

Relocation as a Response to Persecution

RLP Policy and Commitment

Adopted by the Religious Liberty Partnership in March 2011 and modified and reaffirmed in March 2013.

Context

- Christians in many parts of the world face continuing or increasing pressure and persecution – whether by State authorities, extremist groups, communities or families.
- In Scripture we see three main responses to persecution: to accept and endure (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:10-13), to challenge or resist (e.g. Acts 22:25-29), and to flee (e.g. Acts 9:23-25).
- Especially within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, those facing religious persecution, and those supporting them, are often quick to assume that relocation (i.e. fleeing or extraction) is the only viable option, or that it is the most appropriate response.
- Based on the testimony of Christians who have relocated from the MENA region, and on our experience of supporting those facing persecution, it is our firm conviction that hasty relocation – especially to “the West” – can be problematic both for the individual(s) concerned and for the wider church.
- As members of the [Religious Liberty Partnership](#) (RLP), we recognise the need to work collaboratively to meet the many support needs of persecuted Christians and to nurture the continued growth of the church where it is under pressure. We seek to follow the RLP Best Practices for Ministry to and with the Persecuted Church.

Policy

We advise and assist Christians under persecution to relocate out of their country/region only as a matter of last resort, where no other viable options are available.

Commitment

In considering relocation as a response to persecution:

- We seek to understand and verify the nature of the persecution before determining a response.

- We give due consideration to the advice of local church and ministry leaders and respond, where possible, with their authorisation.
- We take account of medium- and long-term implications – both for the individual(s) involved and for the church – as far as we are able.
- We consider in-country and in-region relocation options before pursuing out-of-region options.
- We collaborate with others to meet the many support needs of those facing persecution, whether they remain within their communities or are forced to relocate

Rationale

Supporting healthy churches. We seek to support and foster the building up, not the depletion, of national churches in the MENA region – whether historical/recognised churches or the emerging church movements. In many countries in which the church is under pressure, national church leaders have urged their Christian compatriots to remain in the country and not to emigrate. They recognise that, whenever possible, the believers should remain so that the church will become more firmly established. The challenge is especially great for the emerging communities of believers from Muslim backgrounds. The cycle of conversion-persecution-relocation must be broken if these communities are to flourish. The hasty relocation of believers without realistic expectations or adequate planning also places a strain on the receiving church communities.

Promoting biblical perspectives. We seek to maintain and foster biblical perspectives on suffering and persecution within the worldwide church – including those supporting persecuted Christians as well as those under pressure. We may need to rethink our theology, recognising that the gospel is not about avoiding persecution. We need to understand the different Biblical responses to persecution and depend on the Holy Spirit as we seek to discern the appropriate response in each situation.

Maintaining local witness. For some who face persecution, there may be appropriate ways in which they can adapt behaviour, work or fellowship patterns so that they can maintain a faithful witness while remaining in their location. Families and friends are unlikely to be convinced of the relevance of a faith that divides and alienates family members.

Avoiding unintentional messages. By too readily or too hastily advising/assisting persecuted Christians to relocate to “the West,” we can inadvertently send a signal that “the West” is in some way superior. This is an unhelpful attitude within the body of Christ, and is sometimes promoted by those who have successfully settled in the West as well as by Westerners. We can also encourage spurious claims of religious persecution among those who may primarily be attracted by the lure of opportunity and material benefit they perceive in “the West.”

Prioritising local options. For those forced to flee because of threats to life or family, local (in-country or in-region) relocation options, where available, are typically more straightforward logistically, can be implemented more rapidly, are less costly financially, and involve less cultural adjustment than out-of-region relocation (though in-region options may be challenging to sustain in the longer term).

Supporting through partnering. Through partnership and cooperation, in-country or in-region alternatives can often be found, for example through short-stay, employment or study visas. If in-country or in-region options are not available, there may be viable options in the “non-West.” Sometimes these may not be long-term options – but they leave more open the possibility of return (see below).

Meeting the range of support needs. In any case of relocation, it is vital that adequate attention be given to the wide range of support needs that arise for the individuals and their families – including spiritual, emotional/psychological, financial, medical, logistical, educational etc. Through partnership and cooperation many of these needs can be met locally or in-region – sometimes more fully or adequately than out-of-region.

Recognising immigration challenges. Visa, immigration and asylum rules mean that out-of-region relocation (especially to “the West”) is often time-consuming and challenging, with significant rates of non-acceptance, though work or study visas may be available for those with suitable qualifications. In particular, asylum/refugee systems and procedures are typically time-consuming (sometimes taking years), challenging (in terms of the necessary burden of proof), restrictive (for example, with limitations on movement or employment while awaiting determination of refugee status), and uncertain (there is a high rejection rate, with those rejected often then facing more severe pressure).

Acknowledging challenges in “the West.” Those who relocate outside their region often face significant challenges in adjusting – for example, to a new climate, language, culture and society, new temptations and even new church environments. Experience shows that there can be increased risk of falling away from the Christian faith. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that a majority of Middle Eastern Christians who flee from persecution by relocating to “the West” end up losing their faith in their new location.

Maintaining the possibility of return. Relocation to “the West,” especially if through asylum or refugee systems, is usually a long-term or permanent move. Even though some express a desire to return to their countries when the security situation allows, or are encouraged to do so, experience shows that very few in fact do so. Typically, viable in-country or in-region options leave

more open the possibility of return. By leaving open the possibility of return for as long as possible, we also leave open to our persecuted brothers and sisters the possibility for forgiveness and reconciliation with perpetrators, for the encouragement and strengthening of the local body of Christ, and for positive impact within their societies and nations through the witness of the church.

Relocating to “the West” as a last resort. Although we advocate in-country or in-region relocation when it is necessary for Christians to flee, we recognise and affirm that it is sometimes appropriate and necessary for Christians to relocate outside their country or region, including through asylum/refugee systems. However, we affirm that out-of-region relocation, especially to “the West,” should be the option of last resort.

Quotation

A missions worker with 40 years’ experience in the Middle East states:

“It has been my experience that every person who enters an asylum-seeking procedure eventually becomes depressed with the interminable delays and insensitivities of the ‘system.’ It seems to me that the real issues relate to lifestyle choices and employment potential.

“If the individual has the option of finding gainful employment (through which they would qualify for a visa) in a country other than their own, it is far more practical than subjecting oneself to the humiliations and psychological trauma that accompany identification as a refugee, especially in the initial stages when the individual is not allowed to support him/herself and is often reduced to depending on some kind of welfare system or the generosity of friends or churches.

“The whole refugee system is demeaning. It is easy to understand that governments and NGOs do not want to make asylum-seeking procedures attractive. I would not advise anyone to seek asylum unless there is no other option whatsoever. And in assisting a convert from Islam to Christianity, I always try to work out other options.”

Further analysis and information

More detailed analysis of the pressures facing those who relocate because of religious persecution is available from Middle East Concern (office@meconcern.org) and other ministries.

For more information on the Religious Liberty Partnership, contact: info@RLPartnership.org