

How progressive Denmark became the face of the anti-migration left



By [Emily Rauhala](#)

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Danish authorities have rescinded protections for some already settled refugees and put them in dreary deportation centers like this one in Kaershovedgaard. (Lorenzo Tugnoli for The Washington Post)

KAERSHOVEDGAARD, Denmark — Zero asylum. Send them back to Syria. Claims should be sorted somewhere else. It may sound like the rhetoric of the far right, but in this wealthy Scandinavian welfare state, it has become the political center.

Denmark, polite and progressive, is profoundly skeptical of asylum seekers. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, of the center-left Social Democrats, has touted a vision of “zero” people arriving to Denmark outside the U.N. resettlement system. A key priority for her government: working with European Union allies to set up claims-processing centers far away.

Even as the country [touts](#) its human rights record abroad, Danish authorities are threatening already settled refugees with deportation to Syria, claiming against considerable evidence that the Damascus area and two other regions are safe. They can’t actually send people back — Denmark does not recognize the Syrian government — but many Syrians live in fear of being kicked out, and small numbers languish in deportation centers. The Kaershovedgaard center is in fact a former prison.

Rangin Mohamed Belal said she was notified that her Danish residence permit had been revoked because security conditions had improved in Syria. She now lives in the Kaershovedgaard deportation center. (Lorenzo Tugnoli for The Washington Post)

The Danish case offers a vivid example of how far-right ideas are flourishing, even where the far right has struggled to gain power. For some, Denmark demonstrates how rich democracies are eroding refugee and asylum protections, shifting blame and shirking responsibility — all without meaningfully addressing root causes. And Denmark may preview where the E.U. is headed, as the 27-nation bloc warily watches [rising migration numbers](#) and mulls a more restrictive course. *[Migration to Italy is soaring. And it’s still the off-season.](#)*

Denmark’s hard-line stance does not apply to everyone seeking refuge. The country last year welcomed tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, easing their path to school and work.

Nadia Hardman, a researcher in the refugee and migrant rights division of Human Rights Watch, called Denmark's policies "racist, duplicitous and hypocritical."

In a statement, Kaare Dybvad, Denmark's minister of immigration and integration, called that characterization "offensive" and "lacking of the seriousness that is required when talking about the Government's policies."

The government's goal is not zero asylum, he said, but zero people arriving through unofficial channels. "Refugees should come to Denmark through the U.N. resettlement system where they will be selected on the basis of humanitarian criteria," he said. In the past three years, the country of nearly 6 million has accepted fewer than 250 refugees through that program, according to [data from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR).

The U.N. refugee agency has been critical of Denmark's approach. "It was never the intention that refugees were to be subjected to constant reassessments once their protection needs had first been established," the UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries said in [recommendations from November](#).

Frederiksen, the prime minister, declined an interview with The Washington Post, as well as a request for comment.

Because Denmark has opted out of many of the E.U.'s immigration and asylum rules, not all its policies are replicable. But the country's hard-line rhetoric, its insistence on temporary protection and its focus on externalizing responsibility have echoes across the continent.

[*Fortress Europe can't stop immigration numbers from rising*](#)

"The Danish approach may become the European mainstream," said Kasper Sand Kjaer, a member of Denmark's Parliament and the Social Democrats' spokesman on immigration and integration.

Inside the high-walled Kaershovedgaard center, deep in the Danish countryside, that is a chilling thought. Dounia Ibrahim Khalaf and Rangin Mohamed Belal, both Syrians from the Damascus area, are among those stuck here.

Neither would consider returning to Syria, and Denmark can't force them. But it can keep them in what the government calls a "[return center](#)" while they wait for further word on their cases. They are not allowed to seek employment. They must be present for daily check-ins, which, combined with a lack of transportation, restrict how far they can go. Worse than any of the particular restrictions, they say, is the surreal limbo. "When," Khalaf asked, "is this all going to end?"

Denmark was not always like this.

Thirty years ago, the country was relatively open and welcoming, with strong protections for asylum seekers and refugees. But that started to change in the 1990s, as the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the far-right Danish People's Party proved politically potent.

Anti-immigrant voices sold the idea that Denmark's success was a result of its homogeneity — that protecting the welfare state required protecting "Danishness."

[*Greek court rejects charges against aid workers, including Sarah Mardini of 'The Swimmers'*](#)

Political figures on the right started saying that refugees should eventually be sent back to their home countries, recalled Haifaa Awad, a doctor who serves as chairwoman of the Danish aid organization Mellempfolkeligt Samvirke. "This was a right-wing agenda, but it was widely accepted by other parties that if you want to get into power, you have to play with their discourse."

