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Gulf Countries as a Destination for Syrian Financial Capital: The Case of the United Arab Emirates

→ Maher Al Junaidy



Arab Reform Initiative

Throughout the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) maintained a reputation among Syrians as the ideal Gulf country for those seeking to earn enough money to return home and begin a new life. Additionally, many Syrians invested their capital and professional skills and became quite successful in the UAE. This success enabled some Syrians the ability to create large businesses or gain the distinguished status associated with the Emirati economy. Among these are Dr. Qassem Al-Aoum in Abu Dhabi, Mr. Yahya Kodmani in Abu Dhabi, Mr. Mowaffaq Qadah in Sharjah as well as Mr. Emad Ghreiwati and Dr. Mazen Al Sawaf in Dubai.

However, following 2011, a new wave of Syrians, largely academics, professionals, entrepreneurs, and those aspiring to contribute to the future of Syria, found a haven in the UAE. They enjoyed banking and tax facilities, advanced infrastructure, numerous career opportunities, and suitable logistical capabilities, which enabled them to continue communicating with Syria. Before 2011, the "old Syrians" had built a strong relationship with the local community, respected the rules and regulations of the UAE, and focused on productivity and excellence. Following the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, the new wave of Syrian investors and entrepreneurs transferred their way of life to the UAE, along with their business structures, systems of loyalty, and supply chains they had in Syria. In doing so, they benefited from their positions as ministers, ambassadors, members of parliament, and army officers to build a new circle of connections with the existing Syrian community. Despite the initial period of tension between the "old Syrians" and the "new Syrians" in the UAE, the idea of returning to Syria and thus contributing to its reconstruction has been an explicit shared concern that has taken shape, and ranges from mere dreaming to concrete planning.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the Syrian community in the UAE, beginning with an overview of the Syrian community in the Gulf. It will also explore divisions that have appeared within the Syrian expatriate community in the UAE following 2011 and why wealthy Syrians have chosen the UAE as their destination of choice in the Gulf. The second section will analyze the results of a survey sent to prominent Syrians in the UAE to study trends in their views on Syria's future reconstruction.



1. Syria and the Gulf: an overview

A thorough overview of the Syrian presence in the Gulf States should begin in the mid-twentieth century for Kuwait and Bahrain, and the 1970s for the UAE and Qatar. The Syrian presence in the Gulf was funded primarily by the state of Kuwait, especially in the education and health sectors. This explains why doctors and teachers, as well as engineers, constitute a large proportion of the Syrians who reside there. Arab countries rely on labor migration as a solution to the high levels of local unemployment. However, after 2011, the most important factor behind the migration of skilled Syrians to the Gulf was the deterioration of the security situation that affected not only dissidents and defectors, but also neutral capitalists. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) aims primarily to maintain the temporary nature of the external labor force and to subject it to strict management.¹

Officially there are no refugees in the UAE, whether Syrian or non-Syrian, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The term legal resident or legal migrant as adopted by Amnesty International is probably the closest description of the situation of the Syrians in the UAE. Additionally, the Gulf States have not signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which defines the term refugee and clearly establishes their rights.

In order to maintain a legal status in the UAE, Syrians most possess a visa that is renewed every two or three years. Without a visa or if a visa has expired or revoked, the individual is no longer a legal resident. This situation applies throughout the UAE as well as the other GCC countries, with some variations. In general, individual residence visas are issued on the basis of a sponsorship by employers, a personal sponsor, a university, or the head of a family with a monthly income of at least ten thousand Dirhams (\$2750).

It is difficult to determine the precise number of Syrians in the UAE due to the two concepts of residents and dwellers. The former refers to any non-UAE person who has a valid visa in the country, whether or not they reside there. The latter refers to all of those who live in the UAE but are not citizens, whether they were legal residents, tourists, on temporary visas, or even illegal residents. In addition, Syrians who have a second nationality and reside in the UAE are not considered



Arab Reform Initiative

Syrians in state records and are not present in Syrian consulate records. The UAE's Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority ([FCSA](#)) disclosed that "the actual number of UAE residents reached 9,121,167 people, according to official records, as of January 31, 2016." Statistics from the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) estimate that the number of Syrians, Palestinians, and other (non-Egyptian) Arab and Western communities account for 12.8 percent of the total population.

