Comparative study on integration of Kurdish, Iranian and Afghan diasporas in London and Cologne: A Working Paper at 75th anniversary of Geneva Convention

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The Approach to Integration of Refugees

My overall approach and methodological framework on social integration is largely based on my most recent study on refugee integration in London, and I primarily looked at lived experience and voices (Ata, 2023). This discussion does not necessarily focus on Geneva Convention, although I am writing for this Special Issue at 75th anniversary of Geneva Convention. The discussion on social integration of refugees is, however, at stake and related to Refugee rights and protection at this time in Europe, UK and elsewhere. In focusing on social integration and lived experience of refugees, I do not distract but rather address a crucial aspect of the Refugee rights and protection in the 21st century Britain and Germany, which UN Refugee Convention 1951 did not adequately address.

Some scholars and policy makers would call integration a *two-way-street,* and I have developed it into a *junction approach*, meaning I look at persons, communities (both migrant and host), and policies/polity, and equally importantly, the question of social cohesion a subject concerning cultural group interactions which sometimes stands alone as a subject.

Definition of integration and community cohesion

The definition of integration, within and under the umbrella of social cohesion, is about individuals who are able and willing to blend, mix, and mingle with other individuals from the larger and diverse society, and it is a two-way street. Some academics argue these complex and dynamic social interactions start from day one of arrival for individual refugees (Bloch 2002a). Furthermore, (Hall 1992a) argues that integration is a subtle process and is largely initiated by citizens from grassroots and within diverse communities.

Under the same social umbrella, social cohesion is a multifaceted and complex social concept understood to include a set of attributes like trust, shared values, respect, and common purpose which applies to "groups first, and individuals second." (Nima Orazani, Reynolds, and Osborne, 2023).[2] In short, my working paper attempts to cover four models of integration and social cohesion articulated by scholars like Hall, Gilroy, Modood and Bloch.

The Social Models

Assimilation (French model), Individualistic (elitist-personal choice), cosmopolitan (emphasis on citizenship, more common in Germany), and multiculturalism (which England-London and probably Canada, and Sweden are still known for), within this forth model the cultural and religious differences are recognised, celebrated, and even promoted.

I am interested in applying a social constructive framework and a dialogical approach for data gathering and analysis, thus, I would also add my own personal and first-hand experience as a refugee, and my professional engagements with refugee and migrant groups in England in the

past fifteen years. With a particular focus on London, and as a refugee scholar, I am not talking about integration; I am integration, "lived experience is knowledge." (Ata 2023).

In my view it is appropriate to add another angel to my hypothesis about integration which is my work in progress about the application of contact theory[3] which was developed in the USA in the late 1980s, and it is still very relevant to any discussion about social integration and social cohesion in most cosmopolitan cities in our world today.

By social contact I mean a range of different things: from an initial eye contact, to greeting and often talking about the weather (if you live in the UK), having a chat over coffee with a new colleague, attending away days at work, sharing food, community festivals, football (of course) active listening, honest disagreements and agreement, mutual respect, enjoying your neighborhood and feeling safe, attending community hubs/ occasional poetry readings, doing voluntary work with an NGO, riverside walks, charity runs, understanding statutory organization.

Furthermore, understanding the justice system, being and staying part of education system through your children and for yourself and ultimately working out culturally grounded strategies for all of us to co-exist as equal, productive, and happy citizens, both as free individuals and also as members of all sorts of cultural groups which constitutes progressive and ideal social cohesion.

The above sentiments and wish list are expressed by people whom I interviewed and they strongly and positively expressed a desire and willingness to integrate, if the right opportunity, education, and encouragement given. Moreover, if integration is a two-way street, and indeed it is, the migrant side is often open by a green light both in London and in Bonn, and most people I interviewed would like to integrate, but not to assimilate. However, this green light should not be taken for granted!

With a reflection on my invaluable time working with two research institutions in Germany and when I carried out my comparative study on integration (November 2021-May 2022), I felt welcome by the whole FAU-FFVT[4] team, including given a shiny yellow bike which helped me to explore the beautiful and small city of Erlangen before embarking on my research journey to Nuremburg and Bonn. I benefited from my highly developed social skills as a Londoner and my deep interest in migrants and their stories. I made good progress in my networking within weeks and managed to organize networking dinners, brunches, drinks, and outings successfully with colleagues inside the university-house (Qasim, Alex, Rusmus, Farzaneh, Robert, Christopher) and with Chris my German neighbor.

