

UNHCR recommendations to Denmark on strengthening refugee protection in Denmark, Europe and globally

June 2026

This document sets recommendations, which the Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has developed, to further strengthening the protection of refugees in Denmark, as well as to support Denmark's engagement in European and international fora where issues of refugee protection are being discussed. The recommendations are addressed to the Danish Government, parliamentarians and all other relevant actors and stakeholders and aim at contributing to constructive discussions on improvements of the protection and integration systems for refugees and stateless persons at the national, regional and international level.

UNHCR offers these recommendations as the agency entrusted by the UN General Assembly with the global mandate to provide international protection to refugees and, together with Governments, seek permanent solutions to their plight.¹ UNHCR is responsible for supervising the application of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees – to which Denmark is a State party. UNHCR thus has a direct interest in policy discussions and legislative initiatives in the field of asylum.²

1. Introduction

For decades, Denmark has made important contributions to international refugee protection – including through maintaining a well-established asylum and reception system, engaging in comprehensive integration efforts and participating in UNHCR's resettlement programme. As one of the first parties to sign on to the 1951 Convention, Denmark has a long tradition of providing sanctuary to those in need of international protection. Denmark is also a State party to both the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions.

UNHCR appreciates the strong partnership and cooperation that exists between Denmark and UNHCR in supporting the protection of the high number of forcibly displaced persons around the world and in the search for solutions to their plight. Denmark is also a very important donor to UNHCR's global activities, enabling UNHCR to address critical humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable refugee populations as well as strengthening and building capacity in host countries.

2. Strengthening protection and integration policies in Denmark

While Denmark continues to maintain a robust asylum system, the overall direction of policy places a strong emphasis on deterrence, temporariness, return and expulsion, with consequences for legal certainty, protection standards and the prospects for sustainable inclusion and integration.

Denmark's swift response to displacement from Ukraine demonstrated a rapid, pragmatic and protection-oriented solution. The Special Act on Persons Displaced from Ukraine provided prompt access to residence and services, and residence permits under this scheme have been extended until March 2027.³ UNHCR encourages Denmark to draw on elements of this response more broadly and to

¹ UN General Assembly, UNHCR Statute, 14 December 1950, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3628.html, para. 1.

² UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/50/152, 9 February 1996, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f31d24.html>, reiterated in subsequent resolutions.

³ Note, however, a February 2026 legislative proposal by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration to narrow access to that framework based on geographic origin in Ukraine, available here: <https://hoeringsportalen.dk/Hearing/Details/71099> UNHCR shared its observations to this proposal on 16 March 2026 here: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/natlegcomments/unhcr/2026/151387>.

ensure that future reforms across the asylum and migration system are guided first and foremost by protection principles, legal certainty, family unity and durable solutions.⁴

2.1. Quality asylum procedures and reception system

Denmark has a well-established asylum and reception system, with the Danish Immigration Service responsible for first-instance decision-making and the Refugee Appeals Board serving as the second and final instance. This institutional structure provides the basis for fair and efficient procedures.

Resource constraints due to reprioritization toward Ukraine arrivals affected processing times in 2024,⁵ and asylum case processing indicated as the most-resource-intensive task of the Danish Immigration Service in its 2026 results plans.⁶ UNHCR notes with concern a proposal put forward to the Danish Parliament in early 2026 to abolish the Refugee Appeals Board and transfer decision-making on asylum appeals to bodies subject to ministerial control or political oversight.⁷ UNHCR emphasizes that independent and expert second-instance review is a fundamental safeguard in asylum procedures and a cornerstone of compliance with international refugee law. Any reform affecting the institutional structure of asylum decision-making should preserve the independence, impartiality and legal integrity of the appeals system.

