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Israel Detention Profile

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Israel encourages Jewish immigration and allows those with Jewish ancestry to immigrate and naturalize even if they are not considered Jewish under religious law. In addition, a migrant labour policy adopted in the 1990s has brought several hundred thousand workers from Asia, Africa, and South America. Meanwhile Israel limits Palestinian access to residency and family reunification, and denies Palestinian refugees' right of return. Since the early 1990s, Palestinian work permits have been increasingly restricted while foreign migrant labour, which is considered a more secure alternative to Palestinian labour, has been encouraged.

By the mid-1990s, the burgeoning number of non-Jewish migrants began to stir public agitation and the government responded by limiting migrant work permits and increasing the detention and deportation of migrants. Deportations dramatically increased after the establishment of the Immigration Authority (IA) in 2002, an agency tasked with implementing deportations along with the police (Berman 2007, pp. 7-8). IA also oversaw rapid expansion of Israel's detention complex, with the number of places allocated for immigration detention increasing from 260 in 2002 to 1,300 by 2003 (Kav LaOved & HMW 2003, p. 1). By the end of 2010, Israel's detention capacity had grown to an estimated 2,500 beds (Berman 2011).

Since 2006, Israel has experienced a new wave of immigration comprised of asylum seekers from Africa (HMW 2007, p. 3; Martins 2009, p. 7). Most of these asylum seekers—estimated to number some 30,000 by 2010—have come from Eritrea and Sudan, crossing the Egyptian border into Israel (IRIN 2010). The country was ill-prepared to deal with this influx and in the absence of national asylum laws these migrants have often faced ad hoc and arbitrary treatment (HRW 2008).

The influx of asylum seekers and irregular migrants has triggered concerns that they pose socio-economic problems, and that they threaten the Jewish character of the state (Martins 2009; AP 2010). The government has responded with a number of increasingly restrictive measures.

In 2009, the government created a specialized immigration force called the Oz Unit, which is tasked with deporting all of the country's more than 200,000 irregular residents. In January 2010, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced plans to build a wall along the country's border with Egypt because, according to Netanyahu, the country "cannot let tens of thousands of illegal workers infiltrate into Israel through the southern border and inundate our country with illegal aliens" (Al Jazeera 2010a). Several months later, in November 2010, Netanyahu announced that the government would build a massive new detention facility to confine up to 10,000 so-called infiltrators—unauthorized non-citizens—in order to "significantly reduce the economic incentive for them to arrive in Israel" (CNN 2010). And Israel's Knesset has proposed a new "infiltration" law whose draconian measures regarding detention and deportation of asylum seekers led a coalition of Israeli human rights groups to describe it as "one of the most dangerous bills ever presented" (ACRI et al 2010).

Detention Policy

The majority of asylum seekers and irregular migrants arrive in Israel after transiting Egypt. Termed "infiltrators" by the government, these non-citizens are either detained under the authorisation of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) or immediately turned back to Egypt as part of an unofficial "Hot Return" policy, a practice that has been criticized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as contrary to international law (Weiler-Polak 2009). In August 2007 a group of human rights organizations filed a petition to the High Court of Justice contesting the legality of this practice (*Hotline for Migrant Workers et al v. Minister of Defence*), which is still pending (Berman 2011).

Border Apprehensions. Those apprehended while attempting to cross the Egyptian border and not immediately "returned" to Egypt (see "Hot Returns" below) are initially briefly confined in IDF military bases along the border before being sent to Israeli Prisons Service (IPS) facilities elsewhere in the country (HRW 2008, p.74). According to a non-governmental source in Israel, the amount of time people are held by the IDF depends in part on space availability in other detention facilities. There is no evidence of IDF bases being used for long-term detention (Berman 2011b).

Most people apprehended at the border are sent to Saharonim Detention Centre in southern Israel, which has been the subject of intense criticism for detaining migrant children alongside adults (Haaretz 2010). Immigration detainees at the facility are held under administrative orders of detention issued by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) (Berman 2011).

