



Protection Concerns Facing Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Israel

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Some 55,000 asylum seekers live in Israel, primarily in South Tel Aviv. Although officially referred to by Israeli authorities and much of the public as “infiltrators,” most have fled persecution in Eritrea, Sudan and a handful of other African countries. On the way to Israel, many have been ransomed, tortured and sexually assaulted in the Sinai. Most entered Israel without authorization through its southern border with Egypt. While Israeli authorities provide Eritreans and Sudanese “temporary group protection” from deportation, they have processed very few of their asylum claims. The vast majority are not issued work permits and have no access to medical or social services.

While refugees from African countries have been seeking asylum in Israel for close to a decade, by Spring 2012, some 2,000 were entering Israel each month. In response, a wave of protests and anti-African violence and rhetoric hit the country. Numerous attacks on African shops and homes took place. During one anti-migrant rally, Member of Knesset (MK) Miri Regev compared African asylum seekers to a “cancer” in Israel’s body and other MKs called for their immediate detention and deportation. Israeli residents of South Tel Aviv complained they no longer felt safe walking the streets.



While the xenophobic violence has since decreased, the government continues its efforts to stem the flow of asylum seekers, and to encourage those in the country to leave. One of the most significant steps Israel took was to build a fence along the Sinai border. Following completion of the fence, unauthorized entries have dropped dramatically: in all of 2013, fewer than 50 people entered Israel without permission. The government also compensates for those who choose to leave voluntarily with \$3,500, though where they are meant to go is unclear.

The Knesset has also taken legal measures to detain asylum seekers. In 2012, it passed amendments to the *Prevention of Infiltration Law* allowing unauthorized entrants to be detained for at least three years without trial. In September 2013, the Israeli High Court of Justice unanimously overturned these amendments, finding that they violated Israel’s *Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty*. In response, the Knesset passed new amendments in December 2013 that shorten the detention period to a year, but allow for the indefinite confinement of unauthorized entrants in an “open” facility, called *Holot*. Located in the Negev, *Holot* has a capacity of 3,300, which some report may expand to 9,000. Surrounded by barbed wire and an hour away from the nearest city, *Holot* residents must report in three times per day, and cannot work or leave at night. The United Nations’ refugee agency (UNHCR) and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including HIAS have raised concerns about this policy, arguing that this form of indefinite detention might violate Israel’s obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The closed detention complex nearby houses 2,500 asylum seekers and is slated to expand.

Meanwhile, although the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has hired and trained a full corps of asylum officers, virtually none of the asylum claims of Eritreans and Sudanese have been evaluated. Internationally, Eritreans are granted asylum at a rate of 80% and Sudanese at 30%. The current “recognition” rate of asylum seekers in Israel is less than 1%.

Facing limited access to asylum, the prospect of indefinite detention, and significant barriers to social assistance, medical care and work, many asylum seekers feel compelled to leave Israel, even to countries where their lives might be at risk. Israel’s political leaders have little sympathy for their plight. Prime Minister Netanyahu noted in December 2013 that “these are not refugees, but people who are breaking the law and whom we will deal with to the fullest extent of the law,” adding, “we will continue to deport the illegal migrants from our cities.” Israel’s Interior Minister, Gideon Saar, supporting the Prime Minister, vowed that “we have no intention of compromising.”

HIAS is the global Jewish nonprofit organization that protects refugees—including women and children, and ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities—whose lives are in danger for being who they are. Guided by our values and history, HIAS helps refugees rebuild their lives in safety and advocates to ensure that all displaced people are treated with dignity.

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