Renovating Detroit with Syrian Style

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns

Detroit, USA

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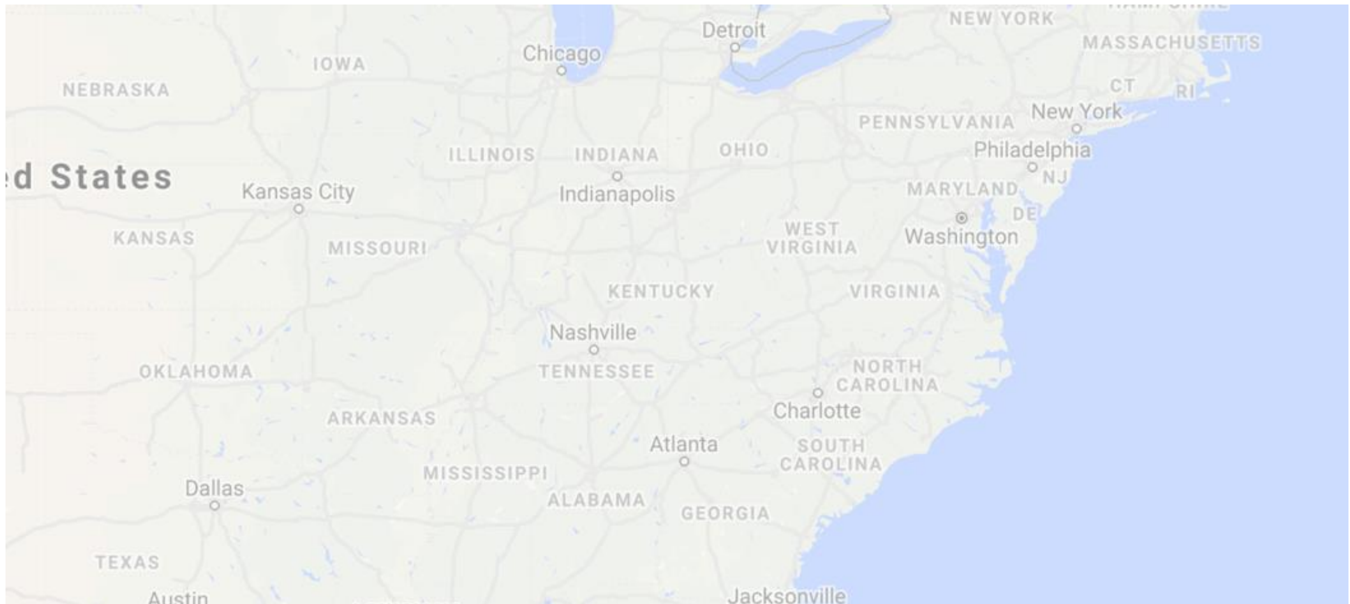
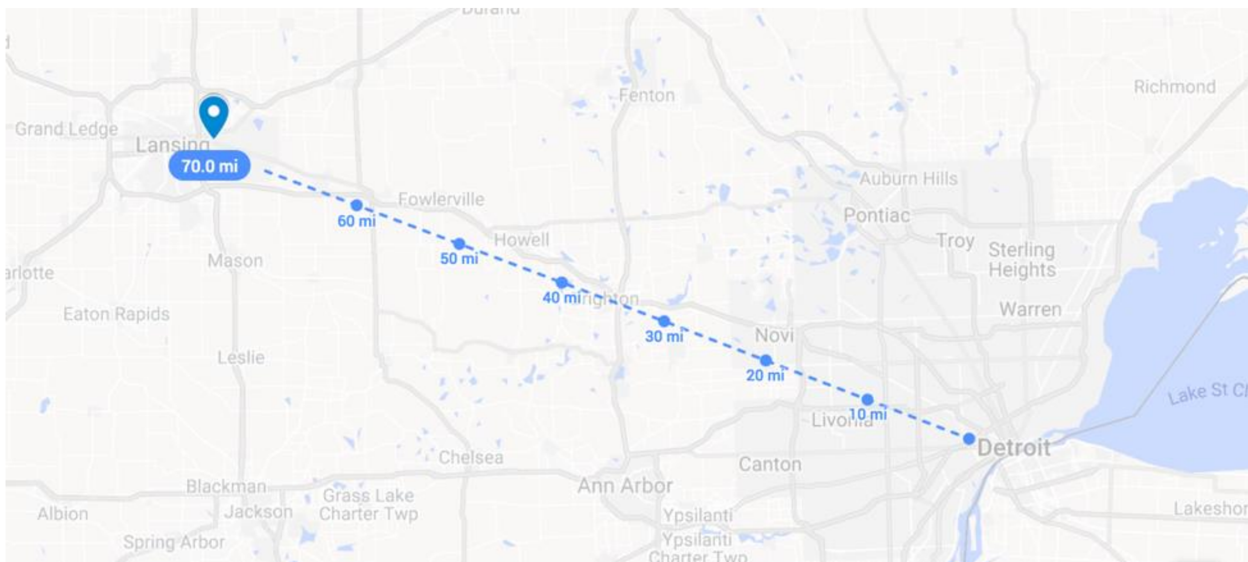
Cover Photo
"They" are revitalizing Detroit's neighborhoods. Cover photo caption: I took this photo in an area with many Syrian residents. While I don't know specifically whose house this house was, I enjoy the fresh life there despite the abandoned house next door. All report photos by author.

Location



Detroit's booming industry in the 20th century helped make the city a destination for economic migrants and resettled refugees. However, as jobs have shifted from industry to the service sector, the city and its demographics have diversified.



This report includes data from Detroit, and surrounding neighborhoods, especially East Lansing—roughly 70 mi (112 km) northwest of downtown Detroit—where many Arabs have found homes. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

For more background on refugees in Detroit and the US, continue to the appendices.

Introduction

> Leila, whenever you eat at a *sufra*,* the food becomes delicious.
>
> Wait! There is no difference: the food is delicious no matter where you eat it.
>
> Yeah, but when you sit at the table you become American,
> and when you eat at a *sufra*, you become Syrian. That's what I mean.

