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Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe: Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom

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Study background and objectives This research was commissioned by Danish Refugee Council's (DRC) Diaspora Programme as part of a project with the Durable Solutions Platform (DSP) joint initiative of DRC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). This study seeks to explore Syrian diaspora mobilisation in six European host countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The report focuses on the organisational framework, transnational links and practices of Syrian diaspora groups, by taking into account both internal dynamics and potential lines of conflict as well as the contextual factors in the country of origin and destination. The mapping and study seek to provide a basis for further engagement with the most relevant group of Syrians (associations and individuals) across Europe for consultations on future solution scenarios for Syrian refugees, as well as to enable DRC's Diaspora Programme to develop activities specifically targeting the Syrian diaspora looking towards the reconstruction and development of Syria.

Key findings Altogether, Syrians in Europe mirror to some extent the situation in Syria, and their heterogeneity has become even more pronounced after 2011, politically, economically and ethnically. The Syrian uprising in 2011 can be perceived as a transformative event that politicised Syrians abroad and sparked collective action aiming to contribute to the social and political transformations happening in the country. Besides, the escalation of the conflict and increasing numbers of Syrians seeking protection in Europe have led to further mobilisation efforts of the diaspora, who try to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people both at home and abroad. While the revolution itself can be perceived as a unifying factor, the conflict escalation, with rising ethnicisation and radicalisation on the ground in Syria, also affect the patterns of diaspora mobilisation in Europe. In all the countries represented in this study, it is clearly visible that the same (political, ethnic or religious) tensions that escalated and perpetuate the conflict, are reproduced in the Syrian diaspora in Europe. At the same time, the findings show that host countries can provide a safe and neutral space for rapprochement, reflection and dialogue among the diverse range of Syrian diaspora actors, highlighting the potential role of diasporas as agents of change and peace

The aspirations and motivations of the Syrian diaspora elaborated in this study



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show that there is a strong desire and commitment to contribute to peace and reconstruction of the country. In general, the findings indicate that there is a strong desire to return to Syria, especially among those who migrated to Europe more recently. At this stage of the conflict, with high levels of instability and insecurity, the absence of essential freedoms and human rights, and a lack of infrastructure for a decent life, large-scale return and sustainable reintegration are not perceived as a viable option. Therefore, integration opportunities and an inclusive society for those seeking protection in Europe should be promoted. Interviewees pointed towards access to language courses, education and the labour market as key factors in that regard. What also should not be overlooked are the benefits that the current migration can yield for hosting societies if integration efforts are successful.

Concerning the organisational capacity, the landscape of Syrian diaspora organisations in the six selected destination countries is characterised by great diversity. The majority of organisations started at the “kitchen table” and have since tried to professionalise and institutionalise their efforts. Interestingly, some organisations in the UK and to a lesser extent in Germany and France successfully mastered the path towards professionalisation, emerging now as key players within the humanitarian response in Syria. Regarding cooperation, Syrian diaspora groups in host countries like Germany, the UK, France and more recently Denmark, are now seeking new forms of cooperation through the creation of umbrella organisations. Through this, the diaspora seeks to bundle resources and respond more efficiently to the various aspects of the crisis. Beside this, other networks have evolved, revolving around specific professions or fields of engagement, often being transnational in nature and involving members that are scattered across the world.

Over the past years, the Syrian diaspora groups across Europe showed strong commitment in alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people, in building a strong basis for social change and political transformation, and in addressing the needs of Syrian newcomers in the host countries. Herein, different patterns can be observed when comparing the countries selected for this study. For instance, Syrian diaspora groups in Sweden and Denmark tend to focus on activities related to integration in the host country, whereas organisations in Switzerland mainly



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focus on the Syrian context. While promoting integration also plays a role in the context of Germany, the UK and France, Syrian diaspora organisations there are equally involved in the Syrian context, by providing humanitarian aid to those suffering from the conflict and implementing development initiatives that foster self-reliance. The results indicate that several host country-specific factors, such as institutional framework and funding mechanisms, asylum and integration policies, as well as the history and composition of the immigrant population, may influence the size, mode and focus of Syrian diaspora in the respective destinations.