"Hot Returns." Israeli authorities have undertaken coordinated border patrols with Egyptian police, who have been repeatedly condemned for shooting migrants who attempt to cross into Israel clandestinely (McCarthy 2010). Although there is no formal agreement between Egypt and Israel on returning asylum seekers, in 2007 then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced that he had reached an oral agreement with then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak according to which Egypt agreed to accept asylum seekers apprehended at the border. Shortly after the announcement, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior announced on its website that no such agreement had been made (Berman 2011). Israel has continued to insist in proceedings at the High Court of Justice that such an agreement exists, and human rights groups and UN agencies have documented numerous cases of "coordinated returns" of asylum seekers to Egypt. Human Rights Watch's 2008 report *Sinai Perils* discusses cases in which asylum seekers "sent back" to Egypt were "disappeared" (HRW 2008).

In its *Global Report 2008*, UNHCR reported: "Israeli authorities returned several asylum-seekers without giving UNHCR a chance to assess their protection needs. Furthermore, the Office received reports of hundreds of persons of concern, mainly from Eritrea and Ethiopia, who were detained or forcibly returned from Egypt, again without UNHCR having an opportunity to assess their asylum claims. With the exception of some 180 individuals in a prison in Aswan, UNHCR's efforts to obtain access to the detained Eritrean asylum-seekers in Egypt were unsuccessful in 2008. The Office also received reports about the forcible return of some 30 people to Southern Sudan" (UNHCR 2009).

Legal framework. Two laws dictate Israeli detention policy for irregular migrants and asylum seekers: the *1954 Prevention of Infiltration Law* and the *1952 Entry into Israel Law*.

The *Prevention of Infiltration* law authorizes the Ministry of Defence to detain any "infiltrator," regardless of whether the person poses a security threat. Article 30 of the *Infiltration Law* allows the Minister of Defence to issue a deportation order to "infiltrators," and states that the deportation order is also to be considered a detention order providing for administrative confinement until deportation. This law has no provisions for judicial or administrative review of detention (Berman 2011).

According to the *Prevention of Infiltration* law, any citizen or resident of a select group of countries (as well as "visitors" to these countries)—including Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi-Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and Yemen—or any Palestinian who has "left his ordinary place of residence in an area which has become a part of Israel" can be designated an "infiltrator" and be subject to detention and deportation (art. 1). Article 10 adds that a person who "enters Israel without permission or who is in Israel unlawfully is ... deemed to be an infiltrator so long as he has not proved the contrary."

An infiltrator can face criminal sanction and be imprisoned for up to five years (art. 2) or seven years if re-entering after having been deported (art 3). If entering while armed or in the presence of an armed person, the infiltrator may be imprisoned for up to 15 years; if carrying a firearm or explosives, life imprisonment (art 4). A person who assists an infiltrator may also be

imprisoned for up to five (art. 6) or fifteen (art. 8) years.

The 1952 *Entry into Israel Law* authorizes the Ministry of the Interior to administratively detain and deport non-citizens for irregular entry (art. 10). Border control officers, operating under the Ministry of the Interior, are empowered to detain a person awaiting deportation if they are not returned on the vessel on which they came. Additionally, irregular entry, the provision of false documents, and/or the violation of a residence permit can result in criminal imprisonment for a maximum of three months (art. 12).

Criminalisation. Although both the *Infiltration Law* and the *Entry into Israel Law* provide criminal sanctions for violations, according to a source in Israel, in practice criminal cases are not pursued except in cases dealing with Palestinians or persons who entered Israel without authorization several times (Berman 2011).

Length of Detention. The law does not set a limit to the length of time a non-citizen can be held in administrative detention. After 60 days, authorities have the discretion to release “cooperative” detainees. According to a source in Israel, in practice such discretion is rarely exercised. Authorities consider asylum seekers who refuse to drop their asylum claims to be uncooperative, and thus they are not released until deported (Berman 2011b).

Judicial review. In contrast to the *Infiltration Law*, the *Entry Law* provides for “semi-judicial” review of detention orders, although people can be detained for up to four days before the review must take place. **Hotline for Migrant Workers** characterizes this review as “semi-judicial” because it is undertaken by a panel of lawyers appointed by the Interior Ministry in consultation with the Justice Ministry, and thus it is not considered to be an independent panel (Berman 2011b).

According to a source in Israel, persons apprehended at the border can sometimes be detained for periods exceeding four days before being afforded a review. Typically, border detainees are initially issued a deportation/detention order by the IDF. They are held by the IDF for a few days with no review, then they are transferred to a prison and issued an order under the provisions in the *Entry Law*. At this point, they are afforded a review within four days (Berman 2011).