Only a year and a half after they arrived in the United States as refugees, Maryam and her husband were able to buy a house in Detroit, by auction and with a mortgage. It was built in 1946 as a single-family home near the Ford Manufacturing Development Center and only a ten-minute drive from Dearborn. After they moved in, her husband, Abu-Ummar, and their oldest son reconstructed the house in the Arabic style. They built a guest room with a separate entrance and furnished it with an Arabian-designed sofa and mattress. They installed a dark red curtain to separate the kitchen and the small living room where a group of Syrian women and I would usually socialize or practice English. Thus, we could comfortably hang out in the living room and chat and not be seen by the men of the house if they stopped in the kitchen for a cup of tea or coffee. Nobody needed to put scarves on.

I conducted my first interview with Maryam in her old, American-style single-family house, but next time we met in her renovated Syrian home. Maryam invited me to sit around their *sufra* to eat from a tray of food shared with all family members, including her husband and son. The house was reshaped, and our relationship was too. This reminded me of Sidney Mintz's remarks that "locality and what people use their environment for is fundamental for understanding of who they are" (1:05:18).[1] Over time we met more often, and eating at the *sufra* added to our intimacy.

In this paper, I trace the history of Syrian Americans' presence in Michigan, unraveling the geographical, racial, and economic complexity of the state to understand the lives of newly arrived Syrian Muslim refugee women against the backdrop of the emerging anti-immigration discourse in the U.S. I then analyze how their access to public space may affect the ways they shape and reshape their relations with themselves, their community, and the host population.

A Note on Terminology

I use the term "refugee" in accordance with the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.[2] I define "integration" as the result of a process through which a person becomes comfortable socially and spatially, as a part of a society. Integration occurs when people from minority groups, having different racial, religious, or ethnic origins, relate equally with the

* Iranian *sufra* (Arabic *ma'ida*) means "table," but unlike a Western raised table, is on the ground. See Ali, 2018 or the Encyclopedia Iranica.
[1] The food anthropologist, Sidney Mintz, wrote for a long time about food, culture, and human habits. He argues that food is a symbol of belonging and exclusion. To learn more, see: Sidney Mintz, "Food and Diaspora," *YouTube*, video file, June 27, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWZ6m8E3kvE. Accessed August 3, 2018.
[2] United Nations General Assembly resolution 429 (V) of December 14, 1950. http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f08a27.html.

social structure of the host society to form a whole and to engage with the cultural, political, and social life of the host country.

In academic terms, integration is a long, complex process in which difficulties with material living conditions such as access to housing, employment, health, and education all ease up, creating a sense of belonging to a certain cultural, social, and political structure. Integration also implies connection to community as one of Syrian women translated it for me: “Community consists of people who are around us, those we get involved with, the people whom you find when you need help, from all religions but mainly Muslims.” [3] This is what we can define as the sensing of self and community as dialectical and interdependent.

The Author's Position in Detroit and Experiences Researching this Case

I arrived in Michigan in the first week of May 2017, a few months after the presidential executive order later called “ the Muslim Ban.”[4] As an Iranian immigrant affected by the ban—along with Syrians—which restricted my mobility to and from the United States, I was an insider to my Syrian friends despite the role of the Iranian government in supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. I had been in Michigan a few years before and had observed Detroit and particularly Dearborn as a tourist and outsider but had not grasped the everyday experience of its residents.

This time was different. I was an observer and a researcher tracing the struggles of Syrian refugee women beginning their ordinary lives after fleeing war in their country. Before coming to the United States, I worked for five years with Afghan and Iraqi refugees in Iran. Those interactions with displaced people, even as an outsider and from the position of a host, exposed me to the fragility of human life during the transition from loss and displacement to relocation and integration in the host country. I am now an insider standing almost on the same ground with my research subjects. We are all Muslim women from the Middle East, speaking the same religious language and coming from similar cultures and experiences. Displaced by war and political discontent, we all are trying to reestablish our lives and integrate into American society.

[3] Shefa (Syrian refugee) in discussion with the author. Field notes, March 25, 2018.
[4] Executive Order 13769, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” known as the Muslim ban or travel ban, was issued by President Donald Trump on January 27, 2017 to lower the number of refugee admissions to the United States. It suspended entry of refugees from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Kaila C. Randolph, “Executive Order 13769 and America's Longstanding Practice of Institutionalized Racial Discrimination towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers,” *Stetson Law Review* 47, no. 1 (2017).

My knowledge of Islam and the Arabic language built a bridge between us. My religious background prepared me to analyze findings from fieldwork and understand the Quranic terms. I am Shia and my research subjects are Sunni, which opens space for inter-religious conflicts. My technical knowledge of both sects enabled me to bring familiarity to our dialogue. However, as a citizen of a country interfering in Syria, I avoided political discussions. I constantly struggled to move beyond political misidentification and build trustful relationships while listening to stories of Syrian women affected by my country's politics and Shia-affiliated Iranian combatants. Therefore, I moved between being an insider and outsider, a friend and an enemy.

For more on the methods used for this case report, continue to Appendix A.

The Urban Impact

"Detropia:" The collapse of American corporate utopia

In Detropia,[5] a powerful documentary on the thriving city of Detroit in 1940s, an African American former teacher and current bar owner recalls the rise and demise of the city: "Well, capitalism is a great system, but it exploits the weak" (1:18:25). This phrase captures simply the history of Detroit. The city is called "Motown," the "Motor City," or the "D," but as the Detroit news anchor Carolyn Clifford states: "No matter what you call the city, if you travel anywhere in the country and mention Detroit, people usually think of a black, urban and crime-filled city."[6] I heard this message from my American friends and surprisingly also from the Syrian women who had heard the fearful rumors about Detroit before coming to the United States. Often when I would ask what they knew about Michigan, they responded: "Before coming to this country, our friends in Jordan warned us of the dangerous neighborhoods in Detroit."[7] It is notorious today, but Detroit used to be called the "US arsenal of democracy."[8] It was a symbol of the economic growth of the 1940s and the epitome of a city run by corporations, whose transformation began with mass production of cars by companies such as Ford Motor Company and General Motors. They attracted labor from South America, Europe, and the Middle East. Seeking jobs, many African Americans also migrated to Detroit.[9]