As transnational social agents, Syrian diaspora groups play an important role in building bridges between the origin and host countries, hence matching resources across spaces. Further, the transnational involvement contributes to growing the network of institutions and individuals who work in (post-) conflict environments. Given their intimate knowledge of Syria, access to diverse social networks, and higher risk thresholds, Syrian diaspora groups are able to work in areas where the international community is either unable or unwilling to. In the host country, Syrian diaspora organisations serve as a trusted point of contact for newcomers and facilitate their first orientation in the new “home”. Moreover, many of the organisations have a strong desire for professionalisation, yet they also face many challenges that stop them from reaching their full potential.

While political opportunities varied across the countries, one of the major challenges frequently identified in the different destinations was the lack of financial capacity, making it difficult to broaden the scope of activities and to implement long-term action plans. In addition to financial resources, some organisations see a great challenge in the loss of human capital. The fact that the Syrian conflict progresses with no end in sight causes despair, frustration and hopelessness, demotivating many Syrians from taking action as it is perceived that the fate of their country is out of the hands of Syrians themselves. The difficulty in mobilising Syrians for collective action is further exacerbated by the general mistrust and fragmentation that continue to characterise relations among Syrians abroad. In the context of Syria, the complex conflict setting, with several regional battlefronts, and great numbers of armed actors, pose challenges to the realisation of diaspora activities in Syria. Moreover, the political and public discourse on the Syrian crisis, which almost exclusively focusses on security



threats and terrorism, is perceived as a major challenge to mobilise support by the broader public. Counter-terrorism regulations and “de-risking” measures further complicate access to and management of financial resources.

Recommendations

A sustainable, conflict-sensitive and effective engagement with diasporas require that international organisations/NGOs and governments, who are interested in this engagement, ensure that efforts are long-term rather than ad-hoc, and support the development of a trustful and lasting relationship. Moreover, the following recommendations have been identified:

- **Strengthen efforts of the Syrian diaspora through the promotion of networks within each destination country and in the transnational sphere**, as this enables peer-to-peer learning, facilitates dialogue between the various organisations and strengthens the advocacy efforts through the formation of a collective voice.
- **Include Syrian diaspora in decision-making processes**, by involving the Syrian diaspora in political negotiations, peace talks, and the designing of foreign policies.
- **Provide targeted funding streams for diaspora organisations**, to facilitate access to and management of financial resources
- **Support diaspora organisations’ capacity to develop and manage projects, fundraise and collaborate with each other**, by providing workshops and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- **Support advocacy efforts of the Syrian diaspora** through facilitating networks and contacts with the international community and developing advocacy papers presenting diaspora recommendations on key topics (local integration, voluntary return, conflict resolution, etc.).

Recommendations specific to durable solutions to Syrian displacement

- **Promote efforts by the Syrian diaspora to strengthen local structures** by providing funding for development-orientated diaspora



initiatives implemented in the Syrian context.

- **Support human capacity development** of Syrians residing in the host countries to build a strong basis for the reconstruction process and to facilitate reintegration upon potential return.
- **Promote a change of the discourse on integration**, in which integration must be fundamentally understood in the frame of inclusiveness and the right to remain, integration opportunities and a welcoming culture for those seeking protection in Europe is promoted.
- **Provide targeted support for newcomers**, in which group-specific needs such as psychological distress and trauma are addressed.
- **Involve the Syrian diaspora in the design and implementation of integration policies**, as the intercultural and linguistic competences of Syrian diaspora members can help to build a bridge between the needs of Syrian newcomers and the support structures offered by the respective governments and civil society actors.

