



The Future of Israel's 'Dreamers'

Raised and schooled in Israel, these young Africans could be sent back to a country they don't know.

This article first appeared in The Washington Post on March 6, 2018.

Alam Godin fled to Israel as a boy, escaping war in Sudan more than a decade ago with his family. His mother and four younger siblings call home a squat, gray, two-bedroom bungalow in a downtrodden section of Tel Aviv.

Now, he's among thousands of African men who could be given a choice by the Israeli government: Take \$3,500 to relocate to an unnamed "third country" — widely reported to be Uganda or Rwanda — go back to their home country, or go to jail.

Israel began handing out the first deportation orders to Africans earlier this year. The government is scheduled next month to relocate the first of 38,000 Sudanese and Eritrean migrants, who entered Israel illegally in many cases more than six years ago. Israel had said it wouldn't deport women and children — for now.

For hundreds like Godin, who have graduated from the Israeli education system, speak Hebrew and know little of their home countries, a deportation order could turn their lives upside down. They are Israel's "dreamers."

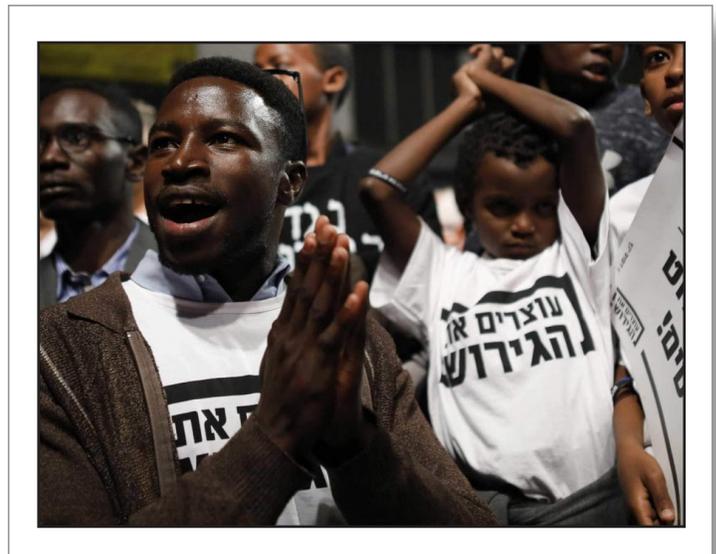
"We have to keep them," urged Eli Nechama, a Tel Aviv school principal who is campaigning on their behalf. "They will be amazing, amazing citizens here in Israel."

Nechama is spearheading a campaign to prevent deportations of graduates from Israeli schools, hoping to also secure them a permanent status in the country. There are estimated to be 5,000 Sudanese and Eritrean children in the country, and around 600 graduates.

The parallels with the immigration debate in the United States — and, in particular, the undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children now known as "dreamers" — are not lost on Nechama.

"When you ask the kids here, when they first come, what they want to be, these kids don't dream," he said. "Let them dream."

The deportation plan has prompted an acrimonious and emotional debate in Israel. The government and supporters of the plan brand the African migrants as "infiltrators" illegally in the country seeking employment rather than



Usumain Baraka (center), 23, takes part in a Feb. 24 demonstration against deportations of African migrants in Tel Aviv, Israel.

fleeing violence. They say they are burdening southern Tel Aviv.

"We do what we are required to do by law, which is to take care of those who are seen by our law as being in danger," said Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, adding those



who are not should be deported. "As wise men have taught us: 'Take care of the poor in your city before taking care of the poor in other cities.'"

Critics however, say the plan conflicts with the values of a Jewish state built by refugees fleeing persecution and that the government has not properly considered asylum requests. Holocaust survivors and pilots from the national airline are among those who have spoken out against the plan.

The Godins were among more than 60,000 Africans who crossed into the country from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula before Israel finished a 152-mile border fence, equipped with motion detectors and cameras, in 2013.

More than 20,000 Africans have already taken the option to return. But Israel says that soon it will no longer be a choice.

Godin is a soft-spoken 21-year-old, a keen basketball player and fan of the Cleveland Cavaliers. He says he'd like to study nursing but instead, at the moment, flips burgers at a fast-food restaurant. He has put his plans on hold and fears he could be handed a deportation order whenever he renews his visa. He says he'd rather be jailed than deported.

