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The Refugee Debate in Palestine/Israel: An Ongoing Narrative of Struggles from Palestinians to Africans

Abstract

Since 1948, with the establishment of the state of Israel and the Palestinian *Nakba* (Catastrophe), the refugee question has become one of the major issues debated not only in historical Palestine, but in many other countries across the world. Throughout its history, the Jewish state has been characterised by successive waves of refugees, each with their own struggles and demands. Accordingly, this chapter aims to analyse the current situation of the most recent waves of non-Jewish African refugees, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, and their role within the heterogeneous panorama of Israeli social and political activism.

Keywords: Palestinian *Nakba*, Israel, non-Jewish Africans, Sudan, Eritrea, refugees, infiltrators, activism

Introduction

The representation of a mythical homeland for the Israeli Jewish settlers based on the Zionist principle of "a land without a people for a people without a land"[1] and the corresponding issue of the Right of Return for indigenous Palestinians have both been constructed and consolidated within the land of historical Palestine. In parallel, both the establishment of the state of Israel and the *Nakba* (the Palestinian 'Catastrophe') have

[1] Even though the land was not 'empty', since the Palestinian Arab population had flourished and already included a small number of Jews, the Zionist leaders created this myth to justify dispossessing the indigenous population and establishing the ancient land of Eretz Israel.

affected Palestinians through the loss of their homes and the dispossession of their lands, forcing them to become refugees.

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Palestinian refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict”. These refugees, who numbered around 750,000 when the Agency began operations in 1950, currently amount to some 5 million (UNRWA, 2018). Furthermore, Palestinians who remained inside the Jewish state and represent twenty per cent of the current Israeli population, have been subjugated under a hierarchical status dominated by Ashkenazi Jews.

When the 1951 Refugee Convention[2] was established in response to the Holocaust and the experience of European Jews fleeing the Nazis in World War II, the recently proclaimed state, governed by and for Jews, started working on the creation of a legal system to prevent Palestinian refugees from entering Israel, and devised the Prevention of Infiltration law that was enacted in 1954. Under this law, an ‘infiltrator’ was defined to be either “a national or citizen of Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Trans-Jordan, or the Yemen” or “a resident, or visitor in one of these countries” or “a Palestinian citizen or a Palestinian resident without nationality or citizenship” who “entered Israel knowingly and unlawfully” and who was “armed with any instrument or material likely to cause death or serious or dangerous injury to a person”.

[2] Although this Convention and the 1967 Protocol were ratified respectively in 1954 and 1968, Israel has never incorporated them into domestic law (Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe & Campbell, 2013; Ziegler & Berman, 2015).

During the same period, Jews from the Arab and Muslim world[3] began emigrating to Israel, where they became immediately Israeli citizens due to the Law of Return of 1950, which granted automatic citizenship to all Jews. Nevertheless, they were first placed in transit camps, also called *Ma'abarot*, and later settled in peripheral areas with the aim of marginalising them at various levels and through different tools.

In the following years, always in accordance with the Law of Return, two other significant groups arrived in Israel as Jews, respectively the Ethiopian Jews - also defined as *Beta Israel* - in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the Russian Jews in the 1990s. Once again, these new immigrants had to deal with the power asymmetries within Israeli society, particularly racism and discrimination against the Ethiopian Jewish community.

Similarly, in the 1990s, non-Jewish labour migration began to increase, largely as a result of the changing political and economic realities of the time. In fact, following the outbreak of the first *Intifada* in 1987 and the Oslo Accord in 1993, Israel imposed severe restrictions on Palestinian movement from the Occupied Territories, such as closing border crossings and denying working permits to Palestinians. As they had previously represented the main source of cheap labour within Israel, this enforced a clear division between the Palestinian and the Israeli labour markets (Kemp & Raijman, 2007; Schnell, 2001). To meet the resulting shortage of cheap labour, Israel now

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[3] Also called as *Mizrahim* ('Eastern Jews'), they include Jews coming from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey, who continue to be at the margins of Jewish Israeli society. The Ashkenazi population, Jews of European, American, and Russian origin, represent the ruling economic, political, cultural elite of the country. The Palestinian citizens of Israel correspond to 20 per cent of the total population and are at the bottom of the Israeli socio-economic and political system.

primarily sourced this from non-Jewish international migrants from countries such as Romania, Thailand, Turkey, China and the Philippines.

