

Small Boats, Big Stakes

Options for a UK-EU Deal on Migration and Asylum

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Executive Summary

When it left the European Union, the United Kingdom lost its participation in the EU system for managing which country is responsible for which asylum seekers. This change has been a major, though not the sole, factor in burgeoning numbers of people attempting to reach UK shores in small boats, some dying in the process. The UK government and its European counterparts recently announced progress on cooperation in trade, security, and youth mobility, but addressing the politically corrosive Channel crossings will depend on whether the United Kingdom and its EU partners sign a readmissions deal—an issue that has proved much more thorny.

Under the contemplated deal, the United Kingdom would accept transfers of certain asylum seekers from the European Union in return for an agreement by France and/or other Calais Group countries (Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands) to readmit asylum seekers who have reached the United Kingdom by sea. Such an agreement could be a bilateral readmission agreement, which would be easiest to stand up but holds political risks for the French if it lacks the European Union's blessing. Alternately, an agreement could be reached with the European Union itself to facilitate the readmission of small boat arrivals directly to the EU country responsible for them, in line with rules set out by the EU Pact

on Migration and Asylum—an option that could take longer to negotiate but also reduce the risk of simply shifting irregular migration routes to a neighboring country. The architects of the deal will need to balance the need to quickly deliver an agreement and proof of concept with the longer-term goal of creating a system that will significantly bring down dangerous Channel crossings and improve how countries share responsibility for the asylum seekers involved.

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At the same time, this deal is an opportunity to test a more managed approach to asylum and migration. This could be done by establishing multipurpose hubs in France that rapidly process people with likely protection claims for orderly pathways to the United Kingdom (such as resettlement, family reunification, or private sponsorship), drawing on lessons from the Safe Mobility Offices in the Americas and using technological tools including artificial intelligence to support processing. Such a system would bolster the deterrent effect of a readmissions deal by providing a viable safe alternative to smuggler-facilitated crossings for a segment of the population most at risk of making such journeys. It would also

provide an effective way for the United Kingdom to fulfill its side of the bargain in a readmissions deal, by accepting referrals from France at roughly equivalent numbers to Channel returns.

While this might not reduce the number of people receiving humanitarian protection in the United Kingdom, it would make the process more managed and predictable; indeed, arrivals could be subject to a cap indexed to readmissions from the United Kingdom to France. Converting irregular small boat arrivals into orderly, screened admissions would also be much more acceptable to the UK public, whose anxiety about this issue is driven primarily by the perception of a loss of control rather than the numbers of asylum seekers per se.

Meanwhile, this model would help address what has become a humanitarian and political crisis for the French. An orderly registration process on the French side would bring people out of the shadows and, if not referred for relocation, support processing of their asylum claims or allow the French authorities to initiate their transfer to the EU country responsible for their case or return for those who have exhausted avenues to remain in France. At the same time, a readmissions deal could be a moment to beef up UK-France cooperation on counter-smuggling, surveillance, and third-country returns. For instance, the United Kingdom could offer shared charter flights, given that insufficient flight capacity is one of France's major bottlenecks in third-country returns. This would reduce possible secondary attempts to cross the Channel again, and help address the pooling of migrants in northern France in a more comprehensive way. To sweeten the deal further vis-à-vis other European partners, the United Kingdom could offer to take some relocations through the new EU "Solidarity Pool," a system for relocating 30,000 asylum seekers per year within the bloc, which may otherwise struggle to achieve its goals because an increasing number of EU Member States are signaling they intend to provide financial contri-

butions, rather than relocation places, amid political pressure.

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All in all, this is an opportunity for UK and EU policymakers to build the muscles needed to cooperatively address migration issues, with considerable potential to reduce the human toll of this small but harmful strip of water. Moreover, if a pilot of the multipurpose hub process works, the United Kingdom could explore similar models for processing migrants en route combined with safe third country agreements with other partners—laying the groundwork for a more humane, predictable, and politically viable approach to humanitarian protection.

1 Introduction

Addressing crossings of Channel waters in small, often unseaworthy vessels from France to the United Kingdom has become a top priority for governments on both sides. Small boat arrivals are acting as a visible blight on the UK government's record on immigration, and 2024 was the deadliest year to date.¹ The small boats issue has become a top doorstep issue, driving strong results by the populist Reform UK party in the May 2025 local elections. Meanwhile on the French side, the poor conditions in which many asylum seekers live in northern France and the infiltration of various camps by smuggling networks have prompted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), local government officials, and other on-the-ground actors to ring the alarm on a growing humanitarian crisis.

