



Feinstein International Center

Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice



African Migration to Israel Debt, Employment and Remittances

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We began to learn about the experience of Sudanese refugees in Israel as a result of our ongoing research in Cairo on Sudanese refugees.¹ In November 2010, one of the authors (Furst-Nichols) from the Feinstein International Center traveled to Israel to conduct a scoping study to better understand the livelihoods and protection issues confronting Sudanese and Eritrean migrants and asylum seekers² in Israel. This report is based on her qualitative research from November-December 2010.

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Summary of main findings

Legal status – Sudanese and Eritreans make up the two largest African groups in Israel and share a similar legal status. Most have temporary protection in the form of 2A5 conditional release visas, renewable every three months. The Israeli government has not clarified their official rights however, and holders of the 2A5 visa live under the constant threat that protection will be revoked. A few thousand Africans in Israel have residence permits or six-month working visas, granted to specific groups in 2007 and 2008.

Routes – Most new arrivals come directly from Sudan and Eritrea, passing through Cairo for a few days only (earlier migrants to Israel had often lived in Cairo for many years). Bedouin smugglers are paid between \$350 and \$7,000 dollars for guidance across the Egyptian Sinai to the Israeli border. Eritreans pay significantly more money and appear to face more danger and abuse along the route than do Sudanese. There appears to be increasing levels of abuse by Bedouin smugglers.

Migration debt and extortion – Most asylum seekers obtain the money to pay smugglers through loans from friends and family. Once in Israel, repaying this loan is a priority and most earned income beyond daily requirements is used for this purpose. In part because of this debt, relatively few asylum seekers are sending remittances home, although all had planned to send when they left for Israel. In addition to existing migration debt, Sudanese and Eritreans in Israel must sometimes gather large sums of ransom money to secure the release of co-nationals held captive by smugglers in the Sinai.

¹ The Feinstein International Center is collaborating with the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies at the American University of Cairo to conduct a survey exploring the livelihoods and remittance patterns of Sudanese refugees in Cairo.

² The terms “refugees” and “asylum seekers” are used interchangeably in this report, although officially they remain asylum seekers since they have not received refugee status.

Social capital – Knowing family or friends in Israel is a significant advantage upon arrival. Co-national networks assist new arrivals with securing temporary free housing, jobs, food, cell phones and knowledge about the Israeli legal and social system. These networks are also mobilized to pay ransoms.

Employment – Most asylum seekers work temporary or day labor jobs obtained through employment agencies or by standing at the corner of Levinsky Park. Being underpaid or not receiving owed pay is common, with little opportunity for recourse. There are relatively few reports of physical threats related to employment. Since the end of 2008 when the government began granting temporary protection to Eritreans and Sudanese, a minority have opened small businesses including restaurants, internet shops and clothing stores catered toward African migrants.

Attitudes towards Israel – New or recent arrivals expressed relief at being in Israel where they are physically secure, and appreciation for the lack of police harassment. Those who have been longer in Israel expressed frustration at being unable to support themselves. Israel is seen as a last resort destination; many come because they do not have money or social networks to assist them in going to Europe or America.

1. Background and Israeli refugee policy

African refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, among other countries, began migrating across the Egyptian Sinai to Israel in search of asylum and work from the mid-2000s, with numbers increasing rapidly beginning in 2007.³ By the end of 2010, there were 33,273 asylum seekers or African migrants in Israel, up from 17,000 in 2008, and November 2010 saw the highest ever influx of asylum seekers over the Egyptian border.⁴ Israeli officials estimate that 2,000 new African migrants are now entering through Egypt each month. In late 2010, Prime Minister Netanyahu described a three-pronged response: the government will impose heavy fines on employers, construct a fence at the border with Egypt, and build a 10,000-person detention center in the Negev.⁵

³ Human Rights Watch, *Sinai Perils: Risks to Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers in Egypt and Israel*. New York, November 2008, 1; Afeef, Karin Fathimath, "A promised land for refugees? Asylum and migration in Israel," *UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service*, December 2009.

⁴ Interview, Hotline for Migrant Workers (hereafter, *Hotline*), <http://www.hotline.org.il/english/index.htm>, November 14, 2010. See also Ynet News, *Infiltration record: 1,940 illegal aliens entered Israel in Nov.* December 1, 2010 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3992729,00.html>.

⁵ The Jerusalem Post, *PM calls on citizens not to use violence against migrants*. December 22, 2010 <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=200558>.

Asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea currently have an unofficial temporary protected status in Israel. While they will not be deported due to the danger they would face at home, Israel does not consider them for refugee status, so all are technically asylum seekers. According to advocacy organizations, there is no uniform procedure in granting status, and visas are issued in an arbitrary manner. Some receive one-month visas while others receive three months, even when they applied on the same day and had seemingly identical profiles.

In earlier years, some Eritreans and Sudanese were granted longer-term working permits. In 2007, the Minister of Interior Affairs granted citizenship to several hundred Darfurian refugees, and in 2008, nearly 1,000 Eritrean refugees were granted six-month work permits.⁶ Currently, all new arrivals receive 2A5 ‘conditional release’ visas. An estimated 28,000 in the country possessed this type of document as of November 2010. All asylum seekers report to the Ministry to receive some form of documentation.⁷ New arrivals now receive a temporary visa upon release from detention that must be renewed after one month and then every three months thereafter. So far, Sudanese and Eritreans have always had their visas renewed, but this is never guaranteed. The 2A5 visa is officially a deportation order, with the “condition” of their release that they must cooperate with the order should the government decide to follow through with it. This means that protection in Israel is only a protection from deportation, and does not provide any rights. Israel has avoided setting clear parameters regarding asylum seekers’ length of stay and ability to work. Many believe that the “policy of having no policy” is purposeful, intended to maintain a sense of instability and discourage those already in Israel from encouraging friends and relatives to join them.⁸

1.1 UNHCR and Asylum seekers from other African countries

An estimated five to fifteen percent of African asylum seekers are not from Sudan and Eritrea.⁹ They must file individual asylum claims, which are reviewed by a committee of government ministries. Those who are denied refugee status are returned to prison or deported.

