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# Syrians in Egypt: Major Financial Investments in a Volatile Context

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Syrians fleeing the war in their home country are dispersed, largely in camps, across the Middle East. However, in Egypt, there are no camps for Syrian refugees. Instead they live as members of Egyptian society and receive basic services from the state; they have the right to education through the undergraduate level, and health care. Syrians also enjoy freedom of movement, residence, and the right to work. Despite these rights accorded by the Egyptian state, Syrians still struggle to obtain residence permits. Additionally, they can be subjected to random searches in their homes, which was implemented following a decision in 2013 to oblige Syrians to acquire visas to travel to Egypt in order to prevent illegal residents.

However, the Syrian community in Egypt has no political agenda as the community lacks organized leadership due to the Egyptian government's fluctuating and ambiguous position on the Syrian issue. Regardless of the Egyptian position, the Syrian community is known for their scientific and professional expertise. Many Syrians immigrants in Egypt have successful industrial and commercial investments, especially in the fields of clothing, textiles, restaurants, and furniture. This represents an enormous lever for Syria in the future, as they could stand to benefit from their various expertise in the community.

This paper examines the Syrians present in Egypt following the 2011 Syrian Revolution. At the time, Egypt was a preferred destination for Syrians who held valid passports for economic, social, political and religious reasons.

## **1. Syrian immigration to Egypt and resulting interactions between 2011 and early 2018**

This section will provide an in-depth examination of Syrian immigration to Egypt, Syrian organizations, and Syrian investments.

By the end of 2011, many Syrians had begun to travel to Egypt, for many reasons. Firstly, many Syrians felt connected to Egypt for historical reasons. A first wave of Syrian migration to Egypt began in the nineteenth century and a second in the early twentieth century. Additionally, the two countries were united under the United Arab Republic in 1958 which encouraged migration and intellectual



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cooperation between Egyptians and Syrians. Secondly, the success of Egypt's January 25, 2011 revolution transformed Cairo into a safe haven for Syrian intellectuals, given the prevailing democratic atmosphere that allowed for freedom of actions for individuals, organizations, and gatherings. Additionally, the majority of Egyptians supported the Syrian revolution and sympathized with the Syrians' situation. As a result, Syrians were welcomed by not only Egyptians but also institutions and associations which provided material and moral support for Syrian refugees. The Syrian diaspora in Egypt can be divided into two phases: the first, between 2011 and June 30, 2013, and the second, after June 30, 2013.

The period between 2011 and June 30, 2013 was a golden age for Syrian refugees, especially for elites and intellectuals. Egyptians as well as institutions greeted Syrians at the Cairo airport and provided them with housing, shelter, and aid. As the number of refugees swelled, Egyptian organizations continued to offer similar support during the period of the military junta, from February 2011 to August 12, 2012. Additionally, during the golden age no restrictions were imposed on Syrians. Work and residence were secured easily and no visas were required to enter the country. Syrians in Egypt engaged in a large number of activities in support of the Syrian revolution and most meetings were held in Cairo. The Syrian National Council, established in Istanbul on October 2, 2011, even had an office in Cairo. This office would later host the official headquarter of the National Coalition of the Forces of the Revolution and the Syrian Opposition, which was founded in Doha on November 11, 2012.

This support increased further when former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi assumed office, as Syrians enjoyed the same privileges as Egyptian citizens. They were not required to obtain a valid residence and no restrictions were imposed on their private businesses, revolutionary activities, or media, political, and relief activities. Health and education were provided for free, including post-graduate education, in which Syrian students received the same status as the Egyptians. This remarkably increased the number of Syrian students in Egypt.

The situation for Syrians began to change when demonstrations began in Egypt in June 2013. Shortly before, President Mohamed Morsi delivered a speech in front of thousands of people in the covered hall in the Cairo Stadium, in which he declared that Egypt had “decided to cut relations completely with the current regime in



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Syria, close the embassy of the current regime in Egypt, the withdraw the Egyptian Chargé d'affaires” in Damascus. This speech had a negative impact on the Syrians in Egypt immediately after the toppling of Mohamed Morsi on July 3, 2013.

