

Between trauma and conflict: Torture survivors in Israel during the war

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Abstract

Introduction: October 7, 2023, has intensified the vulnerability of torture survivors among asylum seekers in Israel, mainly from Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, who remain without legal recognition or access to essential services. *Materials and Methods:* This study integrates quantitative surveys on poverty and food insecurity, qualitative interviews, and policy analysis, based on data from ASSAF and partner organisations. *Results:* At least 4.000 documented asylum seekers who are torture survivors live in Israel experiencing food insecurity at severe levels. The war triggered PTSD, depression, and anxiety, while survivors were excluded from governmental emergency aid and mental health programs. Proposed legislation threatens to further erode rights. *Discussion:* War-related trauma, combined with structural exclusion, has deepened humanitarian crises. Urgent policy reforms are necessary to secure recognition, access to services, and trauma-informed rehabilitation in accordance with international obligations.

Keywords. Refugees, torture, Israel, war, human rights, asylum seekers

Introduction

The terrorist attacks of October 7th, 2023, followed by large-scale military operations, have resulted in significant civilian casualties and displacement in both Israel and Gaza. Among the most vulnerable are asylum seekers, many of whom are survivors of torture¹. These individuals, primarily from Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, have lived in Israel for nearly two decades, often without official legal status. Although protected under the principle of non-refoulement, their lack of formal recognition excludes them from national insurance, healthcare, and welfare systems, exacerbating the impacts of past traumas. This article examines their current circumstances, systemic challenges, and recent political threats to their already precarious existence.

Asylum seekers in Israel: A legal and humanitarian overview

According to the last official data available, approximately 73,000 asylum seekers² reside in Israel as of 2024 (Government of Israel, 2024), many of whom are survivors of torture and human trafficking, both in their countries of origin, en route, and in the Sinai Peninsula torture camps.

However, Israel has reviewed the asylum requests and granted refugee status to only 0.5% individuals, despite the likelihood that most would qualify under international refugee definitions (Amnesty International, 2018).

The Israeli asylum system imposes significant bureaucratic barriers and has a longstanding policy of neglecting the review of asylum applications. While we use the term ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘refugee’ in this article for convenience, we wish to underscore that the majority of asylum seekers from Sudan, Eritrea

1 From roughly 2010–2014 (with cases before/after), Eritrean and Sudanese refugees were kidnapped or handed over to traffickers while moving through eastern Sudan and the Sinai. They were held—often by Bedouin trafficking networks—in makeshift sites where they were tortured (beatings, burning, electric shocks, sexual violence) to extort ransoms from relatives abroad. Multiple investigators documented this pattern with survivor interviews and corroborating evidence (HRW, 2014)

2 24,000 Eritreans (including approximately 8,000 children, most of whom were born in Israel), 23,000 Ukrainians, 7,000 Sudanese, 8,000 Ethiopians, and 400 Congolese. Those are the groups in Israel under group protection.

* The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Journal, the Publisher or the Editors

and Ethiopia in Israel are refugees, despite not being recognised as such.

First, the interpretation of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 2019) holds that a person becomes a refugee when they are forced to flee their country under circumstances that fall under the definitions of the Convention, regardless of whether they are recognised as such by the host country. More so, while all asylum seekers from Eritrea, Sudan and Ukraine are protected by non-refoulement, Israel has recognised only 21 as refugees, with the remaining asylum applications still not reviewed.

Moreover, Israeli refugee policies create bureaucratic and substantive barriers for asylum seekers, ranging from difficulties in submitting asylum applications to an almost absolute refusal to recognise Eritrean Army deserters as political refugees. In comparison to other Western countries' refugee mechanisms, it is probable that the majority of asylum seekers in Israel would have been recognised as refugees, had Israel reviewed their asylum applications.

Methodology

This article is based on a literature review, data and field experience gathered by ASSAF – Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, the Refugee Organizational Forum, and other human rights organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers. The analysis draws from institutional data, civil society reports, and continuous case management record. Due to government restrictions on refugee recognition and documentation, a comprehensive registry of torture survivors does not exist; consequently, the findings reflect only the cases documented by ASSAF and its partner organisations. The study is constrained by the absence of systematic data collection resulting from government restrictions on refugee recognition and documentation. The lack of longitudinal data restricts the ability to evaluate long-term trauma recovery. Future research employing formal sampling methods, broader geographic coverage, and repeated follow-ups would yield a more comprehensive understanding.

