

Research Briefing

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Unauthorised migration: UK returns agreements with other countries

Summary

The UK has agreements with some countries for the return of people lacking legal residence. These agreements take various forms and are not usually published. This briefing lists known agreements and links to the text where available. There are known to be agreements with 24 countries, shown below.

Formal and informal returns agreements confirmed by the government since 2021

Albania*	Georgia*	Pakistan
Algeria	Guinea	Serbia*
Angola	India	Sierra Leone
Azerbaijan	Iraq	Somalia/Somaliland
Bangladesh	Ireland*	South Korea
China	Kuwait	South Sudan
Democratic Republic of Congo	Moldova	Switzerland*
Djibouti	Nigeria	Vietnam

* Covers third country nationals. Sources are given in section 2.1 below.

1 Background

1.1 What are returns agreements?

Foreign nationals in the UK without permission are liable to removal by law.¹ In practice, the government's ability to remove a given person against their will depends on there being a country willing to accept them.² Removals are a bilateral rather than a unilateral process.

Countries often make agreements with one another about the circumstances in which they will accept migrants back from the other country. These are known as returns agreements.

Such agreements might cover the types of people the recipient country will accept back, the process for confirming their identity and issuing a travel document, and deadlines for responding to return requests.

The government distinguishes between different types of returns agreements, noting that they include:

- Readmission treaties: reciprocal agreements that are legally binding under international law. An example is the [UK-Georgia Agreement on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation](#).
- Memorandums of understanding: commitments between countries that are formalised but not legally binding.³ Most known UK returns agreements take this form.
- “Informal operational arrangements”: administrative procedures that might be agreed at official level (that is, between civil servants) rather than at political level (by ministers). An example is the [arrangements with Ireland on return of asylum seekers](#) which became politically contentious in 2024.⁴

Returns provisions can also be included in a more wide-ranging cooperation deal that touches on many different subjects, rather than a standalone agreement.⁵

¹ [Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, section 10](#)

² “In order to effect returns, we need the agreement of the receiving country”: [HC Deb 16 December 2020 c280](#)

³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Treaties and MOUs: Guidance on Practice and Procedures](#), 15 March 2022

⁴ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021

⁵ European Institute of the Mediterranean, [Cooperation on Readmission in the Euro-Mediterranean Area and Beyond: Lessons Learned and Unlearned](#), May 2023, p24

People not from the country of return

Returns agreements may cover “third country nationals”. These are people who are not citizens of the country of return but whom that country will nevertheless agree to readmit in certain circumstances.

For example, the UK’s readmission treaties with Georgia and Serbia do not only provide for the return of Georgian/Serbian citizens. They also apply to non-nationals who had visas or residence permits in those countries or travelled directly from them when illegally entering the UK.

The Conservative government’s UK-Rwanda deal, unusually, did not apply to Rwandan citizens and did apply to third country nationals with no pre-existing connection to Rwanda.⁶ It therefore had no “return” element as such.

Negotiating returns agreements

Government ministers often emphasise that formal agreements are not usually necessary for returns of a country’s own citizens to happen. An agreement might be put in place if there are difficulties in securing the practical cooperation of officials in the other country or if the other country requests one.⁷

Ministers have noted that there can be trade-offs in seeking to strike a formal deal. The other country might ask for something in return (other than improved ability to remove British citizens from its territory), such as a loosening of UK visa requirements for its citizens.⁸

Nevertheless, the Labour and Conservative general election manifestos promised to negotiate additional returns agreements to send people back to their home country.⁹ Both parties have also expressed interest in an agreement with the European Union on return of third country national asylum seekers who have passed through on the way to the UK.¹⁰

1.2

Do returns agreements work?

The mere existence of a returns agreement does not necessarily mean more returns to that country. Such agreements may not be honoured on the ground or prove ineffective in achieving their aims over time.