The Egyptian media accused Syrians of supporting Morsi, and created an anti-Syrian position that became a major part of the hate speech directed at Syrians in Egypt. This racist discourse resulted in verbal and physical harassment of Syrians residing in Egypt. Consequently, a large number of Syrians were also arrested, some of whom are registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In a statement issued on July 26, 2013, the UNHCR called for the protection of refugees , guarantees that they would not be deported to Syria, and fair legal procedures. The Commission also appealed to the Egyptian government requesting that they refrain from using the security conditions in Egypt as a pretext to take precautionary measures that could deprive refugees of basic human rights.<sup>1</sup>

This tense situation in Egypt prompted many Syrians to cease their commercial and industrial activities and to subsequently leave Egypt. It also contributed to the departure of scores of Syrian families in 2013 and 2014, especially revolutionary activist intellectuals, who were subjected to harassment and instead sought refuge in Turkey or Europe, either legally or illegally. As the result of a series of campaigns against Syrians without residence permits and the poor treatment of Syrian students a group of Syrian business owners and industrialists transferred their work to Turkey.

The Syrian immigrants in Egypt during these time periods, especially after 2013, had many obstacles to overcome. The main difficulties faced by Syrians are obtaining a legal residence permit, overcrowded immigration offices, and reentering Egypt with only a tourist visa or a UNHCR card. Among the other obstacles are low wages as well as numerous restrictions imposed on Syrian institutions, associations, companies, and factories, which included the approval of the security apparatus until the end of 2015. The situation changed slightly, however, after 2016, when Syrians’ interactions with these institutions were facilitated, as a result of the apparent rapprochement between the Assad regime and the Egyptian government. Additionally, many media outlets have adopted the Assad regime's narrative of events in Syria while also following the Egyptian government’s position of neutrality to maintain a balanced relationship with the



various actors in Syria, except, of course, for the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated opposition, which the Egyptian government opposes.

More recently, however, between mid-2016 and January 2018, the situation of Syrians in Egypt has improved. Syrian families residing in Egypt were briefly allowed to reunite with their families, this policy was, however, abandoned by the end of 2017. Syrian students were once again granted the same rights as Egyptian students, except in graduate schools. Syrians were also once again granted access to health care. Additionally, there was also a shift in the media discourse towards Syrians which now praises the Syrians' role in enriching the Egyptian society and economy. This change was unmistakable in mid-January 2018, when Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi praised Syrian refugees in Egypt just days after opening a clothing factory for a Syrian businessman in Sadat City.

## 2. Syrians' demographic distribution in Egypt and the volume of their investments

Geographically, Syrians in Egypt are heavily concentrated in Giza outside Cairo, in the neighborhoods of 6th of October, Haram, Faisal, Badrashin, and Sheikh Zayed, due to concentration of UNHCR services and partners in these areas. The second largest Syrian community can be found in Cairo, in Nasr City, Maadi, Helwan, al-Tajammo al-Awal, al-Rehab, Heliopolis, Madinaty, and al-Shorouk, due to the proximity to commerce and other services. However, the Syrian community can also be found throughout the country in Alexandria, Damietta, al-Sharqia, Qalyubia, Menoufia, Tanta, Ismailia, Marsa Matrouh, and Hurghada, as many of these cities have industrial and commercial zones as well as a tourism industry. Syrian communities in Egypt are largely based on profession and class, rather than ethnicity. However, some communities have formed around a common city or region of origin.

Many of the Syrians in Egypt are originally from the Damascus area, Homs, Aleppo, and Deraa. As of January 31, 2018, the UNHCR reported that they had registered 127,414 Syrian refugees in Egypt, or 42,741 families, of which 48.4% were female,



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51.6% were male, and 31.9% were children under the age of seventeen. In 2017, the Egyptian government estimated the number of Syrians in Egypt at half a million. The discrepancy between the numbers reported by the UNHCR and the Egyptian government could be due to the fact that many Syrians are actually reluctant to register with the UNHCR. This unwillingness to register among the Syrians has several reasons, including, the fear of being detained by the security services if they return to Syria and some do not consider themselves refugees as they reside in Egypt primarily for work and investment opportunities.

