

Hotline for Migrant Workers

"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" - *Exodus 22:20*

September 06, 2010

Incitement and Racism Against Asylum Seekers in Israel

Numerous cases of incitement and racism were displayed in Israel during the past year, from an array of individuals ranging from elected national parliament members – either practicing populist tactics or expressing their honest opinion that they do not want foreigners living in Israel – to city council members, journalists and ordinary citizens. Through their actions, these people, who have tried various methods to advocate their campaign against asylum seekers in Israel, apply their own version of “attrition through enforcement,” believing that by creating unpleasant conditions, legislating specific laws and enforcing them will lead the individuals that they seek gone to voluntarily leave the country.¹

In January 2010, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he had approved a plan to construct a fence along Israel's border with Egypt to help stop infiltration into Israel. The decision was met with a great deal of support, as many citizens had begun to feel threatened by the number of people seeking refuge in Israel. Yet some viewed the measure as insufficient. In April 2010, Knesset Member Yaakov Katz, an elected parliamentarian from the National Union party, who also chairs the Knesset Committee on Foreign Workers, issued a letter to Tel Aviv residents, calling for the immediate declaration of a state of emergency due to the high number of Africans infiltrating the country through the Egyptian border.

In his letter, Katz claims that some 20,000 Africans live in Tel Aviv (out of 22,000-25,000 in Israel), and that by his calculations (according to which 1,000-2,000 people infiltrate each month) there will be 50,000 Africans in Israel in two years, and 75,000-100,000 in six or seven years, the majority of whom will reside in Tel Aviv. In the open letter, Katz says that the State of Israel, which the country's citizens worked so hard to build, is being killed and that, “In ten years the infiltrators could ruin it all.” Katz goes on to say that Eritrean and Sudanese children are filling up schools in the cities of Arad and Eilat, and that nearly one tenth of the population of Arad is comprised of Muslims and Christians from Eritrea and Sudan. He claims that this is a collaborative effort by leaders of Sudan, Eritrea and Egypt. Katz called on Netanyahu to declare a state of emergency in regards to the “infiltrators,” saying that the construction of the border fence along the Egyptian border must be constructed immediately. The elected parliamentarian called for a city to be established not far from the Egyptian border, where “infiltrators” would be allowed to live. According to Katz's plan, individuals who had crossed the border from Egypt to seek asylum in Israel would not be able to live anywhere in the country aside from the proposed city. Katz's plan calls for the “infiltrators” themselves to construct the border fence along the Egyptian border, and suggested that they also work in construction to serve the needs of the residents of Israel's south. Katz stated that the manual labor would likely be a burden on the asylum seekers, which would result in them advising their friends and relatives not to try to join them in Israel, and could encourage them to leave of their own volition. Katz concludes his letter by expressing his dismay with Tel Aviv residents, whom he calls “dull and witless,” stating that not only is their city

¹ Downes, Lawrence. “The Hunt for Decency in the Arizona Quicksand.” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/04/opinion/04wed4.html?_r=1&ref=opinion

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becoming an Eritrean and Sudanese city, but that they had lost their will to live,² an expression that seems to infer that living in a city with a small minority of refugees is no way to live.

Katz was not alone in criticizing the government for not building the border fence fast enough, as various government officials and members of the general public were very vocal in their remarks calling for an end to the "infiltration" as quickly as possible. In July 2010, Public Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch criticized the fact that construction of the fence on the Egyptian border had not yet commenced. He spoke of the unfavorable reality that would ensue if things continue as they are, saying that Israel will pay a heavy price in the coming years. He stated that if the fence is only completed in 2013, 1,200 "African migrants" would enter the country each month, adding to the "state within a state" that he claims they have already built.³

Leaders, senior officials and citizens make remarks that are blatant in their disregard for the conditions that the asylum seekers fled, while dismissing the fact that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has advised against returning Eritrean asylum seekers to their home countries due to the conditions they could face, or the fact that the civil war in South Sudan and the genocide in Darfur have created conditions in which the lives of countless people are in danger simply because they are there. Other comments emit disdain, without even considering that these people may in fact be refugees. For example, the head of the Immigration Authority, Amnon Ben Ami, spoke in favor of a "legitimate" refugee from Darfur who had been recognized by the state, and in the same breath disregarded many other asylum seekers who had arrived in Israel, some from Darfur, as having come to the country for work purposes. Ben Ami makes a distinction between individuals officially recognized by the State of Israel as refugees, saying that the state grants them all of the rights that they deserve. He goes on to say that problems start when people who are not refugees, who come to Israel for work purposes, "use the state's sensitivity to the refugee issue."⁴

