

Lærdansk Aarhus

Welfare Without Welcome in the “City of Smiles”

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Aarhus, Denmark

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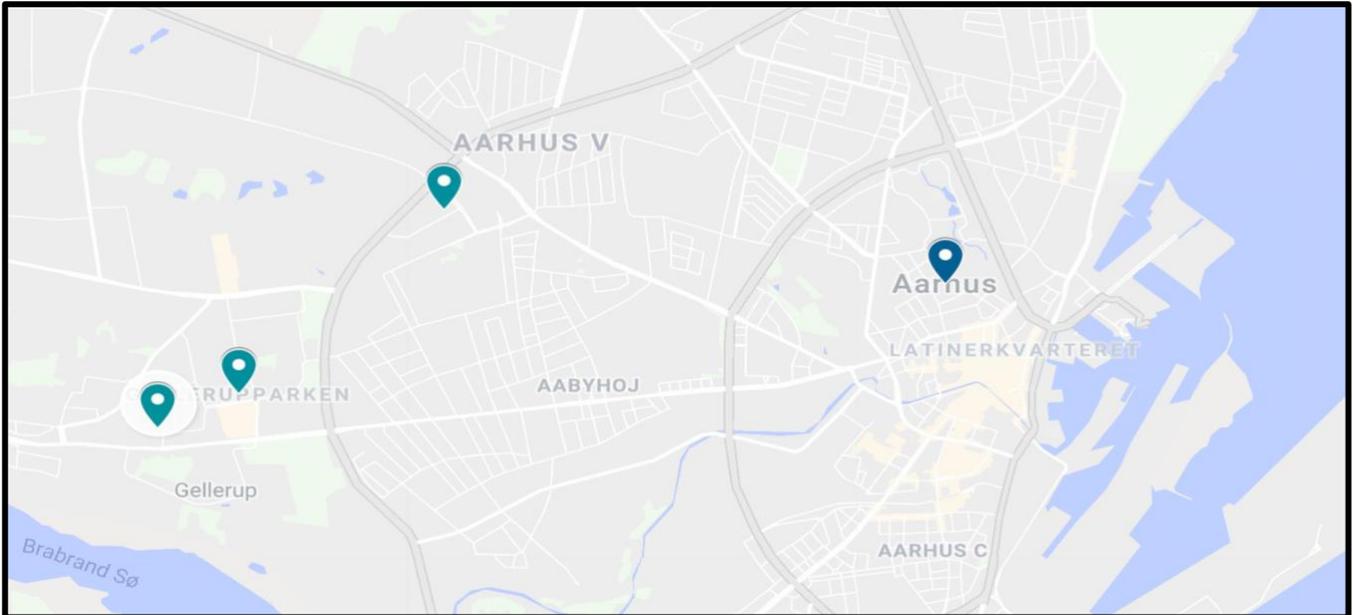
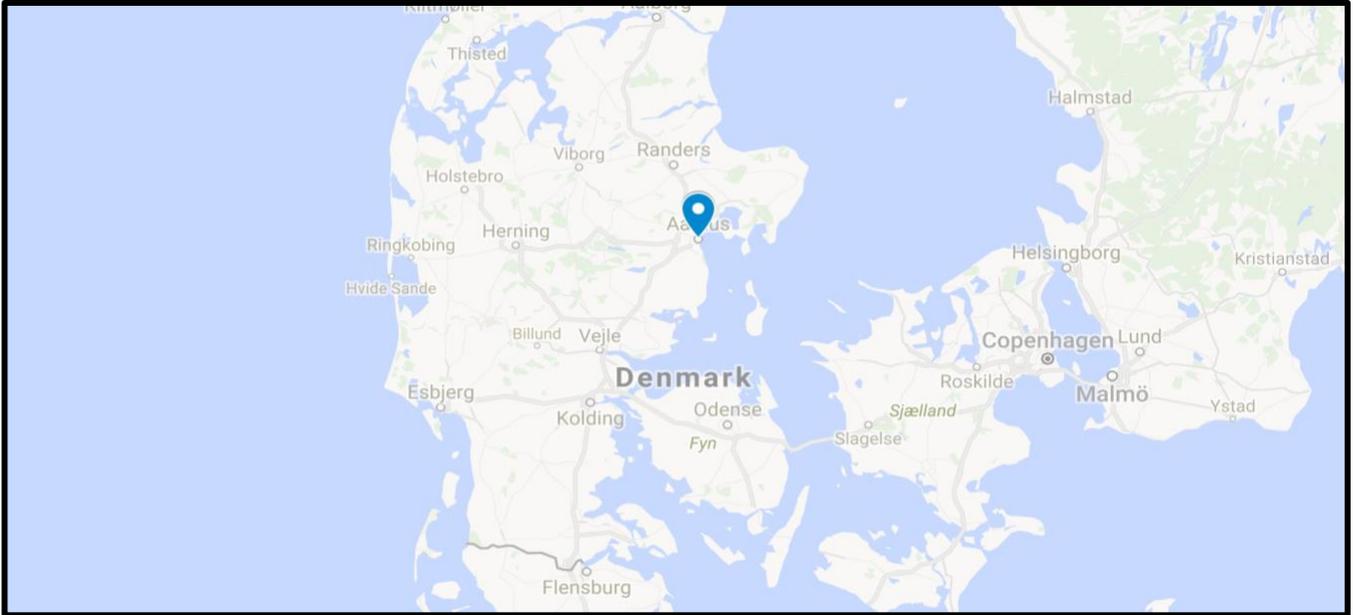
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*Cover Photo by Akram Skaikar, Learn Danish Center in Aarhus

Location

Aarhus, Denmark



Three “ghetto” neighborhoods of Aarhus in light blue, city center in dark blue: (from left to right): Børnehaven Skovgårdsparken, Gellerup, and Bispehaven

For background on Denmark as a host country and the town of Aarhus, see the appendices.