⁶ See Commons Library research briefing CBP-9568, [UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership](#)

⁷ PQ 259657 [on [Immigration](#)], answered on 4 March 2009; [HL Deb 5 June 2023 cc1137-1138](#)

⁸ [HL Deb 5 June 2023 cc1137-1138](#)

⁹ [Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2024](#) (PDF), p38; [Change, Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#) (PDF), p17

¹⁰ [HC Deb 1 May 2024 c272](#); [HC Deb 23 July 2023 c652](#)

For example, the European Union’s financial watchdog noted in a 2019 report “the Cotonou Agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries stipulates that these countries must readmit any of their nationals who are illegally present on the territory of an EU Member State without further formalities. In practice, this legal provision is not respected”.¹¹

One study in 2021 concluded that the EU’s readmission agreements made only a temporary impact, if any. Returns to African countries generally fell irrespective of whether there was an agreement in place or not.¹²

On the other hand, the UK has multiple agreements with Albania, which the government credits with increasing returns to that country.¹³ Albanian citizens account for one third of all enforced removals from the UK since the start of 2021.¹⁴

1.3 Are returns agreements published?

Returns agreements that take the form of a treaty would be published and laid before Parliament.¹⁵ Other types of agreement are not usually published. The government is not legally required to publish a memorandum of understanding or operational protocol. Ministers say the agreements can be sensitive and countries might pull out if details were made public.¹⁶

This means that there is no publicly available and up-to-date consolidated list of which countries the UK has returns agreements with and what those agreements say. A list of countries with which returns agreements are thought to be in force is in section 2.1 below.

The fact that an agreement was made in the past does not necessarily mean that it remains relevant indefinitely. Agreements may be formally terminated, fail to be implemented, or fall into disuse. A list of countries with which returns agreements were announced or confirmed at one time, but no longer appear to be in use, is in section 2.2 below.

¹¹ European Court of Auditors, [Special report No 24/2019: Asylum, relocation and return of migrants: Time to step up action to address disparities between objectives and results](#), 13 November 2019

¹² Philipp Stutz and Florian Trauner, “[The EU’s ‘return rate’ with third countries: Why EU readmission agreements do not make much difference](#)”, *International Migration*, Volume 60 Issue 3, 13 July 2021
See also Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Justice and Security, Research and Documentation Centre, [Intergovernmental relations and return](#), 25 October 2022

¹³ Prime Minister’s Office, [UK-Albania Joint Communiqué: Enhancing bilateral Cooperation in areas of common interest](#), 13 December 2022

¹⁴ Home Office, [Returns detailed datasets](#), year ending September 2024, table Ret_D01

¹⁵ [Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, part 2](#)

¹⁶ [HL Deb 5 June 2023 cc1137-1138](#); see also PQ 149254 [on [Repatriation](#)], answered on 4 February 2021

2 Lists of known returns agreements

2.1 Which countries does the UK currently have agreements with?

- Albania: [Readmission treaty](#), 2021. Covers third country nationals. It is supported by various other unpublished agreements, such as a memorandum of understanding on “exchange of information for migration-related purposes”.¹⁷

The UK had previously taken part in an [EU-Albania readmission agreement](#) (2005) and before that in a bilateral [UK-Albania treaty](#) (2003).

- Algeria: [Readmission treaty](#), 2006.
- Angola: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2007.¹⁸
- Azerbaijan: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, as of 2021.¹⁹
- Bangladesh: Unpublished standard operating procedure, 2024.²⁰
- China: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2004.²¹
- Democratic Republic of Congo: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2009.²²
- Djibouti: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2008.²³
- Georgia: [Readmission treaty](#), 2023. Covers third country nationals. The UK had previously taken part in an [EU-Georgia agreement](#) (2011).

¹⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, [UK-Albania Joint Communiqué: Enhancing bilateral Cooperation in areas of common interest](#), 13 December 2022

¹⁸ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; European Migration Network, [Good practices in the return and reintegration of irregular migrants](#), 2014, p49

¹⁹ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; PQ 141403 [on [Asylum: Deportation](#)], answered on 18 June 2007

²⁰ PQ 9784 [on [Deportation: Bangladesh](#)], answered on 24 October 2024; Home Office press release, [UK and Bangladesh sign agreement to tackle illegal migration](#), 16 May 2024

²¹ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; European Migration Network, [Good practices in the return and reintegration of irregular migrants](#), 2014, p49

²² As above

²³ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; Jean-Pierre Cassarino, [Inventory of the bilateral agreements linked to readmission](#), accessed 5 December 2024