It is unclear whether elected officials spread their opinions to the general public, or whether they are simply expressing the views of their electorate. It may be the latter, based on an opinion piece that ran in the most circulated newspaper in Israel, which regards asylum seekers coming to Israel as invaders. Writer Hagai Segal states that the "infiltration rate" through Israel's southern border is equal to that of Jewish migration to Israel. Segal, in blatant disregard for current events that have claimed thousands of lives, states that while the media refers to the Africans who have arrived in Israel as "Sudanese refugees" they are not refugees and have come to Israel simply to seek employment. He goes on to claim that Israel should send them back to their home countries, yet the government does nothing to deal with this "national problem of the highest priority," which he regards as more pressing than the Iranian question. Segal, who is critical of the Israeli government's lack of urgency on the matter, proposes a means of dealing with the "problem:" Establishing a "ministry for curbing African work migrants."⁵

Some Israeli cities with the highest concentration of asylum seekers have seen drastic measures taken, both by elected officials and by ordinary citizens. The southern city of Eilat has seen a number of asylum seekers take up residency in its neighborhoods, as a significant number work in

2 Katz, Yaakov. "Wake Up, Tel Aviv Residents!" April 2010.

3 Golan, Gidi. "Build the Fence on the Egyptian Border – Immediately." *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2010.

4 Eichner, Itamar. "The Boy From Darfur is Going to Auschwitz." *Yedioth Ahronoth*, June 26, 2010.

5 Segal, Hagai. "Curb the African Invasion." *Ynetnews*, July 30, 2010.

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3927351,00.html>

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the hotel industry. The city's mayor, Meir Yitzhak Halevy says that with respect to the asylum seekers, he has lost control of the city and that Eilat is losing its character as a normative city, as dozens of asylum seekers move to the city each week. Halevy says he expects a collision between the asylum seekers and city residents in the near future, as the latter do not want them there.⁶ Simon Ben Dor, who ran for mayor of Eilat five years ago and lost, but served as a city councilman in the past, and Avi Hillel have started a movement in Eilat against the Sudanese presence of the city. In June the two distributed fear-mongering fliers in the city, which scared residents and incited them against the asylum seekers. The fliers read: "Wake up Eilat residents!!! The Sudanese have conquered Eilat!! The streets are filled with fear and terror. We won't wait for the first rape and murder. The police are helpless. Infiltrators + anarchy = violence." The fliers play on Israelis' fears of high numbers of foreigners entering the country, and allude to the fact that the asylum seekers pose a physical threat to residents. The flier goes on to claim that asylum seekers will at some point be a majority in the city of Eilat. The fliers get people riled up and promote an anti-asylum seeker mindset when they state that, "One million infiltrators are waiting in Egypt to infiltrate Eilat and the government is silent!!!! The streets are a nightmare!!! We must defend our home, Eilat for the people of Eilat – Sudan for the Sudanese."⁷

Ben Dor, one of the leaders of the campaign against asylum seekers in Eilat, claims that the Sudanese nationals in Eilat are not refugees, but are infiltrators seeking comfort. By associating asylum seekers with terrorist organizations, Ben Dor conjures up fear among the general public, while comparing them to a Biblical plague. "They are being funded by Al Qaida, Hamas and Saudi Arabia. Some of them are sleeper agents. The government has no control when it comes to these infiltrators. They conquered the entire city. They're like locusts who descend on the city and they're destroying our city." He claims that the Sudanese have brought record amounts of alcoholism, violence and sexual crimes to the city, though he has no actual data to substantiate his claim. Promoting negative stereotypes, he claims that many women call in and that there are "near rapes." Ben Dor says that Sudanese men sexually harass all women, and continues by generalizing that Sudanese men are very violent, particularly when they are intoxicated.⁸

For its part, Eilat's municipality does not meet the needs, try to meet the needs or even feel that it is in any way obligated to meet the needs of the Sudanese community. The community is formally discriminated against, as Sudanese children are not enrolled in Eilat schools. When asked why they don't study in Eilat schools, the children of asylum seekers say that it is because of the color of their skin. The municipality does not intervene when youths are not enrolled in school, a violation of Israel's compulsory education law which states that all children residing in Israel should receive equal education regardless of their legal status, nor does it step in to address alleged cases of sexual or physical domestic abuse in the Sudanese community. Halevy, the city's mayor, claims that the municipality's policy is in no way racist, nor does it have to do with the asylum seekers' countries of origin. In regards to the Sudanese community, he says: "They aren't residents of the city. With all of my goodwill, I can't assist these people. A group of people came here, dangerously changing the demographic parameter. People call me a racist, but believe me, I'd act the same way if they were

