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Asylum-Seekers in Israel: Background and Figures

Basic Statistics and Demographics

According to the most recent figures from the PIBA (Population, Immigration and Border Authority)¹ there are 40,721 asylum-seekers living in Israel. The vast majority are from Eritrea (29,367) and Sudan (8,066). Most of them entered Israel through the Egyptian border and therefore are defined by the Ministry of Interior as ‘infiltrators’. **Asylum-seekers represent only 20% of the foreigners living in Israel.** The population of foreign workers, for example, numbers 81,329 (including around 16,736 workers without valid work permits), and there are some 78,500 people with expired tourist visas.

Official Status of Asylum-Seekers and Policy of Non-Deportation

Asylum-seekers reside in Israel legally, by virtue of Visa 5(A)2 which they must renew monthly or bi-monthly, at one of three offices of the Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA). Israel has adopted a policy of non-deportation for asylum-seekers from Eritrea and Sudan, and upholds the principle of *non-refoulement* due to the life-threatening situation that individuals may face upon return to their home countries.

Recognition of Asylum-Seekers in Israel and around the World

Until 2013 the State of Israel did not allow Eritreans and Sudanese to submit requests for asylum, and settled, in practice, on providing them group protection from deportation. From the end of 2013 the State began to officially examine asylum applications—although the process is deemed ineffective and many applications are rejected out-of-hand. **For example, while other global-north countries accept an average of 87% of asylum requests from Eritrean asylum-seekers, in Israel there have only been seven requests granted by**

¹ Foreigners in Israel, 3rd quarter 2016

https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/foreign_workers_report_q3_2016/he/foreign_workers_STATS_Q3.pdf

Eritreans out of over 10,000 submitted requests.² Similarly, while the rest of the world grants an average of 63% of requests for asylum from refugees from Sudan, only one Sudanese national received refugee status in Israel. Recently, PIBA has begun to reject requests for asylum out-of-hand on the grounds that they were ‘delayed’, even though for years they have denied Eritreans and Sudanese the opportunity to request asylum, never informed them of a change in this policy towards them, and certainly never told them of the existence of a deadline for submitting requests. The conclusion from all this is clear: the Israeli immigration system is built so that no requests will be granted, by applying stringent criteria and restrictions that are unacceptable in the rest of the world.

Vague policy around work permits enables exploitation

Asylum-seekers are permitted to work in Israel, except for those detained in Holot Detention Center.³ Despite this, it is clearly written on their permits that they are not allowed to work. This unclear situation is the foundation for many problems: worker exploitation, difficulties in finding work outside Tel Aviv, difficulties in living accommodation outside Tel Aviv (landlords are reluctant to rent to people with no permission to work), and more. An example of the deliberate confusion created by the PIBA can be seen in the campaign which took place in April 2016, implying that employing “infiltrators” is not legal, although, as indicated above, it is legal.⁴

Holot Detention Facility

The Holot Detention facility, which is now fully occupied, holds 3,360 asylum-seekers (less than 8% of all the asylum-seekers currently living in Israel). However, during 2015, there were 12,424 people brought into the facility. The Prevention of Infiltration Law was amended in February 2016 so that the maximum time of detention is 12 months. The cost to the state of

² 10,551 requests, as of January 2016. Ilan Lior “Refugee Committee Hasn’t Met in Half a Year X in Number of Requests for Asylum Waiting for a Response” <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/.premium-1.2819247>

³ For those staying in Holot, their visa indicates ‘not permitted to work’ although for all others it is indicated ‘this permit does not include permission to work’. For details see: http://www.piba.gov.il/SpokesmanshipMessages/Pages/11122013_2.aspx

⁴ Lior, I. (5 April 2016) Announcement published by Population and Immigration Authority cautions against employing asylum-seekers—even though it is legal, *Haaretz* <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/.premium-1.2904926>

building the facility was over half a billion shekels (about \$128 million), and the cost of maintaining it approaches more than 100 million shekels (over \$25 million) per year.

"voluntary" Return Procedure

In recent years the Interior Ministry has put heavy pressure on asylum-seekers to leave Israel “voluntarily”, especially to third countries which are known to be Uganda and Rwanda. PIBA promises those who leave that they will go to a secure country, where they can live in dignity and submit requests for asylum, although numerous witnesses among those who left found a harsh reality in those countries: they are exploited, humiliated, forced to hand over the travel documents provided by Israel, and the money they were given is taken or paid in bribes. Without status and without the ability to submit requests for asylum in order to receive status, many of them continue their journey as refugees and leave those countries as well. In 2015 the Interior Ministry began to threaten to imprison those who were not willing to leave “voluntarily”. A petition on this subject is pending in the Supreme Court.

Insufficient Health Services

The National Health Insurance Act does not apply to asylum seekers, and therefore they have no access to public health services except in emergencies. The rest of the time, limited access to services is provided to asylum-seekers at the *Gesher* (Bridge) clinic for mental health in Jaffa – although the clinic is currently not receiving new patients due to lack of resources and the *Terem* clinic in Tel Aviv. Some asylum seekers can obtain private insurance. This lack of access to regular and comprehensive medical care endangers people's health, and especially harms the most vulnerable populations: the physically disabled, chronically ill, those with mental disabilities and survivors of torture camps in Sinai. The State Comptroller's report refers to the sad situation arising from this policy (page 54):

“These cases of foreigners who are not in detention who are chronically ill and those who are afflicted with mental disorders point to a reality the requires immediate rectification: because the medical care for the community of foreigners is partial, and limited essentially to the central part of the country, their medical needs are being neglected.”

Extremely limited welfare services leave the most vulnerable to fend for themselves

According to the policy of the Welfare Ministry, asylum-seekers cannot receive services or treatment. The only ones excluded from this policy are at-risk minors, women who are victims of domestic abuse in life-threatening situations, and victims of human trafficking. The Report of the Research and Information Center of the Knesset affirms this:

“There is not a single source at the Welfare Ministry supporting the care of the population of people without status, and there has so far been no policy established by the Ministry concerning a package of services for them. Additionally there is no budget dedicated to the care of foreigners without status. Intervention is carried out in various services according to the merits of the situation, providing solutions according to need.”