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# Uganda Is Taking Israel's Unwanted Asylum Seekers to Get Cheaper Weapons

The Israeli government already have strong relations with their Ugandan counterparts, with Israel currently "working to introduce sophisticated agro-technology" to the country. But it is newer support to Uganda's military—weapons, training, fighter...

By Joseph Cox

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*Israeli Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar, who last week announced that he will start deporting Israel's African migrants to Uganda. (Photo [via](#))*

Earlier this month, it was reported that Israel was trying to swap Africans for arms. Or, more specifically, brokered a deal with a number of unspecified African countries that would see thousands of African refugees included in lucrative deals for Israeli weapons and military training. If you take back these annoying, resources-sapping asylum seekers, the Israelis seemed to be saying, you can buy our guns for cheap.

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The Israeli government is currently detaining thousands of African asylum seekers in desert prisons on the Egyptian border. Many of them now face being shipped off, against their will, to whichever African country will take them. Seemingly no thought has been paid to sending asylum seekers back to oppressive regimes they may have been fleeing in the first place.

It seems that a deal has now been struck, as late last week Israeli Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar announced that he would start the process of deporting migrants to Uganda.

The Israeli government already have strong relations with their Ugandan counterparts, with Israel currently "working to introduce sophisticated agro-technology" to the country. But it is newer support to Uganda's military—weapons, training, fighter jets, and possibly drones—that many suspect to be behind the country's decision to import asylum seekers from Israel.

"We're hoping to operate in the coming weeks and months in a way that will make another exit for infiltrators in the country," Sa'ar explained, "while trying to reach agreements with more countries."



*The Saharonim detention facility in the Negev desert, where African refugees are being detained. (Photo courtesy of Karin Keil from the Hotline for Migrant Workers.)*

Around 40,000 of these "infiltrators" are Eritreans, trying to escape a country with one of the worst human rights records on Earth. According to a 2012 report from the US State Department, over the past year "unlawful killings by security forces continued, as did torture, harsh prison conditions, and incommunicado detention, which sometimes resulted in death. The government continued to force persons to participate in its national service program, often for periods of indefinite duration. The government also severely restricted civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion [...] An international NGO reported that the government continued to hold five to ten thousand suspected political opponents without charge and perhaps tens of thousands of additional persons suspected of evading or deserting national service."

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These people aren't coming to Israel because they fancy upping their matzah intake or living on Palestinian land illegally; they're genuinely trying to escape persecution and find a way to survive.

One such Eritrean is Awat Ashbar, who has been living in Israel for six years. "If Israel returns me to Uganda, it's like putting a knife to my gut," he told *Haaretz*. "Uganda will send us to Eritrea. We are very afraid."



*A UN-supplied refugee camp near the border of Ethiopia, accommodating some of the thousands of Eritreans who flee across the border every year. (Photo by Dan Connell)*

And it appears that Sa'ar's eviction plan doesn't only apply to those detained in the desert camps (often on spurious charges), but also to the remaining 54,000 African asylum seekers in Israel. In what the Israeli government presumably sees as a generous handout, each migrant's flight to Uganda will be paid for, their "absorption" into society—whatever that involves—will be financed and they'll receive \$1,500 of pocket money.

The Israeli government insist that migrants put themselves forward for deportation "voluntarily." However, there have been allegations that "voluntarily", in this case, translates to something more akin to "eventually agreeing after coercion and outright pressure". Plus, if they don't jump at the chance to be shipped back to a life of persecution after a certain amount of time, they'll eventually be forced to leave against their will anyway.

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In response to the announcement, a group of NGOs – including Amnesty International Israel – said that, “For years, the Interior Ministry has spoken of an agreement with a third country to buy Israeli asylum seekers in exchange for weapons and money, and Uganda has been mentioned. But it turns out that Uganda is an unsafe country and there is no way to assure the safety of those deported there. Last March, Israel expelled an Eritrean asylum seeker to Uganda, which was quick to deny any agreement with it and expelled him immediately upon his arrival.”

Strangely, when I contacted David Apollo Kazungu—the commissioner for the Ugandan government’s Refugee Department—he told me that, “No such agreement is in place between Uganda and Israel,” and that, “Uganda fully respects and

encourages state parties to respect rights of refugees, including the principle of 'non-refoulement' and burden sharing.”