2.2. Regular review of protection status and termination of protection needs

Denmark applies a legal and policy framework that centers on the temporary nature of refugee protection, including through short-term residence permits, systematic and frequent review of protection status and the use of cessation. This practice undermines the stability necessary for effective integration and creates uncertainty for refugees and other protection beneficiaries,⁸ including those resettled through international cooperation mechanisms meant to offer a durable solution. UNHCR has cautioned against the risk of premature termination of protection that is misaligned with the cessation clauses in Article 1C of the 1951 Convention.⁹

That said, following years of controversial practice around the early termination of protection status of Syrians in Denmark, UNHCR notes the resumption of asylum interviews in December 2025 after a year-long suspension following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. The Refugee Appeals Board's

⁴ Denmark's response to displacement from Ukraine demonstrated the capacity for faster and more pragmatic procedures, with a 35-day average processing time for Ukraine cases. UNHCR encourages Denmark to draw on these practices where appropriate to strengthen the efficiency and quality of the broader asylum system.

⁵ Danish Immigration Service, *Årsrapport 2025*, p. 9, <https://us.dk/media/gsojnjbw/aarsrapport-2025-us.pdf>.

⁶ Danish Immigration Service, *Mål- og resultatplan 2026*, p. 4, <https://us.dk/media/50ujxiqt/us-maal-og-resultatplan-2026.pdf>.

⁷ Folketinget, Samling 2025-26 (1. Samling) beslutningsforslag, B 115 Forslag til folketingsbeslutning om at nedlægge Flygtningenævnet (Proposal for a parliamentary resolution to abolish the Refugee Board), <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20251/beslutningsforslag/b115/index.htm>.

⁸ This is reflected in several reports by civil society actors and NGOs. See for example Save the Children Denmark (Red Barnet), *Young people in uncertainty – the importance of temporary residence for children and young people with a refugee background in Denmark*, 2024, <https://taggodtimod.redbarnet.dk/ung-i-usikkerhed/>; Michala Bendixen, *Refugees Welcome, They don't know how much stress we have – women in the asylum system and the integration process*, June 2023, https://refugeeswelcome.dk/media/1300/they-dont-know_web.pdf; Danish Institute for Human Rights, *Man kan aldrig føle sig sikker. En analyse af retssikkerhedsmæssige udfordringer, når flygtninge mister deres opholdstilladelse*, 2022, <https://menneskeret.dk/files/media/document/Man%20kan%20aldrig%20f%C3%B8le%20sig%20sikker%20analyse%20af%20syriske%20flygtninges%20retssikkerhed%20juni%202022.pdf>.

⁹ UNHCR's most recent observations on a Danish law proposal illustrate the continued strive for ceasing international protection, *UNHCR Observations on the L 179 Proposal for amendments to the Danish Aliens Act, Return Act and Act on the Execution of Sentences, etc.*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/natlegcomments/unhcr/2025/en/149974>. Similar comments were made in UNHCR's *Observations on the Proposal for amendments to the Aliens Act and the law on temporary residence permits for persons displaced from Ukraine*, 11 August 2023, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/natlegcomments/unhcr/2023/en/124329>. See also UNHCR's 2025 *Recommendations for the Polish and Danish Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (EU)*, January 2025, pp. 7-8, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/polrec/unhcr/2025/en/149353> where UNHCR has reiterated the importance of avoiding premature returns and emphasized the need for legal certainty, particularly for refugees and other protection beneficiaries originating from countries where conditions remain fluid, volatile and unpredictable.

decisions suggest a move toward more individualized and cautious assessment of protection needs, rather than a general conclusion that conditions in Syria justify large-scale cessation or return.¹⁰

UNHCR recommends that Denmark:

- Discontinue the regular mandatory review of continued international protection needs upon extension of residence permits and ensures that reviewing or ending international protection is limited to situations where the criteria and standards established in the 1951 Convention are clearly present, to reduce legal uncertainty and support integration.
- Ensure that any application of cessation, withdrawal or non-renewal of international protection status is subject to strict safeguards, a holistic assessment and rigorous scrutiny of the applicable criteria and standards established in the 1951 Convention.

