

Post-independence Eritrean Migrants Transiting Through/Living in Sudan: Driven by Politics or Economics*

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Irregular cross-/trans-national mobility has increasingly become one of the most talked about subjects in the public domain so much in the press, among academics, policy-makers, and parliamentarians. The level of irregular out-migration of people from Eritrea to neighboring and far off countries has drastically risen and remains unabated since the eruption of the second Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000). With an estimated 400 to 5,000 Eritreans reportedly fleeing either to Sudan or Ethiopia, Eritrea has been dubbed as the “fastest emptying country”. Using methodological triangulation and cross-national field work conducted both in Sudan and Eritrea, this article unravels the principal factors behind the country’s disproportionate youth emigration arte. It aims to illuminate whether post-2000 Eritrea’s massive irregular youth “exodus” reflects its political or economic woes. It also tangentially touches on whether any rigorous analysis about such “phenomenal” irregular youth efflux from a country who prides itself of considering its biggest asset as nothing, but its human resources should heed to regional and international politico-economic factors into the equation under scrutiny. The center of such inquiry lies debunking the tautology of the simpleton of narratives advanced, on the one hand, by migrant “exporting” government authorities and by rights groups and most researchers, on the other hand. The paper ultimately discusses the politically sensitive nature of labelling contemporary Eritrean migrants: Are they all refugees, economic migrants, or something else?

Keywords: Multiple uncertainties; national service; structural unemployment; irregular migration; refugee regime; prima facie refugees; migrants’ agency; mixed migrants/ hybrid refugees

Setting the Context

Located in what scholars of international relations call as the “Arc of Crisis”¹, the Horn of African countries (HACs) have, for decades, featured as migration *problematique*. For decades, these countries have been recognized as source, transit, and/or destination for migrants of varying scale, magnitude, and nature. Post-liberation Eritrean cross-/trans-national migrant collectivities transiting through/living in Sudan have caught the attention of activists, journalists, the international refugee regime, and scholars. Having started with what was called as the Addis Ababa process during the early-1990s, their outflow surged at the dawn of the

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¹ The phrase “Arc of Crisis” was coined by Zbigniew Brezenski, President Carter’s national security advisor, to characterize the region that includes Kenya, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and as far as Pakistan (Bariagaber, 1997, p. 41). Again by the Horn of Africa we are referring to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti.

century. Accurate statistical data about the number of such irregular émigrés are hard to come by though. Various UN bodies, however, suggest that ever since the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement on 13th March 2002 between the warring Eritrea and Ethiopia, somewhere between a range of 400 to 5,000 Eritreans are estimated to flee the country each month.

Without necessarily providing or suggesting any alternative figure, the government of Eritrea/GSE dub such figure as “untrue” (Copnall, 2009). Other times, the former secretive guerilla fighters-turned-bureaucrats out rightly refute the estimated figures by merely arguing that the number of Eritrean migrants fleeing the country is excessively exaggerated (IRS, 2014). Overall, over 400,000 Eritreans are estimated to have already left their homeland. Irrespective of Eritrea’s lack of population census (whose estimates have ranged from 2.5 to 6 million), its stock of emigrants is believed to account for 9% to 18% of the entire population (Plaut, 2016, p. 135; Tinti & Reinato, 2017, p. 18). According to the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for instance, as of mid-2014, more than 313,000 are reported to have fled their homeland. Elsewhere, of the 1.6 million emigrants originating and living/transiting through the 14 countries constituting the Eastern African region, Eritreans are estimated to account for 23.7% (IOM-ACP Observatory on Migration, 2011, p. 9). Up until, the first half-decade of the new millennium, Eritrean emigrants’ main continent of residence remained in Africa. For instance, by 2005, 78.2% of all the all Eritrean emigrants were residing in the African continent—the overwhelming majority of them either living or transiting through Sudan and Ethiopia. With more 95% of refugee recognition rate, Eritreans registered as refugees or asylum seekers as of the third of quarter of 2017 constituted 112,450 people (Smith, 2017, p. 10). Such proportion was matched by few members of the East African region—specifically Burundi (90.8%) and Rwanda (85.2%) (IOM-ACP Observatory on Migration, 2011, p. 9).

Overall, over the last quarter a century, more than 400,000 Eritreans are estimated to have already left their homeland. With the number of Eritreans currently living abroad ranging between 700,000 and 1,000,000 (Plaut, 2016, p. 135), the country has undoubtedly become a “diasporic state”. Irrespective of Eritrea’s lack of population census (whose estimates have ranged from 2.5 to 6 million), its stock of emigrants is believed to account for 9% to 18% of the entire population (Plaut, 2016, p. 135; Tinti & Reinato, 2017, p. 18). Of the estimated 0.1 million Eritreans who have forcibly fled their homeland over the last 23 to 26 years (World Bank [WB], 2017, p. 26), over half of them live in the neighboring countries. Estimates indicate Ethiopia and Sudan alone host for 36% and 22% of the entire Eritrea refugees (Smith, 2017, p. 20).

Since the last decade or so, owing to lack of economic opportunities and security challenges, they increasingly face in the receiving and/or transit countries; Eritreans are however becoming among the top Europe-bound irregular migrants. Evidences to confirm such trend abound: Of the total 11,298 irregular immigrants (mainly from the HACs) who sought asylum and succor in European member states in 2013, Eritreans scored 76% recognition rate (Philips & Horwood, 2014). A comparison of the proportion of Eritrean asylum seekers in Europe reveals that it nearly tripled 2014 against 2013 FY. Put otherwise, as of the third quarter of 2014, nearly 37,000 Eritreans have sought refuge in Europe, compared to almost 13,000 during the same period for 2013 (Plaut, 2014). Furthermore, the number of Eritrean asylum seekers to developed countries for 2014 FY has more than doubled compared to a year earlier (48,400 against 22,300 asylum claimants).

While unprecedented increase for such asylum claims were particularly registered during the second and third quarter of last year (UNHCR, 2014) and is recently reportedly declining, their overwhelming stay in the

Global South defies Europe's myth of being "invaded" by migrants originating from SSA including by Eritreans (De Haas, 2008). Compared to the resource-poor neighboring African countries who shoulder the largest burden of accommodating Eritrean influxes, the proportion of Eritreans living in the top European refugee hosting countries still remains small. During EU's 'migration crisis' of 2015-2016 alone, the recorded Eritrean refugees in Switzerland, Sweden and Germany was 47, 264, 46,171, and 41,000 respectively (Hirt, 2017, cf. UNHCR).

Even if the massive irregular entry of Eritrean migrants to the EU member states has sent shockwaves to these countries for quite some time now, it is the least developed African countries who are chiefly shouldering the burden of accommodating these "guests". Notable among these neighboring countries that are accommodating a disproportionate number of Eritrean migrant collectivities—chiefly in the form of refugees, asylees, and economic migrants—are Sudan and Ethiopia. While the former country is believed to be hosting around 120,000-333,500,² the latter one is believed to be home for 99,000 to 104,000 people (data for both countries are as of end of 2014). Apart from these two neighboring countries, (tens of) thousands of post-2000s Eritrean migrant collectivities are also living in South Sudan (who increasing vacating it), Uganda, Angola, South Africa, Kenya, Israel (until it sealed its Sinai border using barbed wire at a costing \$524 million), and more recently several Eritrean migrants are encroaching Rwanda.³

