



“Be Brothers”— Case Studies of Muslim Receptions of Refugees in History

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Abstract

In the time of the Prophet ﷺ, Muslims provided protection to asylum-seekers and the *Ansar* of Medina treated the *Muhajirs*, who were essentially refugees, like brothers. During the Crusades, Muslim governments and individuals provided aid and refuge for those fleeing the invaders. After the fall of Al-Andalus, the Ottomans took in Jews and Muslims who had been persecuted in the Reconquista and Inquisition. And in World War II, the Muslims of Albania saved Jews fleeing the fascists. Muslims throughout history have helped refugees. In this paper, I look in depth at these various cases that encourage embracing those facing oppression and keeping borders open to refugees. This history is especially important today when Muslims make up the majority both of the world’s refugees and of the populations of the countries taking most of them in.

Introduction

At the beginning of a day’s recitation of Qur’an, we recite a formula, the *ista’aadha*, “*A’udhu billahi min ash Shaytanir Rajim*,” “I seek refuge in Allah from Satan, the accursed.” The same turn of phrase “*A’udhu billah*” (I seek refuge in Allah), is used again and again in the Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet ﷺ.¹ We are told to seek refuge in God from oppressors, from the evil in our own selves, from the evil of created things, from miserliness, cowardice, and fear. Before reciting our most sacred text, and repeatedly in prayers, we are reminded of our condition as humans—as created beings in peril, who need the protection and preservation of God the Most High. We are all refugees in relation to God. And as the first tradition taught in *hadith* classes for centuries goes, “Show mercy to those on Earth and He who is in the heavens will show mercy to you.”² It follows that providing refuge to those on Earth allows one to attain the refuge of God. As Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah writes, “The recompense for deeds is like for like.”³

¹ Qur’an 7:200, 23:97; *Sahih al-Bukhari* 6371; *Jami’ at-Tirmidhi* 3604; *Sunan Abi Dawud* 1552.

² *Sunan Abi Dawud* 4941.

³ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *I’lām al-Muwaqqi’ in ‘an Rabb al-’ Ālamīn*. Edited by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Ibrāhīm. (Bayrut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1991), 1:150.

As of 2016, at least 65.6 million people were in need of refuge on Earth.⁴ People like Um Nawwaf, whose daughter ran to find shelter from bombshells.⁵ A rock hit her head and she began to experience seizures. Um Nawwaf took her children to Jordan where her 13-year-old son ended up having to leave school to work to support the family. Rehana Begum’s life was turned upside down one afternoon when the Myanmar military burned houses in her village and started shooting.⁶ Her brother was killed, but her husband made it out alive, albeit wounded. They walked for four days until they managed to borrow a boat and narrowly escape gunfire on the way to Bangladesh.

Of those 65.6 million, 40.3 million were internally displaced—they had to leave their homes but remained within their country.⁷ 22.5 million were classified as refugees because they fled their country due to war, persecution, or other devastating conditions. And the remaining 2.8 million have sought asylum. These numbers are records in human history. The world has never seen so many people forced to move against their will. The majority of the world’s refugees are most likely Muslim, and Muslim countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have taken in the majority of the world’s refugees.⁸ In this article, I explore cases of how Muslim societies have historically treated refugees. I find these cases are evidence enough that Muslims should never draw borders between themselves and the oppressed, and that they are motivation for Muslims and those of other faiths to help provide refuge to others. In this work, I will be using the word refugee to refer to anyone who has been forcibly displaced.

⁴ UNHCR, *Global Trends-Forced Displacement in 2016*, (UNHCR: Geneva, Switzerland, 2016), 2.

⁵ "3 Real Stories from Refugees." World Economic Forum. Accessed July 30, 2018.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/12/3-real-stories-from-refugees/>.

⁶ Arnold, Katie. "Tales of Horror from Myanmar: 'They Burned My Daughter Alive.'" CNN. Accessed July 30, 2018. <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2017/09/world/myanmar-rohingya-refugee-stories/>.

⁷ "What Is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning | USA for UNHCR." Refugee Crisis in Yemen: Aid, Statistics and News | USA for UNHCR. Accessed June 26, 2018. <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

⁸ UNHCR, *Global Trends*, 14-15.

