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Syrians in the USA: Solidarity Despite Political Rifts

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Abstract

The Syrian American diaspora has been actively engaged in the Syrian uprising through the provision of humanitarian assistance and the entry into political advocacy work. Yet, the Syrian diaspora in the U.S. does not represent a homogenous population group nor a unified political position. On the contrary, assessing the dynamics of the diaspora since 2011 reveals important transformations within diasporic groupings, with the 2011 uprising acting as a catalyst for the emergence of new fractures. Through a mixture of desk research and interviews with key members of the Syrian American diaspora, this paper investigates the evolution of the community and discusses the potential role of the diaspora in a post-conflict Syria. By assessing current and evolving trends within the diaspora from 2011, it is possible to shape future reconstruction plans to effectively include the Syrian American diaspora.

Introduction

Syrian Americans are among the highly integrated and economically successful immigrant groups within the United States. As a diverse body, originating from different ethnic, religious, educational, and regional backgrounds in Syria, the Syrian American diaspora has not been historically organized or active except for those within geographical proximity of one another. This, however, was transformed after the 2011 uprisings. Syrian Americans began forming institutions and organizations to represent their political views and reflect their interests in the Syrian conflict. Humanitarian assistance was the prevalent form of support provided but as the conflict escalated, political advocacy became a priority. This, in turn, deepened the divides among the diaspora groups as each party solidified their support to the various sides of the conflict. While the interests and engagement with the Syrian conflict differed greatly, the one common overarching interest was the diaspora's increased activity in the United States, both among each other and with the various executive and legislative bodies of the U.S. government. While many diaspora members have a vested interest in remaining involved with the developments taking place on the ground in Syria, some have focused instead on U.S. policies towards Syria.

This paper, based on original research and interviews with 10 members of the Syrian American diaspora, explores the dynamics of migration flows and how these changed with the onset of the Syrian conflict, as well as the emergence of organizational structures but also new lines of fractures. While the priorities of the Syrian American diaspora prove heterogenous, all participants in this study expressed a need, to varying degrees, for continued diaspora support in the transition and reconstruction of post-conflict Syria.¹

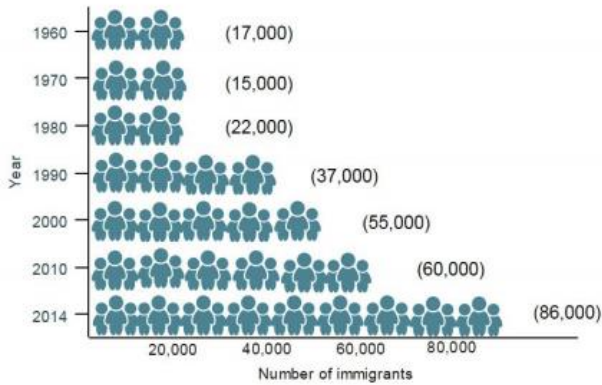
1. Syrians in the United States: Strong Integration, Weak Ties

Syrian immigration to the United States occurred in two distinct waves, the first in the late 19th century and the second in the 20th century. These immigrants mainly settled in large urban cities such as New York, Boston, and Detroit. During these two periods, records show that around 1,000 Syrians from Damascus and Aleppo officially entered the United States annually. During the first wave, many of these migrants were from Christian villages, fleeing religious persecution and political unrest, or seeking economic betterment. However, in 1924, the U.S. Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Quota Action, enforcing quotas to limit the number of immigrants from all national origins. This resulted in a cease of migration from Syria that persisted until the 1965 Immigration Act was passed. The implementation of the Immigration Act marked the beginning of the second wave of immigration as it eliminated the national-origin quota system. [The majority of migrants during the second wave were Muslims moving](#)

¹ Research for this article was conducted through analyzing secondary literature and interviewing members of the Syrian American diaspora throughout the U.S. The interviews serve to provide an understanding of the behavioural dynamics between the diaspora groups. Every effort was made to maintain a gender balance among the interviewees: four participants were female and the remaining six were male. Participants were selected from states identified as having a large Syrian population or the presence of Syrian American organizations. The interviewees belong to various religious, ethnic, and professional backgrounds. Additionally, they have diverse regional origins in Syria and have spent varying amounts of time in the U.S.