6 Batito, Merav and Zadok Yechezkel. "South Africa." *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 2, 2010.

7 Batito and Yechezkel.

8 Batito and Yechezkel.

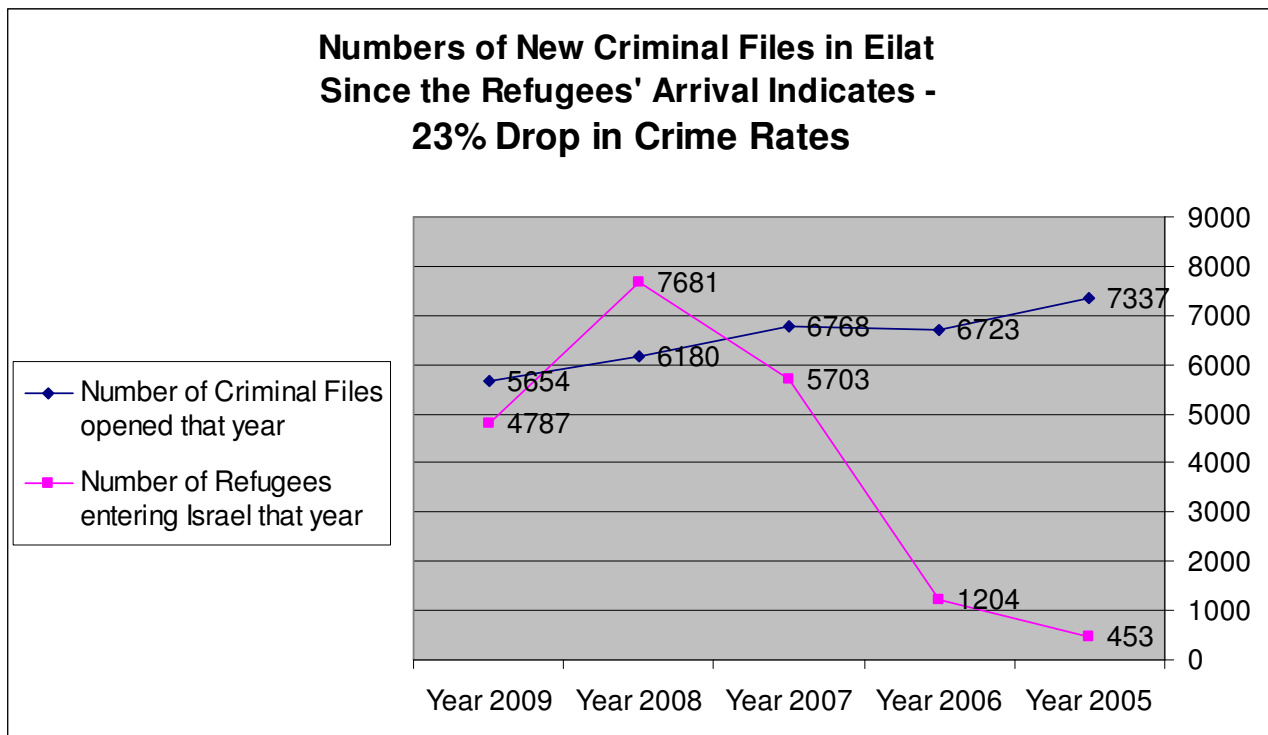
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infiltrators from Stockholm." He goes on to express his fear of a permanent Sudanese community emerging in Eilat, complaining of the new places of worship and clubs in the city.⁹

According to an Eilat police report released in May 2010, Sudanese community members' involvement in crime began in April 2008. The report states that, "There are instances of domestic violence, drunk violence, attacks on police officers, and recently drugs." The report goes on to note that, "A high percentage of them are unemployed, do nothing and drink alcohol." The report is not subtle in stating that, "Their appearance is threatening and harms the public's sense of security. In the mornings and evenings they convene in the industrial area and get drunk." The report's conclusion is that the Sudanese and Eritreans believe that they are protected and that state authorities will not deport them to their countries of origin, and there is a greater chance that they will get legal status in Israel, and thus they encourage their friends and families in Egypt to reach Israel quickly."¹⁰