In Theory and Earliest Practice

Arafat Shoukri, in his book *Refugee Status in Islam*, has examined concepts similar to that of the refugee in Islamic scholarship and during the Prophet’s life.⁹ He explores the concept of *jiwar*, providing protection and, on occasion, asylum to one who seeks it for whatever reason. This practice existed in the pre-Islamic period wherein *jiwar* would defend people against the ravages of blood feuds. Muslims kept up the practice of both providing and receiving *jiwar*; the Prophet ﷺ’s daughter Zainab gave *jiwar* to her war-captive husband and The Prophet himself gave it to a man who betrayed him.¹⁰ Abu Bakr (RA) received *jiwar* when he was facing persecution in Makkah. Among pre-Islamic Arabs, when a person provided *jiwar*, his tribe would have to respect and enforce it. The Prophet ﷺ overcame tribal boundaries and announced that when one Muslim provided *jiwar*, all other Muslims would have to uphold it.¹¹ An arguable conclusion from his pronouncement is that if any Muslim takes in refugees, Muslims in general would have to ensure those refugees’ protection.

Allah says, “And if any one of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of Allah. Then deliver him to his place of safety. That is because they are a people who do not know” (Qur’an 9: 6). The word used, *istajar*, means to seek *jiwar*. Even under threat of conflict, Muslims were obligated by God to provide *jiwar* to those seeking it. Shoukri notes that commentators disagreed about how long *jiwar* was to be given according to the verse but the fact remains that it was to be given.¹² He highlights the idea of *aman*, safe-keeping, embedded in the verse, and also discusses the *dhimmi* category, a protected subject-status, as ways to accommodate non-Muslim refugees in

⁹ Shoukri, Arafat Madi, *Refugee Status in Islam: Concepts of Protection in Islamic Tradition and International Law*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 3-6, 31, 43.

¹⁰ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* 4358.

¹¹ *Sunan an-Nasa’i* 4735; *Jami’ at-Tirmidhi* 1579.

¹² See Shoukri, *Refugee Status*, 45-66.

historical Islamic state structures. In light of this, in theory, the Islamic tradition is quite favorable to taking in and protecting refugees.

In practice, the earliest Muslims both sheltered refugees and were themselves refugees. Conditions in Mecca were difficult—Bilal (RA) had been tortured by being dragged on the hot sand, and persecution was rampant. As the poet Warsan Shire would say, home was the mouth of a shark.¹³ A group of Muslims migrated to Abyssinia so they could practice their religion freely and later nearly the whole community made the *hijrah* to Medina. The Medinans agreed to accept the Prophet ﷺ and his community, and most of them became Muslim themselves. Muslims took in Muslim refugees. There was nothing shameful or weak in the Muslims leaving Mecca. And there was beauty and an example for all humankind in their reception in Medina. Ibn Hisham writes in his *Seerah* that Ibn Ishaq, the first biographer of the Prophet ﷺ wrote, “The Prophet established mutual brotherhood between the companions from the *Muhajireen* (the Migrants) and the *Ansar* (the Helpers, the Medinan locals). According to what has reached me, and I seek refuge from attributing to him words he did not say, he said, ‘Be brothers in Allah, pair by pair.’”¹⁴ The companions then proceeded to pair up and the *Ansar* treated their *Muhajir* counterparts like actual family. As Allah says in the Qur’an:

And [also for] those who were settled in Medina and [adopted] the faith before them. They love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts of what the emigrants were given but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul - it is those who will be the successful. (Qur’an 59:9)

The Prophet ﷺ exhorted his followers to take care of the most vulnerable and himself provided protection for someone who had acted against the Muslim community. In Prophetic times, refugees were welcomed with open arms and

¹³ Shire, Warsan. "Home." PoemHunter.com. March 02, 2016. Accessed July 30, 2018. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/home-433/comments/>.

¹⁴ Translated by Abd al-Salam M. Harun. Ibn Hishām, ‘Abd al-Malik, ‘Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun, and Inas Amin Farid. *Sirat Ibn Hisham: Biography of the Prophet*, (Cairo: al-Falah Foundation, 2000), 112.

became integral parts of society; together, in fact, the locals and the refugees of Medina changed the world, and with the will of Allah are responsible for Islam’s continued presence.

