



Living in Prolonged Temporariness:
Experiences of Syrian Refugees and Civil Society
Volunteers in Denmark after the Turn to
Temporary Protection

Marie Sandberg, Associate Professor, PhD
Director of AMIS – Centre for Advanced
Migration Studies

Nordic-Baltic Migration Conference
September 17, 2026

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN





En fotoudstilling om

Midlertidighed

I samarbejde med



DRC DANSK
FLYGTNINGE
HJÆLP



- In 2026, a total of 133.316 persons are living on temporary residence permit in Denmark (including resettled refugees, family reunified, and 42.204 Ukrainian displaced people).
- The novelty: The temporary turn relies on a proliferation of protection categories with more explicit return pressures
 - Refugees are kept in prolonged temporariness

AGENDA

1. The temporary turn in Denmark
2. The Boundary work project
3. Refugees' experiences and strategies
4. Volunteers' experiences and strategies
5. Conclusion



1. THE TEMPORARY TURN IN DENMARK'S IMMIGRATION & INTEGRATION POLICIES

- 1) 2015: 'Temporary protection status', Aliens Act 7(3). Weaker protection and rights for people fleeing general violence.
- 2) 2019: All residence permits are granted with 'a view to temporary stay'.
- 3) Permanent residence only after 8 years (previously 5 years) following a range of criteria: min. 3,6 years of full-time employment, self-sufficiency, passing of active citizenship and language tests.

► A fundamental re-orientation of Denmark's approach to the protection of refugees (Vedsted-Hansen 2022)

► A paradoxical borderscape of integration AND return



2. BOUNDARY WORK – NEW INTERFACES BETWEEN THE STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND REFUGEES AFTER THE TEMPORARY TURN (2021-2025)

- **Practice-research collaboration:** University of Copenhagen/AMIS, the Red Cross and DRC - the Danish Refugee Council. Funded by the VELUX Foundations.
- **Aim:** To strengthen knowledge and agency of those affected by the turn to temporary protection: refugees, volunteers, caseworkers.
- **RQ:** How the temporary turn in Danish immigration and integration policies, incl. the paradoxical borderscape of integration and return, are shaping encounters of volunteers, refugees, and municipal caseworkers.
- **Methods:** 11 months of collaborative fieldwork conducted in 3 Danish municipalities, incl. semi-structured interviews with 75 refugees, volunteers & caseworkers.



The AMIS research team: Katrine Sypli Kohl, Marie Sandberg (PI), Ditte Shapiro & Rikke E. Jørgensen, at the 2022 IMISCOE Conference

3. REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES WITH THE TEMPORARY TURN

- The temporal governance of the temporary turn: Short-term temporary residence permits, widened cessation window, increased revocation efforts.
- A temporal turn in international migration studies (Ramsay 2020, Griffiths et al. 2013).
- Across our ethnographic material, we identify three temporal modalities:
 - *Acceleration*
 - *Entrapment*
 - *Rupture*



Kronos & Kairos, by Jamuna Burry 2020

ENTRAPMENT

How is Entrapment experienced?

- Uncertainty about future
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling stuck with little room for action
- Fear separation of family

I think about it 24 hours a day, if they will send me out or not. How will it end and what will happen to the children? I am linked to this uncertainty, and I cannot avoid thinking about it all the time.

[...] This pain is inside me, in my head. When I eat, sleep, and wake up. I don't know what to do [...].

(Coban, interview, 2022).

ACCELERATION

How is Acceleration experienced?

- High-paced everyday life seeking to close the cessation window.
- Choice of activities (work or study) is affected by requirements for permanent residence.
- Precarious labour, working while sick
- Strained work-life balance, little time with kids.

Now I have worked 30 hours a week for two years, but I must [...] forget those years and work hard from 4 am in the morning. I don't see my children before I come home at 7 pm. [...] You get mentally distressed, because you are a human that is not welcome.

(Amal, fieldnotes, 2022)

ACCELERATION

“ It is a race against time to get permanent residence
(Maritsa, interview 2022).

“ If I apply [for permanent residence], I should abandon all my dreams and plans. I should work for three-and-a-half years, whether I like it or not. [...] I prefer to follow my dream and get kicked out. Because I don't think that I am guaranteed to get it. [...] That would be a waste of my time.

(Baas, 21years, interview, 2022).

I sleep and wake up with these rules. I feel it in my body. I am always afraid. If I make a mistake, then everything is ruined for me. With everything in Syria and my experience from ten years in Denmark, all this stress and pressure. I do not want my children to experience that. [...] (Ayse, mother, interview, 2023).

RUPTURE

How is Rupture experienced?

- Time stops: Shock
- Acute uncertainty
- Loss of focus, sense of blackout
- Activities lose their meaning

We live by the rules. [...] So, it was a great shock.

[...] During my 7 years in Denmark, I have built a beautiful, tall building and they [*The Immigration Services*] have destroyed it.

Suddenly, they said "We don't want you", even though I have been very active.

(Abbas, interview, 2022).

RUPTURE

*The Aboud family
after receiving the letter of revocation*

I was shocked (Abbas, father). We got nervous. We thought 'Oh, we cannot think about our future. We must think about now. What will happen?' (Abia, mother).