With the exception of migrant workers, in general terms, throughout the history of the Israeli state, the great majority of immigrants to Israel was represented by Jews coming from various countries around the world[4]. This situation changed in 2005, when the first wave of non-Jewish African refugees arrived in Israel and became the protagonists of one of the most challenging and controversial internal issues of the last decade, widely debated among the public, and up to the institutional level.

It caused a deeper demarcation between Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants, since Jewish immigration continues to be actively encouraged, while non-Jewish immigration has become more and more restricted. The most recent non-Jewish and non-white immigration had a major impact on a society built on the assumption that ethnicity is a major criteria in the distribution of power and resources (Yiftachel, 2006). In a country whose primary objective has historically remained to be a home only for Jews, non-Jewish people have been considered as a threat to the Jewish character of the Israeli state due to "their presence in urban space and their uncontrolled flow through borders" (Yacobi, 2010, p. 15).

In this chapter, I aim to analyse the current status of African refugees, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, and their most significant struggles within the heterogenous forms of political and social grassroots activism that currently exist inside the Israeli state. Although the number of asylum seekers is still small in comparison with the number of

[4] One of the few exceptions of non-Jewish immigration was the case of a group of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, fleeing their war in small boats. They were picked up by an Israeli cargo vessel in a port in South China and, as no other country was prepared to accept them; on that occasion, the former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin granted them political asylum (Omer-Man, 2014).

refugees in other states in the region, such as in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, or the number of migrant workers within Israel, this issue still needs to be explored and investigated. In view of the increasing academic interest in migration and refugee studies in many disciplines and using a variety of approaches, this study presents a new perspective, by connecting the specificity of the Israeli case to the current global phenomenon.

Non-Jewish Africans[5] in Israel: from refugees to 'infiltrators'

The number of African refugees[6] in Israel is about 41,477, substantially less than the combined total of 81,438 legal migrant workers and 15,284 illegal migrant workers (Israeli Ministry of Interior, July 2016)[7]. Among African refugees, a large majority of 30,009 come from Eritrea, mostly to escape indefinite forced conscription, 8,130 people come from Sudan, fleeing the conflict in Darfur[8], and 2,815 are from other African countries, such as South Sudan, that was formed in 2011 and has been experiencing an ongoing civil war since 2013. The common denominator of these authoritarian places of origin has been the lack of any state protection of their citizens' basic rights, or the

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[5] An earlier wave of Africans - mainly international labour migration - arrived in Israel by air from West Africa during the 1990s, by means of tourist or pilgrim visas, until the vast majority of them was deported in the beginning of the 2000s (Sabar, 2010).

[6] As established by the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it". The full text is available at the following website http://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html

[7] The data is published on the Israeli Minister of Interior website at the following link: https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/q2_2016_0.pdf

[8] The case of refugees from Sudan is even more complicated since Sudan is an enemy state and it is a crime for its citizens to enter Israel.

freedom to express any form of dissent. Despite legal recognition of their refugee status by Israel, no institutional support has been provided to integrate refugees into society or to help them to obtain legal citizenship[9].

In the beginning of 2007, when the conflict in Darfur was internationally recognised, the former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert decided to give 498 Darfuris, as a one-time and humanitarian gesture, the status of group protection (Duman, 2015, p. 1241), but in reality, they had no access to basic rights or social services. It was considered a temporary solution that gave automatic group protection, instead of individually examining each asylum claim.

