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Destination Detroit

The Refugee as a Means of Economic Revitalization

In this chapter I chiefly explore the discourse that sought to smooth the way for routing Syrian refugees to Detroit. My goal is to provide a broader understanding of what has been termed the greatest refugee crisis since World War II (Packer 2015). The debate on whether the United States should help to address the crisis, and to what extent, including the number of refugees it would take in, occurred within a larger global context. The US contribution would at best pale in comparison to the role played by countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as by some European countries. Closer to home, neighboring Canada took in about four times as many Syrian refugees as the United States in 2016 (Zong and Batalova 2017). The debate occurred within the larger historical context of US military invasions of Iraq, which created a domino effect leading to the Syrian refugee crisis (Cassidy 2015).¹

1. The specific debate over Syrian refugees was taking place at a time when the issues of refugee resettlements and immigration had become central to the shaping of liberal democracies, and at a time when several leaders with autocratic tendencies had been elected on a platform of restricting the intake of refugees and immigrants to their respective countries. Trump was elected president on a platform that vilified refugees and immigrants, in a stark reminder of the material consequences of discourses on refugees.

Methodology

I used a combination strategy to collect and examine newspaper articles addressing the subject of Syrian refugees. While my main focus is local news coverage of Syrian refugees, I also examine national news coverage of Syrian refugees for comparison. As a starting point, to find the largest number of relevant stories in national and regional newspapers, I searched LexisNexis Academic for the terms “Syrian refugees in U.S.” and “Syrians in Detroit.” I delimited search results for the term “Syrian refugees in U.S.” to the date range May 1, 2015, to December 31, 2015, the period when these stories were concentrated. The search term “Syrian refugees in Detroit,” with or without a time range, yielded too few stories, so I broadened the search to “Syrians in Detroit” without a time range.

The LexisNexis search yielded 166 national news stories on Syrian refugees, all bunching within the few months after the attacks in Paris, the deadliest to occur in France since World War II. Gunmen and suicide bombers had hit several locations almost simultaneously, leaving more than 120 people dead, hundreds wounded, and creating economic, political, and social ripple effects in France and beyond. The search also yielded 41 news stories on Syrian refugees in Detroit, 4 of which were in *Crain's Detroit Business*. These constitute a universe of articles as located through the database using those particular search terms.

While the searches did yield different kinds of stories, including editorials, columns, and even letters to the editor, the majority were straight news stories. In the discussion below, I indicate the type of story only when it is not a straight news story—for example, when the news item referenced is an editorial.

In addition to the broader LexisNexis search, I reviewed select individual newspapers for relevant stories. For the local press, I chose the best-known and most widely circulating local papers, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News*. The *Detroit Free Press* tends to be at the liberal end of the political spectrum, and the *Detroit News* at the conservative end. Reviewing both allowed me to gauge whether the approach to the refugee issue diverged or converged based on a newspaper's political orientation.

I used the search term “Syrian refugees” when searching the two local papers. I used the same search term to examine news stories on the web-

site of Michigan Radio, an Ann Arbor-based affiliate of National Public Radio. In addition, I did a Google search using the term “Syrian refugees in Detroit.”

When reading the articles from the local press and local radio station, I learned of a specific controversy surrounding the construction of a housing complex for refugees in Pontiac, Michigan. To get a hyperlocal perspective on this issue, I conducted a Google search using the term “Pontiac and Syrian refugees” as well as the search term “Pontiac Syrians” on the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Detroit News*, and Michigan Radio websites.

My review of the sources discussed above revealed recurring themes in each set of articles and for each area of inquiry. These themes crossed over between national and local news coverage. When examining the coverage of the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Detroit, I separately located recurring themes in the articles yielded by LexisNexis, those from the *Detroit Free Press* website, those from the *Detroit News* website, and so on. In the sections below, I explore these themes in greater detail.

The Paris Attacks: An Inflection Point

During my review of news stories, I realized that the ISIL attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, were a natural inflection point in both national and local coverage. Before the Paris attacks, President Barack Obama had announced a policy to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees into the United States in 2016. After the attacks, various entities—including governors, Congress, elected representatives at the local level, faith-based and other groups working to settle refugees, and (although rarely) the refugees themselves—either defended or resisted President Obama’s stated policy. Twenty-six state governors—including Michigan Governor Rick Snyder—questioned Obama’s position, citing security as their primary concern. Congress also passed a bill calling for a halt to refugee resettlement until certain security guarantees were met. On the political stage, both nationally and locally, stances toward refugee resettlement split mainly along party lines. Republicans voiced security concerns about Obama’s policy, and Democrats defended the position based on humanitarian concerns.

