

Discussing about integration: The importance of traditions and religious practices

22nd meeting of the NIEM alliance

Thursday 31 March 2022 at 19:00

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Introduction

Individual religiosity seems to play a role in the integration of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection and migrants. Religious practices are often an integral part of people's cultural identities and they influence both, beneficiaries of international protection lives in the host country and the perceptions of the local population in shaping cultural boundaries between host and foreign populations. However, we still do not know whether following religious practices help or prevent applicants and beneficiaries of international protection and migrants in their social integration in the host country.

The coalition meeting was planned as a round table to discuss with people from informal places of worship located in Thessaloniki. In order for this coalition meeting to be successful, preparatory meetings were held with the informal religious leaders of various informal mosques¹ in Thessaloniki². At these preparatory meetings, it was stipulated that only Sunni Muslims would participate in the coalition meeting. This would limit any references to differences with other denominations and would give us the opportunity to focus on the subject of the coalition meeting.

Six meetings were held, from February to March, with the informal religious leaders and some people involved in the activities of the informal mosque. In these meetings, information about the NIEM Program and ANTIGONE was provided in order to establish channels of communication based on trust and acceptance. In these preparatory meetings, issues related to the functioning of the prayer places maintained, difficulties, relations with

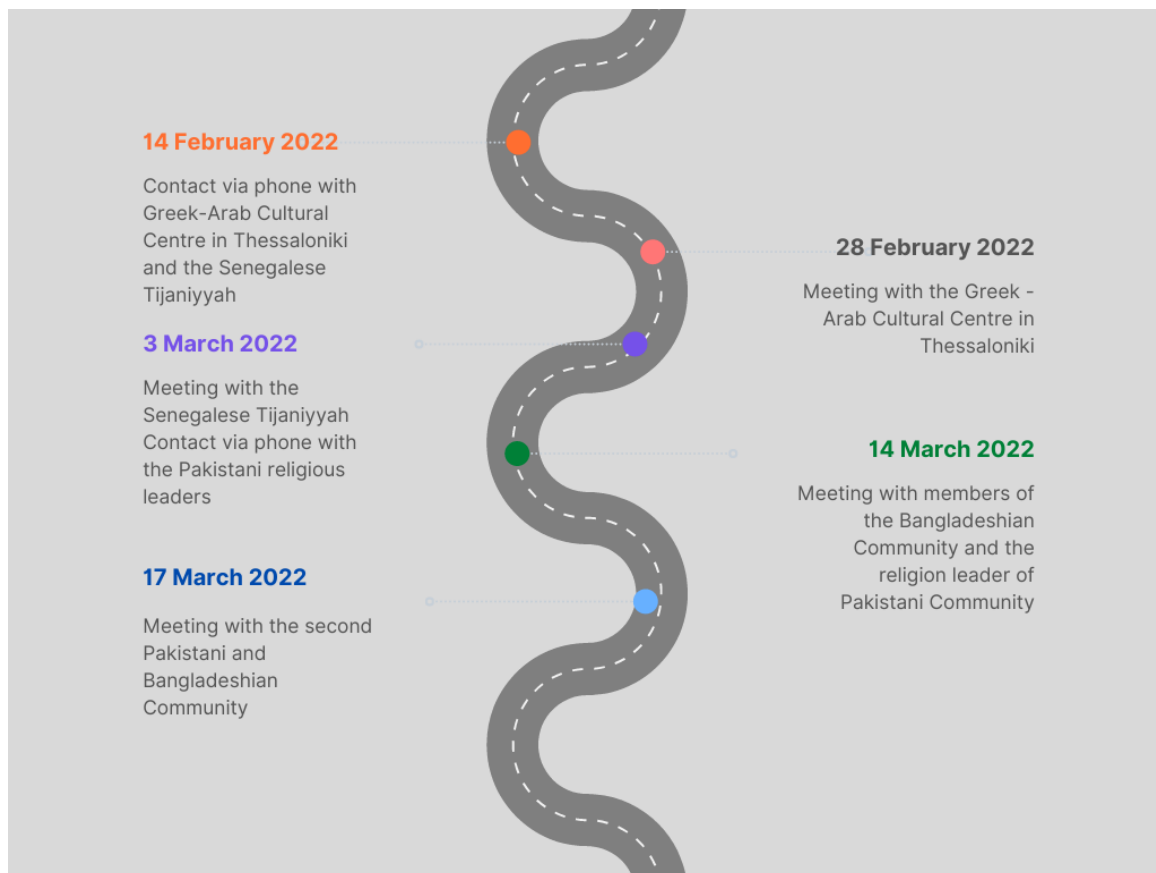
¹ Communities use the term Mosque to refer to temporary places of worship.

