Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Israel

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In recent years the number of asylum seekers arriving in industrialized countries has grown as a result of armed conflict, civil unrest, and safety concerns. Images of asylum seekers arriving by land or sea in countries in southern Europe, Australia and South Asia have populated the news and given rise to hot debates, on both the political and public opinion levels in many destination countries, including Israel.

Since the middle of the 2000s significant flows of African asylum seekers, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, have reached Israel. A dramatic increase in these flows occurred in 2007, but it was most marked in 2010-2012 when over 42,000 asylum seekers arrived. Since 2012, with the erection of a fence along the Egyptian border the arrival of African migrants has dwindled, and only a tiny number have been able to cross the border. By the end of 2016, 40,274 asylum seekers resided in Israel, comprising less than one percent of the country's population. Most (92%) originate from Eritrea and Sudan (Population and Immigration Authority, 2017), countries known for severe human rights violations. These asylum seekers are given Temporary Group Protection (TGP) status, which grants them immunity to deportation, in line with the principle of non-refoulement endorsed by the Refugee Convention of 1951, to which Israel is a signatory, but it does not offer socio-economic rights (see Kritzman-Amir, 2015).

Asylum seekers are defined by the Israeli state as "infiltrators" who make illegitimate claims for asylum in Israel. The legal basis on which the state determines its policy is the anti-infiltration law passed in 1954, which was originally designed to secure Israel's right to protect itself, and authorizes severe measures against individuals from enemy states who enter Israel unlawfully to commit terrorist attacks (see Yaron Mesgena and Ramati in this special issue). Since 2008 the government has attempted to introduce an amendment to this law which would allow the state to hold asylum seekers in administrative detention, that is, without trial or even an indictment (Sabar and Tsurkov 2015). To this end a new facility, Holot Detention Center, was constructed close to the Egyptian border to accommodate asylum seekers upon their arrival into Israel, as well as asylum seekers already residing in the country (Hochman and Herkowicz-Amir 2016). Thus the state applies the policy—or threat—of detention as a means to influence those who are in Israel to leave, and to deter other potential asylum-seekers from attempting to enter.

Asylum seekers are denied welfare rights and social rights, and de jure they do not have the right to work in Israel. Under TGP status Eritrean and Sudanese nationals were not permitted to submit individual asylum applications and have their case heard until 2013. Since then some thousand asylum applications have been submitted, but recognition rates remain exceptionally low—less than one percent (Kritzman-Amir, 2015).

Perhaps more than any other category of migrants, asylum seekers heighten the tension between the commitment of democratic nation-states to humanitarian principles and universal rights on the one hand, and the interests of national communities based on ties of common descent and ethnicity on the other (Statham, 2003). The changing composition of the ethnic landscape poses new challenges to both the collective identities in Israel and to patterns of social inequality based on citizenship and nationality (Raijman and Kemp, 2010). The Israeli regime of incorporation reflects a double standard: an exclusionary model for non-Jews versus an "acceptance-encouragement" model for Jews. The current immigration regime is highly exclusionary to non-Jews not covered by the amended Law of Return: they lack a priori any possibility of incorporation into the society and the polity. Unwillingness to accept non-Jewish immigrants is expressed through exclusionary immigration policies (especially restrictions on family reunion and refusal to grant residence status) and restrictive naturalization rules (Raijman, Semyonov and Schmidt, 2003). This is the highly exclusionary and non-egalitarian context in which we should understand the unique status of asylum seekers in Israel.

This special issue of *Hagira* assembles papers by academics and practitioners and activists alike. These highlight a wide variety of dimensions encompassing both the hostile reception shown to asylum seekers in Israel and the migrants' strategies for making a living in the country, which operates a hostile policy and expresses public anti-immigrant sentiments.

Lisa Anteby's paper, entitled *African Asylum-Seekers in Israel: Illegalization, Incorporation and Race Relations*, examines three main aspects concerning asylum seekers in Israel: (1) the tightening of geographic and political-legal borders constructed by the state aiming to contain the flow of non-Jewish African asylum seekers through processes of criminalization and illegalization and social and urban marginalization; (2) asylum-seekers' increasing participation in economic and social spheres of Israeli daily life that challenges the state's exclusion policy; (3) relations between African asylum seekers and Ethiopian Israeli citizens that give rise to ambivalent forms of racial identification of the former with the latter. The article provides a general overview of the unique situation of asylum seekers in Israel.

