

Education and Conflict Review



Education, Peace and Development in Somali Society

Edited by
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Centre for Education and International Development
UCL Institute of Education

Going on Tahriib: Young Somalis and the risky journey to Europe

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In Somaliland and Puntland ‘going on tahriib’ has become a trend within the youth population. Tahriib is an Arabic word that has gained huge prominence in the Somali circles. In the contemporary Somali lexicon tahriib has been adapted to refer to a specific form of emigration – mostly to Europe via the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean.

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Although accurate statistics are rare, perceptions on the ground suggest that a large number of young Somali men and to a lesser extent, women, some as young as fourteen, embark on tahriib using one predominant route via Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya and across the Mediterranean into Europe. This route is known as the Central Mediterranean Route and is mainly used by people from the Horn of Africa (including Eritreans). This journey is fraught with dangers and incidents of young Somalis perishing in the desert and in the Mediterranean are pervasive and widely acknowledged locally.

In both Somaliland and Puntland, incidents of young people going on tahriib has caused huge community uproar and efforts to halt the trend carried out by households, civil societies, religious and government institutions, are common. This uproar raises a number of puzzling questions. First, given that the two Somali regions have experienced numerous waves of international migration in the past, why is tahriib now causing such a commotion? Second, since a large part of the Somali population in the Horn of Africa depends on remittances for their livelihoods, and since the diaspora in general have and continue to play prominent roles in the post-war development of the two regions, why is going to Europe seen to be vigorously discouraged?

This brief text explores the above questions by examining the features of tahriib that sets this journey apart from prior forms of emigration. The article draws from a new report by the author, *Going on tahriib: The causes and consequences of Somali youth migration to Europe (2016)*, based on the findings of a household survey conducted in Somaliland and Puntland in June and July 2015.

Profile of travellers and the leave now – pay later scheme

In contrast to prior forms of emigration, tahriib is exclusively a preoccupation of dhalinyarada [youth]. The majority are young men aged 18 to 21 although a significant minority embark on the journey before they are 18 years old. Given this age profile, many drop out of secondary school and university to embark on tahriib.

Tahriib is also exclusively facilitated by smugglers operating in major towns in Somaliland and Puntland and throughout the route. On the ground, smugglers operate a leave now-pay later scheme, which means young people do not need to have money upfront to go on tahriib. The leave now-pay later system is a creative strategy employed by smugglers to remove a key obstacle that their potential customers face: lack of credit. Since there are no credit facilities that issue loans to young people, and since income earning opportunities for young people are rare, removing the initial financial requirement significantly lowers the direct cost and subsequently removes a crucial barrier to international migration. Any young person wanting to leave could in effect leave. This has made tahriib a ‘way out’ of a wide range of challenges that young people face.

A lonely endeavour

An important feature of tahriib is that the decision to embark on this hazardous journey is largely an individual affair. This is in contrast to assumptions in mainstream labour migration models, for instance, where international migration is often seen as a household livelihood strategy, or as a way of spreading risks and diversifying household incomes. Within tahriib, other household members are not involved in the decision-making process and are often caught by surprise when a family member leaves. This is because those going on tahriib employ a wide range of strategies to avoid detection.

Not involving other household members in the decision making process is to a large extent made possible by the existence of the leave now—pay later regime. Not having to worry about the initial finances not only lowers costs associated with tahriib, but also removes the need to involve other household members. This is particularly important since other household members would most likely try to stop the individual from leaving, owing to the dangers associated with the journey and the huge financial cost bound to befall the family at a later stage.

Finding the ransom money

Although young people embark on the journey without having to pay anything upfront, tahriib is not a free journey. The leave now-pay later system merely delays the payment. At some point during the long journey (often somewhere between Sudan and Libya) young people are held hostage by a Magafe – a sort of debt collector – until their families back home pay the required ransom.

While household members are not involved in the decision to go on tahriib, they quickly become involved once they realise that their family member on tahriib is in danger, and before too long they will be contacted by a Magafe, who will be making the call to demand ransom. The Magafe not only tells the family how much to pay, but also gives them a deadline for when the ransom has to be received.

On average, households pay about USD 7,700 on ransom and other expenses incurred during tahriib. Given that the GPD per capita in Somaliland, for instance, is only about USD 348, the question here is how do households manage to raise such huge amounts in relatively short period of time?

Households utilise desperate and disparate means to raise the required finances. From mobilising kinship connections both locally and abroad – a crucial system of support for Somalis – to borrowing and stress-selling key assets such as land, livestock and houses, often at prices well below the prevailing market rates. Failure to pay ransom on time can have significant ramifications to the young person being held. Accounts of young people being abused or killed while in captivity are not uncommon.

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The huge cost of tahriib

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school fees and health care. The sale of assets has further ramifications to the ability of households to manage future livelihood shocks.

Costs are, however, not limited to financial ones. The emotional distress that members of the household left behind experience are immense: normal household patterns are severely disrupted when an individual goes on tahriib. This continues until the individual reaches Europe safely. Although a large proportion (about 90 percent) make it to Europe, a significant minority (about 7 percent) perish en-route.

The elusive contradiction

It is important to note here that while many families would categorically prevent their sons or daughters from risking their lives by going on tahriib, and some better off parents proactively look for ways to stop their children from leaving: there are many social cues, though subtle, that are to some extent encouraging young people, especially young men, to leave.

In some instances, tahriib is socially considered to be a courageous act: instead of a young man wasting his life away in Somaliland or Puntland, where social and economic resources required for a successful transition from youth into adulthood are difficult to secure, he decides to take his chance, to try his "nasiib" [luck] elsewhere. This captures important socio-cultural stereotypes about what it means to be a Somali man and can act as a powerful incentive for young men to go on tahriib.

Conclusion

Although both Somaliland and Puntland have experienced numerous forms of emigration in the past, three features of tahriib are responsible for its rejection by the community. First, tahriib is exclusively a youth phenomenon. Second, the journey is fraught with dangers and accounts of young people perishing en-route are pervasive. Losing youth, the future of the region, is something that the community is finding difficult to come to terms with. Third, tahriib has significant financial and non-financial costs to the households and household members left behind. Although some of these costs might be short term, others, such as the loss of assets, can have long-term implications to households. However, regardless of the community uproar and the many awareness campaigns designed to discourage young people from going on tahriib, a contradiction exists. Socially, there are many hints that also work to sanction tahriib and indirectly encourage young people to leave.

Reference

Ali, N. (2016) *Going on Tahriib: The causes and consequences of Somali youth migration to Europe*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute Research Paper 5



*Migrants from the Mediterranean are rescued in the Channel of Sicily, Italy.
UN Photo by: IOM/Francesco Malavolta.*

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