2.3. Family reunification

Denmark amended its legislation on family reunification¹¹ following the European Court of Human Rights' (ECtHR) 2021 judgment in *M.A. v. Denmark*, which found the three-year waiting period for refugees with temporary subsidiary protection under Section 7(3) of the *Aliens Act* to be incompatible with Article 8 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).¹² UNHCR welcomed the reduction to two years although this remains among the longest in Europe.

The definition of what is considered a family unit remains narrow under Danish law. Children under the age of 15 are generally granted family reunification with a parent in Denmark, while children between the ages of 15-18 are only granted family reunification where 'very special reasons' exist. Practical barriers, such as limited embassy access and documentation requirements, have further delayed family reunification. Prolonged separation affects refugees' mental health, well-being, and integration, especially for children.¹³ UNHCR's 2024 Guidelines on Family Reunification reaffirm that the right to family life applies regardless of protection status and that decisions must be guided by the child's best interests, with a flexible understanding of family based on social, emotional, or economic dependency.¹⁴

UNHCR recommends that Denmark:

- Remove mandatory waiting periods for family reunification for all beneficiaries of international protection, in line with the principle of non-discrimination and UNHCR 2024 Guidelines.
- Guarantee family reunification for all children, including those between 15 and 18, in line with Article 1 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
- Interpret dependency of family members of beneficiaries of international protection in a flexible and inclusive manner, in accordance with UNHCR's 2024 Guidelines.
- Introduce consular and embassy access for family members seeking family reunification in locations where Danish diplomatic missions are absent or inaccessible, facilitating document issuance and travel arrangements.

¹⁰ Danish Refugee Appeals Board practice page, filtered under Syrian cases for the year 2026 here: <https://fln.dk/praksis/>; see also Refugees Welcome, Michala Bendixen, *The first test cases for Syrians after the fall of Assad have now been decided*, 19 March 2026, <https://refugeeswelcome.dk/en/information/news/the-first-test-cases-for-syrians-after-the-fall-of-assad-have-now-been-decided/>.

¹¹ Section 9.1(d), 9.2(d), 9.3(d) *Aliens Act*: §9 "A residence permit may be granted upon application to: 1) a foreigner over 24 years of age who lives together in a common residence in marriage or in a permanent cohabitation (...) / 2) an unmarried minor child under the age of 15 (...) / 3) a minor foreigner (...) who d) has had a residence permit pursuant to section 7(3) for more than the last 2 years."

¹² Council of Europe: European Court of Human Rights, *M.A. v. Denmark* (Application no. 6697/18), 9 July 2021, paras. 194-195, <https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/caselaw/echr/2021/en/123893>.

¹³ See for example Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović, *Report following her visit to Denmark from 30 May to 2 June 2023*, section 1.4.1, <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-denmark-following-the-commissioner-for-human-rights-visit-to/1680ad4d49>; Michala Bendixen, Refugees Welcome, *Long Waiting times for family reunification despite few cases*, 8 August 2024, <https://refugees.dk/en/news/2024/august/long-waiting-times-for-family-reunification-despite-few-cases/>.

¹⁴ UNHCR *Guidelines on international legal standards relating to family reunification for refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection*, December 2024, paras. 24, 40, and 46, as well as sources listed in footnote 101 of the Guidelines, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2024/en/149243>; *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (CRC), Article 10(1); CRC Committee, General Comment No. 6 (2005): *Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin*, 1 September 2005, CRC/GC/2005/6, para. 83, <http://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2005/en/38046>.