Israel’s Ministry of Interior took over refugee status determination responsibilities from UNHCR in July 2009.¹⁰ Since then, UNHCR has not conducted interviews but is tasked with “ensur[ing] a

⁶ See Yacobi, *Irregular Migration to Israel: The Sociopolitical Perspective*, CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/63, 5.

⁷ Interview, *Hotline*. One staff member explained that *Hotline* seeks people without documents in order to assist them, but have never found any undocumented African migrants.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview, Advocates for Asylum, <http://www.asylumseekers.org>, November 11, 2010. Ethiopian asylum seekers are distinguished from Ethiopian Jews who fall under Jewish immigration laws that allow them to make *aliyah*, or follow a path to Israeli citizenship.

¹⁰ UNHCR Israel Fact Sheet – June 2010.

fair and efficient asylum procedure in the country”; this is an advocacy role, aiming to push the government to develop a favorable legislative and procedural framework.¹¹ UNHCR also works to “secure access of refugees and asylum seekers to Government provided services,” and provides funds to organizations assisting refugees in Israel.¹²

UNHCR can make recommendations to the Ministry of Interior when it believes cases are wrongly decided, but in reality the committee rarely meets, very few cases are ever granted, and many individuals remain imprisoned indefinitely.¹³ The Israeli government claims that 99 percent of Africans in the country are economic migrants (deemed “illegal infiltrators”) and not genuine refugees.¹⁴ According to refugee advocates, the government is able to claim they are not refugees only because they do not hear their cases. During a weekly cabinet meeting in November 2010, Prime Minister Netanyahu laid out his government’s distinction between refugees and economic migrants saying, “we do not intend to arrest refugees from war. We allow them to enter and will continue to do so. But we must stop the mass entry of illegal infiltrators who are looking for work, due to the very harsh repercussions that this wave will have on the character and future of the State of Israel.”¹⁵ Netanyahu warned that a “flood” of illegal migrants is “threatening the jobs of Israelis, and it is threatening the Jewish and democratic character of the state of Israel.”¹⁶

¹¹ UNHCR Israel Fact Sheet – June 2010.

¹² The African Refugee Development Center (ARDC), Aid Organization for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, Hotline for Migrant Workers, Kav LaOved, Mesila, and Physicians for Human Rights are all UNHCR implementing partners (Israel Fact Sheet – June 2010).

¹³ Interview, Advocates for Asylum.

¹⁴ The Jerusalem Post, *Netanyahu: Flood of migrants must be stemmed*. November 28, 2010 <http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=197099>; Haaretz, *Eli Yishai: Infiltrators pose existential threat to Israel*. November 22, 2010 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/eli-yishai-infiltrators-pose-existential-threat-to-israel-1.326075>.

¹⁵ The Jerusalem Post, *Refugees protest in TA: ‘We are not diseased.’* December 24, 2010 <http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=200873>.

¹⁶ The Associated Press, *Israel fears ‘flood’ of migrants threatens state*. December 6, 2010 http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20101206/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_israel_african_migrants_2.

2. Research Objectives and Methods

The study's specific objectives were to explore the migration routes used by Sudanese and Eritreans to get to Israel and to gain some understanding of their decision to come to Israel, their livelihood activities and remittance patterns, and their future migration intentions.

The research was based on qualitative methods and included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. The researcher began by interviewing staff members of refugee-serving agencies in Tel Aviv about the current legal and policy context and to request names of interviewees and potential translators from the refugee community.

The sampling strategy sought to reach roughly equal numbers of Sudanese and Eritrean men and women, people who had arrived in Israel at different times, who were unemployed and employed, and those who were homeless and had housing. Observation and key informant interviews made it clear that the majority of asylum seekers in Tel Aviv are men. Female participants were sought where possible. Since both Israeli policy and reasons for migration have evolved over time, we sought to interview people who arrived in Israel at different periods to understand how livelihoods and migration routes have shifted over time.

Interviews were conducted at varied times of the day and in different settings in order to obtain participants with different types and levels of employment. Settings included refugee-owned small businesses, places of employment, homes, refugee agencies, and Levinsky Park in south Tel Aviv where many homeless refugees sleep outdoors while waiting to obtain work or housing.

The following people and groups were interviewed:

- Interviews:
 - Eleven Sudanese men (nine from Darfur)
 - Five Eritrean men
 - Six Eritrean women
 - Staff of three refugee-serving organizations
 - Two community activists
- Focus group discussions:
 - Three focus groups with Darfuri men
 - One focus group with Eritrean men
 - One focus group with Eritrean women

2.1 Limitations

This study was exploratory and did not collect a representative sample. The sample was based on a “snowballing” approach and on participant availability. We used purposive sampling to help offset potential bias inherent in this method, but we could not obtain the full range of perspectives of the refugee population. For example, most of the Sudanese interviewed were from Darfur, and they reported that Southern Sudanese were better established because they had been in Israel longer. We were unable to verify this. The sample was not large enough to make statistically significant comparisons between Sudanese and Eritrean groups, but our interviews revealed a few key differences regarding migration experiences (see next section), a finding substantiated by a November 2010 report by Physicians for Human Rights.¹⁷ We did not find many differences in livelihoods and protection experiences between the two groups in Israel.