To make progress on the issue of small boats, the UK government has made improving relations with the European Union and France a priority. The country has extended its agreement with France to resource police patrols on French beaches to reduce departures, and France has agreed to change its law to allow authorities to intercept boats after their launch and prevent the practice of “taxi boats” picking up people already in the water to avoid interception by the authorities.² But the real prize would be a readmissions deal (with either France or the European Union as a whole), which UK policymakers see as essential to severing the pull factor behind Channel crossings. Since many asylum seekers in the European Union have ties in the United Kingdom, or see it as offering better economic prospects, many are willing to risk their lives to reach UK shores. If they knew they had a non-negligible chance of being returned to France, the reasoning goes, this would break the magnet effect and reduce irregular crossings. To get a readmissions deal off the ground, however, the United Kingdom will need to show solidarity with its European counterparts and acknowledge the additional pressures it would place on the French, namely by admitting some people through managed, lawful pathways in exchange.

This policy brief begins by diagnosing the small boats problem, explaining why it has exploded in recent years and what is known about the people who cross. It then analyzes how a readmissions deal could work, given the legal constraints that both sides are operating within, and identifies steps that could be taken to make this work. Finally, the brief outlines different options for the United Kingdom to show solidarity by accepting the transfer of some asylum seekers, whether via processing in a specific partner country such as France or through the newly created EU Solidarity Pool.

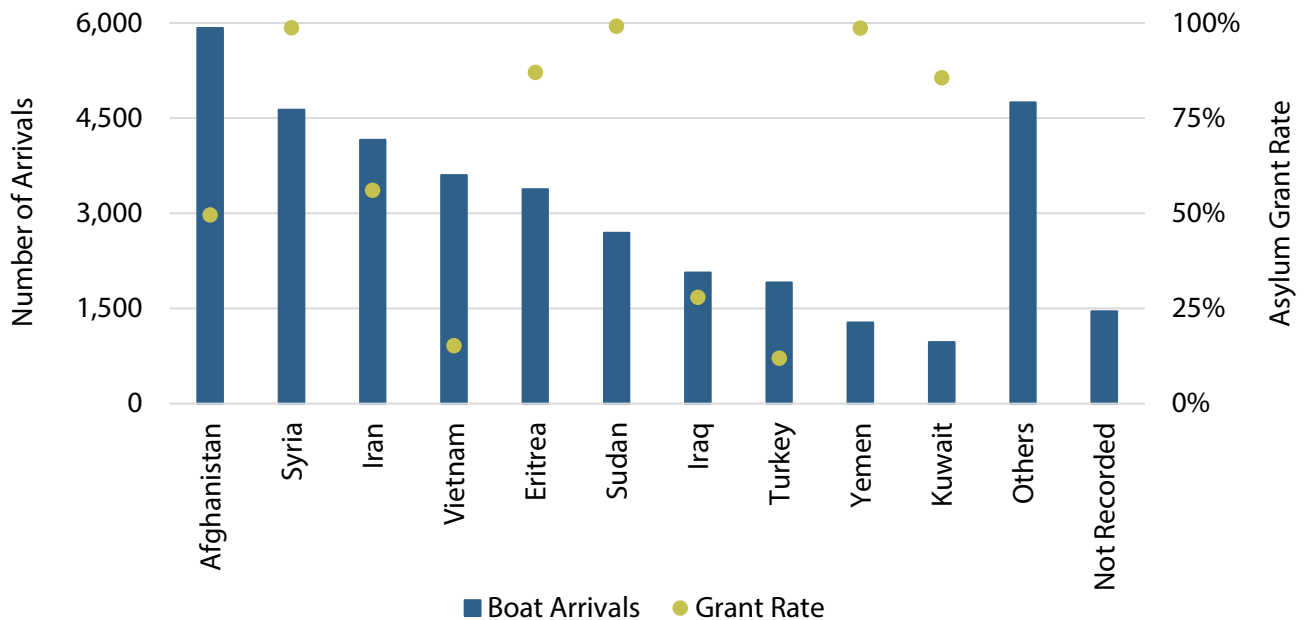
2 Who Crosses the Channel and Why?

Small boat crossings of the English Channel have been increasing since 2018, for a number of reasons. This trend partly reflects a general increase in irregular migration worldwide during this period,³ but the Channel route has also gained in prominence. The United Kingdom has in recent years stepped up its enforcement of truck crossings (which were previously a more prevalent mode of smuggling migrants into the country), and more road travel restrictions were in force during the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which have pushed people to attempt to enter the country through other means. Other factors include the increased professionalization of smuggling operations and, relatedly, smugglers offering more competitive prices for boat crossings.⁴

The exact routes taken have also changed over time. Originally concentrated around the French port city of Calais, departure zones have since extended both southward to areas such as Berck and northward toward the Belgian border. Many people preparing to cross gather in places such as Grande-Synthe in France and various parts of Belgium before making their way to the French coast.⁵ Most small boats are monitored by the authorities and intercepted at sea off the coast of Kent, but some evade detection, land, and are reported by local residents.

People cross the Channel for a mix of reasons, including humanitarian protection needs, family or other personal ties, and study or job opportunities. Many of those who undertake the journey are from nationalities often granted protection in the United Kingdom (see Figure 1). For instance, Syrians were the second-largest nationality group among those arriving by boat in 2024, and 99 percent of asylum claims filed by Syrians were granted at initial decision (although the United Kingdom paused processing for Syrians in December 2024 following regime

FIGURE 1

People Detected Arriving Irregularly in the United Kingdom by Boat, by Nationality and Asylum Grant Rate, 2024

Note: The data in this figure are for initial grant rates.