His father, who is South Sudanese, was already forced out after Israel deemed it safe enough for him to go home in 2012. He now lives in Rwanda.

Godin and his mother break down at the prospect of the family being torn apart even more. "It's not our country, Rwanda or Uganda," said Godin, who speaks near fluent English, along with Hebrew and Arabic.

His younger brother, Alan, 18, is on the cusp of graduating and facing uncertainty.

"They can't do anything to you while you are at school," said Alan, as he flicked through Katy Perry and Shakira music videos on the family television. "It's a safe place."

Israeli school. Student artwork decorates its corridors, which echo with childhood chatter in Hebrew. But while it is a government-run school, not one of its 1,300 children is Jewish. None of the Jewish families in the neighborhood chooses to send its children there.



Alam Godin, in the yellow shirt, waits in line to renew his visa in Bnei Brak, Israel, last month. Most refugees need to renew their visas every two months, and he was relieved that his was approved.

Only 42 percent of the students have legal residency in Israel.

"The rest we don't know," explains Nechama, the school's principal. "They might be deported, their parents might be arrested, their parents might run away to another city, they might go to a different country."

So in addition to Hebrew, the school teaches eight other languages, including Arabic and Tigrinya — which is spoken in Eritrea — so if the children are deported, they at least will be able to communicate.

Despite serving one of the country's poorest communities, the school's matriculation rate is over 90 percent.

Mikal Hagos, 17, from Eritrea, says she celebrates Jewish holidays, has gotten to know the country through the Israeli scouts movement known as Tzofim and wants to be a psychologist some day. But she added, "It's hard to plan."

After the deportation plans were announced in January, Nechama wrote to all 120 members of Israel's parliament, urging them to guarantee protection for graduates. Last week the Jewish Agency, the largest Jewish nonprofit organization in the world, also called on the government to grant legal status to 500 African



asylum seekers who have graduated from its education programs.

So far, the young men have no official protection, though some officials have offered verbal assurances.

“There is no decision yet about this group of children educated in schools here,” said Shlomo Mor-Yosef, director general of Israel’s population and immigration authority.



Mikal Hagos, 17, was born in Eritrea but has grown to love Israel. She wears her Israeli scouting uniform at Bialik Rogozin, her school in South Tel Aviv.

Omri Gelber-Tzur, who teaches civics at Bialik, said he sometimes worries that school cushions students too much from reality.

“Older kids say, ‘It’s a bubble, and you are practically lying to us,’” he said. “One of my students told me, ‘You are trying to build our dreams, but you are lying.’”

Only a few will go on to higher education, he said, but a clear legal status in Israel would help more.

Among those that have managed is Usumain Baraka, who came from the Darfur region of Sudan as an unaccompanied minor in 2014. He studied at a largely Jewish Israeli school before moving on to IDC Herzliya, one of Israel’s top private colleges, located on an idyllic, eucalyptus-studded campus. He dresses sharply, with a crisp

shirt poking out from the top of his knitted sweatshirt as he explains how he crammed 12 years of education into four years.

After he graduated, he wanted to serve in the Israeli army, but not being a citizen, he was prevented.

Baraka is one of around 1,000 asylum seekers from Darfur who have been given temporary group protection, but he still lacks refugee status.

“A lot of Israelis are saying, ‘Not in my name,’” he said. “It gives me hope.”

But others say they feel unwanted.

“I thought about it, when we were kids,” Godin said of serving in the army. “But there’s nothing you can give to a country that doesn’t want you here.”

He said there is little doubt in his mind that Israel’s policy is driven by racism.

“They see a black person,” he said. “They don’t see a person. People are racist. They try to show they aren’t racist, but inside they are.”

It’s a charge made by critics of the deportations — but one that Israeli officials strongly deny.

“The claim that we are sending those with black skin away and that we don’t do anything to the whites is a lie,” said Deri, the interior minister. He said that 5,200 Ukrainians and Georgians were deported last year, without relocation payments. “We don’t need to apologize to anyone,” he said.

But the language of the debate is often inflammatory. In a heated hearing at a parliamentary meeting last month, Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely described south Tel Aviv as being in the grip of “terror” because of the migrants.