The question that naturally arises is why it is that Eritrea is experiencing such a massive hemorrhage of its citizens over the last decade and half. In other words, why are the country's most needed manpower and brainpower—the youths—irregularly exiting from their homeland? Such apparently politically sensitive question has been repeatedly raised by many concerned organizations and individuals for quite some time now. Yet explicating the root causes of irregular youth emigration from post-2000s Eritrea has been mired by disagreements and heated controversy among activists, humanitarian actors, practitioners, policy-makers, scholars, and the general public. For the scholarly debate about the issue, one can consult, among others, Bariagaber, 2013; Plaut, 2014; Danish Immigration Service [DIS], 2014; van Reisen, 2014; Independent Advisory Group on Country Information [IAGCI], 2015a, 2015b; Concerned Scholars' Press Release, 2015; Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea [COIE], 2015). In fact, the prevailing un-accommodative controversy regarding the centrifugal forces that explicate the "phenomenal" Eritrean youth cross-/trans-national movements as viewed by rights bodies (such as the COIE, 2015), scholars, mainstream media depictions, and Eritrean authorities understanding would remind one of an old parable revolving around

² Note the discrepancy between Sudan's COR (Commission for Refugees) which calculates the number of Eritrean refugees as constituting 333,500 out of a total refugee population hosted in the country of 615,340 and UNHCR which counts 120,000 Eritreans out of a total of 178,308 refugees living in the country as of end 2014. Such discrepancy could be attributed to COR's controversial incorporation of people who also live outside camps while UNHCR's imperativeness of considering people under its immediate assistance—what it calls "people of concern". At any rate, the figures provided by COR (Commission for Refugees) or ARRA (Ethiopia's Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs) should not be taken at face value for various political and practical matters linked with refugees and asylum seekers.

³ The current increase of Eritrean migrants to Rwanda is partly because of the country's relative peace and partly due the country's arrangements to receive Eritrean "infiltrators" to Israel in turn for a package of technical and financial assistance in return. Such seductive "packages" reportedly comprises "military aid" such as arms, training, and knowhow; agricultural and other civil support; and per capita financial rewards that would benefit their economies. Of the African countries approached by Israel, while Rwanda seems to have openly accepted the arrangement, Uganda seems to be very reluctant about it. Furthermore, there are reports confirming that xenophobic Israel is pressuring Eritrean immigrant-refugees to return to their home country or any other African by deploying monetary incentive system (around US\$3500) for what they call a "voluntary return program" (Peebles, 2014; Plaut, 2016).

“the blind men and the elephant”.⁴

Purpose and Structure of the Study

The main purpose of the article lies in modestly reconciling the existing divorced and uncompromising views and bringing about fruitful engagement of the bi-furcated explanations circulating among the scholarly community and policy-makers. It aims to bring to the fore the explanations advanced by advocates of the two camps—those who claim political vs. economic woes of the equation—such that the refugee regime and other stakeholders would be able to stem and/or manage the massive irregular outflow of Eritreans to neighboring countries and further afield. The article is divided into six sub-parts. Having set a very brief contextual background to the study and disclosed the study’s main purpose, a very brief snapshot of the structure of the rest of the paper is in order. Section Three presents the methodology, in which the study is based. The fourth section delves into examining and systematically presenting the controversy around explaining the massive irregular cross-/trans-national movements of Eritreans over the last decade and half. In so doing, the literature review first presents the dominant and most vociferous explanation—the political explanation—asserted largely by foreigners (at an organizational or/and individual level) and to some extent by diaspora-based Eritrean dissident groups (including activists, the literary community, academics, and but most notably by political entrepreneurs).

The paper then focuses on the much overlooked part of the equation—the economic explanation to the massive youth hemorrhage from contemporary Eritrea. Also, briefly presented in this sub-section is the less salient Eritrean authorities’ (and their lobbyists) understanding and stands as regards to the matter under scrutiny. As institutional mediated views (be those of international organizational organizations, dissident groups, or the government authorities of the source or transit/destination country) can only be a partial discursive representation about the issue under scrutiny, it is critically important to check such views against those of the “subjects” in focus, i.e., the voices and views of the migrants (or escapees, if you will) themselves.

In Section Five, research findings, a summary of what contemporary Eritrean (transit) migrants in Sudan say about their “irregular” exit from their homeland is presented. The paper’s concluding remarks emphasizes the narrowness of the bifurcated views advanced so far to explicate Eritrean’s disproportionate youth emigration rate to neighboring countries and far off lands. By underscoring that the prevailing discourse and analysis about the problem fails to comprehensively capture the complexity of the phenomenon, the paper finally suggests that stemming and managing irregular emigration of Eritreans would necessitate addressing the prevailing youth-unfriendly domestic and regional political situation along with redressing to the country’s prevailing economic challenges.

If there is anything noble about this article, it would be its plea that suggests failure to conjointly treat

⁴ The story of the blind men and an elephant has originated in the Indian sub-continent. Subsequently, it has widely been diffused beyond Hindu followers transcending many religious traditions, notably: Jain, Buddhist, and Sufi Islam lore. As per the slightly different variants of narration of the story, a number of blind people, or sighted people in a dark house, a grope find an elephant. Each touches only a part; each gives to his friends outside a different account of what he has experienced. Some think that it was a fan (referring to the ear of the animal); another takes the legs for pillars; a third the tail for a rope, and so on. Notwithstanding its varied interpretations, since 19th century the story’s modern treatments also hit Europeans. In its contemporary application, the parable is frequently invoked to illustrate a range of truths and fallacies. Implied within it is that one’s subjective experience can be true, but that such experience is inherently limited for it fails to account for other truths or a totality of truth. While parable invokes relativism, inaccessible nature of truth, the behavior of experts in fields where there is a deficit or inaccessibility of information and hence opaqueness in some (social) inquiry, its interesting bottom line moral teaching lies in the need for communication and respect for different perspectives (http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant).

political and economic factors in the overall analysis of the massive youth out-flow from post-2000s Eritrea is doomed to fail. Non-comprehensive and compartmentalized diagnosis and prognosis of the irregular cross-/trans-national movements that contemporary Eritrean youths are entrapped into is likely to lead not only to the country to be “unsustainable” (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2014) but also further exacerbates migrants’ suffering and abuse *en route*.

Methodology

Using several instruments/tools and drawing on data collected using “mixed method” (mainly survey, FGD, personal interviews with key informants, and document analysis including relying various actors’/stakeholders’ public statements that deepen our understanding about the issue), pertinent data were collected on a wide range of issues related to contemporary irregular “exit” of Eritreans’ out of their homeland. Using cross-national research, the study’s main field work was carried out in three Sudanese states where three cities (Khartoum, El-Gadaref, and Kassalā cities) and three refugee-camps, i.e., Shagarab I, II, and III. Among others, the study has captured a range of data from 404 randomly selected Eritrean migrants transiting through/living in Sudan. The utilization of multi-method approach to collect empirical data that would capture the complexity of the inherent cross-national migration is informed by the insights of Network Episode Model (NEM) that argues that sociology must explicitly measure contextual factors and the connecting mechanisms of influence.

The Debate About Emigration From Post-liberation Eritrea

Controversies over why Eritreans’ are leaving their country *en masse* abounds. Central to the debate among the various actors and seasoned observers who closely follow the predicaments of post-independence, Eritrean migrants is whether they really are driven by political or economic factors that transpired (continue to do so) in their homeland. What complicates the existing analysis about the causes of the massive youth hemorrhage from the post-2000s Eritrea is the near complete absence of actual field research from the source country. Whatever minor rights-based organizations’ findings appear to suffer from small sample problem or selectivity bias. Other compiled researches are, by and large, driven out of data collected from the asylum seekers in the high income countries. Data driven and compiled from these sources, they are often argued, do not necessarily capture, or accurately depict the actual complexity of the matter. This is true because it is not uncommon for asylum seekers, to win the hearts and minds of decision-makers and to engage in “deceit and trickery in institutionalized settings” of the refugee regime (Kibreab, 2004; Hepner, 2009; Kagan, 2010).

