

UK Wants to Incarcerate Asylum Seekers “Offshore” on Abandoned Oil Rigs

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Eighteen months ago, reports started to surface that Boris Johnson’s Conservative government in the [U.K. was planning to detain would-be asylum seekers in places as far away as the South Atlantic](#). Some sites, such as Ascension Island, are [4,000 miles](#) from Britain.

Johnson’s plan was actually a spinoff of [a never-implemented idea put forward by the Labour government back in 2003](#) to “offshore” the country’s asylum process to “regional protection zones” in the vicinity of the conflicts and collapsing economies that were sending hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers to the U.K. and other European countries. Then-Prime Minister Tony Blair and his colleagues backed off of that idea after it received tremendous pushback from social justice and immigrant rights organizers, who averred that it would place large and unfair financial burdens on poor countries that had the geographic misfortune to be located on the periphery of war zones.

Since those initial reports — with asylum seekers finding ever-more creative ways to cross over to England from the continent, either via boats or, in some instances, being smuggled through the Channel Tunnel — Home Secretary Priti Patel has increasingly looked to penalize asylum seekers, to render their actions criminal and to deny them the right to a fair hearing in the U.K. The British government is mirroring U.S. government actions taken during the Trump administration against would-be asylees attempting to traverse the southern border into the U.S., such as the Orwellian-named [Migrant Protection Protocols](#).

This past summer, Patel unveiled plans, contained in legislation called the [Nationality and Borders Bill](#), to criminalize asylum seekers entering the country without the correct paperwork and to make it easier to deport them. The plans also sought to house asylum seekers in offshore facilities such as abandoned oil rigs, or on Ascension Island off the coast of southern Africa, while their cases slowly wend through the court system. This sort of offshore detention — a practice long utilized in Australia, and currently being proposed in [Denmark](#) — is one that immigrants’ rights groups view with deep suspicion. If implemented,

it would also give the British home secretary unprecedented powers to revoke the citizenship of certain U.K. citizens deemed politically undesirable, a move that picked up steam in the wake of a number of high-profile cases of U.K. citizens operating within the ranks of ISIS.

So desperate is Johnson's government to deliver on its electoral promise to anti-immigrant voters of curtailing immigration that it has reportedly turned to a range of countries, from Norway to Rwanda to Albania to host its detention facilities. All, apparently, have turned down the U.K.'s overtures, leaving the remote Ascension Island, with its once-a-week flight to South Africa, as choice number one. If this tough-on-asylum proposal becomes law, [it could end up costing the U.K. a fortune](#): A similar offshoring policy in Australia ultimately cost the Australians roughly 2 million pounds per person per year held at these remote detention sites, and helped shred the country's human rights record in the process. In addition to the immorality of such a measure, as a deterrent system this sort of off-shoring policy is shockingly expensive to implement.

Since the bill was first proposed, opposition parties, combined with a number of rebels from within Conservative ranks, have fought a rearguard action to try to prevent it being enacted into law.

Now, with war raging once again on the European continent and displacing millions of people, and with tens of thousands of British families having signed up for a government program to host Ukrainian refugees in their homes, one might imagine that Prime Minister Johnson and Home Secretary Patel would use the moment as cover to back off of the more inflammatory of their anti-immigrant proposals.

To the contrary, they have doubled down. Earlier this month, the government repeatedly made it clear that it was sticking by this bill, and sent the legislation over to parliament's upper chamber, the House of Lords, to be debated, amended and voted upon. [But members of the House of Lords weren't happy about the legislation, and in a series of hearings successfully defeated or amended many of its more contentious, more anti-democratic, provisions.](#)

Unfortunately, that doesn't mean the bill is dead. The House of Lords is, these days, more of an advisory chamber than an institution with veto powers over legislation. And, at this point, it's looking as if Johnson's government intends to try to steamroll the legislation through Parliament later this month, when members of Parliament once more debate the merits of the proposals.

Yet, Johnson is, after months of political scandals, a wounded leader, and his hold on the Conservative Party is nowhere near as total as it was last year. In recent days, [more than two dozen of his members of Parliament have indicated their discomfort with key parts of the legislation](#), including the part which refuses to grant asylum seekers temporary work permits while they are waiting for their cases to be heard.

The war in Ukraine is rapidly shifting the dynamics around refugees and asylees. For years, a growing number of countries in Europe, pushed by electorates increasingly wary of large-scale migration, locked down against poor (mainly non-white) migrants seeking asylum. But Ukrainians, forced to flee suddenly before a staggeringly violent Russian onslaught, aren't seeking asylum, a process that can take years of legal hearings to complete; rather they are

heading west as refugees — into refugee camps in countries bordering Ukraine, and then westward into other countries in Europe. And, unlike with the victims of other conflicts in previous years, [aid agencies in Europe are watching, somewhat amazed, as governments welcome these displaced Ukrainians with open arms](#). This treatment is far cry from how European countries' response to the civil war in Syria — a year after a mass migration into Europe in 2015, one country after another began locking its borders down against the refugees — and the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

In contrast, Ukrainians are being met with work permits, with free public transit passes and so on, despite the fact that these same European governments have steadily been turning away refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other non-European conflict zones in recent years after a populist backlash against the liberal entry policies of 2015.

After a [slow start denounced by opposition politicians](#) as “shameful,” [Britain has begun easing its rules-of-entry to allow for large numbers of Ukrainians](#) to be temporarily resettled in the U.K. As a result, somewhere in the region of [200,000 Ukrainians](#) could end up living in the country over the coming months and years — [a number roughly equal to the number of EU nationals who left the U.K. in 2020 as Brexit's provisions began to kick in](#), and one that might go a long way to fill the labor shortage in key sectors of the economy that Britain has repeatedly experienced post-Brexit.

[Some relief workers and experts argue that this is a moment for Europe to fundamentally rethink its obligations](#) to those fleeing persecution and violence, finally bringing the continent more in line with the spirit of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

But, at least in the short term, that seems an unlikely outcome. In Britain, the political tradeoff is, perhaps, most obvious. The home secretary, with Prime Minister Johnson's backing, is continuing to push the noxious Nationality and Borders Bill in the same month that the government has been forced, by public opinion as much as by internal party dissent, to roll out a much larger welcome mat for Ukrainians than it had initially intended.

The U.K. is rightly responding with generosity to the victims of Russia's violence in Ukraine. But, unless the Conservative parliamentary rebels pick up more followers in the coming weeks, it will soon be going down an even nastier road than before in its responses to other displaced, traumatized people fleeing non-European conflicts, non-European economic collapse and non-European zones of despair.

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