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## What's God got to do with it ? The role of religion in the internal dynamics of migrants' networks in Turkey

*Et Dieu dans tout ça ? Le rôle de la religion dans la dynamique interne des réseaux de migrants en Turquie*

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Sebnem Koser Akcapar\*

## *What's God got to do with it? The role of religion in the internal dynamics of migrants' networks in Turkey*

**Résumé.** *Et Dieu dans tout ça ? Le rôle de la religion dans la dynamique interne des réseaux de migrants en Turquie.*

Jusqu'à présent, les académiciens travaillant sur l'immigration ont davantage abordé la question religieuse en termes d'adaptation ou de non adaptation à la société d'accueil. Cependant, la recherche sur le rôle de la religion en tant que porteur de capital social positif dans les pays de transit n'a pas été suffisamment traitée. Tout en retraçant les trajectoires de migration de deux groupes de demandeurs d'asile iraniens en Turquie, qui offrent des cas de conversion à la chrétienté et au Bahaisme, cette étude examinera les différences et les similarités entre ces deux groupes. Elle étudiera en outre l'identité religieuse de ces deux groupes de demandeurs d'asile iraniens en Turquie, en essayant de voir comment ceux-ci ont instrumentalisé la religion et les réseaux sociaux et religieux récemment acquis dans des congrégations différentes ainsi que dans des assemblées spirituelles Bahai en Turquie, en vue de déterminer les pays destinataires dans le pays de transit et ainsi parvenir en tant que réfugiés à l'ouest.

**Abstract.** So far, immigration scholars have mostly taken up the religion issue in terms of adaptation or non-adaptation to the host society and research on the role of religion as carriers of positive social capital in transit countries has not given enough attention. Drawing on the migration histories of two groups of Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, converted cases to Christianity and Bahais, this paper will examine the differences and similarities between these two groups. It will further discuss the religious identity of these two groups of Iranian

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asylum seekers in Turkey and how they use their social and religious networks within different congregations and Bahai spiritual assemblies in Turkey to determine destination countries in the transit country and to reach ultimately the West as refugees.

## Introduction

When religious identity became a feature of majority – minority relations in the migrant-receiving countries in the West in the 1980s – especially within the axis of Christianity and Islam, social scientists have begun to explore the relationship between migration and religion in depth. Religiosity in that case is sharpened with the purpose of cultural defense; in other words, «religious institutions acquire an additional purpose as defenders of the culture and identity of people» (Bruce, 1996: 97). The ongoing war against international terrorism started with the unfortunate 9/11 attacks in the USA in 2001 and more recently in Madrid on November 3, 2004 and in London on July 7, 2005, as well as the securitization of international migration and criminalization of asylum seeking has also put the religion issue at the front. The November 2005 riots started in Paris and spread over other cities in France because of two Muslim teenagers killed when running from police made many people start to revisit the relation between religion and integration.

Despite the existing extensive literature on international migration, however, the link and the significance between migration and religion during different migration processes have been overlooked (Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003) and religion has been mostly taken up in terms of (non)-adaptation to the host society. Recently, there are a number of researches carried out in the field of religious communities in the countries of destination and the role of religion in particular (See Leonard *et al.*, 2005; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2002; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001). Nevertheless, research on the role of migrant networks and on religious institutions in transit countries has largely been neglected.

This paper draws on the migration histories of two groups of Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey: converted cases to Christianity and Bahais, who have the intention of going further West, but who are stuck in Turkey for longer than expected either because they are waiting for their applications to be handled by the UNHCR or because they are rejected and not wanting to return to Iran, they became illegal aliens in Turkey. In this paper, the religious identity of Iranian migrants in Turkey will be elaborated. Normally, religion is considered as an integration agent among immigrants once they reach the West, but for Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, belonging to a specific religious group and religious conversions are used as a migration project (Koser Akcapar, 2006).

As the role of religious institutions in migration flows still remains a mystery, this research will attempt to shed some light on the role of religion in a transit country. I will argue that religion plays a very important part among different groups of refugees and asylum seekers not only during the integration process in

the destination countries but also in the transit period. In the absence of other social networks, long procedures and lack of sound policies targeting asylum seekers, religious networks give a meaning to migrants' lives and they support their migration project as well. Depending on extensive fieldwork carried out in various cities in Turkey where the Iranian migrants are heavily concentrated, it is intended to display how Bahaism and conversion from Islam to Christianity, mainly from Shi'a Islam to Evangelism and Pentecostalism, are used as migration strategies. I will also examine how these asylum seekers use religion and their social and religious networks within different congregations and Bahai centers in Turkey to determine destination countries and to reach ultimately the West as refugees.