² As established in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) Muslims are recognized as a minority in Greece in the region of Thrace. These are Greek Muslims and have a varied ethnic background: Turkish, Pomak (Slavic-speaking Muslims) and Turkish-speaking Roma. In fact, they are the only minority explicitly recognized by the Greek state. The Mufti is the head of the minority, and it is appointed directly by the government. In the rest of the country, Muslims are not considered a minority which explains why religion is carried out in an informal fashion by the Muslim migrants that have arrived in Greece in the last decades.

The construction of a Muslim Mosque within the city limits is an issue that you have been discussing since 1983. The construction of a Mosque in Athens started many years ago, there have been several delays due to the intense opposition to the construction of the Mosque.

Today in Athens, there is a Mosque with a capacity of 350 people with spaces for both men and women. The Mosque was built by the Greek state. During its construction, care was taken to ensure that there was no minaret. The Imam is appointed by the Greek state. Prior to his appointment, meetings were held with the Communities in Athens where the person was presented so that he could be accepted by the Communities.

the community around them and other issues related to the believers associated with non formal mosques were discussed.



Timeline of the communication and meetings

It was decided through our meetings that the coalition meeting would not be disseminated online and not be open due to doubts about security and protection so that it would not be easy to identify places of worship and target them, especially since they are in preparation for Ramadan and wanted to avoid "provoking" as they said.

The coalition meeting took place on Thursday 31 March 2022 at 19:00, at Ptolemaion, 29A, Oikopolis at the 5th floor. All necessary measures were followed to contain the Covid 19 pandemic. In particular, the in-person meeting was attended by refugees and migrants came from the non formal mosques of Thessaloniki.

The context of the event

The program of the Coalition meeting (You can see Annex I) was formulated in the preparation meetings held in the places of worship maintained by the Communities.

Finally, the coalition meeting was attended by religious leaders and members of 4 informal places of worship accompanied by some community members who are not represented by a place of worship and some local people interested in the issue. At the beginning of the Coalition Meeting we present the NIEM (National Integration valuation Mechanism) project and our organization ANTIGONE - Information and Documentation Centre on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non - Violence. This was followed by a presentation of the individuals who participated and the places of worship they represented.

The attendants represented the following communities: the Senegalese Community through the Tijaniyyah Association who have created a place of worship in the city center, a Pakistani Community of Thessaloniki that maintains a place of worship in the Western part of the city and another Pakistani Community that maintains a place of worship in Ioannina and is now creating another place of worship in the center of Thessaloniki. Hence, the attendants came from both Thessaloniki and Ioannina. One of the gentlemen who participated is a member of the nationwide network and is a religious leader responsible for Epirus and Macedonia.

The round table began by discussing the need that prompted the creation of the places of worship and the present need to increase their number to safely accommodate the members of the community. The oldest informal space created in Thessaloniki was founded around 18 years ago, unfortunately the representatives of this space were unable to attend due to an emergency that occurred at their place of worship. This space belongs to the Greek - Arab Cultural Centre of Thessaloniki. In the meetings held in preparation for the coalition meeting, we were given special insights both on its creation and the need for the worshippers to visit the space but also on how traditions and religious practices helps some people to feel freer and thus be able to integrate into the Greek host society. The emphasis of the Greek - Arab Cultural Centre of Thessaloniki is on the observance of traditions so that the members of the Association do not lose elements of their cultural identity

important to them. Arabic lessons are given to children as their mother tongue. There is freedom of participation of women but the space has not been configured accordingly to be able to welcome women.

The Association of Senegalese Tijaniyyah was established in 2010 and focuses on the mutual support of their members and the observance of the rituals of their religion based on their country of origin for their members to be able to study the Quran in their mother tongue. Many of the Friday prayers visit other places of worship. They emphasize on supporting members especially in situations which they are in need. There is provision for the participation of women even though they feel that they have no particular need to participate in prayers in the informal religious space. Through conversation with the women, they stated that as in their country of origin they feel that they can participate in the place of worship on major festivals and especially on pleasant events. They are often asked by their country of origin to pray at home and not to read the holy books of their religion.

