

**Annual progress report - June 2020**  
**The Boris Mints Institute for Strategic Policy Solutions to Global Challenges**

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**Title of the project:** "Refugees in town: assessing the "local turn" of forced migrants integration"

The overall research project examines how cities deal with the social and economic incorporation of forced migrants. The research focuses on the challenges and the opportunities that local governments face as they mediate between national migration control policies and the influx of asylum seekers in precarious socio-legal situations.

In addition to a qualitative extensive case study analysis of 2 central cities (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), this year, we expanded the research to Haifa as a third central city in Israel to elicit variation of how different localities exhibiting characteristic differences in dealing with "aliens" or unclassifiable others within the nation-state (see previous report).

We also treat Haifa as a case study by itself due to the relatively few numbers of refugees residing there and the only currently evolving situation on the ground. Following Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2015), we seek to contribute to the literature seeking a "multiscalar perspective" on relationships between migration and localities by researching cities that are not central gateways to migration and yet important for grasping new dynamics of refugees dispersal, such as in Haifa.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit Israel in mid-March, and resulted in a closure of the economy, administration and public transportation during our field work preparations, we re-oriented the research for the second half of the academic year 2020. We decided to utilize the research cooperation we established with the organization ALEF in order to focus on the situation of asylum seekers and the work of civil society actors in Haifa during and in response to the pandemic. By including new emergency situations such as those summoned by COVID-19 into the study of asylum seekers' integration in particular localities, we will be able to further our understanding of how pandemic emergencies impact on populations that are already in precarious conditions.

### **Current State and Progress**

In the following, we present a summary of the current state and progress of our research following up on the commencement of the Haifa case study and the focus outlined above:

1. Data collection based on weekly (online) meetings with the director of ALEF between March and June 2020, visits to the organization, and communication with other members of the organization.
2. Mapping the situation of asylum seekers during mid-March to June regarding work, health, housing, and education for children of asylum seekers (see short summary below).
3. Mapping the work and adaption of civil society engagement to support asylum seekers in Haifa during mid-March to June (see short summary below).
4. Ongoing: Evaluation of the work and adaption of civil society engagement to support asylum seekers in Haifa during mid-March to June in collaboration with the director of ALEF and members of the organization, including identification of strategies, challenges and best practices.

### **Expected Outcomes**

1. Report about the situation of asylum seekers in Haifa during the COVID-19 pandemic and national and local level responses (March-June 2020), expected publication in the framework of the global Refugees in Town project (<https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>).
2. First annual report of ALEF including results from the research project and the evaluation.
3. “Emergency-response handbook for civil society organization working with populations with liminal status” in collaboration with ALEF, presenting action strategies, guidelines and best practices for front line workers.

### **Future steps**

1. Possibly: extension of data collection of civil society responses to the COVID-19 pandemic regarding asylum seekers in Israel to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.
2. Continuation of planned data collection in Haifa (see previous report).
3. Transcriptions of interviews from Haifa with the Atlas.ti program for content analysis and in-depth data analysis of the Haifa case along the relevant parameters of the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem analysis.
4. Cross-location comparison between Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.
5. Focused analysis of how local communities on the ground—including refugees and hosts—co-exist, adapt, and struggle with integration.
6. Publication of research on a three-localities comparison of local forced migrant integration in Israel based on the cases of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa.

### **Summary of data collection on asylum seekers and civil society action in Haifa**

#### Situation asylum seekers in Haifa during mid-March to June 2020

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, there was inconsistent information about the number of asylum seekers in Haifa. Different organizations knew about a part of the overall population, depending on their engagement with them (e.g. Tipat Chalav for mothers with newborn children). Currently and based on the outreach and support for asylum seekers during the pandemic, we estimate the number of asylum seekers in Haifa to be around 500. This number is on the one hand based on up to 50 households (comprised of an average of 2-3 children and 1-2 parents) and an additional 250-300 single men. In an effort to map asylum seekers also in the area around Haifa, we were not able to find any information about households with children in the Krayot (that are not part of Haifa municipality).

Overall, the pandemic exacerbated the already precarious situation of the asylum seeker community in Haifa. Most difficulties derive from lack of income (sudden unemployment), lack of status and the consequential lack of access to services.

**Work:** While the vast majority asylum seekers (those who work in restaurants or cleaning) lost their jobs due to the closure of a large part of the economy, some working in essential services, e.g. in hospital cleaning, or factories in which they were able to keep distance regulations could keep their job. The loss of employment in times of the pandemic had several further implications: Based on the nature of their work, now unemployed asylum seekers faced the impossibility to get a new job and unemployment benefits. Those who received health insurance through their employers lost also that as soon as they lost their job. Moreover, staying at home is a new situation for many, adding an

additional level of stress in the overall situation on the household and family units. Due to the lack of income, unpaid bills became an immediate and imminent need in the community.

**Health:** As of the end of June, in contrast to other cities in Israel, we have no information about an outbreak of COVID-19 infections within the asylum seeker population in Haifa.