Diaspora mobilisation in selected destination countries

1. Germany

The Syrian immigrant population in Germany is characterised by great heterogeneity regarding religion, ethnicity, socio-economic characteristics and trajectories of displacement. Syrian migration patterns have been both conflict-fuelled and more voluntary in nature for the purpose of work, studying and family reunification. The violent conflict that has ravaged the country since 2011 engendered the second phase, in which Germany has become the major destination country of displaced Syrians in Europe. While many respondents state that the pre-conflict Syrian immigrants tended to be more medium and highly skilled, the newly displaced Syrian population in Germany tends to comprise both persons with high and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Syrian diaspora in Germany shows a strong desire and high commitment to address the various aspects of the Syrian crisis, in Syria, the neighbouring countries and Germany. Due to their extensive networks to local communities, diaspora organisations are able to reach areas that are inaccessible to other



actors, hence, often helping those who are the most affected by the crisis. At the same time, Syrian diaspora organisations in Germany are confronted with several challenges that limit their potential of contributing to peace, reconciliation and reconstruction. These include the devastating security situation in Syria and the inability of the international community to find a political solution to the conflict; the lack of capacity as a result of limited infrastructure as well as scarce human and financial resources; and a lack of information on funding opportunities as well as high bureaucratic burdens associated with fund applications and management.

Over the past years, a vibrant Syrian civil society emerged in Germany, which is characterised by great diversity concerning aspiration, visions, capacity and fields of engagement. The path of Syrian diaspora mobilisation was marked by a moment of unification in response to the Syrian revolutions and a period of fragmentation, due to the escalation of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian diaspora in Germany shows high commitment to address the various aspects of the Syrian crisis, by being engaged both in the Syrian and the German context. While many organisations that started to alleviate the suffering of those being the most affected by the conflict, activities in the context of Syria are now moving towards more development orientated efforts through, among other things, the provision of health care and education and the promotion of community cohesion and women empowerment. More recently, many initiatives focus on the promotion of integration through assisting displaced Syrians in their integration process and strengthening intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding between the displaced Syrian population and the broader German society.

2. France

The Syrian diaspora in France is par excellence heterogeneous, where all social classes, individuals of all faiths, older generations and newcomers, multiple ethnicities, are represented. As a reflection of the current situation in Syria, one may not be able to apply the same standards to all categories alike – thus underlying the importance of taking into account differences across socioeconomic or ethnoreligious categories.

Given regime repression, many respondents emphasised that Syrians abroad were



afraid to talk and organise politically before the outbreak of the revolution. The social and political transformations triggered by the Syrian revolution in 2011, activated Syrians in France to collectively engage in shaping the home country's future. Yet, the conflict potentially brought both unification and fragmentation tendencies. Initially, joint efforts have been made to strengthen the networks of the Syrian diaspora to work together towards political change in Syria. There are very little, if any, relationships between pro and anti-regime diaspora members, highlighting a real break between these two categories. There also are a few diaspora associations that agree to cooperate with the regime in to achieve greater security and stability as well as the country's unity.

Among the most often cited challenges is notably the lack of available funding, hindering the capacity of organisations to efficiently provide adequate aid to Syrians, especially in Syria; the lack of reliable and trustful partners and the loss of partners targeted by the different conflict actors; and the lack of motivation and the decrease in participation in associations.

The Syrian diaspora in France can be characterised as reactive, in the sense that it seeks to meet the demands of the moment. Diaspora groups in France, not just raise awareness on the situation in Syria, calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but also provide humanitarian to those suffering from the consequences of the conflict and help newcomers to settle in the French society. It is important to continue efforts towards bringing multiple stakeholders around the same table and try to establish dialogue and foster cooperation attempts. CODSSY is a good example of a working system to pool efforts towards achieving similar goals and should be assisted in fulfilling its objectives. Despite the different political aspirations that characterize France's Syrian diaspora, there is hope that these people may work together. With time and efforts, things shall slowly fall into place and should bring increased partnerships. Current projects/initiatives have already proved it could lead to positive achievements already.