[to escape war and persecution, as well as for education, employment, or family reunification.](#) The American immigrant population of Syrian origin currently represents nearly 0.2% of the total immigrant population.²

Figure 1. Syrian Immigrant Population in the United States, 1960-2014



2. Demographics, Geographic, and Professional Characteristics

[There are currently between 90,000 and 155,000 Syrian immigrants in the U.S. living in metropolitan cities. Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago are home to the largest Syrian-born populations.](#) The table below displays the top ten metropolitan areas with the highest Syrian immigrant populations.

TABLE 3
10 metropolitan areas with the highest Syrian immigrant population

Metropolitan area	Born in Syria	Syrian share of immigrant population, per 10,000	Syrian share of total population, per 10,000	Share of all Syrian immigrants in the United States
Los Angeles	14,454	33	11	20%
New York	10,311	18	5	14%
Chicago	5,924	35	6	8%
Detroit	3,520	92	8	5%
Riverside, California	3,495	27	6	3%
Allentown, Pennsylvania	2,096	308	25	3%
Boston	1,928	24	4	3%
Washington, D.C.	1,863	14	3	3%
Houston	1,715	12	3	2%
Phoenix	1,131	18	3	2%

Note: Includes all metropolitan areas with at least 400 Syrian immigrants.
Source: Authors' and Fiscal Policy Institute's analysis of 2014 American Survey 5-year data.



According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Syrian immigrants become naturalized citizens at a much higher rate than other immigrant populations, due to the fact that many Syrians enter the U.S. legally.³ The process of applying for naturalization is quite involved and includes paying fees, passing

² Gaby Semann, "Arab Americans: Stereotypes, Conflict, History, Cultural Identity and Post 9/11", Intercultural Communications Studies Vol.23 No.2, 2014.

³ Jie Zong, "Profile of Syrian Immigrants in the United States"

exams (both English and civics), interviews, and swearing an oath of allegiance to the United States. As such, naturalization is a strong indicator of integration.⁴

Syrian Americans, particularly men, are well-educated, and, compared to other immigrant populations, are more likely to have completed a post-graduate degree. The accomplishments in higher education among the Syrian population in the U.S can be explained by their average age, 47 years old.⁵ This makes the majority of the Syrian population older than other immigrant populations as well as the American-born population.⁶

Syrian populations in the U.S. have also been economically successful. Compared to other foreign and American-born populations, Syrian-Americans are more likely to work in skilled occupations, such as in education services, health care, social services, and in the retail sectors. The Syrian skilled worker earns an average annual income of \$52,000, a higher average when compared to the salaries of other immigrant and American workers. Additionally, around 11% of Syrian immigrants are business owners. This is double the rate of business ownership among other immigrant populations and three times the rate among American citizens. The most prominent types of business among the Syrian population are medical offices, food services, and automobile dealerships.⁷ The average earning of a Syrian business owner is approximately \$72,000 annually.

2.1. Diasporic Groupings

The Syrian American diaspora is not a homogenous community. It is diverse, with different ethnicities, regional origins, demographic characteristics, and religious groups. Before 2011, Syrian Americans did not closely interact, and political groupings were limited; different diaspora groups coalesced solely based on their professions, place of origin, family ties, and religious backgrounds. For example, doctors and business owners would gather amongst themselves within their states of residence but the two groups would not associate with each other.⁸

While Syrian-Americans encountered other members of the diaspora at mosques or churches, groupings were regional and based on location in the U.S. When diaspora members socialized, they identified, above all else, as Syrian. Some organizations, such as the [Syrian American Club](#) in Texas, and the Lebanese [Syrian American Junior League](#), existed long before 2011 and aimed to strengthen the bond among the Syrian and Lebanese communities, to facilitate integration in the U.S., and to celebrate shared heritage.

