



"I felt as though

I had never left Saudi Arabia..."

CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIVES OF ATHEIST REFUGEE RELIEF





In Saudi Arabia, Rana was not allowed
to leave the house without a veil

Rana's Escape

Rana did not believe in Allah. And she was convinced that women too are entitled to **a life of freedom and equality**. She knew that it was only a matter of time before she was going to be threatened, persecuted or murdered in her homeland, possibly even by her own family, because of her unorthodox views about religion, people, and the universe. Life in Saudi Arabia became more and more a torture for her, so she felt increasingly faced with the choice: **suicide or escape?**

Rana decided to flee. She thought that she would only have to survive the long and, for her as a single woman, extremely dangerous Balkan route in order to live in peace, to be safe and free. After all, Germany, which she reached with much luck, was a **peaceful and safe country** with a **liberal constitution**:

no one could be convicted here for a "thought crime" – in the eyes of the Islamists, her fall from faith was nothing else.

But when Rana found herself in a refugee shelter in Cologne, she realized that her dream had not come true. The danger from which she had fled had travelled with her: in the form of other refugees. They too had good reasons for leaving their countries, but **apostasy**, falling from faith, was not one of them. Many of the refugees Rana met in Cologne were religious Muslims. And some of them thought that apostasy was a terrible crime, **punishable even by death**.



Rana was in a state of shock: she was threatened in Germany – just like she had been in Saudi Arabia. She had to fear for her life – just like in Saudi Arabia. “I felt as if I never left Saudi Arabia”, she later summed up her experience. For a long time she didn’t know what to do. Then she learned by chance that the chairwoman of the **German Central Council of Ex-Muslims (ZdE)**, Mina Ahadi, also lived in Cologne. Rana contacted Mina and through her got to know some members of the **Giordano Bruno Foundation (gbs)**. A little later they were able to find her an apartment in Cologne, which she gratefully moved into.

Only now was she free. She could have settled into her new life and enjoyed her new freedom, but she was painfully aware that her own fate was **not an exceptional or isolated case**.

Therefore Rana gathered all her courage and, with the help of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims and the gbs regional group in Cologne, she brought her story to the public. In June 2016, a first major article appeared in the **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung**, and, in September, she was a guest on two occasions in the popular German program **sternTV**.

Rana’s commitment attracted the attention of large sections of the German population to the precarious situation of non-religious refugees in Germany. In addition, her case was the final impetus to launch a project that had long been discussed among ex-Muslims and the Giordano Bruno Foundation, the **founding of an Atheist Refugee Relief**.



ex-muslime.de



Secular refugees in Germany

When non-religious people flee from countries where **political Islam** dominates, they are not looking for economic improvements, since many of them come from wealthy families. Nor are they concerned about fleeing war, since many of them come from countries where there is nominally “peace”. People who are not religious flee because they cannot accept the fundamentalist norms of their home countries and therefore have to **fear for their lives**.

In their homeland, non-religious people are often threatened even **by their own family members**, who see their “honour” at stake and will resort to any means to silence their rebellious relative. They are threatened by **states** in which apostasy is punished with imprisonment, torture, or even death, and by **zealous Islamists** who feel called upon by “Allah” to ensure that “unbelievers” receive their “just punishment”.

Under such circumstances, secular-thinking people are willing to give up everything they have: Wealth, friends, family, their home – everything for the chance of a free and self-determined life!

These special motives of secular refugees were long misunderstood by the German state. The responsible authorities even made the erroneous assumption that those who do not belong to any religion could **not be religiously persecuted**, which is why – as a matter of principle – they were not granted the status of “religiously persecuted refugees”. This only began to change with the campaign “**Asylum for Ex-Muslims**”, which was launched in 2009 by the Giordano Bruno Foundation and the Central Council of Ex-Muslims.



Demonstration by the Central Council of Ex-Muslims
in front of Cologne Central Station

The campaign made clear that in Islamic theocracies, it is particularly atheists, agnostics, secularists, and those without religion who suffer **religious persecution** (i.e. persecution by religious fanatics). In 2010, the campaign was able to achieve its first legal success when the Iranian apostate Siamak Zare was recognized as a refugee because of his involvement in the Central Council of Ex-Muslims, and the threat of deportation issued against him was lifted.