Source: UK Home Office, “Immigration System Statistics Data Tables—Irregular Migration to the UK Summary Tables, Year Ending December 2024—Irr_02b and Irr_02g,” accessed May 28, 2025.

change in Syria).⁶ Sudanese and Yemeni claims have equally high initial grant rates (99 percent), and half or more of claims filed by Afghans and Iranians (the first- and third-largest groups of arrivals) were also granted.⁷ This suggests that many of those crossing the Channel may have a valid protection claim. Additionally, personal networks seem to play an important role since the top nationalities for people who cross have larger diaspora populations in the United Kingdom than in France.⁸

One of the consequences of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union is that it is no longer part of the EU system that determines which country is responsible for individual asylum claims. This system was originally set out in the Dublin Convention in 1990,⁹ later made a regulation, and has now been revised under the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR), part of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.¹⁰ Formerly known

simply as “Dublin,” the system assigns responsibility for asylum cases to a particular EU country based on where a person first entered the bloc or where they have “meaningful connections” such as family. It is designed to prevent “asylum shopping,” whereby an asylum seeker chooses a particular EU destination country in which to seek protection rather than applying in the first safe third country they enter in the European Union, and to avoid prolonged debates over responsibility between EU countries that leave asylum seekers in limbo. For the United Kingdom, leaving Dublin has meant that it cannot transfer asylum seekers back to the first EU country they passed through. It also means that a portion of Channel crossers may be doing so to avoid Dublin rules, if they do not want to be transferred to the EU country where they first arrived and were fingerprinted or if they are trying to evade a return order in an EU country.¹¹

These dynamics point to a few considerations for policymakers working to hammer out a UK-EU or UK-France cooperation agreement:

- 1 **Many of those crossing may have valid protection or even family unification claims in the United Kingdom.** It is also likely that many who cross have already received an asylum decision (positive or negative) or a return order from an EU country, or have a pending application under the responsibility of a Member State other than France, per Dublin/AMMR rules.
- 2 **Returns to France are complicated by the fact that the United Kingdom no longer has access to information about asylum seekers' history.** In leaving the European Union, the country lost access to Eurodac, the biometric database for asylum seekers who submit claims within the European Union, which is used to assign responsibility for their claims to a particular country. Being unable to verify someone's asylum status in the European Union raises potential political risks that UK officials should bear in mind; for instance, granting asylum to people whose claims have been rejected elsewhere in Europe could trigger a public outcry.
- 3 **Asylum seekers and smugglers can rapidly shift to other locations or even other routes when one is closed off.** This can be plainly seen by the speed with which the small boats issue exploded when the UK government cracked down on irregular migration by truck. At present, departures from the Belgian coastline are generally avoided due to the longer crossing distance and the area's higher population density, which makes it more difficult to launch a boat undetected. But smugglers may move in this direction if new restrictions are implemented in France. Avoiding such shifts would be

a major value-add of a UK deal with the European Union overall rather than with a single country, such as France.

3 Options for Cooperation

Since the new UK government came to power in mid-2024, it has sought to restart discussions on asylum cooperation with the European Union as part of a broader “reset” in relations. Following the UK-EU summit in May 2025, the two sides announced their commitment to working together on “practical and innovative approaches to reduce irregular migration,” “a balanced youth experience scheme,” and deepening cooperation on trade, security, and defense.¹² The UK government has made clear it hopes that a readmissions deal with France or the European Union would reduce small boat crossings, relieve pressure on the UK asylum system, and bolster attempts to break smugglers' business model.¹³

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But for such a deal to be viable politically, it needs to involve some form of responsibility-sharing with the European Union—and this will likely have to go beyond a small family unification program. Additionally, on the EU side, much of the focus is currently on other priorities, not least the war in Ukraine and the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum. In this context, the UK government could pursue progress on an agreement that is initially narrower in scope but that could lay the groundwork for more comprehensive cooperation with the European Union in the future.

A. *Designing a Readmissions Deal*

The first element of a readmissions deal would be setting up a process by which people who arrive in the United Kingdom in small boats could be returned to France or another EU country. EU Member States and the EU institutions have long sought to deter the United Kingdom from brokering any post-Brexit bilateral deals, preferring to stay united. However, there are significant legal and operational barriers to a broader UK-EU deal, especially one that follows the AMMR. Chief among these is the fact that the United Kingdom is unable to access the Eu-rodac database, which is the de facto gold standard for evidence of an individual's transit or prior asylum claim in another country. A readmission agreement between France and the United Kingdom alone would likely be easier and faster to implement, as it would avoid complex negotiations over transit routes and evidence of responsibility, which have caused delays in the Dublin system. France, however, has expressed concerns about a bilateral deal, which would leave it the only EU country responsible for receiving returns from the United Kingdom, and there is a risk departures could shift to Belgium and the Netherlands to avoid triggering returns to France.¹⁴

Assuming a deal between the United Kingdom and France, most people intercepted in the Channel or encountered immediately after disembarking in the United Kingdom would be returned to France, based on the presumption that they had transited through the country. Individuals readmitted to France would be able to file or continue any claims for protection there. This arrangement could potentially be extended to include other states on a multiparty basis, such as members of the Calais Group (which includes Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands in addition to France and the United Kingdom).