Based on interviews with members of the diaspora, ties within the Syrian American community were weak and unorganized, in part due to the large geographic size of the United States as well as the lack of institutions to unite the diaspora. Even though intermingling among the diaspora was mostly social, there were two exceptions: [the Syrian American Medical Society \(SAMS\)](#) and the Syrian American Council (SAC). SAMS, established in 1998, is a professional association that provides “networking,

⁴ David Dyssegaard Kallick, Cyierra Roldan, and Silva Mathema, "Syrian Immigrants in the United States".

⁵ Jie Zong, "Profile of Syrian Immigrants in the United States".

⁶ David Dyssegaard Kallick, Cyierra Roldan, and Silva Mathema, "Syrian Immigrants in the United States".

⁷ David Dyssegaard Kallick, Cyierra Roldan, and Silva Mathema, "Syrian Immigrants in the United States".

⁸ Omar Salem, telephone interview, 17 May 2017.

education, cultural, and professional services” to Syrian American physicians. In 2005, SAC was founded as the first political Syrian American organization. SAC’s founders were members of the “old opposition” who had fled Syria in the late 1970s and 1980s and who sought to provide international support for local Syrian civil society to reform the Syrian regime following the U.S. intervention in Iraq. To avoid the same fate as Iraq, the founding members positioned themselves as interlocutors between the U.S. and the Syrian governments rather than advocating for U.S. military action in Iraq.

The rifts between the Syrian diaspora have also been intensified due to the security culture in Syria. This security culture has instilled fear and mistrust between the diaspora. As Moss writes, this has subsequently “de-politicized the diaspora’s speech and social life and rendered anti-regime activism a high-risk activity. As such, only a minority engaged in opposition activities abroad, and no public membership-based transnational advocacy organizations existed before 2011.”⁹

3. Dynamics of the Syrian American Diaspora Post-2011

3.1. Mapping Solidarities

After 2011, the Syrian American diaspora began organizing based on their political views. For many, it was the first time to meet other Syrian Americans outside their families. The increasing political divides centred around support for the Syrian government or the opposition. The Sunni diaspora members largely supported the opposition while the Syrian Christians predominately sided with the government. However, there were many exceptions and neither group was homogenous. Some Christians have challenged the assertion that they all defend the Assad regime, and conversely, many Sunnis did not vocally support the uprisings. According to Dr James Zogby from the Arab American Institute (AAI), the “majority of the Christian Syrian American communities [as well] [were] quiet” because they did not support the Syrian government and were discouraged by some of the opposition groups’ sectarian rhetoric.¹⁰

The most widespread expression of solidarity among the Syrian American diaspora is financial donations to humanitarian relief efforts. This gesture of solidarity transcends religious and political divides. Initially, diaspora members only wanted to donate money to Syrians from the same religion, sectarian community, and region; however, donors loosened the conditionality of their donations and allowed humanitarian organizations to determine where money was needed most.¹¹ Nevertheless, as the conflict worsened, the seemingly apolitical act of donating to support humanitarian relief evolved and became politicized. Many Syrian American groups would only donate to organizations that shared their political views, and did not trust other groups to deliver unbiased aid. Among the participants interviewed, those who considered themselves neutral donated money to religious institutions to

⁹ Dana Moss, "Diaspora Mobilization for Western Military Intervention During the Arab Spring", *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, Vol.14 No.3, 2016 (Dana Moss, “Diaspora Mobilization for Western Military Intervention during the Arab Spring”).

¹⁰ James Zogby, in-person interview, 11 May 2017 (James Zogby, interview).

¹¹ Jomana Qaddour, in-person interview, 11 May 2017 (Jomana Qaddour, interview).

support humanitarian efforts. Some accused Syrian American organizations of selectively delivering aid to those from the same religious background, regions, or sectarian communities. Despite the divides, the Syrian American community has, according to interviewees, raised over half a billion U.S. dollars for humanitarian aid.