In fact, Syrians have become important investors in Egypt. The volume of Syrian investments in Egypt is estimated at \$800 million. According to Khaldoun al-Mouakeh, head of the Syrian Businessmen's Association in Egypt, there are about 30,000 Syrian investors in Egypt. Investments are concentrated in the spinning and weaving industries as well as integrative industries, such as sponges, paper and plastic, as well as the manufacture of simple medicines, furniture, and food products. Syrians are also active in the commercial and service sector, and have opened restaurants and shops. The economic activity of Syrians varies according to their financial capacity and is divided between entrepreneurs and labor, which encompasses both Egyptians and Syrians. These investments are predominantly medium-sized enterprises, small enterprises, and, lastly, large investments.

Syrian investments were further consolidated in early 2014 with the creation of the Syrian Businessmen's Association in Egypt. This association had several meetings with the Egyptian Foreign Ministry to address the challenges faced by Syrian investors. However, the association's role became less influential with the creation in March 2016 of the Syrian Investors Committee, which is housed within the General Union of the Egyptian Chamber of Commerce. Additionally, Tarek Kabil, the Minister of Commerce and Industry, announced the establishment of a large integrated industrial zone for the textile industry comprising 500,000 square meters. Immediately, al-Mouakeh expanded his activities, meeting with Syrian businesspersons and investors to ask them to join the industrial city project, which now includes one hundred Syrian companies and factories.

At the beginning of 2017, the Association took a clear political line in contributing to the normalization of economic relations with the Assad regime. They endeavored to entice investors and Egyptian companies to invest in Syria and to



convince Syrian investors to return to Syria in order to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. As a result, a visit to Syria for a delegation of Egyptian businesspeople was organized. In a press statement the head of the Egyptian Federation of the Chamber of Commerce stated that the visit would concentrate on two important issues: reconstruction and the economy. The visit took place in mid-August 2017, and has been repeated several times since with Egyptian real estate developers who wish to contribute to the future reconstruction. More recently, another visit was planned at the end of February 2018 for some 400 investors and an Egyptian businessperson.

Despite the services the Syrian investor community in Egypt has provided Syria, the Assad regime has aimed to hinder the project of the Syrian industrial city in Egypt. The project was accused of moving Syrian capital to Egypt and encouraging Syrian investors to invest in Egypt instead of Syria. As a result, another association, this time loyal to the Syrian regime, was established at the end of 2016. This association has encouraged Syrian businessmen to return to Syria and to persuade Egyptian businesspeople to invest there. Due to its loyalty to the Assad regime, this association receives the full support from the Syrian Embassy in Cairo. In addition, 150 Syrian businesspersons met in Cairo to discuss the establishment of an office for the Syrian community in Egypt that would provide services to Syrians in Egypt. This idea, however, was not well-received by everyone as this office could have a powerful influence over Syrians in Egypt, especially during any Syrian election process.

### **3. Forms of solidarity among Syrians abroad**

The volatility of the political situation in Egypt has had a major impact on interactions among Syrians. Before June 2013, the Syrian community was flourishing. They organized meetings, forums, festivals, parties, and demonstrations in support of the Syrian revolution, and, additionally, they hosted expatriate families. However, these interactions have since declined. Sisi's ascension to power marked a change in the various forms of solidarity among Syrians. Currently, solidarity between Syrians is limited to aid in the field of



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administrative information exchange, relief, and service assistance through social media sites or activities organized by Syrian associations and institutions in Egypt as well as the owners of factories and shops. Additionally, before the summer of 2013, financial aid was sent to Syria, however, today this is limited to individual financial transfers, usually conducted in secrecy.

It is also necessary to examine the varied forms of solidarity between the Syrian community in Egypt and the Syrian institutions. In political terms, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has an office in Cairo, however, it lost considerable influence following Sisi's election and moved its main headquarters to Istanbul. The Syrian consulate in Cairo remains open and continues to offer consular services to Syrians residing in Egypt. Additionally, the National Coordination Committee, Syria's Tomorrow Movement, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party all have an office located in Cairo.