Anyways, a closer glimpse at existing reports and research articles about 2000s Eritreans cross-/trans-border movements can hardly be distilled into a single neat explanation. With a passing mention of the complex and multi-causal nature of the post-2000s Eritrean irregular cross-/trans-national movements (Bariagaber, 2006; ICG, 2014; Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat [RMMS], 2014; Martini, 2015), the overwhelming majority of the researchers is more inclined to underscore either the youth-unfriendly political factors or the depressing economic situation of the country. Very few have sufficiently considered the latter factor. Nor do most serious researchers have adequately and meaningfully considered how the two factors are actually inseparable when it comes to the disproportionate youth exit process in post-2000s Eritrea.

Various rights-based organizations, the international refugee regime as spearheaded by UNHCR’s (2009/2011) guideline document, Eritrea’s chiefly diaspora-base political entrepreneurs and some scholars have

vociferously argued that it is chiefly the political situation that transpired in post-2000s Eritrea that is responsible for its youth “exodus”. They vehemently argue and persuade several stakeholders to render these people refugee status on a *prima facie* basis or granting them asylum or humanitarian protection on compassionate grounds. Perhaps partly due to the increasing state repression observed in Eritrea and partly due to the refugee regime’s lobbying for a special treatment of Eritrean migrants, 48,000 of the entire stock of Eastern African emigrants in OECD countries recorded in 2009 were Eritreans. Again, of the 17.5% of the global stock of refugees originating from the Greater Horn of African region, by 2010, Eritreans started to account for 12.9% (IOM-ACP Observatory on Migration, 2011, p. 10). Since then their rate continues to rise unabated, with very brief pause observed more recently.

The unabated out-flow of Eritreans has generally been associated with the “catastrophic” human rights violations committed against Eritreans by the country’s politico-military elites since the country’s liberation. In the strongest words of the UN-mandated COIE (2015), “systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government” ever since the current ruling part came to power. The UNHRC-mandated Eritrea commission thus concluded, “It is not law that rules Eritreans, but fear”. In the words of two legal scholars,

The Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea has made the link between human rights violations and forced migration explicit, calling on the international community in engaging with the Eritrean authorities on solutions to stem the flow of asylum seekers from Eritrea, place human rights considerations at the forefront of any package of proposed abatement measures and keep Eritrea under close scrutiny until tangible progress in the situation of human rights is evident, and ensure the centrality of human rights in all engagement with the country. (Oette & Babiker, 2017, p. 24)

Along similar lines of reasoning, Malk (2016) attributed much of the unregulated cross-/trans-national migration of Eritreans is a reflection of the political and legal failures in the source, transit, and final destination countries. The prevailing “skewed” human rights narrative regarding the massive youth hemorrhage from post-2000s Eritrea, as told by some asylum seekers and the NGO of their predicament by powerful human rights lobby groups that is further amplified by some scholars and the mainstream media, is however not without its limitations. As one scholar forthrightly concedes:

[Partly] it is a discourse that is hard to criticize. The human rights abuses are real. But this this discourse presents only one facet of what is much more complex picture. [...] Few are prepared to consider other facets of this picture.... A more accurate portrayal requires a more historically grounded understanding of contemporary Eritrea, in the context of both its emergence as an independent state and the pattern of statecraft in the Horn. (Müller, 2015, my italics)

All in all, the core political driving forces for the massive “irregular” exit of Eritrean youths over the last 15 or so-years has unswervingly been attributable to the: (1) Political situation in the migrants’ homeland including the active yet open-ended mandatory military conscription and national service call for all citizens aged 18 years and above. Since 2012, the age for the Eritrean National Service (ENS) conscripts as promulgated in the *National Service Proclamation No. 82/1995* was extended for those above 40 years (including formerly demobilized ones) to engage in what is called “People’s Army”; and (2) Absence of rule of law and actual or perceived human rights suppression (for details of such accounts, AI, 2004, 2013; Conrad, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Dorman, 2005; Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2009; Flinterman, Laak, Nayeri, & de Pater, 2006; Healy, 2007; Treiber, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Abdulkader, 2008; Hepner, 2008, 2009, 2012; 2014; Mekonnen, 2008, 2011; Baldwin, Mawson, & Frelick,

2009; Campbell, 2009; Kibreab, 2009a, 2013; O’Kane & Hepner, 2009; Reid, 2009; Tronvoll, 2009; Bozzini, 2011; Habte Selassie, 2011; Connell, 2012; Müller, 2012; USSD, 2018; Jacobsen, Robinson, & Lijnders, 2013; Hirt & Mohammad, 2013; Mekonnen & Kidane, 2013; Welde Giorgis, 2014; Plaut, 2016; Malk, 2016).

All the afore-mentioned organizations and scholars, in one way or another, tend to overstress the role of political factors in instigating and perpetuating massive irregular youth exodus from post-independence Eritrea mainly from a “human rights” stance and lack of good governance in the country. They insist that the core driving force behind the unprecedented scale of irregular cross-/trans-national movements of contemporary Eritreans is linked with the ever-diminishing civic freedoms that contravenes the spirit and fundamental principles of the Eritrean National Charter of the 1994 and the momentarily shelved and then ultimately “discarded” Eritrean Constitution of 1997. In so doing, they trace the ruling party’s ill-reputed transgressions of human rights of the country’s citizens ever since the fall of 2001 where they report of the widespread intensification of violation of freedom of conscience, religion, expression of opinion, movement, assembly and organization have forced Eritreans to vote on their food in search of safety and protection (Flinterman et al., 2006; Tronvoll, 2009; Mekonnen & Kidane, 2013; Hepner, 2014; Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014; European Asylum Support Office [EASO], 2015; IAGCI, 2015a, 2015b).

Advocates of the political explanations thus blame the Eritrean government for the suppression of human rights (accompanied with several abuses) and the unfolding of unencumbered trafficking in persons or migrant smuggling of its constituents (USSD, 2018). Incriminating the Eritrean political elites for all the massive youth hemorrhage from the country, they vehemently underscore, “The draconian policies pursued by Eritrea are directly responsible for ... the huge outflow of population after 2000” (Campbell, 2009, p. 17). To marshal another such accusative example, the year-long investigation carried out by the Commission of Inquiry (COIE) explicitly holds GSE liable of having committed crimes against humanity of unprecedented “scope and scale”. The commission’s report concluded that since Eritrea’s liberation the government was responsible for forcing hundreds of thousands of Eritreans to flee their country through embarking extrajudicial killings, widespread torture, sexual slavery and enforced child labor (COIE, 2015).

Silent Economic Explanation

While it would be impossible to dismiss the aberrant and reprehensive human rights records of post-independence Eritrean authorities who run their newly created state without impunity, allegations that attempt to monolithically liken the country’s migration challenges exclusively to domestic political problems risks simplification of the diagnosis and prohibits sound remedial prescription to the problem. The explanations depicted by the UN-COIE and its likes have generally been rejected by Eritrea’s political establishments. Few foreigner scholars and analysts also contend that Eritrea’s “refugee card” has been deliberately singled out as part of a silent regional cold war propaganda (Draitser, 2015; Müller, 2015). Eritrea’s former guerilla-fighters-turned-state-bureaucrats occasionally seem to reluctantly acknowledge of their governance deficits (i.e., poor human rights records) over the last decade and half where they maintain of working their level best towards redressing them. At other times, they try to defend themselves by either arguing that it is heavy price they have to pay for state consolidation, securitization, and overall nation building process (Müller, 2012), or their governance track records are not any worse than other African contemporaries. Yet they also adamantly insist the centrality of human rights explanations vs. the country’s youth migration challenges are devoid of the political and economic contexts of the country. In what appears a whitewashing political drama of

their incrimination, they also, to quote a top PFDJ-official, charge “such analysis and their conclusions are extremely exaggerated”. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for these elites to brash the rights-based interpretations and their audacious conclusions about Eritrea’s migration challenges as “vile lies that are not more than politically motivated gestures” for the their reports clearly stand in stark contrast to migration experts’ finding that points out the complexity of the individual “push” and “pull” factors that induces or perpetuates people of leaving their homelands.

