

Diversity and Inclusion In the Light of Cross-Cultural Experience

A Reflection on Integration from Refugees in Towns
Al-Hasakah, Syria & Albany Park, Chicago, USA

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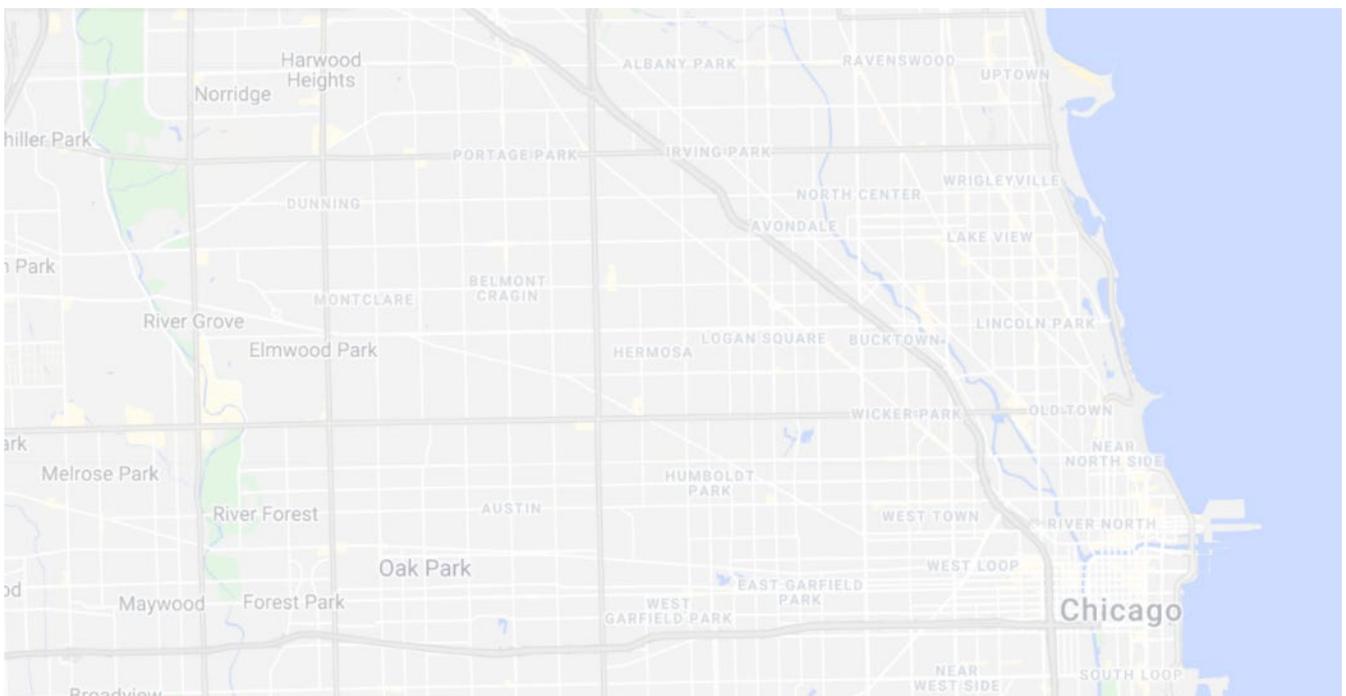
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Cover photo: Downtown Albany Park featuring numerous migrant-owned restaurants and shops.
Photo by author.

Location



Al-Hasakah is a small city located in the northeast of Syria near the Turkey and Iraq borders.



Albany Park is a neighborhood of northwest Chicago, located in the Midwest of the United States.

Base map imagery © Google 2020.

My Introduction to Integration

I recall skipping down the streets of my hometown, Al Hasakah, Syria—with a big smile on my face, my signature bob and short bangs bouncing off my forehead, rocking my favorite flowy dress and tiny heeled shoes—as we made our way to one of my all-time favorite spots in town. Some of my fondest childhood memories growing up in Syria revolved around the trips I took with my dad to the cultural center, as if it was my little window to the world. There were piles of books from every genre displayed on each table, everything from poetry to nonfiction, whatever my scholastic heart desired. But what intrigued me the most was one genre in particular: international novels. There was something about these that drew me in like a magnet, enraptured by the charm and beauty of the different countries and cultures in every story I read.

