



## Diaspora Mobilization in Contexts of Political Uncertainties

Exploring the potentials, limits and future roles of the  
Syrian civil society in the Middle East and Europe

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All photos by Bassam Khabieh except front page photo which is by Samara Sallam: “Memory” A ball made of razor barb wire and bells. The artist invited the audience to play with it during the exhibition in 2018

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# List of Abbreviations

**CSO**

Civil society organization

**DFID**

Department for International Development (UK)

**EU**

European Union

**IDMC**

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

**IDP**

Internally Displaced Persons

**IGAM**

İtica ve Göç Ara tirmaları Merkezi (Research Center on Asylum and Migration)

**IIIM**

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism

**INGO**

International non-governmental Organization

**IO**

International organization

**IOM**

International Organization for Migration

**IRC**

International Rescue Committee

**ISIS**

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

**MENA**

Middle East and North Africa

**NGO**

Non-governmental organization

**NRC**

Norwegian Refugee Council

**OCHA**

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**PKK**

Partiya Karker Kurdistan (Kurdistan Worker's Party)

**SDF**

Syria Democratic Forces

**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**US**

United States

**YPG**

Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)



While living under the siege, Syrian Artist Akram Sweidan decided to start making art out of material remnants of bombing campaigns. He is shown here decorating a missile shell with ornate tiles. Photo credit: Bassam Khabieh

# Executive Summary

The Syrian uprising in 2011 can be considered a transformative event, which prompted unprecedented levels of collective action and organization, in particular among the opponents of the current government of Syria. The countries hosting Syria's displaced populations witnessed the emergence and ongoing development of a vibrant, politically and socially engaged civil society led by Syrians with the aim to, first, play a part in the social and political transformations Syria is going through and second, respond to the pressing needs of Syrian people both in the country of origin as well as of destination. Through workshops and semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the external and structural conditions that interfere with the space and actions of Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) in six host countries (Lebanon, Turkey, France, Germany, Denmark, United Kingdom). In addition, the prospects of Syrian CSOs, potential strategies, solutions and fields of action are elaborated on in the light of likely scenarios.

The actions and strategies of Syrian civil society are influenced heavily by the dynamics inside the country of origin, such as the bureaucratic and security challenges to the delivery of aid inside Syria and the general lack of security and stability in cross-border operations. On the host country level, the legal environment of European countries concerned in this study is an enabling factor for advocacy, while the legal precariousness and political instability in neighbouring countries does not allow much space and freedom for political mobilization. International political contexts and discourses pose both opportunities and constraints to the Syrian diaspora and affect the direction of engagement. A potential normalization of international relations with the Syrian government is likely to intensify the political nature of diaspora mobilization in some segments of civil society, particularly in European host countries, with increased advocacy efforts to indirectly influence the homeland's political situation. The UN-sponsored peace talks and the efforts of European countries in peacebuilding present opportunities for Syrian civil society to voice their demands, but the diverse components of Syrian civil society are not adequately engaged in such settings. The narratives of conflict and peace that are imposed by the host countries and international organizations potentially portray parts of Syria as being safe for returns, but many refugees continue to face serious risks upon their return. Reconciliation emerges as a contested term in some contexts both in the region and Europe, with the argument that the desire to rapidly achieve peace can hinder the processes of justice for the sake of stability in the region. The needs and resources of organizations are diverse and context-specific, but mainly centred around coordination efforts, accessibility and availability of funding, technical capacities, human resources, availability and reliability of data and the need to harness advocacy efforts to promote wider solidarity and mobilization.

Over the past years, the manoeuvrability and adaptability of Syrian civil society actors in response to the changing realities inside and outside Syria is noteworthy. However, it is safe to say that concrete organizational strategies and solutions for likely future scenarios hardly exist for the majority of Syrian CSOs except for a handful of professionalized and well-established organisations. The divergent perspectives of actors regarding the controversial matter of building or maintaining ties with actors and entities in the government-held areas of Syria may introduce new fault lines among civil society actors in the 'near' diaspora (Syrians in the neighbouring countries) in a scenario in which the Syrian government regains control of Syria. However, the mere fact that it is possible to openly discuss these seemingly hard to touch issues may serve to illustrate that such positionings are not as indisputable as popular views might suggest. The protraction of conflict entails sustained efforts towards relief aid while at the same time, it is seen as essential to work towards increased solidarity and dialogue among Syrian people. In a scenario with a federal system, there is a tendency to shift the emphasis on fostering dialogue among fragmented geographies and the creation of social capital to maintain the unity of Syria to some extent. The post-conflict role of civil society mainly lies in advocacy and justice, especially in the European context. Syrian organizations express a desire to strengthen international ties with a perspective to contest a

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default gradual legitimisation of the current government of Syria, intensify efforts in the pursuit of justice in international courts and to put the issues of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention on the international agenda. To what extent and under which conditions an independent civil society can exist inside and outside Syria is uncertain.

While the organizations in Europe seem relatively more settled, it is uncertain whether the end of the conflict will jeopardize the existence of Syrian civil society in Lebanon and Turkey. The potential deterioration in host country contexts may force Syrian CSOs to relocate to another hub in the region or extend transnational networks to more enabling contexts in Europe. Depending on the financial capacities and the existing transnational ties, a potential pathway for well-established humanitarian organizations could be building on their capacities to become international players, as some key Syrian humanitarian organizations did, and serve in missions elsewhere, which means a partial loss of diasporic identity.



# 1. Introduction

In March 2011, the people of Syria engaged in massive/wide-spread protests calling for freedom, justice and equality. The brutal repression of the protests by government forces led to an escalation of the protests first into an armed insurgency and later a full-scale civil war. The conflict pulled in global and regional powers and what followed has been an ambitious territorial battle for the control of Syria. During the last eight years, continuous violations of human rights with unlawful attacks on civilians resulted in the deaths of more than half a million people and made Syria the largest refugee-producing country in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2019; UNHCR, 2018).

According to UN estimates, 540,000 people were still living under siege by June 2017 (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Before 2011, Syria had a population of approximately 22 million (Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria, 2011) and the population outside Syria is estimated to be around 1.7 million, mainly composed of labour migrants settled, by and large, in the Gulf States and neighbouring countries to Syria in the 1970s (De Bel-Air, 2016). Since 2011, 6.7 million people are internally displaced, and over 6.3 million people have been forced to move across the borders and seek refuge in other countries in a mass exodus situation (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2017; UNHCR, 2018). Syrian refugees have been granted asylum in 129 countries worldwide, but the vast majority are hosted by their immediate neighbours including Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt and, to a lesser extent, in North Africa, Europe and the United States (UNHCR, 2018). These figures demonstrate that more than one third of Syrians are currently living outside Syria.

Entering its tenth year in March 2020, many observers argue that Assad has effectively won the Syrian war and will most likely remain in power (Hassan, 2018; Griffing, 2018; Behraves, 2018). Yet, resolving the conflicts within the broader Syrian society will be a long-term endeavour, heavily challenged by the fact that the sovereignty of the Syrian government continues to be contested and that the future of Syria's displaced population, which accounts for the bulk of its population, remains uncertain. Past experiences affirm that expectations of a rapid return to peace and stability in Syria are slim and the overwhelming majority of the Syrian refugees will continue to live in their host countries in the short and medium-term, in line with the overall nature of mass movements (Kiri ci, 2014; Erdo an & Ünver, 2015). While host countries in the region as well as in Europe deal with the acknowledgement of refugees' presence, Syrians have been mobilizing for their causes since the first year with the aim to, first, play a part in the social and political transformations Syria is going through and second, to respond to the pressing needs of Syrian people both in the country of origin as well as of destination. The countries hosting Syria's displaced populations witnessed the emergence and strengthening of a vibrant, politically and socially engaged civil society led by Syrians to address pressing demands on the ground. Given that many Syrian diaspora organizations and initiatives position themselves in opposition to the government, but also with particular areas of contestation between each other, the main question is how different Syrian diaspora actors will be able to and are already adjusting to political realities in the wake of changing conditions inside Syria. It is this overarching question that the research will seek to explore.

This study is based on the basic assumption that Syrian civil society actors in host countries act as agents of their own cause, the Syrian cause, in which they advocate for their own rights. Therefore, they will likely continue to play a significant role in Syria's future. In order to grasp the nature of such engagement, this study explores the prospects for the future roles of Syrian civil society **outside** Syria, in light of the changing political realities **inside** Syria as well as in the host countries. At the same time, we aim to inform policy development to empower Syrian civil society organizations outside Syria by documenting sector-specific and context-related challenges and opportunities as well as their needs and resources.

To realize this, we have conducted workshops and interviews with Syrian diaspora actors in Europe (Germany, France, the UK, Denmark and Sweden) and in major host countries neighbouring Syria (Lebanon and Turkey). The comparison of diaspora groups in two distinct regional settings (Europe and the Middle East) can help to identify similarities and differences between the cases, leading to a better understanding of how different transnational opportunities and constraints shape the needs, objectives, and practices of different diaspora groups. Through this, the research can promote a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness, variability, and contextuality of migration and social change. By analyzing diaspora engagement with a multi-site approach, the research further aims to discover transnational connectivities, forms of cooperation, and activities of diaspora groups, cross-cutting dichotomies of “local” and “global.”

## 2. Diasporas and conflict-mobilization in contexts of contested sovereignty

The term diaspora has become a catchword in contemporary political, academic and media debates. The increasing popularity of the term has also led to a stretching of the concept, as the word diaspora is frequently used as a metaphor for immigrant populations, ethnic minorities or transnational social formations (Brubaker, 2005; Dufoix & Waldinger, 2008; Vertovec, 2007). As a result, there exists a wide range of competing definitions, which poses a challenge to the analytical power of the term. This study makes use of the definition elaborated on by Adamson and Demetriou (2007), who conceptualize diasporas as:

**“a social collectivity that exists across state borders and that has succeeded over time to (1) sustain a collective national, cultural or religious identity through a sense of internal cohesion and sustained ties with a real or imagined homeland and (2) display an ability to address the collective interests of members of the social collectivity through a developed internal organizational framework and transnational links” (p.497).**

In line with newer conceptualizations within diaspora literature, we understand the provided definition from a constructionist perspective. In that sense, diasporas are not natural results of migration, but instead a product of an active process of transnational mobilization. Understanding diaspora mobilization as a process puts emphasis on the dynamic, multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of the concept. Rather than imposing a communal identity based on a homogenizing narrative, it is important not only to investigate the processes through which a diasporic identity is constructed, but also the actors who engage in the construction of “transnational imagined communities” (Sökefeld, 2006). Central to this approach are the questions of how and why people mobilize for certain collective goals, and what political opportunities and constraints provide conditions for transnational mobilization (F. Adamson, 2008; Chaudhary & Moss, 2016; Koinova, 2012; Sökefeld, 2006). Lyons & Mandaville (2010) argue that not every migrant or refugee who feels connected to the homeland and shares a common identity with others should be considered as part of a diaspora, but only those who are “mobilized to engage in homeland political process” (p.126). ‘Diaspora entrepreneurs’ – formal or informal leaders of different diaspora groups – are considered key actors in the mobilization process due to their capacity to make claims, mobilize, and organize support towards the original homeland. As such, diaspora mobilization can be defined as **“individual and collective actions of identity-based social entrepreneurs who organize and encourage migrants to behave in a concerted way to make homeland-oriented claims, bring about a political objective, or contribute to a cause”** (Koinova, 2018). Müller-Funk (2016) sees diaspora mobilization as **“political activity which crosses one or more borders’ and ‘targets the domestic and foreign policy of that country”** (p.354). Although most often undertaken by migrants and refugees and their descendants from one origin, allegiances may include the involvement of other, thematically aligned groups such as human rights activists, religious groups, or similar movements in other countries. She argues that diaspora mobilization aims at exerting influence on the homeland’s political situation. This influence can be pursued either directly through the establishment of networks and linkages with political actors, organizations, and institutions in the country of origin and the cross-border diffusion of material and immaterial political resources, such as money, political tools, values or ideologies, or indirectly by raising awareness and influencing public opinion and political decision-making in the host countries.

In line with the scholars of migration and development literature, we understand diaspora mobilization more broadly, by also including actors that engage in collective action that contributes to development processes in the homeland in material and non-material ways. Besides political involvement, diaspora actors can contribute to peace processes and mechanisms, promote infrastructure development, education and employment, or provide humanitarian or emergency assistance (Brinkerhoff, 2011). Hence, in the realization of collective goals, diaspora actors mobilize through a wide range of structures such as hometown associations, religious and cultural clubs, development, humanitarian and human rights organizations, youth and women groups, political parties and activists as well as academic networks and media outlets (Kleist, 2015; Sinatti & Horst, 2014). Scholars of transnationalism emphasize that migrants, being connected to several places, commonly engage in exchanges and interactions across borders and are involved in multiple societies at once (Glick Schiller, 2013; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Mazzucato, 2008). As a result, diaspora civil society actors also transform the political spaces of the host country, by promoting the inclusion of co-nationals, advocating for rights and against discrimination or promoting intercultural dialogue and social cohesion (Però & Solomos, 2010). Transnational practices of diaspora actors, hence, can be considered not just as a form of civic participation in the country of origin, but as a crucial part and voices of the civil society in the country of settlement (Horst, 2013, Müller-Funk, 2019).

## 2.1. Concepts and definitions

Based on the definitions above, and for the sake of simplicity, this study refers to all Syrian CSOs established in host countries as ‘Syrian diaspora CSOs’ regardless of the host country and the migration motivations of its members. There are distinct aspects of near diaspora (neighbouring countries) and distant diaspora as well as diverse visions and aspirations of members of old diaspora (those who migrate before 2011) and new diaspora (arrivals after 2011), which are briefly reflected upon in the final sections of comparative analysis and concluding remarks. However, these divisions are not analyzed in depth and therefore, not referenced throughout the empirical discussions. Rather, diaspora CSOs is used as an overarching term that encompasses all civil society organizations established by Syrians and which work on the Syrian cause or target Syrian beneficiaries in the respective host countries. In addition, the usage of the term diaspora is not necessarily linked to the self-identification of participants as diasporas but rather based on the definition of diaspora adopted in this study. Thus, we do not have strong claims on the propriety of the usage of the word due to limited self-identification, which might stem from the contemporary confusion about the term and its origins.

In the same vein, conceptual clarity about ‘justice’ is needed. The concept of ‘transitional justice’ has come to play a prominent role in academic debates in the literature of justice, peace and reconciliation. Based on the definition by Minow (1998), transitional justice refers to dealing with past atrocities during the transition to stable and democratic governments. Recent studies demonstrate that this concept and its language has also been adopted by Syrian activists (Stokke & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2019). However, the probable victory of the Syrian government and the lessened hopes for a democratic transition in the near future seems to leave demands for justice unaccompanied by a transition. The scarcity of discussions on a possible political transition in this study is supportive of this usage. In this context, the authors of this study preferred to use ‘justice’ over the term ‘transitional justice.’