In order to convey a vivid picture, brief information on Turkey, Iranian migration into Turkey and the asylum procedures in Turkey will be provided. Thereafter, the history of religious minorities in Iran, social unrest and disregard towards Islam among the population after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 will also be discussed. Within this framework, two Iranian communities in Turkey will be dwelled upon: first one is the converted cases from Shi'a Islam to Evangelism and to Pentecostalism. This group consists of those who converted in Iran and those who converted in the transit country. The second group is Iranian Bahai asylum seekers. Although Bahaism is unrecognized by the Islamic regime in Iran, they are the largest non-Muslim minority in their homeland. While trying to show the role of religion on these religious communities, one will see the similarities and differences between the two, especially on the scale of continuity, discontinuity and modifications of religious beliefs and how individuals from different religious backgrounds come up with definitions of belonging and how they confront the tension between different definitions of social and individual identities (Spellman, 2004: 13).

## Methodology

This article is based on qualitative research conducted among Iranian asylum seekers. Data in this paper are part of larger fieldwork initiated in 2002 and lasted for more than two years and was conducted among 43 Iranian asylum seekers in various cities in Turkey, such as Van, Istanbul, Ankara and Kayseri (Koser Akcapar, 2004a). An additional ten interviews were carried out with Iranians in Belgium and Germany, who transited through Turkey, by human smugglers, applying asylum there. The respondents in Turkey include rejected asylum seekers, asylum seekers waiting for their applications to be handled by the UNHCR and refugees waiting for resettlement. This group includes Fars (Persian), Kurdish, Bahai, Azeri and other ethnic and religious populations of Iran. Among the 43 respondents in Turkey, with which in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted, 20 were converts to Christianity from Shia background (17 Persian and three Azeri ethnic origin) – five converted in Iran

and the rest while in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> They are a small but a visible group especially on Sundays in Istanbul; as they go to churches with their families and stay on to socialize after the sermon. Fourteen of the respondents were Bahais (ten Persian and four Azeri ethnic origin) and they represent one of the highest number of Iranians applying asylum in Turkey based on religious persecution and discrimination in homeland.

The interviews in Turkey were mostly carried out in Turkish, as one member of the family interviewed usually was competent in the Turkish language; a smaller number of interviews were conducted in English, Kurdish Sorani dialect and Farsi especially if the respondents' date of arrival to Turkey is recent. Interviews were made with one member of the family, but interview data was further supplemented by information gathered from open-ended questions, group discussions with other members of family or close friends, participant observation, and life histories. Coming from a different faith background, the role of the researcher inside the churches and Bahai spiritual assemblies was limited to observation and to building 'etic' constructions about the role of religion in migration, the re-organization of migrant networks, intergroup dynamics and transnational links of religious communities.

## Turkey as an Important Hub of Immigration

Although Turkey has long been known as a country of emigration especially with labor migration in the 1960s and refugee movements in the 1980s to Western Europe, historically, it has been one of the most important centers of immigration (Karpas, 1985; Kirisci, 1996: 385). The significant role that immigration played in the transformation of the Ottoman Empire is undeniable. In fact, the Ottoman governments maintained a liberal immigration policy, regardless of the religion, language and ethnicity of the immigrant (Karpas, 1996: 87). As a result of these large migratory movements, the Ottoman state founded a *Muhacirin Komisyonu* (Migration Commission) in the 1860s – probably one of the first of its kind in the world at that time – to regulate immigration and deal with settlement policies more effectively (Karpas, 1996: 88). From the early XXth century, the most important population movement occurred with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire when ethnic Turks and other Muslims living in the Balkans and the Caucasus began migrating to Istanbul and Anatolia (Karpas, 1985). An estimated 1 445 000 people of Turkish and Muslim descent came to Anatolia when the size of the Ottoman Empire decreased in the Balkans (Kirisci, 1996: 385). Later, after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the new Turkish state accepted responsibility for ethnic Turks who were

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1. Although some of them go to churches and receive financial help, there were no religious conversions, however, among other ethnic and religious respondents coming from Iran, such as among Kurdish Sunnis. Conversions are also to a lesser extent among Shiite Azeri Iranians with Turkic origins. These groups and Bahais have other identity markers to distinguish them from the Persian Shiite groups and it is observed that they generally establish different migrant networks.

left behind in the Balkans (Kirisci, 1996: 387). For many years, Turkey hosted many refugees and asylum seekers of Turkish or Muslim descent from Europe, mainly from Greece, Bulgaria and from former Yugoslavia.

Ever since mid-1980s, Turkey has also been regarded as a magnet attracting many forms of immigration (Koser Akcapar, 2004b; Erder, 2003; Narli, 2002; Icduygu, 2000; Aktar and Ogelman, 1994) due to its changing position in the global migratory movements. Apart from the migration of ethnic-Turks or Muslims due to clashes and political instability in the neighbouring countries, there are three main types of inflows of foreign nationals to Turkey, which are sometimes overlapping categories. These are: 1) transit migration flows, 2) irregular temporary labour migration, 3) movements of asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle East and other non-European countries.

