

ANALYSIS / WHO, WHY, WHAT, WHERE & WHEN...AND THE ANNE FRANK CONNECTION

# 10 key questions about Israel's African asylum seeker controversy

As authorities gear up to expel migrants amid growing pushback, here's a primer to help make sense of the complexities



By **MELANIE LIDMAN**  
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African asylum seekers and human rights activists protest against deportation in front of the Rwandan Embassy in Herzliya, on January 22, 2018. (Tomer Neuberger/Flash90)

## 1. Who are Israel's African asylum seekers?

There are approximately 38,000 African migrants and asylum seekers in Israel, according to the Interior Ministry. About 72 percent are Eritrean and 20% are Sudanese. The vast majority arrived between 2006 and 2012. In 2010, the height of the wave of asylum seekers crossing from the Sinai to Israel, 1,300 people illegally crossed the border each month. In 2014, Israel [completed construction of a 242-kilometer \(150-mile\) electronic fence](#) along the border with Sinai. Illegal immigration through Sinai dropped to just 11 cases in 2016 and 0 in 2017.



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Eritrean asylum seekers have fled a harsh dictator and compulsory military service that can last for 40 years. Sudanese asylum seekers have fled genocide in Darfur as well as fighting between Sudan and South Sudan.

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Israeli officials contend they are economic migrants looking for work opportunities, not asylum seekers. “We are not taking action against refugees,” Netanyahu said at the [beginning of the weekly cabinet meeting](#) on January 21. “We are taking action against illegal immigrants who come here for work purposes. Israel will continue to be a shelter for true refugees and will eject illegal infiltrators.”



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with residents of south Tel Aviv where many African migrants live, on August 31, 2017. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

## 2. Why do people want to deport them?

Some Tel Aviv residents in the southern part of the city, notably the Central Bus Station Neighborhood Watch group, say African asylum seekers have “destroyed the neighborhood” and blame them for rising crime rates. [According to police statistics](#), 90% of African asylum seekers live in south Tel Aviv, with the remaining 10% spread across the country.



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Neve Shaanan, a poor neighborhood whose infrastructure was crumbling before the African asylum seekers arrived, is now home to 35,000 people, though it was originally planned for 6,000. It is the most crowded part of Tel Aviv. Some activists have hung signs around the neighborhood stating, “Rehabilitation begins with deportation.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [has visited the neighborhood](#) on multiple occasions in an effort to shore up support among conservative voters. Culture Minister Miri Regev said south Tel Aviv’s Israeli residents are “refugees in their own country.”

*“Ninety percent of African asylum seekers live in South Tel Aviv, with the remaining ten percent spread across the country.”*

According to police, African asylum seekers account for 70% of the population of Neve Shaanan but are responsible for 40% of the crime, countering reports that they are responsible for the rise in criminal activity.

### 3. What is the status of the asylum seekers in Israel? Are they considered refugees?

The European Union has recognized asylum claims from 90% of Eritreans who apply for refugee status and 56% of Sudanese, according to the [European Stability Institute](#). Israel has [recognized refugee status for one Sudanese](#) and 10 Eritreans, out of thousands of applications for asylum, an acceptance rate of 0.056%, according to the Hotline for Refugees and Migrant Workers.

Refugee status is a recognized legal status that allows people to obtain certain rights that vary according to the host country, including work permits, health insurance, education for children, housing assistance and language classes.

About 200 Sudanese in Israel received an A5 humanitarian visa, which is a partial recognition of refugee status and enables them to work legally in Israel.

The rest of the asylum seekers and migrants receive temporary visas every few months, which they must renew in person at the Interior Ministry in Bnei Barak near Tel Aviv. If the Interior Ministry wants to pressure someone to agree to “willing deportation,” they may give someone a visa forcing them to go to Holot.

Holot is an open-air detention center in the Negev Desert for illegal migrants. Asylum seekers sent to Holot can leave during the day but must stay inside between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. Generally, asylum seekers are sent to Holot for a year, after which they are released and can continue their lives.

Technically, those temporary visas do not allow asylum seekers to work, though the government has announced they will not enforce the work permits issue.



African migrants protest against the 'Deposit Law' in Tel Aviv, June 10, 2017. (Tomer Neuberger/Flash90)

Because asylum seekers have an uncertain status, most are forced to work in menial jobs such as construction, food service, or cleaning because those are the only industries that agree to hire people in limbo. Asylum seekers do not have recourse or rights if they feel an employer has mistreated them or withheld paychecks.