3. The United Kingdom

Several waves of Syrian migration to the UK, characterised by both voluntary and forced displacement, resulted in the construction of a very diverse Syrian



immigrant population, where immigrants are facing now different social, economic and political circumstances and conditions in the destination country. Moreover, the Syrian immigrant population in the UK also mirrors the rich religious and ethnic diversity of the Syrian society. Similar, to other contexts, diaspora mobilisation based on a collective Syrian identity was almost absent prior to the conflict. Syrians in the UK, either were not collectively engaged at all, or identified themselves with wider ethno-religious identity markers such as Kurdish, Assyrians or Muslim communities. Regime repression prevented not just major political mobilisation of the Syrian diaspora, but also created a lack of cohesion among Syrians in the UK. A general mistrust towards the other, along with a fragmented solidarity among Syrians in the UK limited the ability to generate and maintain a collective national identity and can be seen as major stumbling blocks for diaspora mobilisation. Initially, the Syrian uprising was a unifying factor, sparking the rise of collective action among Syrians in the UK. Yet, with increasing escalation, ethnicisation, and radicalisation, Syrian conflict dynamics were reproduced in the diaspora, leading to fragmentation based on ethnic, religious and political divisions. More recently, there has been a strong desire for more collaboration, as many members feel that a solution to the conflict and a strong voice of the diaspora can only be achieved through a strong more unified network.

The organisational landscape of the Syrian diaspora is characterised by great diversity. Syrian diaspora groups seem to respond to the various aspects of the Syrian crisis, by being engaged both in Syria through the provision of humanitarian aid and the implementation of more development-orientated projects, as well as in the UK, where they promote the integration of Syrian newcomers and raise awareness on the Syrian conflict. Some organisations active in humanitarian aid mastered the path from informal initiatives at the “kitchen table” to leading actors within the Syrian humanitarian system. Other more recently established organisations that address the needs of Syrian newcomers in the UK struggle to receive financial support and to achieve sustainability and institutionalisation of their effort.

Next to the lack of capacity of some organisations, fragmentation due to conflicting ideas and continuous mistrust among Syrians in the UK can be seen as major obstacles for diaspora mobilisation. First, the lack of unified voices weakens



the position of the Syrian diaspora in the international political arena and reduces the potential of contributing to the political solution of the conflict. In addition, networks and cooperation would also increase the capacity of organisations and initiative and enable them to respond more effectively to the diverse aspects of the Syrian crisis.

4. Sweden

Although the Syrian immigration population in Sweden is well established, it is difficult to consider them a unified and homogenous group. Due to the long-standing ethnic/national divisions, during the last four decades, many Syrians have built their own communities organised along ethnic, religious or political lines, representing not just Syrians but also members of other origins. Only few associations have attempted to be inclusive and promote the Syrian identity as a collective one for all Syrians regardless of their backgrounds. With the increasing number of Syrian refugees, the number of people of Syrian origin in Sweden has increased significantly. Similar ethnic and political lines of division are reflected among them, although this group of Syrians came from diverse backgrounds.

The ethnic division and political polarisation tend to also be reproduced on the organisational level. One can see that each community has its own associations and umbrella organisation. Similarly, the newcomers who support the Syrian uprising have founded their respective associations, as many believe that the old Syrian associations are supporters or sympathisers of the Assad regime.

Indeed, the engagement of the Syrian diaspora regarding the promotion of integration in Sweden or with Syria is relatively rare when compared to its number and how well-established some of the associations are. Here, several reasons have played a role, such as the (perceived) exclusiveness of the communities of the pre-conflict Syrian immigrants, the social and cultural nature of most old associations, as well as the political polarisation resulting from conflict dynamics in Syria. These have greatly affected the work among and within most of the old and new associations alike.

After seven years of conflict, most of the practices and activities of the Syrian diaspora have, to a large extent, only assumed a cultural and social character.