## 2.2. Contextual dimension

Diaspora mobilization in conflicts is a multi-faceted phenomenon in which the cause-and-effect relationships are particularly complex, multidimensional and interlinked. Importantly, it has been argued that the space and nature of diaspora mobilizations depends on the opportunities and constraints diasporic political entrepreneurs encounter in the country of destination, the country of origin, and the international

sphere, hence the exogenous factors enabling or constraining mobilization (F. Adamson, 2008; Chaudhary & Moss, 2016; Maria Koinova, 2012; Sökefeld, 2006). Transnational political opportunity structures thus help to explain why the success of diaspora groups in homeland conflict often vary over time and place (Wayland, 2004). Depending on the country of origin's authority type of governance, there will be a more open or more restrictive space for transnational political action, with authoritarian origin-country regimes tending to provide fewer avenues for political influences, at least in cases in which the sovereignty of the government is contested by the diasporic political entrepreneurs. Policies and strategies targeting the diaspora will also depend on how the emigrant population is discursively and symbolically included in the nation. In some cases, the diaspora might be framed as a distant member of the national community and seen as hero and savior of the nation, while in other cases those in exile might be depicted as troublemakers and traitors (Boccagni, Lafleur, & Levitt, 2016). In the latter, countries of origin may introduce long-distance instruments and policies in order to monitor and exert control over their emigrant population. Turkey (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003), Morocco (Brand, 2006; de Haas, 2007) and Tunisia (Brand, 2006) have been examples in which state-run institutions abroad were involved in surveillance and intelligence measure to repress diaspora political activism and to prevent the emergence of political opposition from the outside. In contrast, socio-economic and political incentives provided by the country of origin can enable diaspora contributions to peace and reinforce an interest in the origin country's development (Burgess, 2014). Transnational political actions are also influenced by the relative stability of the country of origin, as critical social and political events, such as revolutionary struggles, conflicts, economic crisis, or natural disaster, can shape and influence diaspora consciousness and mobilize members to take action (Chaudhary & Moss, 2016; Hammond et al., 2011; Hess & Korf, 2014; Khayati, 2012; Maria Koinova, 2011; Skrbis, 2007).

Important factors in the country of destination are refugee and migrant incorporation regimes as well as multiculturalism policies. In general, more democratic countries that adopt cultural pluralism and multiculturalism provide more freedom and space for diaspora activism and enable collectivities to unfold their diasporic identities (Kadhum, 2014; Shain & Barth, 2003). Since diasporic actors do not act in a political vacuum, the measures they implement and the strategies they choose often match with the host country's policies and the broader public discourse (Al-Ali, 2007; M. Koinova, 2014; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). On the other hand, a perceived lack of interest towards diasporic stances could also motivate political entrepreneurs to take action in order to raise awareness for their claims (Hess & Korf, 2014). It is thus important to highlight that public discourse is also shaped and influenced by diasporic actions (Horst, 2013). The institutional framework and funding mechanisms in the destination country also shape the capacity of diaspora entrepreneurs to exert influence on the origin country. Diaspora actors often face a lack of structural funds and heavily rely on the contributions of members to fund their operational budgets. However, financial arrangements can also lead to competition for resources among groups, or depoliticized diaspora actions due to the requirement to comply with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Warnecke, 2010, Horst, 2013).

In the international sphere, political opportunities and constraints are shaped by supranational institutions such as the United Nations or the European Union, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as well as by international humanitarian and human rights regimes. Supranational institutions can provide a platform for advocacy where diaspora actors can mobilize support and call for action and international recognition of their cause (Chaudhary & Moss, 2016). In the humanitarian system, UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations cooperate with diaspora actors in responding to the needs of the target population either via funding or partnership. In the case of Syria, Svoboda and Pantuliano (2015) argue that diaspora organizations were mainly used as service providers, which risked a depoliticization in not only the name of neutrality, but also the reinforcement of imbalances of power inherent in the humanitarian system. Counter-terrorism laws and measures introduced after 9/11 pose a risk of criminalizing financial transaction of diasporas in the case where the conflict is related to the security discourse, potentially limiting the ability of groups to generate both internal and external funds (Chaudhary & Moss, 2016).

## 2.3. Temporal dimension

Transnational mobilization of diaspora groups should not be perceived as fixed, but rather as situated in the historical context, being, therefore, dynamic in space and time (Mavroudi, 2007). On the one hand, changes in political opportunity structures can lead to shifting configurations of power and transform the strategies, spaces and trajectories of diaspora mobilization (Koinova, 2018). For instance, if avenues for direct influence on the country of origin become more restrictive, diaspora entrepreneurs may capitalize on the opportunities of expression and protest in the destination country to indirectly influence decision-making on their cause (Chaudhary & Moss, 2016). Moreover, conflict dynamics have been shown to shape mobilization trajectories in various ways. In the emergence of a conflict, diasporic political entrepreneurs may lobby to influence decision-making at the international level or within the receiving country. Once the conflict escalates, diaspora groups can mobilize public opinion through media campaigns, organization of demonstrations and other information events to raise awareness on their cause, lobby for direct actions and intervention by host country governments or the international community or provide humanitarian assistance to those suffering from the consequences of the conflict (Bercovitch, 2007). Post-conflict interventions tend to depend on the outcomes of the conflict and the respective diasporic positions towards it. If diaspora groups perceive themselves on the losing side, those actors are most likely less willing to engage in state-rebuilding and reconstruction and indeed might cultivate their own alternative imaginations of national community (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017). At the same time, diaspora groups have actively pursued trials of home-state perpetrators of crimes abroad under universal jurisdiction laws, which enables prosecution for serious violations of human rights outside of the country where such violations occurred when the justice system in the home state is unwilling or unable to do so. The Argentinian, Cambodian, Chilean, and Rwandan diasporas all petitioned and lobbied for their host states, particularly France and Belgium, to arrest and try former members of state regimes accused of human rights abuses in the host country (Mey, 2008).

## 2.4. Spatial dimension

On the one hand, the spatial dimension of diaspora mobilizations refers to the geographic distance that diaspora groups inhabit with respect to the country of origin, in which the distinction is made between the 'near diaspora' residing in neighboring countries and the wider diaspora living in at a greater distance. Given the selectivity of migration processes, those who reside further away tend to be endowed with greater economic, cultural, social and human capital than those in more vulnerable positions in the neighboring country, being hence equipped with a higher capacity to exert influence on the origin country (Van Hear, 2006). Moreover, distant diaspora groups may benefit from various opportunities and a safer space to mobilize for their political causes, whereas diaspora groups residing in the neighboring countries might be exposed to greater threats and higher risks of violence (Adamson, 2016). On the other hand, spatial contiguity may allow for more continuous cross-border movement and exchange, through which the everyday lives in the origin country are experienced more closely. Distant diaspora groups may be much more disconnected from the reality on the ground, hence, potentially cultivating alternative imaginations of the national community, which do not necessarily correspond with local aspirations in the homeland (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017). Moreover, spatiality not only refers to the geographic distance but also to the positionality diaspora political entrepreneurs inhabit in the transnational social field. Koinova (2012) defines diaspora positionalities as **“the relative power that diaspora entrepreneurs perceive as deriving from their social positions occupied in a specific context [and is] both a perceptual and relational category.”** She argues that, among other things, proximity to the majority race and religion and comparative advantage of place vis-a-vis other segments of the network influence the power and positionality of diaspora groups in the transnational space. For instance, Palestinian diaspora groups in the UK perceived themselves in a weaker social position, due to the experience of discrimination, xenophobia

and resentments towards Islam by the majority society. At the same time, the presence of international media in London was perceived as favorable as it enabled diaspora groups to raise awareness of their struggles by reaching a broader audience.

## 3. Methodology

This research has been carried out in form of an exploratory study, in which interviews and workshops with engaged members of Syrian diaspora civil society in four European countries, (Denmark, France, Germany and the UK) and two selected neighbouring countries to Syria (Lebanon and Turkey) have been employed as the main methods for gathering data. The workshops and interviews were conducted between December 2018 and March 2019.

As a first step, a general **literature review** on diaspora mobilization in conflict-settings and their contribution to development and peacebuilding was conducted in order to develop a conceptual framework for the qualitative analysis. Furthermore, desk research identified the trends of Syrian migration, the migration and asylum context and the existing space of Syrian diaspora organizations in the respective destination countries.

**Secondary data and statistics** have been reviewed and included in order to provide an overview and comparison of the demographic and socio-economic composition of the Syrian immigrant population in the six selected destination countries. Data has been retrieved from the respective national statistical offices and offices for migration and refugees and incorporated wherever necessary UNHCR, IOM and World Bank sources and figures.

**The workshops** made use of an action-based approach, in which future scenarios and potential strategies for action have been elaborated collaboratively by the participants. The objectives of the workshop were twofold. On the one hand, they served as a tool to generate knowledge, by collecting and documenting the different perceptions, opinions, and aspirations of Syrian actors with regard to the challenges and opportunities arising from the changing realities inside Syria, in the host countries and on the international level. On the other hand, the workshops aimed at providing a space for the development of future scenarios, joint strategies and plans for action for the Syrian civil society in the respective host countries.

A series of five workshops were organized respectively in Beirut, Istanbul, Gaziantep, Berlin, and London. **The workshop design** was highly interactive with small group discussions followed by plenary sessions. The agenda was designed slightly differently in the region due to the additional sensitivity required in Lebanon and Turkey.

Eligible **workshop participants** were engaged members of Syrian diaspora civil society including civil society actors, activists, academicians, and journalists who work on the Syrian cause or target Syrian beneficiaries in the respective host countries. Participants were recruited by making use of the existing networks of researchers in Europe and in Turkey, in addition to the referrals made by INGOs, GIZ, IMPACT in Beirut and Syria Solidarity Campaign in London. Among the invited parties were a few key actors from academia and media next to the main target group of civil society actors including professionalized organization and smaller size local and community-based organizations established in the post-2011 context in response to the situation in Syria. Therefore, CSOs that established a presence in host countries before 2011 are not in the scope of this study. Some of the organizations, particularly in Europe, are set up or staffed by Syrians that represent the old diaspora, i.e., Syrians that left Syria before the current crisis. Of the 71 participants who attended the workshops, 67 were civil society actors, two were academicians and two were journalists. For reasons of brevity, the participant group will be referred to as civil society actors or diaspora civil society actors throughout the report. The CSOs represented by the participants include international, national and local NGOs, community-based organizations as much as volunteer collectives, activist groups, religious groups and humanitarian organizations which do not necessarily self-



identify as civil society organizations. By sending out a short registration form, we collected information on the participants' fields of civic engagement, which were then used to inform the workshop session on challenges and opportunities in different sectors.

The first three workshops were held in December 2018 in Beirut, Istanbul and Gaziantep, respectively. Personalized invitation emails were sent to roughly 75 eligible participants in Turkey and Lebanon. Among them, 54 people registered and 32 attended. The workshop in Beirut<sup>1</sup> was held on 14 December 2018, at Arjaan by Rotana Hotel in collaboration with the team of IMPACT, a Syrian CSO headquartered in Berlin with presence in Turkey and Syria. The event hosted representatives from four organizations based inside Syria and seven participants from different parts of Lebanon. The participation of CSOs operating inside Syria was not initially planned, but resulted from the wide circulation of the invitation email by our partner organization shortly before the event. Their participation necessitated in-depth considerations of potential tensions it could create in an interactive workshop setting. In order to mitigate the risk of confrontational discussions, the scenario-building session in the second half of the workshop was re-shaped to centre around identifying likely events that would have consequences for Syrian civil society, rather than developing concrete scenarios concerning the future of Syria. This amendment was applied in all three workshops in the region as a general measure. The workshops in Europe, on the other hand, explored possible future scenarios in Syria during open-floor brainstorming sessions.

The workshop in Istanbul<sup>2</sup> was held on 18 December 2018 at Kiraathane Istanbul Literature House; eight civil society actors from Istanbul attended. The workshop in Gaziantep<sup>3</sup> was held on 21 December 2018 at Novotel Gaziantep; 12 participants were from Gaziantep and one respondent travelled from Hatay.

In Europe, the workshops were held respectively in Berlin and London in February 2019. Personalized invitation emails were circulated to 80 potential participants in four countries, of which 45 were registered and 39 attended. The workshop in Berlin<sup>4</sup> was held on 9 February 2019, at the premises of IMPACT in collaboration with their team. The meeting hosted five participants representing organizations based in France, six participants from Denmark and fifteen participants from organizations in different parts of Germany. The workshop in London<sup>5</sup> was held on 16 February 2019, at SOAS University. The meeting was attended by thirteen diaspora members from different parts of the UK including Scotland and Wales.

Country	City	Date	# of participants	Female participation	CSO operation base	Workshop Location
Lebanon	Beirut	14.12.2018	11	4	4 from Syria 7 from Lebanon	Hotel (formal setting)
Turkey	Istanbul	18.12.2018	8	1	all from Istanbul	Art and Literature house (cosy setting)
Turkey	Gaziantep	21.12.2018	13	1	12 from Gaziantep 1 from Hatay	Hotel (formal setting)
Germany	Berlin	9.2.2019	26	4	6 from Denmark 5 from France 15 from Germany	Office space of IMPACT (casual setting)
United Kingdom	London	16.2.2019	13	0	5 from Wales 3 from Scotland 5 from England	University (formal setting)

1 - The workshop is designed and facilitated by Monaf Melhem and Anas Younes based on the content provided to them by the researchers.

2 - The workshop is facilitated by the researchers with the support of Mohamed Housseem Eddine Taboubi and interpreted by Elaa Jamazi.

3 - The workshop is facilitated by Ayman Abou Samra and interpreted by Mousa Amhan from the local Gaziantep office of IMPACT.

4 - The workshop is facilitated by Ruham Hawash from IMPACT and Mohammad Khalaf from UNU/Maastricht University acted as an interpreter.

5 - The workshop is facilitated by Abdulaziz Almashi from Syria Solidarity Campaign and Bayan Abughaida assisted with interpretation.