Since then, similar decisions have been made in several asylum cases. But this can only be a first step. Legal recognition alone is not enough to enable ex-Muslims to **live in freedom and safety**. Even in refugee hostels, secular refugees are not safe, as they are inevitably conspicuous due to their clothing, their food, or their non-participation in religious festivals and rituals.

They are often **traumatized anew** in the shelters, as they have to live together in a confined space with strictly religious Muslims from whose dogmas they have just fled.

The authorities show little sensitivity to this problem. Furthermore, almost all refugee aid in Germany is provided by **religious organizations** (although largely financed by public funds!), and is thus greeted with little trust by atheists in need of help. Moreover, many employees of confessional institutions lack the necessary **awareness of the problem**, as they cannot understand that it was not faith, but rather absence of faith, that exposed these people to religious persecution and drove them to flee.



Atheist Refugee Relief

Through Rana's activities in the German media as well as in Arabic-speaking atheist forums, more and more **refugees from all over Germany** contacted gbs Cologne and the Central Council of Ex-Muslims. Fortunately, the nationwide network of gbs regional groups was available to provide practical help outside Cologne as well. However, it became increasingly difficult to meet the growing demand. Thus the idea was born of founding a **non-profit association** to tackle these challenges.

The **“Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe – Atheisten helfen”** (SF-AH), English name: **“Atheist Refugee Relief”** (ARR), is now a registered and non-profit association. Its aim is to provide practical assistance to non-religious refugees and to improve their situation through political work.

The association's **self-conception** is based on secular-humanist, rational and naturalistic guiding principles (“evolutionary humanism”). It fights for the enforcement of human rights and for humanist ethics. The association's work focuses on the **principles of the Open Society**, namely *liberalism* (orientation to the ideal of freedom), *equality* (orientation to the ideal of equality), *individuality* (orientation to the individual rather than to the collective) and *secularism* (orientation to secular forms of the foundation of standards).

FRAUEN. FLUCHT. WEGE.



In its **practical work**, the association aims to assist the secular refugees in finding suitable housing, to accompany them to offices, doctors, lawyers, and to help them to access suitable language and integration courses, physiological, and psychological therapy.

We also see it as an elementary part of our work to enable those concerned to experience **their long-awaited freedom in real life**. This freedom is often expressed in seemingly trivial matters, yet ones that are by no means a matter of course for those affected: the possibility of freely choosing one's own clothing and being able to wear it in public.

The freedom to cycle around the city. To experience the feeling of diving into the water at a public swimming pool, or just going to a big cinema. This is an overwhelming experience, especially for women.

Many of those concerned are also **politically active**. They are fighting for their rights and want to draw attention to the situation of their societies of origin. We consider this work to be essential and therefore support them in their travels to conferences and networking meetings as well as in their appearances in the press, radio and television.

If you want to support our work, please transfer your donation to the account of the association "Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe" e.V. (Sparkasse KölnBonn, BIC: COLSDE33XXX, IBAN: DE70 3705 0198 1933 9865 13). All money received is used for the support of secular refugees. Donations to the association are tax deductible in Germany.



Mina Ahadi gives interviews

after an asylum court case in Münster (2017)

Political demands

The “Atheist Refugee Relief” was founded because there are **serious deficiencies** in the handling of non-religious refugees that need to be corrected. The primary goal of the association is therefore to make itself superfluous by eliminating the grievances. To achieve this, two main political demands must be met:

1. Guaranteed adequate state protection for non-religious refugees in Germany: This means, among other things, housing the persons concerned separately from religious Muslims; police protection and assistance in assuming a different identity if they are subject to persecution from their country of origin or by Islamists in general; maintaining the confidentiality of sensitive data by all involved authorities.

2. Recognition of apostasy as a ground for asylum – not only in cases of persecution by the state, but also explicitly in cases of threatened persecution by private individuals in the country of origin.

We call upon the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) to ensure that all decision-makers are trained in this regard. Unfortunately, too few of them know that apostasy is still punishable by the death penalty, which the representatives of political Islam legitimize, e.g., with Quran sura 9:74 (“if they turn away, Allah will punish them with a painful punishment in this world and the Hereafter”). In Sudan, Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Mauritania, apostasy from Islam is punishable by death, and **executions** are in some cases carried out in public.



