

# The Story of Yaser Abdulla Darfuri Asylum Seeker Who Was Tortured in the Sinai Desert Only to Face Imprisonment in Israel and a Life Without Refugee Status

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**Abstract** The 33,000 African asylum seekers currently residing in Israel face a lack of legal status and receive no services from the state. The entire population is under pressure but those who have faced torture in the Sinai desert en route to Israel struggle with additional problems and have nowhere to turn for help. The story of Yaser Abdulla – an asylum seeker from Darfur who was tortured by Bedouin traffickers in the Sinai – illuminates the circumstances that pushed asylum seekers from their home, what they encounter on their way, and the situation they grapple with inside of Israel.

**Keywords** African asylum seekers. Torture. Sinai. Israel.

At the time of writing, in 2019, there are currently some 33,000 asylum seekers in Israel; more than 90 percent are from Eritrea and Sudan.

At the peak of migration to Israel, there were approximately 60,000 asylum seekers in the country. But the Israeli government put this population under tremendous pressure through a number of draconian measures. Upon entering the country, asylum seekers were detained and held in prison, without

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The following pages tell the story of Yaser Abdulla and are taken from my book *The Unchosen: The Lives of Israel's New Others*, published in 2017 by Pluto Press (courtesy of).



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charge or trial, for an arbitrary period ranging from weeks to over a year. When they were released from jail, most asylum seekers received 'conditional release' visas, which must be renewed often and which stipulate that they cannot work legally. This essentially forces African asylum seekers onto the underground economy where they face labor exploitation; not only are asylum seekers unable to work legally, they are not eligible for basic services like healthcare except under emergency circumstances. Those who are suffering from mental health issues stemming from the trauma they experienced in their home countries or on their way to Israel - as in the case with those who were raped and/or tortured in the Sinai desert - do not have access to mental health services.

Israeli officials have also failed to conduct comprehensive reviews of applications for asylum, summarily rejecting most requests. Government officials often claim that asylum seekers are "work migrants". They have also turned public opinion against asylum seekers and have engaged in incitement. In 2012, after an Israeli politician called asylum seekers "cancer in our body", a race riot broke out and dozens were injured. Asylum seekers have also been targeted in numerous acts of violence.

Despite the fact that they do not receive work visas or any sort of benefits from the state, and despite the fact that the wages they receive for working menial jobs on the underground economy are very low, the "Deposit Law" requires asylum seekers' employers to put 20 percent of their pay into an account asylum seekers can only access when they leave the country. Although the law has been poorly enforced, it is one of many ways that the Israeli government has pursued a policy of deterrence to discourage asylum seekers from staying in the country. Beginning in 2013, in an attempt to get asylum seekers to self-deport, Israeli officials told asylum seekers they could choose between "voluntary departure" to a third country - Rwanda or Uganda - or imprisonment. To that end, Holot Detention Center was opened in December of 2013. While the facility was closed in March of 2018, the asylum seekers remaining in Israel are still under stress as they still lack legal status and as politicians like Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked continue to discuss deporting them "voluntarily or by coercion".<sup>1</sup>

So while international law and Israel's obligations as a signatory to different human rights treaties effectively protect asylum seekers from outright deportation to Sudan and Eritrea - at least for now - they live in perpetual legal limbo and their futures remain uncertain.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Yaron, "Israeli Justice Minister Seeks New Destination for Deporting Asylum Seekers", *Haaretz*, 3 April 2019. URL <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israeli-justice-minister-seeks-new-destination-for-deporting-asylum-seekers-1.7084343> (2019-10-18).

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As the situation inside Israel devolved, so was the journey to the Jewish state becoming increasingly dangerous. It wasn't just hot returns and Egyptian soldiers. In 2009, human rights organizations had begun to encounter women who had been raped by their Bedouin smugglers in the Sinai; by 2010, Bedouin traffickers had made torture camps in the Sinai, where they held asylum seekers for ransom. Approximately 7,000 victims had entered Israel by 2012, when the newly completed fence on the Egyptian border more or less stopped the flow of Africans into the country.