The steps for such a readmission process would have to involve:

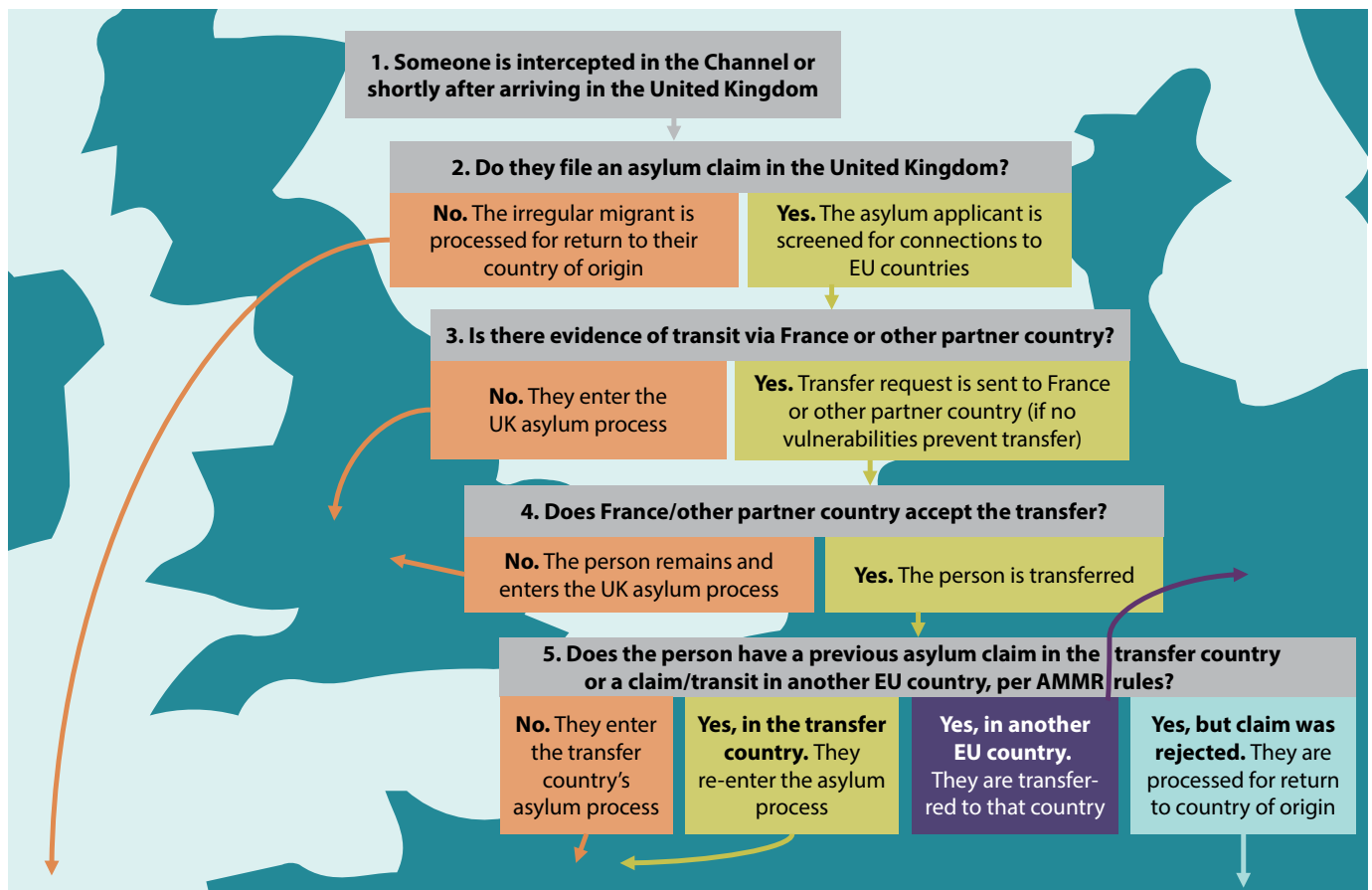
- 1 **Interception.** Individuals who are intercepted by UK authorities in the Channel or apprehended immediately after arriving irregularly in the United Kingdom should be provided the opportunity to file an asylum claim and be screened for vulnerabilities, per UK obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.¹⁵ Individuals who do not file for asylum would have to be treated as irregular migrants under UK law and could be returned to their country of origin.¹⁶
- 2 **Registration and screening.** Following the registration of an asylum claim, applicants should be screened for connections to a safe country and for vulnerabilities, per UK law.¹⁷ This should include an examination of the applicant's travel route to determine if there is reason to believe the person transited via France (such as travel by boat); if so, they would be placed into admissibility procedures for verification of the route (see below), and those whose transit is confirmed would have their asylum application deemed inadmissible in the United Kingdom. Individuals who have particular vulnerabilities and for whom transfers might pose risks (such as unaccompanied children) could be allowed to proceed with an asylum claim in the United Kingdom.
- 3 **Verification of route.** Any readmissions deal would need to include agreement on what evidence is acceptable to prove transit via France, as part of the examination of an applicant's travel route. One option would be to agree that individuals who are intercepted in the Channel or apprehended immediately after disembarkation could be presumed to

