

# THE EASTERN MIGRATION ROUTE

## From Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia - risks and humanitarian needs

### OVERVIEW

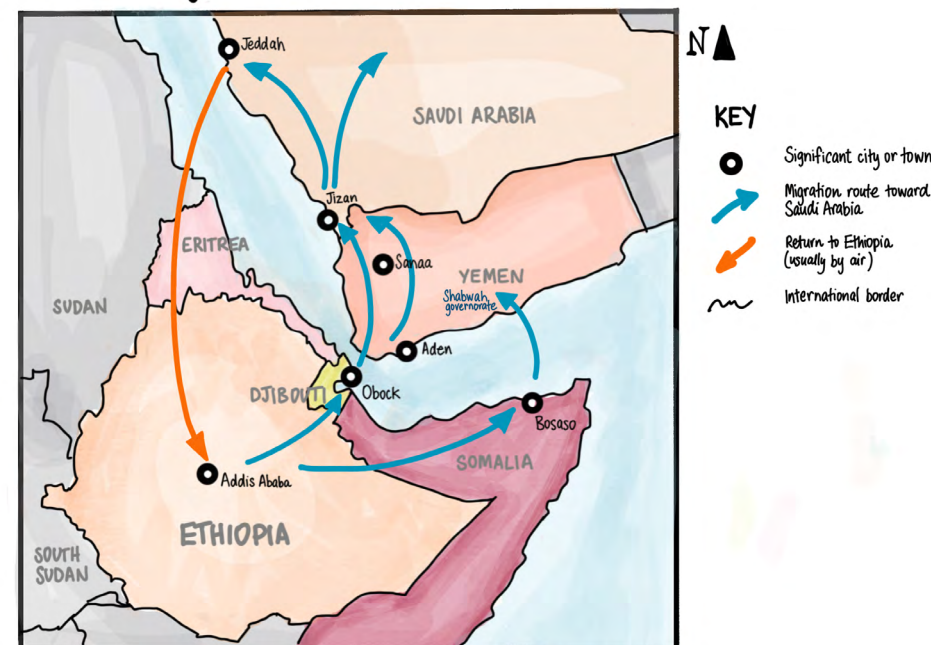
The Eastern Migration Route is one of the main migration routes globally, running from the Horn of Africa to Saudi Arabia. It is among the busiest maritime migration routes; reports on 2019 movements indicate an average of 11,500 people boarding every month (IOM 14/02/2020), with 63% of the migratory movement tracked in the Horn of Africa region (IOM 05/05/2020).

Between 2017 and early 2020, at least 400,000 Ethiopians reached the Arabian Peninsula through this road (Africa Renewal 22/05/2020). Despite the high risks associated with irregular migration, Ethiopians still find Saudi Arabia an escape from dire living conditions because employment opportunities are available there (HRW 15/08/2019). The number of migrants attempting the journey has decreased since the first half of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the border with Djibouti. As COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and key drivers of migration remain unsolved, this number is expected to gradually increase. Since November 2020, more than 50,000 Ethiopians – or an average of 6,500 per month – have attempted to migrate to Saudi Arabia (DTM accessed 06/09/2021).

### KEY FINDINGS

- **Between 2017–2020, at least 400,000 Ethiopian migrants reached the Arabian Peninsula through irregular migration.**
- **The critical humanitarian needs of migrants include protection, health, and shelter.** The response capacity is limited, especially in Yemen, where migrants are stuck in conflict-affected areas.
- **In July 2021, a bilateral agreement between the Government of Ethiopia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia led to the return of 40,000 migrants in two weeks.** The returnees need humanitarian assistance and protection, as the reception facilities in Addis Ababa are overcrowded and certain migrants face discrimination.
- **The number of migrants attempting the journey is likely to increase in the long term,** with different armed conflicts (especially in the Tigray region since November 2020) continually affecting Ethiopia and as the COVID-19 restrictive measures are lifted.

### The Eastern Migration Route: Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia



See full map on page 7.

#### About this report

**Aim:** this report aims to outline the main risks faced by Ethiopian migrants as they attempt the journey on the Eastern Migration Route towards Saudi Arabia, as well as their critical humanitarian needs.

**Method:** this report is based on publicly available information from humanitarian organisations working in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen; think tanks; migration institutes; and news articles.