While many had fallen into their torturers hands on their way to Israel, there were those who had never intended to go to the Jewish state, who had been kidnapped from refugee camps in Eastern Sudan. The Sudanese and Egyptian police and the military of both countries also facilitated these crimes by “hand[ing] victims over to traffickers in police stations, turn[ing] a blind eye at checkpoints, and return[ing] escaped trafficking victims to traffickers”, Human Rights Watch reported.<sup>2</sup> The kidnappers took them to the Sinai where they were held in chains. Victims were forced to call their families so that their loved ones could hear their cries as they were tortured. The Bedouin would then demand ransom, the price for freedom sometimes topping 30,000 USD. Back home, the panicked and poverty-stricken families sold everything; Eritreans the world over pitched in to help their countrymen. But paying didn't always secure release – sometimes the traffickers sold their human goods to other kidnappers who would then hold the victim for yet another ransom. Occasionally, men were sexually assaulted; women and girls were usually gang raped, some arrived in Israel pregnant.

While most victims were Eritrean, some were Sudanese. Yaser Abdulla was among the latter. He'd been held in a Sinai torture camp for two months before arriving in Israel in October of 2011 at the age of 26.

The events that brought Abdulla to south Tel Aviv, where I interviewed him, began in 1991. Government militias attacked his village in Darfur when he was just six years old. Abdulla and his immediate family fled to Nyala City in south Darfur but his beloved grandfather stayed put. Then the genocide began in 2003. “There was a group of rebels, Darfurian who helped the people”, Abdulla said. He joined when he was 19.

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**2** Gerry Simpson, “‘I Wanted to Lie Down and Die’: Trafficking and Torture of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt”, *Human Rights Watch*, 11 February 2014. URL <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/11/i-wanted-lie-down-and-die/trafficking-and-torture-eritreans-sudan-and-egypt> (2019-10-18).

He returned, eventually, to Nyala City to study but the Sudanese government caught up with him and he was jailed, for having fought against Bashir's militias. The head of his village stepped in on his behalf and, somehow, persuaded officials that Abdulla was a student, just a student, not a rebel. He was released. Feeling unsafe in Nyala City, Abdulla went on to Khartoum, where he hoped to study law. But he was arrested again; this time he was held for two months; this time it was a human rights organization that came to his aid. And then he moved on again and was arrested again. It was time, he realized, to leave Sudan.

Abdulla made his way to Cairo. But he didn't "see [it] so safe" because of the diplomatic relations between Sudan and Egypt. The Egyptians, he explained, "were deporting people to Sudan". So, Abdulla determined to keep moving. He could go to Libya and from there he could try to make the treacherous journey to Europe. Or, he could go to Israel.

In Cairo, he met a Bedouin who said he could smuggle him through the Sinai to Israel for 3,000 USD. Once they were in the desert, however, the man demanded an additional 8,000 USD, which Abdulla didn't have. He found himself in some sort of a building - he lacked the words to describe it, not because his English was poor but, rather, because language began to fail him as he revisited the experience. He found himself shackled to a dozen other people. Several of those people would die in the coming weeks, while they were attached to each other.

And the torture. "They shock us. They beat us" until Abdulla's forearm broke. "They're pouring, they're pouring by fire", he said, referring to the melted plastic that was dumped onto his body and dripped into his eyes. Other victims were mutilated, their fingers cut off. Their bodies used as ashtrays. They were hung upside down for hours at a time.

"And they didn't give us even water". The only sustenance the captives received, Abdulla recalled, was "at midnight, something like this, they give us yogurt, a small cup of water". Just enough to keep the asylum seekers alive. But a number of them, a number of the people Abdulla was chained to, didn't make it. "A lot of people - they died. There was no water, they died. They died when they tortured them".

"They give you a phone to call them", your family, "to make just one call. My family [was] in a refugee camp then - in Darfur there is a big refugee camp called Zam Zam - and they didn't have the money to pay so I stayed [in Sinai] two months".