The tussle between federal and state government entities garnered

news attention at every level, while the Congressional response was covered mainly at the national level. Stories not only increased in number after the Paris attacks, but their framing changed. A *New York Times* article encapsulates well the general contours of news discourse at the national level before the attacks. In “Let Syrians Settle Detroit” (2015), the main concern is to persuade national policymakers and administrators that settling Syrian refugees in Detroit would benefit both the refugees and Detroit. The authors ask political and administrative entities to “[s]uppose these two social and humanitarian disasters were conjoined to produce something positive.” The rest of the article is devoted to defending the track record of Syrian and other refugees in the United States; to demonstrating the feasibility and suitability of the relocation plan; and to addressing concerns voiced by skeptics, namely “the difficulties of assimilation” for refugees, the possibility of failure should “the most ambitious Syrians . . . leave the city once they achieved economic security,” and the political challenges confronting the plan “given skepticism toward immigration, particularly in the Republican Party.”

Although the article leads with the benefit to refugees, the rest of it is mainly premised on the idea that the proposal will rise or fall based on the costs and benefits for Detroit and US agencies. Although the economic benefit from refugees is the focus, toward the end of the article the authors speak of the plan’s consistency with “America’s ethical and moral commitments.”

The *Times* piece was one of a handful of news stories supporting the relocation of Syrian refugees to Detroit in the months before the ISIL attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 (Detroit has space, need for Syrians 2015; Walsh 2015; Opinion 2015). The *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* also carried articles echoing an optimistic outlook for resettling Syrian refugees in Detroit. In one such article, the *Detroit Free Press* quotes Michigan’s Republican governor Snyder at length, as he explains “in addition to helping people in need, Michigan can improve its economy by taking in refugees,” and says of past refugees in Michigan that “they were great small business people, they were professionals, they were people that hire people, that tend to create jobs” (Eagan 2015).

In the same vein, another story in the *Detroit Free Press* personalized the issue by leading with the story of a Syrian refugee family who had just

settled in Michigan, with family members expressing how the “accessibility to everything” familiar because of the local Arab population had made the adjustment easier for them. The authors asserted that “unlike some places where people have been wary about Syrian refugees, Michigan sees them as one solution to the state’s population loss” (Karoub 2015).

The *Detroit News*, at the more conservative end of the political spectrum, observed in a story featuring a refugee advocate that “Michigan once ranked first among states for taking in Syrian refugees,” but now ranked second. Like the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Detroit News* carried articles before the attacks on the successful relocation of Syrian refugees, and on Governor Snyder’s and Mayor Duggan’s efforts to increase the number of Syrian refugees coming into Michigan and Detroit. Before the Paris attacks, the economic aspect, absent in stories about the overall Syrian refugee issue, was central to the stories about Detroit and Syrian refugees.

After the Paris attacks, stories on Syrian refugees surged in both national and local news. However, they typically focused on the political controversy in the United States, not on the question of resettling refugees in the country. Taken collectively, the coverage foregrounded two main competing perspectives: humanitarian and security. The Paris attack was the main news hook, but the refugee crisis became a “political football” (LaFranchi 2015), with actors at all levels using the situation to position themselves favorably with their constituencies. This was particularly apparent with candidates in the Republican presidential primary race, who discursively used security concerns about the refugee program to display patriotism, strength, or overall suitability for the position of commander-in-chief. Candidates felt obliged to address Obama’s refugee policy in some way because of heightened public concern after the Paris attacks (Fitzgerald and Hanna 2015). This shift in framing also happened at the local level, with coverage of Syrian refugee relocation in Detroit converging around two story lines: Governor Snyder’s turnaround on welcoming Syrian refugees to Detroit, and the efforts by Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson to stop the construction of a housing complex for Syrian refugees in the city of Pontiac, Michigan (discussed in more detail below). Although there was some national coverage of Snyder’s reversal, local stories predominated.

In a handful of news stories, refugees themselves argued against per-

ceived security concerns by questioning the conflation of “refugee” and “terrorist” in the political rhetoric. In these articles, refugees showed through their own stories that they’d had no choice but to flee violent situations and were merely looking for safety and a chance at normal lives for themselves and their children. The few stories where refugees offered their opinions came to the attention of the media thanks to either organizations in the business of settling refugees or faith-based groups aiding in this area. Representatives from these organizations often described refugees as worthy of entry into the United States and deserving assistance. Refugee organization spokespeople also represented the refugees as regular human beings who wanted the same things as the articles’ readers.

Similar to what has been found in research at the national news level in other contexts, almost no mention or critique was made of the nation’s (in this case, the United States’) responsibility for creating a political context that led to the increased movement of refugees. A similar absence has been found in work on the UK, Germany, and Australia (Pickering 2001; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013). As we will see later in this chapter, this aspect was true of news coverage at the local Detroit level as well.

Local Coverage Maintains More Sympathetic Framing

The stories addressing the general issue of Syrian refugees all had an adversarial frame, balancing the perspectives of those for and against Obama’s policy. In contrast, the stories addressing the routing of Syrian refugees to Detroit were almost invariably sympathetic to the idea. This was true of stories both before and after the Paris attacks.

The handful of stories before the Paris attacks echoed the general tenor of the *New York Times* article with which I started this discussion: Detroit is a very suitable place to locate Syrian refugees, and that by welcoming Syrian refugees, Detroiters would be helping not only the refugees, but themselves. These themes occurred in both the local and national coverage.