When the Crusaders Took Jerusalem

In his chronicle, *The Complete History*, the 13th-century historian Ibn Athir writes about the fall of Jerusalem and the fate of survivors:

They departed at night for Ascalon where they remained... In Ramadan men came to Baghdad from Syria seeking assistance, accompanied by the Qadi Abu Sa’d al-Harawi. They recounted in the court a narrative which brought tears to the eye and pained the heart. They demonstrated in the mosque on Friday and cried out for help, weeping and reducing others to tears. A tale was told of the killing of men, the enslavement of women and children and the plundering of property that had fallen upon the Muslims in that revered august place...The rulers were divided... and so the Franks conquered the land.¹⁵

The lack of military support for the victims of the First Crusade is a historical blight on the collective conscience of the *ummah*, but Muslims did work to help refugees, just as they eventually helped reclaim their lands. The Qadi Abu Sa’d al-Harawi, though not a refugee himself, took it upon himself to find them support. He went so far as to challenge the caliph’s court himself.¹⁶

As Ibn Athir suggests and Hadia Dajani-Shakeel notes, refugees in the immediate aftermath of the First Crusade came to Ascalon and Tyre.^{17,18} Both cities fell to the

¹⁵ Translated by Ibn al-Athīr, ‘Izz al-Dīn, and D. S. Richards. *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athīr for the Crusading Period from al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīkh*. 2010, year 492.

¹⁶ Maalouf, Amin., and Rothschild, Jon, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*. 1st American ed., (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 11-13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, year 492.

Crusaders in the mid-12th century, at which point refugees migrated to the environs of Damascus and deeper into Egypt. Despite the Fatimid government’s chaotic state, they offered aid to the refugees in Ascalon. The Palestinian refugees participated in society and were socially mobile without restriction; al-Qadi al-Fadl al-Asqalani became a minister under the Fatimids and eventually the Grand Vizier under the Ayyubids. Refugees and their descendants became noted scholars, including the grammarian al-Maqdisi (d. 1186) and the expert on Qur’anic recitations Ibn Ali al-Kinani al-Maqdisi (d. 1238). They also aided in the defense of Egypt against the Crusaders.

Many refugees after the fall of Tyre resettled in the Salihyya neighborhood of Damascus.¹⁹ The neighborhood was established by the Palestinian Qudama family. They had initially left the Crusader yoke for fear that they would not be able to practice their religion properly. Their scholarly family settled by the Salih Mosque in Damascus but quickly entered into competition with local *ulema*. The ruler of the city, Nur ad-Din Zangi, ruled in favor of the Qudama family against the local *ulema* when the local *ulema* wanted them gone, and gave them the endowment of the *masjid*. They eventually moved further away but named their new neighborhood after the *masjid* where they first settled.

In his memoir, the 12th-century nonagenarian Usamah ibn Munqidh explains that when his home city of Shaizar was taken over by the Crusaders, he was welcomed in Damascus.²⁰ Due to political ploys many years later, he had to leave but the man who sponsored him in the city remarked on the great friendship between them—one a refugee formerly in a position of authority, the other a powerful local. He said to Usamah:

¹⁸ “William of Tyre indicates that the Egyptian government used to pay a stipend to every individual in the city (Ascalon).” Dajani-Shakeel, Hadia. “Displacement of the Palestinians During the Crusades*.” *Muslim World* 68, no. 3 (1978): 158-161, 167-168, 172-174.

¹⁹ Miura, Tōru, *Dynamism in the Urban Society of Damascus: The Ṣāliḥiyya Quarter from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Centuries*. Islamic Area Studies (Brill) ; v. 2. (Boston: Leiden: Brill, 2015), 55-58.

²⁰ Translated by Philip K. Hitti in Usāmah ibn Munqidh, and Philip Khuri Hitti. *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usāmah Ibn-Munqidh; Translated from the Original Manuscript by Philip K. Hitti*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 26-28.