Eventually, his family raised the ransom and Abdulla's captors took him to the border. The wounds on his back from the melted plastic were infected; his arm needed to be set - it was healing crooked and was painful. But he made it across.

Israeli soldiers picked him up and took him to Saharonim prison. He received medical treatment there and, while talking to the other Sudanese, realized an old friend had ended up in south Tel Aviv. Abdulla was released after a month; he and other prisoners were taken to Beer Sheva, where Israeli authorities gave them one-way tickets to the *tachana merkazit* (the Central Bus Station). “They say, ‘You are free to go to the city’... they say ‘You are free’ and it’s amazing to hear that”, he recalled.

“And then I come to Central Bus Station and I don’t know how to get out of [it]”. He laughed at the memory. The *tachana merkazit* is a cement labyrinth of hallways and ramps and bends and dead ends and stairs and escalators that lead to more hallways and ramps and stairs. It was designed to confuse - in theory, the disoriented consumer, wandering among its many stores, would end up spending more money. But today many storefronts sit empty and the Central Bus Station is just somewhere to get lost.

Once Abdulla found his way out, he went to Levinsky Park. He called his friend from Sudan, who took him in and didn’t charge him for rent and food. Abdulla was in no shape to work. He spent the next few months getting regular treatment for his burns at one of the clinics in south Tel Aviv he’d heard about from a human rights worker he met in Levinsky Park.

Healing his mind was another matter. Abdulla was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and needed treatment. But, other than the limited counseling services offered by ASSAF and the AR-DC, there was almost no help available. This was early 2012; two years later the Israeli MOH and UNHCR would open a small clinic in Jaffa for asylum seekers suffering from mental health issues. The place can only accommodate a few dozen people a week, however, and it doesn’t treat children.

As Abdulla struggled, alone, to recover from what he’d been through in Sinai, his friend gave him “money for alcohol because I couldn’t sleep. I could stay for three days without sleeping” so disturbed was he by the memories of torture and death. “So every night, he give me money for one liter of whiskey or vodka and he say, ‘This is strong, this will make you go to sleep.’ So every night I have one liter of whiskey for like four months”.

Realizing that his drinking was out of control, Abdulla quit. After six months in Israel, he felt he was ready to work. “I decided to go look for [a] job by myself. I feel like I’m not completely well but I’m well”. He went to Eilat, where many asylum seekers had found work in hotels in the past. But by this time, in 2012, it proved more difficult. And so he moved on, yet again, finding work, eventually, in Netanya; then, later, in Tel Aviv. He also joined a theatre troupe - African Israeli Stage, which included both asylum seekers and Ethiopian Jewish Israelis. Performing, Abdulla explained, keeps him present,

helping him cope with the trauma of the past as well as the uncertainty of his life in Israel. And when we met in 2015, four years after Abdulla had arrived, his future in Israel was more uncertain than ever - he faced imprisonment under the latest amendment of the Prevention of Infiltration Law.

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In the winter of 2015, Yasser Abdulla was facing time in Holot (detention center for African asylum seekers). Despite the August 2015 court ruling, the summons he'd received said he would spend 20 months in the facility. He'd gotten a private lawyer - the NGOs were overworked and, in recent years, asylum seekers in Israel have become increasingly cynical about the human rights organizations. His attorney was fighting the detention on the grounds that Abdulla had been recognized by the UN as a victim of human trafficking.

I asked Abdulla what would happen if he ended up going to Holot.

"It's a prison, eh", he said. "So prison's prison anyways".

I pushed a bit, trying to get him to describe how detention feels - he'd been in jail in Sudan and had spent a month in Saharunim upon his arrival in Israel.

"[Have] you been in prison?" he asked. "It's very bad, I cannot explain to you how prison feels".

He mentioned the discrepancy between the summons he'd received and the High Court ruling, "On paper, they gave me 20 months, but there is [a] new law that they can't hold you more than a year". He shook his head and looked down at the table, where our Styrofoam cups of tea were growing cold. Either way, he said, "It's too much".