



The Religious Dimensions of Refugees in Kenya

HIGHLIGHTS

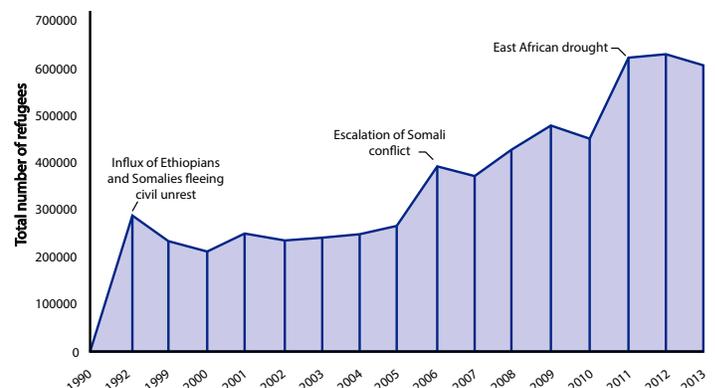
Kenya faces a protracted refugee crisis that is a human tragedy and strains national and international resources. It exemplifies many aspects of today's global humanitarian challenge. Some refugees have lived in camps for three decades and prospects for resolving their situation are far off. The crisis includes significant and complex religious dimensions ranging from the central roles of religious beliefs and practices in refugee lives to the work of many faith-inspired organizations in refugee support. These organizations bring diverse and often distinctive and valuable assets. The refugee challenge exacerbates Christian-Muslim tensions in Kenyan society nationally but especially in the areas hosting the camps. This brief accompanies a full report, *Refugees in Kenya: Roles of Faith*, which is part of a county-level mapping project investigating the intersection of religion and development in Kenya. Examining how religious beliefs and faith institutions are involved in the lives of refugees adds to an appreciation of its human dimensions and points to policy insights that could enhance domestic and regional stability and help link Kenya's humanitarian and development agendas.

Nearly 600,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons were counted in Kenya as of October 2015. About 530,000 live in camp settings with the rest mostly located in Nairobi or elsewhere in Kenya.¹ The majority (71 percent) come from Somalia with increasing numbers from South Sudan. The camps are overcrowded and services are stretched thin. In Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, the world's largest, women outnumber men in the 18-59 group (53 percent).² Some 42 percent of refugees in Kenya are under 12 years old.

Due to protracted conflict in the region, a third generation of refugees are growing up in Kenya's refugee camps, with no clear end or likely return in sight. The first waves of refugees (fleeing Uganda's civil violence in the 1970s) often settled permanently in Kenya and integrated into society. In the early 1990s, however, large-scale refugee arrivals, spurred by conflicts and drought in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, forced the Kenyan government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to establish refugee camps along Kenya's borders, initially as a temporary measure. These have grown and today Dadaab's complex of camps in Northeast Kenya is the world's largest single concentration of refugees in a camp setting. The Kakuma camps are growing notably as a result of conflicts in South Sudan. The location of camps in Kenya's arid and poor regions makes

camp management difficult and fosters tensions with local communities who view refugees as favored competitors. As refugee arrivals continue, Kenya's role as a host country is clearly far from temporary.

Flow of Refugees Entering Kenya



Source: "UNHCR Global Reports 1999-2013" and "Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Returnees 1990-1992." *Refugee Consortium of Kenya*. Chart includes asylum seekers and stateless persons as well as refugees.

KENYA'S REFUGEE CRISIS: CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

Refugee challenges are complicated by Kenya's historical, political, and social dynamics. The religious and ethnic identity of the refugees, who are mainly Somalis, and historic tensions between Kenya's Christian population (82 percent) and Muslim populations (approximately 11 percent) come into play. Factors include secessionist movements along the majority Muslim Kenya Coast (since 1990s) and historically in the Northeast Region by ethnic Somali Kenyans (1960s) as well as Christian-Muslim tensions exacerbated by Al-Shabaab terrorist attacks (since 2012, more than 600³ Kenyans have been killed in over 90 attacks associated with Al-Shabaab or its sympathizers⁴). Political dynamics such as the contestation of Kadhi courts during the constitutional referendum and tensions around Kenyan elections add to complexities. Socio-economic tensions also illuminate religious divisions as Kenyan Muslims feel marginalized from education and employment opportunities and ethnic Somalis are perceived, often with jealousy, as successful businesspersons. Intra-Muslim tensions are also a complicating factor, both within camps and in urban centers.