News stories supported the first point with cultural, administrative, and economic arguments. They noted Detroit’s existing Arab population,

its social service nexus supporting this population, and the availability of property due to the city's depopulation. Together, these themes created a frame of interpretation that encouraged readers to see refugee relocation as a mutually beneficial policy, with the refugees finding a suitable refuge and a suitable bridge to assimilate to the United States, and Detroit receiving the human capital necessary to revitalize its economy and its neighborhoods.

The lead to an article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* captured well the tone of the arguments.

We shouldn't do it [help Syrian refugees] just because it makes us feel good. We should do it to help our economy. And one American city, my hometown of Detroit, has the space and infrastructure to welcome tens of thousands of Syrian refugees while benefiting the most from their presence. (Detroit has space, need for Syrians 2015)

Local organs such as *Crain's Detroit Business* echoed this sentiment, positing that "to many, the refugees represent an opportunity to repopulate a Detroit neighborhood [in this case North Town] and boost the local economy." The article goes further: "And there's no question that immigration is an important strategy for Detroit" (Walsh 2015).

It is notable, however, that the overall interpretive frame of the local news continued to be sympathetic to the relocation of refugees in Detroit, even after the Paris attacks, regardless of the various politicians' stances, and even when the stories were organized around a frame of conflicting views. For example, a story published in the *Detroit Free Press* on the day Snyder made his announcement was headlined "Snyder suspends Syrian refugee effort in Michigan," with the subhead "Many in state are outraged, but governor says safety is a key concern after attacks in Paris" (Eagan and Warikoo 2015). The subhead cued readers to realize that Snyder's decision had prompted pushback. Early in the article the authors observed that "Snyder's announcement Sunday is a step backward from recent efforts and comments from his administration offering to aid refugees," extending the critical frame from this being an unpopular move to it being a regressive step and contrary to Snyder's own earlier stance. To drive home

the contradiction, the story cited the governor's statements before the attacks, including one referring to himself as "the most pro-immigration governor in the country." The story also gave far more space to the critics of Snyder's move than to supporters of it, allowing local Arab American leaders and refugee advocates to point out how misguided the reversal was and how it sent the wrong message. While two Republican representatives' quotes in support of Snyder's statement were included, these had a marginal position in the story. As another example, Brian Dickerson of the *Detroit Free Press* pointed out in his column that as a governor Snyder had no authority over refugee relocations and that his statement was a matter of "partisan demagoguery" (Dickerson 2015).

A couple of other stories focused on families that had arrived soon after the governor's statement. These stories reinforced the idea that the governor lacked the authority to pause the resettlements. The articles used the story of particular families as a hook to discuss the national mood against Syrian refugees after the Paris attacks. They allowed refugee advocates and Syrian American advocates to voice their concern about the negative rhetoric at the national level. In one of these articles, a refugee advocate said, "This is the worst we've seen." A Syrian American advocate said, "I'm not just concerned about the Syrian refugees, I'm concerned about the future of Muslims in this country." As for Snyder himself, the article pointed to a contradiction, indicating that his statement "was the first in a wave of governors and other politicians moving to halt or block Syrian refugees," but that when it came to actual refugees coming to Michigan, he had changed his tune, saying through a spokesman, "We are happy that people want to come to Michigan to rebuild their lives, and we have a very supportive community here that can help them do that" (Warikoo 2015). Clearly, even a Republican governor in Michigan must tread carefully because of the importance of refugees to the state's economy and the degree of support for the refugees in the state, especially in an empowered Arab American community.

Another story using a personalizing frame focused not on the family next door, but on a scientist—the kind of person who embodies qualities that would be generally considered highly desirable in a refugee or immigrant (Stafford 2015). The story about Rafaai Hamo arriving in Mich-

igan drove home the point that Syrian refugees contribute to the state. The pathos of the story of Hamo losing seven family members to bombing, including his wife and daughter, and then discovering he had stomach cancer had already touched many people around the world through the *Humans of New York* blog on Facebook. In fact, fundraisers collected \$450,000 for his family. By the time the local press covered him, the sympathy he had garnered could be seen as support for resettlement of Syrian refugees in Michigan.

Hamo insisted that he wanted to start a new life and contribute a meaningful legacy, that he wanted to be treated as a citizen rather than a refugee, and that Syrians “will give back to the community, they will be good citizens to the countries they are living in.” In doing so, he served as an elite ambassador for Syrian refugees. And by carrying his story, the local news was able to piggyback on his positioning as an ambassador, further bolstering the sympathetic covering of the issue.²

This general impression grew stronger when newspapers gave prominence to sympathetic letters from readers. One led with a bold headline: “We shouldn’t be afraid of Syrian refugees” (*Free Press* readers 2015). A newspaper also carried a piece by guest writer and refugee advocate Sean de Four, who made the case that it’s “the American way” to keep our borders and hearts open to refugees, and that “the integrity of humanity” depends on helping them (de Four 2015). Other stories told of Detroit mayor Mike Duggan standing firm on welcoming refugees soon after Snyder made his statement (Warikoo 2015), of Reverend Jesse Jackson saying Snyder was “wrong to pull back the welcome mat for Syrian refugees” (Erb 2015), and of Michigan documentary filmmaker Michael Moore calling Snyder’s statement “disgraceful” (Hinds 2015). Thus, even after the Paris attacks, the overall frame that emerged was sympathetic to the relocation of Syrian refugees in Michigan.

