

## ASSAF with the refugee communities – operation Iron Swords

Last update: 26.10.2023

*“The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself” (Leviticus 19/34)*

The horrific crimes committed by Hamas on Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, against innocent civilians, including women, children, and senior citizens, are heartbreaking and impossible to contain. The images and the sounds are incomprehensible, the pain and the grief are immense. The brutal attackers spared no one, Refugees communities were also among the victims: particularly harsh has been the situation of those who live in the combat zones; and some of the community members are still missing.

**We must make sure that when it comes to providing care and assistance, no community is left behind.**

Approximately 70,000 refugees and asylum seekers and their children, mostly from Eritrea, Ukraine, and Sudan currently live in Israel. They fled their countries to escape ruthless militant rule, wars, genocide, rape, looting and murder. They left behind their homes, their possessions and most importantly, their families. On a daily basis they are coping with the dangerous and traumatic circumstances they escaped from in their home countries, while struggling to survive in Israel.

[ASSAF – Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel](https://www.assaf.org.il) provides support and assistance to refugees, driven by a deep-rooted belief in the historical and moral responsibility of Israeli society toward those seeking refuge. ASSAF has been operating since 2007 on two main levels: (1) providing psychosocial support to refugees and asylum seekers and (2) promoting their rights by raising public awareness and promoting their rights before the state authorities. The organization's offices are located in South Tel-Aviv, however it provides services to refugees and asylum seekers all over Israel, including those who live in conflict zones, such as Sderot, Ashkelon, etc. **Most of those who turn to ASSAF for assistance and support come from the most vulnerable groups among the refugee population:** survivors of torture and trafficking, people with physical and/or mental disabilities, the sick, the homeless, people in prostitution or survival

sex, single-parent families, women suffering from domestic violence, teenagers and minors at risk, and more. Notably, more than half (52%) of the applicants for assistance are women, a worrying trend given that women comprise only about 19.5% of the African refugee population.

**The main challenges and obstacles faced by the refugee communities these days:**

1) **Vulnerability due to the “invisibility” of the communities:** The refugee communities are the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in Israeli society. There is a risk that even in dangerous situations and in cases of emergency, these communities will be disregarded by the authorities, and will therefore be deprived of resources and assistance. It is crucial to bear in mind that refugees in Israel are largely ineligible for economic and social rights, which include social security benefits and most welfare services. Consequently, many of them go unrecognized by the social services departments of local authorities where they reside or by the National Insurance Institute, at the state level. In addition, questionable practices that homeowners who rent dwellings to refugees often use, cause the tenants not to register with the local authority as "holders" of their apartment, and are therefore not included in the residents' lists of the local authorities. All of these circumstances create a high risk that refugees who were injured in the war or are at risk by living in conflict zones will remain "under the institutional radar" and will not receive life-saving assistance and protection.

2) **Lack of access to secured shelters:** Most refugees and asylum seekers in Israel live in extremely poor conditions and do not have access to bomb shelters or to reinforced safety rooms (“Mamad”). They often live in crowded apartments located in old and frail buildings of impoverished neighborhoods. Many point out that no shelters are available close enough to their places of residence.

3) **Limited possibilities of evacuation from war zones:** Refugees who live in war zones have extremely limited options of evacuation and finding safe alternative housing, especially as Israeli's in the same areas are also struggling to find alternative housing solutions. Despite the inspiring self-recruitment by Israeli civil society and business community to help refugees, who lack extended family support and suffer from discrimination and exclusion, the chances of the refugees to escape the war zones and find alternative safe housing, if only temporarily, is

extremely meager. We faced this week heartbreaking cases of several families evacuated from war zones who were refused lodging because of their civic status or religion.