Time limitations and lack of organizational support meant that interviews were conducted only in Tel Aviv. It is possible that in Israel’s smaller refugee-hosting cities – Arad and Eilat – where there is less competition for employment amongst refugees and other foreign workers (and/or fewer employment opportunities), refugees might experience different livelihood choices or outcomes.

The researcher did not speak Arabic or Tigrinya and was unable to converse directly with Sudanese or Eritrean refugees. She hired two translators. The Tigrinya (Eritrean) translator was more established in Israel so Eritrean interviews were secured based on his networks, while the Arabic (Darfuri) translator had recently arrived and did not have established social networks. Accordingly, Darfuri participants may have been more guarded in what they shared.

It is likely that the willingness of people to tell their full stories was influenced by their legal status in Israel. Many participants were hesitant to be interviewed, at least initially, due to uncertainty about the use of the research. New arrivals in the park expressed serious concern about the researcher’s presence; they were afraid it would attract undue attention from the Israeli intelligence or police.¹⁸

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Sinai Perils*.

¹⁸ One day while the researcher accompanied the research assistant to recruit participants in the park, an Israeli man approached the large group and told one of them in Hebrew that he was a police and that the researcher needed to “go back to her own country.” The translator suggested that the researcher leave immediately. She left although she doubted the man was truly a police. She followed up staff from the African Refugee Development Center (ARDC) who believed Israeli police would not do this. From then on, participants in the park were reluctant to be seen with her to avoid attracting attention. To overcome this difficulty the research assistant recruited participants and arranged for interviews to be held in local coffee shops, the ARDC office, or participants’ homes.

3. Research Findings: Migration, livelihoods, debt and remittances

3.1 The migration decision

When asked why they came to Israel, the majority of participants described the situation in their home country as ‘very serious.’ The interviews did not probe respondents’ experience in their home countries and only two respondents shared their stories in depth. One Eritrean man said he would “die or succeed, but it was worth the risk. In Israel they treat you like a human; our government does not have even basic rights.”

Another noted that in Eritrea the youth want to “use their time effectively” rather than face indefinite forced conscription there. This man, a recent arrival, said that he decided to come after seeing friends in Israel who had made a life for themselves. He had a university business degree and the Eritrean government was constantly “disturbing” his business. In Israel, he hoped to use his degree and to grow professionally. Many hoped for education or for a job where they could use the skills they had.

Many Eritrean respondents mentioned having an initial plan to go to Europe through Libya, but the smugglers’ prices were too high, and the dangerous sea voyage also stopped them.¹⁹ Europe and America were the preferred destinations, but failing that, Israel was a democratic country and accessible to them. Most interviewees did not know anyone when they arrived in Israel and did not have family or friends in other Western countries, suggesting that their lack of diaspora connections also made it difficult to reach other destinations.

Only one participant had previously lived in Cairo.²⁰ Most respondents had only passed through Cairo for a few days or weeks. The increase in organized smuggling probably contributes to migrants being able to travel directly from Sudan and Eritrea. While early migrants came to Israel after living for a while in Egypt, recent arrivals appear to head straight to Israel.

The Israeli government claims that the majority of ‘infiltrators’ are economic migrants rather than asylum seekers, and indeed, many respondents said they came because they were unable to support themselves in Eritrea and Sudan and that they planned to send money to their families at home. However, the close relationship between persecution and lack of livelihoods²¹ in Sudan and

¹⁹ Tightened border controls and agreements between Libya and Europe have also been cited as a reason for increased arrivals in Israel. (See Human Rights Watch, *Global: Flawed Policies Expose Migrants to Abuse*. December 11, 2010 <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/12/12/global-flawed-policies-expose-migrants-abuse>; Reuters Africa, *U.N. urges EU to ensure asylum seekers not shut out*. December 10, 2010 <http://af.reuters.com/article/ethiopiaNews/idAFLDE6B90WU20101210?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0>)

²⁰ This is a surprising finding since the 2005 demonstration outside of the UNHCR office in Egypt is commonly cited as the event that initiated the Cairo-Israel migration route.

²¹ Young, Helen, Karen Jacobsen, and Abdalmonim Osman, “Livelihoods, Migration and Conflict,” *Feinstein International Center*, April 2009.

Eritrea means that decisions are influenced by a combination of factors. While all mentioned a desire to earn money and send it back home, this was never cited as the main reason for leaving. Both Sudanese and Eritreans stated that their lives would be threatened should they return home.

3.2 Migration routes

The role of Bedouin smugglers in assisting African refugees across the Sinai has been well documented.²² Participants readily shared the routes they took and the amounts they paid to smugglers. Sudanese refugees pay significantly less than Eritreans. Sudanese reported paying between \$350 and \$500 in recent months, while Eritreans paid between \$2,700 and \$7,000. According to Physicians for Human Rights, the reasons for this difference in price – and for the different treatment the two groups receive at the hands of the Bedouin – include that the Sudanese are Muslim and Arabic-speaking like the Bedouin traffickers.²³ One of our respondents believed that the Bedouins know they can get more from Eritreans because of their wealthier diaspora linkages. Another, an Eritrean Christian woman, described the role of religion in affecting her treatment by the smugglers:

For many years I had been hearing about the discrimination between Muslims and Christians. When I prepared to take the journey, I knew I could get further if I pretended to be a Muslim. I was very scared of being violated [raped] because I had heard stories about it. Before I left, I read the Koran and kept many things in my mind. During the journey I changed my name from [a Christian name] to [a Muslim name], and I brought a copy of the Koran. I never told any of those I was traveling with my real name. The smugglers asked me “what is that book?” and then they respected me and treated me differently. When everyone was thirsty, they brought me water, even extra water for praying. When they weren’t looking I shared the water with others. The smugglers made special efforts to ensure I succeeded. They let me cross with the men [instead of the special crossing reserved for women] because I was pregnant and they knew the men could help me over the fence. Even today in Israel, people who traveled with me come and thank me for helping them along the way.

