

To Integrate or to Move On?

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Thessaloniki, Greece

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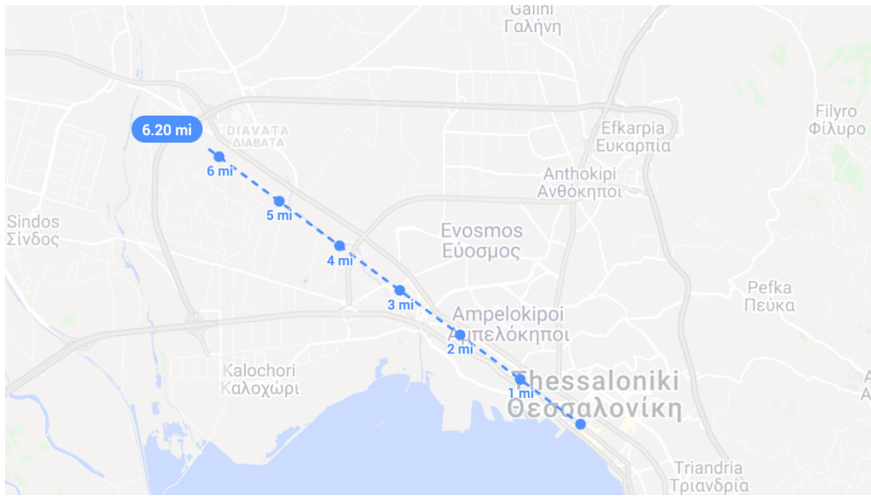


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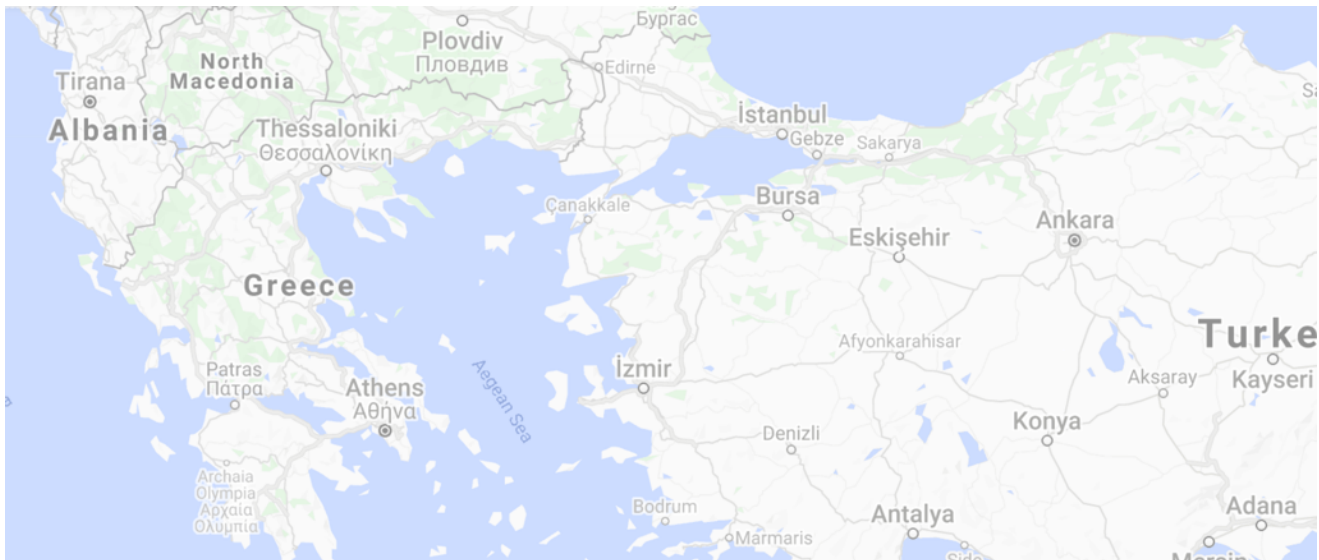
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Cover photo of temporary housing in the Diavata camp on the outskirts of Thessaloniki where many asylum seekers reside while awaiting more permanent residences in the city, or resettlement elsewhere. Photo used with permission from Alexandra Tarzikhan.

Location



Thessaloniki is a medium-sized city with a population of over 1 million people. Asylum seekers and refugees typically will initially take residence on the outskirts of the city some 6.2 miles (10 km) from the city center in the Diavata camp (top left corner) but are increasingly finding apartments in the city proper on their own volition or through an Urban Housing Program.



Thessaloniki is typically the second or third stop for asylum seekers travelling irregularly to Northern Europe after crossing from Turkey. The route either goes by land near Edirne, or by boat from the Turkish coast near Izmir to a Greek island, then by ferry to Athens, and finally by train or bus to Thessaloniki. The city is attractive because of its large international humanitarian presence, and because of its connection to smugglers who might assist migrants irregularly traveling to North Macedonia or Bulgaria *en route* to destination countries with higher employment rates like Germany.

Base map imagery © Google 2019.

For more background on refugees in Thessaloniki and Greece, continue to the appendices.

Introduction

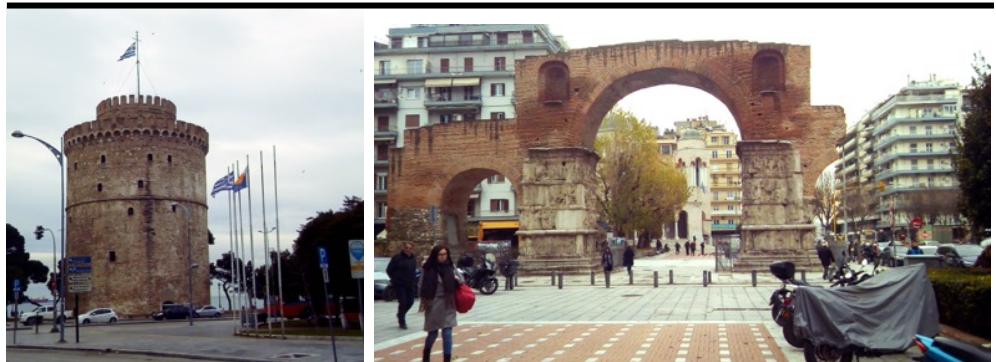
Thessaloniki is known by Greeks as the “Mother of Migration,” due to its centuries-long history of providing refuge to those fleeing persecution and conflict, from Sephardic Jews in the 1400s to Greek refugee returnees in the 1900s. Today, Thessaloniki hosts asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, plus south Asian and African countries. In Greece as a whole, asylum seekers and refugees number [some 115,600](#), with around [16,000 in Thessaloniki and the surrounding area](#).¹ Some refugees treat Thessaloniki as a transit city where they stay while preparing to travel to other, wealthier European countries. Others see Thessaloniki as a permanent home (destination city) and seek to integrate into Greek society.