Authorised detaining authorities and sites of detention. According to the *Entry Law*, a police or immigration official may apprehend a person if there is probable cause to suspect that he/she is illegally staying in Israel. The *Entry Law* stipulates that persons may be held in prisons, in places of arrest, in other places declared by the Minister of Interior or the Minister of Internal Security to be “special detention facilities,” or in any other place specified in the deportation order (Berman 2011).

Revision of the Prevention of Infiltration Law. In 2006, a bill was introduced in the Knesset amending the *Infiltration Law* that would have widened the scope of who is considered an “infiltrator” and increase the severity of penalties. The proposed law’s hardline measures regarding detention and deportation of asylum seekers led a coalition of Israeli human rights groups to describe it as “one of the most dangerous bills ever presented” (ACRI et al 2010). Although this bill was eventually withdrawn, in December 2010 a new bill was introduced that would leave criminal penalties in the 1954 law untouched while modifying administrative measures of detention and deportation (Berman 2011). According to Amnesty International, the amendment proposals are intended to serve as a central component of Israel’s policy towards refugees and asylum seekers, and would effectively annul Israel’s ratification of the 1951 **Refugee Convention**, which has never been incorporated into domestic law (AI 2010b).

Asylum seekers. Israel is notorious for rejecting nearly all asylum applications. In 2009, Israel’s asylum recognition rate was less than 1 percent (UNHCR 2010b).

Like other migrants, asylum seekers stopped at the border without adequate entry papers are generally detained. While the *Entry into Israel* law requires that detention be reviewed within four days, asylum seekers are often detained for weeks or months. Detention times vary widely, and often release only comes after intervention by UNHCR or an NGO (UNHCR 2009b) and sometimes doesn’t come even after such intervention. (HRW 2008, p.76; Berman 2011).

Formerly, UNHCR was responsible for conducting first-instance refugee status determination and submitting recommendations to Israel’s National Status Granting Body (NSGB) (HRW 2008, p.75). As of July 2009, UNHCR began turning over the handling of refugee status determination to the MOI. This change was codified in guidelines that entered into force in January 2011 (State of Israel 2011). According to a source in Israel, all asylum seekers now have an initial “basic interview” that is undertaken by officials who are not generally trained to conduct RSD (refugee status determination). Following this basic interview, most applicants are summarily rejected. Those summarily rejected have no right to administratively appeal the negative decision, and their only recourse is to initiate a petition to the district court (Berman 2011).

Those who are not summarily rejected—a minority of asylum seekers—have their cases transferred to the RSD unit at MOI. The RSD unit’s recommendations are then sent to the NSGB, and the NSGB’s recommendations go to the Minister of Interior or the Head of the Population and Immigration Registry for a final decision (Berman 2011).

A non-governmental source in Israel characterized the handover of refugee status determination responsibilities from UNHCR to MOI as “simply a disaster.” He added: “Although the RSD clerks receive training, they have been pretty much indoctrinated to perceive all asylum seekers as economic migrants and imposters. For this reason, although MOI reviewed thousands of cases since July 2009, they have not given one single positive recommendation” (Berman 2011).

According to this source, beginning in January 2011, people who apply for asylum at the Ministry of Interior (MOI) have their applications summarily rejected and then they “are taken into custody at the MOI’s offices ... creating a chilling effect on asylum seekers and discouraging people from even applying” (Berman 2011).

Although Israel became a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1954, it has never incorporated the provisions of the treaty into domestic law, in part because of fears that doing so would encourage claims to right of return by Palestinian refugees, who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). A “roundabout route” for assessing non-Palestinian refugee claims has thus been adopted that provides for things like the right to work, temporary protection, and non-refoulement (UNHCR 2007). Despite these measures, Israel consistently refuses to review refugee claims, and many are turned away as part of the “Hot Return” policy along the Egyptian border, or designated as “infiltrators” (ACRI et al 2010).

Migrant workers. Migrant workers represent a significant part of Israel’s work force, including many unauthorized labourers. According to one media report, the Interior Ministry claimed that as of January 2009 “there were 280,000 foreigners living in Israel illegally. ... Of these, 118,000 were foreign workers who entered the country legally and either lost their status or stayed after their five-year permits expired” (Friedman 2009).