As the conflict evolved, the pro-opposition and pro-government communities in the U.S. strengthened their expressions of solidarity by diversifying their fields of engagements. Solidarity was expressed through political advocacy, awareness raising, and student organizations. Public protests and demonstrations became a popular vehicle to raise awareness within the American public. Different groups organized rallies, demonstrations, and candlelight vigils to memorialize different events occurring in Syria or to influence U.S. government policy. [For example, in 2013 Syrian Americans in Allentown, Pennsylvania continuously protested against U.S. intervention in Syria](#). Likewise, Syrian Americans supporting the opposition organized to lobby the U.S. government to condemn the Syrian government's actions. Moss's recent research demonstrates the influential role played by Syrian American organizations in raising awareness of human rights violations in Syria.¹² Groups from both sides have lobbied for different legislative and military actions since the beginning of the conflict. This level of organization did not exist prior to 2011.

After six years of conflict, diaspora groups have either disengaged from the Syrian conflict, adjusted their approach, or shifted focus to assisting refugees. Prior to 2011, many Syrian Americans were not comfortable with political advocacy and had little knowledge of how it was conducted. According to Kenan Rahmani from The Syria Campaign, "people had more faith that the politicians would play their role and figure out a political situation for Syria." As such, individuals focused only on humanitarian efforts. However, as a result of their disenchantment with U.S. inaction, these groups began shifting towards more political engagement. The 2016 U.S. presidential election was a turning point for political advocacy. Syrian Americans continued making donations but also created structured political organizations in an effort to influence U.S. policy. The Free Syria Political Action Committee (PAC) was established to legally allow Syrian Americans to support congressional members who defended their agenda.¹³ Similarly, the [Syrian American Forum](#) advocated for the preservation of the Syrian state and against U.S. intervention. Other organizations, like the [Syrian Community Network](#), were established to coordinate assistance for refugees and to integrate them into their new communities.

3.2. Emergence of Institutions

Prior to 2011, Syrian American organizations were predominately cultural or professional and aimed to preserve their heritage and educate others on Syria. However, with the onset of the uprisings, new organizations emerged and existing ones, like SAMS and SAC, gained more support. These organizations have diverse focuses, with some advocating for refugees and others engaging in politics; however, whatever the cause, the relationships between these organizations and Syrians on the ground vary. Relief organizations tend to be more connected with their beneficiaries inside Syria, whereas, political advocacy organizations have remained more US-centric.

¹² Dana Moss, "Diaspora Mobilization for Western Military Intervention during the Arab Spring".

¹³ See Free Syria PAC, available at freesyriapac.org

Drawing on the experiences of other cultural and political organizations, Syrian Americans endeavoured to establish associations strategically and relied on lawyers to ensure their visions and missions were carried out legally. In addition to humanitarian and advocacy organizations, cultural organizations were also founded with the goal of challenging common perceptions of Syrians. One organization, the Syrian Cultural House, organizes events around Syrian food, culture, cinema, and art. Likewise, research institutes and think tanks were created, such as the Syria Institute, to conduct evidence-based research. Despite the increase in the establishment of Syrian groups, many concentrated on similar issues, leaving large gaps. Members of the Syrian diaspora founded their own NGOs to respond to these needs. The Syrian American diaspora communities focused on establishing umbrella coalitions to facilitate organization among associations. Some of these coalitions include the American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS), which was created to coordinate between organizations supporting humanitarian assistance, and the Coalition for a Democratic Syria (CDS) for advocacy organizations. Similarly, the Syrian Community Network transformed from a single organization supporting refugees in Chicago to a federation coordinating among organizations assisting refugees throughout the country. Syrian American elites contributed financial and professional support to these causes and were instrumental in the creation of these institutions. Some elites even travelled to Syria and its neighbouring countries to train professionals.

3.3. Fractures within the Diaspora

Today, rifts between the diaspora have become more pronounced along political lines, most notably between those in support of the 2011 uprising and those backing the Syrian government. Syrian restaurants, cafes, and other social establishments in the U.S. have become battlegrounds, with pro-opposition sympathizers boycotting businesses owned by pro-government supporters and vice-versa. According to one interviewee, “the Arab Spring has divided the Arab American communities in the United States instead of bringing them together.”¹⁴ He believes the conflict has not only affected the Muslim-Christian divide in the U.S but has also exacerbated the Sunni-Shia divide.