**Housing:** While the housing situation of asylum seekers in Haifa can generally be described as “messy,” the lack of income, savings and status contributed to a further complication of the situation. During March to June, only few landlords were sensitive to the situation of asylum seekers also due to the fact that many were in a parallel precarious situation. Many members of the community became very desperate to the point at which some started “skipping,” meaning that people were living in one place for which they can’t pay while arranging and saving money for the rent of another place and then left just before they needed to pay the debt (including rent, arnona, water), which left landlords stuck with unpaid rent but also debt from bills.

**Education:** The interruption of learning over months exacerbated the already existing gaps and difficulties in learning as children of asylum seekers are generally taken to the next school year regardless of their level of knowledge (different from Israeli school children). While schools were closed, the community did not have access to online learning like other students. Most children’s learning halted completely due to lack of internet or computer/tablets to do the learning, as well as lack of understanding from parents on what the expectations and the ‘how-to’ of distance learning.

#### Civil society response mid-March to June 2020, from the perspective of ALEF

Based on initial information from the Ministry of Health (March 11), ALEF bought an initial stock of alcogel, gloves, masks, and dry foods. Additional **funds** were **requested** from the main donor to assist in these times (granted a week later). As the ‘soft’ lockdown was imposed (March 17), ALEF stepped up efforts to stock the office with constant supply of dry food and fresh produce, to begin distributing to up to 20 households, while gathering information from third parties and putting out information in community WhatsApp groups. In the remainder of March, **WhatsApp groups specific to information and aid during the pandemic** were created, and a community member appointed to send out translated messages with updates on protocols and safety guidelines; food distribution was raised to 30-40 households. Additionally, two WhatsApp groups specific to communicating with the municipality and third parties within Haifa, and a second one to communicate with TLV organizations was established to keep information flowing both ways. As ‘hard’ lockdowns were imposed, volunteers were sent to buy food and distribute to those who lived more than 100 meters from the office where the food bank was. A community survey via WhatsApp was conducted at the end of March to assess needs and efficacy of ALEF’s response, and to project upcoming needs.

In April, the food bank was in full swing with food arriving and being distributed on a semi-daily basis. A community outreach/translator had to take on the job of managing the food bank while most of the regular volunteers and staff were in lockdown. A second community survey focusing on children’s needs, and home internet needs was conducted with the purpose to assess necessary resources to support children’s return to learning. The **food bank** supply switched to a regular monthly contract with MyMarket, to order enough food for 30-35 households at a time, twice a week, to cover up to 60 households. In reality, due to the high need across the entire community, closer to 40 families came regularly and often twice a week. In addition, communication networks were new and not as efficient outside the circles from pre-COVID-19 activities (such as the parents’ group for the children’s activities or the adults’ learning groups), hence, dissemination of information was incomplete.

**Stipends**, which were part of ALEF's support resources, increased almost three-fold as unpaid bills became an immediate and imminent need in the community. Stipends continued to increase, as eventually it was clear that only a small minority of exceptions managed to pay their bills through the entire lockdown period. Funds were raised specifically from private donors who were ear-marked to help pay bills/rent. In May, as lockdowns eased and people returned to work, or looked for work, ALEF began scaling down the food bank support as it was not the central issue in people's lives. The focus shifted to bills and rent as almost everyone had been unemployed and behind in their bills by this point. Stipend support increased again almost to four times from before the Corona period, and guidelines had to be put in place to limit the distribution of stipends to get to more households. The food bank is now scaled down to the most needy families identified during the Corona period, and reduced to once a week for a shorter list of households.

### Initial Evaluation

The main issues identified in the situation of asylum seekers in Haifa were meeting basic needs, paying rent/bills, and the halt of education for children from the community. The civil society actor's intervention therefore concentrated on the food bank, giving stipends, communicating with landlords and negotiating discounts. As a result of the latter, many could retain their housing. In May 2020 alone, ALEF paid 27,000 NIS from donations for rent and bills. Another part of the corona response was the "tablet project," (providing tablets to currently 25 children), which, however, could only be implemented after the lockdown finished. While a new one-on-one tutoring for children was planned before, the pandemic turned out as a "way into the project". Difficulties, e.g. that parents gain understanding of the framework and scheduling as well as technical knowledge, remain and will be refined over the summer.

The current state of evaluation showed different challenges and ways of adaption for civil society intervention: While ALEF's work is funded by private donors, getting "official" funding for the status-less population proved impossible in the crisis situation. Furthermore, while ALEF was able to alleviate a large part of the urgent needs during the pandemic, transitioning out of this phase proves difficult.

Overall, ALEF as the main civil society organization in Haifa dealing with asylum seekers' concerns functioned one the one hand as a provider of basic needs and instant financial help, and on the other as a mediator between different parties affected by the consequences of the economic lockdown. In order to maneuver this situation and to acknowledge the complexity of the situation, ALEF implemented guidelines, e.g. a mandatory 48-hour review period, in which cases are reviewed holistically and not only by single criteria, to limit the distribution of stipends to get to more households. Furthermore, while the implemented communication networks are imperfect, the outreach of both the civil society and the community enabled gathering of information about the community and its consolidation into a "general roster" for continued and future action.

### Reference:

Çağlar, Ayse and Glick Schiller, Nina. (2015). A Multiscalar Perspective on Cities and Migration. A Comment on the Symposium. *Sociologica*, 2/2015, 1-9. doi: 10.2383/81432

Pictures: courtesy of ALEF