Many of our respondents came in mixed groups of Sudanese, Eritreans, and occasionally other Africans. The groups ranged from 14 to 50 migrants, and often involved transfers between multiple groups of smugglers. Darfuris coming directly from Darfur paid, on average, 45 Egyptian pounds (8 USD) to be transferred from Darfur to Khartoum. Many reported being hidden in a car and then a house or market in Khartoum for several days. From Khartoum, they received notice

²² See Physicians for Human Rights, *Desert Hell – The Journey of Refugees through the Sinai Desert*, November 19, 2010.

²³ Physicians for Human Rights, *Desert Hell*, 5.

the day they needed to be at the airport to catch a flight to Cairo. The flight cost 350 Egyptian pounds (60 USD). In Cairo, most waited several days before being transferred to another group of smugglers to start the journey north to the Sinai. From Cairo they reported paying \$350 to \$500. The journey from Darfur to Israel takes an average of one month, although some reported being stuck in Bedouin camps in Sinai for much longer.²⁴ For example, one woman spent two months trapped in Sinai during the 2009 Israeli operation on Gaza, and others spent time waiting for additional ransom money. Those who reported the least amount of trouble with the journey still spent several days in Sinai as the smugglers went back and forth to the border waiting to see when the Egyptian guards were clear from the area.

Eritreans reported that the price has risen considerably in recent months. Many had begun their journey with an agreed-upon amount and then were passed to other groups who demanded increased payment. One respondent received a phone call from a relative in distress in the Sinai: smugglers had abused his captive relative and threatened to kill him if our respondent did not send money to pay for his release. Several others reported hearing of this form of extortion. A social worker interviewed had worked with several Eritrean women who had been raped during the journey, some of which resulted in unwanted pregnancy.²⁵ One group of Eritrean women reported that men and women were separated so the smugglers can “do what they want” with the women. Numerous interviewees reported that smugglers took their watches, clothing, and shoes.

The smugglers took the refugees to within 50 and 100 meters from the border fence, pointed to Israel, and told them to run. The last leg of the journey was often made without shoes to avoid detection by Egyptian police. It is documented that Egyptian police shoot and kill Africans on the Egyptian side of the border,²⁶ and our respondents described this as being the most frightening part of the journey. As one man described, “I can’t tell you how is the fear over there.” Another recalled, “I tied my shoes very, very well, and I ran.” Several lost layers or all of their clothing as they tore through the barbed wire fence. One Eritrean woman recounted being left behind by her group and having to climb over a tall section of the fence alone while her baby slept on her back. She described her terror that her baby would cry out and that she would be discovered by the Egyptian police.

²⁴ When asked where they went from Cairo, the asylum seekers all used the Arabic word for the Sinai, “seena,” probably referring to different Bedouin camps hidden throughout the Sinai. It is likely they were not aware of exactly where they were in Sinai.

²⁵ Interview, ARDC, <http://www.ardc-israel.org/en/>, November 16, 2010. We were unable to interview any Darfuri women but it is likely that they also experience this abuse.

²⁶ The 2008 report by Human Rights Watch (*Sinai Perils*) states that the Egyptian government shoots migrants to deter them from crossing into Israel as part of its strategy to fight transnational crime, but others speculate it is a result of racism.

Informal interviews with two Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers and an affidavit provided by *Hotline* indicate that *refoulement* (forced return) continues to take place at the border, although the majority of new arrivals are allowed to enter. A staff member from *Hotline* estimates that perhaps 1,000 people have been turned back, based on reports from asylum seekers in Israel and 580 instances that the organization has confirmed.²⁷

Participants described a strong sense of confusion at the border. All were intensely afraid of the Egyptian police and unsure when they had reached Israel where they knew they were safe. One recalled seeing the “new letters that were not in Arabic” on the IDF uniforms, and saw that as a symbol of hope. The IDF do not use force with the migrants.

After being picked up by the IDF participants were taken to a nearby army base where they were questioned and provided with food, clothing, and showers. After one to three days they were taken to the “camp” (detention center). The largest detention center is Saharonym prison, in the Negev desert, which is attached to Ketsiot prison that also houses Palestinians. Saharonym houses 2,000 African refugees, including 200 women and children currently living in tents.²⁸ Earlier arrivals remained in the camp for several months, while new arrivals reported being let out after about 15 days. Pregnant women were usually released within three days. Several Eritrean respondents reported being released separately from their spouses, which caused distress because they did not know when the spouse would be released or how to find each other. There appears to be no coordinated policy regarding how long individuals are held at the detention center, and they are not notified of the length or reason for detention.²⁹ Individuals with the same nationality and arrival date are often released at different times, sometimes just depending on where they happen to be sitting when the guard makes the selection.³⁰ Upon release from prison interviewees were taken to Be’er Sheva and given a free bus ticket to Tel Aviv.³¹

²⁷ Interview, *Hotline*; informal conversation with IDF soldier, November 2010.