I got stressed and had a blackout. I could not focus. I could not go to school because it did not make any sense. (Busra, daughter, Interview 2023)

What strategies do refugees use?

- Unskilled jobs instead of studying (mostly parents)
- Studying to avoid temporal dispossession (mostly youth)
- Fighting revocation in Refugees Appeals Board, protests, activism, aided by volunteers & activists.
- Seeking emotional and legal support and engaging in activities through civil society

4. CIVIL SOCIETY VOLUNTEERS AFTER THE TEMPORARY TURN

- The temporary turn risks pushing towards increased professionalisation of volunteer social sector (la Cour 2010).
- The growing need for support is challenging (Frazer 2020).
- Some task cannot be solved, which increases inequality and precarity of refugees



*Volunteer activity in support of refugee children.
Photo from fieldwork 2022*

CIVIL SOCIETY VOLUNTEERS' EXPERIENCES

[The revocation cases] are in fact cases, we as civil society volunteers should not be dealing with [...] it is **trial and error** – and we learn all the time. However, the minute we feel at home in the regulations, then they change the rules, and we can start all over again. (Helga, volunteer leader)

You fear getting too close to other people, refugees, that you can **risk losing** again (Volunteer leader on refugees who suddenly "disappear")

Mette: "It is very **demanding** to us as volunteers". Lars explains how it can be '(...) very difficult to know what is the minimum amount of basic knowledge you need to have as a volunteer to be able to help. [...] and exactly where is the boundary?' Mette agrees adding: 'It feels a little bit **like drowning** in practical tasks, and I even have to assist in reading letters I can hardly understand myself!' Christine nods, stating that "the tasks we are facing are very **complex**, and sometimes the municipality just seem to be handing them over to the volunteers." (fieldnote, volunteer meeting 2021)

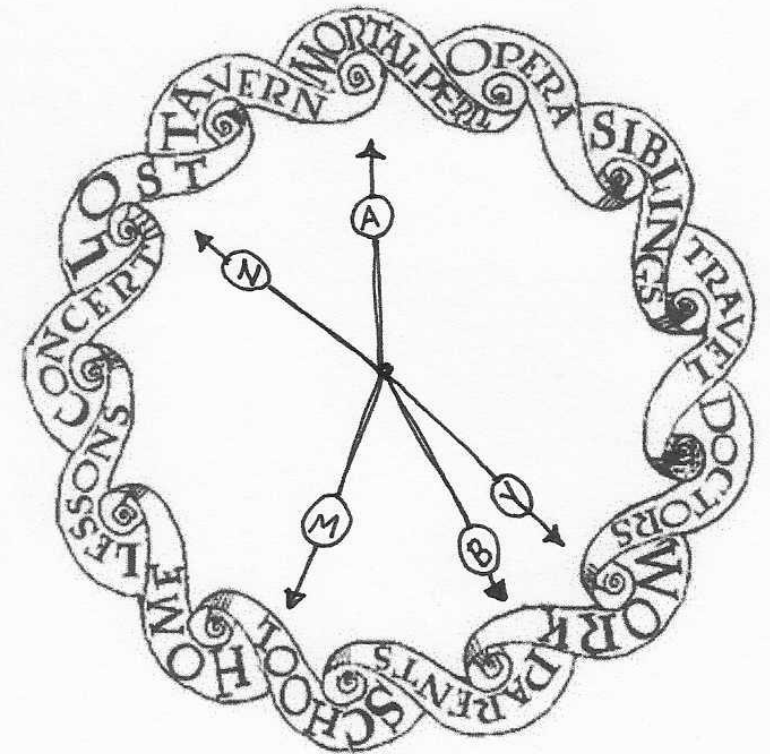
What strategies do volunteers use?

1. **Relaying of tasks** – to legal counselling.
2. **Demarcation** – to protect themselves from burnout.
3. **Prioritising** – raising dilemmas, such as who are most worthy of support?

► In sum: The turn to temporary protection increases the number, character, and complexity of tasks performed by volunteers

5. IN CONCLUSION: THE TEMPORARY TURN

- Exposes refugee families to prolonged uncertainty and deportability.
- Pushes refugee families out of sync, creating temporal dissonance, and well-founded fear of separation.
- Confronts refugee families with the fact that despite their best efforts, they are unwelcome.
- Challenges volunteer support: Volunteers fear providing incorrect advice, and temporariness is working against the long-term horizon of volunteer efforts.



If you would like to read and listen to more:



- Sandberg, M., Schultz, J., & Kohl, K.S. (2025). The temporary turn in asylum: a new agenda for researching the politics of deterrence in practice. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-18.
- Sandberg, M., K.S. Kohl, D. Shapiro & R.E. Jørgensen (2025). Boundary work in times of deterrence and return: Changing relations between integration caseworkers, volunteers and refugees in Denmark. *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2441594>
- Shapiro, D., K.S. Kohl, M. Sandberg & R. E. Jørgensen (2024). "Out of Sync: Temporal Governance and Agency in Refugee Families with Temporary Protection Status in Denmark." *Journal of Refugee Studies*.
- Podcast series in 4 episodes: Den Store Modtagelse. Spotify, Apple Podcast, etc. (in Danish).

Thank you for your attention!