4) **Loss of income and lack of economic and social safety net:** Many refugees have lost their jobs in restaurants, shopping malls etc. Since they are not eligible for Social Security allowances and benefits (including unemployment benefits and income support allowances), and neither for state health insurance and most other social services, they do not have an institutional safety net to fall back on. It is expected that the longer the crisis lasts, the more intensified the deterioration of the refugees' financial situation will become. Food insecurity, which is already rampant among these communities, will increase even further, as will the shortage of basic products, including diapers and baby formulas, and there will be more and more cases of people who are unable to pay their rent and fear eviction. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these communities encountered a severe humanitarian crisis, which unfortunately could hit them again in the current war and its aftermath.

5) **Deterioration in mental health:** Saturday (7.10.2023) was one of the most frightening and traumatic days in the history of Israel. Refugees and asylum seekers survived severe trauma, wars, genocide and other atrocities that forced them to leave their homes and seek asylum in Israel. Many of them were victims of human trafficking and brutal torture. For them, Hamas' brutal attack meant reliving traumas and the flooding of difficult memories from the past, increasing the plight of the already vulnerable communities. It's worth noting that even during regular times, refugees in Israel have limited access to mental health services, which have become nearly non-existent during these challenging days.

6) **Lack of access to reliable information:** Important instructions and guidance of the Home Front Command ("Pikud HaOref") are not officially translated to some of the languages relevant to the refugee population. In addition, refugees often receive information distributed by informal networks and unreliable sources, increasing the anxiety and vulnerability within their communities.

**To provide some remedy in this bleak situation we act in three main areas:**

1. **Direct aid to the most vulnerable communities** – Since the news of the attack reached us, ASSAF's staff has been assisting in the following aspects:
  - Maintaining a routine of aid and support to the most vulnerable applicants: the psychosocial department (including the social workers, the reception team, the community mediators and the youth counselors) continues to provide solutions and assistance to the applicants who are supported by the organization.
  - Expansion of support services through the Advocacy and Support Center: ASSAF has expanded its reception hours and set up a telephone hotline in order to provide a tailored response to the communities at this time.
  - Mapping ASSAF's applicants and beneficiaries who live in war zones: Thus far, ASSAF has identified about 200 families who live in war zones within Israel. The organization's staff has been working to reach out to refugees living in the war zones and those affected by it and offered them humanitarian, mental and practical aid and support.
  - Humanitarian aid: in this time ASSAF assists the community with financial aid- Emergency stipends to ensure that vulnerable community members will receive assistance for the following until they can hopefully resume employment, Secure temporary living solutions for refugees living in the war zone; Distribution of canned and dry food packages and Distribution of diapers and baby formula.
  - Identifying missing members of refugee communities and forwarding their information to the appropriate authorities.
  - Identifying humanitarian challenges linked to the crisis, such as insufficient food security, housing requirements, and financial needs, and devising tailored intervention strategies to alleviate the struggles of refugee communities, both in the immediate and distant future.
  - Conducting multi lingual zoom community meetings to support specific audiences and providing viable information according to the identified needs and first aid mental health support.

2. **Making reliable information accessible to the communities** - ASSAF aims to enhance security and fortify community resilience by facilitating access to pertinent information and providing aid in comprehending the rights of refugee communities. To achieve this, ASSAF regularly updates refugee communities on crucial information, procedures, and urgent developments. This is done through the translation of official announcements, the creation of linguistically and culturally accessible information, and the dissemination of updates from partners, ensuring their accessibility.

In addition, based on ASSAF's expertise in providing psychosocial support to refugees and asylum seekers, the organization produces and distributes content designed to reduce the stress level of the communities (for example [maintaining mental resilience](#) and more).

The majority of information written, published and/or shared by ASSAF can be found on our [Facebook page](#) designated for refugees in Israel and on the ASSAF [website](#) (we have created designated pages for making the information available in different languages).

3. **Advocacy aimed at making rights and services accessible for refugees and asylum seekers according to their needs during the crisis** - ASSAF collects data and maps the authorities' treatment of refugees and asylum seekers during the crisis, striving to amend the discriminatory policies that work against this population compared to Israeli residents who have been affected.

**Our hearts go out to the bereaved families and the families of the wounded, the missing and the captives and we pray for the fast and full recovery of the wounded and the return of the captives.**

Now more than ever we need you here with us.

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