²⁸ Interview, *Hotline*.

²⁹ In a recent visit to Ketsiot prison, one staff member of ARDC reported that the majority of asylum seekers she encountered were non-Sudanese and Eritreans, likely because these individuals are held longer while waiting for their cases to be heard or have been denied status but not deported. Sudanese and Eritrean new arrivals reported having stayed in detention for about 15 days.

³⁰ According to interviews with key informants, reasons for detention include to keep them from calling their family and friends to tell them it is safe to come, to simply harass and make it difficult, to verify their country of origin, or to ensure they are not a security threat.

³¹ Considering Israel's past policies against allowing refugees to live or work in or around Tel Aviv (Hadera-Gadera), the current practice of providing bus tickets to Tel Aviv is surprising. According to an interview with staff at *Hotline*, pressure from NGOs resulted in refugees being provided with bus tickets to Be'er Sheva or Tel Aviv upon release.

3.3 Livelihoods strategies in Israel

3.3.1 Living arrangements

Many interviewees said they chose to go to Tel Aviv from the detention center because they knew that there were “other black people” (Sudanese or Eritreans) there. One man who had been living in Levinsky park in Tel Aviv for eight days described his experience:

After 12 days in the camp, I was released and knew I needed to go where Sudanese people are. I didn't know anyone in Tel Aviv. I arrived to the park and got a carton [cardboard box] from the outside of a store. I put it on the ground, and I slept there. It was very cold without a blanket or a mat. At midnight you feel very cold. But I am happy because there is water here.

By 10:30 each evening, Levinsky Park is scattered with people under blankets, many sleeping under the playground equipment. The park fills up on weekends because people who work outside of the city come into Tel Aviv on the weekends to catch up with friends and reconnect with social networks. During the day, blankets and belongings are cleared from the area.

In Tel Aviv, refugees with access to social networks usually get assistance with housing, clean clothing, and a cell phone upon arrival. Small apartments are shared, sometimes with eight or more in a single room with four beds. Our respondents described a housing system in which newcomers were welcomed and told they could stay and eat for one month while they looked for work, but were expected to rotate out to sleep in the park if they could not help with rent by the end of that month. Many who initially slept in the park on arrival found others from their country and were welcomed in, even if they did not know them before.

3.3.2 Income generating strategies

Most of those who had regular jobs found work through someone they knew who could help them access potential employers. Regular jobs, often restaurant work, were steady (set days of the week) but often part time. Those with regular work had usually been in Israel longer. All respondents who had a six-month working visa had obtained regular work.

Those did not know anyone in Israel and lacked social networks would stand on the corner in Levinsky Park in the mornings hoping to be picked up by employers, or they would sign up for work with a manpower (employment) agency. Such work included temporary daily or weekly jobs with construction, moving companies, or cleaning. These workers nearly all reported some period of having been underpaid or not paid at all, some for as long as three months. Although long-term withholding of payment was not common, nearly everyone reported one or two days of work that

was never paid.³² Some reported lack of pay to Israeli police and received instructions about how to follow up, but no participant had recovered wages through this process. Interviewees attributed this problem to a lack of knowledge of Israeli systems and an inability to speak Hebrew. Most of our interviewees reported a regular wage rate of less than 21.70 shekels per hour, the official minimum wage.

As greater numbers of asylum seekers arrive in Israel it is increasingly difficult to obtain work by waiting to be picked up in Levinsky Park. Walking by the park at mid-day, the researcher every day observed between 40 and 60 men who had not been picked up for work; usually only a few people were picked up each morning. One man had spent six months living in the park without a job and discussed the mental anguish he faced:

When you're standing in the park looking for a job, people just stare at you. Each day, only one, two or four people are taken. There is nowhere else to go when you are not taken. And so people start losing their minds. I spent six months in the park without a job and started to become mentally crazy. And when you have no idea about your future and nothing to do, you start to think more about what happened in your country.

One new arrival from Darfur had found employment for one day. After earning a day's wages he secured a loan from other Darfuris he met in the park, and used all of the money to purchase a cell phone. He explained that having a cell phone would allow him to connect to future work opportunities.

Female respondents were more likely to find work through the "work office," meaning a manpower agency. These agencies hire and contract the refugees out, often to large hotels. The refugees earned less than minimum wage and know that the agency took some proportion of their wages. Although participants expressed frustration at this, they recognize that the agencies assist them in working out problems with employers, particularly involving language barriers. There is more work during the summer months in the hotel industry, and many refugees worked outside of Tel Aviv in hotels, particularly in Eilat. One man described the emotional toll of not having consistent work: "sometimes I live as a parasite, and sometimes I stand on my own. I worked for two months as a gardener outside Tel Aviv. I lost that job because it was only seasonal work. I came back to Tel Aviv to find work." Another lamented, "I work like a donkey but people don't respect me because I don't have a permanent visa."

³² Inspectors at the Ministry of Labor checking compliance with minimum wage laws are not able to oversee all places of employment, according to an interview with *Hotline* staff, and asylum seekers are often paid less than minimum wage.

