Faith and responses to displacement

are currently focusing on education and health, and involve refugees with skills or an interest in these areas, as well as those who have been active in establishing their own community-based services.

The network provides a forum where FBOs are supported and strengthened in their work. For example, FBOs that are concerned about the impact on their mission of providing refugee services and are seeking to move away from providing direct material assistance are encouraged to continue to assist but to do so less visibly, by providing financial and human resources to other organisations running services and activities for refugees.

Communication between all individuals and organisations working with urban refugees is key to striving for high standards of assistance to better meet the material needs of the population being served, without this being at the expense of meeting spiritual needs. Joint problem solving is vital, and refugee service providers should ensure that FBOs active in the provision of assistance for urban refugees are included in collaborative approaches.

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1. This article draws on views regularly expressed during meetings of the Bangkok Asylum Seekers and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN) and by FBO representatives consulted in writing this article.

Faith and the politics of resettlement

Shoshana Fine

For some asylum seekers in Turkey, conversion may be an opportunistic strategy to improve resettlement prospects.

Those working with asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey have noticed that a growing number of Iranian Shi’ite asylum seekers are converting to Christianity during their migratory passage through Turkey. With apostasy punishable by death in Iran, asylum claims and requests for resettlement can be based on or strengthened by such conversion.

Resettlement is considered a privilege rather than a right under international law, and the selection process occurs in a context in which demand is much greater than the quotas stipulated by resettlement countries. This selection process divides refugees into sub-categories of deservedness, which are in theory based on vulnerability but are in practice linked to political as well as humanitarian rationales.

It has been argued that in the case of the United States – by far the most important resettlement country for refugees in Turkey – foreign policy interests have in the past played a key role in deciding which refugees are selected for resettlement. Resettlement selection processes have long favoured the entry of ideologically useful entrants, such as individuals fleeing Communist regimes during the Cold War. With a shift in focus from resettling religious minorities in the former Soviet Union to a similar focus in Iran, the US gives preferential treatment through reduced evidentiary standards to Iranian religious minorities (Baha’is, Jews, Christians). It is in this context that conversion is perceived by some Shi’a Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey as a way to improve their prospects for reaching the West; several studies have shown that the conversion of Iranian migrants and asylum seekers is a significant practice in Turkey.

The absence of welfare support for migrants and refugees in Turkey opens up a space for voluntary support mostly provided by
NGOs and Christian associations. Their staff are frequently missionaries, a significant number of whom are fluent in Farsi and who are associated with networks of Farsi-speaking churches throughout Turkey. Missionaries assist migrants such as by offering translation services or establish contact by inviting Farsi-speaking migrants and asylum seekers to social events and church services – providing social networks which can give meaning to migrants’ lives in an otherwise unstable situation.

An important part of the trajectory of conversion is the production of a personal narrative of conversion. Undoubtedly some of these narratives of conversion are ‘real’ in the sense that the Christian faith is believed and internalised by the individuals in question over the course of their passage in Turkey. For others, conversion maybe more of an opportunistic strategy to improve resettlement prospects.

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**Principles and proselytising: good practice in Ethiopia**

Zenebe Desta

Faith-based organisations need to ensure that in providing essential humanitarian assistance they do not exploit the vulnerability of people by proselytising, whether overtly or covertly.

Humanitarian agencies who have signed up to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief have committed themselves not to use humanitarian response to further political or religious creeds. However, the reality is that some faith-based organisations (FBOs) do proselytise in the context of giving aid, whether through activities such as prayer, scriptural study and distribution or display of religious materials and symbols. Such practices gravely erode the contributions of FBOs in the protection and support of refugees. A World Council of Churches report in 1961 defined proselytism as a corruption of Christian witness: “Witness is corrupted when cajolery, bribery, undue pressure or intimidation is used – subtly or openly – to bring about seeming conversion.” That same year several Orthodox Churches – which had long been opposed to proselytism – joined the World Council of Churches.

The Ethiopian Tewahido Orthodox Church runs a refugee support programme through its Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission in the Refugee and Returnee Affairs Department (DICAC-RRAD). The refugees supported by DICAC-RRAD are mainly from Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Yemen. In February 2014, about 2,000 camp refugees were receiving secondary education provided by DICAC-RRAD, and around 2,500 urban refugees were dependent on the department for health care, education and subsistence money. In accordance with the Orthodox Church’s long history of opposition to proselytism, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s refugee support programme takes a firm stance against proselytising.

Although DICAC-RRAD’s website carries references to biblical sources for its commitment to assist refugees, “there is no religious statement or symbol or icons that I have ever observed written or displayed except the stamp of the organisation that bears a cross”, says a Somali refugee interviewed by the author. This is an important practice in keeping spirituality and humanitariansim separate. However, it is essential to be aware that even a symbol such as a cross on an organisation’s ‘stamp’