Figure 1. Distribution of Participants' fields of activity in Turkey and Lebanon

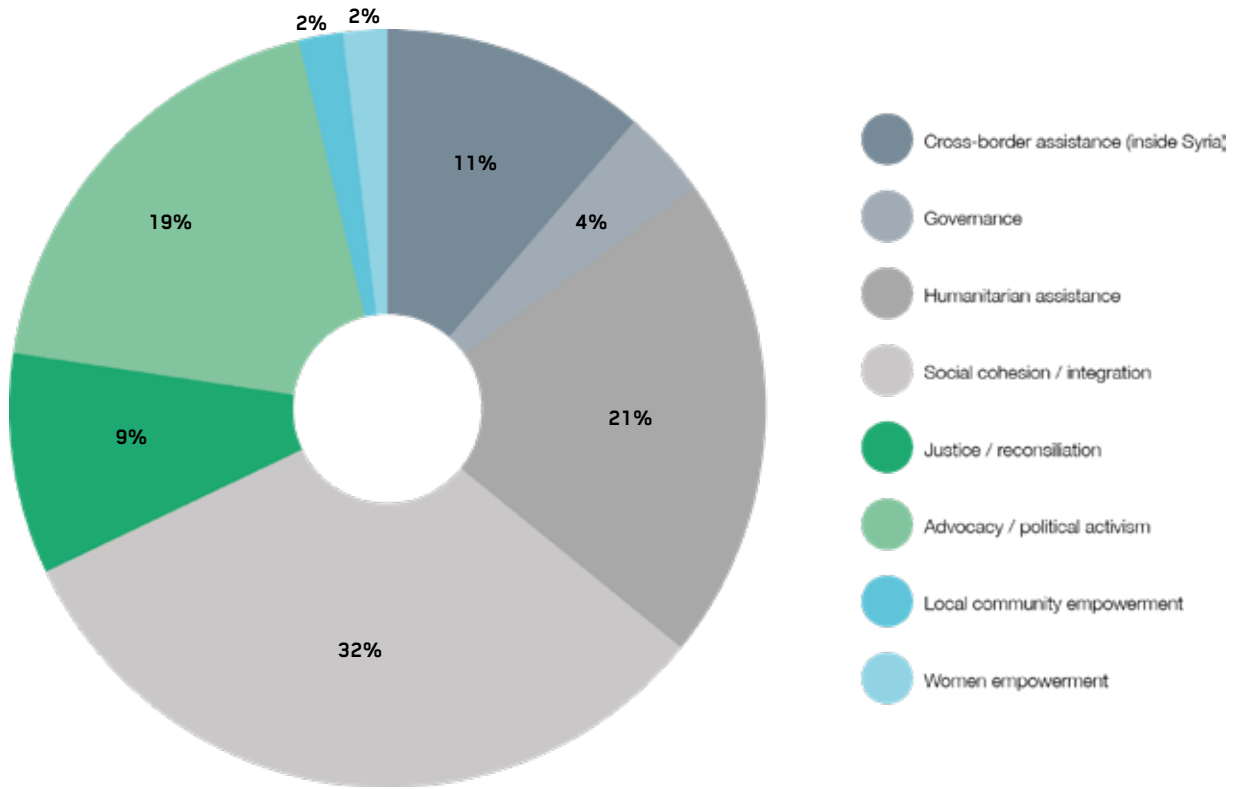
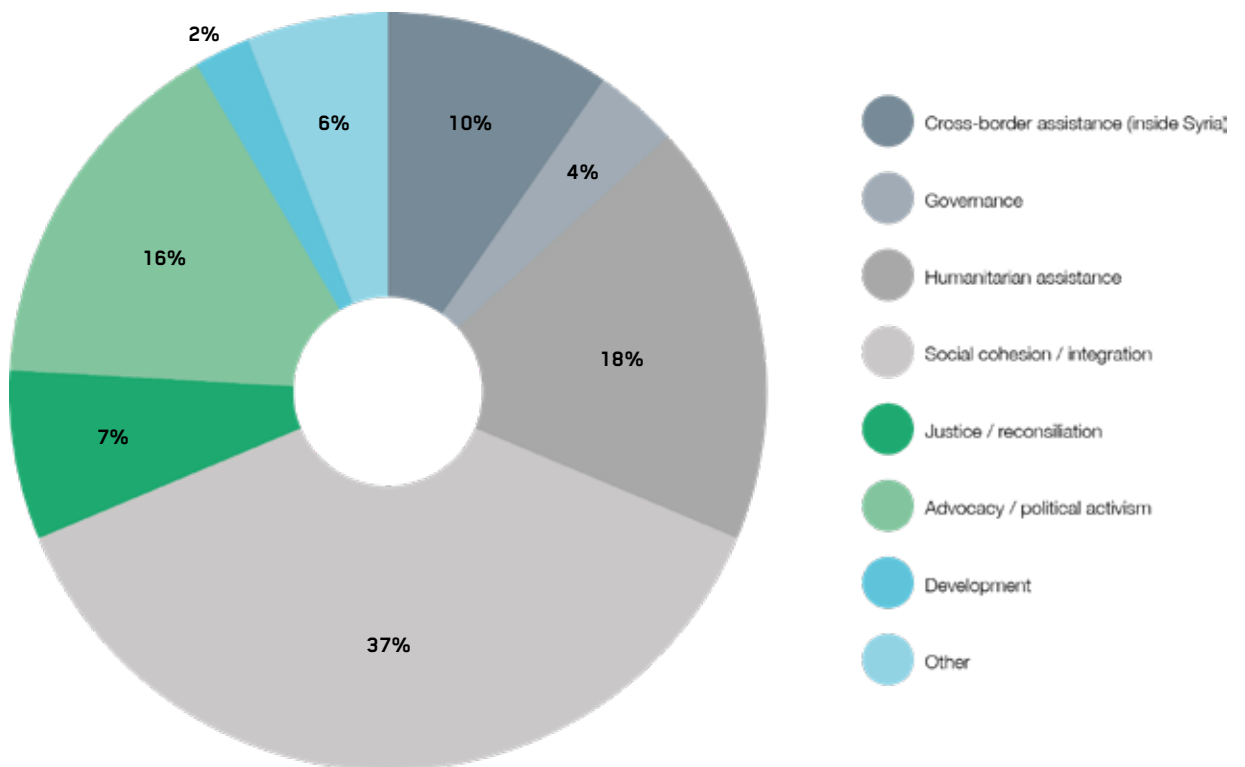


Figure 2. Distribution of Participants' fields of activity in Germany, France, Denmark and the UK



A resident rides his bicycle near what activists said was an exploded cluster bomb shell in the town of Douma, eastern Ghouta in Damascus November 5, 2015. Photo credit: Bassam Khabieh

The workshop language was mainly Arabic, and there were brief discussions moderated with Arabic-English translation. After the workshop, facilitators prepared a short observation report, describing the general atmosphere and group dynamics as well as main points of consensus and dispute. These reports are also integrated into the analysis. The workshops in the region took place during weekdays, whereas Saturday was more appropriate in the context of Europe because the majority of participants are engaged in civil society on a voluntary basis and they have other occupations during the working days. On the contrary, many participants in Turkey and Lebanon are permanent and paid employees of their organizations.

To complement the data generated through the workshops, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with nine Syrian civil society actors and one stakeholder engaged in building capacities of Syrian CSOs. While the workshops provided us access to narratives and arguments that participants present in group situations, the aim of one-to-one interviews was to elicit private accounts on the topic and gain further insight into the underlying factors such as professional, ethnic and gendered hierarchies that shape their vision, practices and interactions. The majority of interview subjects were selected from those who registered but did not attend the workshops. The interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview guide (see Appendix C), and have been conducted, via Skype (9) and face to face (1). To ensure a high-quality analysis, all interviews have been transcribed and coded.

Code	Gender	Type of Organization	Country	Main field of engagement	Date / location
T1	Female	Syrian CSO	Turkey	Cross-border operations and community empowerment	30.01.2019 / Skype
L1	Male	Syrian CSO	Lebanon	Humanitarian assistance, Social cohesion / integration, Cross-border assistance (inside Syria)	15.01.2019 / Skype
T2	Male	Stakeholder	Turkey	Empowering Syrian CSOs	17.01.2019 / Skype
T3	Male	Syrian CSO	Turkey	Humanitarian and cross-border assistance	15.01.2019 / Skype
G1	Female	Syrian Kurdish CSO	Germany	Promotion of political rights and justice	01.03.2019 / Skype
U1	Male	Syrian NGO	UK	Humanitarian and cross-border assistance (does not identify as CSO)	25.01.2019 / Skype
F1	Female	Syrian CSO	France	Social cohesion and assisting asylum seekers and refugees	03.02.2019 / Skype
U2	Male	Syrian CSO	UK	Social cohesion and assisting asylum seekers and refugees	01.03.2019 / Skype
G2	Female	Syrian CSO	Germany	Coordination	07.02.2019 / In person
T4	Male	Syrian CSO	Turkey	Humanitarian and cross-border assistance	27.05.2019 / Skype

The findings in this report are subject to at least two limitations. First, the gender imbalance in both the workshops and among the interviewees limits the gender perspective in the study. Initially, we aimed for diversity in experience, type of organizations, and gender balance to be represented in our sample. However, given the self-selectivity of participants and time limitations, we were not able to fully control the composition of the sample. Longer field stays in each context would have provided more opportunities to build relationships, trust, knowledge and access to the target group prior to the workshop, through which a more purposively sampled selection of participants would have become more feasible. Second, the majority of the respondents attracted to the event in Gaziantep have existing ties with GIZ, which may have produced a selection bias by representing only those organizations within the radar of international organizations. It is observed by the researchers that the Syrian organizations that work closely with refugees and host country governments were underrepresented in the Gaziantep workshop. However, since an exploratory approach is used, the study does not claim to make representative statements. The goal is to contribute to the understanding of Syrian diaspora engagement in the conflict and seeks then to identify the potential for constructive involvement and cooperation.

# 4. The Syrian conflict and diaspora mobilization trajectories

## 4.1. Roots of the conflict and developments

The demonstrations in Syria began as part of a wider wave of the so-called Arab Spring protests that spread across the Arab world in late 2010. Initially minor anti-government protests exploded into a major uprising after 15 children were arrested and tortured for painting anti-government graffiti on the walls of a school in the southern city Daraa in March 2011, an event that is said to have been the spark that lit the flame for Syrians and galvanized the demands for an end to the authoritarian practices of the Syrian regime<sup>6</sup>. As the mass protests spread swiftly across the country, it was heavily countered by government crackdowns and extensive use of violence by police, military, and paramilitary forces. In a short period, the civil uprising transitioned first into an armed insurgency with the formation of opposition militias (July 2011 - April 2012) and later a full-scale civil war in the summer of 2012.

Soon after, Syria became the stage for over a thousand armed groups fighting with different fractions and complex relationships (Pettersson & Wallenstein, 2015). The actors changed, and new actors constantly emerged, marking the conflict with the presence of multiple perpetrators with a myriad of international ties. The dominant fighting groups in the country were the Syrian Army and its paramilitary forces, the majority-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Sunni opposition groups including Free Syrian Army and the Salafi-jihadist groups including Jabhat al-Nusra (a local affiliate of al-Qaeda) and the Islamic State (ISIS) (International Crisis Group, 2018). The Syrian conflict became one of the major issues on the international agenda with the involvement of a number of countries – including Iran, Russia, United States, France, and Turkey – either directly or through supporting certain insurgent groups.

**Table 3. The factions of the Syrian civil war**

Factions of the conflict	Major player	Backed by
Syrian regime	Syrian Army Paramilitary groups of the regime	Direct military support from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed foreign militias
Opposition groups	Free Syrian Army	Military and financial assistance from Turkey, the Gulf states, the United States and European countries
Kurdish forces	YPG on the military side, SDF on the political side	Direct military support from the United States and France as part of the international coalition against ISIS
Jihadist groups	Islamic State (ISIS) Jabhat al-Nusra (renamed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Tahrir al-Sham, local affiliate of al-Qaeda)	Private funding mostly from Gulf countries and through local, war economy-related revenue generation

Source: International Crisis Group (2018)

6 - According to Krasner (1983), regimes can be defined as “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge”. Governments, on the other hand, are defined as systems or groups of people that have the authority to govern a state or a community. The Syrian war has constituted a space in which ideologies and positions are presented via different word choices (Amin & Jallifar, 2013). Within this context, the reference to ‘Syrian or Assad regime’ has become associated with the opposition language while pro-government sources tend to avoid this terminology and only use the term ‘government’. It is therefore important to clarify that the authors of this study adopt the above definitions of government and regime and uses both terms contextually with no intention to indicate a particular political position.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the systematic and widespread human rights violations by the Syrian government have been reported on repeatedly by the UN, condemning the excessive use of force against protesters, violations of the rights to food and health, arbitrary detentions, executions, abductions, forced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). As a result of the Syrian government forces' siege warfare tactic, thousands of people have been killed in besieged areas (Todman, 2016). Despite the fact that elements of sectarianism have been present since the onset of the Syrian conflict, huge scale sectarian violence in the form of mass killings, ethnic cleansing or ethnically motivated sexual violence has largely been propelled by the rise of the so-called Islamic state and other militant groups such as the Al-Qaida linked Al-Nusra Front, which dominated the battlefields by the year 2014. The militant paramilitary groups loyal to the current government of Syria, or the Shi'a brigade Dhu al-Fiqar have also been accused of exacerbating the sectarian dimension of the Syrian conflict (Pinto, 2017). The total number of refugees who had fled the country exceeded 3 million by the end of 2014 due to the exceptionally high levels of intensity of the conflict throughout 2013 and 2014 (UNHCR, 2019; Pettersson & Wallensteen, 2015). In 2015 Assad began to lose power, but Russia's direct military involvement supporting the government of Syria in September 2015 turned the war in the regime's favour. The recapturing of Aleppo in late 2016 was a major turning point for the Syrian Army as it gained an important strategic advantage in North-western Syria against the Free Syrian Army.

As a result of the international efforts to craft a sustainable end to the conflict, some progress was made as part of the peace process when Turkey, Iran and Russia agreed on establishing de-escalation zones in Syria. The Russian-led agreement, signed in the Kazakh capital of Astana in May 2017, promised unimpeded humanitarian access to besieged areas and the return of refugees to northern Homs, Ghouta, south Dera, and Idlib (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2017). With a loophole in the agreement that allowed for continuous operations against 'terrorists,' a term used to describe the entire opposition in the government's language (Kahl, Goldenberg & Heras, 2017), the initiative did not succeed. On the contrary, UN sources reported increased levels of violence and reduced access to people in need of life-saving aid. In addition, observers state that the regime seized additional territories with the help of the deal. It is a matter of dispute and conspiracy whether these zones were initially planned as a war management strategy by the regime and its allies. -7-

Another major development was the announcement of the United States' decision to withdraw its support from Syria, leaving Kurdish forces vulnerable to attacks by the Syrian government or Turkish forces, as was seen in Afrin in early 2018. The Turkish forces offensive of Afrin, with the support of Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, was justified by the Turkish government as a precaution to prevent the formation of a potential 'terror corridor' between YPG and its Turkey-based affiliate PKK through its borders. The military offensive resulted in the displacement of a total of 300,000 Kurdish people from the region, according to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights<sup>8</sup>, and serious human rights abuses have been recorded by Amnesty International (2018), including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and confiscation of property of local residents of Afrin. The intervention ensured control of Afrin by Turkish forces added to the previously captured territories in the Northern areas of Aleppo. To the east of Jarablus, the territories in North-eastern Syria, also known as Rojava, are under the control of Kurdish forces. The Syrian Army has effectively gained control of the remaining regions of the country, except for some small parts controlled by the rebel forces and Israel. While the intensity of the conflict de-escalated to a large extent, the clashes and armed conflict continues in some regions.