The few refugees who had business skills and were better established in Israel opened small businesses despite their unclear legal status. Restaurants, bars, and small shops proliferated throughout Newe Sha'naan near Levinsky Park, mostly serving other refugee or foreign worker clientele. Owners obtained start-up capital through loans from family and friends in Israel and the diaspora, and through savings from cleaning or restaurant work. Shops catered to local African communities and included goods that had been shipped from different African countries. Business owners paid regular Israeli taxes and had permits to use the space. One business owner said that he did not know where he would be in the near future, and this instability meant opening a small store was his "only option." An owner of an Eritrean restaurant said he would operate until he is removed from the country, and if that happened, he would take his keys and walk away. One staff member of Microfy, an organization assisting a small number of refugees with micro-loans, noted that those who have been in Israel one year or longer have succeeded in businesses simply because they have a more permanent mindset. New arrivals still have a temporary mindset and are therefore hesitant to invest.

There was little correlation between the livelihoods refugees pursued in Israel compared with their home country. In their home countries, people engaged in skilled *or* unskilled labor but in Israel nearly all labor was unskilled. When asked what the best part of being in Israel was, one Eritrean woman noted the "equalizing effect." She felt that in Eritrea success depended on her level of education, but in Israel all Eritreans get the same type of work. A small number of educated refugees had operated businesses in their home countries, but were now working as casual laborers alongside those with no education.

Livelihood choices were determined by the demand for unskilled labor and the number of asylum seekers looking for work. In the past year (2010) increasing numbers of asylum seekers and tightened work restrictions have made it more difficult to obtain work and there are more instances of underpay and lack of pay. However, greater numbers in the country have also had positive effects on livelihoods, as expanded networks have made it easier to settle in and find work.

Pressure from families at home to send remittances did not appear to influence livelihoods choices in Israel, only because most respondents did not have many choices to make. Respondents took any opportunity they could to earn money, but scarcity of work meant there were few opportunities to earn more so as to send money home (see Remittance section below).

3.3.3 Language skills

Learning new languages appears to be related to the perceived permanence of life in Israel. Many refugees want to focus on learning English, since Hebrew is not useful if they are forced to leave or

can find a way to move to another country. Others, however, recognize that “people feel good when you speak their language” and have enrolled in Hebrew language school. Learning Hebrew is also seen as a protection mechanism and livelihood strategy -- increasing employment opportunities and improving one’s chances should a wide scale deportation take place. Only three participants reported that they had learned Hebrew well.

3.4 Legal status, protection and livelihoods

The Israeli government’s policy on refugees’ right to work appears to be in an unstable or perhaps transitional phase, with changing implications for livelihood options. Until November 2010, there was a *de facto* understanding that the government would not crack down on employers who hire asylum seekers, although the policy was never formalized. However there are recent reports that the Ministry of Interior has been instructed to tell inquiring employers that they will be fined.³³ While some employers are willing to take the risk, others will not hire refugees because they have been fined in the past. Large-scale employers, such as chain hotels who hire hundreds of asylum seekers, have more to lose than do small businesses, and are now more cautious about hiring those without documents. The Refugee Rights Clinic at Tel Aviv University has filed a case demanding work permits for refugees, and a hearing is expected in June 2011.³⁴

In December 2010, the government enacted a new law in which three-month conditional visas now read, “cannot work”. During one focus group discussion, Darfuri men showed the old and new visas. Although no one could read what they said because they were written in Hebrew, the men knew that the new visa, with the additional line, meant they could not work. The group reported that some people with the new visa had already been turned down for work. This new stipulation has become a great concern to the community. One man said that to renew his three-month visa, he must take off one full day of work. Another who had been in Israel for two years reflected that with the increased number of asylum seekers he sometimes waits in line for several hours and then is told to come back the next day. The waiting time varies significantly; it can be hours or days. All who were working reported the difficulty of taking time off from work to renew.

New arrivals face an additional visa-related obstacle in attempting to secure work. Upon release from detention they receive a one-month visa. They then must make an appointment with the Ministry of Interior to transfer this to a three-month permit, a process that is often delayed for many months. Many said it is nearly impossible to be hired without the three-month visa. One man expressed frustration with his immigration status and lack of documentation:

³³ Interview, *Hotline*.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

I used to be a refugee. In Cairo I had a refugee card. Now I am confused. Am I a refugee or am I with the Israeli government? I just want to know what I am. I need a good visa, a paper to work or to do something good. I don't get help in Israel, but if I am a refugee, shouldn't I get help?

Several others expressed also frustration, asking what the role of the UN was, and why it could not work to solve the problem.

Some asylum seekers began to open businesses at the end of 2008 when the government allowed them to stay on conditional release visas. As of December 2010, small business owners did not appear to be concerned that authorities would disturb their shops.

In Israel, refugee livelihoods are unstable, especially in the long term, but the research did not reveal physical protection issues. Some respondents reported verbal abuse and many suffered from fatigue due to long hours working at physically demanding jobs. Employment agencies sometimes take advantage of the asylum seekers' illegal status by revoking salaries and there is little oversight of abuses, but these concerns were not widely reflected in participants' responses. When asked whether they could report concerns about their employer to the manpower agencies, some participants, particularly women, expressed surprise at being asked about their rights in the work place. Some said they worried that their employer would fire them any day and were frustrated that they were unable to speak up for fear of losing their jobs. Most who were working reported not liking their jobs but feeling extremely fortunate to have them.

3.4.1 Treatment by police and authorities

Respondents did not fear being stopped on the street by police to ask for documentation. Many reported that this was more of a concern in the past but now everyone has documentation. When asked about physical security in Israel, one Eritrean man reported:

There is no problem with the police here. I really appreciate them. This country is in a very complex security situation and the police are not doing something very wrong. They are polite and civilized and there is no torture, compared to life in the past.