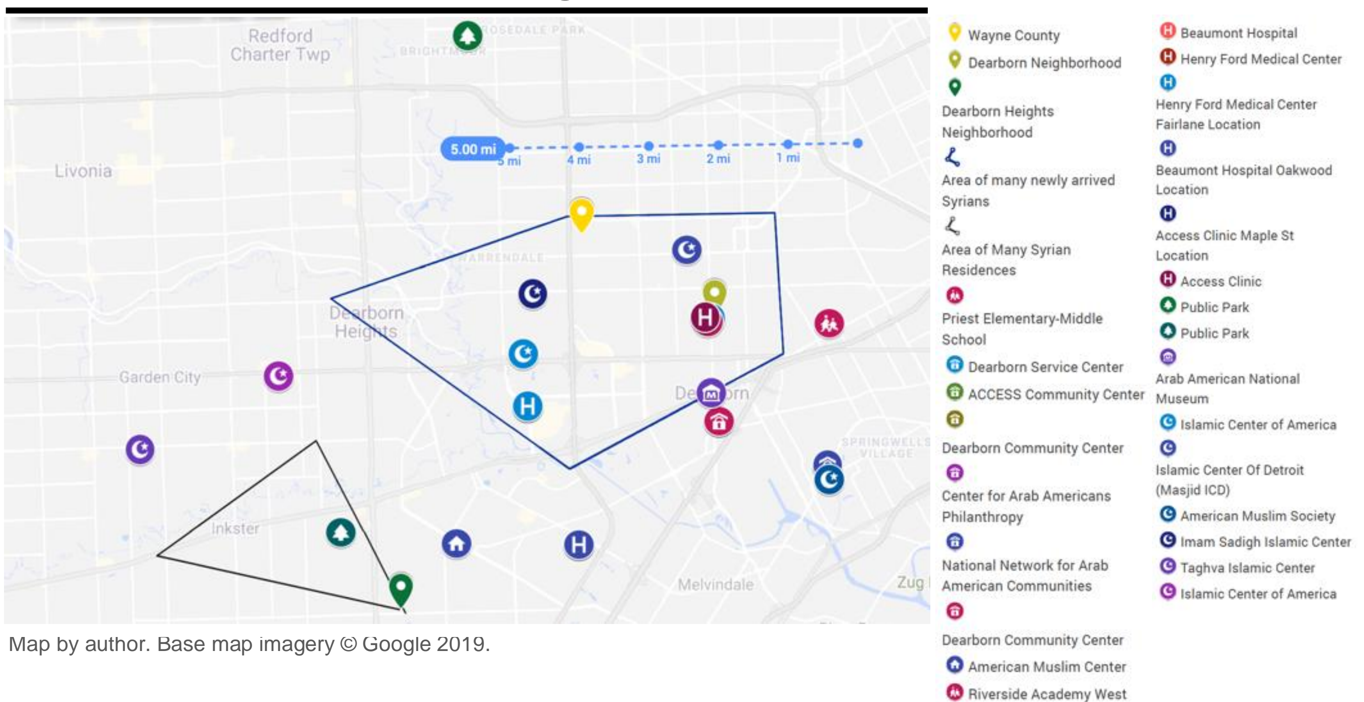
Nonetheless, this "wonderland" was the scene of a "drama of might and violence."[10] The mass productivity in fact concealed racial segregation through which neighborhoods were divided, with black

[5] Heidi E. Ewing and Rachel Grady, directors, *Detropia* (United States), Docuseek 2 (2012).
[6] Field notes, Dearborn, 2017.
[7] Carolyn Clifford, "White Flight and What it Means to Detroit in the Wake of the 1967 Riots," WXYZ Detroit, July 11, 2017. https://www.wxyz.com. Accessed August 5, 2018.
[8] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives, Book 85 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
[9] Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan (Discovering the Peoples of Michigan)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005).
[10] Ibid.,18.

residents east of downtown or the inner city and 8 Mile Road,[11] and white residents in areas in the north. Further, the state home ownership policies intentionally encouraged segregation and racial inequality in order to enforce home ownership according to race. Sugrue notes that whites applying for public housing had a better chance of moving off the waiting list and obtaining housing from the City Housing Commission than did their African American counterparts.

For example, from 1947 to 1952, 9,908 whites compared to 1,226 African Americans got public housing.[12] In 1950, companies moved their production plants outside the city to have more space. This led to labor unrest, population decline including white flight, and unemployment. Then, much of the white labor force left the city, and many workers lost their jobs. The dream of a middle-class life could not be realized, especially for black workers who were, in effect, barred from moving to the suburbs where job opportunities were more likely to be located. Eventually, public dissatisfaction rose up. In July 1967, at the height of tensions, police raided an unlicensed bar, and a five-day "riot" or "rebellion" followed, in which 2,500 stores were destroyed. From an economic perspective, the car companies' move to the suburbs and their self-interest strategies, and the city riot, all had detrimental effects on the values of homes and neighborhood businesses. There was relocation or flight of residents to suburbs outside of Detroit.[13] This chain of events turned the utopian city into a city known to be dangerous and impoverished.

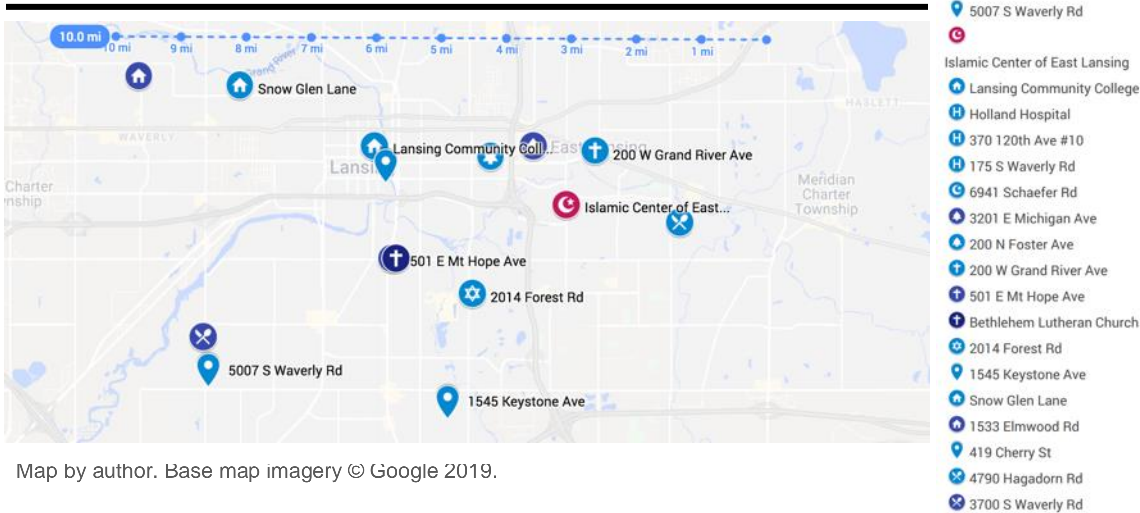
Dearborn Points of Interest to Arab Integration