South Tel Aviv is the epicenter of the fight over African migrants, home to around 15,000. It’s long been a neglected area of the city, but the influx has caused a backlash. Alam Godin and his younger siblings say they get shouted at in the street, told to “go home.”



Friends of Yemin Orde

4340 East-West Highway, Suite 202 • Bethesda, Maryland 20814 • 202-237-0286 • www.yeminorde.org

“Before it was not like this,” said Sima Shbtay, a 34-year-old taxi dispatcher working near the central bus station, where rundown high-rises with balconies crammed with washing lines and satellite dishes suggest the overcrowded conditions.

“You had Filipinos, Turkish, Romanians, but those people don’t do what the blacks do,” she said. “They have diseases; it’s dangerous. The children don’t have inoculations.”

Shbtay complained that Levinsky Park and the area around the central bus station become no-go zones after 8 p.m.

But not all residents agree they need to leave.

“We need to find a solution, but it’s not deportation,” said Rotem Levi, 35, as she walked her dogs with her partner at the park. “They need jobs, schools, rights, medicines, everything.”

Demonstrations — both for and against — have been gaining momentum. At one last month, protesters raised their hands and crossed them above their heads, as if being handcuffed.

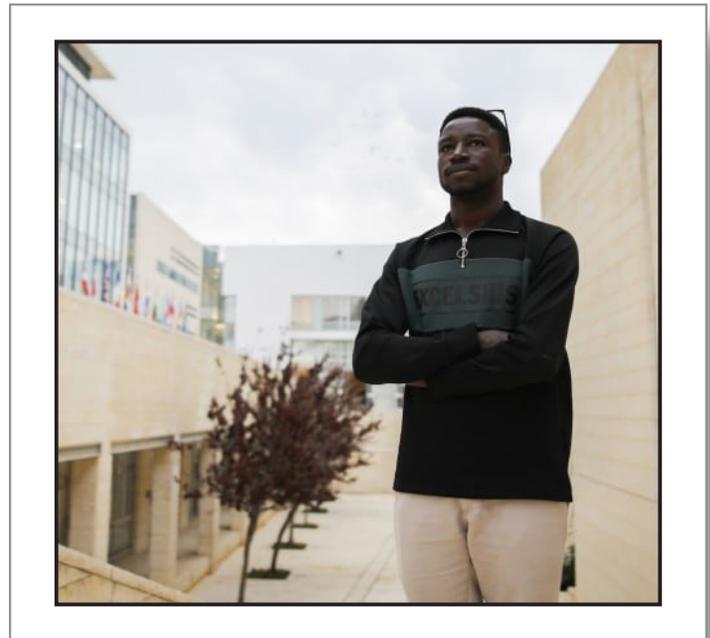
“Refugees are not for sale,” they chanted. Some wore white paint on their faces and posed the question on a signboard: “Would you deport me if I was white?”

At the very least, say Israel’s refugee advocates, the government should properly consider asylum applications.

Many of the Eritreans fled compulsory open-ended military service in their home country and say they would be jailed or worse if they return to the country, a dictatorship that the United Nations has accused of crimes against humanity. But Israel does not consider that a valid grounds for asylum.

It has accepted only 10 asylum cases from Eritrea and just one from Sudan over the past decade, out of more than 14,000 applications. That compares to an acceptance rate of more than 90 percent in Europe, according to E.U. statistics.

“They are not looking at all at the claims,” said Sigal Rozen, public policy director at the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants. “The numbers talk for themselves.”



Usumain Baraka, 23, graduated from IDC Herzliya, a top Israeli college where he studied governance, diplomacy and strategy. The refugee from Sudan hoped to join the Israeli army, but his lack of citizenship foiled that ambition.

Deri and Mor Yosef said on behalf of the government that all claims are given proper consideration.

At the immigration center last week, Godin waited in line to have his two-month visa renewed and see whether he was also handed deportation papers.

Not long before, most of the young African men who had appeared were given orders to leave within 60 days.

But on this day, deportation orders looked to have slowed. Godin returned with good news — for the moment. He was handed a new two-month visa.

“I gave him a big smile,” he said. “Maybe next month I’ll start worrying again about what’s going to happen. But for now, I’m good.”

Ruth Eglash contributed to this report from Jerusalem.

