



Arab Reform Initiative

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# The Syrian Diaspora, Old and New

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Eight years of a high intensity conflict in Syria resulted in the forcible displacement of over half of the population of the country, some internally, while over six million others fled outside, causing the most severe refugee crisis the world has known since World War II. Little is written however on the estimated 18 million Syrians who have been living abroad for years, often decades. These Syrians emigrated in waves and settled in some 30 different countries worldwide, including in the most remote lands of South America and the Caribbean islands. Together with the refugees who fled as a consequence of the conflict, the number of Syrians outside the country is now three times higher than those living inside. This is not specific to Syrians. The number of Palestinians, Lebanese, Armenians and, of course, Jews scattered across continents is also three to four times higher than those inside Palestinian occupied territories, Lebanon, Armenia or Israel. But the Syrian conflict and its toll on civilians has undoubtedly triggered a new awareness of the existence of a strong Syrian diaspora which had, so far, kept a rather low profile.

To the stories of suffering and misery about refugees, diaspora communities oppose inspiring stories of the successful integration of individuals and families in their host societies. The Syrian diaspora is no exception. Its story contrasts with the dire situation of desperate boat people and helpless refugees. In general, the Syrian diaspora is economically self-sufficient and composed of well-integrated communities spreading across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

This report is the result of a collective effort to draw the first comprehensive picture of the de-territorialized Syrian people encompassing the old diaspora and the recent refugees. Co-authored by 13 experts, it describes the socio-economic and cultural features of the old diaspora communities (a subject largely under-researched by scholars) and captures the fast moving but very uneven process of transformation of recent refugees into a new component of the Syrian diaspora. Scholarly research and interviews with key members of the diaspora in their different living contexts reveal the considerable effort that the diaspora has mobilized to support Syrians during the conflict and its potential to be a major player in the reconstruction and development of Syria when the conflict ends.

## Political Economy of Diaspora



## communities

The report defines the Syrian diaspora as encompassing both the old diaspora communities integrated several years or decades ago in host countries as well as the refugees who fled the country since 2011. To the question of whether refugees and members of a diaspora should be considered as two distinct categories, the report responds with an approach that describes a continuum from one status to the other. A refugee clearly differs from a diaspora person at the level of his or her legal status in the first instance. Members of a diaspora most often carry the citizenship of the country in which they established themselves, while a refugee is a temporary resident and is registered as such by the international organizations based in host countries or the governments of host countries themselves. But this criterion is not satisfactory if taken alone as many foreign residents in a given country successfully integrate into the host society after a number of years without necessarily acquiring citizenship. It appears that the distinction is too blurred if based on socio-economic criteria. A more valid distinction relates to the way these two categories are perceived and treated by the different stakeholders. Refugees are seen as temporary while the diaspora is accepted as permanent; the former are treated as a problem to resolve while the latter is defined as a socio-cultural group with its specific identity within a given society.

The defining features proposed here are, first, a behavioural one when a refugee who was forced to leave as part of a group exodus and take refuge in a neighbouring country makes an individual choice to leave the group, renounce the assistance s/he has been receiving to carve his/her own trajectory. Self-perception of one's existence and projection into the future are the most decisive criteria in this regard. The second is related to the policy of the host country and the opportunities offered to the refugee to develop a personal strategy in order to integrate into the host society, or conversely the constraints it puts on refugees as a group to maintain them in a static condition at the legal and economic levels with the aim of pushing them to return or go elsewhere. This second factor is decisive in preventing or delaying the transformation of refugees into diaspora communities.

With integration comes the fear of loosened ties with the home country although



all existing research on diaspora communities indicates that, as they integrate in the economies of host countries, diaspora members don't actually reduce their ties and contribution to the economy of their homeland in volume but rather in nature. From remittances to the immediate family circle, the contributions evolve towards direct investments, partnerships, joint-ventures and other more sophisticated contributions, including institutionalized philanthropy. A diaspora is defined as such precisely because it maintains ties with the original homeland. A commonly accepted definition is provided by Gabriel Sheffer: "Modern diaspora communities are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands."<sup>1</sup> If these ties cease to exist, the diaspora would not be recognisable as no feature would distinguish it anymore from the rest of the society in which it lives.

## Syrian diaspora communities across the globe

Long before 2011, Syria presented a problem of brain drain that was arguably among the worst at the global level. A stark example is the number of Syrian physicians present across the medical systems of Western countries. Over 6000 Syrian doctors are established and practice in France alone, more than 20,000 in the United States while the medical system in Syria suffers from the lack of good medical specialists in most branches.