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When it comes those present, the oldest place of worship was created by the Pakistani community 13 years ago. It is located in the West of Thessaloniki due to the large number of Pakistani Community members living in the Western areas. The creation of the place was related to the need to perform the traditions and religious practices and also to allow the community to meet. The worship space in Ioannina was created about 7 years ago and serves both Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. The increase in the number of Muslims residing in Ioannina and the surrounding areas led to the creation of the place both for religious practices and as a community meeting place. The space being re-founded in Thessaloniki by the Pakistani and Bangladeshi Community meets the need for finding more space and serving a larger number of worshippers who attend both meetings in informal mosques and prayers.

For the two Pakistani religious places, only men attend. Women in the community are very small in number and there is no provision in this regard. In one place, the one located in the West of Thessaloniki, there are lessons of reading the holy book and children (both boys and girls) participate in these lessons.

The discussion revealed that these religious spaces have multiple functions. Initially, they

are created to meet the religious needs of the members of the communities but are not limited to that. The informal religious leader from Ioannina, mentioned problems that people visiting the mosque have regarding unemployment, working conditions especially for people engaged in agricultural work, problems that members have regarding their legal documents and other issues such as marriage celebration, education, rights and so on.

From the above it can be understood that the roles of religious spaces are multiple, they are places where the religious practices of the people who come to them are performed, but they are also a place where they socialize and share the problems, they have in the host society. It is a space of interaction and exchange, religious leaders depending on the space take on a variety of roles.

From the discussion at the coalition meeting it is clear that adherence to religious practices is an important resource gained from participation in religious places and religious practices. Religious identity is linked to cultural elements. Finally, the discourse of religious books and religious leaders has a guiding character to individuals participating in rituals and practices.

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A particular focus of the discussion during the coalition meeting was on the acceptance of Community members by the host society. The reaction of local communities to each religious spaces varies. Although overall participants mentioned that they have no problems with the neighborhoods in which they are located, they know of people who have been attacked both in places and individually are also important. In fact, some places have particularly positive relations with neighbors. All participants mentioned the emphasis they place on all rules being followed. Care was taken by all during the restrictive measures to contain the Covid 19 pandemic.

All Communities stated that they have some shared difficulties. Both to the Senegalese Tijaniyyah Association and the religious leader from the area of Ioannina (who is also responsible for a wider area of Epirus and Macedonia) explained that these problems are mainly the legal status of their members, labour issues with an emphasis on labour exploitation and so on.

The issue of how religious practices affect a person's social integration was particularly discussed and it emerged that inclusion involves several elements such as the individual life

histories, the problems created by their immediate context as well as the way in which the wider societal context shapes the behavior of people from different religious backgrounds. The attendance believed in the possibility of a relationship between socio-economic, cultural and religious integration, but they did not go deeper into that. What they underlined is that religion is a vital factor in the personal process of social integration and as such, central as well for their integration in the host country. Some individuals, stated that they have experienced difficulties particularly in their interpersonal relationships. Many members of the communities' report that their empowerment and liberation often related to their 'spiritual awareness' among other factors, is frequently manifested through their religious beliefs and practices. These rituals and practices are private but through religious spaces they can share them with other people and thus build a sense of belonging which goes beyond religion, but it is usually expressed through it as well.

Members of the Communities referred to the discrimination they suffer and the recent explosion of Islamophobia in recent years. However, there are individuals in key positions who support them if they follow the rules so that religious practices are carried out and places of worship are maintained.

Reference was also made to the establishment of the Mosque in Athens, both for its necessity and for the difficulties it creates for the Communities that are not represented in it.

Finally, the issue of advocacy in matters related to religion and its traditions was raised during the conversation. The discussion was not concluded and all participants expressed the wish to continue cooperation.

We did not come to far-reaching conclusions with just one meeting but it was certainly a very productive discussion which helped us to shed light on various aspects of the integration of beneficiaries and applicants for international protection and migrants.

Dissemination of the event - Publicity

As mentioned above the 22nd coalition meeting was not publicized beyond the meetings held with the communities. The security conditions requested by the participants were respected and all the event was organized accordingly. An invitation banner was created to disseminate the event among the communities as well as the information note shown in Annex I. The rest of the materials can be found in Annex II.

Participation in the coalition meeting

A total of 19 people participated in the meeting. Unfortunately, the three people from the Greek - Arab Cultural Centre of Thessaloniki could not attend the coalition meeting due to an emergency incident that occurred at their place of worship. Three of the participants have the role of the religious leader (Imam) in their communities while the rest of the attendees were members of the communities and some Greeks who were particularly interested in the meeting. For the Greek people to be able to participate, key participants had already been informed and accepted their participation.