2. Although Hamo’s self-representation included both his Syrian identity and his identity as a member of the Kurdish minority in Syria, refugee advocates mainly represented Hamo as a Syrian, with a view to making the case for the continued relocation of Syrian refugees to the Detroit area. They were able to parlay the sense of Hamo as a model Syrian refugee into the local news coverage.

Convergence of News Frames in the Local Liberal and Conservative Press

As discussed, news coverage of plans to relocate refugees to Detroit typically took a sympathetic view both before and after the Paris attacks. This pattern is especially evident when comparing coverage by the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News*.

Although the two papers share a joint operating agreement, the *Detroit News* is to the right of the *Detroit Free Press* on the political spectrum. Despite this political divergence, the newspapers used similar news frames when covering refugee relocation. This points to the importance of the issue in Detroit, including the importance of reframing the debate from the national level to accommodate local economic and social realities.

The *Detroit News* conveyed a distinct overall impression that the relocation was the correct move for the Detroit area and the state as a whole. They did so through a combination of articles about pushback against the governor's decision, opinion pieces arguing that the decision was wrong-headed, an article about Mayor Duggan maintaining his welcoming stance, and articles showing that the refugee relocation to the Detroit area was continuing unimpeded and that the refugees had been assimilating successfully. Like the *Detroit Free Press*, the *News* allowed refugee and Syrian American advocates ample space to voice their concerns about the negative rhetoric at the national and state levels and to express their strong support for refugee relocation. When reporters or columnists quoted proponents of pausing or stopping the flow, they always gave advocates for the refugees a chance to refute their position and arguments.

In one example, an opinion piece had the headline "Syrian refugees an asset to U.S." (la Corte 2015). Addressing the actions of both state and federal officials who have "rushed to close off the doors on refugees," the author argued that excluding refugees played right into the hands of ISIS propaganda. In contrast, the author asserted, helping the refugees would "[provide] us with allies, intelligence, and counterprogramming to ISIS propaganda, reducing opportunities for radicalization." Although the main thrust of the piece was the wrongheadedness of the overall political reac-

tion after the Paris attacks, the piece culminated with a clear statement of Michigan's suitability for relocation.

One story showcased local activists "demanding" that the governor accept Syrian refugees (Heinlein 2015). Another covered a panel convened jointly by the Reverend Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH coalition and the Arab American Civil Rights League. The coalition and the league were pushing back against Governor Snyder's decision and urging people to welcome Syrian refugees in Michigan (Dickson 2015). Another story, which came out immediately after the governor's announcement, showed the decision to be politically driven, using fear as a political tactic. A Syrian American advocate, an Arab American advocate, and an immigration advocate each got space to make their case for accepting Syrian refugees in Michigan (Berman 2015).

In a story headlined "Snyder among governors not taking Syrian refugees," the *News* presented Snyder's stance as a reasonable one in the context of competing opinions of Republican politicians, the Obama administration, and refugee advocates. However, once again the newspaper always countered Republican opinions with the opinions of those advocating refugee relocation (Burke 2015). Like the *Free Press*, the *News* ran a handful of stories showing that the successful relocation of Syrian refugees was continuing without interruption after the attacks and that Syrian families were assimilating successfully (Rubin 2016; Hughbanks 2016; Ramirez 2016).

Local News Coverage of a Planned Housing Complex for Syrian Refugees

I turn now to local news coverage of an even more locally based issue. Although far fewer stories were written on this local issue than on the larger issue of Syrian refugees coming to Michigan, the way that an overall sympathetic frame was established is instructive, echoing and even amplifying the frames used for the larger Syrian refugee issue related to Detroit. Before proceeding to the news coverage, some background information on the issue will be useful.

Three days after Michigan's governor Snyder called for a suspension of the refugee program in Michigan until security procedures had been clarified, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson sent a letter to the mayor of Pontiac, Deirdre Waterman. (Pontiac is a city in Oakland County.) In the letter, Patterson expressed his concern about the plan to build a community center and housing for Syrian refugees and others. Mayor Waterman took a middle-of-the-road approach to the issue, sharing Patterson's concerns about security, but she didn't necessarily want to halt the project.