Migrant workers have been subjected to detention and deportation based on a number of grounds related to employment status, place of residency, economic needs, and family status. Until 2005, a controversial “binding agreement” gave employers control over a migrant’s visa. If a migrant wanted to change jobs, or if the employer refused or neglected to renew the visa, the migrant worker could be detained and deported (Kruger 2005).

Despite changes to this policy in May 2005, in 2009 migrant rights groups continued to denounce efforts by authorities to detain and deport migrant workers before their work permits had expired in cases where they did not have a job during a three-month period, if their employers did not pay fees for their permits, or if an employer illegally transferred them to another employer (Friedman 2009).

Additionally, women can lose their status because of pregnancy, and both men and women are not allowed to have romantic relations with non-Israelis, which can be grounds for revoking work permits. In a February 2011 report on Israel, the UN **Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** highlighted these policies, stating: “[T]he Committee is seriously concerned at the State party’s existing policy that migrant workers who give birth must leave the State party with their baby within three months of giving birth or send their baby out of the State party’s borders so as to safeguard their work permits. The Committee is equally concerned that marriage and intimate relationships between migrant workers under an existing State party policy constitute cause to revoke the couple’s work permits” (CEDAW 2011).

Order 1650 for the West Bank. Order 1650, or the *Order regarding Prevention of Infiltration (Amendment no. 2)*, effective April 13, 2009, expands the definition of “infiltrator” presented in a 1969 Order from anyone entering Israel illegally through an “enemy state” to any one present in the West Bank without a valid permit (Hass 2010). Order 1650 subjects anyone without such a permit to deportation, transfer, criminal charges, fines, and/or imprisonment.

According to B’Tselem, the order is part of a series of steps to remove Palestinians from the West Bank, and according to Amira Haas it will enable the deportation of thousands (B’Tselem May 2010; Hass 2010). The law employs the term “infiltrator” to describe any person “staying illegally” in the West Bank. Violators can be sentenced to up to seven years in prison. Those who entered the West Bank lawfully but remained after the permit expired are subject to up to three-year prison terms (B’Tselem May 2010).

The law has been criticized as a breach of the fourth **Geneva Convention**, which prohibits forceful transfers or deportations of people in occupied territories, as well as a breach of the obligation undertaken by Israel in the Oslo Accords to recognise the West Bank and Gaza as a single territorial unit (B’Tselem May 2010; Guarnieri April 2010; UN 2010). According to the Israeli NGO **HaMoked**, because the order is “worded so broadly” it can allow “the [Israeli] military to empty the West Bank of almost all its Palestinian inhabitants” (Guarnieri April 2010). The Order has been condemned by the **Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network** (EMHRN 2010), Amnesty International (AI 2010), as well as other rights groups.

Deportations and the Oz Unit. Israel began deporting irregular migrants and asylum seekers in 1995 due to fears about threats to the Jewish character of the state (HMW 2009, p. 1). In August 2002, the Israeli government established a new Immigration Authority (IA) unit of the Israeli Police force in order to increase the deportation of irregular migrant workers, with a goal of expelling 100,000 by 2005 (Kav LaOved & HMW 2003, p.1). According to Hotline for Migrant Workers (HMW), between 1995 and 2008, 71,500 people were forcibly deported, half of whom were deported during 2003-2004. HMW received numerous complaints during this period of violent arrests, night raids, and graffiti on migrants’ homes (HMW 2009, p. 1). Official government statistics show that after the 2003-2004 period (when some 38,000 unauthorized workers were deported), deportations dropped off significantly. In 2005, 6,500 were deported; in 2006, 3,500 (CARIM 2008).

An academic study of deportations during the period 2001-2005 concluded that the government’s “deportation campaign was designed to achieve two parallel goals: to lower labour costs by creating a large class of indentured workers through what has been referred to as the ‘binding arrangement’ (a neo-liberal goal) and to deny the grant of civic status to non-Jewish migrant workers (an ethno-national goal)” (Dahan and Gill 2006, p. 1).