To be sure, the political climate in post-2000s Eritrea can neither be considered as youth-friendly nor has the state of the national economy been rosy to the general Eritrean populace. Yet the “political fume” revolving around derogatorily nicknaming contemporary Eritrea as the “North Korea of Africa”, mainstream analysis and discussions about the “phenomenal” youth out-migration from the country (as with most other deriding coverage Eritrea is constantly confronted with) over the last decade and so are increasingly lacking context. The repeated bullying, such as “the world’s most oppressive government” (Smith, 2017, p. 5) or trying to influence its domestic and foreign policy using aid conditionality has proved ineffectual. The more Western countries resorted to such strategy, the more Eritrean politico-military elites resorted to isolationist position and emboldened their armed struggle self-reliance ideology. These approaches in turn paved for their non-cooperation with other state and non-state actors where they, as part of their aspiration to entrench their self-reliance stand, have declined millions of dollars of aid⁵ from the donor community and financial institutions.

The government’s complete turning of policy stand and its ultimate objective amid an ailing national economy has raised considerable eyebrows among its critics. Its critics charge that such policy move does not correspond to the government’s position during 2001-2004 where Eritrea was struggling with the after-war effects, such as large IDPs and food shortage due to consecutive crop failure (Ravinder, 2005). For instance, as early as 2003-2004, the GSE has issued an emergency appeal for \$147 million to cover assistance for 1.6 million people or about 50 per cent of the entire population who are affected by war and drought. This includes 1.1 million war affected, 335,000 drought affected, 175,000 impacted host communities, and 150,000 victims of urban poverty⁶ (Ravinder, 2005, p. 200).

What makes the government’s abrupt decision more perplexing is thus the coincidence of its position with the intensification of youth exodus owing to, among other, ever shrinking livelihood opportunities in their homeland. Taken together post-2000s Eritrea’s political and economic climate compounded its youth irregular cross-/trans-national movements controversial. Most often than not, such analysis has increasingly proven to be “value-laden”, cursory, and hence susceptible to considerable shortcomings.

Anyhow the government’s top cadres and bureaucrats interviewed both in Eritrea and Sudan find it repugnant indiscriminately treating all contemporary Eritrean migrants as refugees/asylum seekers. They ardently argue that their efflux should rather be viewed as “labor-/economic-migrants”. Noting about lack of economic opportunities in contemporary Eritrea and the mass irregular youth out migration from the country,

⁵ In 2006 alone, amid the intensification of the massive youth outflow owing to lack of economic opportunities, among others, Eritrea has reportedly walked away from more 200 million aid from various sources including food aid the UN, development loans from the World Bank and grants from international charities (Kibreab, 2009).

⁶ It is estimated that between 80 to 90 per cent of the entire population who were seeking immediate humanitarian food assistance were women, children and the elderly people (Ravinder, 2005, p. 200, FAO). Moreover, as of 2007, malnutrition rates among children under five years were over 10%, in the Gash Barka region—the country’s breadbasket—the rate was over 20% (Melber, & van Walraven, 2008, p. 320).

an Eritreanist scholar recently writes,

The current exodus from Eritrea might not be sustainable, but it is clear what Eritrea's large youth population would do otherwise. Economic opportunities are scant, partly due to the fact that the private sector has been severely curtailed by the PFDJ, but also strongly related to the lack of economic exchange with Eritrea's most important former trading partner, Ethiopia. (Müller, 2015)

In a more telling confession, a Sudanese diplomat based in UK is recently quoted as underscoring how the better migration management (BMM) of the Khartoum Process⁷ that has been modelled on the Turkey-EU deal could not succeed unless economic dimension of the region's migration challenges are not adequately addressed in the migrants' source and transit countries. Underscoring the weakness of the Valletta initiative and its subsequent Khartoum Process to combat irregular migratory flows to and from the Horn of African region, he remarks the best solution lies in helping development in the migrants' source and transit countries (for a critical view of the Khartoum process, consult Grinstead, 2016; Reinato, 2016). Yet the London-based Sudanese diplomat murmurs,

There is an international financial system which is weighed against developing countries and against their industrialization and stability. It is in the interests of certain [*countries*] to keep it like that. [...] [*Such game*] is illogical because [*it entails*] playing politics with the fate of young men and women. (Smith, 2017, p. 27, italics added)

Indeed turning the vociferous arguments advanced by the rights groups upside down and lending some credence to the Eritrean political elites' assertions that some post-2000s Eritrean trans-boundary migrants can be regarded as "economic/labor migrants", several research findings are underscoring the mixed migratory nature of population cross-/trans-national mobility apparent in the Greater Horn of African region including Eritrea (SAMP, 2006; RMMS, 2014; Martín & Bonfanti, 2015). A researcher writing about the precipitating causal factors behind such phenomenon among HACs' migrants, for instance, underscores: "In general, the economic pushers in this region can be seen as one of the major factors for young people to leave their country and make the dangerous journey of an undocumented migrant" (Martini, 2015).

Against the much touted reports compiled by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea (headed by Ms. Sheila B. Keetharuth) and the UN established Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, chaired by Mr. Mike Smith, a UN agency member based in Eritrea, also corroborates the views and stands of the Eritrean authorities. The Western diplomat is quoted in the controversial Danish Fact Finding Mission report as saying,

Basically, the vast majority of the people who leave Eritrea do so for two reasons. The first reason is that the poor economic situation in Eritrea has led many to look to Europe for a better life. The second reason is the National Service program in Eritrea. The uncertainty concerning the duration of the service together with the low salary make many young people look for alternatives to spending several years working for a meager pay.... (DIS, 2014, p. 31)

Another often overlooked Eritrean migrant who slipped into Sudan after their brief spontaneous or assisted organized homecoming process are the "return migrants"—or what Sudan-based refugee field officers brand as "recyclers". Following a tripartite agreement among the GSE, GOS, and UNHCR, during the first half 1990s,

⁷ A part of expanding the EU-Turkey deal of containing Europe-bound asylum seekers, the EU organized a Valletta Summit in Malta in 2015. In what can be regarded as an EU-HoA deal, the union aggressively worked towards ensuring regional dialogue aimed at tackling human trafficking to and from the Horn of Africa. Even though such irregular migration containment strategy is facing considerable criticism from scholars and activists, out of the total 2 billion Euros allocated to that end, Sudan and Eritrea are receiving 100 million and 200 million Euros (Smith, 2017, pp. 26-27).

Eritrea has returned a large number of its refugees hosted in Sudan. However, owing to considerable economic challenges (coupled with political insecurity) that the returnees encountered immediately after their coming process,⁸ several households were either compelled to return their young (often male) members or preferred to leave them in Sudan as refugees or undocumented migrants.

To the aforementioned direct propelling factors one can also add some other political and economic factors that have albeit received little attention by researchers, namely: (1) acute poverty⁹ that affects two-thirds of Eritrea's entire populace (GSE, 2004); (2) inflation that stands records high affecting the very livelihoods of many urban-based ordinary citizens and civil servants (Hansson, 2000); (3) severe structural unemployment or under-employment problem (WB, 2002)—not to mention the paltry wages (including *une solde*,¹⁰ to use a better French word, for the country's national and military conscripts); (4) the excessive militarization of the Eritrean population due to the “tense” regional political situation in the HACs that is compounded by hegemonic geopolitical interests of the affluent countries; (5) inept/poor governance records of post-independence Eritrean state bureaucrats—not to mention the “generational tensions¹¹” (Dorman, 2005; Conrad, 2006a; Treiber, 2007; Campbell, 2009; Hepner, 2012) they inadvertently created (Abbink, 2005, p. 28); (5) weak institutions and political elites' perpetual “foot dragging excuses” towards building strong, transparent and accountable institutions; (6) contagious regional armed conflicts that is compounded by strategic interests of regional and international countries and hence Eritrea's delay to transition to democracy; (7) incompatible migration policy¹² in the source vs. transit/hosting countries (i.e., discrepant emigration and immigration policies of the source and transit/destination countries); (8) the absence of an innovative developmental approach towards forcibly displaced Eritreans (such as IDPs, deportees, and refugee returnees); and (9) proliferation of relatively efficient “migration industry” including human smugglers/trafficker, brokers, asylum/refugee screening, processing, and assisting empire that facilitates irregular cross-/trans-national movements of Eritreans and expedites their asylum procedures. Even though human smuggling/trafficking of Eritreans can hardly be considered as a cause (but rather consequence) of the massive irregular migration, Araia (2013) persuasively argued that the exacerbation of youth exodus from post-2000s Eritrea cannot be solely be

⁸ Documenting the precarious economic situation of the returnees, it is noted that “eight years after their return in 1991-1997, former Eritrean refugees were still living with very few assets: only 41 percent of them owned land (against 73 percent before flight) with an average lot size a quarter of the previous average; almost no one owned cattle (66 percent before flight); and only 24 percent owned goats (67 percent before flight) (WB, 2017, p. 107).