In a few years, the number of refugees significantly increased. One of the main reasons African refugees are attracted to Israel is that many see it as a bridge to Europe, and a country where economic conditions are still better than in the neighbouring states[10]. Many others did not arrived in Israel by choice, but because they were tortured and kidnapped in the Sinai desert by smugglers, who usually take advantage of refugees' close community ties to the diaspora in the West, who can pay large amounts of money

[9] The data used in this study came from the main Israeli organisations supporting the rights of refugees and migrants, namely ARDC-African Refugee Development Center, ASSAF-Aid Organisation for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, HRM-Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, PHR-Physicians for Human Rights. Founded both by refugees and Israelis, they provide different services for refugees that include basic needs, legal advocacy, language training, health and psychological assistance.

[10] One of the most tragic events happened in Egypt in 2005, when twenty-seven Sudanese refugees were killed and about two thousand five hundred people - including women and children - were removed by the Egyptian security forces during a demonstration outside the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) offices in Cairo. Such a dramatic episode of violence clearly showed the deteriorating conditions of refugees and the lack of political will to solve this issue in Egypt.

to release their relatives[11]. As one of the leading Israeli activists working and struggling on behalf of African refugees, Sigal Kook Avivi, explained to me:

> Most of them did not plan to come here, what they normally do to leave is try to cross the border from Eritrea to Sudan, and then towards the border with Ethiopia, even though they say Ethiopia is an enemy state. They flee everywhere. They flee to Chad, to Libya, to any place imaginable. Most of them look for places where they will not be persecuted. For some of them, the easiest way was to migrate to Egypt, but when they got to Cairo, they found secret police from Sudan who controlled everything that was happening in Egypt, and who knew them and persecuted them in Egypt as well. Many from Eritrea were involved in human trafficking and were pushed to come to Israel. The smugglers obliged refugees already in Israel to call their friends and to convince them to come to Israel. This is the way they made money (Kook Avivi, 2016).

When hundreds of refugees quickly turned into thousands and thousands of people, it became a central issue in the Israeli public debate, that began to use a hostile lexicon to describe the newcomers. African refugees were called as 'infiltrators', the same term used in the 1950s to describe Palestinian refugees who wanted to go back to their homeland after the establishment of the state of Israel, "at first to salvage their belonging and work their lands, and then to commit sabotage and terror attacks" (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2016). More than fifty years later, in 2008, the Israeli government applied this term once again to identify African refugees illegally crossing the border between Egypt and Israel after enduring perilous journeys from their

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[11] Human trafficking in the Sinai desert has become a highly profitable business involving horrific treatment of African refugees, who are usually kidnapped from refugee camps and sold to torture camps. In many cases, refugees have been obliged to pay large sums of money to secure the release of members of their families or of their groups held captive by smugglers in the Sinai (Sigal Kook Aviv, author's interview, 2016). The issue of human trafficking and the role of Bedouin smugglers in the Sinai, is documented in several reports by both Israeli and international human rights organisations. Among them, see Tortured in Sinai, Jailed in Israel: Detention of Slavery, and Torture Survivors under the Anti-Infiltration Law (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants & Physicians for Human Rights, 2010) and "I wanted to lie down and die": Trafficking and Torture of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

countries of origin to the Sinai Peninsula. As the spokeswoman for the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, Anat Ovadia-Rosner describes it:

> The way in which they connected the global phenomenon of refugees with the conflict here and with the security problem, was genius. In that way, African refugees are considered to be a security threat, like the Palestinians and other 'enemies'. People do not want to care about this problem, they do not have any compassion towards them. The general atmosphere is completely against refugees (Ovadia-Rosner, 2016).