- Guinea: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, as of 2021.²⁴
- India: [Memorandum of understanding](#), 2021.
- Iraq: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2005, and unpublished joint statement, 2024.²⁵
- Ireland: Unpublished operational arrangements covering third country asylum seekers, 2020.²⁶ There are likely to be other agreements, formal and informal, as part of extensive UK-Ireland cooperation on the Common Travel Area.²⁷
- Kuwait: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2012.²⁸
- Moldova: Readmission treaty, 2024.²⁹ Not yet published at time of writing. The UK had previously taken part in an [EU-Moldova readmission agreement](#) (2007).
- Nigeria: Unpublished memorandums of understanding, 2005 and 2022.³⁰ It is possible that the latter replaces the former.
- Pakistan: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2022.³¹ The Home Office has declined requests for a copy both in Parliament and under the Freedom of Information Act.³²

The UK had previously taken part in an [EU-Pakistan agreement](#) (2011) and had signed a bilateral memorandum of understanding with Pakistan before, in the 2000s.³³

²⁴ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; PQ 209994 [on [Undocumented Migrants](#)], answered on 17 October 2014

²⁵ Home Office press release, [UK/Iraq border security pact to target smuggling gangs](#), 28 November 2024; *R (Mahmoud) v Secretary of State for Home Department* [2012] EWHC 2201 (Admin), 27 July 2012, paragraph 24; PQ 131592 [on [Asylum: Iraq](#)], answered on 19 April 2007

²⁶ PQ 5258 [on [Asylum: Republic of Ireland](#)], answered on 8 October 2024; PQ 25221 [on [Asylum: Republic of Ireland](#)], answered on 17 May 2024; *A v Minister of Justice* [2024] IEHC 183, 22 March 2024, paragraph 48

²⁷ See Commons Library briefing CBP-7661, [The Common Travel Area and the special status of Irish citizens in UK law](#)

²⁸ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; European Migration Network, [Good practices in the return and reintegration of irregular migrants](#), 2014, p49

²⁹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, [UK signs new agreements on migration, defence & security with Moldova](#), 20 November 2024

³⁰ Home Office press release, [New deal with Nigeria to deter illegal migration](#), 4 July 2022; European Migration Network, [Good practices in the return and reintegration of irregular migrants](#), 2014, p49; PQ 141403 [on [Asylum: Deportation](#)], answered on 18 June 2007

³¹ Pakistan High Commission London, [Pakistan-UK Agreement on Returns and Readmissions](#), 17 August 2022; Jean-Pierre Cassarino, [Inventory of the bilateral agreements linked to readmission](#), accessed 5 December 2024

³² PQ 59011 [on [Immigration Controls: Pakistan](#)], answered on 18 October 2022; [FOI 71424](#), 5 September 2022

³³ PQ 203939 [on [Pakistan](#)], answered on 22 May 2008

- Serbia: [Readmission treaty](#), 2022. Covers third country nationals. The UK had previously taken part in an [EU-Serbia agreement](#) (2007).
- Sierra Leone: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2012.³⁴
- Somalia: Unpublished agreement, as of 2021.³⁵ It is unclear whether this is the 2007 memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, which declared independence from the rest of the country in 1991, or a different agreement with the government of Somalia itself.³⁶
- South Korea: [Readmission treaty](#), 2011.
- South Sudan: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2013.³⁷
- Switzerland: [Readmission treaty](#), 2005. Covers third country nationals.
- Vietnam: Unpublished memorandum of understanding, 2004. Supplemented by further agreements in 2009 and 2024.³⁸

2.2

Which countries did the UK once have agreements with?

This section lists countries and territories with which the UK Government confirmed a returns agreement at one time but where the agreement appears no longer to be in place or honoured. It is not a list of countries to which returns are impossible in all cases: successive governments have stressed that while agreements can facilitate returns, they are not essential.³⁹

- Afghanistan: [Memorandum of understanding](#), 2002. Inoperable in practice since a change of regime in 2021.⁴⁰

³⁴ Sierra Leone Government, [National Review Report of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration in Sierra Leone](#) (PDF), 15 February 2022, p6

³⁵ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021

³⁶ European Migration Network, [Good practices in the return and reintegration of irregular migrants](#), 2014, p49

³⁷ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; European Migration Network, [Good practices in the return and reintegration of irregular migrants](#), 2014, p49

