

# Israel's Fortress State Is the Model for the UK's New Asylum Policy

In copying an Israeli scheme to ship refugees to Rwanda, Boris Johnson's government has turned to the world leader in keeping out 'undesirables'

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*There is nothing innovative or humanitarian about [Britain's](#) new policy of shipping asylum seekers, "on a one-way ticket", thousands of miles to central Africa. Nor is there anything surprising about the choice of destination: Rwanda. Boris Johnson's government has simply copied wholesale a programme established by Israel eight years ago.*

When [Israel](#) introduced the [deportation of asylum seekers to Rwanda](#) in 2014, it did so in secret, fully aware that it was breaking the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention it ratified.

When the policy came to light, Rwanda initially tried to spare Israel's blushes by [denying its involvement](#). Israel, meanwhile, falsely claimed the deportations were happening on a voluntary basis.

The British government, by contrast, [is being far more brazen](#). It has trumpeted its [similarly abusive treatment of asylum seekers](#), making a feature of the compulsion. According to reports, the British scheme will deport refugees first, then force them to apply for asylum in Rwanda. If they succeed, they can remain in Rwanda. If they fail, Rwanda can forcibly return them to the place from which they fled.

Johnson presumably hopes the policy will play well with British voters in the run-up to local elections in May, as they tire of the seemingly endless deceptions and bottomless cronyism of his ruling Conservative Party. Last week the British prime minister was among those fined for [breaking Covid lockdown rules](#) his own government set.

With the mood against Johnson souring, however, he may have been caught off-guard by the backlash. The archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, [condemned](#) the Rwanda plan in an Easter Sunday address, saying the failure to take responsibility for refugees was "the

opposite of the nature of God”.

On Tuesday night Johnson was [reported to have attacked](#) Welby and the BBC’s coverage at a meeting of Tory party backbenchers, accusing them of being “less vociferous” of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine than the government’s Rwanda scheme.

## Dangerous journey

Some are dismissing the scheme as the prime minister’s latest wheeze to deflect attention from his political troubles. But that would be to ignore a growing confidence on the British right towards treating asylum seekers inhumanely – especially those [who are not white](#). Johnson’s government has even been reticent to ride a [wave of public sympathy](#) towards those seeking sanctuary from the war in Ukraine.

The Conservative Party is amplifying deep-rooted nativist tendencies in the UK – and drawing inspiration from Israel, which has long experience of turning itself into a fortress state.

In a sign of the continuing need to pay lip service to humanitarian concerns, Johnson’s government has publicly dressed up the new asylum policy as a move to [prevent people-smugglers](#) from endangering the lives of refugees by transporting them in inflatables across the Channel from France. Dozens have died, including at least [27 people who drowned](#) in November when a single boat capsized.

But Britain’s real motive – barely disguised – is the same one that drove Israel to adopt the policy. It wants to wash its hands of its legal obligations towards refugees by outsourcing responsibility [to far poorer countries](#) whose services can be easily bought.

Bad as that is, there is an even uglier ambition. The UK understands that Rwanda, one of the most densely populated and poorest countries in Africa, is unlikely to make serious efforts to treat the refugees with dignity or resettle them. Britain’s goal is to make an example of them. The refugees’ likely mistreatment is part of the programme, serving to deter others from following in their footsteps.

Britain is trying to make clear that anyone arriving on its shores will face not a warm welcome or British justice but the very oppressive conditions from which they fled in the first place. The vagueness of the policy – and who it applies to – is the point. Why make the hugely dangerous and costly trip to the UK if you are likely to end up effectively back where you started?

Johnson is demonstrating that post-Brexit Britain has the freedom to reinvent itself as [the most hostile corner](#) of Europe to refugees.

## Dissent crushed

Rwanda is an ideal destination. Helped by western leaders like former [British Prime Minister Tony Blair](#), Rwanda has largely succeeded in whitewashing its image with western publics following the Rwandan genocide of the mid-1990s.

But most Africans are aware of Rwanda’s long-term corruption and history of human rights

abuses, which have continued since the genocide ended. Despite a simplistic narrative of those events in the West, more recent research suggests it was not just Tutsis who were victims of violence. Tutsi militias under Paul Kagame appear to have waged their own [brutal ethnic cleansing operations](#) against Hutus. Kagame has served as Rwanda's president for more than 20 years.

Officially absolved of wrongdoing, however, Kagame and his government have evaded proper scrutiny, leaving them largely free to enrich themselves and crush dissent.

Lewis Mudge, Central Africa director of Human Rights Watch, [recently observed of Rwanda](#): "Arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture in official and unofficial detention facilities are commonplace, and fair trial standards are flouted in many cases."

Taking asylum seekers off the hands of rich countries is a money-making opportunity for Rwanda's leaders. Once the refugees land in Kigali, British officials – like their Israeli predecessors – are unlikely to care how they are treated.

And as was clear under the Israeli scheme, Rwanda has little interest itself in encouraging the asylum seekers to remain inside its borders. Of the several thousand [despatched by Israel](#) to Rwanda between 2014 and 2017, [the vast majority soon left](#).

It was a win-win for everyone but the refugees themselves, many of whom ended up either making a second perilous journey to safety or found themselves back in the very areas from which they had originally fled.

## Illegal infiltrators

Like other governments in the global north, Israel and Britain share a distaste for asylum seekers, preferring to portray them as illegitimate "economic migrants". In Israel's case, refugees are chiefly seen as threatening the country's ethnic purity as a Jewish state. And in the UK, they are viewed as taking jobs and diluting the supposed British values that once made the country a global empire.

Both Israel and Britain have been working hard to isolate themselves from the wider region to which they belong. That has made it easier to control their borders and keep out unwelcome visitors.