This report attempts to shed light on the integration process for the most recent wave of refugees in Thessaloniki. While Greece still officially considers itself a transit country, and official policy is meant to provide refugees and asylum seekers with *temporary* relief while they await permanent resettlement, we show that for migrants, many processes meant to be temporary are in fact often the first steps toward *de facto* integration² to Thessaloniki and a sense of permanence.

The report first explains refugees’ journey to Greece’s borders and the obstacles preventing them from leaving Greece, making it a *de facto* host country. We then explain four initial steps toward integration in Thessaloniki: receiving an asylum card (currently called a “White Card”), registering at Diavata Refugee Camp, acceptance in the urban housing program, and receiving Greek social security and tax numbers. We then explore the economic challenges and the setbacks in education, housing, and employment that refugees face while integrating.

Our research includes the authors’ personal experiences as well as the experiences of those we have interacted with or interviewed. Our backgrounds gave us access to Urdu-, Arabic-, and Farsi-speaking refugees as well as to the native Greek population.

Thessaloniki, the “Mother of Migration”



Known as the “Mother of Migration” to Greeks, Thessaloniki’s urban landscape has numerous reminders of its centuries of history with forced migrants finding refuge there including the White Tower (left) and Kamara ruins (right) in downtown Thessaloniki. Photos by authors.

¹ “UNHCR: Greece Hosting 58,000 Refugees and Migrants in Early June | Kathimerini.” Greece, Europe and the Refugee Crisis | Comment. June 20, 2018. Accessed January 23, 2019.

² See a note on terminology below for details on our definition of “integration.”

A Note on Terminology

Defining refugees

In this report, we distinguish between asylum seekers and refugees because these legal statuses have a significant impact on individuals' ability to integrate to Thessaloniki, and on their perceptions of permanence in the city. Asylum seekers have received an asylum card from the Greek Asylum Services (usually acquired within months of arrival; see details below), while receiving refugee status takes much longer (often years, with tens of thousands of logged applications still pending), requires interviews with an asylum case worker and may involve review by a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) asylum specialist. There are also hundreds of migrants in Thessaloniki who only have a note from the local police department (usually, but not always, obtained within days of arriving) but have not yet received asylum seeker or refugee status. Mixed in are numerous economic migrants of various official statuses.

Defining integration

While Greece still officially considers itself a transit country, border closures and long backlogs in the official resettlement process mean tens of thousands of migrants must find ways to continue their lives in Thessaloniki for months and years until their official status is resolved. This report therefore discusses *de facto* integration, not “local integration” as it is defined by the UN Durable Solutions.³ This *de facto* integration includes both informal processes—like finding cash-based work collecting trash—and formal processes like being awarded a social security number as a temporary resident asylum seeker.

A Note on the Dynamic Changes in Greece

The migration situation in Greece is constantly in flux with changes in the demographics and rates of new migrant arrivals, changes in Greek national-level policy, changes in EU regional-level policy, changes in the policies of countries of first asylum, and changes in sending countries from Afghanistan to Syria. We tried to focus this report on the long-term underlying trends of urban integration in Thessaloniki, but inevitably found ourselves needing to describe particular details that are constantly being changed like the cash assistance and urban housing programs, both of which had multiple revisions over the course of our drafting this report. As a result, the reader may find some particular details have changed since the time of publication (March 2020) and the time of reading. However, while these details may shift, we believe that the underlying trends about integration that we describe will remain true and relevant for the foreseeable future.

³ Jacobsen, K. The forgotten solution: local integration for refugees in developing countries. UNHCR, New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper 45. 2001.

The Authors' Positions in the Thessaloniki and Experiences Researching this Case

Osman Mohammad: I am a native of Karachi, Pakistan. I received my master's degree in risk communication and crisis journalism in Thessaloniki and my bachelor's degree in media science in Pakistan. I have worked with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) since 2017. I covered the European refugee crisis as a news reporter, researcher, and interpreter in Thessaloniki. I am a legal migrant and assist Greek authorities, stakeholders, and refugees in bridging the communication gap. Through my work, I encounter refugees and stakeholders on a daily basis and hear their stories. The following research includes my conversations with representatives of international organizations and nonprofits, and with Pakistani refugees.

Rabih Saad: I am a native Arabic speaker from Lebanon and am an electronics specialist. I moved to Greece in 2014 and currently work as a Cultural Mediator Coordinator with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Thessaloniki. Previously, I worked at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as a caretaker officer assisting unaccompanied minors in the Alexandria Camp. I was an Arabic interpreter at the NGO Praksis, working in both the Alexandria and Veria Camps. In addition, I was a camp management technical assistant for the Urban Displacement and Outside of Camps (UDOC) Program for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). My research is based on individual and group conversations about the experiences Arabic- and Kurdish-speaking refugees have in camps and Greek housing.

Ioanna Terzi: I am a native-born Greek citizen working with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) for the cash assistance program. In college, I majored in computer science and telecommunications in addition to studying Arabic for three years. My work with refugees began in 2016, first as a volunteer in Diavata Camp. Afterwards, I started working for NRC, where I helped with the UDOC project. Being a Greek native, I chose to focus my research on locals' interactions with and attitudes toward refugees.

Mohamad Kasra: I am a Cultural Mediator for international organizations in Thessaloniki and am originally from Tehran, Iran. I received a master's degree in polymer engineering and am now an asylum seeker in Greece. My other experiences with refugee integration in Greece include working at NRC in camp management and technical assistance, at the Sindos Community Center, and interpreting Farsi for the Mobile Info Team. I collected data through conversations with Farsi-speaking refugees. I present an analysis of their housing conditions and prospects for integration.