**Limitations:** most figures on irregular migration are likely to be underreported. The impact of the situation in northern Ethiopia and neighbouring regions (with armed conflict starting in the former in November 2020 and spreading to the latter in July–August 2021) on irregular migration is also difficult to determine.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Migrants' profile.....	2
Drivers of migration from Ethiopia.....	2
The Eastern Migration Route from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia.....	3
Main risks and concerns faced by migrants.....	3
Critical humanitarian needs.....	5
People with heightened needs.....	5
Humanitarian response.....	6
Information gaps.....	6

## MIGRANTS' PROFILE

In 2019, the migrant demographic comprised mostly first-time migrants, usually young men, on average 21 years old, single, and with low levels of education (IOM 05/05/2020). Of the arrivals into Yemen in 2019, around 92% were Ethiopians and 8% Somalis (MMC 12/06/2020). The majority of Ethiopian migrants were from the Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray regions, although the number of migrants from Tigray has been hard to determine since the start of the conflict in the region in November 2020. On average, 67% of migrants are men and 33% are women. Over 7% are children, including 2% who are unaccompanied (DTM accessed 06/09/2021).

## DRIVERS OF MIGRATION FROM ETHIOPIA

The lack of employment opportunities is a key driver of migration from Ethiopia. In June 2021, most migrants reported economic reasons as their key driver for migration, followed by conflict and family reasons (IOM 13/07/2021). Factors that contribute to the lack of employment opportunities include natural hazards and armed conflict.

The disruption to agriculture production caused by recurrent natural hazards and armed conflict has affected employment opportunities, as more than 65% of employment in Ethiopia was agriculture-related in 2019 (World Bank 29/01/2021). Drought levels have also increased in the past 50 years, and nearly 75% of the land is dry, affecting agriculture, productivity, and livelihoods (AllAfrica 20/08/2021).

The Kiremt seasonal floods (June–September) displace people and damage farmland. In 2020, floods affected at least 1.1 million people and displaced 342,000 across the country. Floods also lead to crop losses. For example, over 11,000 hectares of sugarcane and cotton were destroyed in Afar region in September 2020 (OCHA 05/03/2021; FloodList 11/09/2020).

Waves of locust infestation also affect people's livelihoods. Since the first wave of infestations at the end of 2019, locusts have affected areas inhabited by more than 16 million people in Ethiopia who depend on pastoral, agropastoral, and farming sources of income. The risk of a new locus infestation in the Afar, Oromia, and Somali regions was still likely as at August 2021 (OCHA 05/03/2021; FAO 02/07/2021).

Conflict in the northern regions of Ethiopia and hunger are also likely to increase migration trends (MMC 26/01/2021). The armed conflict between the Ethiopian Federal Government and Tigray forces that started in November 2020 has resulted in an estimated 5.2 million people (over 90% of the population across the region) needing humanitarian assistance. Over two million people are internally displaced within Tigray, over 140,000 in the neighbouring Afar region, and over 230,000 in Amhara (IOM 30/06/2021; OCHA 16/09/2021). The conflict has had a significant impact on food, agriculture, and livelihoods. People throughout the region are suffering reductions in food stocks, livestock, seeds, and income opportunities (OCHA 07/10/2021). At least four million people are food-insecure, and there are pockets of famine-like conditions and starvation throughout the region (WFP 20/08/2021; AP News 20/09/2021; IPC 30/06/2021). The conflict in Tigray is expected to strongly affect movements within and outside Ethiopia, with the majority of migration movements taking place in neighbouring countries. Oromos are likely to increasingly use the Eastern Route as the Oromo Liberation Front gets stronger, leading to more repression by the Government. Eritrean refugees outside Tigray are also likely to attempt the journey as they are currently targeted in Ethiopia (MMC 26/01/2021).

## THE EASTERN MIGRATION ROUTE FROM ETHIOPIA TO SAUDI ARABIA

The Eastern Migration Route is one of the three main migration routes starting from Ethiopia, along with the Southern Route towards South Africa and the Northern Route towards North Africa, Europe, and North America. The Eastern Route goes towards the Gulf States and the Middle East (Comparative Migration Studies 18/02/2019).