Introduction

Denmark has a population of 5.8 million, 12.3% of which are immigrants and their descendants. Aarhus is Denmark's second largest city with a population of 336,411. Immigrants make up 15.9% of the population. Eleven percent of the immigrants have a non-Western background.¹ Nationally and in Aarhus, almost half of non-Western immigrants fall in the lowest 20% income earners.² This case looks at the integration experience of non-Western refugees in an urban center within a well-organized Nordic welfare state.

The fellow refugees I interviewed generally felt fortunate to be in Denmark, and in particular the city of Aarhus. It is a desirable destination because it has high population density with many cultural and social activities, job vacancies, and transportation options. The University of Aarhus and the other educational opportunities are a great advantage for young people. Families with children find it has an inspiring and healthy atmosphere. Aarhus is more diverse than smaller cities in Denmark, with many people of different nationalities who come for studies or work. Therefore, refugees do not feel that they stand out because of their appearance. They also like that they can easily shop for food items from their home countries. However, it is an ordeal to gain refugee status, and after it is achieved, the lived experiences of refugees show that settling into a new life in Denmark is difficult.

Refugees face challenges related to continued changes to the refugee and immigration policies. The national debates and policies on refugees and immigration have become focused on restricting refugee access to the country and have conflated refugees, Muslims, immigration, and radicalization. The current narrative of official Denmark is focused on addressing "parallel societies" by tackling social control, radicalization, religious coercion, and other negative tendencies born out of parallel societies involving minorities.³

This report reviews how refugees experience integration in this tension between welfare and welcome.

¹ Denmark Bureau of Statistics www.dst.dk

² *Ibid.*

³ Christian, W. (2016). Danish Government Taking on Parallel Society Issues. CPHpost.dk

Methods

This study focuses on two cohorts of refugees: the first came to Denmark during the last three years, and the second came to Denmark four to ten years ago. I conducted 20 individual interviews with refugees from Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, and with stateless Palestinians from Syria. These conversations were in Arabic and English. Two group conversations were conducted, one with four Syrians and three stateless refugees, the other with two Afghans, two Iranians and three Somalis. I also interviewed six Danish actors, including activists of civil society, refugee aid organizations, and the staff of the Danish Refugee Council, a non-governmental organization,⁴ and its associated national for-profit organization *IntegrationsNet* (Integration Network) that offers integration related training and other services to municipalities.⁵

I have shared what I wrote with nine refugees, who have read and commented on drafts of the report.

Refugee Interviews

Nationality	Groups	Individual Interviews	Female	Male	Total
Syrians	4 people	10	4	6	10
Stateless refugees	3 people	5	2	3	5
Afghans	2 people	2	0	2	2
Iranians	2 people	1	1		1
Somalis	3 people	2	2	0	2
Total	14 people	20 Individual Interviews	9	11	20

⁴ www.drc.ngo

⁵ <http://integrationsnet.dk/>

The Author's Position in Aarhus and Experience Researching this Case

I, Abdullah Alsmaeel, am a refugee from Syria who arrived in Aarhus around three years ago, after spending five months in a Danish asylum center. Before fleeing Syria, I practiced law and had some experience working on forced displacement as a coordinator of a UNDP project for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria from 2010-2014. In Denmark I am a “newcomer refugee,” going through the three-year integration period.

The five months I spent in the asylum center waiting for my papers is a short time compared with asylum seekers who are coming from different countries. The last question I was asked during the interview investigating my case was: “if you get the right to stay in Denmark are you interested in living in a specific place knowing that you will not necessarily get it?” I thought about Copenhagen because I thought that I would have a better chance to keep working with international organizations like I did with the UN in Syria there. But I knew that it would be difficult because the big cities in Denmark are not interested in more refugees. Many refugees ask for these cities and do not get placed in them. When I got the permission to stay, they decided to send me to Aarhus. I didn’t know a much about Aarhus but when I asked one of the people working at the asylum center, “what do you think about Aarhus?” he said, “ooh yes, the city of smiles.” That was what I was looking for.

This report draws on my experience with refugees and Danes working on refugee integration, including the Danish language center, which has refugees from many different nationalities. As a Syrian family with young children we met and developed friendships with native Danish and refugee families. I explored the questions in this report with these friends and acquaintances.

The Urban Impact & Living in Aarhus: “Ghetto” or Friendly Neighborhood?

Gellerup is one of the biggest official ghettos in Denmark, and Aarhus municipality’s policy is to not house new refugees there. Not knowing much about Aarhus when they first come, a few new refugees would like to live in the ghetto areas like Gellerup, perhaps only because they have some relatives there and know a bit more about the neighborhood.