⁹ According to the government's interim poverty reduction paper, the country's Poverty Line and Extreme Poverty Line is set to Nakfa 240 per capita/month and Nakfa 150 per capita/month, respectively. As of 2004, an estimated 66% (2.36 million) of the total Eritrean population lives in absolute poverty with less than 60 US cents per day (GSE, 2004, p. 7).

¹⁰ While labor economists estimate the unemployment rate in post-independence Eritrea around 50% (Tewolde, 2008), anecdotal reports produced by the GSE shows that with unemployment rate of just 8.6 %, the country enjoys the lowest unemployment rate in the world (ironically even far lower than the Eritrean migrants' favored destination countries) (Martini, 2015). The payments that national and military service conscripts get are not real salary per se. What the conscripts are getting could be named nominal “pocket money” that does not exceed more than 300 and 500 nakfa per month (\$20-\$33). These payments are hardly meant to sustain conscripts' (and that of their families' life), but rather to merely cover their expenses for cigarettes and very other few things.

¹¹ In post-2000s Eritrea discourses, the Yikealo political and military elites have increasingly rushed into making subjective evaluation of the country's generation. Judging the 1960s-1970s cohorts as the “golden generation”, they dangerously viewed the post-independence youths—the Warsai—as less nationalistic and hence so highly regarded as theirs.

¹² Largely informed by the tense relations Eritrea has with its neighbors, the Eritrean government's emigration policy has been excessively restrictive and mostly unstable and “reactive”. Neighboring African countries' immigration policy (notably that of the Sudan and Ethiopia), by contrast, has been relatively relaxed, and presumably for strategic political calculus very receptive towards Eritrea's national service deserters and evaders.

explicable to the prevailing open-ended national service under the prevailing “frozen conflict”¹³ in the country, but also by the proliferation of multi-million human smuggling and/or TIPs (trafficking in persons) that stretches far beyond the Eritrea-Sudan or Eritrea-Ethiopia borders (USSD, 2018).

Research Findings

Against the backdrop of the literature mentioned above and the controversy circulating among rights groups vs. Eritrean authorities’ position, it would also be appropriate to discuss “what do the Eritrean (transit) migrant collectivities in Sudan say about their ‘irregular’ exit from their homeland?” Very typical to their demographics—who are mainly young and relatively better educated—the majority of the study participants complain of the mandatory open-ended national and military service program that has persisted ever since the country’s entry into the second Ethio-Eritrean war and the subsequent declaration of the *Warsay Ykealo* Development Campaign (WYDC) in 2002. Not surprisingly, the majority of them tend to be either national service deserters (with about 58%) or evaders (42%).

Perhaps indicative of the constriction of life chances in contemporary Eritrea, recently there is an observable spike in the number of minors and to some extent families escaping to neighboring countries. Of the entire respondents who “fully” completed the ENS (Eritrean National Service), they overwhelmingly complain of the “harsh military culture” and “paltry payments” they experienced in several of the governmental and para-governmental workplaces they have been assigned to. Perhaps it is such narratives that have dubbed post-2000s Eritrean migrant collectivities to be regarded as “*Sawa*”¹⁴ refugees” or “millennium refugees”. Bracketing the accuracy of imposing such broad labeling by activists, most of the “subjects in focus” raised various reasons behind their exit from their homeland (see Table 1). Notable among primary reasons for the respondents’ irregular exit include economic reasons, such as job searches; political reasons, such as ENS evasion/desertion and fear of actual or perceived persecution; and social reasons, such as peer influence, parental goading as well as a search for resettlement opportunities under family reunion schemes under Eritrea’s ultra-restrictive emigration policy.

The study participants’ resentment towards the open-ended ENS revolves around, to borrow an eloquent expression from the country’s former diplomat turned into activist-scholar, tortuous call “so much for so little” where the state constantly “relegates their *needs, aspiration, and welfare* to the back burner” (Welde Giorgis, 2014, p. 620). For this reason, over two third of the total respondents contend that the prevailing political system in their homeland has increasingly become unbearable to stay and live a normal life (see Table 2) culminating into the breeding of hopelessness and anomie among them (Hirt & Mohammad, 2013).

¹³ As recently as June 2016, Ethiopia and Eritrea clashed in their contested borders, which worries many Eritrean youths of their safety and security of another possible an all-out inter-state war.

¹⁴ Sawa is one of the major Eritrean defense training centers that is located in the Western Lowlands of the country—the Gash-Barka region. Apart from providing six-months’ long military training for Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) recruits and national conscripts, since 2003 it also simultaneously hosts educational and vocational training centers. All 12th grade students from across the country are thus obliged to complete their high school studies by presenting themselves into this center as part of their national service obligation. Since it is very close to Sudan’s Kassalā State, many youths frequently clandestinely slip into the next border.

Table 1

Respondents' Views about Primary Reasons for Exiting From Eritrea (N=404)

Primary Reason	Frequency	Valid (%)
In search of employment opportunities & better wages	110	27.2
Draft evasion/Military desertion	84	20.7
Peer influence	24	5.9
Fear of Religious persecution	18	4.4
Fear of Political persecution	27	6.8
Parental goading	10	2.4
Family reunification (to join my parents, fiancé/partner)	19	4.7
To seek resettlement and emigration opportunities	22	5.4
For self-Enhancement Purposes (to pursue education/further training)	13	3.3
To have personal freedom or adventure	30	7.5
Transnational processes (Social networks/ Easier communication with relatives and friends)	2	0.6
To accumulate sufficient capital to construct home and/or start my own business	12	3.0
Other	17	4.1
Unstated	16	3.9

Note. Source: Survey Results (End of 2013).

Table 2

The Prevailing Political System in Eritrea Has Increasingly Become Unbearable to Stay and Live in the Fatherland?" (N = 404)

Response	Frequency	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Strongly agree	168	41.5	41.5
Agree	111	27.6	69.1
Uncertain	45	11.2	80.3
Disagree	44	10.8	91.1
Strongly disagree	28	6.9	97.9
Missing data	8	2.1	100.0

Note. Source: Survey Results (End of 2013).

However, it is not only the uncertain political situation or “hopeless stasis” (ICG, 2013) prevailing in post-2000s Eritrea that is “pushing” youths out of their country. So, the country’s is also depressing economic performance and the ever shrinking livelihood opportunities the entire society is confronting. For instance, the gloomy economic performance of the Eritrean national economy, even by regional standards, can be gleaned from the apparent regional economic inequity among members of the Horn of African region. The GDP per capita differences between Eritrea and Sudan attests to such a reality. Indicative of the reeling war-torn Eritrean national economy (Ravinder, 2007), the GDP per capita (as measured by purchasing power parity) score for Eritrea and Sudan has changed from 837 to 689 USD to 1,797 to 1,873 USD, in 2000 and 2013 FY respectively. Concomitantly, attesting to the intimate nature of the political and economic landscape of post-2000s Eritrea, two-thirds of the entire respondents opine that the perilous cross-/trans-border movements that contemporary Eritrean migrants embark on are reflections of the deteriorating economic conditions of their homeland, too (see Table 3).