### **Transients and Temporary Labor Migrants in Turkey**

In the last 25 years, thousands of migrants, with the intention of temporary stay, have come to Turkey from countries as diverse as Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, China, Ghana, and Pakistan often to find their way illegally to the developed countries in the West and in the North (Icduygu, 2003). The irregular migrant labour from Eastern Europe, on the other hand, started in the early 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> This group involves the influx of foreigners coming mainly from the Eastern European countries such as Romania and Moldova or from the Russian Federation and Ukraine who have entered Turkey in search of jobs. These are economically motivated migrants who enter the country legally, but either overstayed their visas or failed to get their visas renewed and work beyond the terms of their entry visas – also known as «pseudo-tourists», as they enter Turkey with the tourist visas. These migrants find employment quite easily in the large informal sector in Turkey and earn comparatively higher salaries than in their countries of origin (Icduygu and Koser Akcapar, 2005). In fact, Turkey's geographical location between immigrant-producing areas and Europe, accompanied by a relative large informal economy, makes it an attractive country for transients and irregular labor migrants (Apap *et al.*, 2004: 17).

### **Turkey as a Country of Asylum**

Turkey is also *de facto* a country of asylum, receiving approximately 5 000 applications a year in the last five years and almost all asylum applications in the country come from non-European countries, and especially from Iran. The Turkish authorities together with the UNHCR Office in Ankara handle all the applications and after long procedures that might even last for more than four years, then for those accepted non-European cases, the UNHCR tries to find

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2. Some asylum seekers and other transit migrants also work without permits in Turkey.

a resettlement country outside Turkey. As resettlement in the West is the only option for those granted refugee status in Turkey,<sup>3</sup> Iranian asylum seekers also consider their stay as a temporary stop on the way to better life standards in the West (Erder, 2003: 166). Their stay in Turkey is temporary mainly for two reasons. First, this is borne out of the law and regulations concerning asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey as Turkey kept its geographical limitation to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, accepting non-Europeans as refugees through UNHCR Turkey but not allowing them to stay within the territory (Kirisci, 1996) – although they constitute the majority of asylum seekers in the country. Second, Turkey is a key location in the flow of international migration from the Middle East to Europe. Those coming from the Middle East have the objective of going to further West and staying in Turkey is not a desirable option because of high costs of living, economic difficulties and lack of social services available.

### **Iranian Asylum Seekers in Turkey**

Just after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 but also within the last years, Iranian nationals dominated the top-10 list of asylum applicants lodged in industrialized countries, although there is a decrease in their numbers in line with the overall decreasing trend in the number of asylum applications.

*Table 1: Total Asylum Applicants from Iran*

Year	Number of Iranian Asylum Applicants
1999	19 040
2000	36 736
2001	21 499
2002	15 696
2003	16 135

Source: UNHCR, Geneva (2004)

In Turkey, Iranians constitute the highest number of asylum applicants (See Table 2 below). Almost half of them are rejected in their first instance decisions. As for the ethnic and religious breakdown of the registered asylum seekers pouring to Turkey, we can say that there are a large number of Farsi, Kurdish and Azeri origin, and a smaller number of Lurs, Turkomen, Armenian and Assyrian. The existing flexible visa regime between Iran and Turkey further facilitates all kinds of migration flows from that country. At the moment, Iranian nationals can stay in Turkey up to three months without a visa requirement. The visa regime, readmission agreements, and refugee flows are still unsolved issues between the two countries.

3. Turkey still holds the geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention and it may be lifted by 2012 in accordance with the process to adapt the European Union acquis.

Table 2: *Asylum Applications in Turkey, 1997-2003*

Year	Countries of Origin			
	Iran	Iraq	Other	Total
1997	1 392	2 939	117	4 448
1998	1 979	4 672	187	6 838
1999	3 843	2 472	290	6 605
2000	3 926	1 671	180	5 777
2001	3 475	998	704	5 177
2002	2 505	974	315	3 794
2003	3 108	342	516	3 966

Source: UNHCR Ankara Office (2004)

As a result of the growing awareness on immigration issues in Turkey in the recent years and pressure from the European Union to control irregular migration as well as flow of refugees, the number of irregular Iranian migrants apprehended in Turkey has increased to a great extent. According to statistics from the Turkish police, between 1997 and 2003, the number of Iranians apprehended without proper visa was almost 22 000. It is important to note, however, that there are many unapprehended cases, such as those who use the help of human smugglers or traffickers to facilitate their passage to the West. It is widely known that only a small number of people apply for asylum to the UNHCR Turkey and wait for resettlement in a third country, whereas the majority – especially those with more resources – tried to find their own way to the West. Among the respondent group in this study, there are many cases who applied for asylum in Turkey after failing to reach destinations in the West by human smugglers.

There is no formal evidence on the exact number of Iranians in Turkey except those given residence and work permits and holding student visas. It is assumed, however, that 500 000 to one million Iranian nationals used Turkey as a transit country after 1980 (Icduygu, 2003; Ghorashi, 2002; Fuller, 1991) and a large number of them were still estimated to live in Turkey, often under irregular circumstances. Today, it is estimated that four million of Iranians live outside their homeland, scattered in Western countries, notably the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK (Mohammadi, 2003:1). Based on a number of researches, Iranians do not consider the option of return migration unless there is a regime change (Adibi, 2003).