Most refugees who came to Denmark over the past three years think that living in “Danish” neighborhoods is better for the following reasons: It provides them with a good opportunity to get closer to the Danish society and learn about it; it is an opportunity to learn the Danish language quickly by communicating with Danes; it is a good opportunity for children to attend 100%-Danish schools where their children learn proper Danish as soon as possible. They also want to stay away from the ghettos because they hear about trouble there, particularly in the Danish media that quotes government officials who state that these are problematic “parallel societies.”⁶

After being in Aarhus for more than three years, refugees see the biggest gain from not living in ghetto areas is that their children learn Danish faster. However, some see the positive side of the ghetto neighborhoods: they enjoy visiting and shopping for their own national goods there. They also enjoy the atmosphere of their homelands there. Further, they find people who speak their native language, relate to their experience, and who can help with translating or explaining systems, such as hospitals and schools.

For those who have been in Aarhus for a while, living in a ghetto is not such a bad idea. Sometimes their experiences in “Danish” neighborhoods feature loneliness and difficulties in establishing relationships and friendships with neighbors; difficulties in finding kids to play with their kids; and missing out on neighbors’ help. Those who live in the town center described significant issues with Danish neighbors. The neighbors often complain about the noise of the refugees’ children and sometimes use the police to solve small problems that could be solved by talking. Some refugees described experiencing racist attitudes.

Social Integration

Refugees told me that they found it difficult to talk to Danish people spontaneously in the street, on the bus, or even neighbors in their building. Danes often seem busy and their calendars are full, so you need to plan to meet them well in advance. This planning of social activities is not what refugees are used to, and they find it frustrating that they cannot talk to people when they need to or just want to.

⁶ Chazan 2018

Some NGOs organize events to match refugees and Danes and provide space for people to talk, but this is unusual and many new refugees do not believe that it is working. Some felt uncomfortable, pointing out that it feels artificial and superficial, and is not a substitute for genuine, meaningful relationships.

Refugees' experiences and opinions varied on what was important for interaction with Danes and living in Denmark. I deliberately avoided using the word "integration," as refugees describe experiencing "assimilation" rather than "integration," based on Danish policies and media narratives.

Language skills, both Danish and English, are seen as important. Most people found that when their experience, skills, and ambitions were stifled, frustration set in. Mutual respect between migrants and hosts was highlighted. In particular, refugees are frustrated by a sense that the integration contract intrudes in their private lives, particularly related to dress, food, eating preferences, child care, and family values. As will be elaborated, this sense of intrusion adds to the feeling of being assimilated, not integrated.

I think when people move to other countries they should learn how to behave like them. I am trying to learn as much as possible about the Danish society. I meet a lot of Danish people. - *Fadi, single Syrian male in his late 20s, who has lived in Denmark for three years*

I think the most important thing in integration that you learn enough of the language to be able to start a simple conversation with people. The first thing I missed when I came to Denmark was my ability to express myself or start a conversation because I don't speak English. I speak only Persian. - *Naerdin, female in her mid-30s from Iran, who has lived in Denmark for three years*

I think to have a good integration in Denmark, policies and people need to take into account refugees experience. The educated refugees are suffering a lot. You can't imagine how hard it is to spend many years studying and working then you feel that you are not useful any more. When I came to Denmark, I didn't expect to get a lot of money, but I expected to be able to gain experience and learn new skills. Denmark is very advanced in many things, but now I am really frustrated. Many barriers keep me from advancing in my career. I am busy doing things not relevant and not related to my interests. I am interested in doing internships and training as much as I can, to use my skills. I would be really happy with that because I would know that I am on the right path to being a resource either here in Denmark, or in my home country, if I go back. But now I am really lost; I am afraid of the time I'm wasting. - *Feras, male Syrian in his early 30s who has lived for three years in Denmark*

The Public Narrative on Integration

On February 9, 2017 the Danish public TV featured a story about the Danish parliament's adoption of an act that differentiates between "Danes" and "Immigrants from non-Western countries and their descendants," which implies that the latter are not Danish, even if they are Danish citizens. A Danish soldier of Pakistani descent said to the news: "Parliament has decided that I am no longer Danish."⁷ Indeed, the debate included the idea that "Danish-ness" cannot be equated with having citizenship—according to some, this even applies to children of immigrants born and raised in Denmark.

The February 9th feature showed three immigrants' children who were born in Denmark, and someone asked them their name, how old they are, and where are they from. The kids answered easily that they are from Denmark, but the person asking the questions replied, "no, you are not Danish."⁸

I think the most important things for integration are learning the language, getting job, and respecting each other ... Integration is not about intervening in people's private lives. We should not focus on what people eat or drink or wear. We should focus on how people treat each other. - *Laila from Syria, age, in Denmark for five years*

The next day there was a big conversation on social media about the video with many different opinions. Some who have spent many years in Denmark were not surprised. Some newcomers were angry, sad, and shocked. There were comments about how, even if we and our children are integrated, the Danish law and Danish society will reject us. People started to get more worried about their children's future. Parents came to Denmark to save their children and give them a healthy environment to grow up in. Many refugees started to talk about ways to protect their children and their identity.