In July 2009, the government replaced the Immigration Police with a new agency called the Oz Unit (“oz” means strength in Hebrew), which is a specialized police agency that is part of the Ministry of the Interior’s National Immigration Authority. The unit was created with the goal of apprehending the estimated 280,000 undocumented foreigners in Israel by 2013.

The unit has been plagued with controversy. According to one media report, “The former head of the Oz unit **resigned** after only six months on the job in 2009 amid allegations of instilling fear in illegal immigrants and unpaid wages for employees, and the unit was **faulted** in a June 2010 State Department report for lacking will to combat human trafficking” (Rosen 2010).

According to the U.S. State Department’s 2010 annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*, local advocacy groups accused the Oz Unit of “lacking awareness of trafficking and the will to combat it.” The report also stated, “While Oz inspectors were meant to convey information to the police if they encountered suspected crimes against migrant workers, NGOs asserted that this did not happen, and a report by the **Knesset’s** Research and Information Center confirmed shortcomings in the operations of Oz inspectors” (Eglash 2010).

Minors. According to a source in Israel, while there are internal guidelines addressing the issue of the detention of minors, there are no special provisions for them and general policies concerning detention and deportation apply to them (Berman 2011). Previously, minors were generally detained along with adult females in separate facilities (HMW 2008). However, recent changes in policies provide that minors be detained with women only if they are accompanied. Male unaccompanied minors are held in a dedicated immigration detention facilities for juvenile males called Matan and female unaccompanied minors are held in Givon Prison, which has a separate section used solely for administrative immigration detention (Berman 2011).

Unaccompanied children under the age of 12 are cared for by the Ministry of Social Welfare, which is authorized to find foster homes for them. Minors aged 12-18 are often placed in Israeli boarding schools, depending on the individual circumstances of each case (HRW 2008, p. 78). According to a source in Israel, as of February 2011, there were several dozen unaccompanied minors in detention, most of whom were facing many months in detention awaiting alternative arrangements to be made at boarding schools or foster homes (Berman 2011).

Alternatives to detention. While there is no official government policy mandating finding alternatives to detention, Hotline for Migrant Workers successfully campaigned to get some asylum seekers released from detention and sent to alternative sites, including kibbutzim, Moshavim cooperative villages, and hotels (HMW 2007, p. 5). According to an HMW legal adviser, these cases “can be partially viewed as a success and partially as a failure” (Berman 2011). He said that these so-called alternatives amounted to severe limitations of freedom because the migrants were not allowed to leave the circumscribed space of the kibbutz they were sent to. Israeli authorities no longer allow these “alternatives” (Berman 2011b).

Detention Infrastructure

The *Entry Law* stipulates that detained non-citizens may be held in prisons, in places of arrest, in other places declared by the Minister of Interior or the Minister of Internal Security to be “special detention facilities,” or in any other place specified in the deportation order. All detention facilities are operated by the Israel Prison Service (not including the IDF bases used for short-term detention on Israel’s border). According to Hotline for Migrant Workers (Berman 2011b), as of February 2011, Israel had an estimated total detention capacity of about 2,500, and six facilities were in use:

- **Saharonim Detention Centre** (also “Saaronim”), which began operations in 2007 and is located near the Egyptian border, is a dedicated immigration detention facility that has a total capacity of approximately 2,000 and is used to confine asylum seekers and irregular migrants, including mothers with children (Berman 2011b). Most people apprehended at the border are sent to Saharonim, which has been the subject of intense criticism for detaining migrant children alongside adults (Haaretz 2010).
- **Givon Prison**, located near the city of Ramla, has a section used exclusively for the administrative detention of non-citizens that began operations in 2009. The immigration detention wing has an estimated capacity of 400 and is used mainly for migrant workers and other undocumented migrants (including men, women and children), as well as female unaccompanied minors (Berman 2011b). The plight of child detainees at Givon spurred a rightwing Likud Party member to say during a 2009 hearing of Knesset’s Committee for the Rights of the Child, “After the shock that I and my fellow committee members experienced during the tour of the Givon facility, we became determined to get [children] out of there. The committee decided that the treatment of unaccompanied foreign minors is twisted and inhumane” (Levi Julian and Cohen 2009).
- **Matan** is an administrative juvenile detention facility that began operations in 2010 and is located near Hadera. It is used only for confining unaccompanied male minors and has an estimated capacity of 70 (HMW 2010).
- **Eshel** and **Dekel** are two prisons located in Beersheba that sometimes confine immigration detainees when they are considered “trouble makers” or are in need of special medical treatment (Berman 2011b).
- **Ben Gurion Airport** in Tel Aviv has a small transit detention facility that is used to hold people who are denied entry into Israel or for people who are awaiting flights removing them from the country. Established in 2010 (Goren 2011), the facility reportedly holds no more than 2-4 people at a time, and generally for only very brief periods of time (Berman 2011b). However, according to a source in Israel, occasionally authorities have confined people for long periods of time at the facility, particularly in cases where detainees physically resist deportation and airlines refuse to allow them to board (Berman 2011b). This source said that the facility could be used by authorities to “break down” people and convince them to