## **Emigration from Iran: A Brief Historical Overview**

Emigration from Iran to Turkey has a long history. In the past, many from the Persian Empire migrated to the Ottoman Empire as a result of foreign invasions or political changes in their territory. In the XIXth century, for example, some wealthy Persians established themselves especially in Istanbul and in Izmir, two

of the major cities in today's Turkey. Following the 1905 Constitutional Revolution, another wave of Persian immigrants arrived in the Ottoman Empire. Their numbers were estimated as 4 000. These were not only the intellectuals and political figures of that time but also owners of small businesses and entrepreneurs and they constituted a visible Persian community then. There were also many who migrated to the Gulf States, like Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait since mid-XIXth Century. Many of those who were living in Iraq for many centuries, near Karbala and Najaf, cities dominated by Shiite population, were forced to go back to Iran under the Saddam regime (See Report released in 2005 by the Centre pour l'égalité des chances et de lutte contre le racisme in Belgium for more details).

After the Second World War, we can distinguish two main flows of Iranian nationals: one is directly linked with the modernization efforts of the Shah regime as of 1950s and education of the young elite. This migration was headed towards the United States and Western Europe. The other flow of migration was linked with the Islamic Revolution in 1979, causing many opponents and religious minorities to leave the country. Another important factor was the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted for eight years, taking many lives of young people on both sides. There were also the flows of young men to Japan, in search of work (Machimura, 2000). The emigration after 1990s was considered to be more related to economic and social reasons, whereas in some cases it is a combination of many factors.

Iran is also an immigration and asylum country. According to the UNHCR estimations, Iran is the top one refugee-hosting country in 2004 with a total of 1 046 000 refugees. UNHCR Global Report states that by the end of year 2004, there were 952 800 Afghan refugees and 93 200 Iraqi refugees in the country (See UNHCR's website for more information: <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/country?iso=irn>).

## Religious Minorities in Iran

The main religion in Iran (89 % of the population) is twelfer Shi'ism<sup>4</sup> but Iran consists of many ethnic and religious groups (Fuller, 1991: 17). Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities. Although Bahais constitute the largest non-Muslim minority in Iran, they have the status of unprotected infidels (Kazemzadeh, 2000: 537). The Bahai faith has never been recognized officially in Iran although the city of Shiraz in the southwest of Iran is the birthplace of the Bahai faith. Estimates on the number of Bahai population in Iran vary from 150 000 to 500 000 (Afshari, 2001: 119); but the exact number is still unknown.<sup>5</sup>

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4. The Shi'a belief suggests that the Islamic Prophet Mohammad had designated Ali – Prophet's cousin and son-in-law – as his successor after his death. Imamiyya or the twelfer Shi'ism thus recognizes twelve such legitimate successors, known as imams.

The Iranian government established after the 1979 Islamic Revolution label Bahais a dissident political group and a challenge to Muslim authority (Afshari, 2001: 119-120). According to the reports of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, there is evidence that Bahais, mostly leaders of the community, have been executed or imprisoned after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Berry, 2004: 141-142; Dossa, 2004: 124; Smith, 1996: 135-136). Moreover, it is documented that Bahais can neither hold government jobs nor can they practice law. In some cases, even the marriages between Bahais were considered null and their property has been confiscated. Another blow on the Iranian Bahais came when they were excluded from institutions of higher learning, as the education of individuals and especially younger generations has been the backbone of the Bahai doctrine. Persecutions targeting Bahais in Iran results emigration of many Bahais to the USA, Canada, Australia and other parts of the Western world. Almost 12 000 Bahais immigrated to the USA between 1979 and mid-1980s (Cole, 1998: 237) and until 2000, it is estimated that almost 30 000 Bahais emigrated from Iran to the West after the Islamic Revolution (Kazemzadeh, 2000: 558).

The coming of Western Protestant missionaries in the early 1900s further enhanced Iran's historical religious diversity. Their efforts at evangelism and conversion have, over more than a century, created a small but visible community in Iran (Afshari, 2001: 140). Starting of 1980s when there was disillusion about the intent of the Islamic revolution among people followed by the devastating Iran-Iraq war, and the economic instability, the Pentecostal Churches started to become successful in converting people from Muslim faith to Christianity despite the ever increased pressure (Spellman, 2004: 166). Today, it is reported that between 10 000 and 15 000 Iranians adhere to the Protestant churches in homeland (Afshari, 2001: 140). Apostasy, however, is a capital offense in Iran and may be subject to death (Foltz, 2004: 94).

Those converted to Christianity and Bahais are reported to suffer various forms of discrimination under the Islamic Republic of Iran (Afshari, 2001: 130). First, we can have a look at the situation of converted Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey and the role of religion inside their social networks.