From Camps to the City

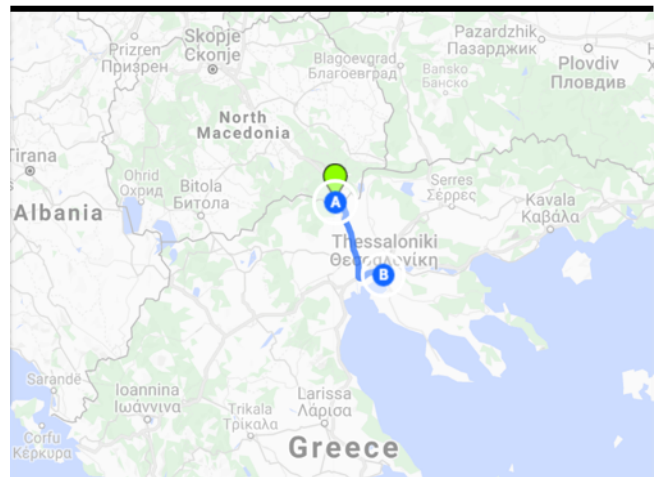
Thessaloniki's most recent experience with refugee integration began not as a destination but as a transit hub. In 2015 and early 2016, [more than one million refugees and migrants](#)—Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghani primarily—are known to have traveled to Greece. It is likely that the actual number was much larger, since many entered illegally and were never recorded officially. Most made their way north, usually toward Germany, Sweden, or other western European Union (EU) countries with higher employment rates than Greece.

In 2015 and 2016, I [Rabih] remember noticing the refugees when I used public transportation in Thessaloniki. The influx of refugees increased the number of Muslims using trains and buses. It became commonplace to see hijab and niqab wearers on trains, a rarity before 2015. Though some chose to remain in Greece, most of these refugees headed for Greece's borders. Several moved through Athens or Kavala to get to the port of Thessaloniki, where the first informal Greek refugee camp was located. After collecting rations, water, and hygiene products, they headed to the town of Idomeni, the border crossing just outside Thessaloniki on the Macedonian border, on the way to northern Europe.

However, by February 2016, their journeys to central Europe were often cut short in Idomeni. Regional countries like North Macedonia began closing and militarizing their borders. About 20,000 refugees were forced to wait in Idomeni. While at Diavata, I [Mohamad] met a man who had been detained in Idomeni for 45 days during this period. He carried 4,000 euros, which the authorities saw as dubious; they suspected him of being a smuggler despite his claims that it was his savings. The authorities confiscated the money and his phone, sending him to Thessaloniki without funds or means to communicate. He ended up in Diavata Camp but regrets that he cannot provide money to his family. The increasing turmoil at the border only grew more chaotic with the passage of time.

After months of non-stop rain and inclement weather, the number of irregular migrants in Idomeni reached 25,000.⁴ When the border remained closed, the government decided to move the refugees to camps across northern Greece including seven camps in the greater Thessaloniki area: Diavata,

Thessaloniki to the North Macedonian Border



Some 25,000 asylum seekers were caught at the Idomeni crossing (A) on the way to northern Europe. The crossing is an hour's bus or train ride from Thessaloniki (B). Base map imagery © Google 2020.

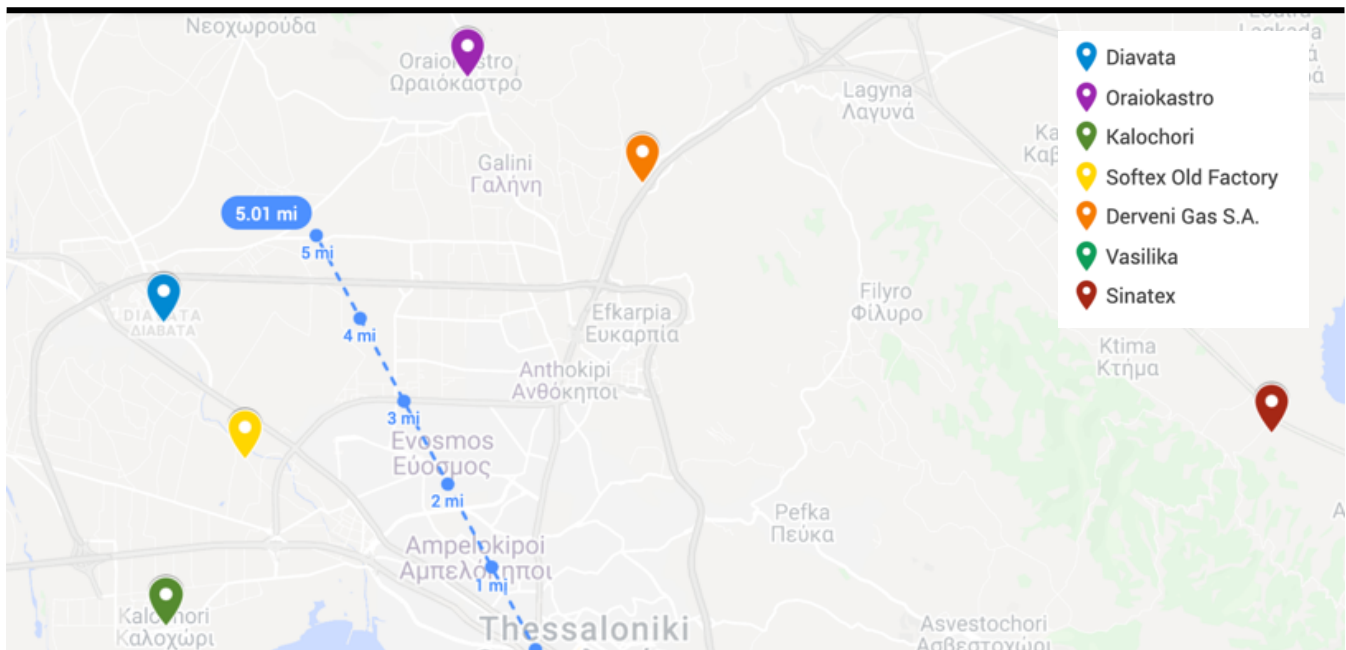
⁴ Yardley, Jim. "A High Degree of Misery: Refugee Swollen Greece. Idomeni, Greece. March 17, 2016. Accessed March 29, 2019.

