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The Christianisation of Afghan and Iranian transit migrants in Istanbul: encounters at the biopolitical border

Shoshana Fine

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Abstract

This paper explores how border control regimes are linked to the local condition of the Christian conversion of Afghan and Iranian 'transit migrants' in Istanbul. It is argued that transit migration is a securitised category, which contains 'undesirable' migration flows in and around the borders of the EU. The stuck condition into which 'transit migrants' are thrown has opened up a missionary space claimed by Christian organisations through their provision of social and welfare assistance. This paper reports on field research among migrants and agencies in Istanbul. Evidence gathered reveals that a state of stuckness is read by the migrants themselves through a desirable/undesirable binary inflected with an orientalist logic: the border is no longer conceived only in territorial terms but acquires an identity dimension cutting through the population. In this context, Christianisation offers the possibility to leap across the binary opposition west/non-west, to land on the desirable 'west' side and thus to reconstitute the self as desirable.

Key words: transit migration, borders, biopolitics, orientalism

Author

Shoshana Fine, CERI, Sciences Po, Paris
Email: shoshana.fine@sciences-po.org

My focus in this paper is on the "Christianisation" of transit migrants in relation to the border regime. I argue that the temporal, spatial and identity logic of the migration control regimes has opened up a missionary space which is claimed on the one hand by Christian organisations on the borders of so-called transit countries like Turkey, and on the other by transit migrants who are seeking either to construct themselves as 'desirable' candidates for refugee status and thus to increase their chosen destination prospects; or to survive better their 'transit' conditions through self-reinvention. To explore this relation I draw on a biopolitical framework which 'reconceptualises sovereign power: not as fixed at the outer edge of the limits of the territorial state, but infused through bodies and diffused across society and everyday life' (Vaughan Williams 2009: 732/3) I suggest that this phenomenon is en effect of biopolitical border controls informed by Orientalist discourses.

Most of the data for this discussion is drawn from semi-structured interviews and participant observation with Iranian and Afghan migrants in Istanbul during the Spring of 2012. This paper is part of my PhD research, the aim of which is to understand the emergent category of transit migration and the phenomenon it is trying to capture. I did not set out to explore religious conversion as part of this construction process, but the significant presence of Christian associations in the reception of transit migrants meant that they inevitably became one of the settings for my fieldwork. Volunteering at an informal migrant association, my initiation into the missionary space came about when I was asked to sign a form affirming my intention, inter alia, to 'spread Jesus's love'. In the course of my participant observation, I observed missionaries and became aware of conversion as a small yet revealing phenomenon among Iranian and Afghan migrants in Istanbul.

Context

In 2013, Iranians make up the second largest national grouping of asylum seekers in Turkey and the third largest group of refugees. It is relatively easy for Iranian nationals to enter Turkey; they are not required to possess a visa for a period of up to three months. However, it is extremely difficult for Iranians to stay in Turkey permanently on a legal basis; acquiring nationality is virtually impossible outside of marriage and Turkey has imposed a geographical limitation on the Geneva Convention to the effect that non-Europeans accorded international protection in Turkey must be resettled to a third country (mostly the US, Canada and to a lesser extent EU states). The Iranians whom I interviewed were male and female, well-educated, and while some migrated alone, others came with their family.

Afghans are by far the most important nationality of asylum seekers in Turkey and the third largest national grouping of refugees. Afghan nationals require a visa to enter Turkey and, more typically, they cross the Iranian border illegally into Turkey. While some Afghans apply for asylum in

Turkey, many hope to cross the border into the European Union via Greece or Bulgaria – usually with the assistance of a smuggler. While some Afghans benefit from Turkey's informal labour market to earn money for the next leg of their journey, others become stuck there as wages are low, exploitation high and the border heavily policed. The Afghans whom I interviewed were young, fairly uneducated and migrating alone.