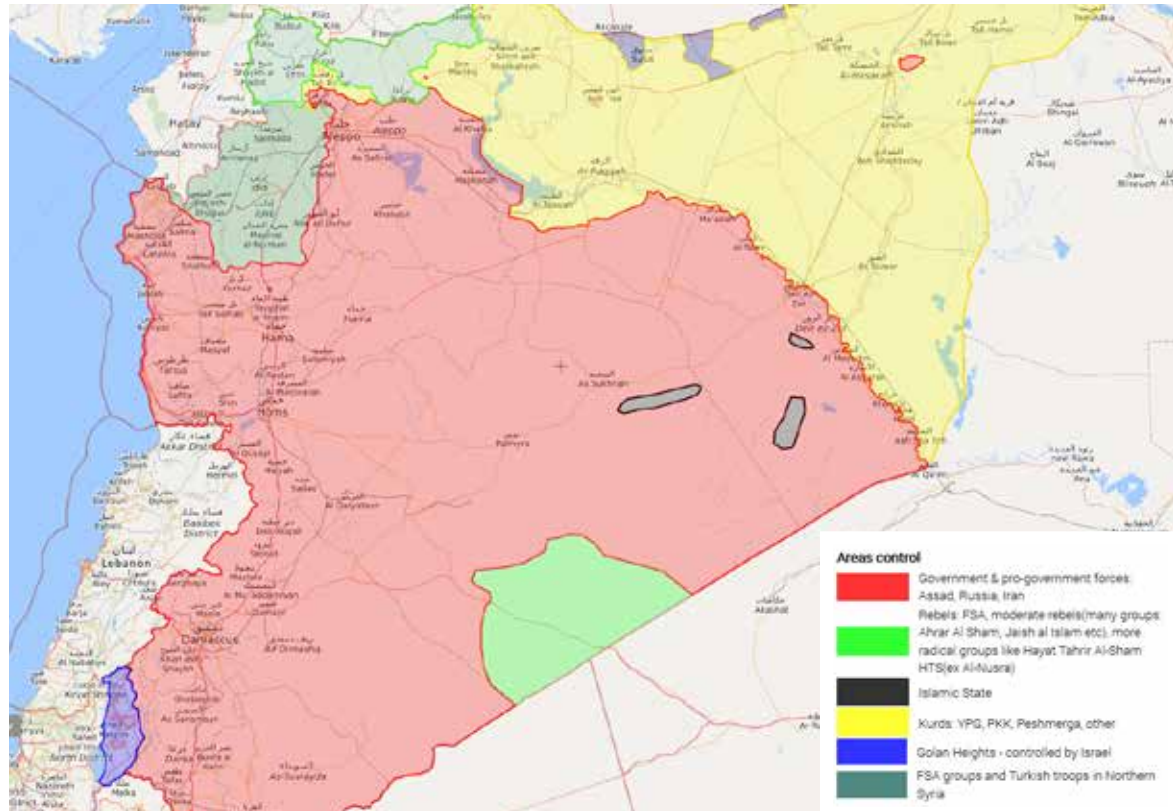
The human cost of any conflict and crisis is hardly new, but the scope of suffering in Syria, as a result of actions by all sides, is striking. Since March 2011, the Syrian conflict has killed over half a million people and forced over 13 million from their homes, including 6.3 million refugees seeking refuge outside Syria

7 - News Deeply, 2018. How de-escalation zones in Syria became a war management strategy. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/02/06/how-de-escalation-zones-in-syria-became-a-war-management-strategy>

8 - Syria Observatory for Human Rights (2018-09-20). "After displacing more than 300000 Kurdish residents of Afrin people, Turkish-backed factions seize more than 75% of olive farms and receive the price of the first season in advance". Available online: <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=102951>

(Human Rights Watch, 2018; UNHCR, 2018; IDMC, 2018). These figures are illustrative of the horrendous consequences of the conflict shouldered by the people of Syria. It also gave birth to the formation of a large diaspora of Syrians living abroad, building on existing networks and communities.

**Figure 3. Who controls what in Syria?**



Source: Map of Syrian Civil War. 2019. Accessible online: [syria.liveuamap.com](http://syria.liveuamap.com)

## 4.2. Trajectories of Syrian diaspora mobilization

It is necessary to understand the nature of Syrian diaspora prior to the 2011 uprising to grasp the extent to which recent conflict and the displacement experience has transformed the trajectory of already existing diaspora mobilizations. Before 2011, the Syrian emigrant population mainly consisted of Syrians who left the Ottoman Empire due to harsh living conditions from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, heading mainly to the US, South America, Europe, and Australia (mid 19th century onwards). Highly skilled and elite Syrians who escaped the rigid government practices migrated to Lebanon, the Gulf countries, Europe, and to a lesser extent to the US (1950s and onwards). Low-skilled labourers migrated to the Gulf States as well as to Libya, Turkey and Lebanon (1970s and onwards), smaller waves of asylum seekers escaping the authoritarian rule of the Ba'ath party went mainly towards Europe (1970s and onwards), as did the latest wave of emigrants who left the country after the repression of Damascus Spring in 2000s (Ragab et al., 2017; Stokke & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2019). The pre-conflict emigrant population has now increased from 1.7 million in 2011, to approximately 8 million with the latest wave of refugees fleeing Syria because of the ongoing conflict (De Bel-Air, 2016; UNHCR, 2018), making Syria the country with the ninth-largest emigrant population (IOM, 2018).

Despite the long history of emigration, there is very limited research on the pre-conflict Syrian diaspora. The majority of available studies on Syrian diaspora before the 2011 uprisings look at Syrian migrants and their descendants in South America and the United States (Almeida 1997; Khater 2005; Gualtieri 2009). More recent works conducted in the post-2011 context briefly discuss some aspects of the pre-conflict Syrian diaspora mobilization based on retrospective interviews (Jörum, 2015; Moss, 2016; Ragab, Rahmeier, Siegel 2017; Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). These studies demonstrate that diaspora mobilization in Europe and the US before the 2011 uprisings was mainly limited to the social and cultural sphere without much engagement in the political domain (Jörum, 2015; Moss, 2016; Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). There are two likely causes for this. First, a sizeable proportion of the Syrian community belongs to minority groups such as Kurdish (9-10%), Armenians, Assyrians, other Christian groups (10%), and Shias and Alawites (11-16%) (Beckouche, 2017). Ethnic and religious divisions become more pronounced in diasporas, where minority groups become more likely to position themselves within a wider ethnic and religious diasporas, such as Kurdish or Assyrian Diaspora, rather than building on a collective national (Syrian) identity (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). Considering the identity-based character of diaspora politics, the inability of Syrians to mobilize around a single Syrian identity in pre-2011 context could partially explain the lack of organization and collective action.

A second explanation is the government repression that prevented political mobilization and weakened solidarity among Syrians in Europe and the US (Jörum, 2015; Moss, 2016; Ragab, Rahmeier, Siegel 2017; Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). Under the rule of the Ba'ath party, state hostility towards civil society and political activists endured for decades with very brief periods of tolerance, which typically ended with persecution, the arrest of activists and shuttering of organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Khalaf et al., 2014). Although past studies demonstrate that emigration from an authoritarian government provides diasporas opportunities for advocacy against homeland governments (Hockenos, 2003; Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004), restrictive diaspora engagement policies can interfere with this. Based on her study on anti-regime Syrian activists in Sweden, Jörum (2015) argues that the repression in the homeland went beyond homeland territorial boundaries through these negative diaspora engagement policies in pre-2011 Syria. Examples of such policies are illegal intelligence activities, state-led creation of new Syrian associations overlooking the existing ones, airport detentions upon arrival in Syria based on records of activities in Sweden (Jörum, 2015). As a result, it is safe to argue that the fears of infiltration and spying by the regime created a general sense of mistrust, thus, made Syrians reluctant to socialize with each other and generate collective political action in diaspora.

Within this context, the Syrian uprising in 2011 can be considered a transformative event which prompted an unprecedented collective action and organization among the opponents of the Syrian government as well as its supporters. The uprising both activated and polarized the diaspora by introducing a sharp separation of pro- and anti-regime collectives. For many Syrians, the uprisings in 2011 awakened a sense of national belonging (Hindy & Ghaddar, 2017) and generated collective action with the aim to, first, play a part in the social and political transformations of Syria was going through and second, to respond to the social, economic, and cultural challenges faced by Syrians both inside and outside Syria. The mobilizations in Europe and the Middle East are largely dominated by opponents of the current Syrian regime whereas pro-regime mobilizations are observed to be stronger in some countries such as Argentina, Brazil (Baeza & Pinto, 2016). By now, the Syrian conflict has become not only a power struggle between the Syrian government and opposition forces, but also a manifestation of dichotomies of Sunni vs. Shia, minorities vs. majorities, religious vs. secular, rural vs. urban, upper- vs. -under class and other socio-political divides. These are largely propelled by a geopolitical quest for power, in which international powers such as the US and Russia, as well as regional actors including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran, scrambled for dominance and power to establish their influence in the region. These lines of divisions are also reproduced in the diaspora, leading to fragmented solidarities in exile. At the same time, networks of Syrian civil society actors emerged transnationally, fostering solidarity and co-responsibility to tackle the diverse consequences of the conflict (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).



The escalation of the conflict and massive displacement amplified the diasporic response, as many organizations started to address the various needs arising from the conflict, be it providing humanitarian aid to those suffering from the consequences of the conflict or assisting newly arrived Syrians to settle into their new environment (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017, Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015). The large number of Syrian-led civil society organizations serves as proof of the extensive levels of mobilization in the diaspora. According to the study of IMPACT (previously Citizens for Syria) (2017), the number of civil society organizations set up by Syrians between 2011 and 2017 alone exceeded the total of registered organizations in the country since 1959. The study mapped 748 organizations in the region (including Syria) along with 200 organizations that refused to take part in the study. Building Markets (2018) mapped and assessed the organizational capacity of 402 Syrian-led civil society organizations, out of which 250 were registered in Turkey. In Gaziantep alone, a Turkish city that borders Syria on the North, there are at least 145 Syrian organizations approached by IMPACT (2017) between 2015 and 2016. In Europe, Ragab & Katbeh (2017) mapped a total number of 156 Syrian-led CSOs across six countries. It is in this context that the Syrian diaspora around the world has been recognized increasingly as an instrumental player that can positively contribute to the future of Syria and improve the lives of displaced Syrians.

It has to be emphasized that the diasporic structures and the set of actors should not be perceived as fixed and static, but rather as highly dynamic and continuously changing. First, one can observe changes in the organizational field, as some organizations, which were set up at the beginning of mobilization, are no longer functioning a few years later, and at the same time new agents entered the field, leading to a high degree of dynamic change and fluctuation within the diaspora structures. These changes might be a product of internal dynamics, such as resignation and a reduced feeling of self-efficacy by diasporic actors due to the dramatic escalation of the Syrian conflict, or externally driven as a result of changing opportunities and constraints in the host country setting. Moreover, diasporic structures are also characterized by great diversity, not only when it comes to their different political identities, but also with regard to their aims, scope, field of engagement and capacity. A few organizations in both Europe and the region mastered the path towards professionalisation, now being recognized as important players in the humanitarian system, while many others operate on a rather low capacity, relying mainly on voluntary work and donations to realise their activities. Some actors operate at the transnational level with networks spanning across different host countries and geographies inside Syria, while again others engage at a local or translocal level by focusing on addressing the needs of the population in specific locations either inside Syria or in the host country context (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).

# 5. The space of diaspora mobilization for Syrians in the Middle East

## 5.1. Migration and policy context in Lebanon and Turkey

Lebanon is the country with the highest number of refugees per capita. According to government estimates, Lebanon is hosting some 1.5 million registered and non-registered Syrians in a country of four million Lebanese nationals (UNDP Lebanon, 2018). The official numbers are lower than a million and show a declining trend since 2015 due to suspension of UNHCR registrations of Syrian refugees by Lebanese authorities along with increasing resettlement and return cases, according to UNHCR (see Table 4). Resettlement statistics show that 52,573 Syrian refugees departed from Lebanon to resettlement countries since 2013, with a large majority destined to Canada (UNHCR, 2019). Turkey, on the other hand, has become the largest refugee-hosting country by the end of 2014 when the total refugee population was around 1.5 million (UNHCR Global Trends, 2016). By March 2019, the number of Syrians seeking asylum in Turkey more than doubled, reaching over 3.6 million (See Table 4). Turkey has been a major country of first asylum for resettlement operations. Since 2013, a total number of 64,285 refugees are resettled mainly to Canada, US (before 2018) and European countries (UNHCR, 2019) (See Appendix D). But unlike in Lebanon, the numbers are still increasing in Turkey.

**Table 4. Number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, 2013-2019**

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Lebanon*		259,503	807,940	1,146,911	1,067,785	1,001,051	995,512	947,063
Turkey**	14,237	224,655	1,519,286	2,503,549	2,834,441	3,426,786	3,623,192	3,646,889

Sources: \*UNHCR Syria Regional Response (2019) \*\*Directorate General of Migration Management (2019)

There are no official refugee camps established for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. 73% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living in rental accommodations in rural areas, 18% reside in unofficial set-up camps, and 9% live in non-residential structures such as garages and worksites (UNHCR, 2018c). On the other hand, the encampment policy of Turkey in the early years of the refugee influx failed to serve as a sustainable solution for hosting refugees due to lack of employment opportunities and the limitations on freedom of movement in camps (İçduygu & Diker, 2017). The proportion of refugees staying in government-run camps steadily decreased over

the years, and reached only 3% following the recently introduced policy to close camps in the Southeastern provinces as an austerity measure. The majority of the Syrian population is living in Istanbul, followed by border cities such as Sanliurfa, Hatay and Gaziantep.

### 5.1.1. Policy context in Lebanon

Lebanon's official stance in the conflict is neutral but the political elite in Lebanon are divided in their attitudes towards the Syrian crisis. Hezbollah, a Lebanese political party, is involved in the Syrian war as an ally to the Syrian regime, whereas others align with opposition forces. The involvement of Hezbollah led to the spill over of the conflict in Lebanese territory and deteriorated the security conditions in regions close to the Syrian border. In 2014, Lebanon's initially open border policy towards refugees made a restrictive turn by passing the controversial October policy that imposes restrictions on the free movement and residency of Syrians (Betts et al., 2017). When the number of refugees reached 1.2 million in 2015, the government instructed UNHCR to suspend the registration of Syrian refugees, including those already in the country (Janmyr, 2017). The official reason given by Lebanese authorities for the suspension was that a new mechanism for refugee registration was to be established, but this plan has not yet been realized as of 2019.