have transited via France. If the agreement were expanded to include additional partner countries (e.g., the Calais Group), more detailed evidence of the individual's travel route would be needed to determine which country should be responsible for them. This task is complicated by the United Kingdom's lack of access to the biometric data collected by EU transit countries and stored in Eurodac. As an alternative to direct access, the United Kingdom and France (or other partners) could stand up a Bilateral Digital Screening Pilot (Eurodac-Lite), whereby liaison officers from partner countries could be stationed in the United Kingdom and use their Eurodac access to check if asylum seekers previously transited through or filed an asylum claim in an EU Member State.

4 Readmission to France and possible onward transfer or return. When evidence is found that an individual transited via France, UK authorities would submit a transfer request to French authorities. If the request is accepted, the individual would then be transferred back to France, where they would be given the opportunity to file an asylum claim or resume a claim that was already open. If a readmitted asylum applicant has connections to another EU country, as defined by the AMMR (such as evidence of transit), France could transfer the individual to the relevant EU Member State. If the individual has a previously rejected asylum claim, they would be subject to return procedures.

FIGURE 2

Readmissions Process from the United Kingdom to France or Other Partner Countries



Source: Illustration by the authors.

To serve as an effective deterrent for Channel crossings, readmission would need to happen quickly. This means that operational simplicity and efficiency would be critical. But to avoid exacerbating humanitarian issues in northern France and creating a situation in which people simply try to cross again, there would need to be a plan in place for how to handle those readmitted to France, including for processing their asylum claims there or in another responsible EU Member State and for returning those with rejected asylum claims to their countries of origin. The United Kingdom will continue to be bound by an obligation under the European Convention on Human Rights to ensure that the country of return, in this case France (or other partner countries), has sufficient and effective asylum procedures available for applicants and no systemic deficiencies in reception conditions. In this assessment, the special vulnerabilities of certain applicants, such as unaccompanied minors, would also need to be considered, per previous case law.¹⁸

A readmissions deal could be leveraged to comprehensively address the situation in northern France through broader UK-France cooperation on third-country returns. While France has been working to increase the proportion of people with rejected asylum claims and returns orders who are ultimately returned, one of the major bottlenecks is insufficient charter flight capacity. Here, UK-France cooperation could create the economies of scale to allow for more flights, and the United Kingdom could offer its expertise and resources to support greater use of voluntary return and reintegration.

B. Showing Solidarity in Return for Readmissions

Whether a deal is signed with France, a small number of EU Member States, or the European Union as a whole, the United Kingdom will need to offer something in return. One of the long-standing discussions

has been that the United Kingdom could accept the transfer of people with family ties in the country; this has a dual rationale, in that people with ties may integrate more easily into British society than other asylum seekers, and creating a managed pathway for people with UK family ties could lessen the draw of dangerous Channel crossings for one of the groups most likely to attempt them, even if they get asylum in another European country. Ideally, whatever the United Kingdom offers to show solidarity should also move the needle on whether people decide to attempt the crossing, namely by showing that there is a viable legal pathway to the United Kingdom, which points to the need for scale.

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For the United Kingdom to take some transfers from the European Union, it could either screen people along migration routes, ideally starting with northern France, and/or take people through the Solidarity Pool envisaged under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. These transfers could be complemented with UK financial contributions to the migration-management operations of its European counterparts, such as supporting additional reception capacity or financial contributions to the Solidarity Pool. Employing multiple levers could give UK policymakers greater flexibility to reach some form of parity, which may make this the best approach for progressing diplomatically.

Option 1: Safe-Mobility-Style Initiative in France for Individuals with UK Ties

One option would be to create multipurpose hubs modelled on the Safe Mobility Offices the United States set up across the Americas during the Biden

presidency. Spread around France, these hubs could process individuals intent on getting to the United Kingdom to determine their eligibility for particular admissions pathways. In addition to providing a way to identify people for transfers to the United Kingdom, targeting people in northern France would be most likely to affect the decision-making of would-be Channel crossers. For this to happen, it would be important for people to see this as a viable alternative route to the United Kingdom, meaning that the numbers of people admitted would have to be meaningful, processing rapid, and the launch of these hubs communicated alongside a readmissions deal.¹⁹ However, the architects of these hubs will have to contend with the risk of more secondary movements within Europe if asylum seekers perceive this as a surefire avenue into the United Kingdom.