Securitization and the 'Muslim threat'

Conversion processes are amenable to the states of 'stuckness', that is, the deceleration of circulation that results from the containment of 'transit migrants' by the European migration control regime (Hess 2012). Containing 'transit migration' in neighbouring countries to the EU (like Turkey) through externalisation policies is a key objective of EU migration and asylum policy. Furthermore, externalisation is largely legitimised through framing irregular migration flows as a pressing security threat whose control requires the deterritorialisation of European border practices. Hence 'transit migration' functions as a discursive practice to support the securitization and extension of the European migration and asylum agenda (Içduygu and Yuseker 2012). As a threat, the transit migrant is assigned a distinctive identity; unwanted, illegal, and generally from the South. While there is no specific religious affiliation to the 'transit migrant', he nonetheless sits on a security continuum connecting immigrants, asylum seekers, trans-national crime networks and terrorists. Enmeshed within this continuum is the construction of the Muslim threat, which trades on a reductive amalgamation of Islam with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. The conflation of these issues has led to the particular securitisation of the Muslim immigrant. Indeed Guild notes that:

> '*Where the protection seeker is from an Islamic country, the geography of terrorism acts in such a way as to heighten the threat that such a person is seen as constituting for the state*' (2006:246).

While European policy discourses and practices do not explicitly articulate any such reductive amalgamations, as I argue, the presence of Christianisation practices among migrants and asylum seekers raises interesting questions about contemporary orientalist discourse embedded in the global mobility regime. If, as the evidence suggests, the idea of the 'Muslim Other' has been presented as a new threat to societal security in Europe and the United States, it would not be surprising to encounter desecuritising moves which involve the shedding of this religious identity.

Local conditions of the transit migrant in Istanbul: a context amenable to conversion

Previous research (Leman 2007; Koser Akçapar 2007) and my own fieldwork suggest that Christianisation is a small yet significant phenomenon in Istanbul. Evidence from my fieldwork points toward an emergent dialectic between Orientalist discourses on the one side and self-making processes on the other in the process of 'becoming Christian'. My evidence suggests that the conversion process is a gradual one of relationship-building that profits from:

i) Migrants' lack of alternative communal space, to that provided by churches; The Church garden and services provide secure, peaceful environments to offer migrants' sanctuary from the Istanbul mayhem and a social setting to meet with others, as well as missionaries who spend cosiderable time getting to know them.

It felt really great in chuch, to be a part of something, to be a part of that religion; I have met so many new people from church.
Bijan, 28 years, Iranian

ii) The absence of welfare support in Turkey, which opens up space for voluntary support. Although at present there is a law on immigration and asylum awaiting approval in the Turkish parliament which will extend rights on health services, education and legal access to asylum seekers, in the meantime much of the legal, financial, and health assistance available for irregular migrants and asylum seekers is provided by Christian NGOs and Churches. These sites of assistance are frequently occupied by missionaries who gave out multi-lingual copies of the bible and information on Church services. It should be noted that Turkey's secular model permits Christian organisations and missionaries to operate and for Christians to worship freely.

iii) Migrants' endlessly empty time. Many of my respondents stressed that without money, settled accommodation or work and without any sense of when they can acquire a stable status, they lose a sense of meaning to their lives:

I can't read, my mind is busy. I don't know where I will be in one year, if I can study or not I don't know… I am not living, I am just existing, life is very boring.
Sharbat, 16 years, Afghan

When you are Afghan, the UN make you wait and wait. It is a policy of discouragement
Sayed, 20 years, Afghan

iv) Physio-psychological wellbeing among migrants. This is related to the uncertainty expressed above.Crisis and instability are frequently evoked as reasons for conversion; the feeling of 'going crazy' reported by respondents can be considered an important aspect of their openness to conversion (Rambo 1989). These vulnerable states were evoked by almost all of my respondents:

I tried many times to cross the border but it is too difficult. They caught me every time. Two years I am waiting for asylum here. All I do is I sleep, I eat. I am finished, all I do in a day is eat macaroni pasta. All together I am crazy, my brain is crazy. For 100 Afghans, 70 have gone crazy.
Javad, 16 years, Afghan

My head hurts my body hurts. The problem is I haven't seen my family for 4 years, the problem is that I am sleeping on the streets, the problem is that I was travelling for four years and no one wants to help me, no one will let me stay.
Ashad, 22 years, Iranian

v) Social networks; previous studies (Koser Akçapar 2007) have revealed the importance of social networks of Iranian migrants and asylum seekers in spreading the notion of Christian conversion as a form of spiritual capital to be exploited as a mobility strategy to reach the West. However, this cannot be said of Afghans. My findings regarding the Afghan community exposed the lack of solidarity within social networks based on nationality as a potential driver towards Christianisation projects. The below testimony from an Afghan respondent offers an interesting example of how the negative perceptions of Afghan social networks are amalgamated with a securitised Islam and how this in turn is contrasted with the Church setting:

When I go to church and I see a lot of people, they love me and speak with me... in the dorm there is a mosque but I don't like it, there is always lots of fighting. The Afghan girls there, they lie to the UN about me, they say Mohammed has stolen something, but the UN say that they believe me, I don't trust Afghans.. I am so angry... I don't like to speak with any Afghan people
Mohammed, 17 years, Afghan

vi) The feeling of being undesirable and rightless; the quote below vividly captures the migrant's sense of being objectified, of being treated like 'a ball' that can be thrown about:

I get to Turkey and I am crazy; I am in so much pain and they are always sending me somewhere else, telling me to go to another place, another time, I am like a ball, they are just throwing me everywhere.
Abdul, 26 years, Afghan

vii) The perception that as Christian converts they will be more successful in their asylum claim; the following testimony from a Rwandan asylum seeker residing in Turkey refers to the strategic conversion of Iranians:

Iranians are mostly educated, they go to war they know what and what not to do. They are calling themselves Christian because they are following an objective. They say they are Christian but they know inside they do not feel Christian and when they get to America they can change; an Afghan they don't want to change they are not educated; they wouldn't use that strategy. So many Iranians they go to the US and Canada, then they become Muslim again. They know they will help them if they are Christian, they are saving their lives.
Patrick, 40 years, Rwandan

viii) Access to liberal practice: not all cases of conversion fit this strategic, cynical view. Some associated Christianity with more personal freedom:

It is very difficult for me at the dormitory. The staff call me a slut because I wear make up and want to go out. They say that the African girls who are Christian can go out as they want but I always have to give an explanation.
Sharbat, 16 years, Afghan

ix) Political understanding: migrants' draw links between their individual predicament and the global, political context. For some, this context is friendly to christianisation.

Put together these temporal, institutional and subjective conditions are favourable to projects of Christianisation precisely because they afford the time, the place, the state of mind and political contexts that are conducive for missionaries to make their moves and for migrants to respond positively to them. They are an integral part of the process of 'becoming Christian'.

Crossing borders through Christianisation

In the light of the above, conversion cannot be viewed only as a private decision since it is dynamically linked to the structural setting which makes 'transit migrants'. I agree with Rambo (1989: 48) that conversion 'cannot be extricated from the fabric of relationships, processes, and ideologies which provide the matrix of religious change'. Transit migrants are subjected to migration regimes in which the right to mobility is limited to so-called desirables. This discursive practice finds its strength through a dualism between freedom and security, according to which freedom of movement for some is dependent on the restriction of others (Bigo 2010). This restriction is legitimized through securitisation processes which label the unwanted migrant as a threat. The threat construction of the refugee and the consequential exceptional practices this 'legitimates', has led Agamben (1998) to refer to them as the ultimate 'biopolitical subjects' in the sense that they are left outside the normal legal framework and are subject to real and symbolic violence. For Agamben, sovereign power does not reside at the territorial border of the state, rather he maintains that the sovereign is he who decides the exception; that is what life is worth living and which is expendable and denied access to legal and political institutions, or as he puts it, which is bare life. This perspective calls for a reconceptualisation of the border in which:

> 'Borders are continually (re)inscribed through bodies in transit that can be categorised into politically qualified life on the one hand and bare life on the other' (Vaughan-Williams 2009:749).

Agamben uses the term 'biopolitical governance' to refer to the power to *make live* and let die; it is the endeavour to regulate life at the level of the population. According to this approach, a thriving population is a healthy and pure one that must rid itself of inferior 'races' as the condition of its own survival. As Michel Foucault also argues support for the population and killing your (biological) enemies are two sides of the same coin.

> '*The fact that the other dies does not mean that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race (or the degenerate, the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier and purer*' (2003: 255).

This vivid counter position between who can live and who can die is not always to be read literally, although in the case of transit migrants there are indeed those who are left to die in their attempts to cross rivers and seas. It refers rather to the interdependence we can observe between the desirable and the undesirable. It is by expelling the undesirable that the desirable may thrive.

The particular nature of the dualism on which Christianisation is based may be illuminated by the concept of Orientalism. The challenges presupposed by migration flows to conceptions of

national identity have influenced states' migration policy throughout history (Adamson 2006). This has taken diverse racial, ethnic and religious forms, including restrictions on Asian immigration to the US in the 19th and early 20th century, the favouring of ethnic Turks and exclusion of ethnic Greeks following the foundation of the Turkish Republic, or the Jewish right to immigrate to Israel. If the 'Muslim Other' has become the new threat to societal security in Europe and the United States, it would not be very surprising that this impacts upon the global mobility regime.