As this event shows, the biggest challenge facing refugees is that they are not welcome in Denmark. Danish immigration policy openly sends discouraging messages that impact integration. The Ministry of Integration even has a counter on its website celebrating the number of new restrictive immigration measures put in place (see Box 3). The intended audience is Danish voters (to show how tough Denmark is on foreigners and refugees) and refugees who are thinking of coming to Denmark (in essence telling them, "don't bother to come, we are tough on refugees"). This messaging has a negative impact on refugees living in Aarhus. Refugees told me about their fears and uncertainties and that they do not know what to think about their future in Denmark. They worry that more tough laws may come to make them leave or even expel them from Denmark.

⁷ Holm Nielsen 2017

⁸ Sturup Hansen 2017

 Søg

Regeringen indgår aftale om nye, stramme og afbalancerede regler for ægtefællesammenføring

Hvis man ønsker at få sin udenlandske ægtefælle til Danmark, vil der fremover blive taget stilling til, om parret forventeligt bliver godt integreret.

Regeringen har gennemført

89

stramninger på udlændingeområdet

Læs om alle regeringens stramninger

Box 3: The landing page of the Danish Ministry for Integration (June 2018).

The counter ticks from 0 to 89, unapologetically sending the message from “official Denmark” that the current coalition government has enacted 89 restrictive measures affecting foreigners, including refugees, living in Denmark. By July 14, 2018 this number had increased to 98.

The headline of the first article reads: “The government agrees new stringent and balanced rules for family reunification [of refugees].”

When I got my first job, a very good Danish colleague recommend that I get a TV and watch the news to what Danes see and learn about what's going on in Denmark. It was good advice and I really appreciated it. But, when I started watching, I was so surprised to see the big focus on refugees and their small and big mistakes. It made me feel like I am destroying the planet. It is all too negative, and I am annoyed that the media is fighting us the way it does. In many ways I am really sorry that the Danish people are seeing what they see. I am sure that they are scared of us and that's so hard for us. My family and I decided to watch only the Danish cartoons with our children and ignore the news. After I got to know what Danish people learn about us from the media, I felt like I am already judged and found it more difficult to meet and interact with Danes. - *Rony, male in his 30s, from Syria, two years in Denmark*

Refugees' Experiences

We got a place in the town of Aarhus and we were so happy with that. It is not a ghetto area and is very Danish. We thought that living there will be helpful to learn the language faster and meet Danes. A month after I came to Aarhus, I thought about preparing some cake to give to our neighbors. We have eight apartments in our building and I hoped to start a conversation with them so we could get to know each other. Unfortunately, even after knocking the doors many times, only one of eight neighbors opened the door and took the cake. My husband and I decided to put the cake at the other doors and write a letter explaining who we are and why we did that. It was disappointing that only two of the neighbors we met in the next days on the stairs thanked us for the cake. We didn't hear from the others. We are really alone in our building. I don't feel safe when my husband travels sometimes. I don't speak English or Danish well and I am afraid that if I had a problem while my husband is out, that none of my neighbors will open the door to help me—especially since I have three young children, and nobody knows what could happen. That's why we think seriously about moving to another area in Aarhus where we can establish good relations with people and live in a place with some diversity, where we don't feel alone. -*Amal, a Syrian mother who has lived two years in Aarhus*

Process for seeking asylum in Denmark

Any person in Denmark has the right to request asylum. To begin the application process, a refugee must contact the police, who will take fingerprints and photographs and obtain an official statement regarding his or her nationality, identity, and journey to Denmark.⁹ The case is then referred to the Danish Immigration Service to determine whether Denmark is responsible for processing the application in accordance with the Dublin Regulation.^{10, 11} The refugee is assigned to 1 of the 22 asylum centers (run by the Danish Red Cross) spread throughout Denmark from this point through the entire application procedure.¹² The process can take up to seven months.

If the asylum seeker is granted asylum, the Danish Immigration Service *assigns* the refugee to a local municipality where he/she is to reside.¹³ The local municipality is then responsible for the integration process, the housing of the refugees, and other practicalities. By way of illustration, a refugee assigned to Aarhus would arrive at Aarhus railway station and be greeted by an integration employee of Aarhus municipality.¹⁴ The refugee is then assigned housing and a doctor, gains access to a digital email system, and is given a residence card. A bank account is opened for him/her to receive welfare benefits.¹⁵ Several local organizations have volunteers who give guided tours around the city and organize other activities. Refugees are obliged to participate in a welcome meeting at the local library. Soon after arriving, the refugees meet with a job consultant to determine their level of competence and learn how to secure a job or internship. After two weeks, the refugees begin classes in integration education, and after four weeks they are obliged to participate in Danish language classes. During the first three years in Aarhus, refugees continuously engage with the municipal system and receive regular assistance in the form of calls, meetings, and home visits.

All refugees in Denmark must enter into a so called “integration contract” with the municipal authorities. The contract is for the three-year integration period. Further, refugees must sign an “integration statement” that details commitments on areas including, women’s rights, civic duties, and obligations to

⁹ Mouritsen and Jensen (2014); The Ministry of Immigration and Integration (2016)

¹⁰ The European Union has adopted a Council Regulation which establishes the criteria and mechanisms for determining which Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States. Denmark has entered into a parallel agreement with the Member States of the Regulation effective from 1 April 2006. According to the Regulation, an asylum application will be examined in one EU Member State only. If an asylum seeker is registered by the authorities in another EU Member State, his or her asylum application will normally not be examined in Denmark. Instead, the asylum seeker will be sent to the country of first registration for an examination of his or her asylum application (The Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2016).