### The route via Obock (Djibouti)

The migration journey on the Eastern Route starts in Ethiopia, where migrants first reach the village of Galafi at the border between Ethiopia and Djibouti. They then cross a desertic zone – where temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius – by foot, to the seaport town of Obock in northern Djibouti, which is the main passageway to Yemen (The New Humanitarian 23/03/2018). They cross Djibouti to reach or come back from Yemen or Saudi Arabia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, borders were closed, leaving some migrants stranded in Djibouti (IOM 09/04/2021). Between January–July 2021, the number of migrants in Djibouti per month was about 900; between April–July 2020, when the border between Ethiopia and Djibouti was closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, that number rose to 1,600 per month (DTM 02/08/2021).

### The route via Bosaso (Somalia)

A secondary route, through Bosaso in Puntland state, Somalia, has become more popular because of increased military patrolling along the Red Sea and airstrikes in Taiz governorate in Yemen, which was the main disembarkation point for migrants coming from Djibouti (IOM 19/05/2021). The route through Bosaso is less used than the one through Obock, as it is longer and more dangerous and strenuous for migrants (IOM 14/05/2021). In June 2021, 993 migrants, the majority of whom (60%) were Ethiopian, arrived in Yemen from Somalia. This number is a 400% increase compared to May 2021 (IOM 27/07/2021). In March 2021, an Al-Shabaab attack on a prison in Bosaso heightened security risks in the area, discouraging irregular migration through the route from March–May 2021 (Reuters 05/03/2021; IOM 22/06/2021).

### Passing through Yemen

Migrants who depart from Obock in Djibouti arrive at the Bab al Mandeb strait, an area that spans the districts of Lahj and Taiz in Yemen. Those who leave from Bosaso, Somalia, arrive in Shabwah or Hadramawt governorate. Most migrants in Yemen are in the main cities, such as Aden, Sana'a, and Rada, in Al Bayda governorate, which is under Houthi control. Migrants attempt to exit the country towards Saudi Arabia through the Monabih district in Sadah governorate, also under Houthi control, primarily through Al Raqw, Al Gar, and Al Thabet towns,

all of which are located on the border with Saudi Arabia (Meraki Labs 22/09/2020). For most of the migrants, the journey ends in Yemen. In 2020, 138,000 migrants, 90% of whom were from Ethiopia, lived in Yemen (HRP 16/03/2021). Since May 2020, around 11,000 migrants stuck in Yemen have returned to the Horn of Africa through the aid of smugglers (IOM 09/08/2021). So far in 2021, 676 migrants have returned to Ethiopia via the IOM Voluntary Humanitarian Return flights (IOM 07/09/2021).

### Arriving in Saudi Arabia

Migrants cross the mountainous border between Sadah governorate in Yemen and Jizan province in Saudi Arabia to make it to Saudi Arabia (HRW 13/08/2020). They are often held in detention centres with little access to humanitarian assistance (The Telegraph 15/09/2021). As at September 2021, around 80,000 Ethiopians were detained in Saudi Arabia (France 24 06/09/2021).

## MAIN RISKS AND CONCERNS FACED BY MIGRANTS

### Smuggling

**In Djibouti**, smugglers ask for considerable sums as payment for their services. In 2019, migrants needed to pay between USD 795–900 to reach Saudi Arabia. Some migrants would resort to working temporary jobs in Djibouti to pay the fees (IOM 15/12/2020). Smugglers tend to increase their profit margins by overcrowding the boats that cross the Red Sea to Yemen. They also force migrants to abandon overcrowded boats while in the middle of the sea. In March 2021, 20 migrants died after smugglers forced them into the sea; another 50 died in October 2020 in two similar incidents (IOM 04/03/2021).

**In Somalia**, smugglers wait for migrants at various strategic locations along the journey, such as Tog Wajaale and Guumays in Somaliland state. There are reports of smugglers resorting to coercion, abuse, and kidnapping (MPI 06/02/2019). These abuses sometimes happen in collusion with state officials and security forces. Migrants who pay the full fees demanded by the smugglers have a guarantee of safety throughout the journey. Those unable to pay the entire amount are kidnapped for ransom, which is demanded from their families in Ethiopia (REF 25/07/2017). To raise the needed amount, some families take loans or sell off property (AP News 15/02/2020).

Smugglers transport migrants in overcrowded trucks, using dirt roads and travelling at dangerous speeds to avoid detection. Consequently, accidents resulting in the death or injury of the migrants are common (IOM 15/12/2020).