Identifying Potential Candidates

Initially, the initiative could be piloted with individuals of nationalities that have high asylum grant rates or those who are highly likely to have protection claims, and then rolled out to other eligible groups. The goal would be to identify individuals in northern France with UK connections and protection needs, so initially it would make sense to work with local NGOs to identify high-priority populations (though after the initial pilot, people could also be given an option to self-refer by registering via a digital platform). Connections to the United Kingdom could be defined more expansively than family unification alone; for instance, this could include prior education in the United Kingdom or having a sponsorship group willing to support the individual after arrival through a community sponsorship for refugees program.

Individuals identified as potentially eligible would then be transferred to reception centers in other parts of France to complete the process. This would help to reduce pressure on reception facilities in northern France, which face capacity issues, and avoid creating a pull factor driving additional in-

dividuals to northern France in hopes of accessing relocation to the United Kingdom. Reception centers near UK consulates (including in Bordeaux and Marseille) could be used to facilitate faster processing. To ensure sufficient capacity at these reception centers, the UK government could provide additional financial support to the NGOs that operate the centers. This would have the added benefit of helping to address capacity shortfalls in the French reception system—another form of responsibility-sharing.

Processing Claims and Granting Status

After arrival at a reception center, individuals who express protection needs would be instructed to register to file an asylum claim in France. This would facilitate the completion of identity checks and initial screening according to EU law, but it would also make it possible to screen out nationals from countries with low asylum grant rates before referring those who opt to pursue a transfer to the United Kingdom to UK officials to be screened for eligibility for relocation. Processing of individuals' asylum claims in France would be paused while they are under consideration for relocation to the United Kingdom, and those admitted to the United Kingdom would withdraw their asylum claims in France.

For individuals interested in and eligible for relocation, the UK government has several potential options to facilitate their admission. First, they could be admitted on a humanitarian visa, after which they could complete an asylum application. The United Kingdom does not have a general humanitarian visa framework, but it could set one up on an ad hoc basis (as was done to facilitate Ukrainian admissions).²⁰ However, if all admitted individuals must go through an asylum procedure after arrival, this risks adding to the country's asylum backlog. Alternatively, the United Kingdom could complete a full refugee resettlement procedure, including any necessary substantive assessment of an individual's status and protection needs, in France prior to relocation. This

would avoid adding to the UK asylum backlog, but it would require a longer processing time in France. For those with close family in the United Kingdom, a family reunification procedure could also be used. The speed of screening processes could be expedited through the use of technological tools (such as using artificial intelligence to support vetting or nationality assessments), while maintaining human oversight.²¹

As an alternative to using such pathways, the United Kingdom could consider operating a full asylum procedure in France, as was recently recommended by the Future Governance Forum.²² Conducting asylum determinations in France would ensure the United Kingdom is only admitting individuals with a valid asylum claim (unlike with a humanitarian visa, where individuals are admitted and then screened for asylum once in the country). However, this process would need to provide applicants with the same legal guarantees that asylum seekers have on UK soil, including full appeals rights.²³ It would therefore be a significant and potentially costly undertaking, since the UK authorities would be obligated to give all applicants a hearing, which would mean large operational burdens in France. A simpler procedure such as refugee resettlement, which does not entail appeals rights, would accomplish the same goal.

Whichever admissions pathway or processing option is selected, the program could operate with a monthly quota that is indexed to readmissions numbers from the United Kingdom. This would allow for rough parity in responsibility-sharing and provide predictability in terms of admissions numbers.

Grappling with Persistent Challenges

The architects of such a model would have to contend with the mixed nature of the migration flows involved. As discussed earlier, some people seeking to reach the United Kingdom may have pending asylum claims or a return order in EU countries. The

UK government will want to avoid the perception that it is granting asylum to people whose claims have been rejected in the European Union. It should also work to ensure that counselling is available for people unlikely to be eligible for a UK pathway, to advise them on alternative immigration pathways or assisted return options for which they may qualify. Individuals who are not eligible for relocation to the United Kingdom would be allowed to complete their asylum application in France or another EU Member State, depending on which is responsible for their case under the AMMR. The United Kingdom could also provide support with returns counselling and reintegration assistance for migrants returning to their countries of origin.

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While much could be done to prevent the hubs from attracting secondary movement from elsewhere in Europe, the potential for such a pull factor is likely to remain a concern in France. Lessons from the Safe Mobility Offices in the Americas suggest that, at least initially while establishing proof of concept, the countries hosting the hubs could set more stringent criteria for the populations eligible to be served to avoid pooling. This could include criteria related to individuals' nationality and/or cutoff dates for when they entered France or another EU Member State.