Lebanon is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention, nor does it have a coherent policy framework to address the needs of refugees. In the void of a specific national refugee law and clear policy, the Lebanese government mainly relies on ad-hoc legislation and enforcement to uphold the obligation of providing refuge, which leaves Syrian refugees open to support or exploitation at the whim of state and non-state actors (Sanyal, 2018). Within the fractured political context, such ambiguity allows Lebanese politicians to instrumentalize the refugee issue for their own purposes (Fakhoury, 2017). The settlement of almost two-thirds of Syrian refugees in the chronically underserved areas in the North and Beqaa Valley region, the geographies that have barely witnessed rebuilding efforts after the Lebanese civil war, aggravates further the living conditions of refugees (Eldawy, 2019). In this context, the pre-existing economic and resource challenges in these regions are depicted by some politicians as stemming from the presence of Syrian refugees. A notable example is the xenophobic discourses of some high profile politicians in the lead up to the 2018 parliamentary elections, which tended to frame Syrian refugees as the cause of deterioration of living conditions including unemployment, instability, and diseases (Geha & Talhouk, 2018). As Stel and Nassar (2019) observe, many therefore speculate that the institutional ambiguity in relation to refugees may feature as a governance strategy rather than an unintended consequence of the hybridity or the fragility of the government.

It is in this context that the negative public perception of Syrian refugees should be understood. The arguments of the anti-refugee segments of the society mostly emphasize that refugees are putting a strain on local resources and the Lebanese economy while some others perceive them as an additional destabilising force for the already fragmented political system, which may lead to the resurgence of sectarian tensions (Eldawy, 2019). In recent years, there is an increasing political rhetoric in favour of the return of refugees. Syrian CSOs in Lebanon emerge and operate in this context to respond to the pressing needs of Syrian refugees who barely receive the minimum protection and asylum services from the government (Mattes, 2018).

Lebanon's fractured political context, with a frail government, and political power distributed on a confessional basis, provides a rather closed political opportunity structure for civil society mobilization. In an investigation into Syrian civil society in Lebanon, Mattes (2018) reports that donors in Lebanon require Syrian CSOs to refrain from the political life in Syria as a precondition to financial support. In addition, some regulations in the Lebanese Association Law represent additional structural constraints. For instance, for every Syrian, there have to be nine Lebanese nationals employed by the CSOs. Turkey has a similar 10%

quota article in the work permit regulation for Syrian refugees, but there is an exception for civil society organizations. This leaves some organizations in Lebanon without official status, hence, hinders their ability to access funding opportunities that entail official registration.

### 5.1.2. Policy context in Turkey

In post-2011 context, Turkey positioned itself strongly against the Syrian government and extended military support to rebel groups from 2011 and onward. Turkey's perception of a national security threat in the emergence of a Kurdish state, or some form of a federal system with increased autonomous powers near its borders gave way to major military interventions inside Syria (Okuy, 2017). Since 2016, Turkey became heavily involved in the conflict and launched offensives to capture territories in the North, leading to mass displacement of inhabitants and cutting off the connection of cantons such as Afrin and al-Bab from the rest of Kurdish-held territory. On the other hand, Turkey's initial 'open-door' policy toward refugees and its treatment of refugees has been widely commended but the restrictions to border crossings were tightened in late 2014 due to increased security concerns (Betts et al., 2017). What followed in 2019 is a sharp reversal of the 'open-door' policy with increasing numbers of reported cases of unlawful detention and deportation of unregistered Syrian nationals, which has not been confirmed by Turkish authorities at the time of this writing (Human Rights Watch, 2019b).

For a long time, the Turkish government treated and labelled the refugees as 'guests' with the presumption that they will eventually return home. Due to the geographical limitation that Turkey maintains on the 1951 Refugee Convention, non-European asylum seekers such as Syrians are denied full refugee status. Therefore, Syrian refugees in Turkey benefit from the temporary protection regime that is designed for mass refugee influx situations (Içduygu & Diker, 2017). Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) of 22 October 2014 outlines the legal framework and administrative procedures such as registration and documentation and facilitates access of Syrians to social services including health, education, and labor market. It was not until early 2016 that the government shifted its policy to encompass longer-term solutions from emergency response. This is reflected in the regulation that grants work permits to Syrians, the decision to integrate Syrian children in Turkish schools and the opening of Migrant Health Centers staffed with Syrian doctors and physicians.

The public opinion on refugees becomes more unwelcoming in line with the increasing length of refugees' stay and the economic downturn Turkey has been experiencing since 2018. There is a common but biased narrative about refugees being granted excessive rights by the government. The host communities mostly complain about Syrian refugees due to the competition in the job market, the social benefits given to them and the perceived security threat that they pose (International Crisis Group, 2016). Especially after the debates on naturalizing Syrians in July 2016, social tensions and xenophobic reactions against refugees have surfaced in different spheres (International Crisis Group, 2016). Such reactions are largely divided by domestic politics as anti-Syrian sentiments on the political level are mainly adopted by the political opponents of the AKP government and its Syria policy (Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019). From 2018 and onwards, the worsening economic conditions and increasing unemployment rate have given rise to social tensions and served as a catalyst for anti-Syrian sentiments, which culminated in increased measures of control that create a sense of fear and uncertainty amongst Syrian refugees in Turkey. With the arrival of Syrian refugees and the corresponding increase in the flow of funds towards Turkey, a diverse range of civil society actors emerged including hundreds of Syrian civil society organizations (Mackreath & Sa niç, 2017). Due to the challenges arising from the increasing number of refugees, the government started to allow the operation of relief initiatives by Syrian individuals or organizations in 2012 (Özden, 2013). Following the 2014 UN resolution that authorized cross-border assistance to Syria, the majority of the organizations were primarily conducting cross-border operations and focused inside Syria. Syrian civil society increased their direct engagement with refugees mainly from 2016 and onward (Ramadan & Ozden, 2019). There are many Syrian CSOs working with refugees, running community centers, support schooling of refugee children, providing legal assistance and providing humanitarian aid inside Turkey. Turkey, and in particular

Gaziantep, is also host to field offices and branches of large Syrian CSOs with headquarters in other countries. In an assessment conducted by Building Markets (2018), the majority of the Syrian CSOs located in Turkey are engaged in cross-border operations mainly in the provinces Aleppo (50%) and Idlib (57%), and they reach an average of 8,150 beneficiaries per year. According to the mapping study of IMPACT (2017), the major fields of activity are social services, education and cultural activities (See Appendix F). Based on an organizational capacity assessment conducted by Building Markets (2018), Syrian CSOs in Turkey scored an average of 4,01 on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high). They scored highest in the functional areas of communication, program management, and safety and security. Only 41% of them have an organization-wide operating budget, while 46% solely rely on the support of volunteers (Building Markets, 2018).

### 5.1.3. Existing support mechanisms for Syrian CSOs

In Turkey, there is no targeted support mechanisms for diaspora organizations on the government level. Syrian civil society organizations can access similar funding opportunities with Turkish organizations including EU funds and funding opportunities offered by UN agencies, foreign embassies and development agencies. UN OCHA, based in Gaziantep, is the main international body responsible for inter-cluster coordination of cross-border humanitarian assistance delivered from Turkey to Syria and operations inside Syria. The provincial governorates in cities densely populated by Syrian refugees regularly organize meetings with Syrian CSOs to monitor their activities and exchange information. In Turkey, Oxfam and IGAM, a Turkish research-oriented NGO, are jointly working on organizing consultation sessions and establishing platforms that bring together refugee-led organizations from Turkey and Lebanon, among other top-refugee hosting countries, to ensure that their voice is included in policymaking efforts related to the international refugee regime. A consortium of international organizations established the “Durable Solutions Platform” with the objective to promote dialogue to find long-term solutions to displacement in Syria and inform policy for the Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries including Turkey and Lebanon.<sup>-10-</sup> In terms of funding, Syrian CSOs in Lebanon typically compete with many others for limited funds from international and intergovernmental organizations. The organizations often rely on private donations or corporate funding (Mattes, 2018).

## 5.2. Key challenges and opportunities for diaspora CSOs in Lebanon and Turkey

As discussed above, Turkey and Lebanon followed similar trajectories in terms of their responses to refugees with initially generous border policies between 2011 and 2014, which was then followed by increased restrictions in light of perceived security threats in late 2014 (Betts et al., 2017). Despite these similarities, the politics of these host states in the Syrian context and their relations with the international community is diverse. To capture the extent to which these diverse political contexts and their interactions shape the outcomes of diaspora CSOs actions, the below analysis makes use of the conceptual framework developed by Chaudhary & Moss (2016). The external structural conditions (constraints and opportunities) shaping the actions of Syrian diaspora CSOs are explained at the host country, home country, and the international level in order to account for the multi-layered embeddedness of Syrian diaspora actors in the political opportunity structures of each context. To this end, the following sections make use of the data obtained from workshops in Beirut, Gaziantep and Istanbul and 5 one-to-one interviews with Syrian civil society actors and a stakeholder.

10 - Information retrieved from European Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) Website: <http://rdpp-me.org/RDPP/projects.php>

### 5.2.1. Home country level: Challenges and opportunities facing diaspora CSOs in relation to the homeland Syria

Emerging as a major concern in most of the discussions concerning work inside Syria, **the lack of security and stability** in Syria is not only preventing CSOs with operations inside the country from accessing communities in need, but it is also seen as a major barrier to achieving long-term strategies. For CSO staff working on the ground in areas not controlled by the regime, there is a constant security threat, as civil society frequently becomes a target of the diverse actors in the conflict.

One of the recurrent themes during the workshop discussions and interviews was the **perceived failure of the UN** to uphold the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence in its operations inside Syria. Some participants argued that the compromises made by UN agencies to comply with the demands of the regime resulted in erosion of trust in the UN-led humanitarian system inside Syria. In this context, the participants referred to cases where they understand relief is used as a political propaganda tool and to consolidate control by channeling civilians into areas under their own control. There is evidence supporting this view that the armed parties including both the regime and radical Islamist groups effectively utilized humanitarian aid for political agendas (Meininghaus, 2015; Martinez & Eng, 2016; Meininghaus and Kühn, 2018). It has also been reported by UN Secretary General that the Syrian government is using denial of aid as a 'tactic of war'.<sup>11</sup> According to UN estimates, 540,000 people were still living under siege by June 2017, exemplifying the use of starvation of civilians as a weapon of war (Human Rights Watch, 2018). On these grounds, some observers argue that the UN-led humanitarian system in Syria emerged as a key vehicle by which the Syrian regime has effectively turned humanitarian assistance to its own advantage (Leenders & Mansour, 2018). As reported by Meininghaus and Kühn (2018), the interference of armed parties from all sides in the distribution of aid left significant parts of the population deprived of humanitarian aid and consistently disadvantaged (based on individual accounts of such interferences). It is perceived by the participants that there is an unequal distribution of aid between government- and opposition-held areas inside Syria and that it is reinforcing the already existing regional disparities in the country. According to Meininghaus (2015), the disproportionate distribution of aid, not only affects the livelihoods of people in the present, it will also have a long-term impact on peace and stability as the diverging structural conditions found the basis for future development trajectories. In line with this observation, one of the participants expressed the fear that also the majority of reconstruction funds will be channelled to regime-controlled areas, which may aggravate further the inequalities across the country. As one of the interviewees working in a well-established humanitarian organization discussed:

**“So the issue is that there's less accountability, less monitoring in the regime area. The government has more influence in the humanitarian aid so they use it. The government uses humanitarian aid, so there's like a certain community which is known as - its antigovernment, and it was one day hosting the opposition - or that it was controlled by opposition forces, then the aid coming to this community will not be similar, the aid, nor services, nor water or electricity, will never be similar to what other communities loyal to the government get. The Syrian regime use aid as a weapon of war.” (T4, Skype)**

In an effort to address this imbalance of aid, UN resolution 2165 adopted in 2014 allowed for cross-border deliveries without regime approval.<sup>12</sup> However, it has been reported that the government can still reject deliveries as it did for areas with immense humanitarian needs (Meininghaus & Kühn, 2018). Nevertheless, cross-border operations from neighbouring countries, in particular from Turkey, continue to play a vital role in delivering aid to areas not controlled by the Syrian government.<sup>13</sup> Because the regime does not allow UN agencies to independently conduct needs assessments in government-held areas, it remains unknown

11 - UNSC S/2014/427 Report of the Secretary General.

12 - UNSC S/RES/2165 Resolution 2165 (2014)

13 - UN OCHA. Millions of Syrians benefit from cross-border operations. 15 July 2017.

to what extent the imbalances in aid provision is addressed by cross-border operations. However, it is reported that cross-border deliveries represent more than one-third of all humanitarian aid delivered inside Syria. <sup>14</sup>

**The regional dichotomies** (rural vs. urban, Sunni vs Alawite etc.) that existed in the pre-2011 context are perceived to be reinforced by the conflict dynamics and have led to further detachment of different geographies inside Syria. Yet the experiences and encounters in exile seemingly increased the awareness of the diversity of Syrian population. This realization may create future opportunities to connect the different geographies and overcome regionalism. This argument is in line with the perception of conflict as an opportunity for some of the participants. They argued that the conflict revealed the needs of people and transformed them into action through civic engagement. One of the participants in the Lebanon workshop used a metaphor where he described Syria as an undiagnosed disease, and the conflict gave way to diagnosis of this disease and revealed the latent problems.

**Social inclusion of IDPs** in their new localities is also a major concern voiced mainly by participants in Beirut and Gaziantep workshops. Inside Syria, displacement created new geographies in which IDPs are confronted with challenges to participate in the new local context. While it could present an opportunity to overcome regionalism by bringing the Syrian people together and expose them to the diversity of the entire society, the participants argue that IDPs are likely to settle in specific neighbourhoods, and segregate themselves from the host community. The participants interpret this voluntary segregation as a means to safeguard their local identity while keeping the hope for return alive. They highlight the need for more research to delve into the reasons of this tendency in order to design targeted social cohesion programs.

The participants expressed strong commitment to continue advocacy **to raise the number of female representatives**. Despite increasing visibility in community-based organizations and NGOs, women are still underrepresented on decision-making levels in the civil society as well as in local councils inside Syria. A study conducted by Abu-Assab & Nasser-Eddin (2019) on gender dynamics in Syrian civil society organizations in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan found that the limited involvement of women is linked to a number of internal and external factors, including lack of awareness about gender-sensitive approach, gendered hierarchies that prevent women from taking decision-making roles in organizations, the misconception that women's organizations receive major funding and the inconvenience of social contexts in some regions of host countries.

### 5.2.2. Host country level: Challenges and opportunities facing diaspora CSOs in relation to Turkey and Lebanon

Despite recognizing the tremendous humanitarian needs of the Syrian population both inside the country and in the neighbouring countries, many participants argue that the situation necessitates a more inclusive response that foster the self-reliance of the Syrian population in host country policies. The barriers in access to education and employment opportunities are briefly discussed within this context. In terms of **access to education**, the participants discussed the surmounting challenges faced by Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. Despite the efforts and increased funding targeting education, it is estimated that only half of the refugee children are enrolled in schools in Lebanon. In terms of education quality, the use of non-formal education methods by alternative schooling facilities is perceived by some of the participants as an opportunity as it presents new and innovative methods of education that is perhaps better than the quality of education catered in many other parts of the world. Barriers in **access to formal labour market** in both Turkey and Lebanon appear to be a major challenge hindering self-sustenance of refugees. In addition, **mobility restrictions** in Turkey are mentioned as producing additional barriers

14 - Ibid.

that limit refugees' access to job opportunities in provinces other than their residence. Moreover, frequently changing requirements and regulations with regard to both the target group and civil society present further barriers to civil society engagement in both countries.

