



Recruitment and Employment of Temporary Migrant Construction Workers in Israel through the Private Track Following the Outbreak of the Israel-Hamas War, 2024–2025

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Abstract

Background

For many years, Israel's construction sector has relied on Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza, as well as temporary migrant workers¹ recruited primarily through bilateral labor migration agreements with their countries of origin. These agreements are intended to promote supervised and fair recruitment processes, reduce the collection of prohibited recruitment fees, and ensure that workers are clearly informed regarding their rights. The October 7 attack and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war led to a severe labor shortage in the construction sector. The entry of Palestinian day workers from the West Bank and Gaza stopped, many temporary migrant workers left Israel, and some countries suspended recruitment under the bilateral agreements. To address this acute shortage, the government approved a private recruitment track for temporary migrant workers in the construction sector, outside the bilateral labor migration agreements. This decision raised concerns among government officials, non-profit organizations, and academics about possible violations of workers' rights, high recruitment fees, and an increased risk of exploitation and debt bondage, echoing patterns documented in the past.

The study was commissioned by the Government Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit in the Social Division of the Ministry of Justice and was conducted in cooperation with the Center for International Migration and Integration (CIMI) and the Population and Immigration Authority. It is part of the broader evaluation of the National Anti-Trafficking Plan for 2022–2026, carried out by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute for the Ministry of Justice.

Study Objectives

The study examines the situation of temporary migrant workers who arrived in Israel through private recruitment to work in the construction sector during 2024–2025. It focuses on their well-being and the protection of their rights.

¹ In the Israeli context, temporary migrant workers are non-citizens admitted to Israel for employment in designated sectors under time-limited work permits.

Specifically, the study explores workers' reports on recruitment costs and sources of funding, working conditions and wages, safety, access to medical services, living conditions, awareness of rights and information and complaint channels, and overall satisfaction with their work and stay in Israel.

Method

The data was collected between September 2024 and December 2025. The qualitative data consisted of 10 in-depth interviews with key informants in government ministries and non-profit organizations, four interviews with stakeholders involved in the recruitment or employment of temporary migrant workers in the construction sector, and eight interviews with workers.

The main research tool was a survey of 320 temporary migrant workers in the construction sector. The sample was drawn from 12,684 workers who had arrived in Israel through the private recruitment track following the October 7 attack, as of December 2024, when data collection began. The survey was conducted by telephone and online, in the workers' native languages. It included workers from India, China, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Uzbekistan.

Key Findings

The findings identify several patterns that suggest possible violations of workers' rights and heightened vulnerability among some workers. Workers reported high arrival costs. Overall, 73% paid more than USD 4,000, and 23% paid more than USD 8,000, amounts that suggest the payment of illegal recruitment fees. The highest average cost was reported by workers from China, at USD 14,883. Most workers funded their migration through loans or by mortgaging assets, placing them in substantial debt at the very start of their employment and increasing the risk of debt bondage.

Workers from China reported particularly long working hours, averaging about 66 hours per week or more. Workers from other countries also reported heavy workloads and long workdays, and some expressed dissatisfaction with these conditions.

The study found widespread wage-payment irregularities, including partial cash payments, delayed payments, and failure to provide pay slips. These issues were

especially common among workers from China: more than 40% reported receiving part of their wages in cash and not receiving regular pay slips.

One-fifth of respondents reported that their passport or another personal document had been taken from them. This practice was especially common among workers from China: 76% reported that such a personal document had been taken, and 37% reported that their passport had been held for an extended period.

Although most workers reported having health insurance, only 35% reported having their insurance card in their possession. Some said they depended on the construction contractor or manpower corporation to access medical care.

Thirty-eight percent of workers reported at least one workplace problem, and 9% reported three or more. In some cases, multiple problems may indicate a risk of offenses related to trafficking in persons, slavery, or forced labor.

The findings also point to limited awareness of rights and of available information and support mechanisms. Many workers did not know how to contact construction manpower corporations or official assistance hotlines. These findings highlight the need to make information more accessible to workers arriving through the private recruitment track.

Despite these challenges, most survey and interview participants were satisfied with their work and with their stay in Israel. Satisfaction was lower among workers from China and Thailand than among workers from other countries.

Although workers were not asked directly about this issue, several workers from China and Thailand voluntarily reported being supervised by unofficial Chinese managers, known in Hebrew as *ra'isim*. These managers mediate between workers and the construction contractors and exercise de facto authority. This arrangement may increase workers' dependence and reduce their direct contact with formal oversight mechanisms. The study draws attention to the phenomenon of unofficial Chinese managers and its possible link to increased worker vulnerability.

Conclusions

The findings support some of the concerns raised when the private recruitment track was opened after the October 7 attack to address labor shortages in construction. The central concern is the high arrival costs, which suggest illegal

recruitment fees. These costs were especially high among workers from China, reinforcing the assessment that private recruitment places a greater financial burden on workers. This burden may increase workers' dependence on employers, heighten the risk of debt bondage, and facilitate other harmful practices.

These findings are particularly notable when compared with assessments of the bilateral track, which operates under bilateral labor migration agreements. Previous surveys of workers from China, together with preliminary data on workers from Sri Lanka and India, indicate substantially lower costs under the bilateral track.

Given these indications of possible violations of workers' rights, including passport retention and excessive working hours, the findings point to the need for effective oversight and enforcement in the construction sector. They also underscore the importance of making information accessible to temporary migrant workers arriving through the private recruitment track.