*By Allah, if one half of the people were on my side, I would risk hurling them against the other half; even if a third were on my side, I would risk hurling them against the other two-thirds rather than risk parting with thee! But as it is, all the people have coalesced against me, and I have become powerless. But wherever thou mayest be, the friendship between us shall ever remain at its best.*²¹

In the aftermath of the First and Second Crusades, Muslims helped Muslim refugees and likely Nestorian Christians and Jews as well, since they too faced oppression at the hands of the Crusaders. Individuals advocated on their behalf even when governments didn’t provide military support, as in the case of al-Harawi. Locals provided sponsorships, and governments like that of Nur ad-Din Zangi did eventually provide humanitarian aid and justice, across ethnic and sectarian divides. In the following decades, refugees contributed significantly to the intellectual and political life of their new homes.

In the Face of the Reconquista

In his 1523 CE chronicle, the Rabbi Elia Capsali writes that in the aftermath of the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Spain:

*(the Lord) let us find mercy with Sultan Bayezid, the king of Turkey—so that he received the Jews with friendship and issued ‘a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows’ (Ezra 1:1): ‘Whosoever wishes to dwell in My kingdom and My realm may gladly come and shall not delay.’*²²

Whether Sultan Bayezid II actually directly invited the Jewish refugees to Spain as Capsali says, and whether he actually said, “Ferdinand,” the king of Spain, “is said to be a well-advised prince, but he impoverishes his kingdom and enriches mine,”

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Translated by Martin Jacobs. Jacobs, Martin, "Exposed to All the Currents of the Mediterranean--A Sixteenth-Century Venetian Rabbi on Muslim History." Association for Jewish Studies. *AJS Review* 29, no. 1 (2005): 45.

the Ottomans welcomed Jewish refugees with open arms.²³ Jews were resettled primarily in port cities and especially in Salonika. The refugees quickly came to outnumber the native Jews in these population centers. They joined local synagogues and faced taxes from the older Jewish communities (in Salonika for example) but soon established their own spaces.²⁴ They improved the Ottomans’ participation in international trade, developed financial services, contributed to medical and other technical knowledge, and were active in the textile industry.²⁵ Under the *dhimmi* system, their synagogues were protected, they exhibited a degree of self-governance and autonomy, and the Sultan himself intervened against anti-semitic blood libel made by locals.

While the Ottomans did not militarily intervene to help the Andalusian Muslims as they requested, they were likewise welcomed into Ottoman lands in the decades after the fall of Granada.²⁶ They arrived alongside the Jews to Salonika according to Kiel.²⁷ Temimi brings attention to an Ottoman imperial edict sent to Tunis in 1613 which reads, “We have permitted them to settle near to Adana, Azir, Sis, Tarsus, and Kars,” all areas in the southeastern part of modern Turkey.²⁸ Harvey notes that in Ottoman Tunisia, refugees participated extensively in the textile trade and agricultural developments, and were welcomed with tax breaks and the hospitality of earlier Morisco migrants.²⁹ While locals did sometimes grow resentful of their treatment, and they faced occasional exploitation, they mostly remained, received statements of support from the Ottoman government, and assimilated into the local populace; Zbiss, a common Tunisian surname today, is, in fact, the Spanish Lopez.

²³ Ibid., 45; Meddeb, Meddeb, Abdelwahab, Todd, Jane Marie, Smith, Michael B., and Stora, Benjamin, *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations : From the Origins to the Present Day*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 178-185.

²⁴ Shaw, Stanford J., *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 52.

²⁵ Meddeb et. al., *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, 187.

²⁶ Finkel, Caroline, *Osman's Dream : The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 216-217.

²⁷ Kiel, W., "Notes on the History of Some Turkish Monuments in Thessaloniki and Their Founders (with 8 Plates)," *Balkan Studies* 11, no. 1 (1970): 142.

²⁸ Quoted in Harvey, L. P., *Muslims in Spain, 1500 to 1614*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 358.

²⁹ Ibid., 357-361.

The Ottoman Empire had an increasingly high degree of centralization and bureaucratization, both features of modern states. It was nevertheless more open to migration across its fluid borders and in this case dutifully worked to welcome the marginalized, both Muslim and non-Muslim. When locals were unwelcoming, the government stood up for the refugees who, in turn, improved conditions in the empire and attained their own success.