## Exposure to the elements

As most migrants travel on foot, often under high temperatures, they are at risk of heatstroke and dehydration. In 2020, at least 12 migrant deaths in the Djibouti desert were attributed to dehydration (IOM 26/01/2021).

Migrants face life-threatening situations while at sea because of the risk of boats capsizing. A study by IOM in April 2020 found that less than 50% of Ethiopian migrants know of the dangers they might face at sea (Africa Renewal 22/05/2021). In April 2021, more than 40 migrants drowned after their boat capsized off the Djibouti coast, while 25 others were confirmed dead in June and at least 150 remain missing (Al Jazeera 12/04/2021 and 14/06/2021). The number of casualties is likely higher, given the underreporting of data.

## COVID-19 and border closures

The COVID-19 pandemic affects migrants' movements when the closure of borders to prevent the spread of infection stalls them from the next leg of their journey.

In Djibouti, as at 31 May 2021, the number of COVID-19-related deaths along the Eastern Corridor inside the country's borders stood at 75 (IOM 22/06/2021). COVID-19 movement restrictions have largely reduced migration flows. Roughly 138,000 people made the journey in 2019, but only about 37,500 did so in 2020 (IOM 04/03/2021).

In June 2021, at least 250 migrants (including 35 unaccompanied children) were stranded in Bosaso because of COVID-19-related restrictions, with limited options to progress with the journey or return home (IOM 27/07/2021).

## COVID-19 and stigma

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants have faced increased stigma and are viewed as responsible for the spread of the disease. The discrimination often makes it difficult for them to access primary resources like food, water, and health services (Global Detention Project accessed 12/11/2021). In April 2020, thousands of migrants were expelled from northern Yemen to the Saudi border by Houthi forces using COVID-19 as an excuse. At least 12 migrants were shot in a specific incident in April 2020 in northern Yemen (Human Rights Watch 13/08/2021).

## Being stranded in conflict-affected areas

As at late 2020, 138,000 migrants (90% of them from Ethiopia) lived in Yemen. Altogether, more than 316,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants lived in Yemen at the end of 2020

(OCHA 16/03/2021). Most migrants are stranded in different parts of Yemen because of the movement restrictions that result from conflict and the pandemic. Saudi Arabia has been leading the military coalition against the Houthis, leading to clashes along its southern border (ACLEDD 13/07/2018). 30% of surveyed migrants in Djibouti were unaware of the current civil war in Yemen (OCHA 04/06/2021). The border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia has also been closed because of the pandemic since 8 April 2020 (Garda World 09/04/2020).

Migrants and refugees in Yemen face multiple risks. They face discrimination from the host population, whose resources (including food, housing, healthcare, and employment) are already scarce (IOM 07/09/2021). There are reports of migrants being forcibly recruited by armed groups in training camps in Al Hodeidah, in western Yemen, and in the Marib governorate (Gulf News 31/05/2021; ACAPS 26/07/2021). These three zones are highly militarised, and the migrants are at risk of being captured and kept in camps (InfoMigrants 08/05/2019). Migrants are sometimes caught in the crossfire between Houthi and Saudi forces (RepublicWorld.com 02/10/2021). There are no publicly available statistics on the number of migrants that have been killed in this region or how many migrants successfully cross into Saudi Arabia (HRW 13/08/2020; AP News 15/02/2020; Meraki Labs 21/09/2020).

## Getting detained

**Yemen:** stranded migrants are often caught and transferred to detention centres by authorities. Migrant detention centres in Yemen are often overcrowded, and migrants are held in poor conditions. On 7 March 2021, Houthi forces launched tear gas projectiles at a Sana'a detention centre, leading to a fire that killed 45 migrants and other detainees and wounding over 200 others (Al Jazeera 21/03/2021).

**Saudi Arabia:** many of the migrants who enter the Saudi border are apprehended by Saudi border guards and transported to detention centres (HRW 13/08/2020; AP News 15/02/2020; Meraki Labs 21/09/2020). In September 2020, an Ethiopian official in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, announced that at least 16,000 Ethiopians were detained in one centre in Al Shumaisi (Telegraph 15/09/2020). In October 2020, at least three Ethiopian migrants died in the Al-Dayer detention centre in Saudi Arabia because of the dire conditions in overcrowded cells (BBC 02/10/2020). In June 2021, Saudi Arabian authorities carried out mass arrests in Ethiopian neighbourhoods, including the Kilo Temania district of Jeddah (Middle East Eye 21/06/2021). There are reports that security forces applied excessive force and confiscated belongings in these arrests. Ethiopians with all the necessary documentation and compliant with Saudi Arabia labour laws were also arrested (Gulf News 04/07/2021; Middle East Eye 21/06/2021; AA 02/07/2021).