When I asked my dad about why he made it a priority to take us to the cultural center as kids, he said that he wanted to make sure that we were not limited to the knowledge and ideas that were presented to us in school. He wanted to broaden our cultural understanding of the world around us, so we were aware of how people from different cultures lived and thought about life. Encouraging us to read international novels written by foreign authors was a way to introduce us to those new perspectives and ideologies that otherwise we may have not had the opportunity to learn about. He also mentioned that he did not have this opportunity growing up and wanted to make sure that we were able to take advantage of what was available for us. As I got older, this childhood fascination with learning about other cultures grew deeper, but little did I know the impact those “trips” would have on my life and my future studies.

Although I grew up in a small, tightly knit Assyrian community in Al-Hasakah, Syria, we lived among Arabs, Armenians, Kurds, and Yazidis. We shared many similar traditions and cultural beliefs that were rooted in the history of the region despite our different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Therefore, I grew up with the notion that we were all Syrians regardless of our ethnic or religious differences. Most, if not all my interactions were with Syrian people until the war in Iraq started. When the Iraq War began in 2003, many Iraqis sought refuge in various cities in Syria, and among those cities was my hometown, Al-Hasakah. As the war progressed over the years, more and more Iraqis fled the conflict and moved to Syria and other neighboring countries. I recall that being a time of solidarity for many people in my city, where even my school turned into a shelter for one summer to host the increasing numbers of Iraqi refugees. For my Assyrian community, this was history repeating itself since many Assyrians fled Iraq during the Simileh Massacre in 1933 and also sought refuge in Al-Hasakah. This city has played a crucial role in hosting refugees, particularly Assyrian refugees, throughout the decades, and has brought many different groups together.

As I got older and began to delve into studying and learning about the cultural history of the Middle East, I wondered about the shared experiences of the various groups that lived in the area and how they influenced one another. I subconsciously became more engrossed in wanting to better understand the complexity of our coexistence. I had this belief that no matter where we come from and what culture we grow up in, we are more alike than different. This is something that, until this day, I try

to seek and prove in my everyday life. My experience going to school in my hometown, Al-Hasakah, a city known for its ethnic diversity, was my first exposure to the concepts of diversity and inclusion and what it means to coexist.

Developing My Integration Skills

As I graduated from one grade to the next, I began to construct a deeper understanding of the complexity of diversity and inclusion. By the time I started my sophomore year of high school in Syria, my friendships had expanded beyond my Assyrian group of friends. I recall our class being a melting pot of Christians and Muslims from different denominations and ethnic backgrounds. For the most part, we all got along together while putting aside our differences. So, was it a perfect harmonious community that I grew up in? Probably not, but the people of my town tried their best to live in peace and stick together despite the occasional disagreements and conflicts that arose from time to time between different ethnic groups. Moreover, my classmates and I formed a community and thereby chose to be part of something greater than our differences while still honoring our individual beliefs and traditions.

In my social circle in Al-Hasakah, we had lots of ethnic diversity and integration, but this is not always the case. I have always wondered what makes minority groups and ethnic communities that have survived war and persecution integrate in some cases, and in others create enclaves and separate themselves from others. Based on my experiences in the Assyrian population, I believe that there are several factors. Other than wanting to preserve one's own culture, traditions, and heritage, I think that fear is what drives many communities apart. So, where does this fear come from? Although I was brought up in an Assyrian community that lived in an ethnically diverse city, as a minority group in the region, Assyrians tend to stick together, especially in times of war and conflict. I would argue that the years of persecution, oppression, and discrimination that we endured throughout history have resulted in our Assyrian community developing unity as a mechanism to protect what is left of our identity. Unfortunately, war and conflict can result in not only loss and death, but also fear. Nonetheless, the Assyrian community, like many other minority groups in Syria, has found a way to preserve its history and heritage while coexisting with other groups. I would attribute this to the human desire to live peacefully and believe this desire surpasses any fear or distress.

When I asked one of my relatives, who is also a former Al-Hasakah resident and now lives in Germany, to reflect upon his experience living back home, he too told me how Al-Hasakah was a hub for many ethnic refugee groups throughout the years. These groups included not just Assyrians but Yazidis, Turkmen, Armenians, Kurds, and Circassians as well. Many of these communities that sought refuge in Al-Hasakah eventually moved out to another city or a different country. He explained that growing up in an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Al-Hasakah, particularly in a building that had families from various religious and ethnic backgrounds helped shape his perception of people from different backgrounds and has helped him better integrate into his new hometown in Germany. He added that what encouraged Al-Hasakah to become culturally inclusive was likely the presence of various ethnic groups seeking refuge from conflict, but also the government's attempt to create a

peaceful heterogeneous society, which is why groups such as the Bedouins were brought from the desert and mixed with other minorities, thereby avoiding enclaves of ethnic communities concentrated in one area.