¹¹ If the Ministry finds that Denmark is not responsible for processing the asylum seekers application, he/she may be referred to a “safe third country” to have his or her application processed. Safe third countries include Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, the United States, and Canada.

¹² Ny I Danmark (2018)

¹³ If the asylum seeker’s application is rejected, the asylum seeker will be required to live at an asylum center until he/she leaves Denmark. Once an application has been rejected by the Danish immigration Service, the decision will automatically be reviewed by the Danish Refugee Appeals Board, which is the appeal body in the asylum cases where a decision can be made against the Immigration Service’s decision. If the asylum seeker’s application is rejected by the Refugee Appeals Board, the asylum seeker is given a specific time period in which he/she must leave Denmark voluntarily. If the asylum seeker does not leave voluntarily, the police will escort the asylum seeker out of the country (The Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2016).

¹⁴ Aarhus Municipality, 2018

¹⁵ Aarhus Municipality www.aak.dk

report suspected terrorist activities. All family members who subsequently join the refugee must also sign “integration contracts” and “integration statements.”

Aarhus: The City of Smiles

After the ordeal of the journey to Denmark and the uncertainty of the asylum processing period, many refugees appreciate the welfare state and the decent living accommodations. Education opportunities are likewise appreciated, starting with free Danish language classes and the opportunity for all to apply to the university. All this is supported by the central government and the municipality of Aarhus. Naturally, refugees appreciate the social benefits the municipality provides in case they do not get a job. Despite these advantages, refugees face significant challenges to integration, many of which are discussed below.

Not Being Able to Decide Where to Live

I appreciated being allowed to settle in Aarhus even more after I heard the story of my friend Fatima. Fatima is a very socially engaged lady from Iran. I first met Fatima at *Taldansk Café* (Talk Danish Café) at the *Lær Dansk* (Learn Danish) language school in Aarhus where Danish volunteers go to help Danish language learners with homework and conversation.

After her request for asylum was granted, the immigration authorities decided that Fatima should stay in a small and quiet city in the north of Denmark. She had a hard time there, feeling alone and depressed. She was struggling to get an education opportunity to have a reason to move to Aarhus. Of course, she would have to pay the cost of moving and would have to find a place to live in Aarhus herself. Even though she would get a student grant once she started her studies, as a newcomer, the cost of moving and the difficulty of finding an affordable place to live were making life difficult.

Living with an Integration Contract

When refugees are asylum seekers in asylum centers they think a lot about their dreams in Denmark and about starting a new life. When they get asylum, move to the city to which they are assigned, and sign their “integration contract,” refugees immediately start feeling pressure from the municipal system to implement that contract. They find themselves very busy with standard programs that do not seem relevant to their aspirations, education, and skills. Although the programs are supposedly jointly made and individually tailored, in practice refugees experience them as standardized and designed in advance. In fact, job opportunities are limited to unskilled work doing cleaning or working in stores. For example, one refugee man said:

I am working in store where I get the lowest wage in Denmark: 110 kr. per hour. However, I have 20 years’ experience fixing machines, but no one opened the door for me in this area in Aarhus. I work hard full time but still not able to cover all the expenses, especially since my wife couldn’t find a job at all. So, we still get some support from the municipality - Ameer

In 2015, a new integration policy put greater focus on refugees getting jobs. The policy states that all refugees who are able should do internships or work paid jobs for 37 hours a week. Refugees mostly agree that it is very positive to have a job and that internships are a good way to get them. However, they also said that the labor market is not very open to employing them. The real problem, as they see it, is that employers do not hire them after municipal intern subsidies stop. Nevertheless, they get sanctioned when not employed, including cuts to social welfare benefits. It is a big problem for them that the demands of the integration plans are so stringent. Safaa from Somalia spends 37 hours per week on an internship in a store and Danish language classes. She says: “it is hard and drains all my energy.” According to the rules, despite her fulltime efforts to work on her integration, she is considered “unemployed.” She feels treated unfairly and told me: “I am doing everything I can to follow the rules that expect refugees to work hard on integration, and still the people who created the rules judge us and say that refugees stay home and don’t do anything, and my efforts don’t count.”

Separated Families

Mohammad, a Syrian man of 52 years, came to Denmark two years ago looking for a safe place to raise his children. The difference between us is that I was granted political asylum because I was at risk of being forcibly conscripted, while Mohammed received the right to stay in Denmark under temporary protection status under the Danish Aliens Law 7.3.¹⁶ He shared with me how the new restrictions on family reunification directly affect his family, his wellbeing, and his integration. He said:

This law devastates me—it split me and my children. What kind of integration does Denmark talk about? Which kind of integration is expected of me? When some of my Syrian friends invite me to visit them with their family I cannot bear to join. How can I ignore that my family is in the war zone and I cannot make them safe? The laws in Denmark drive me mad.

Family separation is hard for all of us. More men than women seek asylum because the men flee first and face the dangers of the journey so that they can find a way to bring their families to join them more safely.