Somali refugees face particular challenges. Somali nationals and Somalia's many problems overflow into Kenya. Somali refugees, over 98 percent who are Muslim,⁵ are stereotyped and discriminated against based on their ethno-religious identity, historical tensions, and suspicion of collusion with Al-Shabaab or criminal activities such as arms smuggling. Somali refugees' rights to protection and safety as refugees are thus jeopardized, for example when the government rounds up refugees living outside camps.⁶ A Kenyan interviewed by Newsweek magazine illustrated attitudes: "We Kenyans have made a mistake. We allowed Somalis into our country, and now they are killing us. Somalis are one, and every Somali is Al-Shabaab. Everybody thinks like that."⁷ Some Kenyan leaders, including religious communities, recognize the human rights challenges involved and seek solutions to the tensions.

Regional instability and increasing severity of attacks in Kenya have spurred the Kenyan government and security forces to take or threaten drastic measures towards the refugee population. Kenya closed its border with Somalia in 2007, notwithstanding international protests, and again in 2013 following attacks on Nairobi's Westgate shopping mall, various politicians demanded that the Dadaab refugee camp be shut down.⁸ Following the 2015 Garissa University attack, Kenya's Deputy President, William Ruto, called for the UN to

take immediate measures to relocate Dadaab outside of Kenya; otherwise, "we shall relocate them ourselves."⁹ The threats were tempered but meanwhile a wall is being built along the Somali-Kenyan border¹⁰ and a repressive national security bill aiming to cap Kenya's refugee population at 150,000 and expanding the government's anti-terrorism powers was introduced in parliament.¹¹

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN THE REFUGEE RESPONSE

Religious beliefs and practices are often the foundation of refugees' coping mechanisms and their ability to see hope for a better future. Some 80 percent of East Africans say religion is 'very important' in their lives¹² and religiosity has been found to increase in refugee situations.¹³ Faith can serve as a source for strength, solidarity, and a path to trauma healing. Religious leaders among refugees are often perceived as influential, trusted, and well positioned to engage their community. A study in Dadaab found that Somali refugees, in particular, held a deep mistrust of non-Muslim or non-Somali health workers so Somali religious leaders' support of, or opposition to, programs was influential.¹⁴ Faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) generally keenly appreciate how important religious beliefs and support are in refugee contexts. FIOs are creative and consistent in collaborating with religious leaders and actors in their refugee programs.

Both within the camps and in urban settings, dozens of FIOs (see box) play prominent roles in Kenya's humanitarian sector. International, national, and grassroots FIOs work across all sectors: care for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camp settings, peacebuilding and resilience building projects in the host communities, care for urban refugees, and actions to prevent future displacement. In Kenya FIO programs with refugees include health, livelihoods, water and sanitation, education, psychosocial services, food

FIO PARTNERS OF UNHCR IN KENYA

- Salesian Missions of Don Bosco
- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)
- Islamic Relief
- Jesuit Refugee Services
- Lutheran World Federation
- National Council of Churches of Kenya
- Catholic Relief Services
- Association of Volunteers in International Service
- World Vision

assistance, shelter, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) response, spiritual support, child protection, and resettlement services. Precise estimates are not available, but FIOs are longstanding partners in work with refugees, shouldering a substantial part of the care work and actively contributing to policy analysis and advocacy, nationally and internationally.

Faith affiliation and openness to working through religious systems and communities are strengths of FIOs, even though programs are almost never explicitly faith-based and they serve refugees of all faiths. Most refugees in Kakuma are Christian and those in Dadaab are overwhelmingly Muslim. When the refugee and the organization share a faith background, FIO staff argue that trust and respect come more readily, particularly with religious leaders but most FIOs also work across faith lines.¹⁵ Islamic Relief cites their Islamic principles as a crucial factor in their high acceptance in the Ifo sub-camp, the oldest and most tumultuous camp within Dadaab.¹⁶

Faith leaders and FIOs respond in diverse ways to the specific needs of refugees but must also navigate local Muslim-Christian tensions and rising concerns about youth radicalization. General interfaith work in Kenya focuses on collaborative action for shared goals. Common tools include formal statements and dialogue: the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK) provides a national platform, the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) acts regionally, Chemichemi ya Ukweli offers a grassroots approach, and PROCMURA is a pan-African organization. With mounting fear of Al-Shabaab and suspicion toward Somali Kenyans and Somali refugees, Kenya Muslim leaders, as well as the FIOs Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) and Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance (KMYA), have responded with assertions that Islam is not a religion of violence. The national focus on youth radicalization has also given rise to a recent intra-faith Muslim initiative, Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE), that seeks to understand the allure of Muslim youth to extremist groups. Somali refugees are in the middle of this security challenge, convoluted by Al-Shabaab's play on existing religious tension in Kenya and simplistic rhetoric that conflates violence extremism with Islam.