Table 3

Contemporary Eritrean Irregular Emigrants Hazardous Journeys vs. Homeland Economic Condition

In my opinion, the hazardous journeys that several Eritrean irregular youth migrants embark on are reflections of the disparately deteriorating economic conditions of their country?" (N = 404)

Response	Frequency	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Strongly agree	123	30.6	30.6
Agree	151	37.3	67.9
Uncertain	52	13.0	80.9
Disagree	38	9.4	90.2
Strongly disagree	28	6.8	97.1
Unstated	12	2.9	100.0

Note. Source: Survey Results (End of 2013).

While Eritrean authorities attribute the country's poor economic performance to pre- and post-independence war and endless regional and international conspiracy, some discussants squarely associate it to clear domestic policy failures of the ruling party—Eritrean Front for Justice and Democracy (PFDJ). The discussants thus lament that the Eritrean government's misguided anti-private business policies have predisposed them or their parents to intractable and paralyzing situation towards carrying out smooth and orderly trade and commercial activities¹⁵ that could have enabled them to remain rooted in their homeland. They also underscore that PFDJ's monopoly over the country's economic space coupled with the insurmountable challenge of getting foreign currency (especially US dollars) at a reasonable exchange rate has exposed them to considerable difficulty towards overcoming routine business activity in Eritrea for well over a decade.

Concomitantly, several of the migrant collectivities transiting or being hosted in Sudan's government designated Shagarab Camps and Eastern States' urban spaces underscore that one of the main reasons, other than the perturbing "no-peace, no-war situation" inducing their irregular exit is a search for "descent and fulfilled life". They characteristically point out of their exit as *"ከብ ግደደ አገጃረ ደልየ ወጸኩ"* *b adehy enjera delye wetsi'e* (Literally translated as "exiting in search of food"). Given the fact that 76% of the entire respondents hardly acknowledge of their families' experience with hunger (that lasted for more than a week) since Eritrea's liberation, the "search for food" should not be interpreted at a face value. Implied within such assertion is that many are also leaving their homeland amid considerable economic and political uncertainty. That is, they are vacating their homeland as much in search of employment abroad in order to augment personal savings and family incomes as they are fleeing in search of succor and protection.

Indeed, a question designed in a Likert-scale to probe to what extent the migrants' decision to emigrate from their country has been informed by their desire to maximize their own personal economic gains indicate that almost two out every three of them responded positively (see Table 4). While such motives were certainly well calculated decisions during Sudan's very brief economic boom (1998-2011) that was mostly driven by the foreign direct investment in the oil sector, it was short-lived. In spite of the visible contraction in demand for foreign labor in the construction, service sectors, and the like witnessed ever since the secession of South Sudan, it is paradoxical to see many more Eritreans continue fleeing the country amid Sudan's economic hardship and

¹⁵ Confirming such allegation and how the government's attitude and practice is invariably associated with its ill-fated command national economic model, in an interview held in 1995 with the Economist, a high-ranked PFDJ official has been quoted as lambasting: "The mentality of traders here is to make a tremendous profit at one time. If the traders try to rip off the public and get rich at the expense of everyone else, we make sure commodities are on the market at a reasonable price" (Gebrekidan, 2006).

organize West-bound secondary movements towards “fortress Europe”. In such context, the interviewed Eritrean authorities were quick to charge how EU’s deployment of blanket refugee status granting to Eritreans and their “social welfare chauvinism”¹⁶ is luring their youths to try their luck.

Table 4

To What Extent Respondents’ Emigration Was Informed by Their Desire to Maximize Their Personal Gains (N = 404)

Response	Frequency	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Strongly agree	148	36.6	36.6
Agree	110	27.3	63.9
Uncertain	43	10.6	74.5
Disagree	59	14.7	89.2
Strongly disagree	34	8.5	97.6
Missing data	10	2.4	100.0

Note. Source: Survey Results (End of 2013).

Anyhow, most of the study participants unequivocally underscore that their clandestine “exit” from their homeland has been informed by the desire to move to countries with better security, increased opportunities, and its associated better living conditions. Partly lining with the Eritrean authorities’ narrative, the much touted and controversial “Pastoral Letter” by the four Catholic Bishops of Eritrea perceptively underscores,

We must acknowledge that frankly the attraction of a better standard of living abroad has ended up creating unrealistic hopes and unrealizable illusions that in their turn induce our youth and their parents to an indiscriminate use of options, for example, unplanned, ill-prepared and even false marriages. There are also those who allow themselves to be seduced by the hope of a permanently subsidized life [*in the prosperous western welfare countries and use Sudan as a stringboard towards that end by*] refusing to look for any kind of alternatives at home. (Tsfamariam, Osman, Yeibio, & Hagos, 2014, emphasis added)

To warp up, the findings of this study that is heavily informed by triangulation of data sources demonstrates that the “uncertain” political situation and “gloomy” economic outlook of the post-2000s Eritrea has unmistakably induced and perpetuated its massive youth exodus the last decade and so. That is, as much as the youth-unfriendly political developments (digression) that post-2000s Eritrea is experiencing (that in itself is further aggravated by regional and international political calculus) is the principal precipitating causal factor for the flight of the country’s much needed labor and brain drain. The “depressing” economic performance of the post-war Eritrea compared with the actual or perceived relative “greener opportunities” in neighboring countries or elsewhere has also convinced the youths that there is nothing they could lose in trying their luck of engaging into an irregular cross-/trans-national migratory movements.

While post-2000 Eritrea’s increasingly repressive domestic political climate that exacerbate the outflow of its youths to neighboring and far off-countries cannot be under-estimated, three other critically important factors are often downplayed by analysts. One, perhaps as part of the regional countries’ “mutual interference” into the domestic political affairs of their neighbors and the subtle “calculated kindness” (Loescher & Scanlan,

¹⁶ Various social welfare benefits for refugees in Europe is somewhere between 400 and 600 Euro which according to the official exchange rate is between 5,000 and 8,000 Nakfa (DIS, 2014, p. 55). A cursory comparison of the benefits Eritrean migrants who safely reach to Europe get against an Eritrean minister’s salary shows that the former is 125 % to 200% higher than the latter. As a deterrence measure to their flawed immigration policies that has become known for its alleged “refugee fatigue”, several Western European countries are nowadays declaring that their doors are “closed for those fleeing poverty, but war!” (De Haas, 2008).

1986) that they show towards hosting mixed migrant flows, the neighboring countries' either positive discrimination (as witnessed in Ethiopia's self-assisted urban refugee scheme exclusively to Eritreans) and Sudan's stretching of its "welcoming mat". Two, as various US State Department's regional Trafficking in Persons report attest, the neighboring countries' demonstrated lack of the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking of Eritreans (USSD, 2018). Three, un-accommodative international environment to Eritrea's ruling elites (including the imposition of what the UNSC calls "smart sanctions" since 23 December 2009) have all compounded the disproportionate "exodus" of the country's youths.