Subsequently, non-Jewish Africans entering Israel were no longer considered as refugees, but as 'infiltrators', thereby violating the Refugee Convention and its prohibition on imposing penalties on refugees who illegally enter another country if they present themselves to the authorities without undue delay. By labelling all African refugees as *mistanemim* ('infiltrators' in Hebrew), several institutional figures, including the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev and former leader of the ultra-orthodox political party Shas Eli Yishai, have employed this provocative and powerful language to directly imply that being a refugee is a crime, and that refugees are 'a cancer' inside Israel and, gone so far as suggesting they all be expelled from the country[12]. Since mid-2009, when ethno-religious and extreme right-wing parties gained much more power, the Israeli government has introduced several measures to deter further arrivals of African refugees. As underlined in the 'Alternative Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination' submitted in January 2012 by the African Refugee Development Centre (ARDC), racial discrimination inside Israel has increased, and led to violent acts against members of the African refugee community.

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[12] All these public declarations have been documented by the journalist David Sheen and can be read and watched at the following website: http://www.davidsheen.com/racism/

At the institutional level, one of the main policies against African refugees was adopted in early 2012, when the Knesset passed Amendment III to the Prevention of Infiltration Law, which stated that people crossing the border from Egypt could be held in administrative detention for up to three years. Nonetheless, the Israeli Supreme Court voided it, and ordered the government to release about 2,000 refugees, including men, women, and children. As in many other cases, the Israeli state did not fully comply with the Court's decision, and in 2013 passed Amendment IV allowing for administrative detention for one year, and indefinite administrative detention in Holot[13] for people who could not be deported in their countries of origin. However, the creation of an 'open' detention camp of this kind has not improved everyday conditions for the refugees held there, as they are still denied their basic rights and to suffer daily exploitation.

In addition, under Amendment IV, the government started forcing them to sign 'voluntary returns': documents that have allowed the Israeli government to send refugees back to third countries, mainly Rwanda and Uganda, in return for cash. These procedures have not guaranteed that refugees are protected against being sent back to their countries of origin, or their basic rights and access to services. On the contrary, Israeli human rights organisations have collected testimony from African refugees sent back to their countries, where they have been subjected to torture, imprisonment and, in several cases, have actually been killed.

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[13] This is described as an 'open' detention camp located in the Negev desert (south Israel), as the detainees can leave the facility during the day, but must appear for roll-calls (initially, three times per day, at present only once at night). If they do not show up, they are automatically transferred to other jails nearby, such as Saharonim, a proper detention centre; Ktzi'ot, traditionally used to hold Palestinians; Sadot, which includes different buildings for education, health, teaching, sport and cultural activities; and Nachal Aviv, which consists of rows of tents.

A year later, in December 2014, the Knesset passed another amendment, Amendment V, which stated that refugees would be detained for a period of twenty months in Holot and, if they had tried to cross the border from Egypt, they would first spend three months in prison and then be transferred to Holot. Meanwhile, the border fence between Egypt and Israel was completed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and a very few African refugees were able to cross it. This meant that most of those in Holot were people who had been living in Israel for several years and had gone to the Ministry of Interior to renew their temporary stay, only to be sent directly to the 'open' detention centre (Kook Avivi, author's interview, 2016).

In contrast with these governmental policies, Israeli non-governmental and human rights organisations have played a crucial role in petitioning for refugees' rights, opposing new laws, and putting the refugee issue on the national political agenda, as well as providing essential services such as food, housing, and medical supplies. One of the major successes was a legal petition submitted by a few Israeli human rights organisations[14] to the High Court of Justice calling for the invalidation of Amendment V that was partially accepted and, consequently, the detention period in Holot was reduced from twenty to twelve months.

Since Israeli policies towards the refugees' issues have often changed in the last few years, it is difficult to give a comprehensive overview of what has happened to the majority of refugees. For some people who have been released from prison, a free one-way bus ticket to Tel Aviv has represented a new starting point in their life, albeit under very difficult conditions. Once they arrive in Tel Aviv, most of them join social

[14] For more information, see this report at the following website: http://hotline.org.il/en/press/the-government-is-continuing-to-ignore-and-mock-the-high-court-of-justice/

networks, mainly based on common national origins, to get assistance with essentials such as clothing and food. Later on, they usually start looking for other basic priorities to improve their lives, such as a job, a house, and an education (in particular, the study of Hebrew and English) and health services.