Annexes

Annex I: Info letter for the 22nd Coalition Meeting

22nd meeting of the NIEM alliance

Discussing about integration: The importance of traditions and religious practices

‘ANTIGONE – Information and Documentation Centre on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non-Violence’ is an independent social non-profit organization with its basis in Thessaloniki and offices in Athens. It was found with the initiative of Ecological Movement of Thessaloniki and since 1993 it is activated in issues concerning racism, discrimination, human rights, social ecology, peace and non-violent resolution of conflicts.

This meeting takes place in the framework of the National Integration and Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM). NIEM is a program that aims to measure, evaluate and monitor the integration of populations under international protection in 14 countries of the European Union. The main objectives of the project are to provide information on the situation of refugee integration in Europe, to understand the role of refugee integration policies by providing evidence and recommendations based on scientific analysis and research, to raise public awareness of the difficult situation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, to raise public recognition that it is the responsibility of the European community to establish integration policies and finally a key objective is to give a voice to refugees and migrants, and to give them a voice in the integration process.

"Social Integration" and "Social Inclusion" are words we often hear. They are concepts that have many interpretations depending on where they come from. In Greece, social integration is officially defined *as the process of interaction and mutual adaptation between asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and the host society, with the aim of creating societies with strong cohesion and achieving coexistence in conditions of peace and mutual understanding*³. This

³ National Strategy for the social integration of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection: [Εθνική Στρατηγική | Υπουργείο Μετανάστευσης και Ασύλου \(migration.gov.gr\)](http://www.migration.gov.gr)

concept is presented through the National Strategy for Integration that has been drawn up in Greece and essentially constitutes the country's commitment in this direction. However, 'integration', or what we define as integration, continues to be a real challenge in the daily lives of beneficiaries and applicants for international protection and migrants.

Our meeting aims to inform each other and discuss one of the important areas of "Social Integration". It is well known that traditions, cultural elements and religious practices are of particular importance for the socio-economic and cultural integration of refugees and migrants.

In our meeting we will be able to discuss the importance of traditions and religious practices and try to approach issues related to the cultural elements of religion and their relation to the "integration" of a person in Greek society, such as:

- Discussion on the meaning of "Social Integration", and the challenges in Greece.
- The existing conditions regarding the performance of religious traditions.
- Experiential feedback on whether religious traditions and practices make it easier or more difficult for a report to "integrate" into the Greek host society.

11 Coalition Meeting will take place on Thursday 31 March 2022 at 19:00 at the premises of Oikopolis, 29A Ptolemaion, 5th floor. From **"ANTIGONE – Information and Documentation Centre on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non-Violence" (ANTIGONE)** in the framework of the program **'National Integration and Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM)'**.

Annex II: The banner of the 22nd Coalition Meeting



Antigone
INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTATION CENTRE
on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non-Violence

22nd meeting of the NIEM alliance

Discussing about integration: The importance of traditions and religious practices

The meeting will take place in Ptolemaion, 29A, 5th floor, Oikopolis

THURSDAY 31 MARCH 2022 AT 19:00

NATIONAL INTEGRATION
EVALUATION
MECHANISM (NIEM)

 EUROPEAN UNION
Asylum, Migration
and Integration Fund

SAFE HARBOUR

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Antigone
INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTATION CENTRE
on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non-Violence

22η Συνάντηση συμμαχίας NIEM

Συζητώντας για την ένταξη: Η σημασία των παραδόσεων και των θρησκευτικών πρακτικών.

Η συνάντηση θα πραγματοποιηθεί στην Πτολεμαίων 29Α, 5ος όροφος, Οικόπολις

ΠΕΜΠΤΗ 31 ΜΑΡΤΙΟΥ 2022 | 19:00 Μ.Μ.

NATIONAL INTEGRATION
EVALUATION
MECHANISM (NIEM)

 EUROPEAN UNION
Asylum, Migration
and Integration Fund

SAFE HARBOUR

Annex III: Photos from the Coalition meeting



Preparing the room for the meeting



The place of the coalition meeting



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The first people arrived



Snapshot of the 22nd Coalition Meeting



Snapshot of the 22nd Coalition Meeting

Annex IV: Participation list



22nd Coalition Meeting, Greece

National Integration Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM)

Thursday 31/03/2022

Oikopolis, Ptolemeon 29A, Thessaloniki

Participants in the 22 nd Coalition Meeting					
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20					



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Helpful material

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