The paper by Noam Tirosh and Amit Schejter, *"Information Is Like Your Daily Bread": The Role of Media and Telecommunications in the Life of Refugees in Israel*, focuses on asylum seekers' daily lives and their information needs. They show how asylum seekers and refugees in Israel have constructed a media environment based on their self-identification as "others." The authors examine how asylum seekers created personal and technological circles to address their information needs on several dimensions—personal, institutional, spatial. In the personal sphere they have acquired electronic media that address many of their needs. In the public sphere, they have set up internet cafés, their own "post office" and their own media. Since asylum seekers are situated in society's least

advantageous position, the authors conclude that attending to the migrants' information needs should be a policy priority as it has the potential to help migrants cope with their disadvantages in Israeli society.

Oshrat Hochman's paper, *Perceived Threat, Social Distance and Exclusion of Asylum Seekers from Sudan and Eritrea in Israel*, compares the Israeli majority's (Jews') and minority's (Arabs') attitudes to asylum seekers. The analysis rests on a unique data set collected in 2013 representing the adult population in the country. Exclusionary attitudes to asylum seekers are explained by two main factors: (1) perceptions of socio-economic threat, (2) perceptions of respondents' social distance. Respondents evincing higher levels of perceived threat and perceived social distance tend to display higher levels of disagreement over provision of rights and humanitarian support to asylum seekers. The relation between perceived socio-economic threat and rejection of the provision of rights and humanitarian support for asylum seekers is partially mediated by perceived social distance. Interestingly, after controlling for all relevant factors, minority Israeli-Arab respondents proved less exclusionist than Israeli-Jewish majority respondents. The author discusses findings in light of existing theories and the ethno-national character of the state of Israel.

The paper *Where Time Stands Still: Holot Detention Facility and the Israeli Anti-Infiltration Law*, by Hadas Yaron Mesgena and Oran Ramat, has two sections. The first examines the origins of the "infiltration" notion and the anti-infiltration law, showing how legislation and discourse concerning African refugees are inseparable from the formative role of the Israel-Palestinian conflict in the country's history and politics. In the second section the authors look at how the African asylum seekers interpret Israel's exclusionary policy, especially focusing on the meaning of their detention in the Holot facility. The paper contributes to understanding the intersection between illegal migration, anti-immigration policies, and the way local/national politics affects both anti-immigration policy and the asylum seekers' lives in Israel.

The article by Efra Ben Zeev and Nir Gazit, *Situational Humanitarianism: Israeli Soldiers and Asylum Seekers on the Egyptian-Israeli Border*, contributes to this special issue an interesting dimension, namely encounters between asylum seekers and Israeli soldiers on the Egyptian border. Asylum seekers arrived destitute and often in a harrowing physical and mental state; Israeli soldiers were the first to meet them, hence were obliged to manage their reception. This encounter presented the soldiers with a special challenge. They were stationed there for security reasons, but found themselves exposed to humanitarian issues of the highest order: to care for asylum seekers who had fled genocide and wars. By focusing on the interactions between Israeli soldiers and asylum seekers, as well as between the former and Egyptian police and smugglers at the border, the authors identify three logics: securitization, humanitarianism and criminality, which guide soldiers' perceptions and practices on the Egyptian-Israeli border.

The two last papers in the special issue appear in the section "Papers from the field." They were written by practitioners and activists, who provide unique insights into the ways whereby asylum seekers' daily lives in Israel were affected by exposure to the hostile environment of the state and by their experiences in the Sinai desert where they were victims of human trafficking Israel.

Shlomit Ben Shmuel's article presents a case study illuminating the important work conducted by mental health practitioners among asylum seekers in Israel. In February 2014, at the joint initiative of the Ministry of Health and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the Gesher Clinic was established at the Jaffa Community Center for Mental Health. The core of Gesher's clinical work is the delivery of diagnostic and psychiatric-psychosocial care to asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan. Through the case study, the article discusses some of the ideological, ethical, theoretical and technical questions and challenges that arise in psychiatric post-trauma treatment of asylum in Israel.

The last article, by Sigal Rozen, Public Policy Coordinator at the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (HRM), focuses on the policy of Israeli Immigration Authority regarding the 5,000 survivors of the torture camps in Sinai, most of whom had fled Eritrea. The essay examines the difference between a torture victim and a human-trafficking victim held in conditions of slavery, explains the difficulties in identifying slavery victims, reviews the mechanisms of identifying slavery survivors in Israel, and discusses why many of these testimonies do not appear in protocols of hearings before Israeli authorities. The article also reviews the changes in legislation that allow incarceration and prevent release of survivors of torture from Saharonim prison and the Holot Detention Facility.

Overall, I think that all articles in this issue contribute theoretically and empirically to a better understanding of the issue of asylum seekers in Israel and set forth new points of view, to date less discussed in regard to asylum seekers in Israel.

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