Currently, the most prominent Syrian associations and institutions in Egypt are the Syria Al Gad Relief Foundation, the Watan Foundation, the Bonyan Organization, the Ensan Foundation, the Habiba Al Khair Foundation, the Farad Foundation, the Omar Bin Khattab Association, the High Authority for Refugees Association, the Bokra Ahla Association, the Souriyat Association, and the INSAN foundation. Many volunteer teams have also emerged, including the Sham Volunteering Team, the Syrian Emergency Team, the Basmat Ibdaa Team, the al--Nabda Team, and the Tumouh Team. These teams meet in an informal entity known as the Syrian Volunteering Platform in Egypt. Most of these associations, institutions, and volunteer teams offer aid and educational services, lectures related to psychological health as well as capacity-building and human development projects. However, these organizations lack a strategic vision, and most of their roles are limited to implementing the projects of international organizations without a specific plan for the Syrian community in Egypt.

Currently, there is no entity to unite Syrians in Egypt. The Syrian House was carrying out this role culturally, but stopped its activities in mid-2013. Likewise, cultural salons and lectures used to take place on a weekly basis, however, they also ceased to exist in 2015. Additionally, there is no active support for civil society, unions, or student associations as a result of the general situation in Egypt. Skilled individuals are unable to obtain work permits in Egypt and Syrian graduates of



Egyptian universities cannot enter the workforce after graduation. Today, there are approximately 14,000 Syrian students in Egyptian universities that will be ineligible for work permits.

### 4. Divisions reflected in forms of participation

The various forms of solidarity among Syrians in Egypt have not prevented divisions from forming within the community. These divisions, however, did not form along sectarian lines given that most Syrians in Egypt are Sunni Muslims. The political divide is the most pronounced within the Syrian community. Few Syrians discuss Syrian political affairs, even on their social media pages or groups, due to the prevailing sense that the popular opinion has grown closer to the Syrian regime instead of the opposition. The political divisions among Syrians in Egypt were also reinforced by the decrease of Egyptian sympathy with the Syrian issue after 2013. Currently, no real attempts have been made by any organization to repair these divisions.

To further investigate divisions within the Syrian community a survey was conducted to study their readiness to participate in Syria's reconstruction. Five direct, in-depth were conducted with prominent figures in the Syrian community in Egypt. They were asked to respond to a set of questions which can be viewed in the appendix. The responses demonstrate that the respondents plan to actively participate in Syria's reconstruction. While residing in Egypt the participants have been closely following the situation in Syria, aiding Syrians in Egypt,<sup>2</sup> and providing humanitarian support and assistance through collective and personal initiatives. Based on their responses, it seems clear that their return to Syria will be contingent upon security, stability, a political solution, justice and integrity. While some participants would consider investment opportunities in Syria, the majority prefer to work with civil society organizations as they believe these organizations will have an important role in Syria's future.

## Conclusion



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Egypt has yet to recognize the numerous capabilities the Syrian community within its border possesses. Syrian civil society organizations in Egypt are absent from participation in the Syrian scene, even via the Civil Society Support Room established by the UN Special Envoy to Syria. The amount of human resources among Syrians in Egypt is clearly demonstrated by the 14,000 Syrian students in Egyptian universities as well as the 30,000 Syrian businessmen and investors present in the country. However, recently the Syrian regime has been attempting to bring these investors back to Syria, and is also trying to create a rapprochement with other Syrians in Egypt through the business community. In conclusion, the features of the Syrian refugee community in Egypt have not yet matured. In order to do so it will need people willing to care for it, sponsor it, and organize it. It has integrated into Egyptian society, but has not completely dissolved into it. The community has maintained its identity and has a desire to return to Syria in the future.

