



UK sending Syrians back to countries where they were beaten and abused

Refugees tell of being held in cages and even tortured in European countries including Hungary and Romania



i Mohammad Nadi Ismail: 'They would wake us after they had been drinking, then hit us or kick us.'
Photograph: Linda Nyland for the Guardian



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Britain is using EU rules to send asylum seekers from Syria and other countries back to eastern European states where they were beaten, incarcerated and abused, the Guardian has learned.

Migrant rights groups and lawyers say the Home Office is using the rules to send people back to “police brutality, detention and beatings” in several European countries.

The Guardian has spoken to refugees who were subjected to assaults as they travelled through Europe. The men tell of being held in “cages” in Hungary, [waterboarded](#) and handcuffed to beds by detention centre guards in Romania and beaten in Bulgaria.

Britain is one of worst places in western Europe for asylum seekers

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They now face being returned to those countries as, under the so-called [Dublin law](#), asylum seekers are supposed to apply in their first EU country of entry.

In 2015 more than 80,000 requests were made by EU countries for another government to take back an asylum seeker. The UK made 3,500 of these requests to countries around Europe, including Bulgaria, [Romania](#), Italy and Hungary.

The Home Office claims it should be entitled to assume that any EU country will

treat asylum seekers properly.

The charity Migrant Voice has collected testimony from several refugees who are fighting removal from the UK to other European countries. Nazek Ramadan, the director of the charity, said the men had been left traumatised by their journey and their subsequent treatment in the UK.



I will kill myself rather than go back.

'Dawoud'



“We know there are hundreds of Syrians in the UK who have fingerprints in other European countries,” said Ramadan. “Many no longer report to the Home Office because they are afraid of being detained and deported away from their family in the UK. Those who have been forcibly removed often end up destitute.

“These are people who were abused in their home country, sometimes jailed by the regime there. Then they were imprisoned again in [Europe](#). They feel that they are still living in a war zone, moving from one arrest and detention to another.”

The law firm Duncan Lewis recently won a key case preventing forced removals back to [Hungary](#) because of the risk that people might be forced from there back to their country of origin.

The firm is also challenging removals to Bulgaria because of [what the UN refugee agency has described as “substandard” conditions](#) there. A test case on whether Bulgaria is a safe country to send people back to is due to be heard by the court of appeal in November.

The situation could get even more complex as an EU ban on sending asylum seekers back to Greece is due to be lifted on Wednesday after a six-year moratorium.

Krishna Prathepan, of Duncan Lewis, said: “We intend to challenge any resumption of returns to Greece, as that country’s asylum system remains dysfunctional and the risk of refugees being returned from Greece to the very countries in which they [faced persecution](#) remains as high as ever.”

The Home Office says it has no immediate plans to send refugees back to Greece, but is following European guidelines.

“We have no current plans to resume Dublin returns to Greece,” a spokesperson said, citing among other reasons “the reception conditions in the country”.

She added: “In April 2016, the high court ruled that transfer to Bulgaria under the Dublin regulation would not breach the European Convention on Human Rights. If there is evidence that Bulgaria is responsible for an asylum application, we will seek to transfer the application.”

Mohammad Nadi Ismail, 32, Syrian



i Mohammad Nadi Ismail in his Syrian navy uniform. Photograph: Facebook

Mohammad Nadi Ismail, a former Syrian navy captain, entered Europe via Bulgaria and Hungary, hoping to join his uncle and brother in Britain.

In Bulgaria he was detained, beaten and humiliated. “They stripped us and made us stand in a row all naked. We had to bend over in a long line. Then they hit us on our private parts with truncheons.

“They would wake us at night after they had been playing cards and drinking. Then they would come and hit us or kick us with their boots or

truncheons.”

One day he was released and took his chance to leave, walking for days to reach Hungary.

But in Hungary he was locked up again. “They took us to a courtyard of a big building where there were five or six cages, about 8ft [2.4 metres] square. Most of the people were African. Some of them had been in there for four or five days. Luckily we Syrians were allowed out after one night and I headed for the UK.”

In the UK Ismail met up with the family he hadn’t seen for three years and applied for asylum immediately.

Then a letter came, saying his fingerprints had been found in Bulgaria and he would be returned. After a month in detention he now reports every two weeks, waiting and hoping that the UK will let him stay.

“I will not go back to Bulgaria. I still have hope that I can stay here legally and rebuild my life with my family who have always supported me,” he said.

‘Dawoud’, 34, Iranian



i Dawoud talking to Nazek Ramadan, director of Migrant Voice. Photograph: Linda Nylind for the Guardian

Dawoud (not his real name) was 28 when he fled Iran after his political activities had made him an enemy of the government. His brother and parents made it to the UK and were given refugee status.

When he was told by border guards that he was in Romania he had no idea what that meant. “I had never even heard of this country,” he said. He was put in a camp where “water dripped through the electrics - we were electrocuted often. Children and families screamed. We lived in fear of the wild dogs who circled the camp, attacking and biting us. We were given no food; we had to go through bins in the town nearby for scraps.”

He escaped once, to the Netherlands, but was sent back.

“I experienced several beatings, on all parts of the body. There were people covered in blood and they were refused medical help. They even waterboarded me. I thought I would die.”

Finally he managed to reach his mother, father and brother in the UK. For two years he has lived in hiding, too scared to apply for asylum for fear of being sent back to Romania. But a few months ago he finally reported to the Home Office. A letter informed him that a request had been made to Romania to take him back.

Dawoud shakes as he talks about his fear of removal, saying: “When I hear people

“I speak Romanian in the street it brings back my trauma. I once fell to the ground shaking just hearing someone speak. I will kill myself rather than go back.”

Wael al-Awadi, 36, Syrian



i Wael with his son, who is now four but his father has not seen him for three years.

Wael travelled by sea to Italy and was detained on arrival in Sicily. “They hit us with their fists and sticks in order to make us give our fingerprints. Then they let us go. They gave us nothing, no accommodation, just told us: ‘Go where you like.’ So many Syrians were sleeping in the streets.”

When he reached the UK he was detained for two months before friends helped him get bail. A year and a half later, when reporting at the Home Office, he was detained again and booked on to a plane to Italy.

He refused to go and a solicitor got him out on bail. His appeal is due to be heard later this year. “I left Syria to avoid jail and detention and here I have been locked up twice,” he said. “I can’t understand it. Why can’t they look at me with some humanity? I am mentally so tired. My children call me from Syria but I can’t speak to them any more. It is too painful.”

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