Most Syrians established abroad several years or decades ago maintain strong ties with Syria. A few figures are indicative of those ties. In 2010, the last year before the uprising for which statistics exist, remittance flows to Syria reached over 2 billion USD which amounted to almost 3.5% of the country's GDP. The Syrian diaspora populations in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Germany were the main contributors.<sup>2</sup> And as the millions of Syrian refugees begin to settle in Europe and in Middle Eastern countries, they are increasingly sending money back to Syria. In 2014, remittances from Europe to Syria amounted to \$84 million, and this figure is growing every year.<sup>3</sup>

The most important test of the diaspora communities' link to the motherland was



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undoubtedly the uprising of 2011 when Syrians around the world who had been living abroad for several decades suddenly turned their attention to what was happening in Syria. A cleavage emerged early on between supporters of the uprising and those in favour of the regime in place, but the intensity of the interest and the mobilization were remarkable. Over the eight years since the conflict started, the diaspora communities in different parts of the world connected together as well as with Syrians inside, and served as a major source of support for the homeland. It is too early to have reliable data but some anecdotal examples can be mentioned. Wealthy Syrian businessmen who moved to neighbouring countries of the Middle East organized collectively and decided to give 25% of their business profits for humanitarian aid, using channels of their own inside the country. Religion-based as well as region-based giving was very strong and revealed the long-established segmentation along religious and regional lines within the society. These networks only intensified with the increasingly sectarian turn in the conflict with notable exceptions such as the organization of medical associations UOSSM, which served populations from all areas of Syria and partnered with international NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières, or media associations that organized to cover all regions in the country.<sup>4</sup>

It was estimated that up to 2013, diaspora support accounted for close to 80% of the needs of forcibly displaced civilians. Later, the high level of destruction and the increase in the numbers of civilians in need of support required the massive assistance of the international community and represented an unprecedented challenge for international aid agencies, both in terms of the volume of aid needed and access of affected areas. Diaspora organizations played a critical role in this regard as international reports note. “The lack of physical presence of international aid agencies has shone a spotlight onto what is commonly called the ‘local response’: groups and organisations that do not belong to the formal or traditional humanitarian sector of the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and international NGOs... These groups have almost inadvertently filled the gap left by the limited international presence, providing both assistance and protection... According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), around 600 to 700 ‘local’ groups have been created since the start of the conflict. ... they are playing a vital role in responding to needs that would only be met inadequately or not at all. Challenges in accessing populations in need



by the formal humanitarian system have made partnerships with these actors an essential tool in the Syria response.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The potential of the Syrian diaspora to contribute in the post-conflict phase**

Throughout the conflict, the Syrian diaspora communities have been resilient and nimble. They have demonstrated their willingness to leverage their experience, knowledge, assets and energy in support of Syria and Syrians in need globally. They have been working in the worst circumstances and are likely to continue to do so. It is safe to say that the diaspora will not wait for change to occur in the power structure of the country in order to continue the activities it started in 2011. The non-financial motivation to remain connected with the homeland is also an important stimulus for early stage investment in the reconstruction programmes. If the terms of the political settlement do not produce a legitimate and stable governance system, the diaspora will be inclined to work through private initiatives, community-based organizations, kinship groups and other informal channels as it has done throughout the conflict. It is unlikely to reduce its support.

Questions that arise relate more to how (rather than if) the diaspora will engage with the homeland in the aftermath of the conflict. There are numerous variables that will affect its behaviour and shape its contribution, most importantly the terms of a political settlement, on one hand, and its capacity to organize, on the other.

If a transition process blessed by the international community at large takes place, there is every chance that the diaspora will mobilize its assets and networks to participate massively in the reconstruction process. Conversely, the prospect of the current regime regaining full control over the country will likely deepen the rift between pro and anti-Assad within diaspora communities and will inhibit the flow of assets from members of the Syrian diaspora who supported the uprising into the state-controlled channels. The second factor is the level of freedom that diaspora communities enjoy in each national context of their host country. Syrian communities in North America and Europe have more space to organize and engage in public activities and political advocacy than those based in the Gulf



countries where individual philanthropists, although they contribute considerable funds to support Syrians inside the country, are reluctant to take a public profile or engage in collective initiatives.