## Challenges in returning

Many migrants attempt to return to their home country after being unable to find work in Yemen or reach Saudi Arabia while suffering from poor living conditions and human rights violations. This situation has led to a new phenomenon of smugglers aiding migrants to return to the Horn of Africa.

From Yemen: most migrants unable to reach Saudi Arabia opt to return to the Horn of Africa. Most are unable to do so given a lack of funds and the limited capacity of the Government to handle them (HRW 26/08/2020). Since May 2020, about 18,200 migrants have made the return journey by sea through smugglers (InfoMigrants 08/09/2021). Many attempting to return home face the same protection risks reported on the outbound journey: blackmail, abuse, torture, and sexual violence (Meraki Labs 21/09/2021).

From Saudi Arabia: following a bilateral agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Ethiopian Government, 400,000 Ethiopian migrants have been returned to their country since 2017. In January 2021, there was an average of 1,000 returns per week, increasing to 2,000 daily returns by June 2021. The number of returning migrants from Saudi Arabia has increased by more than 30% between May–June 2021. In July 2021, the Ethiopian Government made an agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to return 40,000 Ethiopian citizens in a span of two weeks (Ethiopian Embassy 24/06/2021; AA Africa 02/07/2021).

## CRITICAL HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

### Protection needs

Migrants have serious protection needs. 60% of them face a form of sexual violence, maltreatment, or exploitation from smugglers. Discrimination, detention, kidnapping, torture, rape, and forced recruitment are extremely common. Authorities often detain migrants and refugees regardless of their status. Makeshift detention centres have little to no services and poor sanitation, resulting in dangerous health conditions (Global Detention Project 10/04/2018; ACAPS 12/01/2021). In March 2021, at least 40 migrants died after Houthi forces fired projectiles at a detention centre in Sana'a (Reuters 16/03/2021).

Between 2019–2020, unaccompanied migrant children attempting the journey increased from 6% to 9% of the total number of migrants. Migrant children are particularly vulnerable to forced labour and trafficking and often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (IOM 09/08/2021).

### Access to healthcare

Migrants have essential health needs and often need treatment for malaria, injuries from car accidents, and violence. Pregnant women need prenatal care, but their lack of legal status often complicates access to public healthcare facilities because they fear arrest by security forces. The expenses associated with private healthcare facilities rule out this option for most migrants. The language barrier is an additional impediment to their access to healthcare (REF 25/07/2017).

### Shelter, NFIs, and sanitation

**Somalia:** Ethiopian migrants in Bosaso also need shelter. They either sleep out in the open, in worn-out unoccupied buildings, or in overcrowded informal settlements near the port, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and the theft of their belongings. The lack of shelter also places women and children at greater risk of harm (REF 25/07/2017). Armed criminals have been known to target migrants, who they consider 'soft targets'. In June 2021, an armed attack left one migrant dead and two seriously injured (REF 25/07/2017; IOM 27/07/2021).

**Djibouti:** as at 29 July 2021, the number of stranded migrants in Djibouti (who stay in informal settlements along the migration corridor and face a lack of access to essential services) has reached 1,500. Their key priority needs include water, food, hygiene kits, and NFIs (IOM 29/07/2021).

**Yemen:** 4,000–5,000 migrants are currently stranded in the Marib governorate in Yemen because of increasing conflict in the area (UN 07/09/2021). They live in makeshift shelters in Batha Bin Mueyli with little access to health services, sanitation, and protection, and many are held against their will. Heavy rainfall in July 2021 damaged shelters and contaminated water sources, increasing the humanitarian needs of migrants (IOM 01/07/2021). Many are also forced to sleep in open areas where airstrikes are likely to happen. For instance, in 2019, an airstrike in Sadah killed at least 60 migrants (Meraki Labs 21/09/2020).