Map by author. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

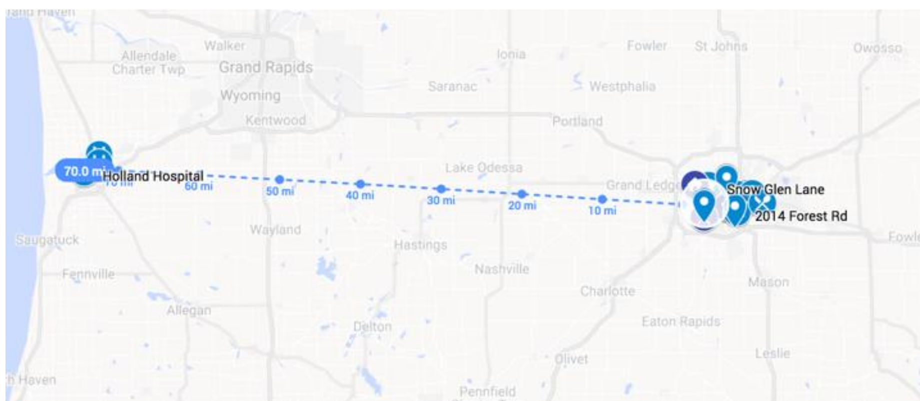
[11] The short historical and spatial report of 8 Mile Road provided on Detroit Historical Society website is very interesting. According to the website, 8 Mile Road separates Wayne and Washtenaw from Macomb, Oakland, and Livingston Counties. It is like a "physical dividing line, as well as a de-facto psychological and cultural boundary for the region." 8 Mile Road is the northern border of Detroit, which separates the African American urban core from the more white, upper-class suburbs to the north. See: Detroit Historical Society, Eight Mile Road, https://detroithistorical.org. Accessed July 23, 2018.
[12] Sugure, *Origins of the Crisis*, 31.
[13] Owens, Raymond, Pierre-Daniel Sarte, and Esteban Rossi-Hansberg. "Rethinking Detroit *[dagger]." *Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. Working Paper Series* 17, no. 4 (2017): 6–7.

Lansing Points of Interest to Arab Integration



Map by author. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

Lansing Medical Points of Interest



While the Lansing neighborhood has the benefits of lower cost of housing and an abundance of co-nationals, it places residents much further away from medical services. Map by author. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

Of the 3.7 million Americans who trace their roots to an Arab country, 223,075 live in Michigan, making it the city with the second-largest Arab population.[14] The first Arab immigrants to the U.S. were mostly Christian Lebanese, followed by Assyrians, Iraqi Chaldeans, and Syrians. They were eventually joined by Yemenis and Palestinians. Around 2003, there was a rise in Iraqi refugees, and after 2012 new Syrians entered the well-established Muslim community. In general, people from Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria constitute the highest percentages of Arab Americans in the U.S., while in Michigan there are more Yemenis than Iraqis and Lebanese.[15] The Detroit 1967 uprising led to the Arab community's political mobility and created business opportunities for them to expand into gas station, and grocery and liquor store ownership after chain grocery stores left the city. Over the years, the Arab community of Detroit has become outspoken and active in displaying their political and religious identity.

The Arab community is concentrated in Dearborn, around West Warren, Shafer, and Ford Streets, which are filled with Shia and Sunni mosques, Arabic book and grocery stores, restaurants, and sweet

[14] Demography, http://www.aaiusa.org/demographics.
[15] Data, USA website, https://datausa.io.

shops that advertise in Arabic. The Middle Eastern American Radio & TV station broadcasts in twenty cities in Michigan. Two local Arabic newspapers, *Sada Alwatan*[16] and *Chaldean Detroit Times*,[17] are written in English and Arabic.

Neighborhood Transformation: From Houses to omes

"We built this place. We made it safe!" Rama, 33-year-old Syrian woman

From Maryam's house to Rama's is only a seven-minute drive. Somayeh lives right across the street, where her mother-in-law sits in their backyard drinking coffee. Lena can walk to her Iraqi and Syrian friends' places in five minutes to enjoy their afternoon chats. While we are driving in the neighborhood, every so often Maryam will point at a house: "A Syrian family lives here. They are from Damascus, but that house belongs to a family from Hama and the next one to people from Dara'a."

A few minutes later she shows me a video of the last week's party in her house. Almost 30 men gathered in the newly designed room in the basement, which functions as an Arabic style guest room. They were sitting on the floor covered by a *sajadah* (carpet) and *farshat Arabi* (Arabic mattress) while drinking coffee. One man lay against back to the wall holding a mike while singing *Ghana Hourani*.[18] Every so often another man, sitting at the center of the room and seeming of out of place, pounded on his guitar, not caring if the sounds went along with the music. Ahmed, the host, passes by the person filming the party and stops to kiss him. The video reminded me of a women's party I went to a few months ago in the same neighborhood. Maryam had invited me to Rama's house, who later became my friend. Mostly from Syria and Yemen, the women enjoyed a very good spread of Yemeni and Syrian food and sang folk songs.

Newly arrived Syrians mostly cluster in the residential areas of Detroit close to Dearborn, where they can afford to buy homes. For many the possibility of owning a house motivated them to live in this area, and many have bought inexpensive and affordable houses that they then redesign. Thus, every Syrian-owned house I visited was in the midst of remodeling and repairing of the damage from the Detroit urban riot and unsuccessful economy. According to a Neighborhood Scout report,[19] the median real estate price in the area is 40% less expensive than in similar neighborhoods. The vacancy rate is 41% higher than in other U.S. neighborhoods. Most residents are low-income service workers. The new Syrian refugees buy and redesign these affordable houses, which were originally built between the 1940s and 1970s.