2.4. Statelessness

UNHCR appreciates that Denmark has demonstrated its commitment to the 2019 High-Level Segment on Statelessness, and its membership in the Global Alliance to End Statelessness in 2025, which supersedes the Global Campaign to end statelessness by 2024 (the #IBelong Campaign).¹⁵

Denmark has taken steps to address statelessness, including granting nationality to over 2,200 stateless individuals since 2014 and maintaining a statelessness registration procedure. However, key gaps remain in preventing and reducing statelessness. For example, children born stateless in Denmark do not acquire nationality automatically at birth. As of January 2025, 1,471 children were stateless, including 371 born in Denmark,¹⁶ underscoring the need for legal safeguards ensuring acquisition of nationality at birth.

Barriers to naturalization also remain significant. All naturalization decisions must be approved through an individual bill passed by Parliament on the recommendation of the Parliamentary Naturalization Committee,¹⁷ a process marked by limited transparency, no judicial review, and wide discretion.¹⁸ For stateless persons, particularly those who are illiterate, elderly, or otherwise vulnerable, this procedure poses serious obstacles and risks undermining the right to a nationality.¹⁹

UNHCR recommends that Denmark:

- Amend the Nationality Act to ensure that all children born stateless in Denmark acquire Danish nationality automatically at birth, or at a minimum upon application.
- Develop the existing statelessness registration procedure into a dedicated statelessness determination procedure.
- Replace the requirement of “lawful residence” with “habitual residence” for the acquisition of nationality by stateless children, to bring national practice into conformity with Article 1(2) of the 1961 Convention.
- Introduce provisions or alternative pathways for facilitation of naturalization for stateless persons with specific vulnerabilities, such as illiteracy or age-related limitations.

¹⁵ See further at <https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/results-of-the-high-level-segment-on-statelessness/> and <https://statelessnessalliance.org/members-directory/>.

¹⁶ Figures of stateless children in Denmark obtained from Statistics Denmark (dst.dk/da/) shared directly with UNHCR's Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries on 30 July 2025.

¹⁷ This process is described in UNHCR's report *Mapping Statelessness in Denmark*, November 2020, section 4.2, <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/46385-unhcr-issues-report-on-statelessness-in-denmark.html>. Section 44(1) of the Danish Constitution states that “No alien shall be naturalized except by statute.” <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/-/media/sites/ft/pdf/publikationer/the-constitutional-act-of-denmark.pdf>.

¹⁸ See for example the UN Human Rights Committee decision in *J.S.K.N v. Denmark*, Communication No. 2754/2016, 25 October 2022. Denmark refused to grant the applicant an exemption from the language proficiency requirement and the nationality test in order to become naturalised. The applicant claimed that Denmark violated his rights under Article 26 of the Covenant. The Human Rights Committee considered that, in failing to provide the applicant with any information about the reasoning in its decision on his application or the grounds for refusing his application for an exemption from the language proficiency requirement and the nationality test, Denmark had failed to demonstrate that its decision was based on reasonable and objective grounds. Therefore, the Committee found that the applicant's rights under Article 26 of the ICCPR had been violated. The Danish Government's response, disagreeing with the Committee's finding, can be found here: <https://www.ft.dk/samling/2022/almdel/IFU/bilag/154/2732583.pdf>; In December 2024, the Parliamentary Citizenship Committee decided to call in three individuals who applied for Danish citizenship to assess whether they have the 'right values' ahead of a final decision on whether their applications will be accepted. The three individuals were selected based on concerning statements they made in the past on social media. The Committee wanted to evaluate their 'democratic mindset'. The interviews are a break with standard practice and the Committee itself was in disagreement over their legality. A confidential Ministry of Justice memo has questioned whether it is permissible under human rights conventions, particularly the ECHR, to summon applicants for such a purpose. On 17 December, the three individuals reportedly 'passed' the interviews and will receive Danish citizenship – BT News, 17 December 2024, <https://www.bt.dk/politik/tre-ansoegere-staar-til-statsborgerskab-efter-samtaler-om-sindelag>. The same day, the Ministry of Immigration and Integration announced it will look into the possibility of screening applicants for Danish citizenship, <https://uim.dk/nyhedsarkiv/2024/december/regeringen-vil-undersoeg-muligheden-for-screening-af-ansoegere-om-statsborgerskab/>.