Moreover, many Syrians in the UAE, as in the rest of the Gulf countries, have left the GCC countries to apply for asylum in Europe and Canada. Many others, however, still come from Syria and Lebanon. However, cross-sectional data suggest that the total number of Syrians holding a residence visa in the UAE or that reside in the UAE, legally or not, was no more than 430,000 at the beginning of 2018. Among these, 320,000 have valid residency visas and live in the state at the same time. This figure contradicts some misleading information that estimated that one million Syrians were residing in the UAE in early 2018.

2. Syrian groups

Prior to 2011, the Syrians in the UAE did not have any organization or forum to bring them together. The majority of the UAE's foreign communities enjoyed social clubs of their own, allowing them to organize, implement activities, and to provide certain services. However, the Syrian community in the UAE was deprived of these opportunities and in the early 1980s, the Syrian Social Club as well as the Palestinian Social Club had both been dissolved and replaced by the Arab cultural Club. The only exception was the [Syrian Business Council](#), which was established in Dubai in 2003 and in Abu Dhabi in 2005. Membership to this forum, however, was restricted to owners of big businesses and their activities were placed under the direct supervision of the Syrian Embassy in Abu Dhabi and the Syrian Consulate in Dubai.

The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, however, marked a shift in the relationship among Syrians in the Gulf. Syrians re-worked their understanding of their country, their relationship with it, the forms of solidarity among themselves, and their relationship with other members of the Gulf expatriate community. Alongside some examples of apolitical social solidarity through social media that



Arab Reform Initiative

aimed to facilitate the interests of the Syrians in general, many of the initiatives in the Gulf countries were invisible to their media outlets and complied with their laws and regulations. However, this limited the Syrian community's ability to raise funds as well as the possibility of establishing regular associations with bylaws, organizational structures, and accountability.

Despite the restrictions, the Syrian community has been able to establish a number of different groups and forums. One example is the Tansiqiyat, or coordination committees. These committees were formed in the Gulf countries and have attracted a large number of Syrians who have carried out solidarity activities in order to raise funds and provide assistance, which, until 2014, was the most persistent activity in terms of relief work. These coordination committees are official organizations, however, other *ad hoc* forums not directly involved in supporting their fellow citizens inside Syria were also formed but did not survive. One example of this is the Syrian Intellectual Gathering, which initially founded a group of cultural producers but quickly became only a Facebook page that published articles on the Syrian affairs from various global media outlets.

Additionally, Syrians have also endeavoured to establish political groups in the Gulf. In 2012, political salons were organized by expatriate Syrian politicians who still wished to play a role in public affairs. These politicians were once supporters of the current regime but ended up at odds with President Assad. As a result of their experiences they became strong supporters of the revolutionary movement.² The most popular salons are run by Mohammed Habash and Samir Saifan in Dubai.³

Syrian businessmen are also supporters of Syrian organizations in the Gulf. Many businessmen have established institutions and initiated regular or occasional initiatives to provide assistance to Syrian refugees in Syria's neighboring countries and to the displaced Syrian still inside Syria. Among these were the initiatives of the Syrian businessman Marwan Al Atrash and the Mazen El-Sawaf Foundation for Humanitarian Works. However, the most successful of these institutions is the Orient Foundation for Humanitarian Affairs, owned by businessman Ghassan Abboud.



3. Divisions within the Syrian community

Historically, there has been a sense of solidarity among the Syrian community in the Gulf, however, the Syrian revolution has revealed divisions. Following 2011, the majority of the Syrians in the UAE supported the revolution for freedom and dignity. A smaller percentage preferred to distance themselves from what was happening at home and only a small minority actively opposed the revolution. Since the beginning of the revolution a fundamental political rupture has existed within the community.

Within the above-mentioned coordination committees and forums, Syrians have shown a deep awareness and understanding of their diversity. Among the activists were Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, Alawites, Ismailis, Druze, Arabs, Kurds and Circassians, males and females as well as religious and secular individuals. It has become natural for Syrians to learn the sectarian or ethnic affiliation of their fellow citizens in their homeland, something that was once considered taboo, which Syrians chose to ignore after the revolution. However, many of these solidarity initiatives enjoyed by Syrians from various backgrounds have disintegrated due to divisions within the community.