The stories about the development had an adversarial frame, with news outlets pitting L. Brooks Patterson against Oakland County Treasurer Andy Meisner and developer Ismael Basha. This frame included language implying that Patterson was the unreasonable party and those favoring the development were reasonable. How did newspapers use language to discredit Patterson? One *Detroit Free Press* article described the letter he sent to Mayor Waterman as "stern." The article stated he was "demanding" that Pontiac stop its plans. The *Free Press* gave the developer Basha space to refute Patterson's stance at length, including his questioning of the phrase "Syrian Refugee Village" from Patterson's letter. The story also mentioned twice that Patterson's letter came on the heels of the larger pushback against Syrian refugees after the Paris attacks, including Governor Snyder's statement delivered a few days previously. This detail lent credence to County Treasurer Meisner's claim in the same article that Patterson's "comments politicize a project that will bring much-needed economic development to Pontiac and provide housing for people desperately in need who have undergone exhaustive background checks." Basha and Meisner echoed each other's stance that Patterson's actions "could scuttle a plan to help repopulate and develop a city facing economic challenges and declining population" (Warikoo 2015).

Stories in a number of other local organs and on radio stations took a very similar approach. They led with quotes from Patterson's letter, and then allowed extensive comments from the developer, the treasurer, and refugee advocates to challenge Patterson's claims and stance. In a vein similar to the one in the *New York Times* article mentioned earlier, insiders from the Detroit metropolitan area put forward the idea of conjoining two humanitarian disasters, Pontiac's economic decline and the refugees' need

for help, as eminently reasonable and commonsensical. The insiders characterized those who resisted this idea as obstructionist.

A *Detroit News* article (Williams and Hicks 2015) exemplifies the general approach. The article devoted four paragraphs to stating Patterson's position, including quotes from his letter. By contrast, it devoted seventeen paragraphs to an eloquent and detailed refutation of Patterson's position by Meisner, the Oakland County treasurer; Basha, the property developer; Dr. Muzzamil Ahmed, the board chairman of the Michigan Muslim Community Council; and Iman Abdulrazzak, the director of the Michigan Muslim Community Council Syrian refugee task force.

The local Fox News television outlet gave more space to Patterson and Waterman than the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* stories did. Still, the language used undermined Patterson's stance. For example, one Fox 2 news story described Patterson as being "upset" about the development and as saying he planned to "raise hell," even while acknowledging that he has no legal right to stop the development (Asher 2015). A later Fox 2 story had the headline "Patterson fumes as Syrian refugee plan in Pontiac proceeds" (Kelley 2015). Again, the language painted a picture of Patterson as petulant and unreasonable. The television station allowed the treasurer, the developer, or both to make statements refuting Patterson's stance and showing that he was politicizing the issue. Reporters took these statements at face value. All in all, then, local news outlets shared news framing favorable to the development of the housing complex, even though those outlets existed on different parts of the political spectrum.

Economic Revitalization as the Predominant News Frame

When it came to Syrian refugee relocation in Detroit and the building of a housing complex to welcome Syrian refugees, it was clear from the stories that economic considerations were at the forefront, which created a favorable frame of interpretation. Local politicians, particularly Republican politicians, felt the pull of the security discourse after the Paris attacks, but the news media centered coverage on the economic perspective, and secondarily on the humanitarian aspect. Local news media did not always include security considerations when exploring the issue, and when secu-

rity concerns did make it into the local news, reporters and anchors always showed them to be exaggerated or misguided.

Detroit's population loss and need for revitalization were the issues that created the larger context from which the local news frames emanated. The news strongly tended to play a developmental role, championing and supporting immigration as an instrument of economic revitalization. In addition, it became clear that Detroit's long-standing strength as a hub for Arab immigration (Rignall 2000; Schopmeyer 2000; Schopmeyer 2011) contributed to the favorable frame of interpretation.

It was also clear from the analysis that one factor allowing for this favorable framing was the eloquent advocacy for refugee relocation. There was a range of refugee advocates, including faith-based organizations such as Lutheran Family Social Services of Michigan/Samaritas. Importantly, these advocates included representatives of Arab American and/or Muslim organizations. Some of these were refugee-specific, such as the Syrian American Rescue Network. Others were not specific to refugees, such as the Michigan Muslim Community Council.

The fact that the stories frequently used prominent members of the Arab American community as spokespersons is in accord with Howell and Jamal's argument that "Arabs in Michigan have achieved genuine political incorporation" (97) and that this "compelled officials to recognize that the fate of Michigan, and of Dearborn in particular, [is] intertwined now with the fate of their Arab citizens." Howell and Jamal (2011) were making this argument in the specific context of post-September 11 Arab Detroit and why the public backlash in Detroit was less severe than it was nationally. But the aspect of Arab and Muslim institutional strength was clear in this news analysis, contributing to a sympathetic framing of the refugee relocation issue. Refugee advocates were able to make an eloquent case for refugee relocation. And in economic terms, the fate of Michigan was seen as tied to the prospect of revitalization by immigrant communities, including Syrian refugees.

Local politicians, such as Governor Snyder and L. Brooks Patterson, got caught up in the national pushback against Syrian refugees after the Paris attacks, but they participated in this pushback as part of their own political calculations. In contrast, refugee advocates, Syrian American advo-

cates, and Arab American advocates at the local level were able to effectively reframe their arguments to make a strong case for the uninterrupted relocation of Syrian refugees to the Detroit area.