Under these circumstances, Sudanese and Eritreans have achieved some kind of temporary protection in the form of a conditional release visa, called the 2A5[15], which they receive automatically, without any review of their asylum claim, and which they must renew every three months. Until November 2010, the Israeli government did not prosecute employers who hired refugees, but from then on, after a new law determined that this conditional release visa was not a work permit, it has become more complicated to find work (Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen, 2011, p. 14). This unstable status has discouraged refugees from remaining in Israel, and, at the same time, it has made refugees' work conditions much more difficult. Some protection against deportation has been afforded by this conditional release visa, but no additional rights have been granted to the refugees.

At the institutional level, these governmental policies can be read as an attempt to control the African refugee community, but they can also be considered as a way of avoiding long-term solutions. This approach, also described as 'chaotic bureaucratic ambiguity' (Afeef, 2009, p. 11) and 'governmental unruliness' (Willen, 2010), is being perpetuated in the strategy currently used by the Israeli government.

Moreover, as will be explained in the next section, at a civil society level, the issue of refugees has been mostly been dealt with by NGOs, human right organisations,

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[15] This status is based on the 2008 UNHCR recommendation calling for Eritreans' group protection as the majority of them can be included in the Refugee Convention definitions (Müller 2015, 9).

individual volunteers and political activists. From the very first waves of African refugees, they have primarily addressed refugees' basic needs, such as food, clothing and medical services. Although these forms of aid and solidarity campaigns were quite effective at the very beginning, the way they have sought to include African refugees in Israeli public debate and society has been problematic. As Haim Yacoby (2009), illustrates, the so-called 'NGOisation of human rights' has been one clear aspect of this phenomenon, and has particularly affected the ability of African refugees to organise themselves autonomously, and their relationship with Israeli human rights organisations and activists.

Voices and stories from African refugees together with Israeli activists

Throughout these legislative and political events, demonstrating the lack of a legal status for refugees in Israel, the everyday life of African refugees has become even more complex, not only within 'open' camps and prisons, but also inside the major Israeli cities. African refugees attempted to organise themselves from the outset and sought to play an active role within Israeli society, so they could emerge as independent actors able to struggle for their own rights and causes. In addition, several Israeli NGOs, human rights organisations, and student groups (especially from Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva) have challenged governmental restrictions and non-policies regarding refugees, while offering them some of the social services the state should be providing.

The most successful political mobilisation organised by African refugees occurred at the end of 2013 and early 2014, when thousands of refugees marched out of the 'open' camp in Holot towards the Knesset in Jerusalem (African Refugee Development Centre, 2015). Here, they directly addressed the government, and demanded to be granted asylum. The march was largely initiated by desperate Sudanese refugees who, having thought they were being released from the Saharonim prison to join their relatives and friends, were actually sent to the 'open' camp in Holot. These became known as the 'Marches for Freedom', and quickly spread across the country as an alternative way of struggling against the Israeli government as well as resisting everyday discriminations. Despite being one of the least visible segments of Israeli society, African refugees succeeded in becoming the most talked-about subject during the peak of their demonstrations.

What started in mid-December 2013, represented a turning point, in the sense that it was the first time African refugees had led and autonomously planned their own protests. These acts were also considered a first attempt at civil disobedience that has remained at the core of different forms of protest used by African refugees. This central stand was also seen as the most significant element of recent struggles in the opinion of most of the Israeli Jewish activists I interviewed during my fieldwork in summer 2016[16]. Among these was Elisheva Milikowsky, who was firstly involved in the students' group at Ben-Gurion University and then worked for human rights organisations such as ASSAF and Physicians for Human Rights, and Moran Mekamel, one of the leading figures of the Negev Refugee Center. In her words:

[16] The aim of my post-doctoral research was to focus on the main heterogeneities, challenges and struggles experienced by the most marginalised communities inside Israel in relation to the ongoing social and political protests. Specifically, I intended to explore and analyse social and political counter-narratives emerging from the most silenced actors of Israeli society. For this article, I conducted fieldwork in summer 2016, mainly in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem.