All the characteristics of the Syrian diaspora suggest it can develop into an influential player with a potentially powerful role when the process of reconstruction begins. The real challenge lies in its ability to organize itself transnationally and institutionalize its efforts. Examples from other diaspora communities around the world, from China to India, Africa, Ireland, or Mexico are all inspiring.

## Forms of diaspora contribution and organization

Diaspora communities are now recognized as key actors in the development of their societies and are increasingly integrated in the prospective analyses and planning of reconstruction and development aid by international institutions. Diaspora studies have flourished over the last two decades, mostly as the research on globalization developed. Kathleen Newland and Erin Patrick, *Beyond Remittances: The Role of Diaspora in Poverty Reduction in their Countries of Origin*, Migration Policy Institute, 2014; and H el ene Pellerin and Beverley Mullings, “The ‘Diaspora option’, migration and the changing political economy of development”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 2012 USAID, *Diaspora Direct Investment: The Untapped Resource for Development*, 2009 These studies provide evidence about the decisive role of diaspora contributions to the home countries. The contributions benefit the economies, but they also influence the social dynamics by fostering more open, more connected societies with greater political awareness as they are permeated by modern techniques and networks, ideas, values, and cultural artifacts that artists and intellectuals in exile transmit back to their home society.

Peggy Levitt defines “social remittances” as “the ideas, behaviors, identities and social capital that flow from receiving country to sending country communities.”<sup>6</sup> Though more difficult to assess than economic contributions, such changes can affect attitudes toward human rights, women’s rights, and the benefits of women’s



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employment. It is as if the brain drain process that happens over the years is compensated by bringing back brains to serve the country.

Studies also show that donors programmes developed in collaboration with diaspora groups tend to promote community self-reliance and as such tend to be more sustainable than other aid programmes; and that while international development agencies are project- and outcome-focused, diaspora groups tend to be people-focused, and centered on the goal of building and sustaining social capital.

Syrians will benefit from the studies on the different diaspora communities to explore forms of organization and consider models of structures from the diaspora philanthropy sector globally. Most often, diaspora communities are organized in a constellation of structures, including associations of migrants originating from the same locality, ethnic affinity groups, alumni associations, religious organizations, professional associations, charitable organizations, development NGOs, investment groups, affiliates of political parties, humanitarian relief organizations, schools and clubs for the preservation of culture, virtual networks, and federations of associations.

China offers the most glaring example of a diaspora's contribution that produced spectacular change in the motherland. It is entirely based on investment by private business. One figure speaks for this contribution. In 2002, out of some \$48 billion injected in foreign direct investment inside continental China, 26 billion of those originated with the Chinese diaspora. Unlike the case of countries in conflict where the identity factor is important, 'Chineseness' was not the chief motive in the growth of business ties between the Chinese diaspora communities and continental China. It was plain profit opportunities due to a set of exogenous factors such as the extremely rapid growth of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s, increased protectionism in the West, economic reform in China, and personal or local networks. These were more important than sentiment – or any effort by the Chinese government to court its diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

Business networks are common among diaspora. Some are long-existing ethnic chambers of commerce within a single country of settlement, while others are new and truly transnational. Many are using information technology to create and



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maintain ties among participants. The Lebanese Business Network, for example, is a non-profit “business development vehicle” with an online marketplace and business matching database. Its goal is to create links between Lebanese entrepreneurs, expatriates and international businesses, by identifying business opportunities and potential areas of partnership.

Mexicans in the United States formed Home Town Associations which serve the dual purpose of providing social support to the migrants and economic support to their places of origin – as did similar associations with Irish, Poles, Italians, and other immigrant groups that came before them to the United States.

The benefits of such networks go beyond profitable investment. The Indian case shows that the diaspora’s organized representation has boosted India’s confidence as well as the confidence of overseas investors about India’s potential despite India’s numerous problems. “Companies like Yahoo, Hewlett Packard and General Electric have opened R&D centers in India largely because of the confidence engendered by the presence of many Indians working in their US operations. This points to the cognitive effects arising from the projection of a coherent, appealing, and progressive identity on the part of the diaspora which signals an image of prosperity and progress to potential investors and consumers.”<sup>8</sup>

In the philanthropy sector, the Co-Impact initiative in India is an interesting model of collaboration between five of the largest foundations in the world and two Indian partners to implement a 500 million USD programme to provide medical services, educational facilities and jobs for the most vulnerable. Diaspora communities often form giving circles which are independent, self-organized groups of individuals who pool their donations and jointly decide which structures to fund. In some cases they are hosted by another organization. They also create intermediary mechanisms which are necessary in order to aggregate individual giving and expand the constituency of givers.

