



Inside Holot: The Effects of Forced Detention of Refugees and Asylum Seekers on Families in Home Countries

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Approximately 43,000 asylum seekers currently reside in Israel, with the majority from Eritrea and Sudan. Although Israel signed on to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees and asylum seekers do not have equal access to state resources and benefits.

One of the ways in which the Israeli government justifies its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is through the Entry Into Israel Law and Anti-Infiltrators Law. Both laws are intended to deal with non-Jewish immigrants. Under these laws, it is extremely difficult for any non-Jewish refugee or migrant worker. Without official status, individuals are constantly under the threat of detainment, which can be more appropriately classified as imprisonment. As outlined in the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2015 Yearly Monitoring Report, “The Entry to Israel Law allows the administrative detention of foreign nationals who have no legal status or who have violated the conditions of their visa. The law states that an illegal resident who is detained for more than 60 days will be conditionally released under certain circumstances. The purpose of the detention is to facilitate the deportation of the detainee, and not to punish the individual or deter others from following him.” Moreover, the Anti-Infiltration Law, which was initially used against Palestinians attempting to return to their homes after 1948, has been modified. Taken from the same report, “The third version of the Law, allowed asylum seekers who entered through the Egyptian desert, to be held for three years in administrative detention and asylum seekers from enemy states, such as Sudan, to be held indefinitely. The High Court of Justice abrogated the third amendment on September 2013, 12 and on December 2013 the Israeli Knesset legislated the fourth amendment allowing one year’s administrative detention of newcomers and an indefinite imprisonment of asylum seekers already residing in Israel in an “open” facility, called Holot, run by the IPS.”

Technically, asylum seekers who have dependents living within Israel and those who have been the victims of torture are ineligible for summons to Holot. However, there have been instances in which torture victims are summoned and imprisoned in Holot. Moreover, asylum seekers with dependents abroad are not exempt from summons and subsequent imprisonment.

Due to the nature of summons to Holot, asylum seekers often fail to obtain wages and pension from previous places of employment. Kav LaOved, a NGO, deals with these issues. Moreover, the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants also helps asylum seekers in other areas.

My exploratory research focused on the effects of imprisonment in Holot on family members in home countries. To do so, I spoke with a number of refugees currently imprisoned in Holot. Interviews were primarily conducted in English, however some were conducted in Hebrew. Every respondent, with the exception of a torture victim who had only been in Israel for a little over a year, had been sending money back to their families in their respective home countries of Eritrea and Sudan. The majority of the respondents reported that their families had no other source of income outside of what they had previously been sending back. Due to the nature of imprisonment in Holot, communication with families was limited and as such the full effects of imprisonment were not completely clear. However, there were several common trends. Among respondents who had children in their home countries, their children stopped attending school due to a lack of funds. Moreover, in many cases the prisoners with children in their home countries had not seen their children since they were infants. These respondents have been in Israel for five years or more. Moreover, the age range was in the mid to late twenties, which is largely due to the nature of the military in Eritrea and Sudan. In Eritrea and Sudan, there is often forced conscription into the military for indefinite periods of time.

My research experience personalized the refugee crisis we hear so much about. Although I initially thought I would be researching the best methods to help female Eritrean and Sudanese refugees combat workplace legal violations, within my first week of work I realized that a great deal of effort was already being put into that area. I found that the effects of imprisonment in Holot on families was largely untouched, possibly because it is usually assumed that individuals with dependents would not be summoned to Holot.

Although the information I obtained was somewhat skewed in the sense that it came from male perspectives, it provided valuable insight into strains on families. The fact that communication and knowledge of family well-being was so limited is a separate issue that could be further explored down the road. If possible, it would be interesting to see the accuracy in reporting among male prisoners compared to firsthand accounts from family members.