Box 1: Law L87

On Tuesday, 26 January 2016, a broad majority in the *Folketing* (Danish parliament) passed bill L87 which introduced a long series of restrictive measures aimed at making it less attractive to seek asylum in Denmark. For refugees, the most problematic part of law L87 is the exclusion of refugees on “temporary protection status” (according to article 7.3 of the Danish Aliens law) from family reunification for the first three years after being granted residency. This has been heavily criticized by UNHCR and many Danish NGOs. The Danish Institute for Human Rights has—in its comments to L 87—established that there is a “very strong foundation” (*meget sikkert grundlag*) in legal precedent of the European Court of Human Rights that this part of the bill is not in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights.

¹⁶ See Box One. Quotes from “Fact sheet on Danish refugee policy and the position of the Red-Green Alliance” available at: <https://enhedslisten.dk/2016/01/28/fact-sheet-on-danish-refugee-policy-and-the-position-of-the-red-green-alliance>

Fathers Taking Action

Having been granted asylum, I came to Aarhus by myself first and eventually had the right to apply for family reunification. It was hard to have to wait a long time for my family and to face the challenges alone, while I missed my wife and my daughter. Even though I had to flee Syria to avoid being drafted into the regime's military, sometimes I felt guilty because I left my family in war circumstances while I was safe in Denmark. The time it took for them to be allowed to join me was much longer than I had expected.



Figure 1 Screenshot of me explaining to my family how people commute on bicycles in Aarhus.

I wanted to be a good father and support my family well, but they were so far away. Then I met a Syrian refugee called Aabdulghafar. He was in the same situation, waiting for his wife and three children. We decided to do something so we could be in touch with our families in a useful way during the waiting time. We started making videos with Danes to share with our children. The videos are about what we've learned in Denmark, the language, and Danish culture and society. For example, we showed how people use bicycles and that the streets even had bicycle lanes, something that people in Syria would not know.¹⁷ Another example, is a video made by Dilbrin, also from Syria. His video shows his children the Danish language class he was attending.¹⁸

We called the initiative Anaobaba.tv, which is Arabic for "Me-and-Daddy.tv." We use these videos to reduce the distance between us and our families and be good fathers even when we are separated.

Box 2: Anaobaba.tv Video

The video shows Dilbrin standing with two Danish students who were interested in the project. Speaking to his children back in Syria, he says "hi" and then introduces the students. One of them says "hi" to his children, and Dilbrin tries to show that he is meeting people from many different countries, that he is learning a new language, and then shows his book from which he studies.

He told me that he would like to push his children and motivate them to study, and to give them hope that they will meet again one day and have a good school to attend. He promised his children to make a good video about the public schools in Denmark, which he has done.



¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubl8hiRmXA0>

¹⁸ See Box 2. Video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO2ktOKPwjw&t=2s>

Conclusion

Ambivalent and unsettled: that is perhaps a way to summarize the picture that emerges from non-Western refugees in Aarhus. On one hand, some of the lucky few who get asylum and permission to move out of the asylum centers, appreciate many aspects of living in Aarhus. Compared to compatriots who fled to other countries, living in a welfare state is remarkable. Refugees speak and talk to each other across country borders, using Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and more. At times it is awkward to convey the problems we face in Denmark to those in less fortunate circumstances. While we are “taken care off,” the biggest issue is that we so blatantly are not welcome. The official Danish unwelcoming policy is causing an increase in xenophobia and Islamophobia and makes many refugees feel unsettled, even if initial housing and social services are provided to us. What is called “integration” in fact is more akin to “assimilation” with a subtitle: please prepare to leave. We worry about our own future and that of our children. Maybe we will never leave Denmark, but maybe we will. We never expected that we would leave our countries.

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Appendix A: Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Denmark

Since 1989, Denmark has received around 500 so called “quota refugees”¹⁹ a year under an arrangement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the context of *resettlement*. It has seen a steady increase in immigration over the past 30 years (see Figure 2), with most new immigrants and refugee immigrants originating from non-Western countries.

Refugee policies and their implementation fall under the Ministry of Immigration and Integration. There is a division of labor between the central national government and municipal authorities. Asylum-seekers are housed and processed in asylum centers which are run by the national central government. Quota refugees, or asylum seekers who obtain “convention refugee” status, then become the responsibility of municipal authorities under a *Dispersal Policy on Refugee Immigrants*.²⁰ There are 98 municipalities in Denmark and almost 30% of all immigrants and descendants in Denmark live in the country's two largest municipalities, Copenhagen and Aarhus.²¹

Denmark is known for its social welfare system and liberal values, where social protection and promotion of citizens' social and economic well-being is considered a responsibility of the state. Denmark is signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, and therefore attracted considerable international attention when in 2016 the government said that the Convention should be open to revision. This reflects that Denmark's understanding of its role in global affairs has radically transformed over the last 15-20 years, along with its immigration policies and national debate on Muslim immigration.^{22, 23, 24}

¹⁹ A refugee delegated for resettlement in Denmark under the Dublin Regulation of the EU that determines how many refugees are resettled in each country as an attempt at “burden sharing.”

²⁰ Anna Piil Damm (2014). The Danish Dispersal Policy on Refugee Immigrants 1986-1998: A Natural Experiment? Aarhus School of Business.