4. The UAE as a destination for wealthy Syrians

Historically, Syrians have occupied important positions in the UAE, both in the public and private sectors. Most Syrians were teachers, doctors, engineers, and merchants. Few Syrian worked in non-specialized jobs, such as restaurants, or as unskilled workers. However, this situation changed in 2000 with the emergence of countless projects in the country, accompanied by the influx of Syrians migrants, which doubled the Syrian population in the UAE. Following this increase Syrians occupied a large share of the unskilled labor market, but many also become owners of major companies and real estate. Some major Syrian investors played an important role during this period in attracting Syrian workers to their projects.

Likewise, 2011 was a major turning point in Syrians' presence and investments in the UAE. Reliable estimates indicate that Syrian funds in the UAE market since



2011 reached forty billion dollars. The same sources estimate that the Syrian funds spent in aid or donations provided by Syrians in the UAE to Syria and the Syrian camps in neighboring countries did not exceed a few hundred million dollars.

The process of moving to the UAE, beginning with obtaining a tourist visa, travelling to live there for a transitional period, and then establishing a company and obtaining official residence in the country, and renting a house could cost more than 30,000 USD. The estimated figure for the movement of Syrian funds to the UAE means that much of it has been used in the local markets, whether to purchase houses, in stock market speculation, to establish businesses, or in the service and trade sectors. Syrians are particularly active in five economic sectors in the UAE: education, construction, media, healthcare, and tourism. There is no doubt that the UAE, with its many facilities, has been a magnet for Syrian money-earners, whether they are business owners or influential government members or the families of the Syrian regime.

5. Trends in Syria reconstruction

The study also endeavors to identify the views and trends with regards to Syria's future reconstruction among the Syrian academic, professional and investment community residing in the UAE. An initial sample including 12 of the most prominent academic, professional and economic figures from among the Syrian community in the United Arab Emirates was selected to respond to a survey, which was sent to each participant on December 25, 2017. Following an additional communication, the participants were given until January 4, 2018 to complete the survey.

6. Technical notes on the survey

The initial sample was chosen to reflect as much diversity as possible and it included highly skilled investment, professional as well as academic individuals, Syrians that arrived in the UAE after 2011, Syrians who had established themselves in the UAE before 2011, supporters of both the regime and opposition, one woman, and a wide range of ages. As the sample was chosen selectively it is not representative of all the Syrians in the UAE. Participants were able to respond



anonymously to the survey and were purposely not connected to their responses.

As expected, despite initial welcome, the survey sparked anger and disapproval among some of the participants. Two refused to answer the questions due to their suspicion, three others refrained from responding for unclear reasons, and one preferred to remain silent while Assad remains in power. Among the seven who responded one expressed skepticism about the questions but participated despite his observations. All questions were obligatory, and participants were not able to refrain from answering any of the questions. The survey itself was divided into three sections, and the participants could only progress to the next section after completing all the questions in the previous section. We received eight responses, however two had identical answers, one of which was omitted after confirming that a single participant accidentally submitted his answers twice.

Responses

Section one: Personal information

1-1: How long have you lived outside Syria?

The responses have been categorized into three time periods: before 1995, 1995 to 2011, and after 2011.

The two responses indicating a departure from Syria before 1995 correspond to two turning points in Syria's history: Hafez al-Assad's ascension to power and the turbulent events throughout the 1980s.

1-2: Do you still possess a Syrian passport?

1-3: Do you have another passport?

1-4: Do you visit Syria?



1-5: What are your professional qualifications and what field do you work in?

Syrian academics represent a significant portion of the Syrian community in the UAE, and they serve both the economic and professional sectors. Additionally, it is worth noting that the participant working in the health and medical sector listed a diverse record of academic and professional certificates: A British Fellowship in Orthopedic Surgery, Masters of General Surgery, Masters of International Relations from the Diplomatic School in Madrid, and a Masters of Media Studies.

Second section: Contribution since 2011

2-1: Did your interest in Syrian affairs increase after 2011, and if so how?

One of the participants used this question to express his longing for his homeland and to discuss changes in his positions and views.

2-3: Have you offered support during this period, and what type?