The **regulations to set up an organization** are perceived to become more difficult for Syrians in Lebanon, whereas in Turkey, establishing an organization is relatively easy but there are concerns about the increasing requirements enforced by Turkish government in order to work in Turkish-held areas in Northern Syria.

The **social cohesion approach** in host countries is considered by a few participants as intensifying the identity struggles of the Syrian people. It is expressed that a sense of collective identity barely existed for Syrians in pre-conflict era and this is reinforced by the conflict dynamics. One of the participants gave the example of Kurds, who have been mobilizing around a Syrian Kurdish identity for decades, as demonstrating clear signs of strong group-reliance, whereas the majority of the population had a fragile self-identification. Under these circumstances, he argued that social cohesion activities in host countries risk producing hierarchies by bringing together weak and strong identities and the activities in this field should initially target supporting Syrians in rebuilding an identity that is detached from the government before improving refugee and host community relations.

The availability of **funding opportunities** varies by sector and location. In Lebanon, it is perceived that a large proportion of funding is channelled towards education whereas in Turkey there is more emphasis on social cohesion projects. Both countries are lauded by CSO actors for supporting relief projects and cross-border operations. But the standards of operation imposed by international organizations in cross-border operations are argued to be difficult to comply with. Moreover, some participants as well as one interviewee from a large humanitarian NGO in Gaziantep expressed concerns that the actual need on the ground sometimes differs from donor priorities. Another interviewee from a humanitarian organization with international presence argued charitable donations as a more reliable source of funding than official grants, raising doubts about the future accessibility of government funds by Syrian CSOs:

**“I think this [private donations] is the most important even than the governmental grants, because governmental things might be related to politics one day, states might change their mind.” (T4, Skype)**

It is also important to note that access to funding vary according to the position civil society actors inhabit vis-a-vis other actors in the transnational social field, highlighting the different localized opportunities present in the host country. Gaziantep, which became a hub for the international humanitarian cross-border response, provides greater access to financial resources due to its proximity to international donors, whereas in Istanbul, accessing funding was by far most often mentioned as the greatest challenge.

### 5.2.3. International level: Challenges and opportunities facing diaspora CSOs in relation to international community

The **limited representation of Syrian civil society** in policy discussions and negotiations dealing with Syria's future is considered a challenge by a majority of informants. The consensus view seems to be that the Syrian organizations attending such meetings are not adequately representing the diverse



components of Syrian civil society and, indeed, some do not even qualify as civil society based on a tailored understanding of the concept in the Syrian context (See Box 1). The perceived tendency of some segments of the international community to equal Syrian humanitarian organisations with Syrian civil society, and at the same time expecting neutrality from those humanitarian organisations is interpreted by the participants as depoliticizing the space of civil society. As an interviewee working in a humanitarian organization said:

**“The UN in Damascus accuses us for taking certain positions or making certain statements on certain occasions. But in the end, we are Syrians and we, the organization, has its identity, which we are proud of. So we can't be split from what is happening in our country” (T4, Skype).**

In this regard, the issue of neutrality as a core principle of humanitarian assistance has been elaborated, with some actors asserting that humanitarian organizations, are withstanding to take a political view due to their core mandate, and as such are not in a position to represent the Syrian civil society within the current dynamics of the Syrian conflict. Such concerns can be said to reflect the political nature of the emergence of Syrian civil society. In return, some participants raised doubts about the political (and party) affiliation of the CSOs that are part of political and peace talks and questioned their independence. Such concerns reveal the need for what the participants in Gaziantep referred to as **“differentiating between Syrian civil society, service providers and political agendas”** for meaningful representation of Syrian civil society on the international level. In this regard, formation of transparent representation mechanisms for the Syrian civil society is deemed necessary to safeguard articulation of the diversity within the civil society.

The discussions in Beirut problematized the **imposition of conflict and peace narratives by the international community**, which can portray some parts of Syria as safe for returns while in reality returned refugees can face serious risks of maltreatment. Following the UNHCR statement that reported half a million returnees to Syria between January and May 2017, a closer look at the data by Balanche (2017) reveals that the number of voluntary returns is less than the number of newly displaced during the same period and the majority of returnees are internally displaced persons. He underlines that such trajectories should be examined carefully taking into consideration the possibility of manipulation of data for political purposes. The discussions in Lebanon revealed participants' awareness of such manipulation, hence, their perceptions of security inside Syria tend to be irrespective of how the security situation is portrayed by international players.

The desire for official recognition is mentioned not only in terms of representation, but also in humanitarian operations, which could be realized through **localization of humanitarian action**. It is put forward by the participants that assistance to Syria should be provided in a manner that recognizes and reinforces the efforts of local and national humanitarian actors inside Syria, as they have a better knowledge of the context and needs of the people. Besides, it is acknowledged that channeling aid through the local communities can help build the capacities of local actors towards a more sustainable response that can eventually improve cost-effectiveness. Increased localization of aid has been a core commitment at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016<sup>15</sup>, leading to a considerable amount of recent work targeting the problematic of the unbalanced power dynamic of the humanitarian system and the necessity to shift the power from international NGOs to national and local actors (Mowjee et. Al, 2017; Emmens & Clayton, 2018; Oxfam, 2018). In line with the perceptions of CSO actors, there is a consensus in the humanitarian aid literature that localization is not only morally and ethically right, but it also increases impact and improves effectiveness (Manis, 2018; Emmens & Clayton, 2018). A comprehensive study conducted by Building Markets (2018) with more than 400 Syrian CSOs in Turkey and Syria shows that Syrian CSOs are delivering an estimated 75% of aid, yet they only receive roughly 0.2 to 0.9% of direct funding.

15 - Launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, Grand Bargain - A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need is an agreement between a number of donors and international aid organizations with an aim to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action, including a commitment to provide more support and funding tools to local and national responders. The full text can be accessed: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Grand\\_Bargain\\_final\\_22\\_May\\_FINAL-2.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Grand_Bargain_final_22_May_FINAL-2.pdf)

The report underlines the importance of engaging local Syrian organizations in humanitarian response in order to reach humanitarian and development goals faster. There are a handful of professionalized Syrian humanitarian organizations that are recognized as major players in the humanitarian system, while many others operate on a rather low capacity, relying mainly on voluntary work and donations to sustain operations. It is therefore essential for INGOs and large Syrian NGOs to empower relatively small Syrian-led organizations by building their capacities and contracting with them as equal partners to provide a more cost-effective and sustainable humanitarian response.

## Politicization of Terms in the Syrian Context

The discussions revealed that certain terms and their inherent meanings are contextually shaped within the wider political and historical conjuncture in Syria. Below is an attempt to summarize and reflect upon how certain terms communicate various connotations and senses in their contemporary usage among Syrian CSO actors.

### **Civil Society**

A discussion on what qualifies an organization as part of civil society emerged after a criticism of the Syrian CSO Platform established by OCHA which mainly consists of humanitarian organizations which are not necessarily viewed by participants as “civil society” per se. It is observed that the majority of participants view Syrian civil society as a revolutionary force that should advocate for the oppressed, take a watchdog role, and act as an intermediary between the people and the authorities. This vision of what civil society means can be interpreted in light of the systematic repression of an independent civil society in pre-conflict Syria and its revival after the revolution (Khalaf et al., 2014). Especially after the Ba’ath party assumed power in 1963, civil society in Syria is often portrayed as an apparatus of the state that is established and co-opted by the government. Arguably, it is in this context that the new actors of Syrian civil society in exile attribute a politically-charged meaning to the term ‘civil society’ and understand it as a tool for political opposition to the government rather than viewing it solely as collective activity of civilians regardless of the nature of the activity. In a study by Mattes (2018), where she conducted interviews with Syrian CSOs in Lebanon, a similar finding is noted with some of the interviewees refusing to identify themselves as a civil society organization due to the politicized concept of civil society in Syria. In our interviews, two humanitarian actors based in Turkey also noted that they do not self-identify their organizations as civil society. In this regard, non-state and non-profit organizations that are solely providing services and aid do not qualify as civil society according to some actors in the field.

### **Reconciliation**

Reconciliation emerged as a contested term prompting negative reactions by some. Discussions revealed the dilemma of the moral understanding of the concepts reconciliation and peace versus justice. In Gaziantep workshop, it is argued that the desire to rapidly achieve peace and reconciliation may harm the process of justice and moving towards reconciliation without justice is unacceptable because it means shaking hands with the current government. On the other hand, organizations operating inside Syria argued that initial focus should be on reconciliation because prioritizing justice will increase the divisions in the society and may even exacerbate the conflict. The embracing of the term ‘reconciliation’ in the discourse of the Syrian government brings a further complexity to the existing dichotomy of justice versus reconciliation. For example, the strategy of the Syrian army to besiege opposition-held areas with intense attacks to force the surrenders of civilian populations has been labelled as ‘reconciliation deals’ by the Syrian government (Meininghaus & Kühn, 2018; Amnesty International, 2017). The government also established the Ministry of Reconciliation, which became a national agency in late 2018. Hence, using the term reconciliation was by many perceived as leading to a normalization and legitimization of the regime discourse.

### **Stakeholder**

When asked about their recommendations to stakeholders, participants questioned if the definition of a stakeholder applies to Syrian CSOs. The tendency to exclude Syrian CSOs from the “club of stakeholders” is perceived by some as reducing their role to passive recipients or providers of assistance rather than agents of change. Syrian CSOs express their demand to be treated as stakeholders in their own assistance and recognition of their self-securing potential and agency.

**The marketization and professionalization of the civil society** through increased ties with the international system (funding, partnership, training etc.) has both positive and negative effects as highlighted by participants. On the one hand, there are more opportunities for training and building capacities. On the other hand, it causes a divergence from the independent missions and goals of the

organization and undermines the value of voluntarism by creating a competitive environment. The resultant rivalry for funds impedes the level of coordination among actors. In addition, local organizations are losing their qualified staff to international organizations that are able to offer better salaries.

**The high level of donor requirements** is seen as a major challenge by Syrian CSOs operating on low capacity. In terms of access to funding opportunities, it is argued that the lion's share of funding goes to the international or more professionalized local organizations due to their ability to meet strict donor requirements. The complicated procedures of grant applications hinder the access of many Syrian CSOs to funding opportunities. For those who could acquire these funds, the need to align with donor standards and requirements influences the type and duration of projects implemented by CSOs. Further, the availability of funding varies by sector, which presents a challenge for some and an opportunity for others. For example, sectors such as relief and social cohesion are perceived to be well-funded whereas the fields of advocacy and justice are less advantaged. This could be one of the reasons behind the comments that point out the gap between actual needs and donors' perceived priorities.

The increasing attention of some segments of the international community on issues related to **justice and accountability** is seen as an opportunity by the participants. In some European countries including France and Germany, criminal complaints have been filed against high-level members of the Syrian government. On the UN level, the establishment of IIIM (International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism) to assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for serious crimes in Syria is praised but it is felt that there is a lack of enforcement and hardly any results so far. On the other hand, the tendency of international community to work towards **peacebuilding** is met with skepticism by some participants, raising concerns over the underlying motivations of the states involved in the peace negotiations. For some participants, there is a hidden risk in moving quickly towards recovery and peace, which may overshadow demands for justice. The discussion pointed towards doubts about whether the international community reflects a genuine desire for finding a political solution that favours Syrian people, or they pursue their own vested interests. A consensus view is that the peace process should be Syrian-led.

### 5.3. Needs and resources of Syrian diaspora CSOs in Turkey and in Lebanon

In less than a decade, the burgeoning of Syrian civic space both inside and outside the homeland is largely made possible through the commitment and dedication of its people. Despite its long list of needs, the participants acknowledge the organizations' shared beliefs and ideals, long years of experience and commitment to the cause as crucial assets. The table below summarizes the pressing needs and existing resources raised by participants in the three workshops in Turkey and Lebanon as well as the interviews. The country names mentioned in parentheses does not necessarily mean that the need/resource is not present in other locations, but simply refer to the context in which it was raised by the participants. Some of the points emerge both as a need and a resource due to the diversity of diaspora civil society actors and the different positions they inhabit in a specific context.

Table 5. Needs and resources of Syrian Diaspora CSOs in Lebanon and Turkey	
Resources	Needs
<p><b>Experience</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large number of experienced organizations, specialized in different sectors</li> <li>• Eight years of civic engagement and learnt lessons since 2011</li> <li>• Maintained feeling of belongingness to homeland</li> <li>• Commitment despite immense challenges</li> </ul> <p><b>Human resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced &amp; skilled human resources</li> <li>• Arabic and English language skills as assets (Turkey)</li> <li>• Local knowledge of Syria and technical expertise</li> </ul> <p><b>Coordination and networking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alliances and umbrella organizations (despite concerns on their effectiveness)</li> <li>• Local and international connections</li> </ul> <p><b>Advocacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Naturalized refugees and old diaspora can take active role in advocacy</li> <li>• Existence of a young population that can harness more civic energy</li> </ul> <p><b>Other tools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Softwares with free and accessible information for CSOs</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>	<p><b>Organizational needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear framework and administrative guidelines</li> <li>• Clear legal guidance for associational procedures (Turkey)</li> <li>• Technical assistance and training in project development and management</li> <li>• Consolidation of policies and regulations governing the functioning of local government institutions under a national umbrella (Syria)</li> <li>• Developing the capacity of the organizations working in the field of governance</li> </ul> <p><b>Human resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced volunteers and staff</li> <li>• Paid human resources to sustain activities</li> <li>• Training programs targeting efficiency</li> <li>• Training the high-level staff on the change theory and change management</li> <li>• English proficient cadres to meet donor requirements and donor communication</li> </ul> <p><b>Coordination and networking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination among CSOs to ensure equal distribution and prevent duplication/ deprivation of aid and services</li> <li>• Greater representation women and minority groups</li> <li>• Partnerships based on knowledge transfer</li> <li>• Strengthening relationships and formulating memorandums of understanding between organizations.</li> <li>• Networking opportunities with other stakeholders</li> <li>• Dedicated agencies to ensure coordination and oversight</li> </ul> <p><b>Political mobilization / advocacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger mobilization around a unified Syrian identity</li> <li>• Long-term and strategic actions in advocacy instead of one-time actions</li> <li>• Access to media outlets to raise awareness on the Syrian cause</li> </ul>

The discussions were centred on gathering information about the internal needs of the organizations and Syrian civil society in general, and what resources are available to the organizations to sustain their work. Some of the themes that received considerable attention in the discussions were concerning coordination efforts, technical capacities, human resources, and the need to harness advocacy efforts to promote wider mobilization. Some other points raised by the participants in the workshop were linked to their expectations from stakeholders as well as their expectations for the future of Syria framed as a need, such as security for staff members working inside Syria or financial, spatial and administrative stability. These inputs are rather integrated in other sections on challenges, opportunities and recommendations.

