

# Muslim Africans' Harrowing Journey to Israel

by Daniel Pipes

“I was dancing with joy when I arrived. It was one of the happiest days of my life.” So spoke Ismail Abdul-Rasul, a father of four from Darfur in Sudan, describing his 2007 reception in Israel after five miserable years in Egypt and a hellish journey across the Sinai Peninsula.

Generally forgotten today, a large influx of Africans—Eritreans and Sudanese especially—made their way without authorization during the years 2006-12 to live in Israel. Their immigration temporarily traumatized Israelis and left a substantial body of Africans living in the country, mainly in Tel Aviv. The total number of illegal migrants to Israel from Africa is estimated at 55,000, with about 35,000 living in the country today. This episode is worth recalling for its drama, horror, resolution, and implications.



*The Israeli band, the Dream Boys, are asylum seekers who fled the genocide in Darfur. In 2014, they met in the Holot detention facility, Negev Desert.*

## The Passage

Muslim Africans nearly all reached the Jewish state by land. The influx began in 2006, apparently due to some Egyptian smugglers helping a few hundred Africans to enter Israel and the Israeli government treating them leniently. As word got back to Egypt and more distant parts of the continent, larger numbers followed. Journalist Uriel

Heilman in 2009 captured the motives of Africans living in Egypt:

On one side lies peril and poverty—crowded refugee camps, scarce jobs, and overzealous Egyptian soldiers ready to open fire on anyone trying to flee to Israel. ... On the other side lies

relative prosperity and protection—a westernized country, a more sympathetic government, and a broad array of refugee services including, in some cases, jobs.

“It’s good. I love Israel. There’s good people here,” said Emanuel, a 16-year-old Sudanese boy who made it safely across. ... Emanuel sleeps on a clean bed, gets three meals a day, and occasionally gets taken to swimming pools, summer camps, and nature excursions.

A Sudanese woman explained why she walked more than two hundred miles across Egypt and the Sinai desert to the Israeli border: Egyptians “spit on us and called us monkeys and animals” while she heard that she would be treated well in Israel. And, indeed, she was: “They gave us chocolate and juice and handcuffed us.”

As this semi-good life in Israel, with its chocolate, juice, and handcuffs, became known, human trafficking followed. Ibrahim, an orphan from Labé, Guinea, in West Africa recounts how, when he was fifteen years old in 2006, the owner of the electrical shop where he worked regaled him with tales of wealth in Israel and offered to pay for his travel in return for half of Ibrahim’s earnings for life. Ibrahim accepted this offer of indentured servitude and soon found himself taken as a captive on the 13-day land journey from Guinea to Morocco to Egypt to Eilat to Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv, the traffickers took him to the central bus station, but his intended employer did not show up, permitting Ibrahim to escape. After various adventures—washing pots in a restaurant, living in a refuge for homeless youngsters,



*Ibrahim, originally from Guinea, was taken to Israel by traffickers but escaped. After an Israeli couple became his guardians, he became a citizen and joined the IDF.*

studying at a school for at-risk children, spending time in a prison—an Israeli couple offered to serve as his legal guardians, opening the door for him to finish his education, become an Israeli citizen, change his name to Avi Be’eri, join the Israel Defense Forces in 2011 as an officer, and consider converting to Judaism.

Until the Abraham accords of 2020, when Khartoum recognized Israel, Sudan’s government considered Israel an enemy state, so its nationals found residence there particularly challenging. “Israel was the absolute enemy. The Sudanese government would cut my throat if they knew I went to Israel,” explained Ahmed, who nonetheless made the trip because his situation in Egypt was desperate: “We were dying here anyway.” He borrowed money to pay a smuggler to get himself and his family to Israel.

Sanka, a Sudanese migrant in detention, lodged at a kibbutz, recalled the judge in his case saying that hostile relations between Sudan and Israel mean, “We cannot set you free, because you may be a danger to our citizens,” to which Sanka replied, “I do not believe that. When I came to Israel, I came to seek help and to be a friend of this country.” The Israeli government in turn held that “the security services have no possibility for distinguishing between someone who is infiltrating Israel on orders from Al-Qaida and someone who is an innocent infiltrator fleeing for his life.”

### Horror in Egypt

Making it through Egypt was the hardest part, leaving many Muslim Africans brutalized or murdered at the hands of the government, Hamas, or tribes of the Sinai Peninsula. The police killed at least twenty-seven Sudanese demonstrating outside the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees’ office in Cairo while Egyptian border guards repeatedly used lethal force on unarmed migrants. In August 2007, for example, Israeli soldiers reported watching the guards shoot and kill two Sudanese migrants at the border, “then dragged two other refugees from the border and beat them to death with rocks.”