Oraiokastro, Kalochori, Sinatex, Softex, Derveni, and Vasilika.⁵ All except Diavata were closed in 2017 as a result of an urban housing program that resettled refugees in Thessaloniki proper. Despite the program, Greece’s camps remain overburdened and overcrowded.

Shifting Routes

In the past year, because of increased naval patrols against smuggler boats, migrants have begun arriving on foot from the Evros River, a border shared by Greece and Turkey, to avoid being detained on Greece’s islands for indefinite periods. The Turkish Army’s initiation of Operation Olive Branch in January of 2018¹ led more Kurdish and Syrian refugees to arrive in Diavata Camp than in previous years.

Thessaloniki’s Camps



Thessaloniki’s camps have all been closed except for Diavata (in blue). The nearest was 3.7 miles (5.9 km) from the city center, making temporary integration very difficult.

Base map imagery © Google 2020.

⁵ UNHCR. Northern Greece—Thessaloniki Fact Sheet. Report. Geneva. 2016.

Four Initial Steps toward *De Facto* Integration

The Greek government created a system that sought to manage the large numbers of migrants living in the country. There are four steps refugees take as they move toward integration:

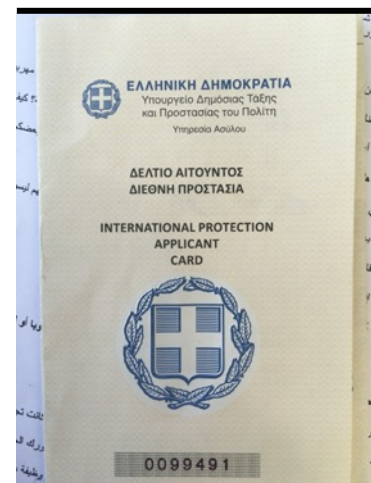
- 1) Receiving an asylum card (now called a “White Card”);
- 2) Registering at Diavata Camp;
- 3) Acceptance in an urban housing program;
- 4) Receiving a social security (AMKA) and Greek tax numbers.

Getting a White Card

Many refugees making their way through Greece from Turkey choose to bypass border security and travel irregularly. As they stop in Thessaloniki, they usually obtain a note from the main police station after at least one night of detention. However, space in detention centers is limited, as the current influx of refugees and asylum seekers has overwhelmed them. Often, refugees are not detained immediately and return to the police station later to be detained and obtain a police note (see info box).

After obtaining their note from police, most refugees seek asylum. This process involves a Skype interview with Greek Asylum Services; but arranging such a call can take several months. Skype connections are often overloaded, making available interview slots sparse. This difficulty of getting an interview slot is another reason why migrants must renew their police notes. Through my [Rabih] conversations with asylum seekers, I found that it can take more than two years for an asylee’s residence permit to arrive after completing a successful interview. While they wait, some try to register to live at Diavata Camp, which is often full. Many refugees are turned away and are forced to live on the streets. Housing programs are overburdened. Refugees with the means may choose to self-accommodate.⁶

Identification Cards



Receiving an “International Protection Applicant Card” like this one is a single step in a lengthy, confusing, and often seemingly arbitrary bureaucratic process toward integration to Greece.

⁶ See Housing section below for details.

Registering at Diavata

If their registration is accepted, refugees are admitted to the Diavata Camp, located 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) outside the town of Diavata, an hour bus ride from Thessaloniki Center. The camp hosts about 2,000 refugees. Diavata was originally an abandoned military camp filled with makeshift tents. Living conditions began to improve after mid-2017, and solar heating, air conditioning, and hot water are now available.

Conditions in Diavata deteriorated after the arrival of more refugees—primarily Kurds—in May 2018. This influx spread the distribution of aid thin, causing conflict and widespread mistrust of humanitarian workers, whom some refugees thought were withholding aid. Fights between Afghans, Yazidis, Arabs, and Kurds increased. Muslim fundamentalists in the camp began threatening groups and people they thought practiced Islam incorrectly. Some fundamentalists pushed Yazidis out of the camps and tried to control daily life inside Diavata. The small number of military personnel stationed inside Diavata departed at night and did little to quell conflicts. Police are only stationed at the gate and cannot interfere with affairs inside the camp without a formal complaint, which costs 100 euros. Even if they can afford the fee, those who complain are threatened by family members of the accused. As the number of refugees increases at Diavata, tribalism and tensions between national and ethnic groups are on the rise.

Despite the struggles of camp life, some refugees prefer camps to urban housing. Refugees receive all of their basic needs and services within the camp while life in the city, i.e., urban housing, is full of uncertainty. When I [Osman] worked for NRC, the 35 Afghan

Receiving a Police Note

There are two kinds of police notes, one with a “willingness number”—that indicates the note-holder intends to apply for asylum—and one without a willingness number—that is obtained either because the note-holder does not intend to apply for asylum, or, more often because the police station was overwhelmed by the volume of migrants and could not register the individual.

A police note without a willingness number is effectively a deadline for the note-holder to leave the country. A note with a willingness number is a deadline for when the individual must apply for asylum. Both police notes give migrants the right not to be detained until it expires. The migrant cannot, however, go on to Europe without proper documentation (e.g., a UN passport/travel document issued by the Greek Asylum Service to recognized refugees); thus, many end up renewing their police note by returning to the police station and asking for an extension.

Although extensions are not allowed legally, they are commonplace because of the number of migrants in Greece. The amount of time before the note’s expiration depends on the nationality of the refugee, their personal circumstances, and the circumstances from which they are fleeing. Usually, police notes expire within one to six months. The police note system shows how overburdened Thessaloniki’s police department is and the inefficiency of both the municipal and national bureaucracies.

families living in Diavata refused urban accommodation. As all of their needs were met in the camp, they preferred to stay there. This preference can be attributed to the dire circumstances of uncertainty the Afghans came from. Although the camp's resources were stretched thin and living conditions remained inadequate, the Afghan refugees continued to feel a sense of stability there that they would not have in urban housing.