## Prospects and challenges for the Syrian diaspora



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The Syrian communities in the diaspora are endowed with skills, expertise and resources that have made them successful in their host countries. The sense of non-territorial membership in the nation is already ingrained. They have the capacity to play an important role if their assets are leveraged for the benefit of Syria. Newly arrived refugees who have a chance to develop their own trajectories have joined the older diaspora communities and will enrich the Syrian identity in exile. Connectivity among them is an asset in its own right: it can help convert diaspora capital in the broadest sense (financial, human and intellectual) into practical projects, serve as bridges to knowledge, know-how, resources and markets. This will benefit everyone: diaspora members, the host countries and the Syrian homeland. As a prominent Irish diaspora philanthropist notes “The key glue in successful diaspora philanthropy is world-class networking, harvesting the best ideas and innovation from around the world and applying them...countries have to use their diaspora communities to network their way to success.”<sup>9</sup>

As the conflict in Syria draws to an end, the needs of Syrians inside the country are shifting. From coping with the hardships of violence and insecurity, Syrians are now looking at how to rebuild themselves, their immediate family circle and their local environment. Refugees are weighing the odds to decide whether they can return to Syria or plan for the long-term in host countries.

Countless Syrians with financial assets have led generous, effective, professionally run organizations. Now is the time to acknowledge the power that the Syrians abroad hold and design a diaspora strategy. The diaspora has the exposure to processes, techniques, networks, new fields of knowledge and methods which Syrians who have not left Syria need. Even without returning – and most will not return to live in Syria – Syrians in the diaspora are all keen to contribute by advising, mentoring, teaching, donating and taking temporary visits to export back to Syria the skills, values and standards they have gained in their respective host countries. Syria can only re-emerge if talents are aggregated and organized in ways that serve this strategy. It can help a young generation of Syrians to reach their full potential, in spite of the tragedies they have lived through. It can build smart communities in various fields and a modern society with gender parity and diversity as priorities. More than any other source of assistance, a diaspora can ensure sustainability, primarily because it is less prone to fatigue than foreign



actors.

Diaspora communities' natural inclination is to work through non-governmental channels, mainly civil society organizations and private enterprise. Today and for some years to come, the onus is and will be on civil society and private initiative to improve the lives of Syrians. A diasporic network of successful and creative Syrians can form the infrastructure of a support system and can shift resources and power to Syrians. Trust is at the heart of such an endeavour. Diaspora communities grow in an organic, peer-led fashion based on trust, shared networks and interests.

Vis-à-vis Syrians, an organized diaspora can ensure independence of agenda, strengthen the legitimacy of civil society organizations by making them less dependent on foreign funding. It can also strengthen the legitimacy of foreign funding by showing that foreign partners are providing support according to a Syrian agenda. When organized as a collective actor, the diaspora can take a seat at the power table of international actors and can play a critical role in advancing international and transnational partnerships. It can shift some of the power that today lies within international organizations and contribute to rebuilding a renewed sense of sovereignty that is modern and more resilient because it relies on the potential of a society rather than on mere control over territory.

An organized diaspora can pool its connections inside the country to provide access to reliable information on the evolving needs of Syrians at home. It will have the capacity to identify priorities quickly, move faster and be collectively smarter. It can also help traditional diaspora communities who work through family ties, cultural, sectarian or regional affinities, to diversify their donations beyond traditional channels.

The Syrian diaspora has all the needed characteristics to organize multiple forms of soft power and play the role of conduit by facilitating the flow of capital, ideas, skills and people, and pointing to the channels through which support can be provided in the most effective way. Government aid agencies and large foundations are encouraging the formation of consortia which can serve as interlocutors and potential partners in order to instigate the kind of co-impact initiatives we mentioned earlier about India. Understanding the power of the Syrian diaspora's resources and tapping into its financial and intellectual capital is



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an effective way of leveraging the support of other non-Syrian actors - international donors, foundations and government agencies - who are looking at ways to help.

For now the diaspora has only started to measure its own importance. It has yet to organize itself with the conscious aim of becoming the strategic player and partner it can be for the international community to help Syria on its long road to recovery.



## Endnotes

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- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- 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.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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