

Border Massacres: The Saudi Ethiopian Migrant Killings

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We know what the regime is like. Starving a country, bombing its hospitals and strafing its schools has been minor fare for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The population of Yemen has found this out to their colossal cost. Add to this the killing of dissident journalists, the enthusiastic employment of capital punishment, and an assortment of other merry brutalities, the House of Saud comes across as a fine specimen of barbaric endeavour. At least, as many of their supporters will say, they like international sporting events, and are willing to throw money at, if not completely purchase, full events.

The killing of hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers attempting to cross the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023 on what is sometimes termed the "Eastern Route" or "Yemeni Route", adds another notch to the belt of bloodstained achievements for Riyadh. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW),

"Saudi officials are killing hundreds of women and children out of view of the rest of the world while they spend billions on sports-washing to try to improve their image."

This is all the more galling for the fact that such human travellers must already encounter the dangers of the sea route from the Horn of Africa to Yemen, where they transit through to Saudi Arabia.

HRW's ["They Fired Upon Us Like Rain": Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border](#), is a self-explanatory document of brutal recounting by the human rights organisation, based on the interviews of 42 Ethiopian and asylum seekers. In addition to the interviews, HRW also based its report on findings drawn from an examination of 350 videos and photographs which were posted on social media platforms.

The examination had been conducted by members of the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims. In terms of injuries, IFEG members reached the conclusion that some exhibited "clear patterns

consistent with the explosion of munitions with capacity to produce heat and fragmentation”; others had “characteristics consistent with gunshot wounds”.

The 2023 report by the organisation notes some staggering instances of violence against those seeking refuge.

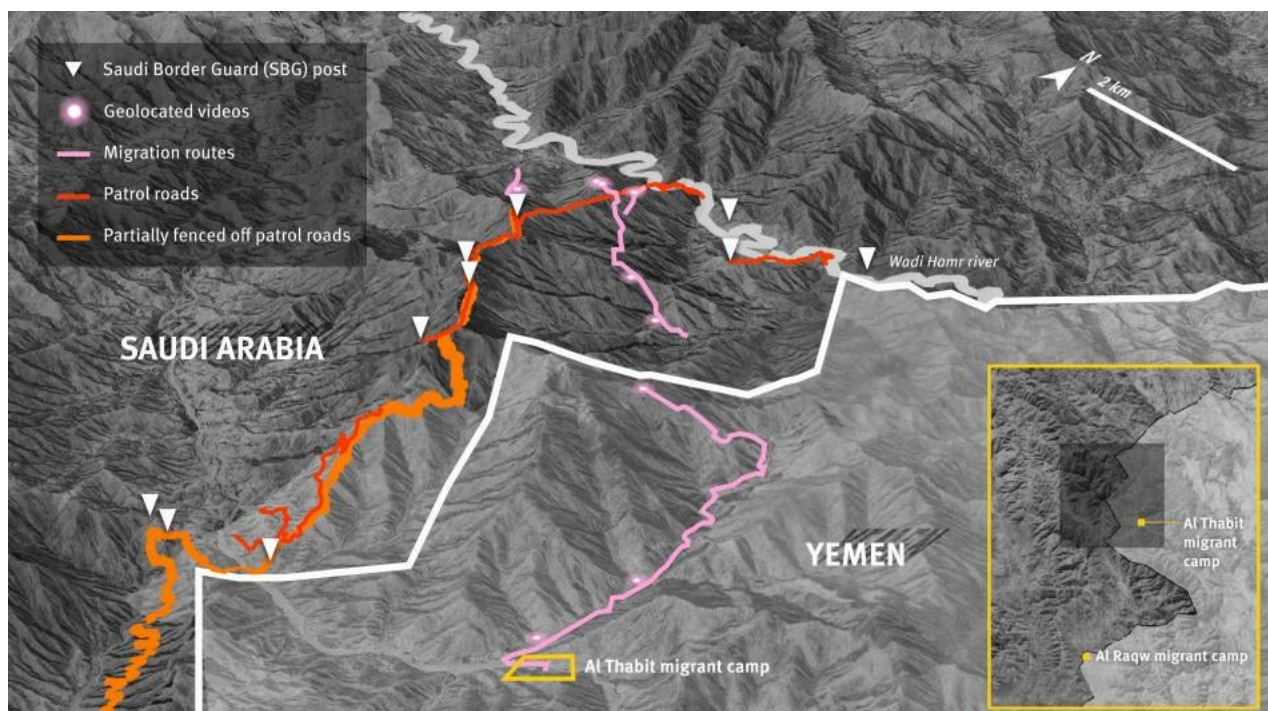
“People travelling in groups, from four to five people to up to several hundred describe being attacked by mortar projectiles and other explosive weapons by Saudi border guards once they had crossed the border from Yemen into Saudi Arabia.”

