

African Migrants & Asylum Seekers

Since 2005, tens of thousands of Africans from Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, the Congo, and elsewhere have entered Israel illegally, trying to make better lives for themselves. Some are migrants looking to benefit from Israel's freedom and growing economy, while others are asylum seekers escaping persecution. Unfortunately, most of them live in areas where Israeli citizens were already facing economic hardships, which has led to societal tensions and pressure on Israel's leaders. Today, Israel is facing a difficult dilemma shared by many other liberal democracies: how to deal with the issue of illegal immigration humanely while ensuring security, fiscal responsibility, and economic opportunities for legal residents.

Israelis have treated African migrants and asylum seekers humanely.

- In interviews, migrants expressed relief at being in Israel where they are physically secure, and face no police harassment.¹ Eritrean asylum seeker Johny Goytiom Kafil stated that, "you are treated like a human being in Israel. Here I am not afraid. In Eritrea, I was afraid."²
- Many found work and were able to open their own small businesses.³ Their children are being educated in Israeli schools.⁴
- Many Israeli human rights groups and activists assist African migrants and work to protect their rights.⁵

A minority of Israelis have engaged in unacceptable racism and violence. At the same time, Israel has welcomed African immigrants and refugees for years.

- Unfortunately, anti-immigrant extremism is a global problem. In recent years there have been violent riots against immigrants in Greece, South Africa, Russia, Spain, and elsewhere.⁶
- Prime Minister Netanyahu and other officials unequivocally denounced anti-African racism and violence.⁷ Many Israelis have stood up for migrants and protested against the extremists.⁸
- Israel welcomed almost 90,000 black Jews from Ethiopia as Israeli citizens, and went to great lengths to help them come home.⁹ It also granted asylum to 1,000 refugees fleeing the genocide in Darfur.¹⁰

Some of the migrants came to Israel seeking work opportunities, not as refugees escaping war.¹¹

- Around 72 percent of the estimated 38,000 African migrants and asylum seekers are from Eritrea. 20% are from Sudan and South Sudan, and others are from the Ivory Coast, the Congo and elsewhere.¹² The majority are males between the ages of 18 and 40.
- Israel is a magnet because of its freedom and economic prosperity. This became especially true after European countries began enforcing harsh laws against illegal immigration from Africa.¹³
- Unlike refugees who are fleeing war or persecution, economic migrants leave their countries in search of better work opportunities. "Refugee" is a legal status that is given on an individual, case by case basis.

The original trickle of illegal immigration dramatically increased after 2005, creating an unmanageable situation for a small country like Israel.¹⁴

- Israel is a small country and cannot act as a safety valve for impoverished African states. There are roughly 30 million people migrating from their homes in Africa.¹⁵ This is almost four times the size of Israel's entire population.

- As of 2018, 90% of the migrants live in South Tel Aviv. This means that there are currently 35,000 people in a low-income neighborhood that was originally planned for 6,000.¹⁶
- The city of Tel Aviv has spent millions in taxpayer funds on education for children of migrants, as well as other social and cultural needs. Tel Aviv's Sourasky Medical Center reported that it had to shoulder \$10 million in health care costs for African migrants.¹⁷ This is especially difficult for some Israelis to accept because many citizens and legal immigrants are still facing their own economic struggles.

Since 2013, the Israeli government has taken a number of steps to stop illegal immigration, some of which are controversial in Israel and elsewhere.

- In January, 2013 Israel completed a fence along its border with Egypt. The fence was built to protect against terrorism, drug trafficking, and further illegal immigration.¹⁸ A total of 34 migrants entered Israel illegally through the Sinai in the first half of 2013, compared to 9,570 during the same period the previous year.¹⁹
- Israel offered South Sudanese migrants \$1,250 per family to return home after South Sudan declared independence in 2011. Many took the offer and returned.²⁰ Israel also offered \$5,000 to migrants who were willing to move elsewhere.²¹
- Israel built an open detention center to house some migrants who enter illegally. Detainees could leave the facility during the day and were provided with food, education, medical, and welfare services.²² The government voted to close this facility in 2017.
- In 2017, 4,000 migrants from Eritrea and Sudan who entered Israel illegally were relocated to other countries. At the same time, 4,000 migrants from Georgia and Ukraine were sent back home.²³
- In 2018 Israel began notifying some migrants from Eritrea and Sudan that they could take \$3,500 in return for leaving to third countries – reportedly Rwanda and Uganda – or face jail time. This policy does not include women, children, families, or anyone with pending applications for asylum, but has generated significant opposition in Israel.²⁴
- Shortly afterwards, an Israeli court ruled that Eritreans fleeing forced military service are eligible for refugee status.²⁵ At the same time, Israel agreed not to deport 2,000 migrants who are in the process of moving to Canada, and began talks with the UN refugee agency about a deal to resettle some migrants in safe countries while others giving permanent residency.²⁶

Israel is investing in the economic development of African countries, helping to alleviate the cause of illegal immigration.

- Israel's development agency, Mashav, is involved in sustainable development projects across Africa. Tens of thousands of Africans have graduated from Israel's training courses in a variety of fields, including agriculture, education, healthcare, small business management, and women's rights.²⁷

Illegal immigration is a global phenomenon that is challenging countries all over the world.

- The Obama administration deported 2 million migrants from 2009-2013.²⁸ France deported nearly 45,000 migrants in 2015.²⁹
- As of 2012, the UK's policy was to "create... a really hostile environment for illegal migration," according to current Prime Minister Theresa May. Britain is denying access to work, housing, services, and banks.³⁰
- Australia holds undocumented migrants, including young children, in detention camps for up to three years while their applications for asylum are processed. If their applications are rejected, they face deportation. The UN condemned Australia's treatment of migrants and conditions in the detention camps.³¹
- Switzerland has detained and deported thousands of migrants per year, and Italy penalizes illegal immigration with fines of up to \$13,500.³² Italy also announced plans to increase deportations in 2017.³³

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