These houses, including Maryam's, have created networking spaces and become a place for friendship, politics, and remembering the good days in Syria. Most significantly, they are a connection between past and future in Syria and Detroit. The reconstructed homes are gradually changing the neighborhood, recasting the history of Detroit's neighborhoods that heavily and painfully remind residents of the failure of the twentieth century's promise of a prosperous life through industrial capital.

16 http://www.sadaalwatan.com.
17 http:chaldiantimes.com.
18 *Ghana Hourani* is a type of folkloric song in the *sha'abi* genre, a widely popular genre. It is popular across the Arab world, including in Syria.
19 DETROIT, MI (SCHOOLCRAFT ST/WYOMING ST). https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/mi/detroit/schoolcraft-st. Accessed December 11, 2018.

The presence of Syrian families has become a part of the daily struggle of Detroit to survive. The single-family homes constructed by the auto industry for single families are now inhibited and improved by Syrian refugees to house six or more family members, bringing new ideas of "home" and "community" to Detroit, based on Syrian cultural practices.

For example, the guest room is an important part of the Syrian home. It is kept ready to welcome spontaneous visits of family, community members, and even strangers. The welcoming of uninvited guests—which is uncommon in Western culture—"encompasses themes of their village life or earlier lifestyles and values that are often understood by people as traditional in a positive sense."[20] It is a symbol of being open to meet and host strangers. Syrian decorations shows nostalgia and romanticization, living out the group's longing for older times when life was simpler in the village. The guest room is an idealized place that displays a family's socioeconomic status and expresses their cultural values of hospitality.[21]

Americans see Detroit's foreclosed houses as reminders of industrial capitalist utopian failure, but Syrian families see the same districts as places where they can rebuild their lives and revitalize the city. "How do you feel walking and driving in the neighborhood?" I asked Rama. She responded: "I am not scared. We made this place safe. Americans don't bother us because they know we only want to build our lives here."[22] This reconstruction of space is an earnest demand for *place making* and *spatial connection* with the history of Detroit by Syrian families. They are reshaping a transnational, regional, and then national relationship with the urban space, through which they produce social spaces in which class and racial structures in the "uneven urban development"[23] highly visible in the area are challenged.

Economic Integration

Many Arab Americans in Detroit own businesses such as gas stations, grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, and accounting and law firms. According to research done on Arab American entrepreneurship,[24] their small businesses benefit from secure capital from their families, friends, and colleagues. This led to more security in their jobs and survival during the great recession in this area. Also, many Arab American business owners gained skills and training in their country of origin, which they can apply in the U.S. as entrepreneurs.

The group I met is mostly from rural areas or the lower economic class in Syria, with farming or working-class backgrounds. Men are the head of household and occupy low-paid jobs, and women are housewives with a high school education. The newcomers interact with Pakistani Muslims, and with organizations that assist and serve Syrian refugees.

[20] Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, "Contesting Urban Modernity: Moral Leisure in South Beirut," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (2013): 730.
[21] Contesting Urban Modernity, 734.
[22] Rama (Syrian refugee woman) in discussion with author. Field notes, April 2018.
[23] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), 40–47.
[24] Ola Marie Smith, Roger Y. W. Tang, and Paul San Miguel, "Arab American Entrepreneurship in Detroit, Michigan," *American Journal of Business* 27, no. 1 (2012): 58–79.

Refugee Experiences in Detroit

I drove by a strip club on a corner in Warren City, in the southeast of Detroit. It was early afternoon, and two women in their 40s, smoking cigarettes, sat outside the club on flimsy white plastic chairs on the sidewalk. They looked bored. As I passed by, I saw graffiti drawn on the walls, unused lots, and abandoned “feral” houses, as they are referred to, which are relics of bygone places and people. They used to be somewhere to live, to love, to shape, to laugh, to hate, and to cry. The streets are in need of repair. The east side of Warren has many stories, the bandages of poverty, drugs, and violence.

Historic Warren Street has been a commercial center of the city for decades. To the east it reaches downtown Detroit and to the west it reaches Dearborn. It is the route that provides access to Arab-American residential areas stretch from Dearborn and into the city of Detroit. It is the hometown of Henry Ford, the American industrialist. It housed the first European settlers in the late eighteenth century. As an Iranian immersed in Western culture for years, my first time on this street was quite surprising. The smell of *shawarma*[25] sandwiches, Turkish coffee, and spices, the sounds of Arabic words flying in the air, Arabic music coming from cars, the sight of Arabic letters written on the advertisement billboards, the men and women smoking *hooka* in indoor or outdoor hookah lounges, and kids playing in streets enjoying cool summer afternoons all awakened my senses and brought back memories of Middle Eastern culture and traditions. Some memories have political meaning, like a veiled woman wandering around the streets in Dearborn, or the Arab American National Museum where the walls are decorated with Islamic geometric motifs—repeated combinations of squares and circles, in gray, dark blue, and turquoise tiles. As I walked in this museum, the interior space reminded me of the mystery of mosques and shrines back home. I could have wallowed in this and let the museum’s slow Arabic music vibrations cover my skin and senses, but I was interrupted when I saw a young Arab American queer woman selling Palestinian *keffiyeh*.[26] She was registering participants at an event on personal narratives of sexuality, identity, and gender. Seeing this person among the turquoise-colored tiles left me perplexed. It is bewildering. This space in the city is contested by the tangible presence of multiple ways of being and includes mixing identities, including secular and religious people in the form of gatherings of Shia and Sunni Americans and Arabs. It displays the non-hegemonic and complex ethno-racial history of the Muslim community, one that reflects the reality of their lives, and their economic and political or “place making” struggles for assimilation in the American context.