International and charitable organizations, including UNHCR, continue to provide medical care, first aid, transportation, interpretation, and food assistance at Diavata. However, refugees accuse such organizations of withholding aid and of discriminating against certain nationalities. Another major challenge of life in the camp is the inability to find work, because the

camp is so far from job opportunities in the city center.⁷ Camp residents also face cultural challenges such as the lack of adequate facilities to bury the dead in accordance with the Muslim faith. As is the case with providing police notes, camp infrastructure remains woefully unequipped to provide for a growing refugee population. It lacks the security capabilities to keep refugees safe or to provide adequate housing. To relieve the stresses shouldered by camps, UNHCR has sought success in its Urban Housing Program.

Interpreters in the Camps

Interpreter services are available through NGOs and play a significant role in assisting the integration process. They help during doctor's appointments and for other social services. Interpreters use technology like WhatsApp to call into appointments to interpret. NGOs use WhatsApp to communicate the locations of clinics or government offices where a refugee or asylee must go for their appointment.

Although the NGOs try to provide impartial interpreters, many asylees report discrimination and bias from interpreters with prejudice against their nationalities. It is not clear if this is truly *discrimination* or just *favoritism* that emerges when interpreters of one language are available but other language interpreters are not. For example, if an Arabic interpreter is available but not a Pashto speaker, the Arabic-speaking asylum seekers in the camp will receive more attention than Afghan asylum seekers, creating feelings that Arabic speakers are receiving preferential treatment. The lack of professional interpreters has also meant untrained bilingual residents get pulled into interpreting work despite having no experience or instruction on working as translators in humanitarian settings.

Acceptance to the Urban Housing Program

Facing the challenges outlined above, refugees registered in Diavata usually apply for the Urban Housing Program, through which they can receive free housing in a furnished apartment in Thessaloniki or a nearby town. The elderly, pregnant women, single mothers, and the sick are prioritized by this program, so it is not the most common way for refugees to leave Diavata Camp. However, those who are accepted have better prospects for integration, because they are able to live

⁷ Noting most local Greeks also struggle to find employment.

closer to the city, which makes most jobs, social services, and daily necessities such as groceries more accessible. While living in the city, refugees—with the help of NGOs—also learn how to schedule their own appointments and apply to jobs if they have an AMKA number and tax number.

The Urban Housing Program began in 2013 when the NGOs Praksis and Arsis established low-income housing in various existing apartment complexes in Thessaloniki proper. In November 2016, at the height of the refugee crisis, NRC—funded by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations program—began to establish low-income housing projects across the greater Thessaloniki area. NRC also rented a few large hotels for refugees transitioning from the rapidly closing camps to new residences within the Urban Housing Program. NRC had the largest UDOC program in Thessaloniki and was among the only organizations to provide accommodation to police note-holders who were not accepted by camps. However, NRC suspended their operations in Thessaloniki in March of 2018, forcing even the most vulnerable of refugees to fend for themselves. Today, Solidarity Now, Caritas, React, Praksis, Arsis, and Intersos manage low-income housing across Thessaloniki.

Obtaining a Social Security (AMKA) and Tax Number

Refugees who have obtained urban housing—either through the government or by themselves—must also learn to deal with social services and government officials. In order to work in Greece, refugees must obtain an AMKA, or social security number, and a tax number. The AMKA is the insurance ID of every employee, pensioner, and dependent member of the refugee and their family in Greece, while the tax number is used to declare taxes. Refugee AMKA and tax number recipients must prove their legal status, which can take months. Obtaining the AMKA and tax number involves visiting a government AMKA office, which, being overburdened and inefficient, places refugees in a seemingly endless bureaucratic spiral to obtain such documents. There is a lack of qualified staff at such offices and ever-changing requirements for AMKA and tax numbers.

The Long Road to *De Facto* Integration

After moving through these four stages, refugees can begin the process of *de facto* integration to the city. This process poses many challenges for refugees.

Economic Integration

Types of Jobs

Depending on the circumstances, refugees find employment working for NGOs, owning a restaurant or store, or working in services and factories. Educated refugees, especially those with skills in translation, find paid positions after volunteering at NGOs. Translation jobs help them integrate into Greek society by making them intermediaries between refugees and Greeks.

Starting a business is another step toward integration, as refugees must interact with Greek customers and vendors. Such businesses are usually small shops in Diavata Camp that sell cigarettes, chocolates, bread, and other goods to refugees. Most do not obtain permits to sell such products, but there are no police inside the camp and few barriers to starting such businesses. Refugees prefer to buy items more cheaply inside the camp, rather than outside, where they would also face language barriers.

Service jobs (waiting tables, cutting hair) and working in neighboring factories or farms are easily accessible from the camps but provide fewer prospects for integration. Few of these jobs require refugees to leave Diavata or use the Greek language. Without leaving Diavata, integration is almost impossible. Many refugees in these lines of work do not have permits or documentation. If none of these kinds of jobs are available, some resort to prostitution, human smuggling, selling drugs or cigarettes, and theft.

Employed refugees and asylees with families abroad often want to make money transfers but cannot do so without a Greek passport or a UN travel document issued by the Greek Asylum Service to recognized refugees. Thus, many rely on friends or acquaintances and use their Western Union accounts to transfer funds. Those without such help are left frustrated and unable to assist their families. Likewise, bank account holders must be employed and have a valid residence card. These circumstances make navigating finances difficult for refugees.

Cash Assistance

Most asylum seekers cover their food and shelter needs with UNHCR's cash assistance program implemented by IFRC. After verifying the eligibility of applicants, these organizations provide monthly cash allowances to asylum seekers who entered Greece after January 1, 2015. Asylum seekers living in camps and urban housing can qualify. The amount of cash assistance depends on the size of the family and on whether they are provided meals.¹

Despite the many migrants who benefit from cash assistance, this program was severely reduced in 2019 by the Greek government. Authorities phased out cash assistance for recipients with refugee status; now only asylum seekers are eligible to receive cash. The government offers the excuse that this policy is not new but is now being enforced. The growing refugee population, overcrowding in camps, and insufficient funds from the EU are the probable causes for the government enforcing this law now.