¹⁹ This is best illustrated by the situation of the stateless Bhutanese refugees resettled to Denmark between 2008 and 2015, the majority of whom remain stateless to date. See UNHCR, *Mapping Statelessness in Denmark*, November 2020, pp. 17, 23, 37, 39, 40-41, 67 and 73; Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović, *Report following her visit to Denmark from 30 May to 2 June 2023*, para. 49, <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-denmark-following-the-commissioner-for-human-rights-visit-to/1680ad4d49>; and The Association of Bhutanese Communities in Denmark, <https://abcdanmark.dk/>.

3. Danish engagement to support and strengthen regional and global initiatives

3.1. EU level engagement

Although Denmark does not formally participate in the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) of the EU, UNHCR recognizes Denmark's active engagement in the broader discussions around migration management.

Denmark has played an active role at EU level in shaping migration policy. Since 2023, Denmark has promoted a “whole of route” approach²⁰ to migration management, aimed at strengthening coordination across countries of origin, transit and destination, and reducing irregular movements. During its EU Council Presidency in 2025,²¹ Denmark took a leading role in advancing the Pact, including discussions on establishing a common list of safe countries of origin and revising the concept of safe third countries, which would also allow transfers to third countries based solely on transit or agreements.²²

UNHCR notes recent developments at EU level concerning external aspects of migration management, including the political agreement reached on 1 June 2026 between the European Parliament and the Council on the Regulation establishing a new Common European System for Returns (the Return Regulation), as a complement to the EU Pact.²³ The Return Regulation envisages, among other tools, the possible establishment of return hubs in third countries, as well as the transfer, on the basis of agreements with third countries, of certain non-EU nationals subject to a return decision. These centers are intended to host individuals whose applications for international protection have been rejected while awaiting return to their countries of origin, or as a destination.

The safe and dignified return of individuals found not to be in need international protection is critical for a well-functioning asylum system. UNHCR emphasizes that the need for an effective system for returns is not incompatible with protection for individuals. Any such arrangements must contain adequate procedural safeguards to support safe, lawful and sustainable returns, and must ensure that individuals are not exposed to protection risks or left in situations of legal uncertainty.²⁴

To contribute to an effective EU protection regime, UNHCR recommends that Denmark:

- Ensure that Denmark's implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, remains firmly grounded in international protection principles and human rights law, including the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement;
- Ensure that any cooperation or transfer arrangement with third countries, including in the context of return hubs or revised safe third country concepts, are accompanied by effective safeguards guaranteeing access to fair and efficient asylum procedures, treatment in line with international standards, and protection against legal uncertainty or onward refoulement.

²⁰ See: <https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2025/03/DRAFT-The-Whole-of-Route-Programme%20%281%29.pdf>.

²¹ Programme of the Danish EU Presidency 2025, *A strong Europe in a changing world*, 1 July – 31 December 2025, <https://emnbelgium.be/sites/default/files/attachments/programme-of-the-danish-eu-presidency-2025.pdf>; Results of the Danish Presidency, <https://danish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme-for-the-danish-eu-presidency/results-of-the-danish-eu-presidency/>.

²² The safe third country concept, currently governed by Article 33(2)(c) of the Asylum Procedures Directive (APR) 2013/32/EU, was revised as part of the EU Pact adopted in May 2024. The new provisions will apply as of June 2026, however, the European Parliament and the EU Council considered that **further legislative changes may be required** even before the APR applies. See European Commission, *Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL amending Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 as regards the application of the 'safe third country' concept*, Document 52025PC0259, COM/2025/259 final, 20 May 2025, pp. 3-4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025PC0259>.

²³ European Commission, *Commission welcomes political agreement on the Return Regulation*, 2 June 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_1222; see also Council of the EU, *Council and Parliament reach deal on returns of illegally staying third-country nationals*, 1 June 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/06/01/council-and-parliament-reach-deal-on-returns-of-illegally-staying-third-country-nationals/>.