Many participants said that the best thing about being in Israel was not being harassed by police, stopped in the street, or physically insecure. One Eritrean owner of a small business who had been in Israel for three years reported,

I accept this situation. I appreciate it because I know what happens in Eritrea. Rights are violated and they don't care about who you are even if you're educated and experienced. You are an instrument, like a slave in your own country. For me, Israel is like heaven. I can sleep

and work and I am not afraid of the police, army, or the people. I have made some nice Israeli friends. Many people are frustrated, but maybe that's because their expectations are different. Life is not smooth, but I'm learning about democracy. I like that I can say whatever I want about the ministers, and fight in the legal system if something goes wrong. It is amazing to have people fight for your rights. I know what our past was like.

3.5 Remittances, savings and debt

Remittance patterns are closely associated with the repayment of smuggling fees. Before they left home, most respondents had gathered money from relatives in the home country or in the diaspora to pay smuggling fees. Once in Israel, most were repaying this debt. Only three participants, all Eritrean, said they had saved enough money in advance of their departure. Several women described the burden of needing to repay a loan when they could not earn enough to provide for themselves in Israel. Most respondents said they used their income first to care for themselves and their family in Israel, then to repay the smuggling loan, and finally, if they had anything left over, they would send money to their families in the home country. One Eritrean man said that when he had money left over in his monthly budget he sent three quarters to those who had paid his smuggling fees (family in Eritrea and a German friend) and one quarter to assist his family in Eritrea. He estimated that he sent \$50 each month, depending on his situation. After eight months in Israel he had sent \$600 to pay back the loan.

Some participants said they had set off to Israel without having the full payment for the smugglers in advance. One woman had been afraid that if she asked her family and friends in advance they would refuse to give her the money, but she knew they would send it if she called in distress along the way. She felt the risk was worthwhile because she would not otherwise be able to go, so she set out knowing she would need to call for help along the way. In Israel, participants reported instances where their community (Sudanese or Eritrean) pooled large sums of money to secure release of a friend or relative who called from the Sinai. Smugglers also often raised the price above the initial agreement and held migrants for ransom. Many believe this is happening with increased frequency and expect to be ready anytime to send money in case it occurred. The smuggling loan and repayment system applied to both Sudanese and Eritreans and to men and women.

In addition to the trauma and grief for the families of those who are held for ransom in the Sinai or who are killed by Egyptian police at the border, there are key livelihood ramifications. Family members who contribute to sending a person to Israel expect to be repaid, and may themselves have gone into debt. When a person is killed on the journey the family loses a significant financial investment. One respondent emphasized that he constantly warned his family in Eritrea about the dangers of making the journey and encouraged them not to come.

All our interviewees said they left home with the intention of sending money, but the amounts and frequency varied. Those who could not find work sent nothing; a few were able to send 50 to 300 dollars every two to three months. No participants were sending money to relatives in Cairo. One key informant believed that Eritreans generally sent more money than the Sudanese, but if this is so, there may well be gender differences. Several Eritrean women reported that they had come to Israel to help their families but instead had been obliged to ask people in Israel for help. They were unable to even call their families in Eritrea, let alone send them money. Other than to pay smuggling costs no respondents received money from family members in other parts of the diaspora.

3.5.1 Banks and Remittance Mechanisms

Sudanese must route remittances through Canada, Australia, America, or neighboring African countries since there is no direct money transfer mechanism between Israel and Sudan. This routing was done easily through the money transfer agency and did not appear to be an obstacle to sending remittances.

Refugees are legally allowed to open bank accounts in Israel, but very few are saving money and none of our respondents had opened accounts. Only one respondent, who had studied business in Eritrea and was working as a cleaner in Israel, had begun saving and he said he planned to open an account in the coming months. Some said that if they became sick they expected to collect money from family and friends to pay hospital fees since they could not save for unforeseen costs.

3.6 Onward migration and return

For the most part, asylum seekers are unable to move beyond Israel because of the prohibitive cost and the high security risk. One man described his failed attempt to reach America:

I have no money to change to another country because I don't have enough work. If I pay the air ticket to Mexico, I will catch the police. I'll come back here and then I'll go to prison. All the money I've invested then I will have lost. Here, there is no legal route to move on. Also, if I had money and stability, why would I want to change places?

This man felt it was fairly easy to get on a flight if one has the money. Others commented on what a shame it is that people try to move onward and fail: “think if those people saved all that money instead of gambling it trying to reach a new country. They would have so much, but instead they lose.” Only one participant reported trying and failing to move beyond Israel, and another said he had a friend who tried to go to Mexico twice and lost \$7,000 each time.

Many respondents said they would go home tomorrow if the security and financial situation allowed them. A few stated that even with the insecurity in their home countries, where they came

from was better and they wished to return as soon as possible, although they did not specify when they would go. However, most said that they would be happy to stay in Israel, particularly if their visa allowed them to plan for the future. All felt physically secure in the country and most believed that despite the hardships they faced it was better than in their country of origin.

In December 2010, a group of 150 to 200 Southern Sudanese was repatriated to Sudan via an undisclosed third country,³⁵ and news sources indicated that the Israeli government provided them with transportation and a stipend of \$500 upon arrival. The link between the January 2011 referendum in South Sudan on independence and a potential larger-scale return to South Sudan remains to be explored. It is possible that remittance flows could increase should relations normalize between Israel and an independent South Sudan as (if) refugees return home. Given the Israeli government's desire to reduce the number of asylum seekers, it is possible that the government would support return migration to South Sudan. One Darfuri man said some Darfuris are registering as Southern Sudanese to go back, as a way to get closer to Darfur, although this was not confirmed by any other interviews.