NGO Support for Refugee Employment

Several NGOs provide support to refugees searching for employment. Caritas Hellas and Solidarity Now provide vocational training (cooking, hair and beauty, sewing, food service) and language classes. After their vocational training, refugees undergo screenings, official formalities, and exams to become state-certified job seekers, after which they can enter the labor market. Solidarity Now helps refugees get jobs at several companies in Thessaloniki by providing various forms of job search assistance, like CV writing, interview preparation, and information on what documents are needed. They also help

refugees in opening a bank account. Blue Refugee Center, the cultural center of the organization, “Solidarity Now,” gives commercial companies access to the skilled workforce in the refugee community.

Impact of Economic Integration on Locals

Prices in the Central Bazaar, in Aristotelous Square, are generally low. Thus, many refugees shop there. The initial influx of Syrian migrants in 2015 helped local businesses and refugees alike. One shopkeeper in Kapani Market—the central bazaar of Thessaloniki—said:

In the beginning, when Syrians were coming, the market was blooming. We had a Syrian working for us, and many other Syrians were coming to buy from us because they knew him or just because they found someone that they could communicate with. He is now in Germany, but we are still in touch. We have many things in common with Syrians, they are family people.

Now however, the profile of asylum seekers has changed. The shopkeepers feel that Pakistanis and North Africans, who have replaced the Syrians, are involved in the black market, sell cigarettes, and cause fights. While the shopkeeper I [Ioanna] spoke to mentioned that relations with Syrians had been good because of the similarities between Greek and Syrian culture, he believes the current wave of migrants do not share these cultural similarities.

The shopkeeper quoted above went on: “Now most of them left to other countries and mostly people from other nationalities [Pakistanis, Algerians, Moroccans] created thieving gangs, and people are afraid to come and shop from here.”

He then he pointed to a person who was passing by, claiming that he was the head of a robbery gang and told me that at exactly 18:00 each day they sell the things that they stole in an area nearby.

Almost all of the shopkeepers we know reported cases of theft in their shops and insisted that refugees were responsible. None of these shopkeepers had hired refugees to work in their establishments recently. They said they did not need extra staff, and if they did, they would hire Greeks or people able to speak Greek. Despite the arrival of new refugees and the merchandise to satisfy their needs, shopkeepers say that they have seen little growth in their businesses since the initial 2015 boom. This speaks to the economic stagnation in Greece, which prevents opportunities for growth and employment for migrants and Greek nationals alike.

Obstacles to Economic Integration

The most significant obstacle to economic integration for refugees is also a challenge for Greeks: the government remains in a debt crisis, [making unemployment widespread](#). The abysmal state of the Greek economy has driven many refugees to search for a way out as quickly as possible. Some attempt to cross the border illegally, while others choose a path to Greek permanent residence because EU residence would give refugees permission to leave the country and go to Germany, for example,

where there may be more economic opportunity. Few, however, complete the four initial steps of integration before giving up on this dream, as even the initial asylum process can take several months.

Greek bureaucracy makes acquiring Greek tax and social security numbers exceedingly cumbersome, and migrants who do not receive these documents are restricted to the informal economy, which has lower wages and less consistent income. For example, one Pakistani I [Osman] spoke to fled from the Taliban and now collects garbage in Thessaloniki, an informal job that doesn't need a tax number. He arrived in Greece four years ago, but his asylum status is still "pending," like most Afghans and Pakistanis living here. Informal work yields about 20–30 euros (22–34 United States dollars (USD)) per week, barely enough for the week's groceries. Though garbage collection is not ideal, refugees appreciate the opportunity to be occupied. They often already receive cash assistance and housing, so the money they earn often goes toward savings that will be spent on a smuggler to emigrate to more economically stable European countries.⁸

Others in the informal economy resort to selling illegal drugs like hashish or cigarettes to young Greeks near Thessaloniki's university. The drug sellers are often young, aged 18–25. Many speculate that refugees use locals to smuggle hashish across the border from Albania. Those who sell drugs often do so because of the pressure to earn a living. Although every adult above 18 receives 150 euros per month as cash assistance, single men who cannot pool resources find that they need more than this amount to get by. Seeing their peers making profits from selling drugs raises pressure to do the same. Additionally, being caught by police means few legal consequences because their asylum status and the principle of *non-refoulement* prevents law enforcement from taking action against them. Some stay in jail for a night and are released the next day because of overcrowding in prisons. They may be questioned about where the cannabis was sourced, or fined, but they face no other repercussions. Another reason law enforcement does not punish drug dealers is that they know many asylees do not remain in Greece for long, and it is considered pointless to waste government resources jailing individuals who will not remain in the country.

Integration to Thessaloniki's Education System

School plays an important role in the future of integration because it is where refugee children learn the Greek language. Only minors under 18 can access public morning schools, but many organizations and NGOs like Solidarity Now, the Red Cross, and Caritas offer Greek language courses around Thessaloniki to adults.

School teachers I [Ioanna] spoke to stated that in their experiences, each migrant child is unique and takes their own time to accept and to be accepted by their classmates. Some teachers reported

⁸ The closing the Balkan Route borders raised the cost of successful smuggling from around 1,000 USD per person to reach Germany from Greece in 2014 to over 6,000 USD today.

violence from refugee children toward Greek children. As a result, Greek children began to avoid refugee children and formed their own exclusive groups. In interacting with parents, teachers often deal with xenophobia at school and among Greeks. A headmaster of one school said that many Greek parents thought that refugees carry diseases that would affect their children.

The amount of help refugee children receives often depends on the quality and goodwill of their educators, which can leave some children without support. Teachers who give minimal assistance to refugee children often do so because they do not wish to invest time in students whose families plan to leave Greece within months. One Greek headmaster said:

We don't know how hard we have to try for the kids to integrate [because] we don't know if they are planning to stay or not. Kids are coming for a while and then leaving. It is hard to communicate this to the parents due to language barriers. Sometimes kids are not coming to schools on time, and sometimes they are missing school for a few days, and we don't know the reason.

Communication between migrant parents and teachers is difficult, since government offered translators are not consistently available. Each of these factors can make it increasingly difficult for refugee children to succeed in the Greek education system.

Beyond primary and secondary education, some refugees try to better their employment prospects by seeking a college education. In 2017, about 30 refugee students earned university scholarships offered by the American Embassy to study at the American University of Anatolia. According to several students who were once funded to attend college, such scholarships are no longer available through the American Embassy. We were not able to receive details from the Embassy about whether there was a definite change in policy.