Although the overall interpretive frame within the news was sympathetic to Syrian refugee relocation to Detroit, there were some important absences or near-absences in the news coverage. The news media allowed some refugees to express their points of view, but these voices were mainly promoted by refugee resettlement agencies to show that the refugees were adjusting well. The agencies featured the refugees mainly to show that they had escaped desperate situations, that they had been stripped of their former networks and possessions, and that they were eager to start new lives for themselves and their families. All of this added up to a sense that the refugees did not represent a threat and deserved support.

But to the people at the news outlets and in the resettlement groups, the refugees had very limited if any self-direction. They seemed like empty vessels, ready to receive Americans' beneficence. They remained largely within what Malkki has astutely described as an essentialized category of "refugee," as having certain cultural traits. These included being associated with loss and needing the help and direction of international, national, and local agencies (1995). A scholar examining national news coverage of refugees in the Australian context described this as the construction of the "ideal refugee," akin to the idea of the "deserving" refugee. The ideal refugee is either very young or very old, and is being persecuted by "an internationally proclaimed oppressive state." Also, the ideal refugee has an invitation from the host government and is "visibly grateful" (Pickering 2001, 177).

Another notable absence was coverage of the political causes of the Syrian refugee crisis and any sense of US responsibility, direct or indirect, for the crisis. What Malkki says about refugee studies literature applies to some extent to the news discourse analyzed here. This discourse locates "the problem not in the political conditions or processes that produce massive territorial displacements of people, but rather within the bodies and minds (and even souls) of people categorized as refugees" (1992, 33). As with refugee studies literature, the political conditions creating the refugee flow were rarely covered in the news. This allows the news cover-

age to represent refugee relocation as an act of charity rather than an act of responsibility or reparation.³

When examining national news coverage of refugees in Germany, Holmes and Castañeda made a similar observation that the representations “shift blame from historical, political-economic structures to the displaced people themselves” (2016, 1). At both the national and local levels, the scrutiny, whether implicit or explicit, shifted from the larger structural causes to the potential danger and/or opportunity that the refugees presented. However, there was also an important counter-current in the news to the representation of refugees as pathological figures. Refugee advocates worked strenuously to show that refugees are normal people trying to establish normal everyday lives. In rare instances, such as through the voice of a prominent refugee like Rifaai Hamo, we could see the refugees themselves straining against the dominant representation, insisting on being seen as humans or as citizens. On the other hand, the fact that so much effort was devoted to insisting on normalcy points to the larger current against which these voices are working, the larger discourse quite ready to pathologize or even demonize the refugee.

In the end, then, the representation of the “refugee” remains contradictory at the local level. Local news outlets and experts depict refugees as deserving of our sympathy and representing the potential for economic revitalization, but it is also necessary to defend their normality and harmlessness. And although local advocates for refugees effectively reframed the security discourse in the news coverage, this reframing included pointing out that stringent security procedures are already in place. These advocates emphasized that refugees coming to the United States are among the most vetted of immigrants, and compared with procedures in other receiving countries, they are among the most vetted refugees in the world.

3. With the exception of one or two phrases from local activists such as Suheila Amen that slipped into the news as quotes, none of the stories broached the larger context of the surge of refugees from Syria or the Arab world. Almost none mentioned the responsibility of the United States in contributing to the conditions leading to the large-scale displacement of Syrians, Iraqis, and others from the Arab world.

Although news coverage of the refugees was largely sympathetic at the local level, the defensive posture sometimes taken in the news stories revealed the larger discourses on the refugee crisis being circulated at this historical moment, even if to some extent they worked against the grain of these larger discourses. By briefly analyzing national news coverage and then focusing more deeply on local coverage of the Syrian refugee situation, I was able to see the finer grain in the discourse. Brought into view were some of the contradictions and layering of the discourse, a result of competing imperatives that become even more visible at the local than the national level.

At the national level, the humanitarian perspective competed with the security perspective. At the local level, the additional considerations of economic revitalization and the suitability of the receiving locale for the refugees entered into the news framing of the issue. Studies of news discourse in other national contexts also point in this direction, as when Pickering observes from the Australian context that “Local political contexts are also important in understanding the engagement of alternative views” (2001, 180). Holmes and Castañeda (2016) observe in the German context, paraphrasing Derrida, that “state interests and local ethics of hospitality are always in tension. On the one hand, states limit the right to residence; on the other hand, local communities may respond with hospitality to newcomers and offer refuge” (13).

At the local level, the contradictory logics and the discursive “war of position” becomes more visible. Local news discourse brings to mind some of the larger news frameworks that have become widespread, such as the security framework. But local news also introduces other frameworks that are relevant to its own survival and historical trajectory, such as the need for the economic revitalization of cities such as Detroit.

From casual perusal of the news coverage of other cities and towns in a similar position, it appears that similarly contradictory logics are at play. For example, a story of manufacturers in Erie, Pennsylvania, told of welcoming Syrian refugees to fill a shortage of willing and able workers worsened by the opioid epidemic (Gillespie 2017). Another story told of immigrants eventually being embraced by a meatpacking town in Iowa (Cohen 2017). An extended study of news coverage of refugee resettlement

in different revitalizing cities would help to corroborate the generally supportive and developmental role the local press plays.