Security, Religion, and Integration

Dearborn is tense in terms of security, religion, and group identification. For instance, I walked into three Sunni mosques where I was never asked to wear a scarf, unlike my visit to the largest Shia-affiliated mosque, the Islamic Center of America on Ford Road. Surprised by the two private security

[25] *Shawarma* is one of the most popular street foods in Arab world. Originally from the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire era, meat or chicken slices are stacked on a vertical spit and grilled. When cooked, they are cut off and served with sauced vegetables wrapped in a flat bread. See Wikipedia contributors, “Shawarma,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shawarma&oldid=856331994.
[26] A checkered black and white scarf that is usually worn around the neck or head. It is a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and resistance to Israeli occupation.

cars patrolling the parking area, I asked the guards what their concerns were. They responded, “Because of the anti-Muslim threats to the mosques.” As I walked into the mosque, the woman at the reception asked me gently to put a scarf on. When I explained that I didn’t have one with me, I was respectfully shown a basket of visitors’ scarves. As I put one on, I recalled the days in Iran, where mosques regulate women’s bodies at the entrance. This is only one battle over different religious identity. The headscarf is a contested issue between different mosques, because how much of your hair you can show indicates the different values of communities.[27] The same applies to Shia and Sunni mosques’ politics over praying in sex-segregated areas. The Shia and Sunni mosques in Dearborn, only 15 of the 70 in Detroit and its suburbs, absorb many Muslim immigrant and refugee communities and embody politics over religious and sectarian identity to shape the remarkable history of the city. Hashmie Hall, American Muslim Society (AMS), Islamic Center of Detroit, and Islamic Center of America are some of them. The historian Sally Howell remarks that their in-group struggle “defuses the claim to pure identities of Muslims.”[28] It displays the variances between groups in terms of religious, ethnic, and geographical origins. They show their in-group disagreement “over the fundamental Islamic practice and the nature of American citizenship.”[29] Howell defines the political and sectarian struggles as “real and imaginary” ones that show the heterogeneous characteristic of Arab Americans and the work they do across their differences in urban spaces to “defend their way of life” by either orthodox, liberal, or left-oriented politics.

The east side, reaching to downtown Detroit, puts me again in the Western space and lifestyle. I drive only five minutes from Dearborn to see its historic buildings and, on and off, abandoned houses. Some have broken windows and nailed doors, some are hidden in un-mowed lawns, struggling to survive. How do the familiarity and strangeness work together for the newly arrived Syrian women?

Dis-integration: Fear and Fragility

It was a Saturday morning. Having driven one hour from Detroit to get to South Pennsylvania Avenue in East Lansing, I found myself staring at the “white nationalist” protesters and counter-rally groups. It was a rally organized by ACT for America,[30] the nation’s largest anti-Muslim organization. The supposedly “anti-*Sharia* and not anti-Muslim” protesters, about 35 in total, were carrying assault weapons and were dressed in military-style uniforms. They were targeting all Muslims as “rapists” and “terrorists.” I stood silent behind traffic dividers placed by police officers between the rally and anti-rally protesters. Even if they seemed very aggressive and assertive, armed with guns, I sensed their fragility. Rabin DiAngelo describes “white fragility” as a racial stress that is triggered by “an outward display of defensive emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”[31] It is an emotional state where a sense of loss and fear of the “other” usurp all other natural senses like seeing or observing somebody.

[27] Linda S. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi’ism in American Community* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1993).
[28] Sally Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering Muslim American Past* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42.
[29] Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit*, 7–8.
[30] https://www.actforamerica.com.
[31] Robin DeAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

I changed my location to watch and film the two groups representing white nationalist America and those trying to defend America's diversity and multiculturalism. An angry, young man defending Muslim immigrants used very simplistic arguments. A tall, white man in his 50s at the other side of the corridor pointed at me, saying, "Hey man, if Muslims continue coming to the state, *Sharia* law will take over the country, and this young woman becomes a sex slave." Stunned, I tried to raise my voice and said, "Well, I am an immigrant, I am from a Muslim country, and my dad was not a rapist." He seemed surprised by the coincidence and said, "Oh, then go back to your country," and turned his back quickly.

In the turmoil of screaming and gun displaying, surrounded by police cars and officers, there was no space for dialogue. I left the venue while Antifa[32] members were covering their faces, taking to the street, and chanting against President Donald Trump and the state. In this mayhem, I felt more than ever an insider in the Syrian community. A few months later when I met my Syrian friends in Dearborn, nobody knew about the event. I was relieved they did not see the violence and pondered why they didn't know about it. I also wondered if they knew the current national political atmosphere. I met Lyla who lives in Lansing. She also did not know about the local demonstration or the national rhetoric, but issues of race and religious identity still came up in our conversations.

Islamic and Arab Solidarity in Dearborn

The Syrian women I met in Detroit like to hear people speaking Arabic in the streets. It is a significant religious ritual choosing which mosque to attend and a challenge to send children to schools where they don't feel pressured for wearing a headscarf or fasting during Ramadan. For example, Priest School in their neighborhood has Arab teachers and is mixed with working-class Mexican and African American children. The proximity of the school and its openness to a diverse group of Muslims and Christian kids was described by Syrian women as one of the advantages of living in the area.

It was important for the migrants to have a support group no matter whether they were from, be it Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, or Pakistan. Rama said, "In the first days of our arrival, my Iraqi neighbor helped us a lot. She even lent us her car to go and buy stuff for our new house." It is important to live in walking or short driving distance from each other in order to check in. Meanwhile, Dearborn's Islamic fashion stores promote a feeling of belonging.

During weekends, families often get together for barbequing in the parks where kids can play all day and women can meet in bigger groups to talk about their feelings, schools, or the good old days in Syria. They have built a network to check on each other, carpool, share information on the unfamiliar bureaucratic system to learn how to pay their bills, and to learn how the coverage of health insurance works or how to pay off their plane tickets to the resettlement agencies. These gatherings also help them cope with their experience of violence in Syria through telling stories about their journey. Sometimes these stories make things tense, but they sing and dance with each other to forget the pain and sorrows of loss. Despite these benefits, the proximity to their Arabic-speaking community also

[32] A left-wing autonomous, self-styled, and anti-fascist militant group in the United States that sometimes engages in violent acts against racism, fascism, and extremism. Since the 2017 presidency of Donald Trump, the group has become very active as counter-protesters in demonstrations and rallies against immigrants and refugees. To learn more, see: Wikipedia contributors, "Antifa (United States)," *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Antifa_(United_States)&oldid=857906832. Accessed September 3, 2018.

creates or sustains some tensions, as these groups will argue with each other over their existing resources or show off their material possessions, copying the capitalist consumer culture of their host city.