“voluntarily” leave the country because the facility is like a “black hole” with little space and detainees are not allowed any form of recreation (Berman 2011b). In February, media reports revealed that the government was intending to use the airport facility for detaining families as they await deportation, spurring one rights activist to accuse the government of committing a “moral stain that will not be erased” (Goren 2011).

Israel’s detention estate has undergone numerous changes since the 1990s. According to one report, until 2002, its immigration-related detention infrastructure was limited to a couple hundred places in the Ma’asiyahu Prison, which were generally used to hold unauthorized foreign workers (Kav LaOved & HMW 2003, p. 1). However, with the creation of the Immigration Authority (IA) in 2002 and its mandate to increase deportations of unauthorized residents, the detention infrastructure expanded rapidly. According to a 2003 NGO report, shortly after IA’s founding, “At Nazareth’s Renaissance Hotel, which was converted into a detention facility for migrant workers, 500 places were earmarked. In the south of Israel, a new detention facility called Tsohar was opened, initially with 67 places for detainees but soon slated to have room for 300 inmates. In Hadera, a police facility was turned into a special jail for migrant workers known as Michal, for 84 detainees. As a result, a total of some 1,300 places will be available to the IA for housing detained migrant workers” (Kav LaOved & HMW 2003, p. 1).

According to one source, since this 2003 report Maasiyahu has been replaced by Givon Prison; Renaissance and Tsohar were closed; and Michal was closed and then reopened as an administrative juvenile detention centre under the name Matan (Berman 2011).

Until 2006, Israel exclusively used prisons for holding immigration detainees. However, beginning in 2005, the government came under increasing public pressure because of growing numbers of asylum seekers coming to Israel. In 2006, the government began creating separate wards for immigration detainees in prisons. Then, in 2007, in response to public pressure led by student groups concerning the treatment of Sudanese asylum seekers dropped off by the military in the streets of Beersheba, the government established the Saharonim facility, which at first was nothing more than a few caravans located on the site of the Ketziot prison. Now Saharonim is under separate administration and is comprised of several tents (which have cement floors) and buildings (Berman 2011b).

According to Human Rights Watch, there have been complaints about inadequate heating in the winter and overheating in the summer, and inadequate educational and recreational activities for children at Saharonim (HRW 2008; see also Wheeler 2007 and UNHCR 2009b). The detention centre has also been the subject of intense criticism for detaining migrant children alongside adults (Haaretz 2010). Saharonim now has separate sections for criminal and immigration detainees, and also for women and children (Berman 2011).

According to HMW, “After a long and intensive campaign by Israeli human rights organizations, a new prison for unaccompanied minors arriving in Israel from the Egyptian borders was established. ... The new prison is called ‘Matan’ and it is situated in Hadera, in the same building of the old ‘Michal’ women prison. While ‘Michal’ was run by the Immigration Authority, ‘Matan’ is run by the Prison Authority (HMW 2010).

In November 2010, the Knesset voted to build a new detention facility to hold an estimated 10,000 irregular migrants and asylum seekers. It was originally due to be completed in May-June 2011, but Hotline for Migrants Workers told the [Global Detention Project](#) that it is unlikely the facility will be completed on schedule. In a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, HMW and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel called the proposed centre “nothing more than a ghetto” (AP 2010). Netanyahu has said that the facility is part of a “multi-pronged” approach that includes construction of a 220-250 kilometre long wall along Egyptian border and increased fines for employers of illegal foreign workers (AP 2010, Al Jazeera 2010b).