*Sigal Rozen, on the right.*

So the apparent adherence to non-refoulement—an important part of international law that aims to protect refugees from being sent back to either their country of origin or a new place altogether where their lives and freedom could be threatened—is promising. However, the denial of the entire scheme's existence by the Ugandan government is worrying, according to Sigal Rozen from the Hotline for Migrant Workers: “Since they deny the existence of an agreement and [...] the extremely poor human rights record of Uganda,” she told me, “they [the asylum seekers] will be in real danger.”

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It is unknown when the asylum seekers will be herded onto a plane headed towards their new enforced country of residence, what status—refugee or otherwise—they’ll

receive upon arrival, or even if they'll subsequently get deported back to the country they are seeking asylum from in the first place.

However, Sigal didn't sound hopeful: "If they [get] deported, then I am afraid that they will be sent back to their country of origin."

Follow Joseph on Twitter: [@josephfcox](https://twitter.com/josephfcox)

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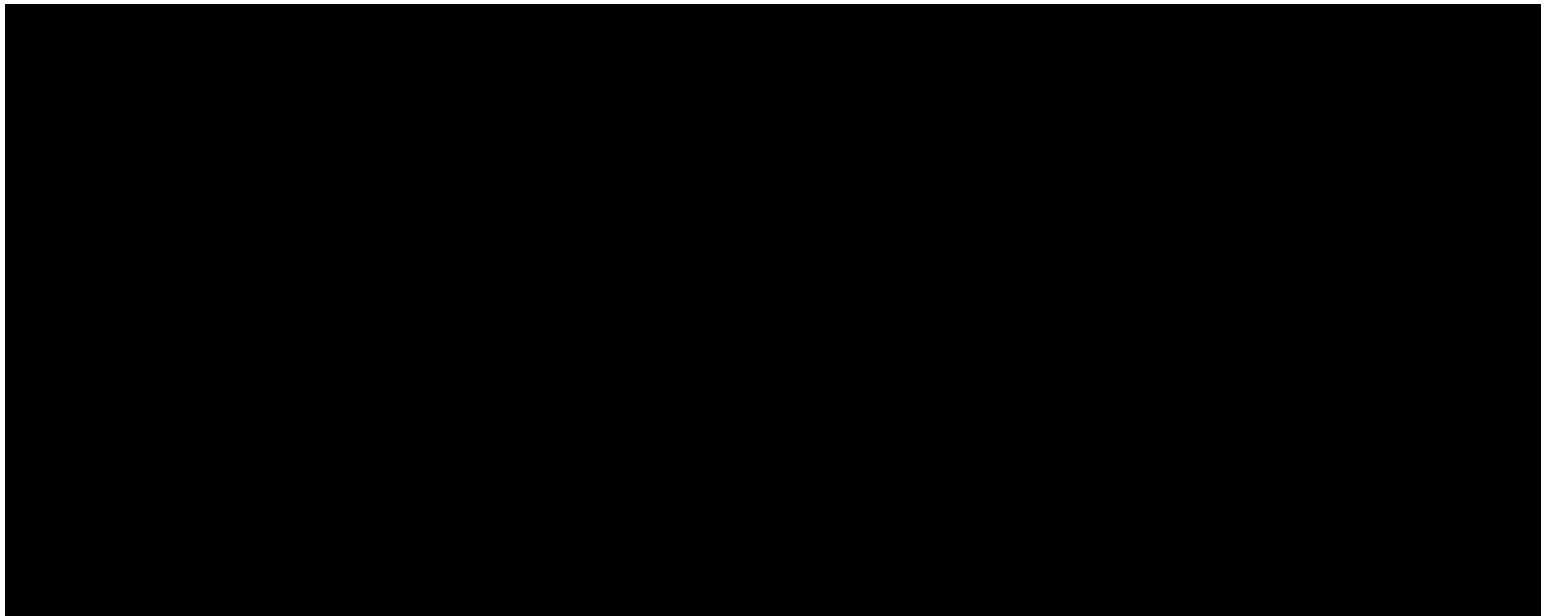
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