Nevertheless, some associations would like to broaden their scope of activities not just in Sweden, but also in the Syrian context. Here, there is immense potential for developing the Syrian diaspora, if a mutual basis for work and cooperation is promoted. Some respondents express the desire to tackle the fragmentation within the Syrian diaspora, through projects that foster an inclusive approach and dialogue. Therefore, a platform that connects the diverse actors within the Syrian diaspora could be a first step towards rebuilding trust among the associations and support communication and cooperation in the long term.

5. Denmark

The Syrian immigration population in Denmark is relatively new and small and, due to the strict distribution policy, dispersed across the country. Furthermore, due to long-standing ethnic division (Arabic/Kurdish) and political polarisation concerning the Syrian conflict, Syrians in Denmark do not represent a unified, homogenous group, but rather reflect the general conflict dynamics of the Syrian crisis. These divisions can also be noticed among and within the organised Syrian diaspora. Only a few small groups of organisations attempt to be inclusive and reinforce the Syrian identity as a collective one for all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity, religion or political view.

Having a look at the organisational landscape, it is clear that the Syrian associations in Denmark are still in the phase of finding, organising and establishing themselves. Concerning their aspirations and motivation, the first established Syrian diasporic associations in 2011/2012, have more political or humanitarian objectives and their areas of involvement were related to the conflict in Syria, like advocacy and raising awareness as well as relief aid. On the other hand, the more recently established associations, mostly by the newcomers, focus more on culture and integration issues, depending on the needs and demands of Syrians in Denmark. However, most of these associations have a homogenous group (mainly Arabic Syrian or Kurdish Syrian), without having Danish members. This raises the question whether this kind of association will help and foster the integration process in the long term or not? Only a few associations have an inclusive approach in this respect.



Despite many challenges, some related to the Syrians themselves and some related to the difficult situation in Denmark, the Syrian diasporic associations have made substantial efforts in a short period, although most of them work on a voluntary basis. Several organisations express the desire for more professionalisation and institutionalisation in order to broaden their scope of activities and to respond more effectively to the various aspects of the Syrian crisis, both in the context of Denmark and Syria. Here lies immense potential for developing the Syrian diaspora, if the associations get the needed funding and support, like capacity building programs and network and cooperation platform.

6. Switzerland

Syria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, and this mosaic is reflected in the many religions and ethnicities making up this diaspora. Altogether, Syrians in Switzerland mirror, to some extent, the situation in Syria, and their heterogeneity has become even more pronounced after 2011, politically, economically, ethnically, among other factors.

While the conflict propelled Syrians to become collectively engaged in the Syrian cause, Switzerland hosts the smallest share of Syrian civil society organisations, when compared to the other countries captured in this study. As newly arrived Syrians make up by far the largest share of Syrian immigrants in Switzerland, they may still lack the capacity, such as language skills, as well as financial, personal, and political security to become collectively engaged. Moreover, Syrian organisations in Switzerland tend to focus their engagement on the Syrian context, with measures ranging from the delivery of aid to financing of schools, medical centres and livelihood opportunities. Engaging in promoting integration appears to be less important, as it is generally perceived that the Swiss government and civil society provide enough support for Syrian newcomers in Switzerland.

While efforts have been made in the last years to strengthen relationships, networks and cooperation among diaspora groups, politicisation, polarisation and mistrust are major stumbling blocks for developing joint efforts towards reconstruction. Yet, bringing together a divided organisational landscape and giving greater attention to long-term initiatives, while incorporating Syrian



nationals to peace-promoting and reconstruction projects, would undoubtedly lead to positive future developments of the origin country.