> In 2014, the protests were led by them; we only helped for technical stuff. Everything was organised by the community. In the media someone tried to represent it as left-wing, that anarchists led the protests for their interests, but it was not true, it was very much led by them (Milikowsky, 2016).
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> In the winter of 2014, I was marching with them from the first day. It was unbelievable, something that in my opinion should be written in the history books. It was a lesson how to arrange non-violent struggles. I had never seen or participated in anything like that before. It was a very hard month, also to see the reaction of Israeli society. It was a great honour to be part of it (Mekamel, 2016).

Israeli Jewish activists supported the African refugees' decisions and simply helped them in terms of logistics, and contacts with media and police, but did not take a leading role in the protests. The few Israelis who wanted to take a leading role, were quickly pushed out by the Eritreans and Sudanese. Among the protesters, every kind of decision – from sharing food to starting a new political strategy – was taken by voting: a democratic practice representing the foundation of their powerful determination to achieve their right to asylum. The majority of Israeli society thought that the Eritreans and Sudanese were incapable of planning such protests and marches by themselves, and the government and mainstream media started suggesting they were fomented by left-wing activists, trying to use the African refugees to further their own agenda.

In the meantime, as several interviewees told me, many Israeli Jewish activists working with refugees were being monitored by the police, and a few of them were interrogated. This tense atmosphere was neither new nor unexpected, in view of the increased violence against African refugees and other marginalised groups inside Israel. In response to the higher influx of refugees, and encouraged by the government's exclusionary discourse, violence against African refugees became more frequent and extreme through assaults, stabbings, arson, and shootings, with the aim of creating a constant climate of fear among these communities. As a result, there was a widespread mobilisation of populist xenophobia, legitimised within Israel by the daily implementation of anti-refugee practices (Duman, 2015).

Although the various forms of protest and struggle employed by African refugees – from marches to hunger and labour strikes – did not evolve into more organised and formal political movements, they did attract public attention and raise awareness of their problem, both inside Israel and abroad. Ultimately, they did not have a lasting impact, and a profound sense of disillusionment set in among the African refugee community, leading many to accept being sent to third countries.

One of the main problems with these waves of actions, especially among the leading figures, was the expectation that they would produce immediate results, which they did not. Most of these protests ended violently due to physical and psychological pressures, and in several cases the government arrested and deported the community leaders, who were also the best integrated, could speak good Hebrew, and had jobs. This government strategy aimed to break the unity of Eritreans and Sudanese in their common struggle, and to weaken each community (Kook Avivi, author's interview, 2016).

Another controversial issue has been the role of the Israeli left-wing regarding this question, particularly the Zionist Left[17]. Only a few members of parliament have shown

[17] The Zionist Left, along with what has been defined as the 'Israeli peace camp', has historically represented the Israeli Jewish mainstream left-wing supporting the 'two-state' solution with the creation of a viable, independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. More recently, it has lost its internal legitimacy especially in the aftermath of the 2015 legislative elections.

an interested in the African refugees' struggle, mainly from the Meretz Party[18] and Hadash[19], while the Labour Party has remained rather ambivalent. It has never become a core issue within the Israeli left-wing, which has continued to spend most of its time and energy opposing the ongoing military occupation and expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people. This has drawn serious criticism from a few Israeli leftist activists who, in contrast, have engaged with the African refugees' struggle. They have called for the creation of a 'huge democratic block of the Left', consisting of the Arab List, the Meretz Party, and part of the Labour Party, to work together on human rights issues (Shtayim, author's interview, 2016).

