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# Diasporas: A Global and Vibrant Force for Arab Democratization

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## **Arab diasporas have a diverse set of strong advantages to further the agenda of Arab democratization: self-organizing can allow them to reach their full potential**

The Arab Spring was to sound the death knell of the decades-old authoritarian regimes plaguing the Arab world. In the end, only Egypt and Tunisia underwent a democratic transition, and only the Tunisian people succeeded in establishing a real, albeit still fragile, democracy. This regional experience illustrates the difficulty to spur democratic change in Arab countries. A lot of actors are involved in these complex processes, such as the political elite, the army, and foreign states. On top of these, Arab diasporas are also an important player, who can play an even more influential role by self-organizing. What are their actual and potential means of action, and how can self-organizing enhance their influence?

Arab diasporas consist of all the Arab people permanently settled in a foreign country who have kept ties with their motherland. These populations, estimated at around 50 million individuals, are highly heterogeneous: they are concentrated in Brazil, Western Europe, the United States and Gulf countries; some hold businesses that have thrived, others hold blue-collar jobs; some are conservatives, others modern-minded. And sometimes, they represent an important share of their motherland's population. The Lebanese and Palestinian diasporas are estimated to comprise more than half of their own populations, making them *de facto* important players in national politics.

Full-fledged democratization in the Arab world is the result of a popular uprising, a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and a consolidation of democracy. Arab diasporas can contribute to all these stages by engaging in six strategic fields, namely: the civic, media, artistic, entrepreneurial, political, and intellectual ones.

The civic field brings together the diaspora partaking in civic mobilizations in their host countries. The support they bring is directly plugged to protests in the Arab world. They can raise the funds needed by the protestors to mobilize, and raise the awareness of world public opinion by organizing demonstrations of solidarity and appealing to the political power of their host countries through petitions. This is



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most notably the case of Maghreb diasporas in France, who have powerful mobilization resources.

The Arab diasporas' engagement in the media field can support both the popular uprisings and the democratic transitions that follow them. They can intervene in written and oral media to raise the awareness of the general public on the events happening in the Arab world. On a more fundamental level, diasporas can also create their own media stations to influence public opinions, both Arab and foreign. That popular newspapers such as *Rai al-Yom*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *The New Arab* are headquartered in London illustrates how strategic the engagement in the media field is.

The artistic field can also bring critical support to Arab democratization. A high share of engaged Arab artists already live abroad, where they find a better environment for their art to thrive. The freedom of expression they benefit from in their host countries enables them to freely criticize Arab authoritarianism and raise the awareness of their communities as well as of their host societies. The case of Raja Meziane, the popular Algerian singer, songwriter and activist (and lawyer!) based in Prague, sheds a lot of light on the power of art in this respect. Her hit "Allô le système", in which she denounces Algeria's *pouvoir*, quickly became an anthem of the Algerian *hirak*.

On the entrepreneurial level, diasporas can support popular uprisings by directly donating to the protestors the funds they need to sustain their mobilization. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs can consolidate democratization by *collectively* investing in their countries of origins once they democratize. Indeed, young democracies firmly take root only if they succeed in meeting people's socio-economic demands, and entrepreneurs' role could be key in this respect. This is particularly the case for the Lebanese and Syrian diasporas, who have a high share of successful businessmen.

Arab democratization can be further supported by diasporas engaging in the political field of their host countries. It would have a meaningful impact if they engage in the political field of states critically engaged in the region, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France. The diasporas can seek to influence their foreign policy by directly entering their decision-making spheres.



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From within, they can promote a renewed vision of the relationship their host country could establish with their motherland. This works also for diasporas in the Gulf, although more sensitive and complicated.

Finally, the intellectual diasporas can crucially contribute too. First, they can push the Arab political culture towards a more democratic one by reconciling it with modernity in general and democratic principles and practices in particular. This is all the more effective if the intellectuals engage with *all* Arab stakeholders, including Islamists and religious currents. Intellectual diasporas are especially well positioned to undertake such a task. Figures such as Mohammad Arkoun, Alaa al-Aswani and Amin Maalouf brilliantly show it. Second, by entering their host countries' intellectual field, diasporas can debunk ideas impeding foreign states from supporting Arab democratization – like the ideas that authoritarianism is the best medicine against jihadism, or that “Arabs are not fit for democracy”. Edward Said's book *The Question of Palestine*, which is explicitly addressed to a Western audience, epitomizes the influence that the intellectual can wield abroad. The creation of think-tanks and of academic journals specialized in Arab affairs can also be an efficient *modus operandi*. Third, intellectuals and experts in public policy can contribute to the consolidation of democracy by offering their expertise to young Arab democracies' new politicians, both in terms of economic and educational policies.

In a way, all the courses of action suggested here are already pursued – sometimes spontaneously, sometimes deliberately. Consequently, what I would like to argue for in the end is the need for diasporas to become fully conscious of their collective strength, and to organically self-organize, both to *systematize* the actions outlined above and to mastermind a *synergy* between them. Of course, self-organizing is not easy, for diasporas are highly heterogenous and already politicized. But given Arab people's urgent need for political systems enshrining transparency, accountability and the rule of law, and considering the powerful obstacles that lie ahead, such a well-thought-out organization is more than necessary. At the very least, it can provide the diasporas with the forum of dialogue their countries of origin lack. At best, this organization would directly support democratization by helping democracy take root and eventually blossom in the Arab world.





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## About the author

### Amine al-Sharif

Amine al-Sharif is a French Sciences Po. graduate with Levantine origins. He holds a master's degree in International Security with a specialization in Middle Eastern affairs. He is especially interested in issues related to regional conflicts, development and culture, both political and intellectual, and has had the opportunity to work on these topics at the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Armed Forces, and at a consulting firm in the Gulf. Amine has also several associative commitments, including one to promote Middle Eastern heritage, and he loves to travel.

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- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

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