## PEOPLE WITH HEIGHTENED NEEDS

**Migrant women:** women suffer more than men from the physical toll of the migration journey. They are also vulnerable to sexual abuse by other migrants and smugglers (IOM 15/12/2020). Some women migrants go missing upon arriving in Yemen; between 2011–2013, over 16,500 women migrants were unaccounted for upon arriving on the Yemen coastline. Information on the topic is limited and inconclusive, and possible scenarios are that they walked away upon arrival or were trafficked or abducted (RMMS 06/10/2014).



**Detainees:** detention centres are overcrowded and lack food, water, and healthcare services (Global Detention Project 04/10/2018). The deterioration of the mental health of detainees is a major concern, with several attempted suicides reported. Detainees also suffer from common illnesses such as skin infections, diarrhoea, and yellow fever, as well as from prison guards frequently administering torture methods such as electric shocks (Telegraph 15/09/2020; Amnesty International 02/10/2020). There is a lack of sanitation facilities, with 350 detainees sharing only two–five toilets (HRW 15/12/2020).

Pregnant women and children are also held in detention centres in poor and crowded conditions. Women receive minimal prenatal care, although medical assistance is sometimes provided when they give birth. There are unverified reports of children, including newborns, dying in the detention centres because of illnesses related to poor nutrition and unsanitary conditions (Amnesty International 02/10/2020).

**Returnees:** in the first two weeks of July, more than 30,000 migrants returned to Addis Ababa from Saudi Arabia after a bilateral agreement between the two governments to repatriate 1,000 Ethiopian migrants each week. This agreement increased the pressure on reception centres in Ethiopia in their delivery of post-arrival assistance to migrants (IOM 16/07/2021). Nearly 20,000 returnees were originally from the conflict-affected regions of Tigray and Amhara (IOM 27/07/2021 and 15/07/2021; HRW 01/03/2021). Protection concerns for Tigray's returnees are serious, given the risk of arbitrary detention by the authorities in Addis Ababa as an outcome of the recent conflict in Tigray (Amnesty International 16/07/2021). Many Ethiopian returnees suffer from trauma from their journey and need humanitarian assistance. Having invested large sums of money during the journey, they also face a worse economic situation than before migration. They have little access to healthcare services (MSF 16/06/2021). Respiratory and psychiatric illnesses are among the most reported (ILO 13/05/2019). Support services are limited for returnees, and reception facilities are often overcrowded with few services available (MSF 16/06/2021).

## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

The 2021–2024 regional Migrant Response Plan (MRP) complements Eastern Route countries' efforts and the work of humanitarian and development actors throughout the region in “supporting safe migration, providing life-saving assistance and services, improving protection and promoting sustainable reintegration and community stabilisation”. The MRP is a response strategy for vulnerable migrants from the Horn of Africa – specifically Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia – moving to and from Yemen (IOM 25/03/2021). The number of people targeted by the 2021–2024 MRP is over 560,000, and the funding requirement is USD 98.7

million. The previous MRP, covering 2018–2020, required USD 84 million for three years and was 34.3% funded for 2020 (OCHA accessed 11/11/2021).

A multisectoral response for migrants is also included in the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen. It aims to reduce protection risks for migrants in Yemen and focuses on the governorates of Aden, Hadramawt, Lahj, Marib, Sadah, Sana'a, and Shabwah. The Plan is meant to be implemented in coherence with the MRP and requires USD 59 million in funding (OCHA 16/03/2021).

In Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen, IOM implements the Assisted Voluntary Repatriation programme to facilitate return, prioritising the most vulnerable migrants. IOM also operates Migrant Response Centres in collaboration with other humanitarian organisations, where immediate short-term assistance for shelter, counselling, and healthcare is provided (IOM 13/04/2020, 16/06/2021, and 27/07/2021; IOM accessed 30/07/2021). In April 2021, 160 Ethiopian migrants chose to return to their home country from Yemen through the IOM programme and in collaboration with the Ethiopian Government (Africanews 13/04/2021). At the end of July 2021, 8,600 migrants were registered for voluntary repatriation from Aden's Migrant Response Centre (IOM 09/08/2021)

Access constraints impede humanitarian assistance. In Yemen, insecurity, COVID-19, and bureaucratic impediments make access challenging (ACAPS 19/07/2021). In 2020, over 4,400 access incidents were reported across 20 governorates (OCHA 15/03/2021).