The allegations are biting in their cruelty, and bring to mind the fact that killings of this sort have happened before along this notorious route. Saudi border guards, it would seem, went so far as to deploy an array of weapons against such migrants, showing a keen interest targeting Ethiopians. Some 750,000 live and work in the kingdom. Movement through the borders is based on the less than scrupulous calculations and account keeping of smugglers.

Those interviewed in the camp of Saada, base for tens of thousands awaiting their chance to enter Saudi Arabia, [note how](#) Saudi border guards tended to patrol the border equipped with “large vehicles” that could have been rocket launchers.

“Many migrants,” the report also notes, “said they saw cameras tracking their movements mounted on what looked like ‘street lamps’ on the Saudi side of the border.”

Some of the brutalities are calculatingly perverse. According to HRW, some Saudi border guards dared to discriminate, bothering to first ask “survivors in which limb of their body they preferred to be shot, before shooting them at close range.” Such viciousness sounds boardroom, spreadsheet and planned, which is exactly the sort of matter that should leave a trail right to the Kingdom’s central authorities. But it could also be burgeoning sadism at work, an instant where the powerful can determine what bit of maiming might excite them.



3D model of likely Saudi border guard posts and patrol roads near fences identified with satellite

imagery near the migration route from the migrant camp of Al Thabit in Saada Governorate, Yemen, into Saudi Arabia. Graphic © Human Rights Watch

For Ethiopians moving through the precarious route, the circumstances of misery have been frequent. While Riyadh engages in its own complement of viciousness, the Yemeni guards have also [had a hand](#) in raping and torturing asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa. Houthi forces have not been averse to targeting immigration centres in Sana'a.

The spectacle recounted by HRW is grotesque. But so are acts involving the turning back of refugee-laden boats or repulsing migrant vessels in the Mediterranean, and conspiring to frustrate the international right to asylum which has been in print since 1951. Little wonder that little mention was made of the killings when [they were made aware](#) to envoys from France, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden and the European Union, not to mention the Biden administration. (The US State Department [insists](#) that it “quickly engaged senior Saudi officials to express our concern” on receiving news on the gruesome details.)

In August 2001, the Australian government, a most eminent practitioner in the field of subverting international refugee law, did not deploy rocket launchers against those seeking asylum off Christmas Island on the Norwegian vessel, the *MV Tampa*. But they did deploy fully armed members of the Special Air Services regiment, an elite force that would go on to, some years later, inflict atrocities upon Afghans in an unwinnable war.

This HRW Report adds another bloodied entry to the chronicles of the Kingdom's brutality. The organisation claims that the killings continue. The sanguinary story is a telling one for those who continue to conduct relations with Riyadh without murmur or concern, delighted by the riches of its Sovereign Wealth Fund. Its officials know all too well that cash and the expediency of security softens a prickly conscience.

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Featured image: A video published on TikTok on December 4, 2022 shows a group of roughly 47 migrants, 37 of whom appear to be women, walking along a steep slope inside Saudi Arabia on the trail used to cross from the migrant camp of Al Thabit.

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