There are some divisions between the Shia and Sunni community in Dearborn. Maryam said she doesn't go to *Masjid* (Mosque) Al-Touhid because it is a Shia mosque.[33] Yet it is common for new Syrians to get help from Lebanese or Iraqi families in Dearborn. Thus, Dearborn may seem divided in terms of mosques and cultural centers run by religious leaders of both sects, but it is close to the secular or non-Muslim parts of the city as well. Women can perform their piety and develop a sense of being, and the city may "enhance their sense of belonging to and identification with the entire Islamic culture/world.

Migrant-Host Solidarity

None of the Syrian women I spoke with in East Lansing had heard of the anti-*Sharia* protesters on South Pennsylvania Avenue in June 2017, just ten minutes' drive away; nor did they know about the Richard Spencer chaos at the Michigan State University (MSU) in March 2018. Spencer is a well-known white nationalist figure disseminating anti-immigration, anti-Semitic views. His arrival on March 5 to the MSU campus created a clash[34] between his supporters and counter-rally groups, but a side event, Celebrating Diversity Festival, had also been organized by grassroots and inter-faith groups to outnumber the presence of white nationalists in Lansing.[35] A community of activists comprising Christians, Jews, and Muslims, including the Islamic Center of East Lansing, gathered in All Saints Episcopal Church just a few miles away from MSU to show their solidarity with the immigrant population. Local politicians, including Andy Schor (the mayor of Lansing), and representatives of MSU were among the attendees. The mayor stated, "We believe in diversity, so we celebrate it. We show how important it is. It doesn't matter if you're black, white, it doesn't matter if you're Jewish, Christian. We love it, we welcome it, we want it." [36]

This was the second time that the local groups organized to unite with refugee families against the fear cultivating the rhetoric and acts. The first time was in 2017, when a group of armed white nationalists was planning to walk in a refugee residential area after their rally. They changed their plan later, but activists already had dispersed in the neighborhood to inform and protect the refugees. Some of the residents responded, though, by saying, "Well, we passed through the war. We are not afraid of death."[37] So, there is some animosity towards the presence of refugees, including Muslims, expressed in recent years, including the two recent rallies that both took place in Lansing. Nonetheless, local groups resist.

[33] She was driving with us, showing us the city. I asked whose group this mosque was. She said, "We don't go there. They are Shia Iraqis and Lebanese."
[34] Simon D. Schuster and Susan Svrluga, "'Nazis Go Home!' Fights Break Out at Michigan State as Protesters, White Supremacists Converge for Richard Spencer Speech," March 5, 2018, *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/03/05/michigan-state-braces-for-white-nationalist-speech-as-protesters-converge/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.142beb619068.
[35] R. J. Wolcott, "White Nationalist Richard Spencer Blames Violent Protesters for Small Crowd at MSU," *Lansing State Journal*, March 5, 2018. https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2018/03/05/richard-spencer-michigan-state/397727002/.
[36] Jam Sardar, "Church Holds Celebration of Diversity to Counter Spencer Speech," March 5, 2018. https://www.wlns.com/news/michigan/church-holds-celebration-of-diversity-to-counter-spencer-speech/1036175982.
[37] Mentioned in my interview with an inter-faith group members. Field notes, February 15, 2018.

Conclusion

The group of Syrian women I interacted with have experienced painful displacement and loss of their home and family members, but they are trying to rebuild their roots and their communities in urban spaces in Michigan. The well-established community of Arab Americans in Dearborn helps Syrian women experience easier transitional periods even if sectarian and class tensions are always present. The integration process into American society is slow, but the immigrant population and the city itself are fluid and changing. Dearborn and Detroit represent a different form of integration compared to what we see elsewhere. For example, the hookah lounges in Dearborn are mostly spaces where young men and women smoke *arghilah*,[38] hang out and intermingle, dress loosely, and stay up late. These young people will eventually change some social and religious norms. Meanwhile, Arab retail shops cover the needs of the Arab American community, from Islamic fashions to spices, foods, and *halal*[39] meats and drinks.

Almost all of the families I interacted with could manage to own a house, which is highly significant in creating a sense of belonging and "being settled."[40] Syrian women have less stress with reconstructing their lives when they live and work with the established Arab American community. The religious and cultural elements present in the city support women's mobility and their return to a normal life, even if they confine their movements to their own neighborhoods. Maryam once said simply: "I don't need GPS if I drive in Ford Road, Shafer and Warren Streets." They are just about to restart and to revive.

[38] A Middle Eastern water pipe, also referred to as shisha or hookah.
[39] Meats slaughtered in accordance with Islamic principles.
[40] Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008): 166–91.

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Appendix A: Methods

The Detroit metropolitan area has an old and very well established Arab American community. After the refugee crisis in Syria, Michigan accepted the second-highest number of Syrian refugees (2,029 in 2017) in the U.S. (California accepted the most: 2,039). The number dropped to 482 admissions in 2019.[41] This report is based on interviews and informal conversations with 17 Syrian women who arrived with their families between 2015 and 2016 and settled in Detroit or Greater Lansing, north of Detroit. Informal conversations took place in their homes in the presence of family members, and I observed at gatherings that they invited me to. In return, I organized weekly English classes in Maryam's home. These weekly gatherings gradually created an intimate space in which women shared their views and concerns with me.

I also consulted historical, racial, geographical analyses of Michigan, especially of the city of Detroit and its population, and reviewed anthropological texts related to the concepts of building community, forming social bonds, and shaping identity in relation to space and urban geography.

Appendix B: Refugees in the US

By: Leila Asadi, Saidouri Zomaya, Anna Ackerman, Hania Mumtaz, Heba El-Hendi, Gina & Taj, Sharon Granados Mahato, May Mzayek, Saidouri Zomaya, and Brinkley Brown

The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees, and though recently resettlement numbers have declined, the United States remains one of the top resettlement countries in the world. More than 3 million refugees have been resettled in the U.S. since 1975.[42] Resettlement of refugees is conducted through the Unites States Refugee Admission Program. The program is comprised of several federal agencies, including the State Department, Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and the Department of Health and Human Services.[43] The President of the United States each year determines the number of refugees who may be admitted, along with the designated nationalities and processing priorities.[44]

The U.S. history with refugee settlement begins with the end of World War II, when the United States resettled nearly half a million Europeans through the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Resettlement of refugees continued through the Cold War period, with the U.S. focusing its resettlement initiatives on taking in refugees from Communist states.[45] Following the large resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which incorporated the United Nations definition of a refugee as defined by the 1951 Convention. Through the Refugee Act, the U.S. standardized the resettlement services for refugees by creating the U.S. Refugee Admission

[41] U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, U.S. Department of State. https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/index.htm. Accessed May 26, 2018.
[42] Refugee Council USA, 2017.
[43] U.S. Department of State, 2018.
[44] Refugee Council USA, 2017.
[45] R. Igielnik, Where Refugees to the U.S. Come From (Pew Research Center, February 3 2017). http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/03/where-refugees-to-the-u-s-come-from/.