Additionally, since May, companies who hire asylum seekers are required to deduct 20% of the paycheck after taxes to put into a “deposit fund.” This deposit fund is only accessible for withdrawal at Ben Gurion airport after the asylum seeker agrees to be deported to a third-party country, a move that was [widely condemned by rights groups](#).

The disarray of Israel’s asylum process has implications beyond Africans already in the country. The long wait time for asylum status has opened the door to nearly 25,000 illegal Ukrainians and Georgians migrants who have [filed for asylum in the past two years](#), the vast majority of whom come for economic opportunities. They arrive on tourist visas and are able to stay in the country until the Interior Ministry resolves their files, a process that can take years due to the backlog from the African asylum seekers.

#### 4. Where are they being deported?

Israel has not officially revealed where they deport asylum seekers, but organizations that follow deportees have reported the destinations to be Uganda and Rwanda. According to the UN, [approximately 4,000 asylum seekers](#) have been “willingly” deported from Israel to third countries.

“Willing deportation” means that an asylum seeker has signed an agreement with the Interior Ministry that they are leaving Israel under their own free will, generally after being made to decide between incarceration and deportation.

Asylum seekers who sign documents that they are willingly leaving the country receive a deportation grant of \$3,500.



Asylum seekers protesting at the Holot detention center in the southern Negev Desert of Israel, February 17, 2014. (Ilia Yefimovich/Getty Images)

## 5. What do Rwanda and Uganda think of this?

In November, Rwandan Foreign Affairs Minister Louise Mushikiwabo said the country [could accept approximately 10,000](#) asylum seekers from Israel. Israel will reportedly pay \$5,000 to the Rwandan government for each deported migrant, plus the \$3,500 grant given directly to the deportee.

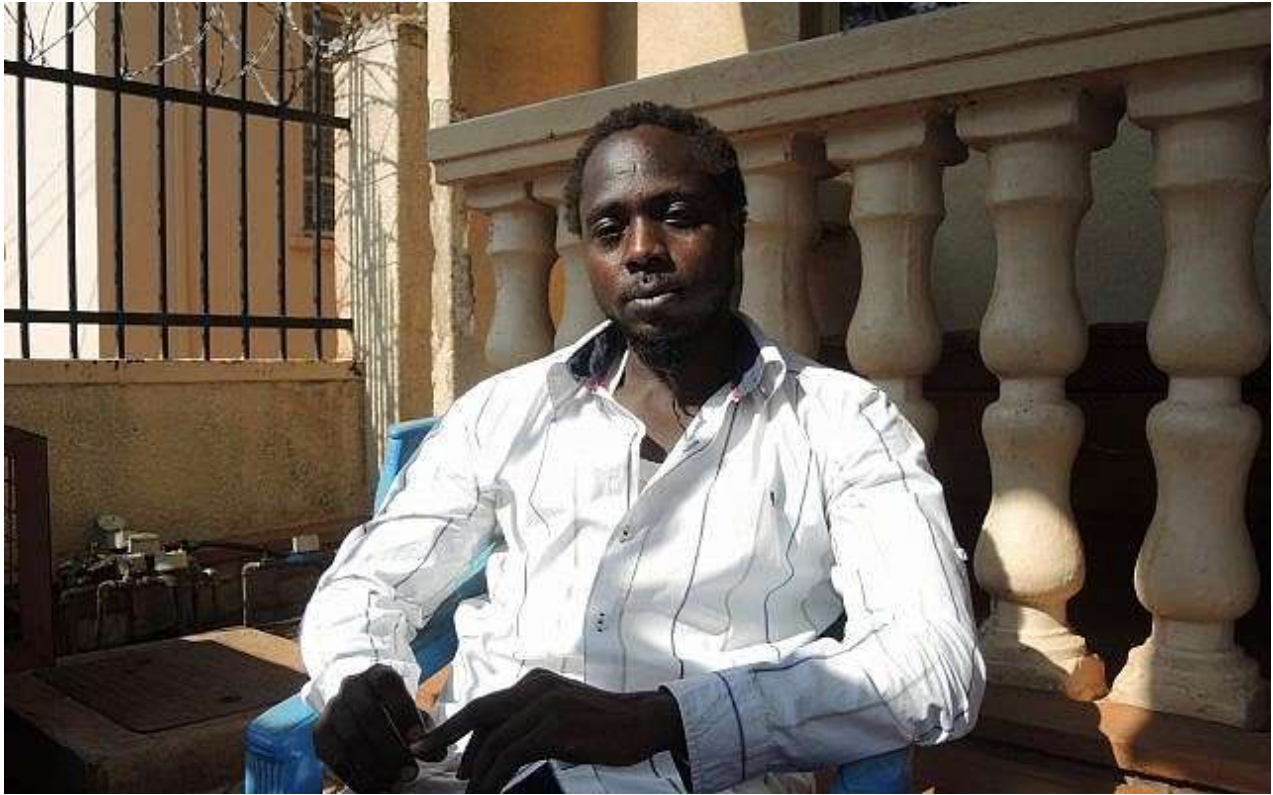
Previously, Netanyahu had insinuated that Rwanda and Uganda would accept asylum seekers who were forcibly deported, not just those who signed a document of willing deportation.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame stressed at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in January that his country will only accept asylum seekers who are deported in accordance to international law. Netanyahu said he would honor the requirement, according to staffers.

