

SAFE PASSAGE

Humanitarian Visas for Refugees from Crisis Regions

What are humanitarian visas?

Humanitarian visas are temporary visas which allow access to the territory of a State for the purpose of seeking asylum. They can be issued by Member States' embassies or consulates in third countries and allow non-EU citizens to travel safely and legally to a Member State of their choice to apply for asylum.

What is the current status?

Though there are two provisions in the EU Visa Code which allow the issuing of humanitarian visas, there is currently neither an EU-wide mechanism nor legal clarity to regulate this type of visa and discretion is left to the individual Member States. In 2016, the European Parliament voted to amend the Visa Code and include a provision on humanitarian visas.

Several EU Member States, as well as Switzerland and other non-EU countries, issue or have issued humanitarian visas for groups of people in need of protection. While there is a lack of clear data available on the number of visas issued - which makes it hard to quantify how many people they have benefited - issuing humanitarian visas is a possible and viable alternative for people seeking protection and States willing to welcome them.



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Why are they important?

In the near absence of legal entry possibilities, travelling to Europe has become the most dangerous route for refugees in the world. The EU Visa Code regulates which country nationals need a visa to access the EU and all main countries of origin of refugees are on the list, including Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, etc. For nationals of these countries it is hardly possible to obtain a visa to travel legally to the EU: they would in fact need to provide guarantees which are extremely difficult to obtain. Requirements are, for example, a return trip, accommodation on arrival for the duration of the stay, a visa travel insurance or sufficient means of subsistence.

Humanitarian visas allow people who are seeking protection to travel safely and legally to a place where they can receive protection. By doing so, they avoid the need for dangerous, expensive and in too many cases deadly journeys in overcrowded boats or by other irregular means. People arrive alive and with dignity to their destination. By providing a safe and cheaper alternative, humanitarian visas can make a huge contribution to dismantling the business model of smugglers.

Furthermore, providing humanitarian visas to people seeking protection allows Member States to conduct pre-departure checks so as to minimise security risks.

The majority of people want to reach countries where they already have families or where there is a community they can rely on, and with a humanitarian visa they could travel there directly. This would, in turn, facilitate their integration into host societies, making it a faster and less expensive process for States. It would also diminish the phenomenon of secondary movements, making it unnecessary for States to implement punitive measures.