While the citizens of Eilat and some anonymous police sources make these claims and accusations of violence and crime, they provide no concrete data to support them, and data provided by the Israel Police statistics department demonstrates that these claims are false. Hotline for Migrant Workers found that over the course of the last five years, since refugees began arriving in Eilat, the crime rate in the city has actually dropped by 23%, as demonstrated below:



In an example of the public's aversion towards asylum seekers, Tal Ben Ari, from ASSAF, an aid organization for refugees in Israel, went to Eilat to try to set up a volunteer network to work with refugee children. For months she tried to recruit volunteers, and eventually she was joined by three volunteers, two of whom were Arab students, along with a woman from a nearby kibbutz. She explains that the problem in Eilat isn't racism, but rather incitement and disinformation, particularly regarding the number of asylum seekers in the city (those leading the campaign against African

9 Batito and Yechezkel.

10 Batito and Yechezkel.

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asylum seekers claim that there are 7,000, asylum seekers in Eilat, while Ben Ari and Sudanese community members say there are less than 3,500).¹¹ Those opposed to the Sudanese make generalizations about them, claiming that they are hot tempered and unclean and that they speak different dialects of Arabic.¹²

Eilat is not the only place in Israel in which people have expressed their contempt towards opening their city to asylum seekers. During the summer months, Benjamin Babayoff, a Tel Aviv city council member from the Shas party (an ultra-Orthodox religion party), representing residents of the city's poorer, southern neighborhoods called for real estate agencies and property owners not to rent apartments out to "infiltrators." He issued a statement citing the Bible, saying that renting apartments to non-Jews is forbidden. Babayoff claims that police records indicate that crime rates have increased significantly in areas inhabited by asylum seekers, and that they are responsible for 40% of criminal offenses. He goes on to say that refugees bring filth and crime, leading to fear among law abiding citizens, and disheartening residents of the city's disadvantaged neighborhoods by noting precedents around the world that indicate that the values of apartments decrease significantly in areas inhabited by Africans. He also expresses his frustration with the "plethora of mixed marriages" between asylum seekers and Jewish women. Babayoff's campaign led a committee of rabbis to issue a statement warning the public of the dangers of renting out property to "these people," citing Jewish laws banning the practice. The rabbis go on to encourage people to "help maintain Tel Aviv's Jewish character." Within a few weeks of the rabbis' petition urging property owners not to rent apartments out to asylum seekers, ten real estate agents and real estate agency owners issued a statement saying that they would not rent apartments to "infiltrators." They explained their decision, stating: "Following the massive entry of infiltrators into the neighborhoods and the rabbis' call not to rent apartments to illegal foreign workers, we hereby declare that we will not rent apartments to infiltrators in the neighborhoods of Kiryat Shalom and Tel Kabir in order to stem the spread of this phenomenon." The real estate agents' statement regarded the phenomenon as "a spreading cancer," in that every month more infiltrators move into the neighborhoods because they can. The real estate agents said they were willing to sacrifice part of their income in order to honor the many residents who had contacted them asking that they not rent apartments to illegal workers.¹³

Babayoff justified his campaign, saying that, "The Torah [Bible] says to care for the foreigner, but our children's' future is more important. I have no problem with foreigners, but only if they are scattered all over the city."¹⁴ In that comment, Babayoff expressed the sentiments of other residents of southern Tel Aviv neighborhoods who claim that the municipality is sending all of the asylum seekers to them rather than dispersing them throughout the city.

Average citizens have expressed their fair share of racism against asylum seekers and non-Jews, taking their complaints to their elected officials in an effort to keep them out of their neighborhoods. In July 2010, a group of parents from Kiryat Shalom, a neighborhood in southern Tel Aviv, met with senior officials in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality's Education Department in an attempt to prevent them from opening a nursery school for children of migrant workers in the area. Local residents threatened to stand at the entrance to the

11 Batito and Yechezkeleli.

12 Batito and Yechezkeleli.

13 Zitun, Yoav. "Real Estate Agents Refuse to Rent to Refugees." *Ynetnews*, August 1, 2010. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3928026,00.html>