The pro-opposition Syrian diaspora community has experienced some internal fractures, especially along organizational lines as personal disagreements between some individuals in various organizations prevented further collaboration.¹⁵ These disputes wasted a significant amount of energy and resources, affecting the number of people benefiting from aid on the ground, decreasing the community’s credibility among policymakers, and weakening the solidarity within Syrian civil society. Another critical disagreement among the supporters of the opposition centres on U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict. Some pro-opposition diaspora members vehemently oppose any military action in favour of a political solution, while others are persuaded that a political solution will only be achieved through military intervention.

Other factors such as age, post-conflict visions for Syria (secular versus religious), as well as regional origin have amplified the divisions among the Syrian diaspora.¹⁶ However, mosques and Islamic organizations served to connect the Syrian community on the local and national level and many Syrians

¹⁴ James Zogby, interview.

¹⁵ Kenan Rahmani, in-person interview, 2 May 2017 (Kenan Rahmani, interview).

¹⁶ Jomana Qaddour, interview.

actively participated in establishing Muslim organizations, including members of the Syrian “old opposition” who established the SAC. Subsequently, after 2011 the divides among the opposition supporters intensified with predominately older males advocating for “conservative Muslims” while Syrian Americans from younger generations favoured a secular approach. Consequently, these two groups did not closely interact with each other. The youth made their voices heard on college campuses and through student groups, but often felt marginalized by the older generation that fled Syria in the 1970s and 1980s and who had experienced first-hand the Syrian government. Another divide was based on regional origins The Damascene populations grouped together as did Syrian Americans originally from Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. Communities from these four large cities banded together at times, additionally marginalizing diaspora members with origins from rural areas. These divides continue to be felt today, but to a lesser extent.¹⁷

There have been attempts to coordinate and ease tensions between the pro-opposition diaspora members. This has most notably occurred through the creation of coalitions and umbrella organizations, as discussed earlier. Another attempt to bring the two sides together took place in March 2017 with the Syrian American General Assembly (SAGA). This event created a platform for Syrian Americans to come together and begin a dialogue in a town hall-style meeting. Additionally, the efforts of organizations like AAI strove to propose a “third way” for Syrians, but have not been as successful yet. Divisions between pro-government and pro-opposition American Syrians have deepened.

4. Interests and Key Priorities for the Diaspora

Most key diaspora figures interviewed expressed an interest in Syria, to varying degrees, prior to 2011 and would periodically visit family or even express the hope of returning one day. However, after 2011 their interests in Syria peaked. All participants described a sense of urgency surrounding the need to alleviate the suffering and destruction. In order to do this, members of the diaspora engaged with civil society organizations. Some interviewees contributed by providing assistance for legal matters as well as organizational structure, monitoring and evaluation, or advocacy. Others closely monitored the evolution of the Syrian conflict and responded accordingly to fill gaps in humanitarian and political needs. Jomana Qaddour, a lawyer, and Nadia Alawa, an educator, both founded humanitarian organizations, Syria Relief and Development (SRD) and NuDay Syria, respectively. SRD supports the healthcare sector inside Syria, while NuDay Syria empowers displaced women and children by providing humanitarian aid. Omar Salem, an orthodontist, donated his time by traveling to Syria’s neighbouring countries to provide dental services to refugees. Likewise, other interviewees have focused their efforts on influencing U.S. policy towards Syria and advocating for an end to the conflict. Ayman Abdelnour, an entrepreneur, established Syrian Christians for Peace (SCP), a member of CDS, with the aim to oppose the Syrian government’s rhetoric on minorities. During the initial phases of the Syrian uprising, civil society focused largely on delivering humanitarian aid. However, after six years of conflict the interviewees observed that contributing, particularly to support advocacy and capacity-

¹⁷ Kenan Rahmani, interview.

building, actually strengthened solidarity between associations and diaspora members as these decisions require collaboration and collective decision-making.