²¹ Hvidtfeldt & Schultz-Nielsen (2017)

²² Gammeltoft-Hansen and Malmvig (2017). The Ugly Duckling: Denmark's Anti-Refugee Policies and Europe's Race to the Bottom. Huffington Post. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/thomas-gammeltoft-hansen/denmark-refugee-europe_b_9574538.html?guccounter=1

²³ Atkin, C. (2015). Danish Government publishes anti-refugee adverts in Lebanese newspapers. The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/danish-government-publishes-anti-refugee-adverts-in-lebanese-newspapers-10491395.html>

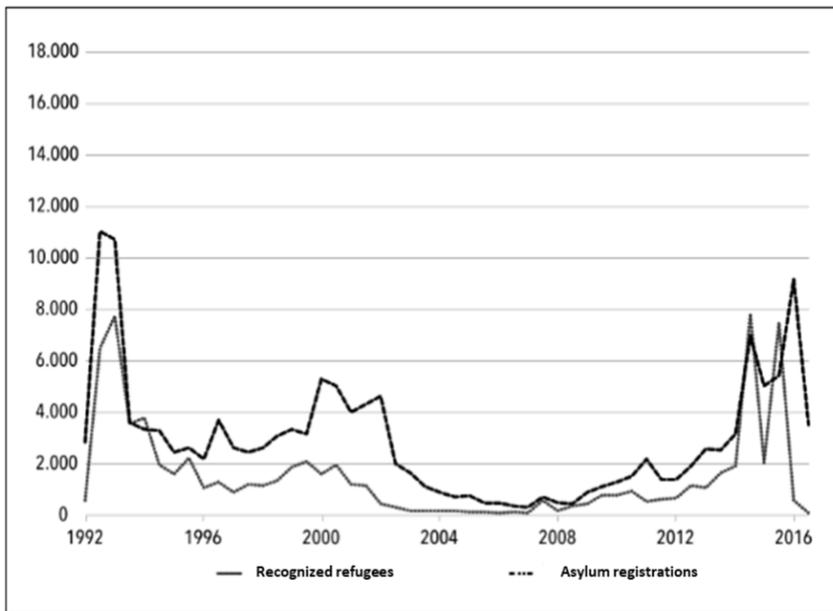
²⁴ See for example:

Atkin, C. (2015). Danish Government publishes anti-refugee adverts in Lebanese newspapers. The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/danish-government-publishes-anti-refugee-adverts-in-lebanese-newspapers-10491395.html>

Delman, E. (2016). How not the Welcome Refugees: With its new immigration law, Denmark is once again sending a blunt message to migrants. The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/denmark-refugees-immigration-law/431520/>

Kirchick, J. (2016). In Defense of Denmark. Foreign Policy. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/20/in-defense-of-denmark-immigration-europe-refugee-crisis/>

Figure 2: Half-yearly registration of asylum seekers and recognized refugees (1992-2016)²⁵



In the early 1990s, the number of refugees was particularly high due to the civil war in former Yugoslavia. Approximately 34,900 asylum seekers arrived in Denmark between 1992 and 1994. In the period from 1996 to 2000, the number of asylum seekers fell to an average of 2,900 a year, while the level from 2000 to 2002 was approximately 4,200. Thereafter, the number dropped to less than 2,000 registered asylum seekers per year until the period after 2010.

From 2010-2015, the number of asylum seekers in Denmark increased greatly from 7,555 in 2013 to 21,316 in 2015. This was caused by a large increase in applicants from Afghanistan (2,331), Iran (2,787), Iraq (1,537), and Syria (8,608). In recent years, the number of asylum seekers has once more increased dramatically, due to the ongoing civil war in Syria. These refugees were part of the 1.3 million people who have applied for asylum in the 28 EU Member states in 2015, which marked the largest annual flow of asylum seekers to Europe since 1985.

In 2015 Denmark received an extraordinary 21,316 asylum applications—primarily Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan—and the Danish Government has since introduced several restrictive legislative and administrative measures. These efforts have made international news as Denmark was the first EU country to publish “anti-refugee” ads in Arabic language newspapers.

Noack, R. (2015). Denmark wants to seize jewellery and cash from refugees. *Washington Post*.

The Local. (2018a). Denmark's immigration minister faces new criticism over EU ruling. The Local. Available at: <https://www.thelocal.dk/20180110/denmarks-immigration-minister-faces-new-criticism-over-eu-ruling>

²⁵ The following groups were excluded from the calculation of the number of recognized refugees: 1) refugees under observation before they have applied for asylum; 2) refugees with unknown valid application dates; and 3) the so called “Convention refugees,” “kvoteflygninge” in Danish under UNHCR’s resettlement durable solution arrangement (UNHCR 2016). Source: Hvidtfeldt & Schultz-Nielsen 2017, adapted and translated from Danish by the author.

In 2017, 3,500 people applied for asylum in Denmark. This is about 300 per month, which is the lowest number of applicants in six years. The number of asylum seekers entering Denmark remains low in 2018, with 806 people applying for asylum in Denmark at the writing this report. The nationalities of applicants are now primarily Eritrean, Syrian, and Georgian.