The war's impact on torture survivors

Refugee and human rights organisations in Israel estimate that at least 4,000 survivors of torture and trafficking camps in the Sinai Peninsula live in Israel today, representing about 10% of a far larger population of torture victims who lack recognition (PHR-I, 2017). Thousands more Eritrean, Sudanese, Ethiopian, and Ukrainian victims of trafficking, rape, and severe physical and psychological abuse continue to endure the aftermath of

extreme trauma without documentation, support, or recognition (Hotline & ASSAF, 2023; Amnesty International, 2020).

Clinical data from Israel show high PTSD rates among asylum seekers, particularly those from Eritrea and Sudan. In one retrospective clinical study, 76.7% of patients reported experiencing at least one traumatic event—most commonly during their journey through the Sinai Peninsula—and 56.5% were diagnosed with PTSD (Youngmann et al., 2021). Another study found significant variation by time since arrival: PTSD prevalence was 3.4% among those seeking help within the first six months after arrival but rose to 40.5% among those who sought care after 18 months or more (Siman-Tov et al., 2019). These rates far exceed those in the general population and highlight the urgent need for trauma-informed care and protection policies for refugees and asylum seekers in Israel.

The exact number of survivors is unknown, due to the Israeli government's longstanding policy of not examining asylum claims or maintaining systematic records of those who entered the country seeking refuge. This intentional lack of documentation has erased countless stories from official awareness and denied survivors access to even the most basic protections (ASSAF, 2024; Amnesty International, 2017).

The war has deepened the already dire humanitarian crisis for torture survivors in Israel. Long before the war, torture survivors in Israel were living in extreme poverty and food insecurity, battling PTSD, depression, and anxiety. These conditions make daily life nearly unbearable, and without systemic support, it is almost impossible to live beyond the basic means to meet one's ends (ASSAF, 2024). The eruption of war only added to these struggles. Sirens, explosions, and scenes of abduction have retraumatized many, triggering painful memories of the horrors they fled. In bomb shelters across the country, asylum seekers and Israelis huddled together, sharing fear, dread, tears, danger, and most of all, uncertainty of whether they would live to see the sun set that evening (Shvartsur & Savitsky, 2024).

Mabrtum Gidhai, an Eritrean refugee who had managed to build a life in Ashkelon with his wife and four young daughters, on October 7th, lost his home and possessions to a rocket while he was hiding in the shelter with his family. For the second time in his life, Mabrtum was forced to flee and once again, become a refugee. In an interview, he said about his daughters, "The girls have been in a very difficult state since the war began. They wet the bed at night and wake up screaming from nightmares—dreaming that terrorists are killing them and that rockets are being fired at the house. They refuse to leave the house, and the older one was afraid to go into the shelter during

sirens because she remembers the stories about terrorists who murdered people in shelters.” (Ron, 2024).

In the early days of the war, Israeli society mobilised in a powerful wave of solidarity, supporting evacuees, launching mental health initiatives, and collecting donations (HIAS, 2023). Asylum seekers, many survivors of torture, joined these efforts wholeheartedly: cooking meals, aiding evacuees and soldiers, and volunteering in fields emptied by war (Ehrenthal, 2025). Their actions came from a deep sense of shared fate with the society they’ve long called home (ASSAF, *ASSAF with the Refugee Communities – Iron Swords War*, 2024)

State neglect and civil society response

While civil society responded with empathy, the Israeli state failed to include asylum seekers in its emergency responses. They were excluded from mental health programs, evacuation support, and financial aid schemes.

