

Parents in Somaliland are going to great lengths to stop their children from migrating to Europe

Nimo-ilhan Ali unveils one of the strategies used by Somali parents to prevent their children from undertaking the risky journey to Europe.

Discussions about the ‘**migration crisis**’ has largely been framed within the confinements of what European politicians and governments are doing or should be doing to halt the arrivals of a large number of people via the Mediterranean. Rarely have these discussions reflected the perspectives of the countries which people are leaving, especially of families of those arriving in Europe.

The salient assumption is that the journey to Europe for one or more household members is part and parcel of households’ livelihood strategy – a way of spreading risks and diversifying households’ incomes – where the potential of future remittance receipts is an important element of consideration.^[1] For this reason, households in the home countries of potential migrants are assumed to actively encourage and willingly spend large amounts of money on the journey to Europe – a precarious journey facilitated by smugglers (and in some instances human traffickers) and fraught with dangers and risks to life.

The Somaliland case overwhelmingly rejects these assumptions. In Somaliland the journey to Europe is not a household strategy but rather a lonely affair: young people, mostly men aged 18 to 21 but some as young as 14, often leave without informing their families. As a result, families are actively and proactively trying to find ways to stop their young from leaving. This brief article captures one such strategy that parents in Somaliland are using to try to keep their children (mainly sons) at home.



Photo Credit: Nasra Jama

A prominent feature in the streets of Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, is the large number of taxis driven by mostly young men. What’s interesting about these taxis, is not how numerous they are or the apparent youth of their drivers, but the reasons why they are in the streets of Hargeisa in the first place.

These taxis are referred locally as “hooyo ha tahriibin” roughly translating as a mother begging, “my son do not tahriib”.^[1] *Tahriib* is an Arabic word that is associated with illegal activities such as

smuggling. In the contemporary Somali lexicon *tahriib* has been adapted to refer to a specific form of emigration involving young Somali men (and to a lesser extent women) leaving for Europe via Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, and then across the Mediterranean Sea.^[iii]

Although accurate statistics are rare, incidences of young people going on *tahriib* are widespread in Somaliland. Many households are directly or indirectly impacted by this migratory trend. In our research in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, one respondent indicated, ‘... it is difficult to find a home that has not been impacted by *tahriib* ... If it is not your child, it is a child of your brother or sister.’

The prevalence of young people going on *tahriib* in Somaliland is to a large extent corroborated by statistics on the number of Somalis (all Somalis not just those hailing from Somaliland) arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean. According to Frontex,^[iii] the number of Somalis detected entering Europe has been on the rise since 2012 (see Fran Quarterly Reports).^[iv] During the first six months of 2015, Somalis were among the top five nationalities crossing the Mediterranean accounting for five percent of all sea arrivals.^[v] So far in 2016 (1st of January to 22nd of May 2016), Somalis are occupying the third top spot accounting for nine percent of all sea arrivals into Italy (33,907 people have arrived in Italy by sea so far in 2016).^[vi] Even though the majority of Somalis enter Europe through the Central Mediterranean Route (crossing the Mediterranean from Libya), the number of Somalis detected using the Eastern Mediterranean Route (crossing the Mediterranean from Turkey) increased in 2015.

Although Somaliland has experienced different forms of international migration in the past and the Somaliland diaspora (both near and far) continue to play an important role in the social and economic development of this internationally unrecognised country, *tahriib* is considered a national disaster and is a cause of widespread community outcry. Awareness campaigns to discourage young people from embarking on *tahriib* are prevalent. The main reason behind this community uproar and efforts to discourage *tahriib* is that in contrast to prior forms of emigration, *tahriib* has huge material and non-material costs not only to the young person undertaking the journey but also to family members left behind.

Similar to trends elsewhere, smugglers facilitate the journey to Europe from Somaliland. These smugglers operate a *leave now – pay later* regime, which means young people do not need to have any money upfront to leave. This system has not only reduced the initial costs of international migration, but it has also removed the need for young people to inform their families of the impending departure. Removing the initial direct costs also means any young person wanting to leave Somaliland is able to do so. It is thus not uncommon for *tahriib* to be used by young people as a ‘way out’ of a wide range of issues they face including an argument with a parent or sibling.