My relative also explained to me that he had an overall positive experience integrating into his new community in Germany and that the process was made easy due to the help he received from the “citizen initiative,” a program that consisted of various community members who received permission from the German government to help refugees with the integration process. These citizen initiative services included support with transportation, paperwork, and housing. He never experienced any discrimination at work nor at school. In fact, when doing an apprenticeship at his workplace, his managers nominated him to enroll at a university while also paying for his education despite not being fully proficient in the German language. My relative was fortunate in that he generally did not feel discriminated against, but he also knows that others do experience discrimination mostly due to their inability to express their thoughts and emotions in German. Because he was able to communicate at a conversational level, he was able to express his thoughts easily and form friendships with German people despite not sharing many of their views. People in his community were willing to discuss various topics with him without having any animosities.

My Experience Integrating to the U.S.

When my family and I moved to the U.S. in 2009, we initially settled in Skokie, a Chicago suburb. Like many other surrounding neighborhoods, Skokie has a relatively diverse ethnic and racial composition. According to the 2010-2019 population estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau, Skokie had a diverse population which was majority white, but had sizeable minorities of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and mixed race people (“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Skokie village, Illinois”, 2020). This was something that I was already familiar with from Al-Hasakah in Syria. The difference here was that the population consisted of groups that came from different countries, not just different religions and ethnicities. Suddenly, I felt like I was the little girl with the short bangs and the flowy dress again, excited to explore my new hometown and learn all about its people and their cultures. I recall visiting our local library in Skokie for the first time and realizing how different it was from back home. Seeing people from different races all gathered in one place was a gripping experience, which I would contribute to my desire to seek and understand what binds us as humans together instead of focusing on fear of the unknown.

My first day of high school in the U.S. was akin to my first time visiting the local library. I was thrilled to see I had classmates from various African, Asian, and European countries, some of whom were born in the U.S. and others who immigrated here. I was able to meet other immigrant students and ask them about their upbringing in their hometowns and how that differed from their experience living in the U.S. My friends and I would gather around a table at lunch and share about our traditions, cultural beliefs, and what it meant to grow up in different parts of the world.

Exploring Integration as a University Student

When I started my undergraduate studies at North Park University, located in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Albany Park in Chicago, I tried to launch cross-cultural discussions with my new university classmates and close friends who were of Chinese, Filipino, and Hispanic descent. Our discussions included talks about cultural norms, family traditions and customs, and our experiences being first-generation college students in the U.S. We often shared our desire to keep our traditions alive and maintain close ties with our community and family. Another common theme that often surfaced during our discussions was the importance of education, especially for our parents and how crucial it was for us to make them proud. North Park University provided an ideal environment that consisted of not only a diverse body of students but also professors who encouraged us to take those conversations outside of our classrooms to our communities and the outside world. As a result, having cross-cultural discussions with fellow students came very naturally to us. For an in depth exploration of Albany Park, see the [2019 RIT report](#).

Conclusion

Reflecting on my experience living, studying, and researching a diverse neighborhood such as Albany Park made me think of many similarities it has with my hometown of Al-Hasakah. Albany Park's culturally inclusive environment stems from the various waves of migration that resettled in the neighborhood and the legacy that these arrivals left behind. As a result, both places have welcoming collective character. This legacy is evident in the various shops, educational institutions, and health care centers that were established by various migrant communities and left to support future ethnic groups to come. Similarly, Al-Hasakah's long history of welcoming various ethnic groups, in addition to the government's policies at the time that pushed for an integrated society, made the neighborhood a welcoming haven for many communities that fled war and persecution throughout the years.

Diversity and inclusion are two concepts that I find essential to survival, especially in such times where we live in a global society, more connected now than ever before. Embracing our differences and similarities as we meet new people is the first step to acceptance of others. My experience surrounding myself with a diverse group of friends from a young age helped me make such conversations about diversity and inclusion a bit more feasible. The shared human experience that I found through my cross-cultural interactions with friends and classmates, both in Syria and the U.S., reaffirmed this belief that humans, regardless of where we come from, are more similar than different.

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

About the Author

Saidouri was born and raised in Syria into an Assyrian family. After moving to the U.S. at 17 years old, Saidouri received her B.A. in Biology from North Park University in Albany Park, Chicago, one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the U.S. Saidouri is currently pursuing a M.A. in Cultural Anthropology with a focus on refugee and migration studies. She is also a volunteer at World Relief, a resettlement agency located in Albany Park, Chicago.

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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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