Although education is often seen as an equalizer and source of social mobility, most refugee children and college students do not have the resources or linguistic abilities to succeed in the Greek education system. They are also often socially isolated from their peers. Those who are equipped to attend top-tier universities cannot obtain passage to Germany, France, Denmark, the UK, or the US where those universities are located. Though education has the potential to facilitate integration, it has failed to do so for most refugees in Thessaloniki. "They gave me back hope to continue my education and feel like an effective part of society," said one female Syrian refugee who was given a scholarship to attend university. However, funding for these scholarships has dwindled for many refugees: "they cut these scholarships," she said. The scholarships only cover studies, not cost of living, so she has had to find work with an aid organization in addition to her classes.

Housing Integration

Refugees Living in and around Diavata Camp

Diavata Camp is located in the rural farmland 10 km (6 mi) from Thessaloniki. Most refugees in the camp live in tents or Conex shipping containers, some of which have cookers, refrigerators, and Wi-Fi. Refugees have access to medical care, food, water, electricity, legal assistance, shelter, and language classes. Although conditions improved significantly when Thessaloniki's refugee population was consolidated in Diavata, the camp's standard of living for residents continues to be poor. There are not enough "rooms" (adapted shipping containers) for every family, and many containers house two families. Those unable to find containers live in tents without running water and heat, even during winter. The overcrowding has become so severe that camp authorities relocated many residents to camps on Greece's islands. Diavata is unsafe for children and women, with incidents of both groups being beaten or threatened by other residents of the camp.

When refugees require services unavailable in the camps, they usually take the bus to the city. They encounter locals on the bus, which sometimes leads to tension or conflict. For example, some locals accuse refugees of talking loudly and leaving trash on the bus. One bus driver told Mohamad about camp residents changing their children's diapers on the bus. Such practices are unacceptable to some Greek locals and can lead to verbal confrontations.

Refugees in Urban Accommodation

Some refugees decide living in a camp far from the city center is not worth the loss of access to services and jobs and try to find housing in Thessaloniki. Refugees who leave the camp take responsibility for their own food, doctor's appointments, and legal matters, navigating the integration process with little guidance. They are also more exposed to racism and discrimination outside the insular environment of the camps. However, after moving to urban housing, refugees continue to receive cash assistance and retain contact with NGOs and community centers. Workplaces in the city increase interactions with Greeks and encourages social integration and learning the Greek language (there are many language tutoring centers). Living in the city encourages self-reliance, giving refugees a better chance for long-term integration within Greece.

Many Iranians have taken advantage of the urban housing initiative. Two brothers chose to pursue Greek citizenship rather than leave Greece. The eldest brother hopes to bring his wife and child to Greece and start a new life with them here. They said they did not want to burden the government but want to be productive, employed members of Greek society, participating in Greek culture. The urban housing program has helped them begin their new lives. Both brothers have learned some Greek and are now working at NGOs facilitating refugee integration.

Self-Accommodated Refugees

There are three types of migrants who will pursue self-accommodation in the city: 1) those who receive refugee status (some of these refugees have lived in Greece for several years or have even obtained citizenship); 2) those who receive a negative decision on their asylum application and are going through an appeal process but no longer qualify for temporary housing programs; 3) those who never qualified for accommodation programs with NGOs or UNHCR for a range of different reasons and instead live in group housing sharing monthly rent. In any case, self-accommodation requires negotiating an affordable lease with a landlord. This is not possible for many migrants because they don't have the required tax number, do not earn enough money, or do not speak the Greek needed to search for housing and negotiate with landlords. However, self-accommodation seems to be the best option for those who want to become fully integrated. Another option for single minors is the ARSIS (ESTIA Program) where I (Osman) worked that provides a year to live in the city, learn the Greek language, become familiar with local society and culture, find work and become independent, while still continuing with the cash assistance program until completing asylum interviews.

Integration is easier for those living in self-accommodated and UDOC housing; however, the availability of such housing is dwindling. As the number of refugees in Greece increases, their chance of acquiring urban housing or even being allowed to stay in Diavata is dwindling (recognized refugees are asked to leave the camp or accommodation within 30 days after notification of recognition). Currently, the Greek government is gradually downsizing the refugee program by requiring those who have held refugee status for more than six months to leave Diavata. Although this ordinance is not new, now is the first time it is being enforced.

Experiences with Racism

Refugees sometimes face racism from the local population. One Farsi-speaking 28-year-old lives with his father and autistic brother while the rest of his family has resettled in Germany. He suffers from PTSD, which is made worse by Greek locals who often stare at him suspiciously in public places, especially in shops. He questions whether Greece is the right place for his family. Though some UDOC refugees struggle with discrimination from Greeks, others find that their interactions with Greeks assist them on their path toward integration.

Social Integration

Cultural Activities in the Migrant Community

While living in Thessaloniki, migrants sustain their own culture and social connections. Before 2015, Arab migrants and refugees were commonly Sudanese and Palestinians, who came to Greece as students on scholarships, often attending Aristoteles University in Thessaloniki. Starting in 2005, the

Sudanese Cultural Committee began cultural activities, including Arabic language classes, that involved the Greek community. They also offered interpretation services for injured Libyan refugees.

Palestinian refugees preserve their culture through group trips, religious activities, and gathering to eat traditional food. The Cultural Committee, founded in 1995, campaigns for the Palestinian cause but is also involved in Greek politics and tends to side with the political left. The Committee participates in charitable activities; it currently provides shelter and other services to refugees.

The Arabic Center, founded in 2005, provides religious teachings and a place of prayer to the Muslim and Arab communities, created for “helping all who need either Arab or foreigner physical or moral support,” ([Union of Hellenic-Arabic Friendship, 2019](#)). Like the Palestinian Cultural Committee, its charitable activities include the distribution of halal meat, food, clothing. It also conducts Arabic and Greek language classes.

Conclusion

Greece is seen by migrants primarily as a stopover (transit) state, or secondary host country. Because prospects for entering wealthier European are slim, some attempt to gain Greek permanent residence in order to legally access EU member states.