As the place in Israel where the daily reality and conflicts of African refugees were most visible, south Tel Aviv soon became the focus of protests, and most initiatives to show solidarity with refugees, emanated from Levinsky Park, close to the Central Bus Station. I conducted most of my fieldwork in this peculiar context, where refugees shared the same marginalised living conditions as other underprivileged communities, particularly the Mizrahi population[20]. The situation in south Tel Aviv (mainly in the poorest areas such as Shapira, Neve Sha'anan and Levinsky) was difficult and tense, not

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[18] Although in the 1990s it took a central position within the Zionist left-wing, since the political elections in 2015 it has been crushed by the migration of the majority of its supporters to either the Zionist Union or to the Joint List.

[19] Founded in 1977, the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality united Jews and Palestinians with the aim of reaching peace, equality, democracy and worker's rights. In the 2015 elections, it joined a new coalition called the 'Joint List', along with the United Arab List, the National Democratic Assembly (Balad) and the Arab Movement for Renewal (Ta'al).

[20] The division of Tel Aviv is not just geographical, it is related to internal ethnic and class conflicts: residents of north Tel Aviv (also called the 'White City', due to UNESCO's nomination of its collection of Bauhaus-inspired architecture as a World Cultural Heritage site) are usually upper-middle class Ashkenazi, while, in south Tel Aviv (the most impoverished part of the capital, labelled the 'Black City', in juxtaposition to the 'White City') the population is historically represented by Mizrahim, living under hard conditions of poverty and marginalisation. The relationship between ethnic cleavages and class stratification is at the core of Israeli society and its internal issues. On this topic, see: *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa* (Rotbard, 2005).

just because of the refugees' arrival, but due to a lack of infrastructure and services arising from a complete absence of socio-economic policies to improve these neighbourhoods.

At the same time, at the grassroots level, there were a few examples of cooperation between the local population, the African refugee community and Israeli activists, who have attempted to construct a new discourse to address the forms of oppression and poverty they all face in the area. Successful initiatives have been mainly led by *Ahoti* (Sister) – for Women in Israel. This is a Mizrahi feminist organisation that promotes social and economic justice by starting from a feminist perspective, and deals with the interconnection of ethnic, national, social, class and gender narrative identities. Mizrahi women, along with Ethiopians, Palestinians, Bedouins, migrant workers, refugees and other marginalised communities have all worked together to change the current political, cultural, and economic cleavages within Israeli society[21].

Other grassroots initiatives have taken a different approach, the best-known of which is 'Levinsky Soup' (*Marak Levinsky* in Hebrew), in which volunteers distribute food to refugees. Combining home cooking by project volunteers with collections from restaurants and bakeries, it served up to 850 meals in a single evening, and also provided clothing for hundreds of refugees. As Yigal Shtaym, the chief instigator of the project, told me:

> In 2012, the situation of African refugees became a disaster, there was a moment when I was very aware I had to do something, and I think it was a part of the Occupy Tel Aviv movement. That was the atmosphere that helped me. We survive for a year and half, giving supper in Levinsky Park, with no

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[21] For further information on their role, aims and activities see the following website http://www.achoti.org.il/?page_id=414

> money, I think it was the best meal in town for a long time. It happened because it was under my eyes, it was here (Shtaym, 2016).

This, and similar initiatives, have led to claims that formal political processes are not always the best way to achieve social change, or to empower citizens to stand up and react to dramatic events, but this approach has also been questioned, as it has not directly challenged power structures or affected current policies. Although immediate humanitarian needs of housing, food and health care, have been provided by a few spontaneous groups, and human rights organisations have played a significant role, especially during peaks in migration, this has been not enough in the long term. The arrival of refugees has also caused further tension between human rights organisations and the local population. In particular, established residents, mostly Mizrahi, have felt excluded from decision making processes by such organisations regarding African refugees in their own neighbourhoods. This ongoing deadlock is still significant, as Anat Ovadia-Rosner explained:

> Nowadays, the stereotype of NGOs / human rights organisations is related to the fact that common people think that organisations like us represent the elite from north Tel Aviv. It's not true, but it's a stigma. I do not want to be portrayed as an enemy, as a rival of people from south Tel Aviv. Our common enemy is the policy of the government. The struggle here is against the government. We should have a common struggle (Ovadia-Rosner, 2016).