Ideally, however, a pilot in France would be the first step toward building more cooperation between the United Kingdom and European Union that would more structurally address the small boats issue, and ultimately toward integrating into the revised AMMR/Dublin procedure a step to screen asylum seekers in EU Member States for meaningful links to the United Kingdom. As part of this expanding co-

operation, an online portal could potentially be created to allow individuals elsewhere in the European Union to self-refer to the UK relocation program for screening. The online portal could be geofenced to limit its use to certain countries or routes, to avoid creating a pull factor or additional pressure on new countries.

Option 2: UK Contributions to the EU Solidarity Pool

Instead of targeting individuals in particular geographies or along specific routes, the United Kingdom could commit to accepting a predetermined number of asylum seekers via the EU Solidarity Pool envisaged by the Pact on Migration and Asylum.²⁴ The political situation in many European countries has meant that several are indicating they may take the option to provide financial support in lieu of places, which could undermine the operations of the not-yet-launched Solidarity Pool. Offering support in the form of relocation places would therefore help the United Kingdom build important diplomatic capital.

The United Kingdom could pledge a certain number of places in coordination with the European Commission as part of the High Level Solidarity Forum each year, as established by the AMMR. The UK pledges could be formally included in the Council decision establishing the annual Solidarity Pool, to give the pledges further legal weight. To fulfill these pledges, the Solidarity Pool would need to be activated by a Member State that finds its asylum and migration management systems under pressure, per AMMR procedures.

Individuals eligible for relocation would be identified by the Member State that activated the AMMR, with attention paid to meaningful links to the United Kingdom and family unity considerations. Eligible individuals could then be transferred to the United Kingdom with a humanitarian visa, set up as part of an ad hoc program, where they would then com-

plete the asylum procedure. All transfers would be voluntary.

Offering pledges under the Solidarity Pool would avoid creating a potential pull factor, as could be the case if a relocation mechanism is based in specific locations such as northern France. Administratively, the United Kingdom could also rely on existing EU infrastructure to identify and refer beneficiaries. However, the impact of responsibility-sharing via solidarity pledges would be more diffuse. While the United Kingdom's immediate neighbors, especially France, would likely bear the brunt of any readmission agreement, the benefits of UK pledges to the Solidarity Pool would most likely accrue to countries at the European Union's external borders, such as Italy or Spain. Under the Solidarity Pool, the United Kingdom would also have less scope to determine the criteria under which individuals are admitted, as the Member State that has activated the Solidarity Pool would be responsible for identifying and referring eligible candidates.

4 Conclusion

A readmissions deal is essential to addressing the small boats issue, but such an agreement may be more difficult to operationalize than negotiators anticipate. To serve as an effective deterrent, readmission to France or other partner countries would have to happen quickly, but as this brief describes, there are both operational and legal constraints that make this difficult. UK authorities cannot simply turn back boats; as a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, the government has to facilitate arriving individuals' access to the asylum procedure, meaning that there are many steps before readmission, including having the opportunity to file an asylum claim, being screened for vulnerabilities, and verifying the asylum seeker's route of travel. Nonetheless, there are lighter-touch ways to do this, especially if creative solutions are considered, such as

assuming all arrivals intercepted in the Channel have come via France and thus not checking their exact route, or stationing liaison officers from EU partner countries in the United Kingdom to perform transit route checks using the Eurodac database.

To bolster the deterrent effect of a readmissions deal and comprehensively tackle the situation in northern France, the UK government and its European partners should seize the opportunity to build an alternative, safe, and managed process for individuals with likely protection claims and UK ties. In particular:

- ▶ **The United Kingdom and France should cooperate to create multipurpose hubs across France**, modelled on the Safe Mobility Offices in the Americas, to screen people for eligibility for lawful pathways to the United Kingdom.
- ▶ **Initially, the pilot should prioritize individuals with UK connections and from countries with high asylum recognition rates**. UK connections could be defined more expansively than family unification alone (for instance, including prior education in the United Kingdom or having a sponsorship group willing to provide support after arrival through a community sponsorship for refugees program).
- ▶ **The program should operate with a monthly quota that is indexed to readmissions numbers from the United Kingdom**, to achieve 1:1 parity in responsibility-sharing and provide predictable admissions numbers that the UK government could communicate clearly to its public.
- ▶ If the pilot is effective, **European and UK governments could explore similar models for processing migrants en route**, combined with safe third country agreements with other partners—laying the groundwork for a more managed approach to humanitarian protection.
- ▶ To facilitate readmissions from the United Kingdom to France, **the countries should initiate a Bilateral Digital Screening Pilot (Eurodac-Lite)** that enables checking the biometrics of arrivals in the United Kingdom against the Eurodac system. French liaison officers could be stationed at UK intake sites with secure tablets granting read-only access to Eurodac data.
- ▶ As part of a readmissions deal, **the United Kingdom should offer support for returns to origin countries (for instance, in the form of charter flights) and funding for reception capacity**; this would both reduce repeat Channel crossing attempts and address critical capacity priorities for France.
- ▶ To show solidarity to European partners, **the United Kingdom could further consider accepting a predetermined number of asylum seekers via the EU Solidarity Pool** currently being developed.