To this effect, the available evidence indicate that it is really problematic to precisely categorize all post-2000s Eritrean cross-/trans-national migrant collectivities transiting through/living in Sudan into "refugee" or "asylee" labelling. While there are many who really seek and undoubtedly deserve protection under international refugee laws and protocols, still some others are simply undocumented immigrants. Well aware of the challenges inherent in the credibility of Refugee Status Determination (RSD) of asylum seekers (especially those with "religious imposer" (Kagan, 2010) as well as the uncomfortable labelling of migrants (Zetter, 1991; Haddad, 2004), the evidences about the study group appear to share more or less similar features and challenges as their fellow migrants from the Greater Horn of African region (RMSS, 2014; Martín & Bonfanti, 2015). Probably one unique feature about contemporary Eritrean migrants that stands at odds with the region's mixed migrants is the universal, compulsory, and open-ended national and military service program they experience. Akin to Robert Cohen's "*net helots*", i.e., undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, guest workers, and over stayers—as a shorthand representation to the so-journeying "second generation" (Treiber, 2009a, 2013; Hepner, 2015) Eritrean migrant collectivities transiting through/living in Sudan, the researcher prefers to brand them as immigrants-refugees or hybrid refugees. The invocation of such hyphenated concept is not only meant to capture the mixed nature of the "subjects" in focus' irregular "exit" from their homeland for varying reasons and capricious motivations, but also to emphasize their agency in overcoming institutional constraints in the transit/hosting country as well in securing protection from the international refugee regime. Indeed an extended participant observation of contemporary Eritrean migrant collectivities (both among camp-based refugees/asylum seekers and urban-based migrant collectivities) clearly demonstrated that they are increasingly trying to make the best out of their new constraining circumstances. They are behaving as active agents who attempt to optimally use whatever information, resources, networks, experiences, and values at their disposal and ultimately wield some sort of manipulation and influence to the hosting countries' and the refugee regime's constraining administrative practices, policies and institutions (Assal, 2004; Kibreab, 2004).

The core argument posited from this study is thus while the prevailing political situation in post-2000s Eritrea does certainly play a critical role in the massive youth "exodus", the border conflict(s) and its looming "no-war-no-peace" situation, and Eritrean authorities' poor governance records should not overshadow the other highly intricate factors that serve as the driving forces or instigators of such unregulated cross-/trans-border mobility. Equally important in the precipitating causal factors to the phenomenon is the overlooked economic factors, such as structural unemployment and under-employment of the country's mostly young population, inadequate salary/wages that hardly matches with the country's higher inflation rate, and widespread grinding chronic poverty rate (GSE, 2004; CPRC, 2009).

Viewing the spectacular irregular cross-/trans-national movements of youths from post-2000s Eritrea to Sudan from a social-problems approach, the study therefore holds that it is erroneous to attribute the phenomena to a single factor (so much so to what dissident groups and the largely diaspora-based political

entrepreneurs prefer to call “the ill-fated totalitarian political system in the country”). Puzzled by the explanation that chiefly attributes the phenomenon to the country’s political conditions (such as “the government’s cavalier attitude towards human rights and democratization”—*a la* Kibreab (2007, p. 99), the study belabors to document how the phenomenon is the result of multiple and highly overlapping factors of which domestic political and economic woes stand out as the most critical ones. Conquering with Martini and Bonfanti’s (2015) observation that cross-/trans-boundary migrations in the HAC context are characterized by economic and political pushers and the notion of “mixed migration” in the region has gained considerable currency, the author argues that most Eritrean “millennium refugees” are driven as much by “security risks as by economic despair”¹⁷ unfolding within their country. What is unique within the context Eritrean mixed migratory movements is however its extended national service scheme that forces a sizeable of its youths to “vote on their foot” amid their country’s highly restrictive emigration policy and restrictive life chances.

The main tenet of this study is thus youth hemorrhage from post-liberation Eritrea to Sudan and elsewhere should be viewed as a process that is mediated by internal political and socio-economic dynamics of the Eritrean society, the migrants’ human agency as well as some regional and international politico-economic factors. The study also holds that if genuine solution to the worrisome massive irregular outflow of Eritreans is thought, balanced political-economic analysis that attempts to comprehensively scrutinize the precipitating causal factors should be the starting point.

Concluding Remarks

Scholars have advanced several competing explanations that account for the “root driving cause”¹⁸ as well as determinants (including contributing factors that perpetuate) of international migration. In spite of the multi-causality of cross-/trans-national movements of people in the troubled Horn of African region sporadically emphasized by scholars (Barigaber, 2006; Campbell, 2009; UNEP, 2011; Warner & Afifi, 2013; RMMS, 2014; Martini, 2015), it is really problematic for many researchers and rights-based organizations to attribute the complex nature of contemporary irregular “exodus” from post-2000s Eritrea to no more than a single factor. The rights-based narrative has so far proved less effective not only in accommodating to other factors that compound Eritrea’s youth migration challenges. Its purported uncompromising position has pushed Eritrean politico-military elites’ isolationist and non-cooperative stand on some issues that matter at regional and international levels (Bereketeab, 2009). Although Eritrea’s diplomatic community are gradually overhauling such policy option and trying to warmup their relationship with Brussels¹⁹ (Plaut, 2016), they have yet to show genuine commitment and bold initiatives that would redress the disproportionate irregular

¹⁷ Having gained considerable traction since mid-2000, the concept of mixed migration blurs the distinction between forced displacement and economic migration. Using this conceptual framework, migration scholars identify two groups of forced migrants where economic factors play considerable role. There are those migrants “who initially stayed in a war zone see their economic situation gradually deteriorates until an exogenous shock tips the balance and forces them out: although the economic shock is the proximate trigger, the conflict remains the underlying driver”. The other group of migrants, by contrast, “flee a combination of political oppression and the absence of prospects in their country of origin” (WB, 2017, p. 50).

¹⁸ The notion of “root driving cause” has actually recently come under attack by some researchers for the following limitations: (i) it does not provide a basis for differentiating between different groups of people with different needs and opportunities to move; and (ii) it fails to account for onward migration (Collyer, Ahmed, Breines, Iaria, & Pascucci, 2015).

¹⁹ On 11 December 2015, EU Commissioner for International Co-operation and Development—Neven Mimica—announced that the Union intended to provide €200 million worth of aid for Eritrea. Notwithstanding rights-based bickering against such decision (Plaut, 2014; Concerned Scholars’ Press Release, 2015) and the Better Migration Management strategy the EU is fully engaged into, politicians and policy-makers are belatedly recognizing that denouncing the economic dimension of irregular migratory movements would be short-sighted at best and counter-productive at worst.

cross-/trans-national movements of the country's most reproductive and productive members—the youths.

The political factor that transpired in post-2000s Eritrea and its role in inducing and exacerbating Eritrean youths' emigration rate from their homeland (especially as regards to conscientious objectors, such as Pentecostals and much of the grievances aired by the literary community), can hardly be dismissed for accounting the plight of many of the country's "wandering" citizens who are seeking refuge or succor in neighboring and far off countries. Yet the role of political factors into the gigantic emigration rate of Eritreans is just half of the story. That is, GSE's infringements into citizens' basic rights and other political challenges such as the "frozen conflicts" that post-2000s Eritrea is enmeshed into cannot comprehensively capture the story. Nor is there any guarantee that addressing the political factor part of the equation alone could provide a panacea to the plight of irregular youth emigrants that the country is resentfully going through.

Economic challenges in the form of acute poverty (GSE, 2004), structural unemployment and under-employment problems (Tewolde, 2008), and the overall ailing national economy that is typified by ever deteriorating citizens' living standards (including the rationing of basic commodities especially among the urban based Eritreans) also deserve equal attention in any genuine efforts towards objective and reliable analysis about contemporary Eritrean irregular youth hemorrhages to the neighboring African countries and further afield. What compounds the country's youth migration challenges further is the relative rapid urbanization rate it recorded since the dawn of the century. For instance, from 2005 to 2010 Eritrea's urban growth rate (5.22%) was the second highest (after Burundi's 5.75%) in the Greater Horn of African region (IOM-ACP Observatory on Migration (2011, p. 9). Such rapid urbanization process amid ever shrinking livelihood opportunity (not to mention the government's halting of housing construction activities in most cities and towns) cannot be underestimated in pushing the youths to seek a decent life elsewhere. As one anthropologist with an extensive field work experience in Eritrea correctly observes, "The advent of renewed war in 1998 resulted in a marked slowdown of developmental achievements. Many state activities came to a standstill while large parts of the population became economically worse off" (Müller, 2012, p. 797).