Along their long, winding journeys toward permanent residence, some refugees make lives for themselves in Greece and gradually become integrated, progressing past the four steps of *de facto* integration: receiving a White Card, registering at Diavata Camp, being accepted to the urban housing program, and receiving social security and tax numbers. The vast majority remain in limbo as Greece’s government and economy lack the capacity to accommodate such a large number of refugees. Refugees and asylees are left stuck in camps waiting to renew their police notes for the second or third time. However, though many refugees are eager to leave Greece, most concede that they fare better there than in their home countries, Turkey, or in Eastern European states.

Religion as a Catalyst to Integration?

Christian Pakistani men seem to have more positive experiences of integration than Muslim Pakistani men do. On the basis of persecution of a religious minority in Pakistan, Christian Pakistanis quickly obtained asylum, eventually getting residence cards. However, they face intense interrogation about their religion during their asylum interviews. For example, a Pakistani Christian told us he was not granted asylum because he failed to describe the tenets of Christianity, and his interviewer did not believe his claim of religious persecution was true. Although low religious literacy is not uncommon for religious minorities, the authorities “test” religion during asylum claims. This practice may be because of Greece’s overburdened asylum system or suspicion about economic migrants claiming to be political migrants.

The Christians we spoke with all have jobs and attend church on Sundays. In asylum applications, people like Yazidis who are from religious minorities in their country of origin are often more successful. Greek officials, being mostly Christian, also are favorably biased towards Christian applicants. Christians appear to integrate easier and faster, in part because they share certain cultural characteristics with Greeks.

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Appendix A: Refugees in Greece

In 1492, when Greece was still part of the Ottoman Empire, the Spanish Inquisition began, forcing 100,000 Jews to flee Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Many took refuge in Greece, where the Jewish community would continue to grow until World War II. In the face of concentration camps and persecution, Jews were once again forced to flee their homes; many resettled in Israel or the United States. Before the twentieth century, 80,000 Jews lived in Greece; 8,000 remain today.⁹

After gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1832, *megali idea*, or the “great idea,” began to pervade Greek foreign policy. It stated that the new Greek state, impoverished and diminished in size as it was, should expand and comprise all historically Greek areas. *Megali idea* found success during the first Balkan War against the Ottomans. Among other issues, the Young Turks’ persecution of non-Muslim Greeks still living in the Ottoman empire inspired Greece to act. As a result of the war, Greece’s territory increased by 70%, and its population doubled to 4.8 million people, allowing it to thrive economically.¹⁰ Additionally, the war brought an influx of refugees from Bulgaria and Anatolia, most of whom were forced to be reeducated in Greek. To repatriate ethnic Greeks and banish Muslims, Greece initiated a population exchange with Turkey in 1923 under the Treaty of Lausanne. Thousands of ethnic Greeks were expelled from their homes in Turkey and forcibly integrated into Greece, while Muslims in Greece were forced to move to Turkey. The two states aimed to create homogenous populations, Christians in Greece and Muslims in Turkey.¹¹

Even in the twenty-first century, Greece remains a haven for refugees. Approximately 800,000 Syrian refugees passed through Greece as a result of the Syrian civil war. In 2018, most applicants for asylum were Syrian (13,390) or Afghan (11,926), while others hailed from Iraq, Pakistan, and Balkan nations in smaller numbers.¹² The Dublin Regulation forces Greece to shoulder a disproportionately large number of refugees, as it requires the first EU member state a refugee enters to be responsible for their asylum.¹³ Although Greece was once seen by refugees as an entry point to travel on to Europe, it is increasingly becoming a holding pen. Greece’s capacity for refugees is increasingly strained. Greeks themselves are emigrating because of the lack of economic opportunity there. Over 400,000 Greeks have left their country since the economic crisis of 2008.¹⁴

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Appendix B: Refugees in Thessaloniki

Known by the Greeks as the “Mother of Migration,” Thessaloniki is considered a historic refuge for those fleeing conflict. The first significant wave of migration occurred during the Spanish Inquisition when Sephardites¹⁵ came to Thessaloniki after their exile from Spain in 1492, with the number of Jewish migrants in Thessaloniki reaching approximately 60,000 by the 1900s. The city was transformed by these immigrants, who worked as traders while living in the center of the city.¹⁶ The second wave occurred after the Greco-Turkish War in the early 1900s, when thousands of Greek refugees came to Thessaloniki from different parts of present-day Turkey. Eventually, after the Greco-Turkey War (1912-1922), approximately 120,000 of these refugees settled in Thessaloniki,¹⁷ causing the residential part of the city to grow rapidly. Population growth was closely followed by job growth, transforming Thessaloniki into an industrial center with thriving textile and food production sectors.¹⁸

A third wave occurred after the Axis occupation of Greece began in 1941. Jews in Thessaloniki were forced to work in concentration camps. Many Jews from Thessaloniki were placed in Auschwitz, where they were responsible for a Jewish revolt against their Nazi jailors. Many of the Jews who survived the Holocaust migrated to Israel. However, others, having lived in Thessaloniki for centuries, remained. Whereas Jews made up a majority of Thessaloniki’s population before World War II, their numbers have since dwindled to 1,500.¹⁹

Today, Thessaloniki hosts asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, and African countries. Many arrive as a result of ongoing war and conflict in their home countries. Some refugees have treated Thessaloniki as a stopover city, where they stay while preparing to travel to wealthier European countries. Others see Thessaloniki as a permanent home and seek to integrate within Greek society. Over 100,000 asylum seekers live in Greece, 16,000 of whom live in Central Macedonia, i.e., the greater Thessaloniki area.²⁰ About 55% of these refugees are children, and most reside in camps or the neighborhoods of the Thessaloniki center, Ampelokipoi, Evosmos, Eleftherio-Kordelio, Menemeni, Neapoli, Oreokastro, Pylaia, Sindos, Stavroupoli, Themi, and Trilofos.²¹

¹⁵ Spanish Jews

¹⁶ Mazower, Mark. “The Consequences of the Persecution of the Jews for the City of Thessaloniki,” in: The Society for the Study of Greek Jewry, (Rika Benveniste, ed.), The Jews of Greece in Occupation. Vania, Thessaloniki. 1998.

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¹⁹ Lewkowicz, Bea. “The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki: An Exploration of Memory and Identity in a Mediterranean City,” London School of Economics, 1999. 127, 197.

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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