All these persons have also contributed to my information gathering and understanding about migrant / refugee integration in Germany. I must also particularly mention Mojib Atal, our PhD student, for all his positive networking in Nuremberg and his hospitality. Thanks also to Lorenz for inviting me to his warm place - hosting our welcome event for the FFVT team.

Using pragmatic mixed methods

I carried out five face to face in-depth interviews / conversations, seven extensive WhatsApp calls, listened to ten podcasts made by migrants in relation to refugee / migrant integration. I had several meetings and chats over coffee with members of Afghan, Iranian, and Kurdish communities with several members of host communities in four cities in Germany (Erlangen, Nuremberg, Cologne, and Bonn). I exchanged information and share views with academics within the FFVT[5] and the FAU-Guest House. I exchanged many emails with the refugee integration commissioner, Huguenots Church members, and the German Language school for migrant and refugee's admin team based at the integration center in Erlangen.

Successful and Proactive Networking

Visiting FFVT colleagues in Bonn from 17-24th January 2022 was particularly useful. We had some productive in-house meetings and exchanges of information and knowledge. I was fascinated by some academics from the newly established Syrian community in Bonn. My thanks to Mosallam, and his snowballing links with some members of the Iranian and Kurdish communities in this region, I met many different people. My networking with FFVT is ongoing and in November 2025 I led a seminar about food as a delicious medium and probably the least disputed element of social integration and social cohesion across Europe and beyond.

A Tentative Conclusion

This working paper is not focused on UNHCR's roles in protection of refugees, integration and failure, though I discussed about lived experience of the displaced as integration at the 75th anniversary of Geneva Convention through examining the complex issues of integration and belonging from a comparative perspective and by considering personal account for reflection on lived experience of a scholar from refugee background. This perspective is neither a scrutiny, nor an appreciation of the UN Refugee Convention 1951. It rather is a necessity of time and context that we focus on real life experience than focusing on the role of international agency. Moving on from person, community and for examining social policy, I need to look back to a political speech in Munich by David Cameron in 2011. The then Prime Minster of Britian, suggested that 'state multiculturalism had failed' and he advocated for a 'muscular liberalism' and much stronger national unity and social cohesion in Britian.[6]

Moreover, and fast forward to March 2026, let us see what the current British Prime Minster Kier Starmer outlined about his position on the same subject:

> *"*By any fair standard, Britain can be proud about of its approach to social cohesion. Simple things we take for granted – like inter-faith marriages, or religious freedom – are in fact a departure from the historical or international norm. Indeed, the ease with which people of different cultures and races live side-by-side in our diverse democracy is both envied and feared around the globe. Feared, because it provides a banal yet profound challenge to the increasingly noisy politics that says it simply cannot be done; people who are different cannot come together united under one flag. In our communities we show, daily, that it can*." [7]*

In this examination of social integration in Britain, I would like to take a critical approach regarding the British state's ever-changing but largely passive policies and positions since 2011

on multiculturalism and social cohesion. In another words, the British state (talks-the-talk but does not walk-the-walk) by providing positive publicity, some funding, and resources to encourage and improve social integration and community cohesion.

However, in line with the radical views of Stuart Hall, a celebrated British cultural theorist, 'subtle' integration, as evident in Germany, and I am still observing in London, Integration happens daily – gradually and delicately at grassroots level, especially in large cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, Edinburgh and elsewhere in Britain.

Some scholars studying multiculturalism in Britain have pointed to the negative and long-term effects of multiculturalism in separating minority communities from the mainstream (Malik, 2013). I would add that multiculturalism should not be used to justify socioeconomic inequalities marginalisation, and disparities in different parts of London or Britain.

As Hall describes, these urban places have historically provided socio-political and economic conditions where individuals and communities mix, mingle, and negotiate their identities, thus forming new hybrid cultures and identities.[8] Further research on the subject may be useful for understanding what ways UNHCR can help create awareness of these everyday and social integration of the displaced – refugees, migrants and the diaspora in the countries of resettlement and countries of return.

References

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Endnotes

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[2] See Nima Orazani, Reynolds, and Osborne (2023) available on https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jasp.12990
[3] Please see John F. Dovidio, Samuel L. Gaertner, Kerry Kawakami (2003). *Intergroup Contact: The Past, Present, and the Future* Research Article. Available from https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430203006001009
[4] See for further information: https://ffvt.net/en
[5] See https://ffvt.net/en/fellows/238/dr-ayar-ata
[6] See https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference

[7] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-co
[8]Interview with Stuart Hall, BBC Radio 4 on Wednesday 16 March 2011 at 4pm.