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## Appendix



## The Survey Response

Question	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4	Respondent 5
<b>Age</b>		35	27	45	44
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male
<b>Degree</b>	Master in Political Science	PhD. English Language	Medical Doctor	High School Diploma	High School Diploma
<b>Current job</b>	Co-founder and Director of an NGO	University Professor	Co-founder and Director of an NGO	Businesswoman	Merchant and Industrialist
<b>Since when have you lived outside Syria</b>	2004	2011	Born outside Syria	2013	2013
<b>Do you carry a valid passport?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	yes
<b>Do you currently visit Syria?</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Has your interest increased in the Syrian cause after 2011? How?</b>	Yes, particularly the Syrian Community in Egypt	Yes, I had been engaged with the Syrian cause before 2011 and continue to do so till the present.	Yes, by participating in activities demanding freedom and bringing an end to the tyranny	Yes. I followed closely and participated in all civil activities when I was in Damascus	Yes. Through the media
<b>Have you provided any support during this time? What kind?</b>	Yes, moral and psychological support	Yes, I volunteered to give English lessons and completed many translations into English	Yes, financially, volunteering, and in the media	Yes, finding Shelters for hundreds of displaced families and helping victims and detained families.	Yes, in relief works
<b>Was your support a personal initiative or part of a collective initiative?</b>	It started as an individual initiative but then it turned into a collective effort through a foundation that was established.	Individual initiative	It started as an individual initiative that turned into a collective initiative through a foundation that was established.	It started as an individual initiative that turned into a collective initiative through a foundation that was established..	Individual initiative
<b>Do you have a desire to contribute to a future Syria or to help Syrian people in the post-conflict era?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



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<b>expatriates should adopt to help Syria?</b>	Syrian business persons who should invest and support national advancement		International Community as well as Building competent institutions.	and following the political transition, my priority is to build a full serviced orphanage that takes care of kids, especially those	council to take care of them and to connect these councils together so that we have a collective work after returning to Syria.
<b>In your opinion, what are the priorities that the Syrian</b>	Every Syrian should play a role and maintain this role. Especially	Focusing on Education.	Support the country politically by putting pressure on the	with disabilities, During the war, we should work until they arrive towards a cease fire. After the war from school and secure a job.	To establish, in each county that has Syrian refugees a special
<b>What kind of help you can offer to Syria after the transition?</b>	Humanitarian assistance inside Syria	Scientific expertise	Cultural and professional.	Different humanitarian aids	Professional and other humanitarian help
<b>Are you looking for investment opportunity?</b>	Not interested.	No	In the near future, yes.	No	No
<b>What are the criteria you are going to take in consideration when helping Syrians?</b>	Freedom in all fields, integrity, empowering competent individuals	Security and safety for me as well as my family.	The Political solution. Finding legal institutions and securing their rights. Integrity. Justice. Engaging interested people in building the Infrastructure. Preventing foreign entities from monopolizing these areas.	The most needed and most The vulnerable side is the political transition and the political solution. The investment criteria is my faith in Syria as a free homeland for all.	Security Integrity Building institutions.
<b>Is there an organization that you can trust?</b>	Yes, Some local and International Organizations	No	Yes	No. I work with my team	No, most organizations have special agendas
<b>What encourages you to make up your mind: news publications, international Organization, advisors, Intermediary institutions, private organizations</b>	Private Organizations	None of those.	Advisors	None of those: rather my previous experiences and my beliefs.	International Organizations that have credibility.
<b>Do you prefer to work with the central government,</b>	Civil Society	Educational institutions.	Civil Society	Civil Society	Civil Society and the central government



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<b>local authorities or civil society?</b>					
<b>Do you trust the Local councils to handle the humanitarian aids?</b>	At present, I do not. In the future, however, they might have an important and basic role	I know nothing about them	Yes, if there is proper monitoring.	I do not trust them, unless the civil society is part of them. Civil society should have an advisory and monitoring role	Yes, if there is integrity.
<b>What factors would make you halt assistance?</b>	Feeling insecure	Lack of security and disrespect of scientific expertise.	Absence of guarantee that my assistance will reach the right people.	Failure of the Political process, in other words the failure of the political transition.	Lack of trust and integrity.



## Endnotes

1. UNHCR, “UNHCR expresses its concern about the detention of Syrian refugees in Egypt amid feelings of hostility to them,” *ibid*.
2. These are Najla Al-Bitar, Maysa Al-Shamma, Al-Khinn, Amer Al-Mustafa and Hisham Naqwa who have agreed to reveal their identity. We would like to express our gratitude and appreciation for enriching our research.



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Firas Haj Yehia is a Syrian human rights lawyer Founder of the Syrian Lawyers' Forum in Egypt, a manager of human rights department in the legal office of the National Coalition of Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian opposition In the past .

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