The organizational experience and the accumulation of social capital and human resources over the past eight years is considered an essential resource for Syrian civil society. There is no available data on the age and skills composition, but it is assumed a young population with a good level of on the ground experience that can harness more civic energy. A significant drawback concerning human resources is that local NGOs lose their qualified staff to the INGOs, who offer much higher salaries in comparison to the local and national CSOs. Because of this **brain drain from local organizations**, the division between local Syrian-led NGO and international NGO staff widens. It makes it difficult for local Syrian organizations to sustain their activities without their qualified staff and leads to rising income inequality in the field. The existence of a vast number of **training opportunities** for civil society workers is an advantage on the one hand, but it is acknowledged by the participants that receiving a training in a certain field does not necessarily provide sufficient expertise. Hence, low quality trainings without a solid learning strategy may encourage non-professional intervention. There is a pressing need for trainings that provide the skills and

knowledge of developing a comprehensive project proposal in line with the donor requirements. In order to support professionalization of organizations, it is also important to support staff with language skills. While the vast majority of participants expressed acquisition of a working knowledge of English as a need for Syrian CSOs, a stakeholder from Turkey highlighted the **language skills of Syrian CSO** actors as an important resource for Turkey as the Turkish civil society landscape has progressed in terms of foreign language skills thanks to the entrance of Syrian actors in the scene.

Many discussions underlined the importance of **coordination and interaction between actors**. Syrian CSOs quickly grew in number, but it is acknowledged that without coordination and joint standards, the high number of organizations may turn into a challenge. There are several umbrella organizations and alliances, but some participants are sceptical about their effectiveness. It is argued that the increasing number of actors in the field, accompanied by the lack of coordination, results in the duplication of services by consistently delivering aid to same groups of beneficiaries and at the same time, creating geographic and needs gaps that are not addressed by any organization. In addition, the marketization of the space of civil society is creating a competitive environment, which reinforces coordination problems. In this regard, there is a need to establish platforms and organize networking events that bring together Syrian-led organizations. The highly fragmented nature of CSOs, in both origin and host country contexts, with divergent perceptions and opinions is mentioned as the main trap blocking higher levels of cooperation and coordination. It is recognized that better coordination will strengthen the voice of Syrian civil society and render it more influential in decision-making processes at the international level. In this context, stronger political mobilization around a unified Syrian identity is perceived as essential by the majority of participants. To achieve this, there was some discussion on the need for wider mobilization through **long-term advocacy projects** by benefiting from social media tools rather than one-time actions. One of the proposals in Istanbul workshop was to promote lobbying activities by Syrians with Turkish nationality to influence decision making in the political system. For example, the candidacy of a Syrian – Turkish businessmen in the parliamentary elections in 2018 is an example in this regard that could pave the way for representation of Syrian interests in host country politics.<sup>16</sup>

## 5.4. Future scenarios for diaspora mobilization in Turkey and Lebanon

The developments that can be depicted as alternate scenarios for Syria, are in fact points that lie on a spectrum of a myriad of possibilities shaped by multiple actors and contexts. The shape and nature of the political settlement in Syria will be the main determinant of what the future might hold for Syrian civil society. In this context, Syrian civil society actors in Turkey, Syria and Lebanon are facing a complex and difficult task as they prepare for Syria's uncertain future that is shaped by and embedded in a multi-layered political context: Syria with its protracted conflict dynamics, host state context and the international political context. Among the respondents, there was a common sense of an unpredictable and precarious future that dominates the discussions on Syria. Despite continued commitment to the cause, ambiguity is a source of frustration for the CSO actors. As an interviewee from an organization in Lebanon said:

**“I [we] have a plan, I have a theory of change and I have the capacity, but I don't know what will happen in ten years. Really. I hope I can make a change, not for me, for my daughter, next generation, but of course this country is not for Assad family, and his group, it's our country, and... If you want to live in freedom and have your rights, we must fight for this.” (L1, Skype)**

16 - PRI. 2018. Syrian Erdogan Running Turkey's Parliamentary Elections. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-06-22/syrian-erdogan-running-turkeys-parliamentary-elections>

The political contexts in Lebanon and Turkey vis-a-vis the Syrian issue and the potential implications of ongoing international efforts to promote a solution to the crisis pose additional layers of complexity that hampers the participants' ability to predict future scenarios and devise a strategy for long-term objectives. While Turkey is, in general, perceived to provide a wider operating space with a relatively permissive environment for the Syrian civil society, the increasing restrictions and regulations are acknowledged by the participants. Humanitarian organizations mentioned delays in operations due to permission processes for cross-border aid deliveries and the difficulty to comply with Turkish regulations in conjunction with international standards of operation. The type of activities conducted by Syrian organizations in Turkish-held areas are also subject to limitations. For example, one of the organizations based in Gaziantep conducting educational activities inside Syria reported that they had to suspend their education-related programs due to recent regulations that require them to sign a protocol with the Ministry of Education in Turkey, a rule that also applies to Turkish CSOs working with refugees since 2017. Two interviewees mentioned that they pay extra attention to permission procedures in order not to confront with Turkish authorities even though they perceive access as their right. As one of the interviewees from Europe, with operations in Turkish-held areas said:

**“We don't access any area, for example the Turkish-held areas now, we decided not to go in until we get the official letter from the Turkish authority (vali) even though this is Syrian territory, Syrian land. So we have the right to access but we said no.” (U1, Skype)**

According to a study by Ramadan and Ozden (2019), there has been a decline in the establishment rate of Syrian organizations in 2017 as a result of stricter enforcement of the regulations concerning associations, such as the requirement to obtain work permits for all staff and unannounced visits that can result in detention of those that do not possess work permits (Ramadan & Ozden, 2019). The numbers will seemingly decline further as it is speculated by some interviewees that the Turkish authorities are taking measures to reduce their numbers and merge some organizations, an effort presumably linked to the hardships in monitoring activities of hundreds of Syrian CSOs in the country. One of the interviewees found this step conceivable in that it could produce a unified voice:

**“The less Syrian society organizations the better it is for Syria. Currently there are talks between international donors and the government of Turkey they might bring the numbers down, say we will have less NGOs working because there is no point in having big numbers.” (T1, Skype)**

The decline in the number of Syrian organizations is also mentioned as a natural aftermath of a peak in numbers due to the sudden freedom to set up independent organizations for their cause. As an interviewee from a large humanitarian organization argued:

**“I think many of those NGOs will disappear one day because some were created for certain purpose, and you know suddenly we found ourselves able to create NGOs, then we have hundreds now. Before 2011, we had very few unless there's some that are under the umbrella of the regime.” (T4, Skype)**

Furthermore, the domestic political dynamics in Turkey influences the decisions and actions of Syrian civil society and compel them to reflect on the sensitivities of host countries in an effort to keep the relations good. As one interviewee put it:

**“We are not operating from Iraq to Syria. This is for like some political reasons, we basically want to keep the relationship with the Turkish government good. And it might be concerning for the Turkish government, for NGOs working from here and there, so I'm trying to figure out how we make our hosting countries comfortable here and there, which is not easy. This is very challenging for NGOs, but still we are working on that.” (T4, Skype)**

In Lebanon, on the other hand, the unstable political and social context interfere with actors' ability to plan for the future and to take more strategic action. Some fear that a political settlement in favour of the current government of Syria followed by the normalization of international relations may manifest itself through restrictive measures towards Syrian civil society in Lebanon and complicate the conditions of existence for Syrians opposed to the Syrian regime. The study of Mattes (2018) on Syrian CSOs in Lebanon shows that some actors even hide their 'Syrianness' to facilitate registration and to avoid appearing on the radar of security agencies. Particularly those engaged in advocacy are walking on thin ice in their relations with public authorities because of the politically charged context. In Turkey, on the other hand, the existing ethnic and sectarian tensions are deepened by the conflict and came to play a central role in Turkey's Syria policies. It can be argued that these tensions generate certain dangerous zones that CSOs are not allowed to enter, such as the Kurdish interests. Thus, the domestic political context in host countries may introduce additional fragmentation in Syrian civil society based on ethnic and religious divisions, reproducing the dynamics of conflict in the diaspora.

Another future concern raised by the participants is that the end of the war may diminish international interest in supporting the Syrian community, and the so-called donor-fatigue may set in in areas except reconstruction and return. One interviewee presumes a rather pessimistic future and explains:





**If the world accepts Assad, we are the most dangerous people for this regime, the civil society outside Syria. So they will do everything to eliminate this voice and to stop the work of these people. And outside Syria, after one year, nobody wants to give money for nothing because it's not a very sexy topic now. So we don't know.” (L1, Skype)**

Despite the overall feeling of ambiguity, the majority of participants acknowledge that the current government will regain control over most of Syria, either with or without Assad. Within this context, it is assumed that it will work towards minimizing or strategically removing the potential for dissent inside the country. The revival of the traditional hostility towards an independent civil society may purge the civil society in most, if not all, parts of Syria. However, the variation of opportunity structures in each locality is recognized, which implies a slight chance for harnessing civil society in certain regions inside Syria. For example, participants in Lebanon (as well as in Germany) mentioned an example of a government-controlled province that still allows a certain degree of freedom to mobilize inside Syria.

#### 5.4.1. Strategies and solutions

In light of the aforementioned probabilities and uncertainties, the range of strategies that are considered by Syrian CSOs in response to changing realities inside and outside Syria reflect the diverse experiences and visions of Syrian CSOs as well as their capacities and transnational connections. As one interviewee from a well-established humanitarian organization in Gaziantep discussed:

**“I think a lot of people are looking at the future as Syrian government will control a big part of Syria. Almost all of Syria again. So where will the civil society life be? Will it resume to work with the refugees? Will it try to solve the situation with the government and try to set up offices inside Damascus? Or try to be an international organization and go to work in other missions in Africa, in Yemen, in Libya? I think CSOs have very limited choices after these 8 years.” (T3, Skype)**

It is recognized by the participants that the end of the war does not necessarily bring peace and any possible scenario calls for sustained effort and commitment over a long period. In the framework of a scenario in which the government regains control in all or most parts of Syria, the possibility of engaging in direct or indirect relations with non-state actors and supporting communities in regime-controlled areas was among the issues discussed. In general, increased dialogue with the homeland could take place at varying degrees and in different forms, be it through returning and shifting operations, establishing partnerships with the local organizations or by empowering the civil society through informal dialogue. While it is speculated that some organizations may consider registering in Damascus, none of the direct informants of this study mentioned this as a potential strategy for their organizations. Some participants hold the view that returning to Syria could be life threatening for opposition voices in the diaspora while for others it is simply unacceptable in principle to return to Assad's Syria and work with the current government's authorization. Even if they come to terms with the idea in principle, the perception of insecurity seemingly holds them back from connecting with the homeland. In this context, the retake of all opposition-held territories may shift the focus of some organizations away from operations inside Syria to improving the situation of refugees in host countries. While this shift could be interpreted as adapting to the circumstances of an ever-changing reality, it is also disputed by an interviewee:

In Douma, a man carries a candle and a placard with an image of the Eiffel tower in tribute to the victims of the Paris attacks, on November 14, 2015. Photo credit: Bassam Khabieh

**“We are Syrians, we are working for Syrians. We are still new, we cannot open ourselves for new markets since we have the mission for Syria first and it’s not accomplished yet. (T1, Skype)”**

As for the future, the discussions revealed that opinions are divided over the issue of working inside government-held areas of Syria. With few prospects for return and limited access to Syria, it is acknowledged mostly in the Lebanese context that building a strong civil society inside could be the last chance to increase the margins of freedom in Syria if there is no alternative political solution. A potential strategy underlined by one of the actors in Lebanon is to advocate for opening new communication channels and increasing dialogue with CSOs that uphold pluralistic and civil values in government-held areas with a perspective to strengthen their capacities and invest in the future of civil society in Syria. It is important to note that the presence of organizations from inside Syria in the Beirut workshop can certainly have an impact on the inclusive language towards them but the high level of meaningful dialogue and the collaborative environment in the workshop reduced the concerns for possible bias. In Gaziantep, on the other hand, there was a higher tendency to view the CSOs working in government-held areas as pro-regime and the majority tend to disapprove of collaborating with them. But the mere fact that it was possible to openly discuss these seemingly hard to touch issues may serve to illustrate that such positions are not as indisputable as popular views might suggest. For example, the subject sparked an interesting discussion when one of the participants critically questioned the neutrality of humanitarian organizations only responding to needs of the communities in opposition-controlled areas, while others argued that they do not have to work in government-held areas to be neutral and it is not possible to gain access to those government-controlled areas without undue interference in their operations. On this issue, a bold criticism of civil society that refrain from engaging with the homeland was made by a human rights activist from Lebanon:

**“In reality, if you are a leader to revolution, you can go to inside Syria and work, it’s [the revolution] not about Gaziantep, it’s not about Turkey. And not about receiving orders from the government in Turkey. That is not negotiable.” (L1, Skype)**

The divergent perspectives of actors regarding the controversial matter of building or maintaining ties with actors and entities in government-held areas of Syria may introduce new separation lines among civil society actors in the ‘near’ diaspora in a scenario in which the government forces regain control of Syria. As put forward by a respondent from Lebanon, the distinct responses of civil society actors in Lebanon and Turkey might have been partially shaped by the host country political context and physical proximity to government-held areas. He argues that Turkey’s relatively strong opposition to the Syrian government with no potential for normalization in sight and its physical distance to the regime-controlled areas arguably reinforces the detachment of homeland from diaspora, and this reflects on the approach of Syrian civil society in Turkey. On the other hand, Lebanon is sharing a border with government-held areas and Lebanese government’s stance in the conflict is divided. Thus, the difference of opinions might be linked to the actors’ embeddedness in host country political opportunity structures. But such differences also demonstrate the existence of diverse geographies both inside Syria and in the diaspora with different experiences, needs, values and perceptions and reaffirms the heterogeneity of this group.

The approach of host countries and the donor community towards diaspora Syrian CSOs and cross border operations is a further variable for future consideration. Some of the actors in Istanbul and Gaziantep recognize the shrinking space for Syrian CSOs in Turkish-controlled areas with new regulations and restrictions while actors in Lebanon have more existential concerns as discussed in the previous section. Under these circumstances, it is uncertain whether the end of conflict will jeopardize the existence of Syrian civil society in Lebanon and in Turkey. The potential deterioration in host country context may force Syrian CSOs to relocate to another hub in the region or extending transnational networks to more enabling contexts in Europe. For example, an organization from Gaziantep mentioned opening offices in Germany as a contingency plan. Another one from Lebanon mentioned Erbil as a potential hub:

**“If regime starts to win, it will cause a political crisis in Lebanon and they will stop the civil society work in Lebanon and... and stop the money that goes to Syria, everything will change. The situation... also in Turkey it is the same... Also in Jordan, everything is changing... Just Erbil, Erbil is now easy to work.” (L1, Skype)**

Furthermore, depending on the financial capacities and the existing transnational ties, a potential pathway for well-established humanitarian organizations could be building on their capacities to become international players and serve in missions elsewhere. There are examples to humanitarian NGOs, which became international in scope and opened outposts in Yemen and Bangladesh in response to staggering levels of humanitarian need. For example, a humanitarian actor working in an organization with branches in other missions explains its multinational presence as part of a longer-term plan:

**“So this doesn't mean that we will stop focusing on Syria, and this doesn't mean we would be shifting into an international NGO. Maybe this might be a goal on the long-term, but one of our main goals is to serve the Syrian community.” (T4, Skype)**

Therefore, internationalization or becoming more cross-regional are considered among viable future strategies for Syrian humanitarian organizations with enhanced capacities and networks.