3.6.1 The burden of uncertainty

Many refugees alluded to the emotional toll of being unsure of the future, and of being unable to "relax" because they were always thinking of others in their country. One man reflected, "now I am skinny. I think too much. I'm not sleeping well because my mind is always at work." Another man who had a degree from Eritrea discussed his inability to invest in a future or integrate with Israeli society:

We are living in Israel but are in Eritrea inside of Israel. We don't share in their technology, development, culture, and way of life. We are only working for them. It doesn't feel good. I had an idea to change my way of life, academically and ideologically. But I am here with exactly what I had before.

Another Eritrean man had a similar story:

This is not a permanent place. If I knew it was a permanent place here, I could make plans. I'd like to get married, have a house, have children, and send money to my family. But now I don't have a set life; I am not stable enough to plan for the future. Being here is like being closed in a dark room. I don't know how long I will stay. If I don't know, how can I make any plans?

³⁵ Haaretz, *Israel sends some 150 refugees back to their native Sudan*. December 13, 2010 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/israel-sends-some-150-refugees-back-to-their-native-sudan-1.330445>.

Several Darfuri men expressed concern that they would not be able to get married and start a family in Israel where there were so few Sudanese women.³⁶ These men recognized that getting married requires money and stability that they do not have.

4. Future Implications

As the number of asylum seekers in Israel grows, a clear policy would be in the interests of the Israeli government. Purposely maintaining ambiguity has failed to have the desired effect of discouraging future migration, and instead the country is faced with growing numbers of asylum seekers who are unable to work and whom Israel is unable to deport. Israel faces a complex set of issues related to immigration.³⁷ In addition to the concerns about irregular migration faced by most developed states, there is the added concern of maintaining a Jewish majority in a the current geopolitical context. While this means limiting African non-Jewish immigration, many Israelis feel they have a moral obligation to refugees, given the history of the Jewish people. Public opinion is mixed, as demonstrated by recent pro and anti-immigration rallies held in Tel Aviv.³⁸

A more coherent policy would include outlining a clear definition of temporary protection for the two largest groups (Sudanese and Eritrean) – including social and economic rights and the conditions under which protection would be revoked – and an agreement to hear individual cases for other nationalities in a timely manner. This would ensure that Israel upholds its responsibilities under the 1951 Refugee Convention while at the same time recognizing that permanent asylum for large numbers is not feasible in a country so sensitive to demographic concerns. One of the greatest challenges in Israel for asylum seekers is their inability to plan or invest more than three months into the future. Knowing the rights and conditions under which they can stay in the country, even if not permanent, would provide relief to asylum seekers plagued with so much uncertainty in their lives. Eliminating the requirement of applying for new papers every three months would benefit both the Israeli government, by reducing pressure on the Interior Ministry, and the asylum seekers, who would have more clarity and more time to devote to livelihoods and other concerns while in Israel.

³⁶According to an interview with a staff member of ARDC, nine months ago an estimated 25 percent of asylum seekers were women, but women are much less visible. The ARDC reported mostly encountering women when they came to collect food at their donation distribution center. Out of 150 enrollees in ARDC classes, only nine have been women.

³⁷ See Martins, Bruno Oliveira, "Undocumented Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Israel," *EuroMesco Paper 81*, February 2009; Afeef, Karin Fathimath, "A promised land for refugees? Asylum and migration in Israel." *UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service*, December 2009.

³⁸ See Ynet News, *TA protest against infiltrators turns violent*. December 21, 2010 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4002634,00.html>; The Jerusalem Post, *Refugees protest in TA: 'We are not diseased.'* December 24, 2010 <http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=200873>.

At a minimum, Israel should grant asylum seekers the right to work. Allowing them to work would reduce the level of state resources to support them in the planned detention center and would allow them to contribute to the communities in which they live. At present, most eventually find livelihood opportunities, even if short-term and insecure, and this has allowed the community to help itself, independent so far of any government assistance. Allowing them to develop skills while in Israel would also prepare them better for return to their home countries.

Most new arrivals are fleeing desperate circumstances in their homelands, and are truly seeking protection (not just jobs) in Israel. Planned government actions – building a fence along the Egyptian border, a detention facility in the Negev, and enforcing employment restrictions on holders of the 2A5 visa – are unlikely to stem the migration. Instead asylum seekers will turn to increasingly dangerous routes. So far, threats from the Bedouin in the Sinai and heavier restrictions in Israel have done little to discourage new arrivals. Well-established social networks and smuggling routes now in place are likely to facilitate continuing arrivals, even if the danger grows.

Assistance from the international community is warranted. Israel should work with UNHCR and key donors such as the United States to engage in talks with Egypt to address the issue of smuggling in the Sinai and the treatment of asylum seekers currently seeking protection in Egypt. UNHCR must clearly assess the issue of African migration in Israel, including developing resettlement strategies for particular cases.

At this writing (late January 2011) two political events are unfolding which will have important ramifications for migration to Israel from the region. The referendum in South Sudan has been declared a victory for secession, and the new state of South Sudan will come into existence (if the process is not derailed) in July 2011. Reportedly, large numbers of Southern Sudanese have repatriated, and this flow is likely to continue.³⁹ Remittances will be needed to support the new state. Second, as we write, the protests in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt are in their seventh day. Should a new government come to Egypt, it will have an opportunity to address serious human rights violations being committed on its border with Israel.

³⁹ According to one informant, some Southern Sudanese have repatriated with the assistance of a Christian aid organization based in Jerusalem, which helps people return via a third country to change documents.