14 Shlomo-Melamed, Merav. "Babayoff Inciting to Racism." *Yedioth Tel Aviv*, July 2, 2010.

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nursery school to prevent anyone from entering if the municipality went through with its plan to open the school to children of migrant workers, a blatant act of xenophobia. Neighborhood representatives met with municipality representatives to convey their views that bringing foreigners into the neighborhood would weaken it. "There are enough buildings designated as nursery schools in northern Tel Aviv. All of the kids can be transferred to those nursery schools," they claim, and went on to say that, "They don't need to be brought to our neighborhood, which has disadvantaged populations and needs to be strengthened, not weakened." The neighborhood representatives expressing concerns that if the children were allowed to go to the school, their parents would want to move to the neighborhood.¹⁵

Babayoff is not the only one accusing asylum seekers and refugees of causing higher crime rates; the past year has seen widespread blame placed on them for crime that has been prevalent in south Tel Aviv for years. In response, Israel Police announced in July 2010 that a new police station will open to fight crime in the area around Tel Aviv's central bus station, crime that they claim is perpetuated by people residing in southern Tel Aviv illegally, namely migrant workers and asylum seekers. According to the police, many refugees in Israel are unable to find work, and they therefore turn to crime, mainly breaking into cars and apartments, to survive. According to a newspaper report on the new station, the 74 policemen assigned to it were slated to undergo special training to learn how to "deal with the neighborhood's population."¹⁶ According to the police, the proposed new unit will be responsible for establishing a database of fingerprints, as well as an intelligence branch to fight crime amongst the 40-50,000 migrant workers and asylum seekers residing in the country illegally.¹⁷

Others in the country have expressed concerns that asylum seekers would take their jobs. In an opinion piece entitled "Refugees Go Home," Ayano Pereda Sanabato complains that refugees are harming the state and destroying Israeli society. Sanabato pays particular attention to Israel's Ethiopian community, saying that refugees are marrying Ethiopian immigrants, and are thus destroying the Ethiopian Jewish community. Israelis who feel threatened dismiss the dangers that refugees and asylum seekers face in their home countries, and claim that they are in Israel to improve their economic status. Sanabato complains that employers prefer migrant workers and refugees over Israelis, as they don't need to pay them full benefits, and notes that in some instances Ethiopian immigrants have been fired and these refugees were hired in their place, for lower wages and without any social benefits. Sanabato and others who do not want the refugees to reside in Israel scare the general public, saying that the asylum seekers will eventually demand an independent autonomy within Israel, or alternately, they warn that Tel Aviv will become a terrorism hub.¹⁸

And in other instances, newspapers have published articles with stories that are not backed with solid proof, stories that tarnish the reputations of an entire group of people, in this instance asylum seekers. In July, Israel's leading daily newspaper published an article stating that Eritrean asylum

15 Shlomo-Melamed, Merav. "Not With Us Please." *Yedioth Tel Aviv*, July 2, 2010.

16 Kubovich, Yaniv. "New Police Station Will Tackle South Tel Aviv Crime Wave." *Haaretz*, August 12, 2010. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/new-police-station-will-tackle-south-tel-aviv-crime-wave-1.307440>

17 Senyor, Eli. "Police want 'migrant worker unit' in TA." *Ynetnews*, July 1, 2010. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3913655,00.html>

18 Sanabato, Ayano Pereda. "Refugees Go Home!" *News 1*, July 20, 2010. <http://www.news1.co.il/Archive/003-D-50181-00.html>

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seekers in the country have been sent to Israel by their home government, so that they can earn money. According to the article, the money that asylum seekers send home each month is taxed, and the Eritrean government therefore profits from their presence in Israel, and because of this the government intentionally sends its citizens to Israel. The article states that Israel enjoys a great reputation in Eritrea, and that there are 120,000 Eritreans en route to Israel, and an unidentified Eritrean official says the Eritrean government has a plan called "Israel Plus," which aims to find work for as many of the country's released soldiers as possible, so that they will send back money to their families, which the government will tax.¹⁹

Societies and countries that fear they are under threat – be it economic, demographic, etc. - often try to find a scapegoat, blaming an entire community for pre-existing, ongoing problems. Disadvantaged sectors in Israel feel threatened by refugees and asylum seekers and fear that they could take their jobs and further weaken their communities. In the meantime politicians have adopted populist policies to get the public riled up against asylum seekers and refugees, to shift the focus away from the fact that the government is not abiding by international law and has not put forth original, applicable means of resolving the refugee issue. Rather than deferring to the international treaties that it has signed, it seems that Israel has adopted a policy of incitement against this powerless sector, a policy that does not appear to benefit anyone, least of all those who need the most help.

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¹⁹ Eichner, Itamar and Danny Adino Abeba. "The African Sting." *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 6, 2010.