

Race, Religion and Rounding Up Africans in Israel

“Israeli citizens have formed gangs of vigilantes who patrol the city streets at night, attacking any dark-skinned person they come across.”

By [David Sheen](#)

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Israel has launched a wholesale roundup of African immigrants, whom members of the ruling parties call a “cancer” on the Jewish state. To circumvent court rulings against imprisonment without trial, the government has packed the refugees into a detention center in the desert. The aim is to convince the Africans “to give up all hope of a normal life in Israel” and go back where they came from.

On Tuesday, December 10, people across the planet marked United Nations Human Rights Day, while global leaders convened in South Africa to mark the death and celebrate the life of its former president Nelson Mandela and his fight for racial equality. The Israeli Knesset, however, spent that day a different way altogether: passing a new law which would authorize the government to round any of the 55,000 African asylum-seekers currently in the country off the streets and into a desert detainment camp.

After all nine Supreme Court justices unanimously struck down the centerpiece of the government’s anti-African legislation in September, the amendment was rapidly replaced with another. The High Court ruled then that to jail without trial people who have committed no crime except to seek asylum is an unacceptable violation of their human rights. To circumvent the ruling and keep the Africans behind bars, the government said it would allow them furloughs lasting a couple of hours at a time, and thus the place in which they would be held by force could no longer be properly called a jail.

In other respects, the new amendment is even more barbaric than its earlier version. While the January 2012 legislation mandated three years of incarceration, the December 2013 legislation allows for indefinite detention. As with the officially-designated prisons where asylum-seekers have been held until now, Israeli officials openly declare that the detention center is designed to convince the Africans to give up all hope of a normal life in Israel and convince them to take their chances back in the countries they fled from.

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Most of the 55,000 non-Jewish African people who have moved to Israel in recent years claim that they fled political persecution in their homelands and came seeking safety in a democratic country. Instead of considering their cases and providing safe haven to those who deserve it, why does the Israeli government criminalize them, contain them and try to kick them out as soon as possible?

In the country’s 1948 Declaration of Independence, Israel’s founding fathers vowed that it

“will be open for Jewish immigration.” In order to secure the support of the United Nations, they added that, “it will ensure complete equality of social and political right to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex”. Since its establishment, however, the government has not only worked to increase the amount of Jews living in Israel, but also to decrease the amount of non-Jews in the country.

The vast majority of the non-Jewish population in Israel consists of the indigenous Palestinians, and they have borne the brunt of the Israeli government’s demographic engineering policies for most of the last 66 years. What began with the Nakba in 1947 and the refusal to allow non-Jewish refugees of the war to return to their homes continues today with barring the Arab spouses of Israeli citizens from unifying with their families and moving to the country.

The first major test of Israel’s immigration policy came in 1969, when a group of African Americans came to the country, abiding by the laws of the Old Testament and craving to live in the Holy Land. The government allowed them in, but demanded that they adopt all the religious rules of the European and Middle Eastern Jews. When they insisted on maintaining their own spiritual traditions, officials had the bodies of their dead dug up from the Jewish cemetery and re-interred next to a trash heap at the edge of town.

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For decades, the members of that group, the African Hebrew Israelites, were refused medical coverage and the right to work legally, forcing them to take odd jobs where they could be easily exploited – and they often were. Without stable sources of income, they lived in abject poverty, with a child’s meal often consisting of half of a single piece of fruit. Government officials claimed without basis that they had a high crime rate and that they were a front group for foreign terrorists.

Eventually, the group grudgingly utilized their political privileges as former Americans, and their allies in Congress convinced the Israeli government to soften its stance towards them. Officials agreed to grant the group temporary residency and make it possible for them to receive permanent residency. In practice, however, the state has made this exceedingly difficult. Even today, 44 years after they first arrived, few African Hebrews have Israeli passports.

The 55,000 continental Africans that have arrived in Israeli in recent years do not claim to trace their ancestry to ancient Israelites, nor do they claim to practice a variant of the religion written about in the Bible. In other democracies, neither of these are necessary to make a case for immigration, and that is why asylum-seekers from the same nations as those who have entered Israel are granted refugee status by the United States and the European Union in over 80% of cases.

The horror stories of forced labor and ethnic cleansing recounted by these asylum-seekers when they managed to reach Israel’s borders should have been enough to melt the hearts of even the most security-conscious Israelis. But they were met by a powerful propaganda machine that inflamed anti-African sentiment, well oiled from decades of instilling in the hearts of Israelis a fear of Palestinians, other Arabs and non-Jews in general. And so they have suffered a fate far worse than the first group of Africans, since they have no American

citizenship to leverage in their own favor.

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To nullify any empathy their tales of torture would elicit, the Israeli government claims that more than 99% of these Africans experienced no persecution at all, and that they only came to the country to make more money than they would have at home. It has refused to review almost all applications for refugee status – and then claims that this is evidence that almost all don’t deserve it. It won’t allow almost any Africans to work – and then claims that their resulting widespread poverty is evidence that they are a blight on Israeli society. It won’t grant them access to nearly any medical services – and then claims that they pose a major health risk.

Israel’s Minister of Internal Security has even acknowledged that official police statistics show that the crime rate of African asylum-seekers is significantly lower than that of native Israelis. But other government officials latch onto any crime committed by any asylum-seeker – and then claim that Africans are predisposed to criminality. In any other modern democracy, this would be recognized as incitement to racial hatred of the worst kind. In Israel, it’s just populist politics.

Encouraged by top government officials who have labeled the Africans a “cancer” and a threat to the Israel’s security on par with nuclear bombs, Israeli citizens have formed gangs of vigilantes who patrol the city streets at night, attacking any dark-skinned person they come across. When one Israeli firebombed several African homes and an African kindergarten last year, he got off without any jail time. Even during the day, racists know that they can abuse Africans and suffer no repercussions – and so they do.

Now that public opinion against the Africans has been brought to a boiling point, the government is able to pass the most draconian measures against the asylum-seekers, and hardly anybody objects. As long as the government doesn’t deport tens of thousands of Africans in a matter of days, and instead only rounds them into a glorified ghetto a few thousand at a time until they despair of the frying pan and elect to jump back into the fire, Israel’s allies in Washington, D.C. will likely remain silent.

David Sheen is an independent journalist and film maker originally from Toronto, Canada who now lives in Dimona, Israel. Sheen began blogging when he first moved to Israel in 1999 and later went on to work as a reporter and editor at the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz. His full-length documentary on ecological architecture, “First Earth”, was translated into a dozen languages and published by PM Press in 2010. Sheen gave a TEDx talk on the topic of the film in Johannesburg, South Africa later that year. He is currently writing a book about African immigrants to Israel and the struggles they face. Sheen’s website is www.davidsheen.com and he tweets from [@davidsheen](https://twitter.com/davidsheen).

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