Hamas and its tribal allies in Sinai treated the migrants mercilessly. According to a *Ynet* article based on a report by the Everyone Group, a non-governmental organization, African migrants

encountered Hamas operatives along the route, who promised to smuggle them into Israel for a



*Egyptian human rights advocate Hamdy al-Azazy (in checkered shirt) said of the way Africans are brought to Egypt’s border with Israel: “They transport them worse than animals.”*

payment of \$2,000. Instead, they were placed in a detention facility on the outskirts of Rafah, an Egyptian town on the Gaza border, demanding their families in Eritrea pay a \$10,000 ransom for their release. ... eight of the immigrants were killed, and four have gone missing—allegedly being the subject of human organ harvesting and trafficking. About 100 of them were transferred to a “concentration camp” at an unknown location, perhaps in the Palestinian territories. The captives are beaten, the women and children raped. “The prisoners eat poor food and are forced to drink their own urine,” the statement reads. “Most of the migrants are contemplating suicide.”

The Egyptian human rights champion Hamdy al-Azazy reported on the way Africans are brought to Egypt’s border with Israel: “They transport them worse than animals,” with migrants hidden inside pickup trucks and empty tankers. “They often make a false shelf in pickup trucks where the

refugees cram inside and then have fruit, vegetables, [and] animals placed on top of them.” It gets worse. Azazy describes the prison camps in which African migrants were dumped:

**Proceeds from trafficking in human beings and organs go to finance fundamentalist armed groups, primarily Hamas.**

The prisoners are subjected to every kind of torture and humiliation—often while their relatives abroad are listening to their cries of despair at the end of the telephone line—until the ransom is paid that allows them to be released on the border with Israel. Those who try to escape are killed in cold blood while the women prisoners are repeatedly raped, often in front of their husbands and brothers.

If relatives are unable to pay the ransom demanded (from \$20,000 to \$50,000 dollars according to which gang is holding them) the young people are transferred to the organ market and are killed during the removal of their kidneys. Many corpses without kidneys have been found in the Sinai Desert, while most of the bodies are burned.

One report noted, “The badly butchered bodies of nine Somalis were found washed up on a beach in Alexandria, Egypt, early in April. The bodies were missing all vital organs.” To make sure the organs fetch the highest value, they are often extricated from live persons by trained medical staff. “The organs are not useful if they’re dead,” Azazy explains. The traffickers first drug the victims, “remove their organs, then leave them to die and dump them in a deep dry well along with hundreds of bodies.”

Azazy—the only source for this gruesome procedure—has pictures which one reporter saw and described: “an empty corpse is seen, cut open from just under the chin

all the way to the navel, the rib cage cleanly sawn through.” According to the Italian analyst Roberto Malini, “Most of the proceeds from trafficking in human beings and organs, in fact, goes to finance fundamentalist armed groups, primarily Hamas.” The United Nations estimates that the worldwide organ trade generated \$600 million to \$1.2 billion in profits in 2011 alone.

Such were the macabre challenges in Egypt that some Africans accepted for a chance to reach Israel.

## Israeli Responses

As mostly Muslim Sudanese and Christian Eritreans began arriving illegally in Israel in 2006, the government detained those it caught as enemy infiltrators but often released them onto the streets; others avoided detention and went straight to the streets.

In August 2007, the government of Israel accepted five hundred migrants from Darfur already in Israel as refugees but indicated that, under an agreement with Cairo, all future illegal migrants would be returned to Egypt. This agreement seems not to have been implemented for the number of Darfur refugees reached six hundred by February 2009, all of whom were granted asylum and work permits.

By 2009, the mayor of Eilat, Meir Yitzhak Halevi, bewailed that parts of his city “have been conquered by infiltrators.” He went on:

With many of the migrants seeking jobs, and some lacking a fixed address, large numbers of the



immigrants congregate in parks and sporting fields. The infiltration is uncontrolled. ... Without wishing to generalize, we have undoubtedly seen an increase in violence among this population. Alcohol-related incidents have grown.

Likewise, in 2011, Tel Aviv's Mayor Ron Huldai called the Africans "infiltrators" and stated that "it is now clear to all that they come here as migrant workers and are not in any existential danger."

In 2010, Arnon Soffer, a geographer at the University of Haifa, estimated that, at the then-current level of migration, Israel would host approximately 500,000 illegal migrants by 2025 and called this an "existential threat" to the country with a population then of 7.6 million. That same year, Israel's public security minister, Yitzhak Aharonovitch, stated that up to 2.5 million African migrants currently residing in Cairo "are waiting" to cross into Israel. At the peak of the immigration wave in late 2011, Israel hosted 117,848 illegal migrant workers and 38,354 asylum seekers from all parts of the world.

Picking up on such predictions and warning of a "flood" of illegal migrants that "threatens the jobs of Israelis and threatens the Jewish and democratic character of the state of Israel," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu endorsed building a fence along Israel's 242-kilometer border with Egypt, from Rafah to Eilat, and even into the Red Sea, as well as a detention center capable of holding ten thousand migrants.

The Israeli government spent \$450 million in 2010-14 on the 5-meter-high fence, dubbed the Hourglass Project, one of the most expensive undertakings in the country's history. The fence immediately reduced the



*In 2010-14, Israel built a 5-meter-high fence, later raised to 8 meters. The fence reduced the infiltration rate by over 99 percent.*

infiltration rate by over 99 percent; 9,570 Africans entered Israel illegally in the first half of 2012 while only 34 did in the first half of 2013. When the smugglers figured out ways to go over the fence, its height in 2016 went up from 5 to 8 meters along a 17-kilometer stretch. The fence not only solved the demographic crisis challenging the very nature of the Jewish state but also the moral crisis of Africans seeking refuge.