Henry Oryem Okello, Uganda's state minister for foreign affairs, [told Reuters](#) that there are no agreements between Israel and his country regarding deportations.

## 6. What happens to asylum seekers who have been deported?

Deportees to Rwanda [have told The Times of Israel](#), and it has been [widely reported in foreign media](#), that they are kept for a few days in a private home and then taken to the border with South Sudan or Uganda in the middle of the night. They are told to cross without documents, and to request asylum seeker status in the new country when they cross the border.



Bernie, 32, pictured here in Kampala, Uganda on September 17, 2017, was in Israel for 6.5 years before he was willingly deported to Rwanda. After a few days in Rwanda he was taken to the border in the middle of the night and instructed to cross to Uganda without documents. (Melanie Lidman/Times of Israel)

Asylum seekers deported directly to Uganda sometimes stay there, but they do not automatically receive asylum seeker status, in opposition to promises from Israel's Interior Ministry. Some deportees have said that the Ugandan government is less willing to recognize their asylum status because they came from Israel. The Ugandan government has been under public pressure not to accept asylum seekers from Israel, as there is public consensus that the country is already doing enough to solve the world's refugee problem.

In the past three years, Uganda has [absorbed over one million refugees](#) from South Sudan. There are periods when Uganda absorbs in a single week the same number of African asylum seekers currently residing in Israel.

### 7. How is Anne Frank connected to this?

Rabbi Susan Silverman launched the [Anne Frank Home Sanctuary Movement](#) (Miklat Israel), an initiative to hide asylum seekers slated for deportation in private homes. "Anne Frank is the most well-known hidden person, and she was hidden so she would not be sent to her death — and we have documentation that these people are facing possible death," Silverman told reporters. [Seven holocaust survivors](#) also said they would harbor asylum seekers slated for deportation in their homes.

El Al pilots, restaurant owners and doctors [have also come out against the deportation plan](#), and SodaStream advertised that they are specifically looking to hire African asylum seekers.



African asylum seekers protest on January 26, 2017 near Jerusalem's Supreme Court against the new 'Rwanda' or 'Saharonim' policy of the Israeli government. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Organizations in the US have also condemned the deportations. The Anti-Defamation League and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society [sent open letters to Netanyahu condemning to plan](#). “The sweeping nature of this deportation scheme, coupled with the extreme difficulty to access the Israeli asylum system, is having a devastating impact on the refugee community in Israel and betrays the core values that we, as Jews, share,” the letter stated.

Despite the condemnations, a Channel 10 poll released Sunday indicated that a majority of Israelis [support expelling African migrants](#) from the country.

Asked if they support the government’s decision to deport the migrants, 56% of respondents said yes, 32% said no and another 12% said they did not know.

Of those who favor deportation, 44% said they would be in favor of forcibly removing the migrants, with 46% opposed to forced removals.

### 8. Is Israel really sending refugees ‘to their deaths’?

That depends. The June 2012 repatriation of South Sudanese migrants, called “[Operation Returning Home](#),” saw about 700 illegal South Sudanese migrants rounded up in the course of a few days. They were sent to South Sudan, following an agreement between Israel and the newly independent nation.

