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## **Inter-religious marriage: a French professor forced to convert to Islam**

HRWF (23.03.2020) – *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) received very disturbing testimony from a French university professor who was obliged, because of the poor administrative treatment of his file by French authorities, to go to Morocco to marry his Moroccan fiancée and, consequently, to convert to Islam and adopt an Arabic name – Ziad. However, the French administrative justice has recently overturned – alas too late – the Interior Ministry’s refusal of a visa for his fiancée.

This case was first brought to HRWF on 11 September 2019 (read

our initial article here: <https://bit.ly/2wuFgL6>).

## **Letter from Mr. Stéphane VALTER to HRWF on 15 March 2020**

I am a French citizen and have been a state civil servant for many years. I was an assistant professor at Le Havre University when this issue occurred, and then I was nominated to a full professorship position at *Lyon 2 Lumière University* on 1 September 2019.

On 6 May 2019, the French Consulate in Casablanca refused a request for a short-term visa for my Moroccan fiancée to come to France for our wedding. Had she been able to come, we would have gotten married on 8 June in the small village where my mother lives. Then my fiancée, Amina, would have returned to Morocco with the family booklet and applied for a one-year family visa. Hopefully, we would have been reunited in France a short time after that. According to this scenario, my forced conversion to Islam would have never happened because the French marital procedure is purely civil. whereas in Morocco a Christian man cannot legally marry a Muslim woman.

Unfortunately, things turned out very differently. After the discretionary refusal of the Consulate, I sent a gracious request to the Commission of Appeals, which is based in Nantes. However, the original decision to deny Amina her short-term visa was confirmed. I then filed a complaint in the Nantes Administrative Court, demanding both the suspension and the annulment of the contested decision.

Surprisingly, my request for a suspension was refused despite the urgency of this situation. The Court supported the infantilising argument of the Interior Ministry that we were “in too much of a hurry to marry”. I was unable to be present to defend our case and so it was denied.

I was shocked at my own country’s attempt to block my right to start a family, especially when getting married in a foreign country would require my compulsory conversion to a religion. However, seeing that we would remain separated due to this impasse with the French authorities for an indefinite period of time, we pursued the only alternative solution – a wedding in Morocco. To prepare for this, I had to go to Morocco a few times to convert to Islam and change my name from Stéphane to Ziad.

Finally, we got married in Morocco on 8 August 2019. I immediately sent our marriage documents to the civil status service in Nantes for transcription. On 13 January 2020, our marriage was transcribed, which was nearly five months after the ceremony. I received the family booklet by the end of January and then forwarded it to Amina, who asked the Casablanca Consulate for a one-year family visa. To our great relief, she finally arrived in France on 25 February.

These many administrative problems cost us about six months of common life, in addition to the expenses induced by my frequent trips to Morocco. Furthermore, my forced conversion to Islam went against my personal convictions, and has now created a risky situation for me as I could be stigmatised or even in danger if I were known to be an apostate.

I am a professor of Arabic language and civilisation, and so I am often studying Islam in my classes and written work. Now I could potentially encounter a fanatic who might consider me to be a traitor to Islam deserving of punishment. Especially considering the ongoing tensions between the Western world and Islamic extremists, the risk does exist even if it is weak.

Despite the extensive damage that has already been done, there is some good news. On 16 January 2020, the Nantes Administrative Court overruled the refusal to grant Amina a short-term visa and included an injunction to deliver said visa within one month. Unfortunately, the Interior Ministry has not yet implemented this judgement, which demonstrates a manifest violation of the *res judicata*'s authority. Fortunately, this short-term visa request was rendered obsolete when we obtained a family visa in February 2020.

On the one hand I am dismayed by the disregard of the political administration towards a citizen and civil servant, but on the other hand I must commend the French administrative justice in its ability to right wrongs, even with delay. However, nothing can erase these wounds.

Finally, I am demanding compensation from the Interior Ministry for my travel expenses to Morocco for all the marriage formalities and for the emotional and moral damages of the prolonged separation and an obliged conversion to a religion. It is improbable that the Ministry will respond positively, if it responds at all, and in that case I will turn to administrative justice.

Stéphane VALTER, Lyon, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020

PS: those who would like more information may contact Mr. VALTER at the following address: s.valter@univ-lyon2.fr

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