

# ISRAEL

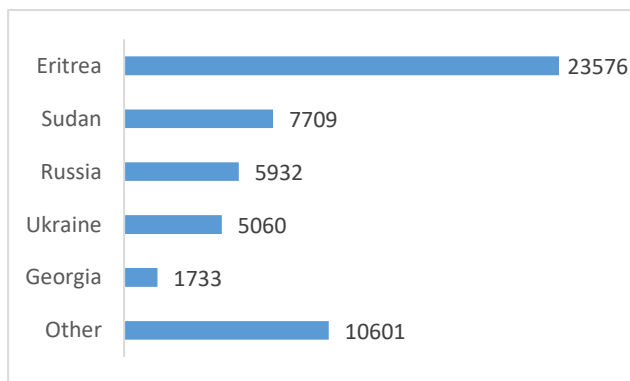
August 2020

Israel is a State Party to the *1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and its *1967 Protocol*, but has yet to adopt national refugee legislation. Over the last 15 years, some 80,000 persons have sought asylum in the country, however less than 1 per cent were granted refugee status or other forms of protection.

Asylum-seekers, particularly those from Eritrea and Sudan who are treated differently because of their irregular entry, have had to contend with significant restrictions and impediments. Consequently, most of their essential social, economic and psychosocial needs remain unmet after living in the country informally for over ten years.

UNHCR's main focus of work in Israel in recent years has been to promote and support qualitative improvements to the national asylum system and the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers in accordance with international refugee and human rights law principles and standards.

## POPULATION OF CONCERN (as of 31/12/19)



**Total: 54,611** (plus an estimated 8,500 children)

## Numbers by status

- Refugees: 65
- Humanitarian status: 1,724
- Asylum-seekers: 52,822

## UNHCR PRESENCE IN ISRAEL

**Staff:** 16 national staff  
5 affiliate workforce members  
2 international staff

**Offices:** 1



## Working with Partners

The Government of Israel is UNHCR's key partner in its mission to ensure the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in accordance with international standards. UNHCR works collaboratively with various Government ministries, particularly those of the Interior, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Welfare and Health. UNHCR has also established constructive working relations and mutual co-operation with relevant Parliamentary committees, resident diplomatic missions, and other national stakeholders.

UNHCR maintains strong links with local civil society organizations and community-based associations. At present, UNHCR has funding-based partnership arrangements with nine NGOs involved in implementing projects in the areas of education, health, child protection, psychosocial counselling and support, community outreach, vocational training, working conditions, and legal assistance and representation.

## COVID-19

UNHCR's population of concern - particularly the 32,000 asylum-seekers from Eritrea and Sudan who remain in a social and legal limbo for more than a decade - have been greatly affected by this crisis. Their situation was already dire prior to the pandemic, and rapidly deteriorated as the health crisis turned into an acute economic crisis. UNHCR estimates that at least 50 per cent of persons of concern are not able to meet their basic needs as an indirect result of COVID-19. There has also been a spike in psychological distress arising from the loss of income, lack of opportunities, and social isolation.

The Government has taken certain measures towards the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers into national COVID-19 preparedness and response with respect to health services, and has been providing limited support to relief programmes for the most vulnerable. UNHCR and its partners have, for their part, employed various schemes to supplement these programmes, whether through protection services, psychosocial counselling, cash assistance, or outreach and awareness-raising activities.

## Main UNHCR Activities

### Protection

- UNHCR **promotes and monitors respect for refugee rights** and the standards of treatment of asylum-seekers, particularly as regards access to asylum procedures and fair adjudication of their claims, access to basic services, freedom of movement and security of residence.
- UNHCR provides **technical assistance, legal advice and other forms of support** to assist local authorities in strengthening national refugee status determination (RSD) procedures to ensure quality decision-making. In 2019, the authorities requested UNHCR's assistance in the reform of their RSD system. In response, UNHCR retained the services of an international consultant who, following a two-month study and field mission, provided a report accompanied by a set of recommendations that have been presented to the authorities.
- **Detention monitoring** is an important part of UNHCR's work and cooperation with the Israeli authorities. In 2019 and 2020, the number of detained asylum-seekers has been at its lowest level in over a decade. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, UNHCR and its partners have successfully advocated for the release of the majority of detainees.
- UNHCR plans and implements various **capacity-building and professional development programmes** for a wide-range of stakeholders, including government officials, judges, adjudicators, legal practitioners, learning institutes, community-based organizations, and the media.
- **Judicial engagement:** In the exercise of UNHCR's supervisory authority, the Office engages with the judiciary and the legal profession to advance the progressive development of jurisprudence as well as

the consistent interpretation and application of the 1951 Convention and other related international instruments. One recent example in this area is the landmark decision by Israel's High Court of Justice on a case that UNHCR provided a legal opinion on. It concerned a law passed in 2017 requiring a compulsory 20 per cent deduction from the monthly salaries of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers as a measure to induce their departure from the country. The High Court found the legislation unconstitutional and ordered the Government to return the 20 per cent deductions to all affected persons, most of whom have now received their refund.

## Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV)

- It is estimated that among the refugee and asylum-seeker population in Israel, there are around 4,000 survivors of torture, SGBV and enslavement at the hands of traffickers in the Sinai region. A State-run rehabilitation programme for victims of trafficking exists, but support under the programme is available for only one year. Furthermore, very few survivors of SGBV and torture in the Sinai have been accepted under the programme, given the restrictive criteria for recognition as a victim of trafficking under relevant national legislation.
- UNHCR works within a multi-stakeholder partnership framework to ensure [SGBV prevention, risk mitigation and response intervention for survivors](#). SGBV sensitization and awareness-raising, capacity development, and strengthening multisectoral coordinated response are the key elements of UNHCR's work in addressing domestic violence, the vulnerabilities of children to SGBV (in particular sexual exploitation, abuse or violence), resort to harmful coping mechanisms (including survival sex) and the protection needs of LGBTI persons of concern subjected to discrimination, stigma or violence.
- A [multi-stakeholder SGBV forum](#), led by UNHCR, provides a platform for NGOs, community leaders and government representatives to regularly share information and discuss response strategies and advocacy work on SGBV related issues. Further, the Office cooperates closely with its partners to ensure adequate outreach activities to increase awareness, provide psychosocial counselling and improve knowledge among refugees and asylum-seekers on the prevention of and response to SGBV. As part of its comprehensive protection and solutions strategy, UNHCR has also begun implementing a [Cash-based Intervention \(CBI\) programme](#) for the most vulnerable persons of concern, including SGBV survivors.
- Incidents of domestic violence against women and children of concern are on the rise in Israel. [UNHCR works closely with community leaders, women's groups and other partners](#) to address the problem through a mix of interventions, including legal advice and assistance, psychosocial counselling, financial assistance, etc. As part of these efforts, the Office, in cooperation with community members, has prepared a *Handbook on the Prevention of and Response to Domestic Violence*.
- There is a growing problem of sex work among persons of concern, usually as a means for survival. It is estimated that [5 per cent of female asylum-seekers are involved in survival sex](#), most of them single mothers. This practice often exposes children of sex workers to explicit adult content and potential sexual abuse.
- UNHCR works closely with NGOs providing services to asylum-seeking women involved in survival sex and supports the implementation of strategic interventions aimed at enhancing their self-reliance by helping to develop and improve their employment skills. This vulnerable population of concern is also included in UNHCR's cash-based interventions (CBI). With enhanced outreach to the communities of concern, UNHCR has also contributed to the [SPEAK UP](#) and [No Excuse/Zero Tolerance](#) campaigns, as well as other activities relating to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). UNHCR continues to strengthen its outreach and collaboration with LGBTI organisations and NGOs.

## Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion

- Advocacy for [improving livelihoods through economic inclusion and participation](#) has been a key component of UNHCR's strategy for achieving protection and solutions outcome for persons of concern. Efforts have focused on promoting the right to employment and work-place protections, combatting labour exploitation and abuse, and abolishing the salary deposit system (compulsory deduction of 20 per cent of monthly income) that has negatively affected thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers.
- Asylum-seekers are generally employed in low-skilled, manual jobs at the bottom of the pay scale. There are no career services offered to discuss their interests, abilities or job prospects and provide them with an understanding of the labour market and the socioeconomic landscape. UNHCR and its partners seek to fill some of these gaps and provide vocational and language training programmes linked to job placement.
- The Office also supports the [participation of refugee women in language and vocational training programmes](#) by planning classes and trainings to suit their needs, with the provision of childcare arrangements.

## Cash-Based Interventions



In April 2020, UNHCR Israel embarked on a CBI programme budgeted at USD 600,000 to [mitigate the effects of COVID-19](#) for the most vulnerable populations of concern, namely women engaged in survival sex, female victims of domestic abuse, victims of torture and human trafficking, LGBTI individuals, persons with chronic illnesses, and victims of child abuse. During the first month of the programme, 232 households (569 adults and children) received multi-purpose cash grants. As a necessary complement to financial assistance, beneficiaries also receive psychosocial counselling and support from a UNHCR partner specializing in mental health and well-being. Even before the pandemic, much of the population was living from hand to mouth, with little stability or certainty regarding their future. The resilience of both community and family structures were observed to be in decline, and mental distress on the rise.

## Child Protection and Education

- Israel has a [well-established child protection system](#), and UNHCR's main role in this area is advocating for the system's accessibility to refugee and asylum-seeking children. There are approximately 8,500 children of asylum-seekers, the majority born in Israel. UNHCR works with education, social services, and health authorities and local organisations to ensure their protection and care.
- Through its emphasis on community-based protection work, [UNHCR seeks to support and strengthen the protective capacity of families and communities](#) as the primary duty-bearers when it comes to the protection of vulnerable children. In this respect, the priority areas of work include identification of protection concerns and vulnerable or at risk children; awareness-raising on the rights of children and child protection; prevention of and effective response to child SGBV; informing communities of available services and referral of children and their families to those services; psychosocial and emotional support to vulnerable children; dispute mediation and resolution in areas such as family or custody issues; and support to learning life skills and good-parenting.

