

## "Israel is not a refugee accepting country"<sup>1</sup>: NGO briefing on asylum seekers

### Demographics & legal status

**African asylum seekers:** 20,000 Eritrean nationals and 4,000 Sudanese nationals are living in Israel for more than a decade and hold "conditional release permits" (2A5 visa). Following a 2021 Supreme Court decision, some 2000 Darfuris received temporary resident permits that require renewal every six months. In addition, 8,000 Ethiopians, among them many from the Tigray region, live in Israel. Some of them managed to receive 2A5 permits after the Tigray war started, while others remain undocumented.

**Ukrainian asylum seekers:** A total of 34,000 Ukrainian nationals live in Israel. 14,000 entered Israel after February 24<sup>th</sup> and 20,000 resided in Israel before the war as migrant workers, asylum seekers or undocumented migrants. Those who entered after February 24<sup>th</sup> received B2 (Tourist) visas. Those who entered before, did not receive new visas - either they remained with their existing visas or without visas. All are entitled for group protection from deportation to Ukraine.

**Refugees are not recognized as refugees in Israel:** As acknowledged by the state comptroller, the UNHCR and different court instances, the Israeli asylum system is flawed. The failure to examine asylum requests promptly and fairly, and the refusal to otherwise regularize their status, leave most asylum seekers in a "limbo". While they are currently protected from deportation, this protection entitles them to hardly any services or rights.

### Inadequate access to rights & services

**Health:** Adult African asylum seekers are not entitled to public healthcare services, except in cases of medical emergencies. The July 2021 declarations regarding a forthcoming State-subsidized health insurance have yet to come into fruition. Minors are entitled to the State-subsidized arrangement with the "Meuhedet" health fund, but due to outstanding debts accumulated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic years, many stand the risk of losing their access to medical care.

Ukrainians who entered after February 24<sup>th</sup> are entitled for some private sector medical services with designated limited funding by the Ministry of Welfare. Ukrainian nationals who entered Israel before the war are not eligible to any social or medical services despite their protection from deportation. Ukrainian minors are not entitled to services under the State-subsidized arrangement with "Meuhedet".

**Welfare:** Asylum seekers are not entitled to welfare services or to national security allowances, apart from a few exceptions. In recent years there have been initial attempts to address the needs of some vulnerable groups, including torture survivors, victims of domestic violence, the homeless and people with disabilities, but most of these attempts did not translate to actual assistance. While many African asylum seekers in Israel suffer food insecurity and even poverty, the most vulnerable ones are having hard time to survive, especially after COVID-19 years. At-risk children of asylum seekers are officially entitled to social services. In practice however, these services fall short of the

<sup>1</sup> Director of PIBA, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2022, [https://www.calcalist.co.il/local\\_news/article/hkthtib9](https://www.calcalist.co.il/local_news/article/hkthtib9)

holistic services that Israeli families of at-risk children receive, mainly due to the denial of social services and social security allowances, including child allowances and disabled child allowances.

Ukrainians who entered after February 24<sup>th</sup> have been entitled to some basic ad-hoc support, mainly in food vouchers. Budgeting for this insufficient assistance is running out. Whether assistance will be extended under the new government remains to be seen.

**Education:** Children of African asylum seekers suffer from severe developmental and academic gaps, language delays and emotional difficulties. These are, among other reasons, the result of the years (0-3) the children spend in under-regulated and unsupervised daycares ("babysitters") and of their parents' past traumas and present life circumstances in Israel. Their teachers face challenges without proper training and resources. Additionally, many of them are forced into separate schools and kindergartens which makes it almost impossible for them to close the gaps.

Ukrainian children can register to the State education system after staying three months in Israel. As of October 2022, the number of the children who attend school remains low, due to, among other reasons, insufficient capacity of schools and kindergartens to integrate them and to meet their needs.

**Socio-economic integration:** Life in Israel with "2A5" permits is an impossible bureaucratic maze. Employment is permitted but not regularized, banks are supposed to give services but mount restrictions, access to higher education is limited, professions that require state licensing are blocked and so are other means essential for socio-economic integration such as driving license, professional trainings and more.

### Imposition of sanctions

Despite the group protection granted to asylum seekers, previous governments, and the Ministry of Interior in particular, actively attempted to encourage asylum seekers to leave Israel "voluntarily", by imposing various sanctions on them. These sanctions included incarceration in Holot detention facility (which was closed in 2018), the "deposit law" (which was canceled by the Supreme Court in 2020) and the failed deportation to "third countries" scheme (2018).

All these sanctions and decrees can be easily revived with the legislation of the "Override Clause", planned by the new Netanyahu coalition. In general, any further weakening of democracy in Israel endangers not only the fight for expanding the rights and services for asylum seekers in Israel, but also the fight against sanctions and decrees.

The recent most "twist" of the chain of abusive policies is a regulation announced by the Minister of Interior in June 2022. The regulation – due to come into effect on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 – prohibits asylum seekers in Israel from working in 17 cities (unless they work in construction, agriculture, institutional care, or building). A petition against this regulation is now pending at the District Court.