LOOKING AHEAD

With no end in sight to Kenya's refugee situation, new approaches and ideas are needed to improve the lot of refugee populations and ease the burdens on Kenya

FAITH MOTIVATION

Faith actors, notably the faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) that are active partners in supporting displaced populations, highlight core values of their faith and concepts of charity embedded in religious scriptures. Stories and texts of all the major world religions underscore the importance of caring for and protecting the stranger.

The Prophet Muhammad was himself a refugee who fled Mecca in 622 CE to escape persecution. Jesus was exiled to Egypt as a child. Ancient Jewish scripture mentions the establishment of 'cities of refuge,' and a Buddhist story tells of the extraordinary measures King Sibi took to protect a dove who needed asylum.

as a host country. Treating Kenya's refugees as a purely humanitarian matter, temporary in nature, no longer fits the reality. What is needed is an approach that incorporates longer-term development perspectives that also fosters greater social cohesion and responds to environmental dimensions, as climate change and scarce resources affect both the refugee camps and host communities. FIOs and faith actors can be strong partners in this endeavor. As the global refugee landscape evolves, Kenya's experience may offer lessons for implementing humanitarian work in other large-scale, prolonged refugee situations. *The following ideas emerge from the review's focus on faith dimensions.*

- Better knowledge about the complexity and interplay of religious dimensions stoking tensions surrounding refugees and IDPs in Kenya could strengthen policy responses, by the Kenyan government and its partners.
- National Kenyan religious organizations and FIOs have substantial potential to advance interreligious dialogue among and between Christian and Muslim communities, including inter-ethnic dialogue and peacebuilding activities specifically with the Somali and Kenyan communities.
- Humanitarian and development practitioners can learn from FIO models and approaches in navigating the religious beliefs and practices of both the refugee and IDP populations in Kenya.
- Local faith communities and grassroots FIOs are active in caring for and protecting refugees and IDPs, but more research is needed to understand the extent and nature of their roles.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Refugees in the Horn of Africa: Somali Displacement Crisis.” UNHCR. <http://data.unhcr.org/horn-of-africa/country.php?id=110>.
- ² “Camp Population Statistics.” *UNHCR Dadaab and Alinjugur*. August 2015.
- ³ Cumming-Bruce, Nick. “U.N. Asks Kenya Not to Close Somali Refugee Camp in Wake of Garissa Killings.” *New York Times*. April 14, 2015.
- ⁴ “The New Frontiers of Islamist Extremism: Understanding the threat that al-Qaeda affiliates pose to African Security.” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*. September 2014.
- ⁵ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Pew Research Center. *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population*. Washington, DC: 2009, 19.
- ⁶ “World Report 2015: Kenya.” *Human Rights Watch*.
- ⁷ Hatcher, Jessica. “After Garissa, Kenyans and Somalis Face Divided Future.” *Newsweek*, April 7, 2015. For more examples see: “From Kitsilano to Kenya: a Somali fears persecution after Al-Shabaab Attack.” *Vancouver Observer*; “Somalis in Kenya find Themselves under scrutiny.” *LA Times*.
- ⁸ Yarnell, Mark. “The Westgate Mall Attack: What it Means for Somali Refugees.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. 2013.
- ⁹ Cumming-Bruce, Nick. “UN Asks Kenya Not to Close Somali Refugee Camp in Wake of Garissa Killings.” *New York Times*. April 14, 2015.
- ¹⁰ Kenya to Build a Wall on Somali Border to Keep Out Al-Shabaab.” *The Guardian*. March 2, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/02/kenya-wall-israel-separation-barrier>.
- ¹¹ “The Security Laws (Amendment) Bill.” Government of the Republic of Kenya. 2014.
- ¹² “Importance of Religion: Global Religious Futures Project.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life*. 2010.
- ¹³ Ennis, S. “Religion, spirituality and the refugee experience” (PD diss., RMIT University, 2011).
- ¹⁴ “Somali Refugee Attitudes, Perceptions, and Knowledge of Reproductive Health, Family Planning, and Gender-Based Violence: Findings from Discussion Groups with Adult Men and Women, Youth, Religious Leaders, and Health Workers in Dadaab, Kenya.” *USAID*. May 2008.
- ¹⁵ WFDD interviews.
- ¹⁶ WFDD interview, Islamic Relief November 2014.

The primary author of this report is Elisabeth Stoddard, program associate at the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD). This brief draws from a full report, *Refugees in Kenya: Roles of Faith*, which provides greater detail and analysis on the topic and context. Both publications are part of a country-level mapping project conducted by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University and WFDD supported by the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs. Comments or questions can be emailed to info@wfdd.us. All project publications and interviews are found online at: <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-kenya>.

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