Contrasting Relocation of Syrian Refugees with Relocation of Burmese and Congolese Refugees in Michigan

Examining news coverage of refugee resettlement in other revitalizing cities was not within the scope of this project. However, I did examine news stories on the resettlement of Congolese and Burmese refugees in Western Michigan to see whether similar news frames predominated and whether similar tensions and contradictions were present.

Using the search term “Michigan Burmese refugees” in LexisNexis yielded no stories, while the search term “Michigan Congolese refugees” yielded five news stories. I then did a Google search using the search term “Congolese refugees in Michigan,” which yielded nine stories. I then used the search term “Burmese Christians in Michigan,” yielding seven news stories. Finally I tried the search term “Western Michigan Burmese refugees,” yielding another two stories. Using the same combination of search terms at the *Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit News*, and Michigan Radio sites yielded no additional stories.

Perhaps even more notable than any similarity or difference in news frames in coverage of the different refugee populations in Michigan is the difference in scale of the coverage. The Congolese and Burmese refugees in Western Michigan did not make it into the news to the same degree as the Syrian refugees. Also, only three of the twenty-three stories had a conflictual frame. These news stories pushed back against either Snyder’s decision to pause refugee resettlement or President Donald Trump’s executive orders leading to a decline in refugee resettlement.

The majority of stories were either human interest stories featuring a refugee family or stories allowing refugee advocates, including Christian churches of different denominations, to highlight the importance and humanity of the work they were doing with refugees. In a news story carried by the newsletter of the Christian Reformed Church, the reader finds out that the Oakland Christian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Michigan,

applied to become a cosponsor of a refugee family and then waited two years before actually being able to host a Congolese family. Whereas they had expected to host a family of four, it turned out to be a family of ten, presenting the parishioners with a “God-sized challenge,” one they rose to meet (Christian Reformed Church 2018).

A news story in the American Baptist Churches of Michigan newsletter recounted the history of the resettlement of Burmese refugees in Battle Creek, with the First Baptist Church of Battle Creek’s having played a crucial role in this history (Bauer and Thawngmung 2017). And an article in the *Christian Post* features a Christian couple in Sault Ste. Marie that adopted eight Burmese refugee children from the persecuted Karen community in Burma, noting that they are “mostly Christian in the predominantly Buddhist country” (Riley 2009). From a piece in *Michigan News*, a University of Michigan organ, we learn that rising seniors at the university formed a group called [RE]vive and that they hosted a group of sixteen Congolese refugee high school students from Grand Rapids for a day of educational and vocational training (Congolese refugee high schoolers get training at U-M). The focus of the story was on the efforts of the hosting organizations.

The rescue narrative was present here, just as it was when talking about the Syrian refugees. Although the organizations proudly shared the successes of the refugees, the organizations themselves were the heroes of the stories. For example, a story in *LIRS*, the newsletter of the Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, relates at the end that among the Banyamulenge Tutsi refugees they had been resettling in Grand Rapids, one had bought a house within three years and another had joined the US Air Force. However, the main focus of the story was the persecution the Tutsis had been experiencing in the Congo and the work Lutheran Social Services/Grand Rapids had been doing to resettle the refugees (LIRS 2013).

Many of the stories included a Christian dimension, an aspect shared with the Burmese and Congolese refugees they were resettling. Even some of the stories carried in secular news organs such as *MLive Michigan* made the Christian aspect central. One such story applauded the humanity of Hager Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan, for their “act of faith, hoping to make a life-changing difference for one unknown family,” a Bur-

mese refugee family of four (Runyon 2018). Another such story led with a pastor, himself a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, leading a weekly church service in Grand Rapids, addressing fellow Christian refugees from the Congo in French. Later in the story, the reader learned that this unusual sight was made possible by the kindness of the regular pastor at the Lutheran church, who had attended an overcrowded service at the Congolese pastor's house and had decided the Congolese pastor and worshippers needed more space (Airgood 2017).

The news discourse on Congolese and Burmese refugees highlighted the religious aspect of the news stories—an aspect not available in the news discourse on Syrian refugees. To include the religious aspect in that discourse would have risked backlash against Syrian refugee relocation, invoking associations with the threat of terrorism as well as the threat of Muslim cultural shifts. As noted earlier, the local press played a developmental role supportive of the idea of refugee resettlement as a tool of economic revitalization. It therefore made sense for the press discourse on Syrian refugees to emphasize the economic aspect while also making room for the humanitarian aspect and staying clear of the specifically religious aspect.

While the Christian and humanitarian aspects were at the forefront when news sources reported on the Congolese and Burmese refugees, the economic aspect did enter into the picture. An immediate economic aspect the stories recognized was the important gap the Congolese and Burmese refugees were filling in terms of Michigan's position as a key destination for refugees. Readers learned early in the story that although there were generally “waning numbers of refugees to the U.S.,” the Congolese refugees were an “exception”; “[o]f the 490 refugees who resettled in Michigan from October through March [2018–19] 319 are Congolese” (Rahal 2019).