World War II Albania

In his book, *Besa: Muslims who Saved Jews in World War II*, the photographer Norman H. Gershman documents the heroism and hospitality of Albanians towards Jews threatened by fascist persecution. He finds their actions rooted in *Besa*, an Albanian concept of honor and morality tied deeply to Islamic notions of compassion and mercy.³⁰ Lime Balla, one of the subjects of his photography, says:

*In 1943, at the time of Ramadan, seventeen people came to our village of Shengjergji from Tirana. They were all escaping from the Germans... My family took in three brothers by the name of Lazar. We were poor—we didn't even have a dining table—but we never allowed them to pay for the food and shelter. I went in to the forest to chop wood and haul water. We grew vegetables in our garden so we all had plenty to eat. The Jews were sheltered in our village for fifteen months. We dressed them all as farmers, like us. Even the local police knew that the villagers were sheltering Jews. I remember they spoke many different languages... All of our villagers were Muslims. We were sheltering God's children under our Besa.*³¹

The story is not unique. Elsewhere in the work, Baba Haxhi Reshat Bardhi, a leader of the Bektashi order cites a secret edict given by Prime Minister Farsheri, a

³⁰ Bailey, Louis, Bethan Harries, Saima Latif, and Humaira Saeed. "Besa: Muslims Saved Jews in World War II." *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World* 2, no. 2 (2011): 86.

³¹ Gershman, Norman H., *Besa : Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II*. 1st ed., (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 2.

Bektashi Muslim, during the war: “All Jewish children will sleep with your children, all will eat the same food, all will live as one family.”³² Leka I, the son of King Zog of Albania, Europe’s only Muslim king, says that his father issued 400 passports to Jews in Vienna. Elida Bicaku’s village sheltered Jews for 2.5 years. Edip Pilku’s mother faced down the Gestapo on behalf of the Jews she was housing and more. These stories demonstrate an openness, a sense that being Muslim means taking others in and caring for them, seeing the presence of God in all of humanity. Their actions follow in the tradition of the *Muhajireen* and *Ansar* pairing off, treating one another like family.

In the 1930 Albanian census, 204 Jews were counted.³³ By the end of the war in 1945, 1,800 lived in Albania, including refugees from Vienna, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. Hundreds, if not thousands, more used it as a transit point to escape the Nazis. Over the course of the war, the Albanian government repeatedly refused to give Germans lists of the Jews in the country and resisted Italian orders to repatriate Jews to homelands where they would be slaughtered. As Harvey Sarner writes in the title of his 1997 book, “one hundred percent of Jews in Albania [were] rescued from [the] Holocaust.”^{34, 35}

In the age of the nation-state, the Albanians used their borders to protect refugees rather than keep them out. They defended refugees of a different faith, who typically spoke languages different from their own, even in the face of international pressure. Both the government and the locals served the refugees, with principles, not realpolitik, guiding their actions.

³² Ibid., 4-10.

³³ Straub, David. “Jews in Albania,” in *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, Edited by Ehrlich, and Ehrlich, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 943-944.

³⁴ Sarner, Harvey. *Rescue in Albania: One Hundred Percent of Jews in Albania Rescued from the Holocaust*. 1st ed. Cathedral City, Calif.: Brunswick Press, 1997.

³⁵ Muslims protected Jews against the Nazis elsewhere as well. In Paris, Imam Benghabrit “provided refuge and certificates of Muslim identity to a small number of Jews to allow them to evade arrest and deportation.” Sciolino, Elaine. “How a Paris Mosque Sheltered Jews in the Holocaust.” *The New York Times*. October 03, 2011. Accessed August 01, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/04/movies/how-a-paris-mosque-sheltered-jews-in-the-holocaust.html>.

Conclusion

The cases surveyed here show Muslims embracing refugees, making borders fluid, and not letting ethnic or faith differences preclude a welcome. In the majority of these cases, the potential economic contribution of refugees was not a critical consideration in settling them, but refugees clearly benefited all of these societies. The actions of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions more than 1,400 years ago were echoed in the actions of Albanians in just the past century. Millions of Syrian, Somali, Rohingya, Palestinian and other refugees are struggling to survive in Turkey, Lebanon, Bangladesh, the United States and elsewhere. Muslims can and should go above and beyond in helping all who flee their home as the Prophet ﷺ and these various predecessors once did. We have done so before and we must do so again.

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