## **Religious Conversions to Christianity in Iran and in Turkey**

The practice of religion is not always a continuation of religious practices of country of origin (Stepick, 2005: 16). As Rambo states: « Changing one's religion is all the more perplexing because religion is believed to be deeply rooted in family connections, cultural traditions, ingrained customs, and ideologies » (2003: 212). People convert for different personal reasons and under a variety of social conditions (Asad, 1996: 262). Converted people usually eradicate old ideas and beliefs and open new doors leading them to different possibilities.

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5. Today, it is estimated that there are some five million adherents of Bahai faith in the world.

Conversion is synonymous with « biographical reconstruction », that is, dismantling of the past and its reconstitution in accordance with the new universe (Snow and Machalek, 1984:173).

When migrants convert, it means a double reconstruction or transformation within oneself, not only do migrants acquire a new identity in a new and volatile setting, but if we think in general terms that migration takes place from the less developed to the more developed, then migrants also get closer to « modernity ». By abandoning the religion of ancestors, migrants come to a total break with the past, as if they are re-born. All of this experience through conversion seems very much in parallel with a migrant's experience when leaving his/her homeland and comes to a new place to start all over again. They cross and transgress international borders and boundaries. In doing so, they find themselves in a different place and in a different situation where identities are transformed as well, maybe not immediately but definitely over time (Koser Akcapar, 2006). The new religion therefore may become a new aspect of their identity and a valuable support in the transit country.

Five of the interviewees in Turkey affirmed that they converted previously in Iran before coming to Turkey through their Iranian-Armenian or other converted friends. All of them said that they could not attend church and practice their new religions freely in Iran because of social pressures and likelihood of persecution. For reasons of conversion, they mentioned the occurrence of an external event, like a miracle, whereas some others emphasized inner experiences, and interior struggles for change, and « seeing the light at the end of a tunnel »:

“My eldest son was sick when he was a baby. Doctors said they could not do anything. I tried everything but in vain... Then one day I learned about the church and Jesus Christ. I prayed to Jesus that he gives recovery for my son and he did. I became a believer after that. My husband was doing his military service at that time. When he came back, he converted too.”

“An Armenian friend of mine in Iran introduced me with Christianity. When I was small, I used to see a bright green light touching my shoulder. I did not want to accept this for years. Then the friends in the church told me that it was the Holy Spirit. So I converted in Iran...”

The majority of the respondents, however, converted to Christianity months or even years after arrival in Turkey with input from their friends and relatives. Unavoidably, when a rejected Iranian asylum seeker in Turkey converts to Christianity, it raises doubts of the convert's sincerity. Notwithstanding the fact that there can be and there are genuine believers in Christianity, the new religion is sometimes used as a pretext in order not to be deported back to the country of origin<sup>6</sup>.

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6. Since 1999, Turkey applies the principle of non-refoulement for non-convention, Middle-Eastern asylum seekers and refugees. Therefore, if documented properly, converted Iranians are not deported back to Iran under the principle of non-refoulement, as apostasy may be subject to death by the Islamic regime in Iran.

The question here, however, is not whether Iranians were truly converted. The real question should be rather what kind of role this new fact plays in their re-identification. Is this a conversion to a better life, to modernity and Westernization and to secularism where men and women are treated as equals during religious ceremonies? Does this conversion open up a new space for being human, regardless of gender, or is it simply something to help deal with their illegal status? If so, how and why?

Johan Leman stated that in case of conversion from Islam to Christianity or vice versa, « the converted person is strongly attached to a specific grammar of the new faith community, such as a shared ritual or prayer » (1999: 218). The converts affirmed that they felt more secure within the walls of their church, together with friends, praying and singing in Farsi under the leadership of an Iranian-origin pastor educated in the U.K. Some other Iranian asylum seekers, even though they are not converts, go to different churches in Istanbul and in Ankara on Sundays after services where there are many fellow Iranians. Repeated attendance to the activities of the church alongside with the socialization among Iranian converts from Shi'a Islam to Christianity led many towards the route to conversion. Within the walls of the church, identities are transforming as well. This is not only because the social networks inside the churches offer more solidarity and extend more assistance, but also the church becomes the only place that they can rid of their « illegality ». As people start their lives in a new society, however temporary, they are faced with different settings, different conditions and therefore a totally different context that initiates a debate between past, present and a possible awaited future.

The reasons leading to conversions are complex. Other family members and friends who converted before them, and missionaries in Turkey and in Iran who introduced them with the new religion by taking them to the church and by handing them bibles in Farsi, led to conversions among the respondent group. Another important factor was the « success » stories of the converted friends and relatives that found refuge in Western Europe or in North America.<sup>7</sup> In addition to finding sponsors in Western countries, there are other forms of support from religious institutions, like procuring places to live for asylum seekers, paying for a month's rent at times, extending medical assistance, and opening Sunday schools at the churches for children. Besides these, the church-related organizations and pastors assist irregular migrants and asylum seekers to fill in forms for application to asylum or sponsorship by certain embassies and show them the ways of basic survival, like temporary work, and what to do if rejected and how to write letters of appeal. This is a reciprocal loyalty through which both asylum seekers and the religious institutions strengthen their relationship with each other.

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7. During fieldwork, five families were resettled in Canada through sponsors found by the churches in Istanbul. Two families I still have contacts with continued to go to churches in the resettlement country and identified themselves as Christians. But there is a need for further research to examine whether and how converted Iranians in Turkey continue to exercise Christianity once they reach the West.

While religious conversion is only a strategy at the beginning and is probably more instrumental, it may become an essential part of their lives in time. Their re-created social networks inside churches help Iranian transit migrants in Turkey develop a sense of belonging, share ideas, overcome feelings of isolation, and learn local culture and ways to survive as well as reconciliation to deportation and other threats (see also Brettell and Hollifield, 2000:105). Some respondents confessed that they were deceived by other migrants or human smugglers and told lies to the UNHCR saying that they were Christians. They emphasized however that they became believers later on and they said that their conversion in Turkey as an asylum seeker must have been their fate and Jesus' plan:

“The social and economic conditions and the regime made us flee from Iran. But we told the UNHCR in Turkey that we converted and became Christians and that we had fear of persecution. An Iranian man advised us to do that. One year later, they found out the truth and our file was closed. Everyone in Iran hears these kinds of stories... They say if you have a good story – or if you say you are a Christian – then you get what you want and go to West. If we had told them our real problems, we could never have the chance to be accepted as a refugee. One year ago, some Christian friends came to Van from Istanbul and this time we became true believers. I was a Shiite before but I was not doing much for Islam. I was a Muslim because I was born into a Muslim family. It was not my decision to become a Muslim. But it was my decision to become a Christian.”

## **The Discontinuity Model among Iranian Muslims Converted to Christianity**

As stated by Lewis R. Rambo, first of all, « conversion is a process over time, not a single event ». Second, « conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations ». Third, « the factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative » (1993: 5). Although conversion is usually regarded as an individual process, it takes place « within a context of institutional procedures and social relationships » (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: XI). Therefore, the macro-context (such as overall environment of asylum seekers, the whole asylum process, and transnationalism of religious networks) and micro-context (such as family, friends, religious community, their neighbourhood in Iran and in Turkey) of a religious conversion process should also be taken into consideration when analysing the religious conversions in the transit country (see Rambo, 1993: 20-22).

The length of stay in Turkey, which is often much longer than anticipated, leads Iranian migrants to find different ways in maintaining themselves, resulting in specific strategies and skills that are certainly crucial. The length of stay is an important factor in most conversion stories as those who used human smugglers to reach the West in a shorter period of time have proven that conversion is not always an option. After the initial feeling of euphoria and relief in getting

away from oppression, their optimism about the future have all died with the rejection of their refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Turkey. Then they have to cope with depression and the economic devastation of prolonged stay in Turkey. During this long period of dejection, the new and recreated community established by conversion leads to a strongly developed bond of trust among a very small number of people, in a larger environment where there is risk of deportation by government officials, hostility and exploitation by some Turkish citizens and other Iranian asylum seekers. At times of desperation and isolation, especially the rejected asylum seekers became exposed to evangelizing Christians and their support systems to make sense of their lives. Church provides a new home for converted Iranian migrants and they even have a new family of sisters and brothers, albeit often based on artificial kinship (Droogers, 2001).

Conversion further helps Iranian asylum seekers to create a more positive vision of the future about their situation and about their country while they are trying to deal with their day-to-day problems in Turkey. Letters sent to Turkey by so-called «successful migrants» who went to the West after transiting Turkey are sometimes read to everyone present in the church and some European and American nationals coming to the church occasionally give moral support (Koser Akcapar, 2006).

### **The Continuity Model among the Iranian Bahai Refugees in Turkey**

The cases of Iranian Bahai refugees are quite different than Iranian converted cases to Christianity in many ways. First, in legal terms, the two groups differ from each other, as Bahais are easily recognized as refugees on the basis of religious persecution and their resettlement usually took place in a shorter period of time, within several months up to two years. Therefore, they are much more focused on the destination country and on their future lives than their temporary status in Turkey. As a result, their interactions with local people and other Iranians outside their religious group are quite limited. Unlike converted cases, for example, Bahais are not working in the informal sector, as all of them have sold their houses and other belongings to be able to live in the transit country for some time. We can say that their migration is rather a planned process. In other words, they are following the footsteps of their relatives who also spent some time in Turkey as refugees in transit. Having heard of their Bahai refugee community and the existence of a local spiritual assembly, most of the respondents either came to Central Anatolia, especially to Kayseri, from Iran directly by train or upon their arrival in Turkey, they were most of the time relocated by the Turkish police in Central Anatolia, the so-called satellite cities, until their applications to the UNHCR are finalized. The fact that they are residing in smaller towns and not in big cities, like Istanbul and Ankara, also affects the dynamics of their social networks. Although Bahais are coming to Turkey and

leaving Turkey to different destinations quite fast, groups of people (four to five families) who come together on a more regular basis during consultations and religious rituals become closer but they are familiar with everyone in their religious networks. Unlike converted cases, the use of religion among Bahais is a more established one and has long been associated with modernity and gender equality. In other words, Iranian Bahai asylum seekers and refugees continue to preserve their monotheistic religion in Turkey through re-established spiritual assemblies in the transit country.

There are, however, striking similarities between the two, especially in terms of their religious networks established in the transit country and how they use their religious institutions to unite, to get support, and to solve day-to-day problems like schooling of children, and giving meaning to their lives, alongside with other physiological problems. The Bahai religion also acts as a global transnational institution. After arrival in Turkey, they start regrouping and reconstructing the dynamics within their small and closely-knit community in Turkey. Their strong transnational links with other Bahais, which consists of friends and relatives alike, is however present in every stage of their lives. Like converted cases, Bahai respondents also come from different ethnic origins, mainly Azeri and Farsi, and from different parts of Iran. They also have different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Again similar to the Christian converts in Iran, they mentioned that they were exposed to persecution and discrimination in homeland.

### **Iranian Bahai Refugees in Turkey and Solidarity within the Religious Networks**

In recent years, Turkey has become a favorite transit route for Iranian Bahais seeking asylum. In fact, local spiritual assemblies were founded where Iranian asylum seekers and refugees were heavily relocated until their resettlement, such as in Van, Kayseri, Nigde, Aksaray, Kirsehir and Eskisehir. As their religious leader, Baha'u'llah, was on exile in the Ottoman territory, first in Baghdad, then in Istanbul, Edirne and finally Akka, Bahai refugees also feel like they are following the footsteps of their prophet.

On their way to the West, not only their established religious communities in the transit country but also some international organizations and non-governmental organizations assist Iranian Bahai asylum seekers. One of such institutions is the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). In Turkey, the Iranian Bahai respondents acknowledged that their relatives also used HIAS to get out of Iran when getting passports for Bahais were still a problem. In recent years, however, Bahais were given passports and the Iranian government for their departure made no restrictions, as a part of the Islamic Republic's policy was said to urge dissidents to leave the country. The other organization is ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission)<sup>8</sup>.

They have a strong group identity with their co-religionists and relations are based on religious solidarity. Whenever a problem occurs, they try to solve their problems with the larger group and through their local spiritual assemblies. Turkish Bahais also extend help and visit them to give support. Thanks to strong social ties among themselves and with their relatives in Iran and abroad, they are equipped with information about the transit country, living conditions, and most importantly about the asylum process in Turkey. The legal status granted in early stages of the asylum process<sup>9</sup> gives them empowerment and they are more concerned about their future in destination countries than their day-to-day problems in Turkey as expressed below:

“I am tired now because of all this. Leaving Iran, coming to Ankara, stress, the UNHCR, the police, being settled in different places in Anatolia, bad housing and high living expenses... But I know we are lucky as Bahai refugees. Other Iranian refugees are less lucky. There are leftists, communists, political dissidents, members of Mucahiddin Halk, Kurdish, etc. They have to wait longer. We are going to Canada soon and we want to start our new life there.”

“We cannot go to school and cannot work. There is still no money. But we don't want to work in dirty jobs. We are awaiting for our new future in New Zealand.”

Nevertheless, they have similar problems as addressed by other Iranian asylum seekers and they establish smaller groups in towns not only to pray and to carry out religious rituals but also to talk about their problems:

“Here, in Kayseri, the Bahai community listens and shares our problems. When some families are in need of money, they collect money in Bahai feasts. If there is a sick person, they take them to hospitals.”

As for reasons of departure from Iran, the respondents mentioned lack of freedom, lack of education opportunities, persecution against Bahais, lack of civil rights, discrimination in the society in general, social pressures, and financial difficulties. The Iranian regime prohibits Bahais touch food and hair of Muslims, as they are seen *najes* (dirty).

“Iran was good but I was not free. I was like a bird in a cage. Apart from freedom, we had everything. We had a car, a house, and enough money. But whenever there was a problem, the Iranian police would not even listen to us.”

“I was mistreated at school. I had a Muslim girl friend. She left me when she found out that I was a Bahai and she engaged with someone else. There is persecution against Bahais in Iran. You cannot enter civil service. You cannot have higher education. Bahais who were studying medicine before the Revolution could not become doctors. If my customers had known I was a Bahai, they would not give money.”

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8. ICMC Turkey office is non-governmental organization that is administering a fast-track program for Iranian Bahais so that they can be resettled in a shorter time in migrant-receiving states, especially in the USA.

9. Embassies of traditional migrant-receiving countries in Turkey, such as Australia, the USA, and Canada have quotas specially allocated for Bahai immigrants.