## INFORMATION GAPS

There is limited information available on the following:

- Number of migrants that have been killed in Yemen, with the number of casualties likely to be higher than what is reported.
- Number of migrants that have successfully crossed into Saudi Arabia.
- Number of women migrants that have gone missing upon arrival in Yemen.

# The Eastern Migration Route: Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia

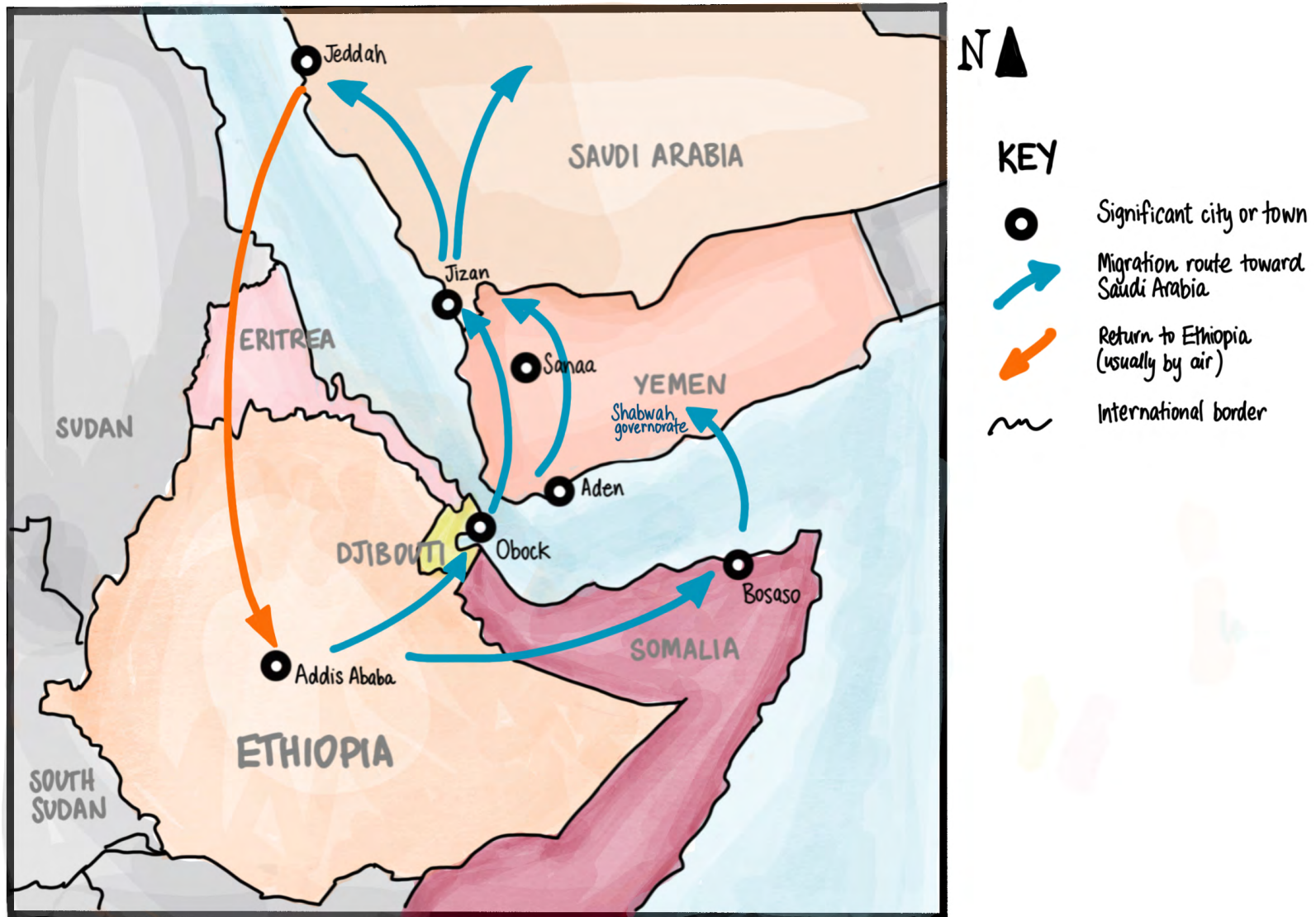


Illustration by Sandie Walton-Ellery