Conclusion

Altogether, Syrians in Europe mirror to some extent the situation in Syria, and their heterogeneity has become even more pronounced after 2011, politically, economically, ethnically, among other factors. In all countries, pre-conflict Syrian diaspora mobilisation was mainly limited to the socio-cultural sphere and tended to avoid political dimensions. Also, some Syrians with a minority background tended to connect themselves to wider ethnoreligious communities. The government repression prevented political mobilisation and created a lack of cohesion and solidarity among Syrians in Europe and has been identified as a major stumbling block for collective action based on a Syrian national identity.

The Syrian uprising in 2011, can be perceived as a transformative event, which politicised Syrians abroad and sparked collective action based on a national identity, mainly of those who position themselves oppositional to the Assad regime. While the revolution itself can be perceived as a unifying factor, the conflict escalation, with rising ethnicisation and radicalisation on the ground in Syria also affect the patterns of diaspora mobilisation in Europe. In all the countries represented in this study, it is clearly visible that the same (political, ethnic or religious) tensions that escalated and perpetuate the conflict, are reproduced in the Syrian diaspora in Europe. These fragmentations, conflict dynamics and divisions within the Syrian diaspora are perceived as major obstacles for diaspora mobilisation and for the resolution of the Syrian conflict in general. Increasingly some initiatives across the countries covered in this study are trying to tackle the social, cultural and political division within the Syrian diaspora, aiming to build a strong, resilient and inclusive Syrian society at home and abroad. Moreover, Syrian diaspora groups in host countries like Germany, the UK, France and more recently Denmark, are now seeking forms of cooperation through the creation of umbrella organisations to bundle resources and respond more efficiently to the various aspects of the crisis.

Hence, it was shown that Syrian diaspora mobilisation is a highly dynamic process, which tends to reflect to some extent the developments on the ground in Syria.



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At the same time, it was shown throughout the study that host countries can provide a safe and neutral space for rapprochement, reflection and dialogue among the diverse range of Syrian diaspora actors, highlighting the potential role of diasporas as agents of change and peace.

The aspirations and motivations of the Syrian diaspora elaborated in this study show that there is a strong desire and commitment to contribute to peace and reconstruction of the country. The findings also indicate that there is a strong desire to return to Syria, especially among those who more recently migrated to Europe. At this stage of the conflict, large-scale return and sustainable reintegration is not perceived as a viable option soon. Therefore, integration opportunities (through access to language courses, education and the labour market) and a welcoming culture for those seeking protection in Europe should be promoted.

Over the past years, the Syrian diaspora groups across Europe showed strong commitment in alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people, in building a strong basis for social change and political transformation, and in addressing the needs of Syrian newcomers in the host countries. As transnational social agents, Syrian diaspora groups play an important role in matching resources across spaces and of growing the network of institutions and individuals who work in (post-) conflict environments. Given their intimate knowledge of the country, access to diverse social networks, and higher risk thresholds, Syrian diaspora groups are able to work in areas that the international community is either unable or unwilling to. In the host country, Syrian diaspora organisations serve as a trusted point of contact for newcomers and facilitate their first orientation in the new “home”.

While political opportunities varied across the countries, one of the major challenges frequently identified in the different destinations was the lack of capacity among recently established organisations. Most associations have very limited access to public funding and are relying on small budgets originating, for most of them, from fundraising events and private donations. With too few donors, not enough funds, and quite irregular money flows, there is an increasing difficulty to broaden the scope of activities and to implement long-term action plans. A lack of strategic planning due to funding insecurity was also visible in the case of well-established, professionalised and institutionalised organisations, which have



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sufficient resources for direct activities, but tend to lack structural core funding, given the project-based nature of many funding schemes.

In addition to financial resources, some organisations see a great challenge in the loss of human capital, a general sense of despair, frustration and hopelessness, demotivating many Syrians to take action as it is perceived that the fate of their country is out of the hands of Syrians themselves. The difficulty in mobilising Syrians for collective action is further exacerbated by the general mistrust and fragmentation that continues to characterise relations among Syrians abroad and a lack of a culture of civil society and volunteering and of an experience with democracy in Syria.



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