²⁴ UNHCR, *International Agreements for the Transfer of Refugees and Asylum-seekers*, 7 August 2025, paras. 8 and 12, https://www.refworld.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/unhcr_guidance_transfer_agreements_asylum-

3.2. Global engagement and public discourse on refugees and others forcibly displaced

While acknowledging the global challenges of refugee protection, UNHCR is concerned by the wider trend seen in parts of Europe in recent years, where political polarization, economic pressures, and security concerns have fueled sharper language on migration, including in Denmark. Public discourse that conflates refugees with broader migration movements, or frames them primarily as a burden, risks reinforcing negative stereotypes, undermining social cohesion, and setting in motion a spiral that may unsettle the foundations of international refugee law.²⁵ Such narratives can contribute to a climate of exclusion, undermine social cohesion, and hinder integration efforts. Political leaders play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions and fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

UNHCR is thankful for its long-standing partnership with Denmark on resettlement.²⁶ Thousands of refugees, including many women and children, have been able to find safety through the Danish programme. UNHCR welcomes the recent extension of selection criteria to include refugees from Eritrea and Afghanistan within the annual 200 quota. UNHCR hopes that Denmark will increase its resettlement quota as well as consider complementary pathways, including work and study visas and community-based support programmes.

Denmark is one of UNHCR's most important donors providing a significant share of its contribution as flexible and unrestricted core funding. UNHCR appreciates Denmark's continued commitment to predictable and increased levels of flexible funding to both humanitarian and development programs, and encourages Denmark to renew the Humanitarian Partnership Framework Agreement.

To enhance Danish support to refugee protection around the world, as a demonstration of responsibility-sharing and global solidarity for refugee protection, UNHCR recommends that Denmark:

- Increase gradually the Danish resettlement quota, apply flexible selection criteria and grant resettled refugees permanent residence;
- Continue commitment to increased predictable financial and flexible humanitarian and development funding to support international and local organizations as well as host countries respond to refugee situations around the world, and renew the Humanitarian Partnership Framework Agreement.

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[seekers and refugees 7 aug 2025 clean.pdf](#); UNHCR Press Releases, *UNHCR urges stronger safeguards in the new EU return rules*, 25 February 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/europe/news/press-releases/unhcr-urges-stronger-safeguards-new-eu-return-rules>; UNHCR, *The Need for Effective Returns Systems and the Potential Role of Return Hubs*, March 2025, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2025/149708>.

²⁵ At the informal Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council meeting in Brussels on 22 July 2025, Denmark's Minister for Immigration and Integration, Kaare Dybvad Bek, responding to a reporter's question, stated that "for the 40,000 Syrian refugees in Denmark, there is an income of around €0.5 billion and public expenditure of around €1.5 billion ... a huge deficit for the nation," Euronews Italia, 22 July 2025, <https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/07/22/danish-eu-presidency-frugal-line-on-migrants-syrian-refugees-a-huge-deficit-for-the-state/>; On 20 March 2025, the Danish Prime Minister stated in an interview with POLITICO that "mass migration is a threat to the daily life in Europe," framing large-scale arrivals of refugees and migrants as a security and societal challenge, POLITICO, 20 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/mette-frederiksen-denmark-jd-vance-migration-asylum-refugees/>; On 2 August 2021, former Danish Minister of Immigration and Integration, Inger Støjberg, in a social media post, urged Syrian refugees to "pack your things, travel home and begin rebuilding your own homeland," adding that they were "very welcome to send the Danes a big thank you for all the help you received when you needed it." The language was widely criticized for its condescending tone and disregard for refugees' rights under international protection standards, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 6 May 2021, <https://euromedmonitor.org/a/4356>.

²⁶ In Denmark, resettled refugees are referred to as "kvoteflygtninge".