

A New Approach To Refugees: Pay Them To Go Home

Our series, “Take A Number,” is exploring problems around the world — and the people who are trying to solve them — through the lens of a single number.

158,000. That’s roughly how many refugees are stuck in limbo in Europe right now.

Many of them got to Europe in late 2015, when the refugee crisis reached its peak, and have been waiting since then to see if they’ll be formally accepted into the European Union. To cut down on the wait time and economic impact of this massive influx, some countries and nonprofits in Europe have embraced a new idea — pay refugees to go back to the countries they left in the first place.

Mahmoud Abdelwahab is one of the people who has been waiting. He’s 25, and originally from Mosul, Iraq. In early 2016, he quit his job as a cook and came to Europe, ending up in Vienna.

“He saw people dying on the trip, like capsizing or falling from the boat into the sea,” Philipp Epaïd says. Epaïd is Abdelwahab’s counselor at Caritas, the nonprofit that provides refugee services to people in Austria who are returning home.

Abdelwahab filled out his application to stay in Austria almost two years ago. Since then, nothing.

All he could do — legally — was wait in a refugee camp. This is a big problem a lot of people waiting for asylum have: They aren’t allowed to get a job, which means Mahmoud couldn’t send money back to his family.

“He wants to work. He wants to learn the language, and if you have no chance to do this, you’re stuck and you get tired,” Epaïd says.

Abdelwahab says he spent two years all alone, feeling like a failure. And that the odds of getting asylum are stacked against him.

He’s not wrong — the Austrian courts have been overwhelmed by applications.

When the migrant crisis reached its peak back in 2015, the number of people wanting to stay in Austria tripled.

Instead of waiting longer, Mahmoud late last year made a tough decision. He decided to leave Austria and go back to Iraq.

“He saw other Iraqi people receiving the negative decision that they have to go back,” Epaïd says. “And that’s why he decided for himself to back, before he got a negative.”

That decision — to voluntarily leave the country — is exactly what the Austrian government wants refugees to do. Last spring, Austria announced that it would give 1,000 euros to the first 1,000 refugees who signed up to leave on their own.

The program was successful, and the government extended the offer to more refugees. It’s an incentive that’s gaining traction across Europe.

“Either they choose the voluntary option or we have to discuss the forced option,” says Karl-Heinz Groendbock, the spokesman for the Austrian Interior Ministry. That’s the department that’s funding the voluntary program. “Whenever it comes to forced return, we’re talking about arresting people. It means we also have detention centers for people waiting for forced return.”

Groendbock says it’s a lot cheaper to give someone a one-way flight and 1,000 euros than using the country’s resources to deport them. And, he adds, when there are more applications, there will be more rejections. So, the government has wanted to encourage more refugees to return home — a decision thousands of refugees made in 2017.

But is paying them really in the best interest of refugees? Philipp Epaïd, Abdelwahab’s counselor, is not sure. He says it’s really important that a refugee makes a life-changing decision like this one on his own.

But this program is exactly why Mahmoud Abdelwahab chose to return home to Iraq — voluntarily.

On a warm Thursday in October, he took a bus to the Vienna airport, ready to board a flight to Baghdad.

He’s taking the buyout, he says, to go home and use the money to buy a car and

become a cab driver.

“Two years ... [I] was here for nothing,” Mahmoud says as Epaïd translates. “It didn’t make any sense to come here.”

NPR has reached out to Abdelwahab, but hasn’t heard from him since he flew home to Iraq.

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