In those countries where apostasy carries no punishment under criminal law, there remains the threat of **civil law consequences**, which are also based on classical Islamic law. For example, a marriage with an apostate can be dissolved and the „unbeliever“ can lose the right to raise their own children. The **social effects** are often devastating as well: people who actually or supposedly turn away from Islam must expect social ostracism, loss of their jobs, and massive threats and attacks by third parties.

In addition to this, the „deviants“ often face complete incomprehension, even sheer hatred, from their own families, since apostasy means „shame“ and „betrayal“ for them. This is particularly harsh on women, because in the Oriental tradition they are considered **bearers of „family honour“**, a circumstance that not infrequently has fatal consequences.

In German government agencies, however, this is often ignored: A young woman from Dubai, for example, who we are supporting, had to listen to a clerk explaining that she actually comes from a safe country, one where European holiday-makers enjoy lying on the beach without any problems. In fact, in the event of deportation, she could be sure of only one thing: that she would be **murdered** by her brothers in order to restore the „family honour“. But this idea lay beyond the horizons of the responsible „migration expert“.

Secular refugees, despite their special threatening situation, often cannot be sure whether they will be granted the right to asylum in Germany. If a Muslim converts to Christianity, the authority relies on the judgment of the local pastor in the asylum process. Atheists naturally have to do without the intercession of a clergyman. We want to eliminate this **unequal treatment**.



Key image of the

First "Critical Islam Conference"

(gbs/ZdE 2008)

Background

Open apostasy is only the tip of the iceberg. In strictly religious societies, the **right to self-determination** is restricted in many ways. For example, critical remarks about religion can lead to social ostracism even if they contain no commitment to atheism.

Drastic invasions of privacy are commonplace in many Islamic countries. While Western criticism of archaic practices such as forced marriage and forced circumcision is often dismissed through **cultural relativism** with reference to the supposed "equivalence of all cultures", it is frequently overlooked that there is massive resistance to enforced religious „virtues“ even **within the relevant societies**.

Unfortunately, the **critical voices** can hardly assert themselves because of the lack of free-speech and due to social pressure – so we should all the more support those freedom-loving people who show courage to stand tall under the most difficult social conditions.

The situation is particularly dire for **freethinking women** in many countries. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women have to submit to a male guardian their entire lives. There is strict gender segregation in the public sphere: women must wear veils in public, may not travel without the guardian's consent, may not choose their spouse themselves, may not work without the guardian's consent and are severely restricted in their occupational choices.



In Iran the situation is not much better: Women are not allowed to practice certain professions, they are not allowed to travel alone, etc. They are severely discriminated against when it comes to the right to give evidence, marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. In court, the life and health of a woman is **worth only half as much** as the life and health of a man. Anyone who objects is punished.

The **situation for homosexuals** is also catastrophic. Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini introduced the death penalty for sexual intercourse between men. Since then about 4000 gay men have been executed in Iran. In the meantime, other Islamic countries have followed the Iranian example. Homosexual men are now threatened with death in Yemen, Brunei, Mauritania, Northern Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Northern Sudan and the United Arab Emirates, while in other Islamic states they face long prison sentences, often including lashing.

Thus, in addition to open apostasy, there are other good reasons why refugees cannot return to Islamic states and should be recognized in Germany as **“politically or religiously persecuted persons”**. It is time to offer special support to these people and to give them the opportunity to raise their voice against the injustice in their home countries! Through their courage, they could also be a **role model for German politicians** who should abandon their „spineless appeasement policy towards ruthless despots“. Only then will the world’s despots understand that humanistic values are not negotiable and that **Universal Human Rights** apply to all people – not just Europeans!

» We stand for the **values of freedom and critical thinking**,
for **an open society** in which
the **rights of the individual** are respected.

For the people who have come to Germany
because they have demanded these **fundamental values**
for themselves and their country,
we should provide the **protection** they deserve!

For ultimately they are fighting not only for **their own freedom**,
but also for **ours**. «

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