A 2024 study (Endeweld Sabag et al., 2025) revealed that 85% of refugees and asylum seekers in Israel suffer from food insecurity, with 55% experiencing it at severe levels. Among Eritrean refugees, poverty is rampant: 63.4% of men and 78.9% of women live below the poverty line. Ukrainian refugees—most of them women—also face grave financial instability, spending at least 70% of their income on rent alone, job scarcity, and severely limited access to medical and welfare services (Moss, 2019). Importantly, the 2024 U.S. Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report (U.S. Department of State, 2024) again ranks Israel as Tier 2, “Countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA’s minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards”, highlighting the heightened risk of exploitation and survival prostitution among asylum seekers with uncertain legal status—particularly Eritrean and Ukrainian women, populations that have been heavily affected by trafficking, exploitation, and torture.

The Israeli government disregarded asylum seekers who had lost homes, lived in conflict zones, or suffered severe trauma (ASSAF, 2024). They were excluded from evacuation efforts, mental health services, and financial aid. Many had to evacuate without support, relying on temporary shelter from kind individuals, while their needs were overlooked entirely by the state. In February 2024, after repeated appeals went unanswered, civil society groups, including ASSAF, petitioned the Supreme Court to extend war-related assistance to asylum seekers (Refugee Organisational Forum, 2024). In response, the government proposed a limited compensation framework, which was deemed insufficient. As of April 2025, although over 100 families applied, no compensation has been provided.

The disparity in treatment between asylum seekers and Israeli residents remains unjustifiable, especially for those who have lived in these communities for years.

Rising legislative threats

Israel’s current political climate poses an escalating threat to refugees and asylum seekers—most of whom are survivors of trafficking and torture. A wave of proposed legislation seeks to erode their protections and weaken civil society’s ability to defend human rights. Key proposed laws include:

- Knesset. (2025). *Basic Law: Entry, Immigration, and Status in Israel*, Bill 5785/2025 [Hebrew]. State of Israel, 25th Knesset. <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Legislation/Pages/default.aspx>
- Knesset. (2024). *Immediate Deportation of Infiltrators Supporting Their State’s Regime*, Bill 5784/2024 [Hebrew]. State of Israel, 25th Knesset. <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Legislation/Pages/default.aspx>
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- Knesset. (2025). *Citizenship Law (Amendment – Denial of Citizenship to a Child of a Person Entering Israel Illegally)*, Bill 5785/2025 [Hebrew]. State of Israel, 25th Knesset. <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Legislation/Pages/default.aspx>
- Knesset. (2024). *Associations Law (Amendment – Donations from Foreign Entities)*, Bill 5784/2024 [Hebrew]. State of Israel, 25th Knesset. <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Legislation/Pages/default.aspx>

These measures undermine Israel’s rule of law framework and violate international legal obligations, effectively criminalizing asylum seekers and disabling civil society advocacy (Refugee Organisational Forum, 2025).

Torture, trauma, and recognition

On October 7, 2023, Hamas abducted 251 individuals in Israel, including children, women, elderly people, and soldiers (Israel Government, 2025). Since then, 148 have been released, 56 have been killed or confirmed dead, and approximately 50 remain in captivity (Israel Government, 2025). Reports indicate that some captives experienced torture, sexual violence, and inhumane conditions during their detention³ (Agence France-

³ Agence France-Presse. (2025, June). Of all the hostages presumed alive in October 2024, 53 were civilians and 11 were military personnel.

Presse, 2025). The psychological impact on both the hostages and their families has been substantial, drawing widespread attention to themes of survivorship and recovery.

Concurrently, hundreds of asylum seekers residing in Israel—many survivors of torture, trafficking, or sexual violence—have lived for years without formal recognition or access to adequate rehabilitation services (Physicians for Human Rights–Israel, 2017). Although their circumstances differ, both groups carry deep psychological and physical scars. As public discourse increasingly addresses the needs of torture survivors, it is essential to include asylum seekers who continue to await protection, care, and opportunities for healing.

Conclusion

The plight of torture survivors living in Israel as asylum seekers demands urgent attention. Recognising their trauma, granting legal status, and providing access to basic services are not acts of charity—they are obligations rooted in law, morality, and human dignity.

In times of national crisis, societies are measured by how they treat their most vulnerable. Israel now faces the challenge of extending the same solidarity shown to war victims to those who have survived horrors elsewhere and continue to live among us—unseen, unrecognised, but deeply human.

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