³⁸ European Migration Network, [Ad-Hoc Query on agreements on the re-admission of irregular immigrants signed with Vietnam](#) (PDF), 10 May 2010; Home Office press release, [UK signs new agreement with Vietnam on illegal migration](#), 18 April 2024

³⁹ PQ 141553 [on [Asylum and Immigration](#)], answered on 19 December 2003; PQ 259657 [on [Immigration](#)], answered on 4 March 2009; PQ 68278 [on [Deportation: Undocumented Migrants](#)], answered on 10 July 2020

⁴⁰ PQ 41950 [on [Deportation: Afghanistan](#)], answered on 3 September 2021; UK Visas and Immigration, [Country returns guide: May 2024](#), 7 May 2024

- Belgium: Unpublished operational arrangements similar to the ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ with France (see below).⁴¹
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2007.
- Bulgaria: [Readmission treaty](#) (PDF), 2003.
- Burundi: the government stated in 2014 that a bilateral memorandum of understanding was in place but did not list Burundi in a 2021 reply.⁴²
- European Union: [Dublin III regulation](#), 2013. This addresses which country within the EU is responsible for deciding a person’s asylum claim, including the possibility for people to be sent back to their first country of entry.⁴³
- Hong Kong: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2004.
- France: [Operational arrangements](#) (PDF), 1995. Known as the ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’, it applied to third country nationals refused admission at the Channel ports. From 1997, it applied only to people who did not claim asylum.⁴⁴
- Iran: Unpublished memorandum of understanding. Inoperable as of 2007.⁴⁵
- Macao: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2004.
- Malaysia: the government stated in 2014 that a bilateral memorandum of understanding was in place but did not list Malaysia in a 2021 reply.⁴⁶
- Montenegro: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2007.
- North Macedonia: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2007.
- Romania: [Readmission treaty](#) (PDF), 2003.
- Russia: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2007.

⁴¹ [FOI 21995](#), 4 April 2012

⁴² PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; PQ 209994 [on [Undocumented Migrants](#)], answered on 17 October 2014

⁴³ Commons Library research briefing CBP-9031, [Brexit: the end of the Dublin III Regulation in the UK](#)

⁴⁴ Children’s Commissioner, [Landing in Dover](#) (PDF), January 2012. See also “[Lstruck gentleman’s agreement on migrants but France welched on the deal - MICHAEL HOWARD](#)”, Daily Express, 19 December 2022

⁴⁵ Unnumbered written statement [on [Bilaterally Negotiated Arrangements for Asylum and Immigration](#)], 7 March 2007

⁴⁶ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; PQ 209994 [on [Undocumented Migrants](#)], answered on 17 October 2014

- Rwanda: the government stated in 2014 that a bilateral memorandum of understanding was in place but did not list Rwanda in a 2021 reply.⁴⁷
- Sri Lanka: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2005.
- Turkey: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2014.
- United Arab Emirates (Dubai): the government stated in 2007 that a bilateral memorandum of understanding was in place but has not mentioned it in subsequent replies.⁴⁸
- Ukraine: [EU readmission agreement](#), 2007.

2.3

How has the number of agreements in place changed over time?

The lists above draw from responses to written parliamentary questions in 2021 and 2014. These named the countries with which the UK had formal agreements (readmission treaties and memorandums of understanding), excluding informal arrangements:

- In 2014 there were 32 countries and territories listed, of which 14 were EU agreements in which the UK took part.⁴⁹
- In 2021 there were 17 countries listed, reflecting the UK's departure from the EU and its readmission agreements.⁵⁰

Of the 14 EU readmission agreements, the UK is known to have replaced five with bilateral agreements. These are Albania, Georgia, Moldova, Pakistan and Serbia (as highlighted in section 2.1 above). The UK's participation in the other nine has lapsed.

⁴⁷ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021; PQ 209994 [on [Undocumented Migrants](#)], answered on 17 October 2014

⁴⁸ PQ 141403 [on [Asylum: Deportation](#)], answered on 18 June 2007

⁴⁹ PQ 209994 [on [Undocumented Migrants](#)], answered on 17 October 2014

⁵⁰ PQ HL1460 [on [Undocumented Migrants: Deportation](#)], answered on 12 July 2021

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