#### 5.4.2. Potential fields of action

In terms of the civil society organizations' potential future programmes and their fields of work, the main focus on the **homeland level** lies on community empowerment projects along with social cohesion projects for IDPs, relief, mental health and psychosocial support, education and generation of livelihood opportunities. The activities in community empowerment could aim at building social capital based on trust, reducing social, political, religious, and regional polarization in the society and spreading contextually and culturally sensitive set of shared values including justice and accountability, gender equality, culture of nonviolence and information sharing. The continuation of relief efforts is deemed necessary and the need for long-term projects in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is highlighted to support the communities in dealing with war trauma.

On the **host country level**, the projected efforts target community empowerment through dialogue and awareness, social cohesion projects that values and preserves Syrian cultural identity, education, advocacy and MHPSS. In order to reduce the polarization of the Syrian society, projects that foster dialogue between Syrians in Syria and in exile are considered vital by many as for the future. In the field of social cohesion, a high emphasis was placed on promoting a unified Syrian identity and the ways to safeguard this identity to develop social cohesion mechanisms based on a two-way process between the host communities and the refugees.

Strengthening the voice of civil society and raising awareness on rights and freedoms of the Syrian communities both in Syria (only in Northern Syria for some) and in exile, enhancing coordination with stronger transnational and homeland ties and increasing visibility on the international level are identified as major common goals. The problem of misrepresentation on the international level is recognized by the participants as a challenge, which renders effective coordination and a more unified voice necessary. While the actors have conflicting ideas, narratives and visions for a peaceful Syria, they recognize the need for concerted efforts to avoid biased thinking. The participants raised concerns regarding the circulation of one-sided narratives about the security situation in Syria and the risk of encouraging returns before the conditions are met, which, in their opinion, could be mitigated by large-scale advocacy work rather than one-time actions that are reactive in nature. As one of the participants in Gaziantep workshop put it:

**“Civil society should bring together parties that are tired of war, in that case opposition and regime and not international actors. The discussion should be between them. They want to quickly finish the plan without taking into consideration people's needs. We should not let this happen.”**

The consensus view seems to be that the actors should come together to work on understanding each other and establishing trust to build a coordinated vision and increase presence on the international level in any likely scenario.

In the field of justice and reconciliation, two divergent and conflicting views emerged in Beirut workshop. It is argued by a participant based inside Syria that efforts for justice inside Syria may not correspond to a reality in the society due to diminishing levels of trust, cooperation, and lack of shared values that can bound the society together. She argued that limited societal awareness of the concepts of justice, accountability and citizenship complicates the existence of an environment conducive for justice efforts, thus, prioritizing justice may heighten the divisions in the society and may even exacerbate the conflict in the absence of shared values. By contrast, diaspora civil society actors are, in general, less likely to compromise in their view of justice as a precondition to reconciliation. There were strong sentiments regarding the usage of the word reconciliation which, in their view, may lead to legitimization of the regime discourse and overshadow the pursuit of justice (also see Box 1). Thus, while diaspora actors place high emphasis on justice and accountability as a field of activity, the actors inside Syria aim to focus more on bounding the society together and building social capital.

# 6. The space of diaspora mobilization for Syrians in Europe

## 6.1. European migration and policy context

### 6.1.1. Migration to Europe

**France** did not experience a significant influx of Syrian asylum seekers. The number of Syrian-born persons in the country increased from 16,224 in 2010 to 28,393 in 2017 (World Bank, 2010; UNHCR, 2018a). A total number of 12,520 Syrians are granted asylum by 2017, including 351 refugees settled before the 2011 conflict (See Table 6). Over the period of five years between 2011 and 2016, 96,4% of the files examined were subject to an admission decision, 55,6% under the Geneva Convention and 40,7% under the subsidiary protection (OFPRA, 2018a).

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Asylum applications by Syrian nationals *	0	450	878	2,072	3,403	3,615	3,249***
Syrian refugees (cumulative) **	351	640	1,474	2,882	5,179	8,991	12,520
Syrian asylum seekers **	0	0	343	1,239	2,711	2,149	2,394

Sources: \* OFPRA (2018a), \*\* UNHCR (2018a), \*\*\* Asylum in Europe (2018)

In 2014 and 2015, France announced its commitment to resettle 500 Syrian refugees per year from first asylum countries and resettled 3657 refugees of various nationalities, mostly Syrians in the next two year period (UNHCR, 2018d). The sub-quota for Syrians increased to 7000 in the 2018/2019 period. From 2011 and onwards, the total number of resettled Syrian cases to France reached 8,637 (UNHCR, 2019a) (See Appendix E for resettlement figures).

**Germany** was already host to a large number of Syrians before 2011. According to World Bank's bilateral migration data, the number of Syrians in Germany was 40,356 in 2010 (World Bank, 2010). Syrian migrants who came to Germany in the 1970s onwards were mostly students and medium/high skilled migrants. In the 1980s, Germany witnessed the first forcibly displaced wave of Syrians especially after the Ba'ath regime's brutal repression of the 1982 uprising in the city of Hama. The latest wave began in 2011 and increased dramatically following the summer of 2015. The highly promoted "welcome culture" towards refugees coupled with Merkel's announcement of a so-called open-door policy in 2015, Germany quickly became the most favored country of destination for Syrians, followed by Sweden (Mixed Migration Center, 2018). The reasons reported by migrants and refugees for the high demand to settle in Germany are listed as the availability of services and support, the presence of family and friends, and the opportunity to work (REACH, 2015; IOM, 2018). As a result, Germany became the top recipient country for Syrian refugees in Europe with 496,674 recognized refugees in addition to 70,833 asylum seekers by 2017 (see Table 6) (UNHCR, 2018a).

**Table 7. Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Germany, 2011-2017**

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Syrian refugees	10,155	18,165	21,253	40,994	115,604	375,122	496,674
Syrian asylum seekers	4,713	5,986	10,566	29,591	81,582	100,527	70,833

Source: UNHCR (2018a)

The Syrian population in Germany is highly heterogeneous in ethnic, religious and socio-economic terms. Kurdish Syrians represent a large part of the community along with other minority groups. The majority of Syrian population is young, with more than 30% of Syrians in school age and about 70% in working age (Destatis, 2018). The majority of Syrian nationals live in North Rhine-Westphalia, while the rest is evenly dispersed in Baden-Wuerttemberg, Lower Saxony and Bavaria (Ragab et al, 2017). Syrians constitute the largest group seeking protection in Germany with a population of 507,190 as of 31 December 2017 (see Table 8).

**Table 8. Syrian population in Germany according to protection status as of 31 December 2017**

Population	Incl. protection seekers	Of whom: by protection status				
		Unsettled	Recognized			Refused
			Total	Temporary	Permanent	
698,950	507,190	27,570	476,025	467,825	8,200	3,590

Source: Destatis, 2018

Germany is the second top resettlement country for Syrian refugees in Europe following United Kingdom (See Appendix E). In January 2017, Germany announced its commitment to resettle 500 Syrian refugees from Turkey on a monthly basis. The total number of resettled Syrian cases reached 12,721 by January 2019 (UNHCR, 2019).

By the end of 2010, only 4,069 Syrians were living in Denmark (StatBank Denmark, 2019). As in other parts of Europe, the numbers of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Denmark have steadily increased since 2011 and doubled the previous year in 2015 (See Table 9). In the first quarter of 2019, the Syrian population reached 42,467; including roughly 6,605 citizenship holders with Syrian descent. It is a substantially young population: 45% of the total population is below 19 years old. The proportion of males began to increase dramatically with new arrivals from 2012 and onwards and they currently represent 55% of the total immigrant population. Syrians primarily inhabit the regions of Syddanmark and Midtjylland but they are more or less equally dispersed across the country.

**Table 9. Syrian immigrants and descendants in Denmark, by gender, 2010-2019**

Year/Syrian Population	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total	4069	4689	5601	7037	11538	23143	36103	40477	42207	42467
Men	2118	2540	3094	3911	6771	13978	20639	22582	23308	23436
Women	1951	2149	2507	3126	4767	9165	15464	17895	18899	19031

Source: Statbank Denmark (2019)

Kurdish Syrians and political refugees who left Syria in 1980s following the brutal repression of the Hama uprising

and are two dominant groups within the Syrian diaspora in Denmark. In addition to these two main groups, a considerable share of Syrians immigrated in different times to Denmark for economic and educational purposes (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).

In 2014, Denmark was the fifth largest recipient of asylum seeker applications in the European Union per capita, and the second largest recipient of Syrian asylum seekers in the EU per capita (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2018). On the other hand, Denmark received only 405 refugees under resettlement programs, which was suspended by 2016 due to increasing number of arrivals on the borders.

The **United Kingdom** hosted 499 Syrian refugees (including refugee-like situations) in 2010. Since 2011, the number of refugee arrivals increased rapidly and reached 9,674 refugees and asylum seekers in 2017 (UNHCR, 2018a). In 2013, the United Kingdom had the fourth largest Syrian population in Europe (see Table 10). The Office for National Statistics estimated that in 2014, the number of Syrian-born individuals was 14,000 and it reached 22,000 in 2015 (Home Office, 2017). Similar to other European countries, the United Kingdom had its share of Syrian immigrants during the political unrest in Syria the 1980s, in addition to other immigrants who were seeking better economic and educational opportunities in different periods of time (International Alert, 2015).

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Syrian refugees	693	1,717	3,169	4,573	6,496	8,269	9,100
Syrian asylum seekers	339	389	641	1,329	1,648	1,010	574

Source: UNHCR (2018a)

Syrians are not equally spread all over the UK. Two of the poorest regions in England, Yorkshire and the North East, have taken three times as many refugees relative to the population as the two wealthiest regions, London and the South East. Some areas with little history of migration such as Scotland's Clackmannanshire and Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar have taken some of the highest numbers of refugees; over nine per 10,000 of their population. Syrian-born population in the UK was estimated to be 14,000, of them 12,000 live in England (7,000 in London) and 2,000 in Wales. Of the 12,000 Syrian-born residing in England 7,000 are males and 5,000 are females, with a large proportion under the age 16.

The United Kingdom introduced a large-scale resettlement program named Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and resettled roughly 15,000 Syrians from a number of first asylum countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey) within a period of five years (See Appendix E). Almost ninety percent of the Syrians who were resettled under the VPRS scheme were Muslim Sunni, a proportion higher than those in Syria where 87% are Muslims and 74% are Muslim Sunni (Home office, 2017).

### 6.1.2. Policy context

Since the beginning of the conflict, **France** positioned itself in opposition to the Syrian government and provided directly military support to rebel forces alongside lethal and non-lethal military support (International Crisis Group, 2018). In the wake of ISIS-led terror attacks in 2015, France increased its military presence in Syria under the US-led coalition against ISIS. On the other hand, France has never been a major recipient of Syrian refugees but channelled aid to first asylum countries mainly Lebanon and Jordan, to be used for the purposes of humanitarian aid, livelihood and education.

The French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) is the main public institution in charge of migration and asylum issues. Operating under the Ministry of Interior since 2010, OFPRA's main missions are to process applications for international protection, to implement the legal and

administrative protection for refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, and to provide consultancy in the context of asylum procedures (OFPRA, 2018b). The asylum policy of France also got its share from the refugee crisis narrative that urge lawmakers to take restrictive measures. In August 2018, a new bill on asylum and migration has been adopted by the National Assembly. According to the bill, migrants are obliged to lodge asylum claims within 90 days upon entering France or face a fast-track process with fewer safeguards for asylum. Furthermore, those who appeal upon rejection can be returned to origin countries before the asylum court rules on their appeal if the origin country is in the list of 'safe' countries. According to Human Rights Watch (2019a), the new measures weaken the safeguards for asylum and makes it less accessible.

The Office for Integration, Reception and Citizenship is the main institution in charge of integration, and it manages programmes for legal newcomers, mostly young immigrants. The integration programs addressing migrants and refugees are designed to serve newcomers who had been in the country for less than five years (Escafré-Dublet, 2014). After five years, the integration policies are mainstreamed into area-based interventions that target neighborhoods largely dominated by foreign-borns (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).

**Germany** is one of the countries that positioned itself in opposition to the Syrian government. The government didn't take any military role in Syria except for providing support to its allies in the coalition against ISIS following the 2015 terror attacks in Paris.

Following the 'Europeanization' of the Syrian crisis in the summer of 2015, Germany adopted a generous refugee policy in response to the mass arrivals of refugees (Corabatir, 2016). Represented by Chancellor Merkel, Germany pushed for a common European approach to the refugees and called for ensuring a fair share of responsibility for asylum applications across the Europe in order to release the burden on EU countries of first entry (Toygur & Benvenuti, 2016). The efforts of Merkel failed to elicit a wide consensus over how to manage refugees in EU territory, but an alternative plan was to ensure hosting of refugees in major host countries by formulating a series of agreements such as the Jordan and Lebanon compacts and the controversial EU-Turkey statement (Betts et al, 2017).

In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge - BAMF) under the Ministry of Interior is in charge of management of asylum procedure and the promotion of migrant integration. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) are main organizations working in the field of migration and development. The Integration Act / Integrationsgesetz enacted in May 2016 aims to regulate the rights and responsibilities of asylum seekers. The main objective is to enable refugees to learn German and thus access the job market to be able to support themselves. The act is concerned with arrangements of integration courses, language courses, work programs, retention of ghettoization and permanent residency.

The initial response of the **United Kingdom** to the Syrian displacement crisis was to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians in Syria and its neighbouring countries without offering any resettlement programs. However, in March 2014, the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Program (VPRP), a resettlement program that gives priority to elderly, disabled people, victims of sexual violence and torture, was launched by the Home Secretary in order to resettle vulnerable cases of Syrians to the UK (McGuinness, 2017). In September 2015, following the appearance in media of a photograph of a three-year-old Syrian toddler, Alan Kurdi's body washed up on a Turkish beach, Prime Minister David Cameron declared that the UK will admit an additional 20,000 Syrians residing in neighboring host countries of Syria. However, the overall public attitude towards immigration is less favourable (BBC, 2018). The media constructions and representations of Muslims as a domestic terrorist threat raises grievances in Muslim society as well as Syrian community.



The Home Office's UK Visas and Immigration section is responsible for resident permits, visas and asylum and immigration-related issues (Home Office, 2019). The department of Housing, Communities and Local Government plays a leading role in the implementation and decentralization of the integration policies (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

**Denmark** positions itself in opposition to the Syrian government but do not participate in any kind of military operation or assistance. