



Working Session 9: Humanitarian issues and other commitments, including combating trafficking in human beings, refugees and displaced persons, and persons at risk of displacement

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The OSCE has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to promote freedom of religion, originally enshrined in Article VII of the Helsinki Final Act.² According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of religion includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief.³ Yet individuals often find themselves being persecuted as a result of holding a particular belief or having converted to a different faith. The Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees thus identifies religion as a legitimate reason for being recognized as a refugee.

The most recent displacement crisis evolving in the OSCE region has revealed flaws in practical matters regarding asylum seekers and refugees. One of these matters is how to assess the credibility of religious conversion.

Authorities often find it difficult to assess the credibility of religion-based asylum claims, especially those involving conversion, as religion is perceived as a very sensitive and abstract subject. Furthermore, there is no uniform regulation on the subject across the OSCE area. It is not rare that the outcome of an asylum claim depends largely on the examiner's subjective perception of the religion in question.⁴ In many cases the authorities tend to test religious knowledge and the intellectual ability of the applicants, instead of the genuineness of their belief and involvement in church life.⁵

This is what happened to Mohammed, an Iranian asylum seeker who converted to Christianity. His application was rejected by the British authorities because he could not

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² 'OSCE Human Dimension Commitments', vol. 1 Thematic Compilation, 3rd edition, p.118-121.

³ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/76894?download=true>

⁴ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 18.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/world/europe/britain-asylum-seeker-christianity.html>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/sweden-bible-tests-christian-asylum-seekers-refugees-a7736981.html>,

name the Ten Commandments.⁶ The shortcomings of this approach are self-evident: on the one hand, it is possible to learn the answers without being genuine. On the other, a genuine convert might not be able to answer correctly for a number of reasons. Therefore, questions asked by a case worker can have a decisive impact on a person's application and consequently on his or her life.

The current international situation calls for great attention to the issue of religiously motivated asylum claims. In 2016, the European Parliament acknowledged that ISIS was committing genocide against Christians, Yazidis and other religious and ethnic minorities.⁷ The lives of people fleeing from severe persecution may be put at risk due to a subjective credibility assessment and its varying quality among the participating States.

Regarding all of the above, ADF International strongly **urges** participating States to review their credibility assessment practices in order to adjust them to the complex nature of religious beliefs and to invest in the appropriate training of case workers.

ADF International further **urges** participating States to shift the focus from testing knowledge to acquiring personalized information about the applicant's religious identity, experiences and way of life.

Finally, ADF International **urges** participating States to involve religious communities in better understanding the nature of religious conversion.

⁶ Dominic Casciani. 'Are Christian converts seeking asylum getting a raw deal?', BBC, 5 June 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-36430880>

⁷ European Parliament, Resolution on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-8-2016-0149_EN.pdf?redirect