Program. Since the 1980s, refugee resettlement demographics in the U.S. have become more diverse and less defined by Cold War dynamics, with refugees coming mostly from Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, Somalia, and Bhutan.

The largest shift in resettlement patterns occurred after September 11, 2001. Under the Bush and Obama administrations, refugee resettlement numbers decreased, with the lowest numbers reaching 27,110 in 2002. Numbers under the second term of the Obama administration began to increase, only to shrink again under the Trump administration, with an estimated 45,000 refugees in 2018.[46] In addition to formally resettled refugees, historically there have been large numbers of irregular migrants to American cities. Efforts to manage irregular migrants have affected their precariousness to varying degrees.

For example, since the 1990s, efforts like the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program have attempted to provide "provisional" humanitarian relief to displaced persons, meant to protect them from deportation and offer the right to work until the "triggering event" of their displacement has been recovered from.[47] By contrast, recent "immigrant bans," bolstering Federal immigration enforcement, and efforts to remove TPS protections under the Trump Administration have put strains on both legal migrants from singled-out countries—especially Muslim majority countries—and irregular migrants alike.

Appendix C: Refugees in Detroit

The first wave of Syrians arrived in the United States between 1889–1914[48] to escape the Ottoman Syria hegemony and to pursue their freedom of religion. Being mostly Christian with a minority of Syrian Jews, they settled in New York, Boston, and Detroit. Through the naturalization system, they gradually became U.S. citizens.

In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act called Hart-Celler[49] was passed and removed the quota allocation based on the country of origin. Section 2, Para (a) declared that "no person shall receive any preference or priority or be discriminated again in the issuance of an immigration visa because of his race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence…"[50] Thus, immigration of Syrians to the U.S. increased again, but this time Muslim groups constituted the majority of Syrian immigrants in the 1960s because of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the region and escalation of religion conflicts. They dispersed to different states, including Michigan, built very strong communities, were highly educated, and had

46 J. Rose, Trump Administration to drop Refugee Cap to 45,000, Lowest in Years (NPR, September 27, 2017). https://www.npr.org/2017/09/27/554046980/trump-administration-to-droprefugee-cap-to-45-000-lowest-in-years.
47 M. Messick and C. Bergeron, "Temporary Protected Status in the United States: A Grant of Humanitarian Relief that Is Less than Permanent" (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). https:// www.migrationpolicy.org/ article/temporary protected-status-united-states-grant-humanitarian-reliefless-permanent. Accessed August 2017.
48 Hitti, Phillip K, The Syrians in America, New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924.
49 The Immigration and Nationality Act passed and enacted in 1965 (H.R. 2580). Pub.L. 89–236. 79 Stat. 911, enacted June 30, 1968. Known as the Hart–Celler Act.
50 The Immigration and Nationality Act.

successful businesses. Many of them now live in South Bloomfield Township, ranked as the most affluent and expensive area in the state of Michigan.

If the old generation of Syrians were more immigrants and less refugees, the new wave of Syrians who come to U.S. are mostly forced and displaced people feeling the effects of war and having experienced a very dire situation in their country. One of the latest reports of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2017)[51] exposes the magnitude of devastation and forced displacement of Syrians. According to this report, 13.5 million Syrian women and men require humanitarian assistance, 6.3 million have been internally displaced, 4.9 million remain trapped in hard-to-reach and besieged areas, and over 5 million have fled the country.[52]

From these numbers, between October 1, 2011 and December 31, 2016, 18,007 Syrian refugees arrived in the U.S., while in the first quarter of 2017 only 3,566 were admitted and resettled. Although the Obama administration raised the overall refugee admission in 2016 and promised to increase it up to 110,000,[53] the promise was never upheld by the Obama administration.

Limiting the number of admissions to 50,000 and targeting "semi-welcoming" immigration and refugee policies,[54] the new president Donald Trump issued an executive order on January 27, 2017, through which Syrians, along with six other countries,[55] were barred from entering the country. Thus, despite the deteriorating situation in Syria that requires the responsibility of international community to enforce their open-door policies, the U.S. government decided to close its eyes and shut the doors.[56] The strict new rules and policies undermined the U.S. international commitments to human rights of refugees as the number of Syrian admissions dropped down to only 11 people in 2018. These strict new rules and policies affected Michigan, which had admitted Syrian and Iraqi refugees as 59% of the state's refugee population in 2016 according to the *Detroit Free Press*.[57] The new Syrian refugees were distributed evenly throughout the state including in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Lansing, and Grand Rapids. The number of refugee admissions also dramatically dropped in the past two years and interestingly from the entire population of refugees, 7,000, only 75 Syrian families were settled between 2013 and 2017.[58]

[51] UNHCR, Syrian Regional Refugee Response Report, http://data2.unhcr.org. Accessed July 2, 2018.
[52] "The Syrian Refugee Crisis and its Repercussions for the EU," July 2016. Accessed August 10, 2016. http://syrianrefugees.eu.
[53] Joe Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Syrian Refugees in the United States" (Migration Policy Institute, January 12, 2017). http://www.migrationpolicy.org.
[54] Compared to many countries in the world such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan that admitted over 3 million Syrian refugees, the United Stated has hosted a very small number of them.
[55] Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia. Later on, Iraq was removed from the list.
[56] According to UNHCR Syrian Regional Refugee Response report, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt have hosted the largest number of Syrian displaced persons: 3,562,523; 982,012; 666,596; 250,708; and 129,507 respectively. UNHCR, Syrian Regional Refugee Response Report, http://data2.unhcr.org. Accessed July 2, 2018.
[57] **Kristi Tanner, "Raw Data. Refugees in Michigan, by the Numbers,"** ***Detroit Free Press,*** **January 31, 2017. http://www.freep.com. Accessed July 2, 2018.**
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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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