Israel has long viewed itself as an ethnic fortress, its borders protected by soldiers, electronic fences, drones and watch-towers. Britain, meanwhile, has been able to take advantage of its geography, as an island fortress protected by the sea. That view has only deepened with Brexit, the UK's exit from the European Union.

And for that reason, Britain has increasingly looked to Israel for ideas on how to curb the "problem" of asylum seekers. Israel quickly developed what were seen as "deterrence" measures against refugees fleeing wars and ethnic tensions close by in Sudan and Eritrea.

Back in 2010, Israel began work on a 230km steel barrier across its shared border with Egypt, the only gateway into Israel for African asylum seekers. It took three years to complete, but the fence reduced the flow of refugees from 10,000 a year [to barely a trickle](#).

Israel adopted an equally harsh approach to the 55,000 already inside its borders. While European governments have assessed more than 60 percent of Eritrean asylum seekers as

genuine, using tough criteria, Israel has accepted a much [stingier 1.5 percent of claims](#).

Instead, Israel has declared the refugees to be [illegal “infiltrators”](#). Many were forced into Holot, a giant detention camp Israel built for them in the Negev desert, despite repeated [rulings from Israeli courts](#) that imprisoning the refugees broke Israel’s own laws as well as international law.

Trapped between its desire to be rid of the asylum seekers and the rulings of its courts, Israel secretly agreed to pay Rwanda and Uganda to take them off its hands. The refugees had a choice between imprisonment in Israel or being deported.

The world took little notice. But reports in the Israeli media suggested at the time that Kigali may have [received arms](#) in return for taking the unwanted asylum seekers – an apparent return to Israel’s reported involvement in [selling weapons to Rwanda](#) that fuelled the genocide there nearly 30 years ago. Prominent Rwandan dissidents have also found [their phones infected](#) with spyware developed by the Israeli firm NSO.

## Clandestine links

Britain is similarly rigging the system to treat asylum seekers as law-breakers. In outlining the policy last week, [Johnson told coastguard officials](#) near Dover: “Anyone entering the UK illegally ... may now be relocated to Rwanda.” He forgot to mention that, for those fleeing persecution, it is invariably impossible to find a legal route to enter Britain.

The UK has paid Kigali £120m upfront. But the five-year initial programme has the potential to earn Rwanda far more, with each refugee estimated to cost [Britain £30,000 to relocate](#).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the main official debate about the scheme has quickly devolved into whether it will provide “value for money”. In correspondence published at the weekend, the Home Office’s [top civil servant warned](#): “Value for money of the policy is dependent on it being effective as a deterrent. Evidence of a deterrent effect is highly uncertain.”

Britain’s new policy is a reversal of Home Secretary Priti Patel’s recent plan to intercept boats carrying refugees in the Channel and [drive them back towards France](#) – a maritime equivalent of Israel’s barrier along the Sinai border.

Such a policy was always going to be more difficult to enforce than Israel’s electronic fence, and even harder to defend. Blocking the passage of inflatables in the Channel simply increased the risk of the boats capsizing or sinking.

So the UK is now following Israel down the Rwanda path. Patel called it an “incredible” country and said other European states were [looking to follow suit](#) with their own refugee populations. Notably, [Frontex](#), the European Union’s border agency, has in recent years been turning to Israel for advice on “border security”.

Patel’s fingerprints on the scheme are noteworthy. In 2017, she was called back from an official visit to Africa as international development minister after it came to light she had conducted clandestine meetings – hidden from her own department – with Israeli officials and lobbyists. [She was forced to resign](#). But those ties have never been properly scrutinised.

Israeli and Jewish human rights groups [have long been shocked](#) by Israel’s continuing abuse of asylum seekers. They highlight that Israel is a nation of refugees who fled European

persecution and that the young state of Israel even played a key role in instigating the 1951 Refugee Convention. How can it wilfully turn its back on those fleeing persecution today, they ask?

But that is to misunderstand what Israel's founders were determined to achieve. They helped to draft the Refugee Convention immediately after they had driven many hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their historic homeland, turning them overnight into refugees.

A Jewish state was always intended as an ethnic fortress, one that could not be shared with the native Palestinian population. Laws against [so-called "infiltrators"](#) and against the [immigration of non-Jews](#) were among the first passed by Israel's young parliament.

Senior Israeli politicians have called today's asylum seekers [a "cancer"](#). Their children – like Palestinian children inside Israel – have been [barred from schools](#) for Jewish pupils only. Before Israel began imprisoning and deporting asylum seekers, [mobs of Israelis attacked](#) anyone looking African in cities such as Tel Aviv.

## Pulling up the drawbridge

Britain and other right-wing populist governments find this model of pulling up the drawbridge deeply appealing. Australia, like Britain, enjoys the geographic advantage of being an island, if a very much larger one that is among the least densely populated places on Earth. Since 2013, Canberra has sent asylum seekers to Papua New Guinea [or the tiny atoll-state of Nauru](#).

The first world's treatment of refugees is already shameful. Developing countries [shelter 85 percent of asylum seekers](#), while western states host only 15 percent. That disparity is only going to grow.

Johnson's government is currently trying to [pass a new immigration bill](#) to make it even harder for refugees to claim asylum – further criminalising their efforts to flee persecution and the resource wars that have been [initiated or fuelled](#) by western states such as Britain.

In a world of resources sharply depleted by western over-consumption, and faced with a future of shrinking economies, privileged states like the UK are preparing for the worst. Israel has led the way for more than seven decades in creating the model of a fortress state "defended" by impermeable steel and concrete barriers, detention centres, segregation and intense surveillance.

Now that knowledge and experience will prove more invaluable than ever as other states line up to copy it.

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