Orientalism entails a way of seeing the non-West by the West. Embedded within a power-knowledge nexus, it is said to invent the Orient rather than describe it. It finds its strength by imposing a singular identity onto a homogenised mass. A unified Islamic world is read as hostile, backwards, fuelled by extremist rhetoric and exhibiting a general animosity for the West (Said 1979). Orientalism entails that immigration from this world should be limited in order not to undermine the so-called core identity of the West. An understanding of Orientalism provides a fruitful perspective from which to approach the question of religious conversion and Christianisation on the fringes of Europe. The testimony from a recent Afghan convert below is emblematic of this orientalist thrust:

> *Islam is always fighting, for example, Afghanistan is Islam and they are always fighting and killing lots of people, and now I have lost my family and I am all alone. I don't know about my life, my future. But Christians do not love fighting; they love all people, and they really love God.*
> Sharbat, 16 years, Afghan

Christianisation is perceived as a way to resist the stigma of Islamic violence and ultimately to become desirable. This shift in subjectivity through the confessional internalises the orientalist gaze through an essentialist representation of Islam, which reduces the Muslim to a singular identity based entirely on religion – and on an extreme reading of Islam at that. All religions have internal conflicts and disputed interpretations of their sacred texts and the existence of fundamentalist versions of Islam makes it no different in principle from other religions that have fundamentalist practises and ideologies. What is collapsed in the Orientalist gaze is a politicised Islam for Islam as such. The racist element of this gaze consists in the failure to acknowledge the many ways in which the Muslim faith can be practised to include versions that sit comfortably with secularist values and principles of equality. Consciously or not, agencies for Christian conversion can exploit this failure.

Othering/de-othering among transit migrants

The theory of biopolitics casts an explanatory light on how border management operates in the sense that it raises the relationship between mobility rights and desirable identities. However, what

makes one desirable or not is a contested zone of practice open to various interpretations. One of my Afghan respondents drew a contrast between undesirable Afghans and desirable Africans

> *The UN don't do anything for Afghan people, just Africa. I hear and I see; for example I saw that two Afghan people stay there a long time, but all the African people they come and they go.* Babak, 23 years, Afghan

Another contrasted the treatment of Afghans to Syrians and Iranians:

> *'I think that the UN wants to help some people, not everyone. When my friend went to the airport, I saw a lot of people there, maybe 30 from Syria and many Iranians but just one person from Afghanistan; Afghan people they are waiting a long time, maybe 5 or 10 years, the UN makes them wait, they don't say no they just don't say anything. Other nationalities, they come and go but Afghans are just waiting.'*
> Mohammed, 24 years, Afghan

Regardless of the truth of these contrasts, that they are made testify to the internal competition within transit migrant groups. Given their predicament in which some migrant groups feel compelled to compare themselves to others, it is not surprising that they problematize the image they feel gatekeepers have of them and to manipulate this image if they can. In this context, I propose that some transit migrants attempt to re-constitute themselves - to become desirable - through Christian conversion, in order to improve the chances of escaping their condition. Whether we are referring to opportunist conversion or conversion through self-reinvention, I argue that the choice of Christianisation feeds from and functions to legitimate the classification of desirables and undesirables through an orientalist lens.

The construction of the desirable self was often demonstrated through reference to the experience of conversion moments, such as a miraculous moment, often expressed through the appearance of Jesus in dream or from reference to having some connection to Christianity in the former life; this might take the form of walking past a church or having been assisted by a Christian nurse. Converting migrants learn to identify a confessional moment that marks a personal turn. Indeed one respondent responsible for processing asylum claims reported that he and his colleagues have grown cynical about the authenticity of many narratives of such moments. Nonetheless, for some, their Christianisation process offered a genuine sense of liberating self-reinvention and subjectification:

'The difference with Christianity is that Jesus paid for our sins, if I sin, God becomes angry with Jesus, not me, this makes me much closer to God, in a way that I never knew with Islam…
Ashad, 30 years, Iranian

This view of Christianity may not be shared but this respondent has clearly constructed it as less punishing. Not all conversions represent such a shift in subjectivity, some of my respondents were opportunist and saw conversion purely as a means to migrate to the West:

My brother (in the US) tells me to be careful and not to believe them; once they get to the US they burn the bible. They say it was just my passport – it is much easier for them to become refugees if they are Christian.
Abdul, 26 Ayears, Afghan

Bob and Chris (missionaries) know that they are not real believers and will convert back once they reach their destination; they say that it is enough for them that they read the bible.
Seyed, 20 years, Afghan

Submitting to processes of conversion, be they out of real interest or not, can also be framed as a form of symbolic violence. Conversion involves a passage from one set of sacred practices to another which, as these Afghan migrants reported, can be profoundly uncomfortable:

I was there to watch, that is all. It is strange, they do not pray the same as us; they sing, we are very calm in a quiet place. I was just looking, I was not praying inside.
Javad, 16 years, Afghan

Whether conversion is heartfelt or not, it entailed an estrangement from the 'homeland'. In effect, while conversion was perceived as a mode of 'de-othering' vis-à-vis the West for some of my respondents, they were also aware that their conversion entailed an 'Othering' from their homeland. We should remember that apostasy is subject to the penalty of death in Iran and Afghanistan. It not only renders the possibility of return extremely difficult, but my interviewees also evoked fear for their families whom they had left behind in case their conversion became known. The politicisation of religion produces both symbolic and potentially real violence.

Not all respondents interpreted the desirable/undesirable border as one made through an Islam/Christian opposition, but there was widespread sentiment that the refugee regime was intimately connected to political interest. Turkey offers an ideal setting to probe into the relation between migration, refugees and world politics considering the limitation on the Geneva Convention and the imposed 'transit' status of all asylum seekers. While States have an obligation to support

refugees present on their territory, they have no such obligation for refugees residing in other nation states; thus the profile of resettled refugees provides a revealing door opener into how European interests (including those of security) permeate the politics of the refugee regime. Unfortunately, UNHCR Turkey would not provide statistics on the number of converted refugees, to enable a deeper analysis of this relation.

However, the asylum seekers themselves frequently made reference to the importance of the global political situation in the outcome of their claim. For instance, several migrants referred to the significance of their refugee claim as a soft power tool in the strategic diplomacy of the US.

> *There are lots of politics in the UN. All this time they wouldn't help Afghan people running from the war. Why were the helping so many Iranians and not Afghans; why go and invade somewhere, and those people when they run away; and yet, they accept Iranians, educated, who are potential terrorists? The UN is not a democratic institution, it works for the superpowers, the US, Canada, France, the UK. Ok what I don't understand, in the Democratic Republic of Congo there was a civil year for many years, but very few people were given asylum although they were accepting thousands of Iranians, why? The US was accepting lots of Iranians to use them against Iran later on. The UN does not follow all its rules and principles, sometimes someone with a real case will be rejected and another accepted.*
> Patrick, 45 years, Rwandan

This perception of manipulation of the refugee regime to meet foreign policy interests may be well- grounded; indeed, it has been argued that the Geneva Convention was crafted in such a way as to encourage East-West immigration and disaffection in the Cold War context (Betts and Loescher 2011). In today's context, the notion that the war on terror has replaced the Communist threat emphatically weighs on the perceptions of some of my respondents regarding their possibilities of acquiring asylum and resettlement.

> *Afghans are kept waiting and waiting. I dont know the politics behind this one… too hard to sort out the infiltrators?*
> Abdul, 26 years, Afghan

In this context, Christianisation offers the possibility to leap across the binary opposition west/non-west, to land on the desirable 'west' side and thus to reconstitute themselves as desirable.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to two interconnected phenomena : on the one hand, the construction of 'transit migration', that is, of unwanted migrants from the South, contained and constructed through securitisation processes; on the other, the Christianisation of some members of this group to improve their conditions and their access to mobility rights. I have offered evidence from Turkey to suggest that the conditions in which transit migrants must live invite christianisation as one way of reconstituting the self as 'desirable'. A biopolitical perspective invites a political analysis of conversion as a migration strategy through an emphasis on a reconceptualisation of sovereign power, which accordingly allows for an interpretation of this phenomenon as an effect of (biopolitical) border controls targeting bodies and the population. Furthermore, I suggest that this phenomenon offers an indication of the existence of oriental discourses at play in the governance of liberal democratic states. This case study may be small in scale but it offers some insight into how relations of power, domination and knowledge function in the contemporary global political context in relation to the regulation of migration.

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