Interviewees prioritized various diaspora issues. Seven of the 10 respondents stressed the need for diaspora support in rebuilding Syria's infrastructure, including the education sector, health care services, civil society, and the economy. In general, the participants believed that the needs of the Syrian people should be at the forefront of any decision. One stated that the diaspora groups should act as a representative for Syria rather than fuel the civil war. On the other hand, two others prioritized political advocacy as they considered it a possible solution to ending Syrian suffering. Both believe humanitarian support is the responsibility of every individual but, collectively, the diaspora should concentrate on influencing American policy on Syria. Conversely, another interviewee emphasizes the importance of conflict resolution. He believes that the Syrian American diaspora should address social divides in Syria to promote coexistence among the diverse religious and ethnic groups.

All participants feel strongly about being involved in rebuilding Syria after the conflict and assisting with this period of transition. Some interviewees intend to provide humanitarian aid and consult with Syrians on development needs. Four participants, however, favoured engaging with the American government to assist Syrians.

5. Supporting Syria in the Transition Phase

Following the end of the Syrian conflict, the majority of the interviewees would prefer to contribute their professional and cultural skills to assist with Syria's transition instead of seeking financial and business opportunities in the country. For example, one interviewee plans to utilize his skills to support reforms of the security and justice sectors. Similarly, another aims to contribute to developing fair and equal labour laws. Others intend to assist professionally by strengthening the capacity of Syrian American organization, or to act as the bridge between the Syrian and American cultures to foster a lasting partnership and understanding.

The interviewees intending to invest in the development of institutions and organizations inside Syria following the end of the conflict identified possible internal partners. The majority of the participants plan to unite with civil society to implement their investments. However, some would prefer to engage with the private sector or even the central government due to their technical expertise. The interviewees that favour a partnership with the reformed government stipulated that it must meet certain criteria before any deals would be made and stressed the importance of transparency, democracy, and trustworthiness. All participants, except two, are willing to coordinate with local councils given that strict monitoring mechanisms are enforced to ensure their investments are used efficiently and effectively to facilitate the transition.

All aspects of Syrian society have been affected by the ongoing crisis and will need to be repaired during the transition phase. The interviewees identified the education sector, civil society, and legal institutions as the areas requiring the most attention following the end of the crisis, with some also adding that development and entrepreneurship should be bolstered through microfinance

programmes and other sources of funding, and others advocating for the restoration of Syria's industrial sector to foster further innovation and development. Several interviewees also cited the aim to empower women and youth by reintegrating them into their communities.

All participants are willing to support the transition phase following the end of the conflict. The interviewees agree that trustworthiness, transparency, and accountability are mandatory criteria for possible partner organizations inside Syria. They also plan to take into consideration the organizations' structure, legal status, bylaws, board members, inclusivity, and previous projects. However, some interviewees are wary of the presence of corruption, especially with regard to future investments. Other obstacles that could deter support for post-conflict institutions include instability, religious extremism, and the possible role of the current government. While only three participants would consider returning to Syria following the conflict the majority of the interviewees were unwavering in their willingness to continue supporting Syrians from abroad.

Conclusion

The sample of select Syrian Americans interviewed here highlights some existing trends within the diaspora, most notably that the Syrian American diaspora tends towards a US-centric focus. While some organizations directly support refugees or internally displaced persons in Syria, the majority of the associations concentrate on strengthening Syrian American institutions that are capable of providing aid in Syria and its neighbouring countries to alleviate some suffering. Recently, however, the diaspora has moved away from a focus solely concentrated on humanitarian efforts and now strives to address issues within the U.S. This is best demonstrated through organizations implementing numerous projects aimed at political advocacy and the integration of refugees. The interviews conducted with members of the diaspora demonstrate these individuals are willing to contribute to the rebuilding of Syria following the end of conflict but are primarily interested in being involved from afar. Consequently, Syrian American organizations could most effectively engage with rebuilding Syria through projects that correlate their missions with US interests.

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ABOUT ARI

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