Ultimately, to have the desired effect of deterring Channel crossings, the United Kingdom will need to be serious about offering transfers that are significant enough in numbers that they are seen as a viable alternative to irregular crossings—a difficult task, given the political climate in the country. A first step in this direction entails being brave in communicating the issue to the electorate and not pretending that there are quick fixes to the small boats issue.

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- 9 “Convention Determining the State Responsible for Examining Applications for Asylum Lodged in One of the Member States of the European Communities - Dublin Convention,” *Official Journal of the European Communities* 1997 No. C 254/1, August 19, 1997.
- 10 “Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on Asylum and Migration Management, Amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and Repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013,” *Official Journal of the European Union* 2024 L 2024/1351, May 22, 2024.
- 11 For instance, some interviewees in the Mixed Migration Centre study of smuggling movements found that some asylum seekers were trying to get to the United Kingdom because they would otherwise be bound by the Dublin Regulation. See Mixed Migration Centre, *Beyond Restrictions*.
- 12 Government of United Kingdom, Cabinet Office, “UK-EU Summit – Common Understanding,” updated May 19, 2025.
- 13 Matt Dathan, “Why Labour Is Setting Its Sights Low for an EU Migrant Deal,” *The Times*, July 19, 2024.
- 14 There is a third option, however. The European Union should also consider an EU-negotiated deal that nonetheless exclusively obliges France (or France plus additional partner states) to readmit individuals from the United Kingdom. This could also be a stepping stone for further bilateral agreements. Something like this has been done before, in the form of the EU-Turkey Statement—a nonbinding statement of objectives that informed subsequent bilateral agreements between individual EU Member States and Turkey.
- 15 The European Convention on Human Rights prohibits collective expulsion and requires authorities to assess return decisions based on individual migrants’ circumstances. See Council of Europe, “Protocol No. 4 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Securing Certain Rights and Freedoms Other Than Those Already Included in the Convention and in the First Protocol Thereto,” September 16, 1963. See also *S.S. and Others v. Hungary*, 56417/19 and 44245/20 (European Court of Human Rights, October 12, 2023).
- 16 Alternatively, the agreement could be written to include transfer of these individuals back to France, or such transfers could be governed by a separate memorandum of understanding, though this would place additional obligations on France and could be politically sensitive.
- 17 See Part 4A of the *Nationality, Immigration, and Asylum Act 2002*, as amended by the *Nationality and Borders Act 2022*, Section 16.
- 18 *Ilias and Ahmed v. Hungary*, 47287/15 (European Court of Human Rights [Grand Chamber], November 21, 2019), §§ 130-138, on asylum conditions in safe third countries; *Tarakhel v. Switzerland*, 29217/12 (European Court of Human Rights [Grand Chamber], November 4, 2014), on reception conditions in safe third countries and vulnerable groups.
- 19 For lessons from the Safe Mobility Initiative in the Americas for the European Union and the United Kingdom, see Susan Fratzke, Meghan Benton, and Andrew Selee, “Legal Pathways and Enforcement: What the U.S. Safe Mobility Strategy Can Teach Europe about Migration Management” (short read, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, December 2024).
- 20 This has previously been done as part of the Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Extension Scheme, and Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, for example.
- 21 European Union Agency for Asylum, *Strategy on Digital Innovation in Asylum Procedures and Reception Systems* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023).
- 22 Beth Gardiner-Smith and Emily Graham, *Asylum Management Centres: A New Approach to Tackle Small Boat Crossings* (London: Future Governance Forum, 2025).
- 23 If this legal standard is not met and an individual whose UK asylum claim is rejected in France were to later reach the United Kingdom and file another claim, UK authorities would be required to assess that asylum claim in its entirety, without limiting the scope of review simply because a claim was previously examined in France. However, if the initial claim was processed with full procedural safeguards, UK authorities could treat a new claim filed in the United Kingdom as a subsequent application and use an accelerated procedure that focuses on assessing whether any new grounds have arisen since the earlier procedure. See Nikolas Feith Tan, *Transnational Asylum: Toward a Principled Framework* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2025), 110–11.
- 24 The Solidarity Pool was agreed as part of the EU Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management, article 12. The standard set for the Solidarity Pool is a minimum of 30,000 relocations and 600 million euros in financial contributions per year to assist Member States facing migration pressures. In years with minimal pressure, the Commission may propose a smaller pool or even no pool; in emergencies, it can raise the targets. The final decision on the proposal is adopted by the Council. All Member States are obliged to contribute, with the size of their required contribution proportionate to their gross domestic product (GDP) and population size, but countries retain full discretion to choose among three types of solidarity measures: relocation of asylum seekers or recent beneficiaries of protection; financial contributions; or alternative in-kind support such as staff, equipment, or capacity-building. For example, a Member State could cancel out or reduce its quota by contributing 20,000 euros for each relocation not made. See Articles 12, 56, 57, and 66 of “Regulation (EU) 2024/1351.”

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