

One year into the war, Israel is still withholding adequate health and welfare services from Ukrainian refugees

Position paper on the situation of Ukrainian refugees after one year in Israel

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About 14,000 Ukrainian citizens have fled to Israel since the outbreak of war on February 24, 2022 but are not eligible to stay in the country under the Law of Return. In addition, another approximately 20,000 Ukrainian citizens who were in Israel before the aforementioned date for various reasons (tourists, asylum seekers, workers, etc.) are unable to return to their homes because of the war. Both of these groups of Ukrainian citizens are currently protected from deportation to Ukraine and legally reside in Israel. Now, a full year later, some of the Israeli government's aid to them, inadequate to begin with, is being withdrawn. The refugees' plight is intensifying.

The State of Israel must come to its senses. There is a need to map the current needs of those who cannot return to their homes and to give them the necessary social support services so they can live in Israel with dignity.

Shortly after the outbreak of war in the Ukraine, Israel's Ministry of Social Affairs announced that it would provide basic assistance to people fleeing from the conflict. The "Order of the Hour" emergency center was established for this purpose. However, assistance was only given to those who arrived in Israel after February 24, 2022; mostly women and about 3,000 children. The assistance included access to primary healthcare services within the framework of the Terem medical clinics, health insurance for those aged 60 and over, and a limited quota of food vouchers. Refugees were almost never given housing solutions because the State requires that they be accommodated in the homes of the Israeli citizens who invited them to stay in the country. The limited aid, given only in the first months of the war and only to those who arrived in Israel after it broke out, has dwindled. It clearly cannot meet the needs of refugees who have been here for a full year and whose savings are running out.

The primary challenges currently faced by Ukrainian citizens who fled to Israel a year ago, but are not eligible for the Right of Return include:

Increased refusals of entry into Israel - Shortly after the outbreak of the war, then- Minister of the Interior, Ayelet Shaked, put forth an outline according to which only 5,000 Ukrainian citizens who are not eligible for the Right of Return and who have no relatives in Israel would be allowed entry into the country. Any Ukrainian citizen wanting to enter Israel was required to submit a request and receive prior permission, before boarding the plane. Following a petition disputing the legality of this outline, the Supreme Court invalidated the outline in July 2022. After this outline was overturned and could no longer be used to prevent Ukrainian citizens from boarding planes to Israel, the Population and Immigration Authority (PIA) began denying them entry upon arrival at Ben Gurion Airport. This is evident from the significant increase, since the Supreme Court ruling of July 2022, in decisions to refuse entry given at the border crossing to those who have already

arrived in Israel. This practice increases the plight of people fleeing the terror of war and seeking refuge in Israel. When they arrive at the airport, they are detained, sometimes for hours, interrogated, and some have been sent back to Europe.

Employment restrictions - In May 2022, Shaked, announced that PIA would not enforce a prohibition against Ukrainian citizens working in Israel, starting three months after their arrival. However, a short time later, the Ministry of the Interior announced that the "forbidden cities" policy that limits the employment of African refugees and asylum seekers in 17 major Israeli cities will also apply to citizens of Ukraine. Moreover, on December 26, 2022, just three days before the new government was sworn in, a new Ministry of the Interior policy was published, according to which Ukrainian citizens who arrived in Israel after September 30, 2022, will not be able to work even 90 days after their arrival.

These policies of not issuing work visas, the vague "non-enforcement of the employment ban", issuing short-term tourist visas lasting only a month or two for people fleeing from war, additional employment limits through the "forbidden cities" policy, and a blanket employment ban for those who arrived after September 30, 2022, taken together, make it difficult for refugees to find proper and legal work and increase their risk of abusive and exploitative employment, human trafficking, and prostitution as a means of survival.

Poverty and food insecurity - Field activists report increasing economic distress. Whatever savings some refugees had are running out. The Ministry of Interior's decrees make it difficult for them to find suitable employment. Most of those seeking jobs are women, and many are mothers with young children. Their employment options are even more limited, and those with babies or toddlers simply cannot work outside the home. The financial aid provided by the Welfare ministry's "Order of the Hour" center, primarily food vouchers, was limited, and many refugees have long since received the amount and portions to which they were entitled and cannot get additional aid. We are seeing evidence of growing distress among refugees suffering from food insecurity, unsure if and when they will be able to receive or buy food.

Healthcare - The healthcare services provided through the "Order of the Hour" emergency center no longer meet refugees' growing medical needs. At the beginning of their stay, Terem clinics that provide "urgent medical treatment, to prevent risk to life or significant health deterioration..." was reasonable. A full year later, it is clear that it is no longer sufficient. There is a need to treat chronic illnesses and special medical needs as well. Field activists describe cases of refugees with serious and/or chronic illnesses who find it difficult to receive medical care, both because it is not included in the services of the Terem clinics and because the information on how to receive treatments and medications is not sufficiently accessible. The financial burden of paying for private health insurance becomes impossible for most of them.

Housing shortage - Many Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Israel since the outbreak of the war are still being hosted in the homes of Israeli citizens. However, some hosts can no longer accommodate the refugees in their apartments. Over time, more and more refugees are forced to look for rented housing. Because they were only granted short-term residence permits, they sometimes encounter difficulty in renting apartments. Moreover, rents in Israel are high and not all of them can bear this financial burden. The "Order of the Hour" center found housing for the most vulnerable, who cannot work for a living, but even these are limited by the short-term validity

of the tourist visas they hold. Therefore, even those who receive housing assistance face severe uncertainty, knowing that within a month they may find themselves again in danger of eviction, without alternative housing.

Risk of human trafficking and survival prostitution - In view of the above factors, Ukrainian refugees, most of whom are women, are at increased risk of human trafficking and survival prostitution. In this context, it should be mentioned that the human trafficking report of the [US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report for 2022](#) ranked the State of Israel in Tier 2 for the second year in a row. It described how the low status and economic distress of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers in Israel, particularly women, "[... greatly increases their vulnerability to sex trafficking.](#)" The report also described the vulnerability of Russian and Ukrainian and Eritrean citizens who are in Israel to human trafficking.

Increasing mental distress - Over time, we are witnessing the deterioration of the mental state of the refugees and their children. The signs of untreated traumas from the war, their escape, and immigration to a new country become apparent. Their mental distress is worsening in the absence of frameworks to maintain a normal routine and functioning, and lack of sufficient mental healthcare support. Further, many of their children do not attend school and have no supportive educational and social routine.

ASSAF has accumulated vast experience in helping refugees and asylum-seekers from Eritrea and Sudan who have been living in Israel legally for some 15 years under group protection from deportation. We have found that without social, health and welfare services, refugees are pushed into a life of constant, poverty, food insecurity, and deterioration of their physical and mental health.

The State of Israel must learn from this experience, and act immediately to renew and expand the solutions provided to Ukrainian refugees, so that they will be able to live with dignity and security. The State must ensure that the refugees have food security, fair and legal employment through the provision of 6-month work visas, provide suitable and safe housing to those who need it, and guarantee access to health and welfare services adapted to their current needs.

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