The responses varied greatly in their details. The most common types of support mentioned were aid (medical/food/clothing), technical (expertise offered to state institutions), media, social, intellectual, and civil society to support education and children.

3-2: Did you offer your support as a personal initiative or as part of a collective initiative?

The majority, seventy-one percent, tended to participate in collective initiatives. However, fifty-seven percent of the sample also reported engaging in personal initiatives as well.

Section three: Future contributions

In response to a question concerning whether the participant intended to



Arab Reform Initiative

contribute to the future of Syria or Syrians after the conflict, all responded positively. However, responses did vary when participants were asked about future investment opportunities in Syria. Two participants responded negatively possibly because they wish to contribute to Syria's without investing or they were not currently seeking these opportunities.

The majority of the participants agreed that they could provide academic or cultural related assistance to Syria followed closely by professional skills while only two participants believed they could provide financial assistance.

All the participants were asked what criteria they would take into account concerning aiding Syrians, investing in Syria, and volunteering their time. As expected, participants agreed that security situation was a fundamental concern that would influence their decisions. Meanwhile three other factors proved to be equally important: the type of political solution, institution building as well as integrity and transparency.

The participants' preferred fields for contribution reflected the extent of the awareness among Syrians from various backgrounds of the importance of cultural development and heritage as well as reconstruction and education.

Among vulnerable social sectors, the majority of the participants chose to focus their attention on youth empowerment, reflecting a tendency to focus on the near future. However, a significant number also considered supporting women and children important.

The priorities of the Syrian expatriates varied among the participants. One believed that Syrian expatriates should demonstrate long-term commitment to civil society institutions and, additionally, should establish branches of the industries in which they currently excel. Another participant believed it was necessary for expatriates to bolster security and stability by adopting a discourse



Arab Reform Initiative

of comprehensive national reconciliation. A third advocated for making the abolishment of the culture of hatred a priority. Only one participant listed reconstruction and aid as a priority while two agreed that education and youth rehabilitation should be primary issues.

Almost half of the participants agreed that intermediary institutions could be used as a means to encourage decision making. However, none of the participants believed news publications could be a useful tool in this case.

The participants' responses varied when asked which organizations they would prefer to work with. Two expressed their lack of trust in any institution, while one noted that he trusted the Syrian government. Another would put his trust in civil society, while a third was more comfortable to continue working with the organizations he already knew well. Three participants would prefer to work with the United Nations, credible international institutions, and some European institutions. When given limited options, the majority of the participants responded they would prefer to work with civil society organizations, as shown in the figure below.

The participants were divided when asked if they would trust local councils to administer aid rationally.

The participants were also asked which factors would prevent them from contributing in any way to Syria. The responses varied greatly among the seven participants. Most of the surveys revealed that the most important factors would be corruption and a lack of transparency as well as accountability. Other answers included violations of basic rights, the security situation, the presence of armed organizations and brigades, the lack of a sustainable solution, dominance of the intelligence agencies, continuing violence, as well as ambiguity.



Endnotes

1. See "Arab Communities in the GCC", translated by Maher Al-Junaidi (Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University, 2016).
2. Most of these salons were open were not regularly held or well-organized in nature. They held meetings in public or private places for the discussion of the Syrian affairs and social networking over a cup of coffee. In addition, these forums were not directly connected to the homeland in terms of material support or the provision of relief. The discourse in the salons ranged from quasi opposition to the radical opposition t the Syrian regime.
3. These names were informal although they were used to refer to the respective salons.



Arab Reform Initiative

About the author

Maher Al Junaidy

Maher Al Junaidy is a Researcher, author, journalist, and media consultant, currently the editor-in-chief of the Arabic unit at Taber.net media organization in Dubai.

Maher is a regular columnist on political and cultural issues in An-Nahar (Lebanon), Al-Hayat and Al Quds Al Arabi (London), and he is the author of three books: *The Orphan Revolution* (Dar Joud 2014), *Juhayna: Modern Technologies in the Media World* (2003), and *Idrissi: Techniques for Searching Arabic Content in Information Systems* (2001).

Maher Al Junaidy participated in numerous discussion panels and he was interviewed on economics and IT by the BBC, Al Jazeera, Dubai TV, Abu Dhabi TV, and Sharjah TV.

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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

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contact@arab-reform.net



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