Appendix B: Aarhus and the Urban Impact of Migration

Aarhus is Denmark's second largest city, located on the east coast of the Jutland peninsula. It has a population of 336,411, of which almost 16% are immigrants. Eleven percent of the immigrants have a non-Western background.²⁶

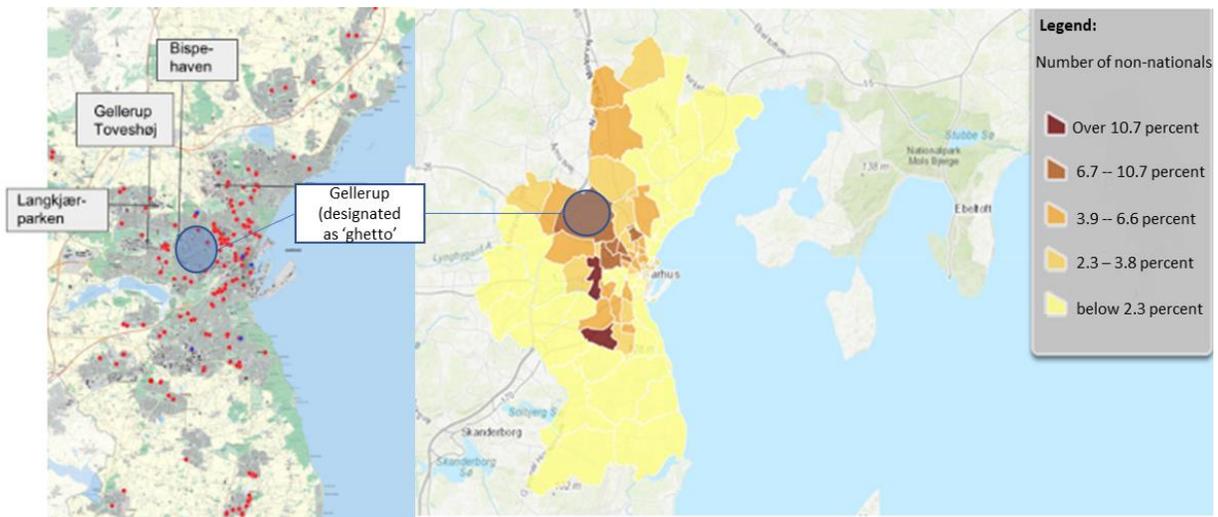
Aarhus formulated an integration policy in 2007, which was revised in 2011 and 2012. This policy was set up as a series of guiding integration goals, which seek to embrace all ethnic minorities in the municipality. The municipality is responsible for finding a permanent accommodation (not in the ghettos) for the refugees. Three areas in Aarhus are formally classified as ghettos, defined as places where more than 50% of residents are non-Western immigrants, and where unemployment exceeds 40% (among other criteria). This policy aims to ensure mixed housing in the general residential areas and avoid increasing the proportion of people who are socially disadvantaged in already exposed residential areas.²⁷ A new law prevents people from getting social benefits if they move to the ghetto areas of Gellerupparken and Toveshøj (see map below). Special measures include plans to double penalties for crimes committed in these areas.

The goals of Aarhus' integration policy are to be incorporated into all relevant municipal authorities and departments, including the Department of Employment and the Department of Children and Young People. Following the national agenda and policies, the area of employment has become increasingly interlinked with the integration efforts of Aarhus municipality. This is evident in the most recent employment action plan of Aarhus municipality (2017), which states that "many more refugees and immigrants are going to work."²⁸

²⁶ Denmark Bureau of Statistics www.dst.dk

²⁷ According to the Public Housing Act, the Ministry of Transport, Building and Housing calculates and publishes a list of ghetto areas each year on 1 December. Simultaneously with the list of ghetto areas, the list of areas where the rules for combined rental can be used is published (the Ministry of Transport, Building and Housing 2018).

²⁸ Aarhus Municipality 2017b, page 3



The red dots on the map on the left show the **locations where refugees are assigned housing by Aarhus Municipality**. Notably, this is **outside the neighborhoods with large numbers residents with non-western nationalities**. Including Gellerup, that is the largest neighborhood officially designated a ghetto. Note that refugees (red dots) are housed outside Gellerup (blue circles).

Sources: map on the right <http://webgis.aarhus.dk/socio/aarhuskortet2016/> (public domain), map on the left by Kåre Kildall Rysgaard, 26. January 2016 in: "Kommuner undgår flere flygtninge i belastedeboligområde" (Municipalities avoid more refugees in challenged residential areas) https://www.ugebreveta4.dk/kommuner-bedre-at-lejligheder-staar-tomme-end-at-fly_20356.aspx. Used with permission

About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

About the Author

Abdullah is a master's degree student in International Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark, and holds a degree in law from Damascus University, specializing in Children's Rights. He is passionate and active in bringing different cultures together, and creating better living conditions for his community. In Denmark he is working on starting two initiatives with refugees from different backgrounds called [Den Nye Havn](#) (The New Harbor) and [Anaobaba.tv \(Me and Daddy TV\)](#), both focusing on welcoming refugees, involving them in volunteer work, and helping them to support each other. Previously, Abdullah worked in Syria as a volunteer coordinator, supporting youth, the poor, people with special needs, orphans, juvenile delinquents, and refugees. He also worked for the United Nations Development Program as a field coordinator before and during the Syrian war.

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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