Although smugglers operate the *leave now – pay later* regime, *tahriib* is far from a free journey. Somewhere during the journey a debt collector, widely referred to in Somaliland as the “Magafe”, holds young people hostage until their families in Somaliland pay the required amount of money. Often families are given deadlines and failure to meet them can result in dire consequences to the young person being held. Accounts of young people dying while in captivity are numerous in Somaliland.

In our research we found that on average families spend about USD 7,661 on *tahriib*-related expenses including ransom. In an environment where GDP per capital is a mere USD 348,^[vii] coming up with such a large amount is a huge undertaking for households. Families in Somaliland utilise multiple means to raise funds. Although reaching out to relatives both in Somaliland and abroad is the most utilised avenue, families often have to also use other means to raise the required amounts. Borrowing money and stress-selling of key assets such as land and livestock, at prices below the market value, are not uncommon.

The financial impacts of *tahriib* to households have far-reaching consequences. Having to pay back loans (which the majority of households reported to pay back by monthly instalments) has

direct implications to household's monthly incomes and their ability to afford crucial expenses such as school fees and health care. The sale of key assets also increases households' vulnerability to future livelihood shocks.

By buying "hooyo ha tahriibin" cars for their sons, parents in Somaliland are hoping to avoid the huge cost associated with tahriib. They hope that these taxis would provide crucial income earning opportunities for their sons and in the process discourage them from going on tahriib. Parents also realise investing in these cars works out cheaper than the money they would have to spend if their sons do go on tahriib (these imported cars are secondhand with apices in Hargeisa ranging between USD 2,000 to 3,000).

It is not clear how effective this strategy is especially since the reasons that compel young people to tahriib are not limited to economic ones. Furthermore, given the large number of "hooyo ha tahriibin" taxis in the streets of Hargeisa, it is also not clear how profitable this endeavour is. However, what is clear is that households in Somaliland are not encouraging their young to embark on the dangerous journey to Europe. Instead, they are proactively looking for ways to halt the trend. Buying their sons "hooyo ha tahriibin", regardless of its effectiveness is one such strategy.

Nimo-ilhan Ali is a doctoral researcher at SOAS.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Endnotes:

[i] This phrase can also mean "my daughter do not tahriib". However, the "hoyo ha tahriibin" strategy is exclusively directed to young men. For example in the literature on labour migration where the potential of remittance receipts plays an important role in the household decision making process behind the emigration of a family member (see for example, extensive discussion in Hein de Haas 2007 paper "Remittances, Migration and Social Development: A conceptual Review of the Literature.")

[ii] Although going to Europe via Libya is prominently referred to as tahriib, there are a number of other destinations and routes that young people from the Somali regions take which can also be referred as tahriib, i.e. movements to Southern Africa and across the Red sea onto Yemen and the Gulf. However, within the Somaliland context, tahriib is largely used to refer to movements to Europe using the predominant route via Libya.

[iii] A European agency responsible for the management of the external borders of the member states of the European Union established in October 2004

[iv] Frontex, "FRAN Quarterly" (Warsaw. Poland.: FRONTEX, March 2016); Frontex, "FRAN Quarterly" (Warsaw. Poland.: FRONTEX, April 2015); Frontex, "FRAN Quarterly" (Warsaw. Poland.: FRONTEX, April 2014); Frontex, "FRAN Quarterly" (Warsaw. Poland.: FRONTEX, May 2013); Frontex, "FRAN Quarterly" (Warsaw. Poland.: FRONTEX, May 2012).

[v] UNHCR, "The Sea Route to Europe: The Mediterranean Passage in the Age of Refugees" (UNHCR. The UN Refugee Agency, July 2015).

[vi] See <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> accessed 24th of May 2016

[vii] World Bank, “The Somaliland Economic Conference on Growth and Unemployment” (Conference on Growth and Unemployment, Hargeisa, January 29, 2014).

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