Many of those people [faced grave danger](#) after the civil war broke out in 2013, and were forced to flee their homes. One teenager told The Times of Israel she saw her best friend, who was also deported from Israel, raped and murdered as her family hid behind trees.

Additionally, some asylum seekers were sent against their will to Sudan, where they were immediately [imprisoned upon disembarking from the plane](#) for visiting an enemy country (Israel). Representatives of Israel’s Interior Ministry have denied that they sent people to Sudan, despite direct testimony from Muhtar Awdallah, a deportee who was sent there.



Muhtar Awdalla is a third-year law student in Kampala, Uganda, pictured here in his dormitory on September 10, 2017. (Melanie Lidman/Times of Israel)

Uganda is considered a [relatively good place to be an asylum seeker](#). The government has a liberal policy toward South Sudanese refugees who flee the war and enter northern Uganda over land. These refugees are allotted a 900-square-meter plot of land to grow their own food, which promotes self-sufficiency. Refugees in Uganda also have freedom of movement and can work, which is not possible in Rwanda.

However, there is animosity in Uganda toward asylum seekers deported from Israel. Many Ugandans feel like their country is already doing enough. Asylum seekers deported from Israel said new arrivals are encouraged to lie to authorities and pretend they came over land directly from South Sudan in order to get refugee status.

There is no evidence that asylum seekers deported from Israel have been able to stay in Rwanda, despite the widespread reports that Israel pays approximately \$5,000 per refugee to the Rwandan government.

Eritrean activists in Israel point out that Uganda is not their country, and that the Eritrean government's intelligence network, which many of them fled, has outposts in Uganda that endanger their lives.





Eritrean asylum seekers outside Holot detention center in southern Israel, January 29, 2018. (Luke Tress/Times of Israel)

Many asylum seekers deported from Israel try to go to Europe through dangerous smuggling routes that take them through Islamic State-held territory in Libya and a treacherous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea.

Eritrean activists said that approximately 20 Eritreans deported from Israel have died trying to get to Europe. The UN Human Rights Council has said it is [unable to track what happens to deportees](#) due to Israel's secrecy, but it believes a large percentage attempt to go to Europe through dangerous routes.

### 9. Who will be deported, and when?

The [“Infiltrator Law” approved by the Knesset in December](#) stipulated that deportations will begin in March. The Holot detention center is also expected to close at the same time.

After Holot closes, asylum seekers who refuse deportation will be incarcerated in Saharonim, a regular Israeli prison that is already filled to capacity. Women and children under age 18 [won't be deported under the first stage of deportations](#), according to the High Court of Justice Ruling in August.



African migrants protest outside Holot detention center in the Negev Desert, southern Israel. February 17, 2014. (Flash90)

Additionally, people who have opened a file for refugee status cannot be deported until the Interior Ministry closes their claim. Between 2009 and 2017, 15,400 people opened files seeking asylum with the PIBA Office. Israel denied asylum seeker status to 6,600 people, and 8,800 applications for asylum are still open.

According to reports, the government hopes to [deport 600 asylum seekers per month](#) for the first year. People with open asylum applications cannot be deported before the applications are resolved.

### 10. Could Israel absorb the asylum seekers instead of deporting them?

Some people, [including some asylum seekers](#), are advocating for Israel to implement a policy of dispersal. This would assign asylum seekers to certain geographic areas in order to relieve the burden on south Tel Aviv.

Activists with the Central Bus Station Neighborhood Watch group are opposed to the dispersal idea. They said they suggested it years ago but the government dismissed it, and now they want total deportation. In Europe, where many countries use dispersal policies for their refugee populations, [studies have found that poorer neighborhoods](#) of each city are still receiving the majority of refugees.

In order for a dispersal policy to be effective in Israel, the government would need to allow refugees work permits and the ability to get driver's licenses.

Amnesty International opposes the plan to forcibly disperse asylum seekers because it would deny them [access to health and welfare services](#), which are currently only available in south Tel Aviv.

Deporting nearly 40,000 people who fill manual labor positions in Israel will also leave the country with a labor deficit. Last week, the government [approved a special resolution](#) that would allow the government to issue one work permit to a Palestinian worker for every two asylum seekers deported.

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