- Education in Israel is compulsory and free for children aged 3 - 17 years, regardless of nationality or legal status. While all children over the age of three have access to public education, most attend segregated schools and kindergartens. Early childhood education is the most concerning as there is no state-funded education for children under 3 years, and current subsidies are available only to Israeli citizens. Most persons of concern cannot afford to place their children in private day-care centres and therefore use improvised, below-standard child-care arrangements with other foreigners. Similarly, access to state-sponsored vocational training, further learning and higher education remains exceedingly limited as foreigners remain outside the national education system.
- There are increasing numbers of children with developmental issues and other specific needs, and UNHCR assists schools in carrying out early identification and diagnosis. Since poverty is a key factor affecting children's access to education, UNHCR's CBI programme targets single mothers as one of the primary beneficiary groups. UNHCR also supports, through partner NGOs, the provision of non-formal education, including home learning and extracurricular activities, psychosocial support and education materials and supplies. UNHCR has also been supporting child empowerment and self-defence programs.
- During the COVID-19 crisis, UNHCR collaborates with the psycho-educational services of several municipalities to provide parental guidance to persons of concern using online platforms.

## Durable Solutions

- Finding solutions that enable refugees and asylum-seekers to live their lives in dignity and peace has been and remains the greatest challenge. Many cannot return home because of continued conflict, instability and persecution, and opportunities for local integration remain limited due to restrictive national policies. Under these circumstances, UNHCR Israel employs resettlement both as an instrument of international protection and as a durable solution, prioritizing survivors of torture or SGBV, serious medical cases, severely traumatized refugees who require specialized treatment unavailable to them in Israel, and LGBTI individuals.
- Between 2015 – 2020, UNHCR resettled over 750 refugees. The needs however remain far greater than the resettlement places available to the Office. In 2019, just 188 refugees departed from Israel to a total of eight resettlement countries.
- Due to the limited resettlement opportunities, UNHCR further supports refugees' pursuit of complementary pathways for admission to third countries, mostly through the Canadian private sponsorship programme, family reunification and humanitarian visas. In 2019, UNHCR supported the application of 450 refugees for admission under the Canada private sponsorship programme.

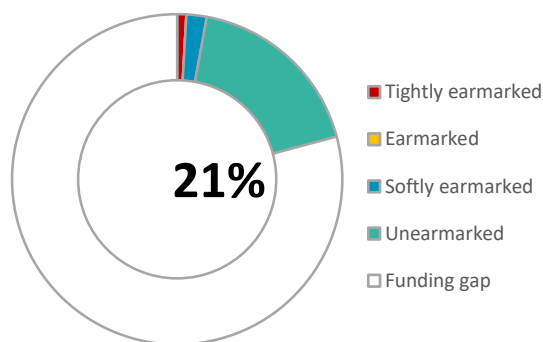
## Community Empowerment

- UNHCR Israel supports persons of concern to play an active role in the decisions affecting their livelihoods and well-being, encouraging them to become driver for change within their communities. In this respect, the Office has strengthened its community outreach and engagement activities, working closely with its partners and refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR regularly supports the involvement of community leaders and youth representatives - as well as engaging and lending a voice to women - for outreach to communities to better identify and monitor protection trends.
- Participatory assessments, focus group discussions and information sessions assist UNHCR with ongoing monitoring of the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers to identify possible solutions. During the onset of COVID-19, UNHCR established a network of community members who have assisted in sharing and disseminating health information in multiple languages. This network is also being used to receive updates from the different communities countrywide and to assist with identification and referrals of vulnerable individuals to UNHCR and partner organizations, municipality services, etc.

- One major constraint has been individuals' lack of time, ability, or resources for effective community engagement. In this regard, UNHCR is launching a [Refugee Outreach Volunteer programme](#) where volunteers will receive a small stipend for their service and contributions. As a vital communication channel between populations of concern and UNHCR, the outreach volunteers not only disseminate information, provide psychosocial support and refer persons to specialized services, but they also notify UNHCR of important issues concerning their communities.

## Funding in 2019 (as of 22 July 2020)

USD 6.0 M requested for the Israel operation in 2020



### Donors

Total recorded contributions for the operation amount to **USD 1.25 million** in 2020.

**UNHCR Israel is grateful for the support of:**

[UN Programme on HIV/AIDS](#)

**Special thanks to the major donors for unearmarked funds in 2020:**

Sweden 76.4 million | Norway 41.4 million | Private donors Spain 39.8 million | Netherlands 36.1 million | Denmark 34.6 million | United Kingdom 31.7 million | Germany 25.9 million | Private donors Republic of Korea 20.5 million | Switzerland 16.4 million | France 14 million | Private donors Japan 12 million

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