A September 2010 HMW report provided detailed statistics about the situation of detained families at Saharonim (HMW 2010). According to the report:

- Fathers are detained in the men's sections and the mothers with their children are detained in the women's section. Some improvements in the imprisonment conditions have been made since human rights organizations filed a petition on that issue in January 2008, but women and children are still detained in cloth tents and no proper schooling is offered to the children who are usually detained for months.
- On August 3, 2010, there were 206 women and children in Saharonim: 41 of them were detained since 2009; 96 of the detainees were from Eritrea; 65 from Ethiopia; seven from Sudan; and 12 were registered as unknown.

Facts & Figures

As of August 2010, 1,042 unauthorized residents were being “unlawfully” held for more than 60 days by the Israeli prison authorities. 415 of them had been in detention for more than a year (HMW 2010). “The average imprisonment period of foreign citizens is 521 days. Among them there is a resident of Togo who has been incarcerated in the Givon Prison since 2004—that’s six years” (quoted in Branovsky 2010). Commenting on these statistics, the organization said: “Instead of these huge amounts, the State could have released and allowed these detainees to work for a living, or at the very least decided who among them should be granted refugee status. Instead the country just imprisons over 1,000 people, including children who have harmed no one and whose only vice was to enter Israel illegally” (quoted in Branovsky 2010).

HMW reports that as of February 2011, Israel had an estimated total detention capacity of about 2,500, and six facilities—three prisons, two migrant detention facilities, and one airport transit facility—were in use (Berman 2011b).

According to the Immigration Authority, nearly 11,000 “illegal migrants” entered Israel from Egypt during January-November 2010, a record number (BBC 2010).

An estimated 300,000 migrant labourers now reside in Israel, with the largest number coming from the Philippines. There are also large numbers of migrant workers from Thailand, China, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. According to the Interior Ministry (MOI), in 2009 there were some 300,000 “illegal migrants” and approximately 70,700 legal foreign workers in Israel (Paiss 2009). Other government sources report that 120,000 foreign workers with expired visas were working illegally in Israel (AP 2010). However, according to Hotline for Migrant Workers, “there is no actual way to know the exact number of ‘illegal migrants.’ The MOI regularly disseminates conflicting information. At a certain point they even stated that there were one million ‘illegal migrants’” (Berman 2011).

The number of asylum seekers in Israel as of November 2010 was estimated to be 30,000 (IRIN 2010). UNHCR registered nearly 7,500 new asylum claims in 2009, mostly from Sudan and Eritrea. Between 9,000-11,000 Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers received temporary protection that year (UNHCR 2009). Nearly 5,000 asylum seekers entered Israel via Egypt in 2009 (ACRI 2010, p. 7).

Only 190 asylum seekers have been granted refugee status in Israel since it signed the 1951 Convention in 1954 (ACRI 2010, p.4; IRIN 2010). In 2009, detention periods for asylum seekers averaged four months (UNHCR 2009b). Most of the asylum seekers detained in 2009 were held in Saharonim/Ketziot prison (1,500) and Givon prison (350) (HMW 2009, p. 5, HMW 2009b, p. 10). 3,300 people were deported in 2008 (HMW 2009, p. 2).

A September 2010 Hotline for Migrant Workers report (HMW 2010) offered the following detention statistics:

- At the time, Sudanese and Eritreans made up more than 70 percent of asylum seekers in Israel.
- A citizen of Congo and a citizen of Kenya had been in detention since 2004; a citizen of Ethiopia had been in detention since 2005; two citizens of Guinea had been in detention since

2006.

- 20 people had been in detention since 2007: 13 citizens of Ivory Coast; one from Uzbekistan; one from Ethiopia; one from Guinea; one from Togo; one from Moldova; one from Nigeria; and one from Zimbabwe.
- 74 people had been in detention since 2008: 20 citizens of Ivory Coast; seven from Somalia; six from Ethiopia; 11 from unknown countries; the rest from 11 various countries.
- 316 people had been in detention since 2009: 135 citizens of Ethiopia; 14 from Ivory Coast; 10 from unknown countries; eight from Sudan; six from Somalia; two from Congo; one from Libya; the rest from 20 other countries.

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