arbitrarily>  
<http://www.irinnews.org/report/93118/eritrea-sudan-refugees-battling-better-life>  
<http://africasacountry.com/2015/02/the-hierarchy-of-refugee-stories/>  
<http://www.consented.co.uk/read/the-hierarchy-of-refugee-narratives-why-dont-black-lives-matter/>

#### IV. FOREIGN NGO RESPONSES

**Human Rights:** There is consensus in the human rights community that the Eritrean government is responsible for severe human rights violations, which are the primary reasons why Eritrea is one of the fastest emptying countries. Many human rights organizations such as Amnesty International have called on other nations to accept Eritreans for asylum, and many of these organizations feature first-hand accounts of refugees to shape their policy recommendations.

*Links to Human Rights Responses:*

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/eritrea-refugees-fleeing-indefinite-conscription-must-be-given-safe-haven/>  
<http://www.unhcr.org/5465fea1381.html>  
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/eritrea>  
<http://www.irinnews.org/afrique/afrique-de-lest/eritrea>  
<http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/where-we-work/africa/red-cross-society-of-eritrea/>  
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea>  
<http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/countryregion/eritrea>

#### V. REFUGEE NARRATIVES

Most of the refugee narratives that are readily available come from foreign NGOS, and thus there is often a framing of the Eritrean refugees as depoliticized and victimized, used as justifications for policy recommendations or political agendas more broadly. It is also important to note that the Eritrean refugee crisis is widely ignored in media, and Eritrean refugees are not talked about as much as refugees from the Middle East or North Africa (despite taking the same routes to try and reach Europe, and the fact that this crisis has been protracted for decades).

*Links to Refugee Narratives*

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/eritrea>  
<http://www.consented.co.uk/read/the-hierarchy-of-refugee-narratives-why-dont-black-lives-matter/>  
<http://www.erivision.org/profile-eritrean-solidarity-movement-for-national-salvation/>  
<http://www.unhcr.org/4fa3eb4c6.html>  
[http://www.merip.org/mer/mer275/eritrean-refugees-trek-through-americas?ip\\_login\\_no\\_cache=f3bd09548998a1d849b2b715a85dfd15](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer275/eritrean-refugees-trek-through-americas?ip_login_no_cache=f3bd09548998a1d849b2b715a85dfd15)  
<http://www.ehrea.org/future.php>  
<http://worldreliefdurham.org/blog/their-own-words-refugee-eritrea>  
<http://eritreanrefugees.org/a-family-abused/>