Conclusion

The current legislation was devised to make African refugees' lives miserable and desperate, and consequently, coerce them to accept the terrible conditions of 'voluntary return', and leave the country. If African refugees see no future for themselves in Israel, they have no reason to remain, even though it is more dangerous to go to third countries or, as it has often happened, to their places of origin. In a few cases, refugees who have decided to remain have started to focus on the situation in their homeland, by sending money to the IDP (internally displaced people) camps, organising action against their regimes, or supporting rebel groups. By trying to change politics in their countries of origin from outside, they have had to establish connections with other diaspora communities, mainly in Europe and the United States.

Looking at the Israeli Jewish side, the issues of responsibility and awareness were central to my interviews with Israeli activists, as many constantly face the rhetorical question: "Why don't you help Jewish people?". This reflects current Israeli society in which patriotic feelings are stronger than ever, and continue to feed a perpetual sense of victimhood, rooted in the trauma of the Holocaust, but regenerated to provoke constant conflict among most Jewish people.

Most Jewish citizens of Israel fear non-Jews, and so-called 'Others' in general, anyone with a different background or history, mainly including the Palestinians and more recently African refugees. In contrast, Israeli Jewish activists, who have been involved in diverse forms of grassroots struggles and protest, in solidarity with the country's most underprivileged communities, have described Israel as a place where everybody is a refugee, which should be open to receiving further refugees, since being a refugee is part of their own story. The fact that most Jews are descendants of refugees was another key issue in my interviews:

> When I met refugees and understood how Israel treated them, I started thinking about other levels of problematic issues inside Israel, about the military occupation, and deeper about the essence of being here. It enabled me to see how the government controls everything, from the military occupation to the social level, how people treat other people, about racism, about controlling power. For me everything is very connected, everything comes together. For most Israeli people being a Jewish state means you cannot help refugees who are not Jews. For me it is the opposite. A Jewish state should be the first state to accept refugees (Milikowsky, 2016).

Accordingly, for many of my interviewees, working with African refugees has also meant working with the Israeli public, and trying to change the reality from within. In order to raise awareness about these issues among Israelis, and to create bridges between people, Israeli activists have worked with African refugees to organise formal and informal events, such as academic lectures, guided tours of Holot, and specific initiatives with women and children refugees, and have collaborated with universities (Mekamel, author's interview, 2016). Although many of these Israeli Jewish activists have recognised their own actions to be political activism, they are also aware that Israeli society is still largely afraid of overtly playing an active role in this change.

This has been underlined by the way that the discourse and practices used towards the Palestinians have been reproduced in recent years, in relation to African refugees. In depicting them as a dangerous and existential threat, the government, supported by mainstream media and right-wing parties, has stirred up a more generalised panic within the country. Ethnicity, race, gender and class have continued to be prevalent factors in fragmenting society, and instigating exclusionary responses.

Israeli governments, during various historical moments and a series of political coalitions have consistently employed similar strategies and policies to oppress the poorest and most marginalised, from the *Mizrahim* to Palestinians, and from African refugees to Bedouins. This 'copy-paste' approach has always worked, it has never failed (Kook Avivi, author's interview, 2016). Against this background, Israel, a country established by refugees, still refuses to adopt a coherent asylum policy, or take responsibility for refugees, from the Palestinian *Nakba* to today's Sudanese and Eritrean refugees. Indeed, a comprehensive resolution of the asylum question would mean reintroducing the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees into the political discourse, and deciding which of two roads to take: continuing dominant exclusionary and racist policies, or listening to the heterogenous voices of refugees, and taking a broader view that recognises their claims to global human rights.

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