Heartwarming stories aside, illegal Muslim Africans have generally had a rough time in Israel, especially as they predominantly did not flee a war zone but sought better economic prospects. Netanyahu articulated this distinction in 2017: "They aren't refugees. Or at least most of them aren't. Most of them are looking for jobs." An Israeli police source added, speaking of Sudanese, "Some of them have launched a Web site which details smuggling routes, so that family members and friends can join them in Israel."

The lack of an Israeli welcome caused some Africans to want out; Jos Nof, a 27-year-old Sudanese, said in 2021, "I want a good life. If my country is safe, I wouldn't

spend a minute more here because I see no future.” Still, Israel retains its allure, and other Africans try round-about routes to reach the Promised Land. In May and June 2020,

for example, Israelis arrested and deported sixteen Sudanese men who tried to enter the country from Lebanon under cover of night.

Some Israelis bemoaned, along with Or Mor-Yosef of Tel Aviv’s African Refugee Development Centre, the missed opportunity to turn these young Muslim Africans into “Israel’s finest ambassadors” by welcoming them more warmly. Others agreed with scholar and journalist Guy Bechor that the African illegals were neither transient workers nor refugees but permanent settlers whose presence leftist Israelis welcomed as a way “to change our country’s demographic balance.” Having failed in their goal to let in masses of Palestinians into this country, he argued, leftists instead encouraged Africans to emigrate by spreading the rumor “that Israel is a paradise, and that it can be reached by foot.” Bechor warns that by giving citizenship to migrants, then letting their families join them in Israel, the Muslim population could become a majority in what had been the Jewish state.

Reporting on African migrants inevitably quotes Israeli leftists about Israel’s moral responsibility to accept illegal migrants, given the Jewish experience and Israel’s proud history as a refuge for the persecuted. But this ignores the fact, as Bechor pointed out, that a warm welcome would overwhelm the country and change its demography and character.

This issue revived in 2023, long after African immigration had ended, becoming a central topic in the huge furor over the power of the Supreme Court; under what circumstances should the court be able to reject legislation passed by the Knesset, Israel’s parliament? Those in favor of restricting its

**Arab states and Muslims  
generally accept and esteem Israel  
while the Left has turned into  
its most severe critic.**

power pointed to the three instances of voiding laws allowing the government indefinitely and without trial to imprison illegal African migrants. They argued that the court

undemocratically privileged migrants’ rights over those of south Tel Aviv residents and presented these decisions as the preeminent symbol of judicial overreach and interventionism. “It is the Knesset that protects rights, not the High Court,” declared Simcha Rothman, a leader of the overhaul effort.

## **Conclusion**

The case of Muslim Africans spontaneously moving to Israel offers a small example of likely future mass migrations from Africa to rich countries in the decades ahead as the continent’s population may triple by 2100. Migrations tend to begin with news of a successful settlement reaching the home country, many more migrants pursuing the same route, followed by human trafficking, corruption, and brutality, then fences and other obstacles going up, and the crisis finally abating.

The 2006-12 episode also has a distinctly Israeli aspect to it. Muslim migrants abandoning their countries of origin, traveling long distances, enduring terrible experiences in Egypt, and taking a chance in the Jewish state unambiguously reveals a wide but covert appreciation of Israel. Far from the angry oratory of the United Nations or the insipid bigotry of the Middle East studies professoriate, large numbers of Muslims long to live among Zionists. As Malcolm Hedding of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem has noted,

It is remarkable that while some highly educated British academics

consider Israel a racist and immoral country, these simple Sudanese refugees seem to know better.

In this, Africans express an admiration hitherto better known among Palestinians and Middle Eastern Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Thus, do Muslim Africans desperate to reach the Jewish state point to an important aspect of Israel's growing acceptance.

Finally, the influx of African Muslims confirms a larger shift underway, one in which Arab states and Muslims more generally accept and even esteem Israel while the Left, once Israel's main ally (think Stalin and Truman) has turned into its most severe critic

(think Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders). Symbolically, Israel has better relations with Saudi Arabia than with Scotland, Spain, or Sweden. Palestinian nationalists and Islamists still initiate most violence against Jews and Israel, but Leftist delegitimization represents, along with Iranian nuclear weapons, the country's greatest danger.

**Daniel Pipes** ([DanielPipes.org](http://DanielPipes.org), [@DanielPipes](https://twitter.com/DanielPipes)) is president of the Middle East Forum and a senior fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies. © 2023 by Daniel Pipes. All rights reserved.



---

<sup>1</sup> “‘[The Hell of Israel Is Better than the Paradise of Arafat](#)’,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2005 and a blog, “‘[Hamas is Worse than Israel, Worse than Sharon](#)’,” [DanielPipes.org](http://DanielPipes.org), Apr. 13, 2005, with many subsequent entries.