In spite of the irrefutable evidences confirming the economic push and pull factors that are initiating and perpetuating youth hemorrhage out of Eritrea, activists and some scholars have yet to acknowledge it. Dismissive of the Eritrean government authorities' views of likening the country's "phenomenal" youth efflux as "labor-/economic-migrants" as either "face saving rhetoric" or the ruling party cadres' attempts of "political correctness" in such assertions, they rather hold the GSE's governance deficit as the "root" cause. Again, even if one can't be indifferent to such critical voices altogether, several Eritrea-based Western ambassadors have subsequently confirmed to various fact finding missions of the economic factors behind the youth hemorrhage from post-independence Eritrea. For instance, the former US Ambassador to Eritrea forthrightly wrote in a *WikiLeaks Cables*:

While some [*of today's Eritrean refugees who are fleeing the country in drives*] are genuinely persecuted by the GSE (religious dissidents, too successful in the private sector, close association with foreigners, etc.), the vast majority simply want to escape poverty, or, in the case of the young, avoid the grinding labor and poor wages of interminable national service. (McMullen, 2009, *italics* are paraphrased emphasis)

In the final analysis, the monolithic interpretations expounded either by champions of political or economic explanations to the very complex irregular cross-/trans-border movements are counter-productive. As Paul Harrison in the "Preface" of his celebrated book *The Third Revolution: Population, Environment and A*

Sustainable World that won a Population Institute Global Media Award has perceptively argued:

It is always tempting to oversimplify, to polarize, and to reduce everything to one or two sets of polar opposites.... Simplification reduces the work required of the brain. It satisfies our desire to belong to the club, to carry a banner or a label. It provides good headlines, makes good speeches. But the world is complex. We have to simplify to some extent. But if we oversimplify, there is no hope of understanding the world properly, no hope of co-operating in tackling its many problems. If we don't cooperate, if we tackle only a few items and leave others to run life, we don't get very far. (Harrison, 1994, p. x)

It has been the intent of this paper reconciling the stands of the GSE that views contemporary youth hemorrhage from the country owing to the less rosy economic situation of the country, and hence, the call to treat them as economic/labor migrants—vis-à-vis the rights-based organizations' claim that "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violation in the name of defending the integrity of the state and ensuring its self-sufficiency" (COIE, 2015) as root driving force behind youth exodus from Eritrea. Finding a middle ground solution that attends to and accommodates the views of both the GSE and that of the rights-based organizations who note "ascribing their decision to leave solely to economic reasons is to ignore the dire situation of human rights in Eritrea and the very real suffering of its people" (COIE, 2015) would thus be a healthy way towards ending the incrimination and counter-blame exercises exchanged between the two groups' striking divergence in opinion and diagnosis of the problem.

This paper has modestly demonstrated that the primary reasons for post-independence Eritrean youths' escape from their homeland is rather a reflection of highly complex, interwoven, multidimensional causes, and contributing factors. In line with the emerging empirical evidences, the existing diagnosis and proposed workable solution to the massive irregular youth cross-/trans-boundary movements from post-2000s Eritrea has to be re-visited by scholars, politicians, and policy-makers. Such renewed stand should openly interrogate analysts' excessive preoccupation with a controversial debate that clumps into whether the gigantic youth hemorrhage from post-2000 Eritrea is a matter of politics or economics (as if these two propelling factors are separate entities operating in a vacuum) that unfolded (and continues to do so) in a country that has collided into a ceaseless conflicts with its neighbors. In the first place, such monolithic interpretation fails to recognize and appreciate the complexity of the matter. What is more worrisome is that such uncompromising bifurcated view also drifts away from proposing workable solution to the predicament among all stakeholders. It merely plays politics over the fate of the youths' life.

To overcome such shortcoming, a systems-thinking of the situation would give a better understanding of the phenomenon and gives higher chances of informed problem-solving edge to all concerned bodies and stakeholders. Indeed genuine analysis of the problem of irregular youth exodus from contemporary Eritrea (by extension its implications to the migrants themselves, the source, and transit/hosting countries) would necessitate a comprehensive and accurate examination of the intricate factors at play. As one of my field work research interlocutors has actually pitifully pointed out,

So you came all the way from Khartoum to study the causes of the current mass youth exodus from Eritrea to the Sudan. Poor you are!?! I am afraid, in no time your hair shall turn into grey studying its complexity.... But suffice to tell you in few words, it is a reflection of the multifaceted ailments that our post-independence Eritrea is going through and thus no single book worth its name, could even allow you to sufficiently analyze and satisfactorily document the unfortunate situation that brought us into this state of affairs. (An Eritrean refugee (Re-cycler) at Shagarab I, Interview with the researcher, November 10, 2013)

As the above-mentioned verbatim quote clearly underscores and some in the policy circles are gradually coming to realize, the root driving factors to the massive youth hemorrhage from post-2000s Eritrea can hardly be attributed to a single factor. Neither could it be single handedly be attributed to political woes nor to economic changes and hardships in the migrants' homeland where the Eritrean government is to be singlehandedly blamed. The phenomenon is a reflection of the youth-unfavorable political situations in the post-2000s Eritrea and the manifestation of state of the economy of the country as much as it is a reflection of migrants' considered calculations of actual or perceived better economic opportunities as well as safety and security considerations. Thus, it would be prudent for all concerned authorities and stakeholders who are genuinely concerned towards curtailing the degrading and perilous irregular cross-/trans-border journeys of post-2000s Eritrean youths to conjointly address the political and economic situation that is chiefly a manifestation of "no-war, no peace" situation in Eritrea.

Eritrea's delay to democratic transition and creating sound national economy should thus be treated hand-in-hand if they are to bring any meaningful and sustainable solution towards stemming and/or managing irregular cross-/trans-boundary emigration. Such measures would need to start by ending the unproductive accusative games and start a fresh chapter of a more fruitful engagement where listening to the views, opinions, and suggestions of concerned bodies and entities becomes its trademark. To this effect, as the root cause and driving to contemporary youth emigration from post-independence Eritrea is a multi-faceted and complex issue, genuine solution to the prevailing cross-/trans-national movements of people requires, as RMSS (2014) and Martín and Bonfanti (2015) rightly acknowledge "adopting a multi-tiered approach" to the analysis of the problem at hand and putting in place appropriate and reasonably workable ameliorative measures.

It is also long overdue that the international community in general and the USA in particular step up efforts to, what US veteran diplomat—Hank Cohen—has branded as "bringing Eritrea in from the cold" for the sake of regional stability, deliberately craft space for the region's people to establish dignified life in their homelands and ultimately to bring them on the path to peaceful and sustainable development. Apart from assisting the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa region overcome the deterioration of their livelihood resilience due to recurrent drought and perennial famine, it is also morally and politically expedient for the affluent countries to assist them enjoy peace dividends. As one Eritreanist scholar has aptly put it,

[Concerned authorities and stakeholders] should move aggressively to end the confrontation between Eritrea and Ethiopia [as well as that of Eritrea and Djibouti]. In terms of historical engagement or current influence, no former colonial power, nor any other state or multilateral institution, is able to play this role. And no other objectives can be effectively dealt with until this issue is taken off the table.... [Thus, first and foremost, there is a need] to pressure Ethiopia to implement the Boundary Commission findings as they are, with no hedging. It also necessitates offering incentives to both sides to make the ending of their confrontation not only palatable but also essential to each of their constituencies. (Connell, 2009, p. 144, emphasis added)

The restoration of peace, stability, tranquility, and promoting security and development in the "troubled" HACs should however be accompanied with well-planned and reasonably financed measures towards the de-mobilization of armed groups, the creation of livelihood opportunities to IDPs as well as facilitation of voluntary repatriation of the new-case load" Eritreans (including the recyclers) and the protracted refugees who are either languishing in Sudan's substandard government designated camps (operating or closed ones) or spontaneously living in the country's urban landscapes.

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