Some of the respondents mentioned illnesses related with stress as a result of their marginality and « liminality » (term coined after Van Gennep, 1908). The narratives about their health bring to mind that « wellness or the state of health is an integral part of the process of reconstructing lives and recapturing meaning in a new land » (Dossa, 2004: 12). The body is in a way trying to connect with its surroundings or the personal drama, through the language of symptoms of illness (Dossa, 2004: 129), as illustrated in the example below:

“Ever since we came to Turkey from Iran, I have suffered from headache. My mother and father call us and they cry. They are back in Iran. I miss them a lot. But my husband’s problem was my problem too. There was too much stress there. There is stress here as well. I don’t know what is going to happen in America. I am happy in a way to go to States. I know that my children would be happy and they would go to school.”

## **Religion as Collective Representation and Control Mechanism among Bahai Refugees**

Religion in general and Bahaism in particular also offers a mechanism to endure economic and social difficulties that the refugees are undergoing. For Bahai asylum seekers and refugees, religion is the most effective tool they used to overcome depression and to cope with other psychological problems arising due to their liminal or betwixt and in-between condition. Through ritualized processes such as feasts, fasting and prayers affirming internal agreements holding Bahais together, the small Iranian refugee community affirms and renews their « collective representation » (Durkheim, 1915).

Apart from giving psychological support, the Bahai Spiritual Assembly works in many ways to help Iranian Bahai refugees in Turkey. Education being one of the important pillars of Bahai faith, a group of Iranian Bahais in the local Spiritual Assembly is working for the education of refugee children. In the privacy of some houses and in smaller numbers, Iranian Bahai refugee children receive religious education, language courses, general knowledge, and get information about recent developments in the world. Iranian Bahai women with small children also get together every two weeks. During these gatherings called *amarrahman*, women pray for ten to fifteen minutes first. Then there are cooking, knitting lessons or they share some information like the benefits of fruits and vegetables. They become befriended within these groups, chat and discuss similar problems and find practical solutions.

The local spiritual assembly also keeps refugees under control. So far, there have been no problems encountered between the Iranian Bahai refugees and the Turkish people. Being law-abiding citizens, the Iranian Bahais distanced themselves with the other political refugees and preserved their good relations with the authorities. Although they enjoy religious freedom in Turkey, they see

Turkey as a waiting room – in which they simply have to serve a time until they go to the West:

“We see Turkey as a room of *intizar* (waiting) but also a room of *istirap* (suffering). Until we receive an answer from the UNHCR, we are in pain. It is not definite for how long we are going to stay here. But it is like an experience room as well. Unlike Iran, there is religious freedom in Turkey and we are grateful. In Bahai religion, as in Turkey, we don't cover our heads. There is gender equality in Bahai religion. But we don't know Turkey that much, as we don't stay here long.”

“I don't have a job at the moment. Our life here is temporary. Besides who is going to give me a decent job? I had a factory back in Iran. We sold everything and came here. That's how we try to survive. But it is very difficult for a man not to work and stay at home all the time with wife and kids.”

## Conclusion

Many researchers have underscored religion's global reach and its transnational character. For Iranian Christian converts and Bahais in Turkey, the religion has a global reach, linking them with those in destination countries. Through religious activities and connections with others already living in the West and in countries of origin, they develop a sense of being part of a global home. They mobilize their transnational religious networks and when they go to the West, they might have « access to a familiar and agreed upon set of tools with which to organize their collective religious lives » (Levitt, 2003: 853). Furthermore, they establish a beaten path to reach destination countries for the ones who stay behind.

Regardless of their religion, and the date and place of conversion, the accounts of the respondents further illuminate that « religion is not just a private affair or worship but in the context of (im)migration, it can constitute a basis for extensive network formation as well as become an important marker of identity and a significant instrument for self-categorization » (Dumont, 2003: 369). The psychological, financial and institutional support that immigrants receive from churches or Bahai spiritual assemblies in Turkey and abroad can also compensate the losses in immigrants' lives by giving them protection, a moral code, self-esteem, and a positive self-image in a different environment (see Dumont, 2003: 370). In a constant flow of changing processes during migration, religion helps Iranian migrants find a new identity as in the case of converts or to preserve an old one as in the case of Bahais.

Iranian asylum seekers and accepted refugees waiting for resettlement who are living in Turkey also use religion to « delineate an alternative cartography of belonging » (Levitt, 2003: 861) therefore, religious symbols, and pictures of Jesus Christ for the converted ones or Abdu'l Baha – son of Baha'u'llah, the founder of Bahaism – decorate the houses of Iranian respondents and in a way take the place of national flags to mark these spaces. As shown above, the findings of the fieldwork in Turkey suggest that it is necessary to include religion as an

institution in international migration theories (Koser Akcapar, 2006). Although religion is initially used as a migration strategy for some Iranian asylum seekers, in time it acquires new meanings and becomes an important element in their lives, mainly due to the positive social capital inside migrants' religious organizations in Turkey. In other words, religion becomes a « cultural map » (Geertz, 1973: 216), enabling individuals to relate to the new elements in their lives as a result of migration.

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