As with the Syrian refugees, some stories refer to the actual and potential economic contributions of the refugees to towns and cities in Michigan. One story showcased the success of Burmese refugees in Battle Creek, noting that “most of the early arrivals have since become citizens of the United States and have purchased homes in Battle Creek. There are currently six Burmese Christian churches and four Asian markets operated by former Burmese refugees” (Bauer and Thawngmung

2017). Another story features a former Burmese refugee, now a community leader, who founded the Burmese American Initiative in Grand Rapids to foster a sense of community in Burmese families in Grand Rapids (Parikh 2012). This same community leader and former refugee, Martha Thawngmung, shared her perspective on Burmese refugee resettlement in a column in the *Battle Creek Enquirer*. Wielding statistics, she detailed the economic contributions the Burmese were making to Grand Rapids: buying homes, being an indispensable part of the workforce, creating new markets, forming families that became an integral part of the school system, and constituting ten new growing church congregations. She added poignantly that Burmese refugees succeeded on their own, and that it was time they got the “earned recognition as a valuable addition to the community.” She reflected that Battle Creek could have done better as a receiving community, and ended the column with a call to the larger community in Battle Creek to invest in the Burmese community (Thawngmung 2017).

As with the news stories on Syrian refugees, refugee advocates’ voices were given the most play. News sources allowed advocates to speak on behalf of the refugees to show that they deserved help. However, unlike the news stories on the Syrian refugees, very few stories about Burmese and Congolese refugees had a conflictual frame. There was no identifiable antagonist against which the advocates were working to normalize the Burmese and Congolese refugees. Further, there was no reference to terrorism or any aspect of threat associated with the Burmese and Congolese refugees.

Perhaps that is also why the stories on the Burmese and Congolese refugees were freer to include details of the difficulties experienced by the refugees, such as trauma, mental health problems, and lack of literacy. For example, the Michigan State University public radio station WKAR carried a story on the mental health challenges Burmese refugees in Michigan faced. These included higher-than-average suicide rates, and “good kids” ending up in jail because of depression and/or alcoholism (Thiele 2018). Another news story spoke of the high level of trauma the Congolese refugees experienced in their homeland, and the resulting medical and mental challenges they faced on arrival in Michigan (LIRS 2013).

In the story about the Congolese pastor in Grand Rapids, he explained his motivation, saying he preached to his fellow refugees “[b]ecause we think that God can repair what has been lost in their life.” However, readers also learned from the story, based on the interview with the pastor, that

Many refugees from Africa suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. . . . A refugee’s whole family could have been killed in Africa. The refugee then has to live with the trauma for the rest of their lives. (Airgood 2017)

Another story pointed out that many of the Congolese refugees had spent roughly twenty years in refugee camps, affecting their ability to adjust and function on their arrival in Michigan.

Many adults thirty-five and older are not literate in their first language. . . . Those are big barriers. Kids don’t get much education, I’ve met eighteen-year-olds who only went through fourth or fifth grade or never learned how to work for the first time. (Rahal 2019)

The same story also mentions that 68 percent of the Congolese refugees are survivors of torture.

These differences in emphasis suggest that the resettlement of Burmese and Congolese refugees in Michigan was not construed as a potential problem or issue in the way that the resettlement of Syrian refugees was. Whereas both kinds of stories spoke of the desire of the refugees to adjust and to contribute to their new societies economically, there was more room in the stories about the challenges and difficulties Burmese and Congolese refugees faced on arrival. In sharp contrast, when speaking about the Syrian refugees more emphasis was placed on normalizing them and diluting any possible perceptions of threat. The humanitarian aspect was at the forefront when news sources reported on the Burmese and Congolese refugees, including the specifically Christian humanitarian aspect. But the economic revitalization aspect was at the forefront when news sources reported on the Syrian refugees. When religion could not be used to tie US citizens’ humanity to refugees’ humanity, the local press sutured the

story of the Syrian refugees to the story of the economic revitalization of the Detroit metro area as a way to humanize and normalize a refugee population that the far right and right-leaning politicians had vilified. While a Christian agenda was predominant in the stories of the Burmese and Congolese refugees, an economic revitalization agenda was predominant in the stories of the Syrian refugees.⁴

4. The economic revitalization of Detroit is highly contested, with the local press supporting a particular vision of economic revitalization that encompasses gentrification. As I was reminded in a talk I attended at the Arab American National Museum by Gloria House (2019), acclaimed poet, educator, and longtime Detroit-based activist, there are two Detroits. There is the Detroit of the rich and white and the Detroit of the poor and people of color, one “flourishing affluent and attractive, the other physically neglected and stripped of essential resources.” She also reminded us in the talk of the “curtailment of freedom of speech in the city” and “the literal white-out concerning anything other than the literal promotion of gentrification.” I include this here to point to the contradictions of a local press that supported the resettlement of Syrian refugees as a tool for economic revitalization, but only as part of a white, elite-led vision of the economic revitalization of Detroit.

