

African refugees in Israel

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A scoping study conducted by the Feinstein International Center (Tufts University) in November 2010 explored the interaction between migration, debt repayments, remittances and livelihoods among Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel.¹

African refugees began migrating across the Sinai Peninsula to Israel in search of asylum and work from about 2006, with numbers increasing in 2007.² By the end of 2010, there were 33,273 African migrants in Israel, up from 17,000 in 2008, and November 2010 saw the highest ever number of arrivals.³ Most new arrivals are fleeing desperate circumstances at home, and are seeking protection – not just jobs – in Israel. Eritreans and Sudanese make up the two largest African groups in Israel. Most have temporary protection in the form of ‘2A5 conditional release visas’ which are renewable every three months but they live under the constant threat that protection will be revoked. Officially, holders of the visa are not allowed to work although some employers overlook this provision.

Asylum seekers finance their journeys in a range of ways. Most borrow money from friends and family to pay smugglers to get to

Israel, and repaying this debt is a priority once their basic needs are met. Any money left over is sent to their families in the home country – but most do not have money left over to send.

Many migrants began their journey with an agreed-upon amount and then were passed to other groups who demanded additional payment. We heard of cases where groups of Sudanese or Eritreans in Israel pooled money to secure the release of a friend or relative who was being held for ransom in the Sinai.

Most migrants borrow money prior to their departure but we heard of people setting off for Israel knowing they did not have enough for the full payment. One woman said that if she had asked her family in advance they would have refused to give her the money for the journey but she knew they would send it if she called in distress along the way. She felt the risk of running out of money

was worthwhile because getting to Israel was her best hope for safety.

Getting to Israel is becoming increasingly dangerous and expensive. Cases of serious abuse and torture by Bedouin smugglers in the Sinai have been reported, including rape, kidnapping and killing of those who are unable to come up with additional payments. Our respondents reported being taken by smugglers to within 50 metres of the border fence, and told to run and climb the fence. In the final stage of the journey several hundred migrants have been shot and killed by Egyptian police.

Economic migrants or asylum seekers?

The Israeli government claims that the majority of those who enter are economic migrants rather than asylum seekers, and indeed many respondents said they came because they were unable to support themselves and their families in Eritrea and Sudan. However, there is a close relationship between persecution and lack of livelihoods in Sudan and Eritrea, and migration decisions are influenced by a



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Asylum seekers calling home from Tel Aviv.

combination of factors.⁴ All our respondents mentioned their desire to earn money and send it back home but none cited this as the main reason for leaving; rather they fled the “very serious” situation in their homelands.

New arrivals to Israel try to find temporary or day labour jobs through employment agencies or by standing at the corner of Levinsky Park in south Tel Aviv. Many do not find jobs, and many more are underpaid or not paid at all for work done, with little recourse. Since the end of 2008 when the government began granting temporary protection to Eritreans and Sudanese, some asylum seekers have opened small businesses including restaurants, internet shops and clothing stores catering to an African clientele.

New or recent arrivals expressed relief at being in Israel where they are physically secure, and many of our respondents said that they appreciate the lack of police harassment and

generally safe environment. However, they also expressed frustration at being unable to support themselves.

Implications

Israel is seen as a destination of last resort; refugees coming there do not have the money or social networks to get to Europe or America, and it is likely that the number of asylum seekers in Israel will grow. The Israeli government should clarify its asylum policy by defining temporary protection and the conditions under which protection would be revoked.

We believe it would be in Israel’s interests to include social and economic rights for those who hold temporary protection visas. Granting asylum seekers the right to work would be in line with international refugee standards and would reduce the state resources needed to support them in detention centres. If they had the right to work, asylum seekers would be able to contribute to their communities both in Israel and in

their homelands. The government is currently planning measures to block arrivals – including constructing a fence along Israel’s border with Egypt, building a 10,000-person detention centre in the Negev, and imposing fines on employers – but these measures are unlikely to stem the migration flow. Instead, asylum seekers will turn to increasingly dangerous routes. Well-established social networks and smuggling routes will facilitate continuing arrivals, even if the risks increase.

At the time of writing (February 2011) two unfolding political events will have important ramifications for African migration to Israel. The vote in the January 2011 referendum on South Sudan has been for secession, and the new state of South Sudan will come into existence in July 2011. Reportedly, small groups of southern Sudanese have already voluntarily returned to South Sudan from Israel, and this return movement is likely to continue. The creation of a southern Sudanese state might reduce future migration from the south but it is unlikely to influence those fleeing from Darfur. Secondly, the political changes of February 2011 in Egypt create a space for its new government to address serious human rights violations being committed in the Sinai and on its border with Israel. It remains to be seen how such sweeping changes will influence the Egyptian smuggling routes.

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1. The research was based on 24 interviews with Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers, five focus group discussions and ten key informant interviews with staff of refugee-serving organisations, all in Tel Aviv.
2. Human Rights Watch, *Sinai Perils: Risks to Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers in Egypt and Israel*. New York, November 2008. <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/11/12/sinai-perils-0>; Karin Fathimath Afeef, *A promised land for refugees? Asylum and migration in Israel*. UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service, December 2009. <http://www.unhcr.org/4b2213a59.html>.
3. Hotline for Migrant Workers, November 14, 2010. See also ‘Infiltration record: 1,940 illegal aliens entered Israel in Nov’, *Ynetnews*, 1 December 2010 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3992729,00.html>
4. H Young, K Jacobsen and A Osman, *Livelihoods, Migration and Conflict*. Feinstein International Center, April 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/Tufts-April09>