Europe's influx of refugees in 2015 and 2016 helped turn talking points into law. In 2015, the Danish Parliament introduced a new temporary protection status that could be withdrawn when conditions in home countries improve even slightly. In 2016, the government granted authorities the [right to confiscate the jewelry and valuables of new arrivals](#), supposedly to fund their stay.

“Anti-ghetto laws” sought to limit the number of “non-Western” people living in certain neighborhoods.

Denmark’s political parties were “competing about being harder-line hard-liners,” Awad said.

In 2019, the Danish Immigration Service began reviewing the residence permits of Syrian refugees from Damascus and the Rif Damascus province. Since then, more than 1,000 Syrians have had their residence permits reassessed, and more than 100 have had their permits revoked, [according](#) to the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

Human rights and legal experts note that the majority of revocations are overturned on appeal, meaning the policy has little impact beyond terrifying newcomers and sending small numbers of others to wait in dreary camps. The cruelty, critics argue, is the point.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has condemned the idea of sending refugees back to Syria. [UNHCR](#) has also expressed concern. Nonetheless, the Danish Immigration Service recently [announced](#) that it considers two more areas of Syria safe, throwing more Syrians in Denmark into a panic.

“Based on considerable evidence, it is the Immigration Service’s assessment that the general conditions in the Damascus, Rural Damascus, Tartous, and Latakia provinces no longer implies a general risk of being subjected to abuse” that would violate European rules, the Danish Immigration Service said in a statement emailed to The Post.

Raghdaa Janoudi, a Syrian from Latakia who has seen her case reopened after living, working and raising her children in Denmark for years, called the designation “shocking.”

Mette Roerup, a retiree affiliated with Grandparents for Asylum, a coalition of activists who support refugees, said many Danes she meets remain unaware — or simply unwilling to accept — what is happening.

“When I tell them what we are doing, people don’t believe me,” she said. “They say, ‘We Danes don’t treat people like that.’”

Mohammad Rona, a newly elected lawmaker who serves as a spokesman on immigration for the Moderates, one of three parties in the coalition government, objects to the tone of talk about immigration in Denmark.

“Fear of ‘the foreigner’ has defined the debate in Denmark for the past 20 years,” he said. “It has won elections and created tunnel vision in political deliberations. The Moderates want to have a more nuanced debate.”

Rona insists that immigrants can thrive in Denmark, if they embrace it. He offers his story as an example. He fled Afghanistan as a child in the 1990s and settled in Copenhagen with his family. They focused on integrating — a fact he plays up. “It’s important for me to say, ‘Hey, you have all opportunities to learn the language and to get a job and so on and be a part of the society,’” he said. But newcomers don’t necessarily get that chance.

Abdullah Alsalloum fled Damascus as a child, trekking north to Denmark with his family. They did exactly what officials suggest: They settled in a smaller town, not the big city. Alsalloum started school, studied Danish and English, and joined the soccer team.

In his Danish classroom, he soaked up lessons on democracy and human rights. “Whatever you want to do, you can do it. Whatever you want to say, you can say it, and nobody can force you to do anything. That is what they taught us.”

After years in Denmark, his family got called in for an interview with immigration officials. Not long after, authorities told them it was safe to return to Damascus. Abdullah figured he could appeal his case. But he worried about the prospects for his mom.

Rather than risk ending up in a deportation center, they fled to Germany, where they were recently granted residence permits, he said. In September, he enrolled at school near the Denmark-Germany border — a mustachioed 19-year-old in the ninth grade, starting over yet again.

“Going through this whole process discourages integration, because you lose trust in authorities,” said Marie Juul Petersen, a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for Human Rights. “People are met with such mixed signals: ‘Should I prepare my children to leave tomorrow, or for integration?’” Asked about Alsalloum’s story, Rona of the Moderates said this kind of case is “very difficult, especially when there are children involved.”

“As I mentioned,” he said, “I don’t know about this Syrian stuff yet.”

Kjaer, the spokesman on immigration for the ruling party, said the government was exploring whether young women from the Damascus area could stay in Denmark if they have the potential to fill in-demand jobs such as nursing. These young women “want to participate, have a job,” he said, but are left in a “no man’s land, or no woman’s land.”

“Maybe,” he said, “we can find a solution for that limited group.”

Florian Elabdi contributed to this report.

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Artiklen er resultatet af et interview med Mette Roerup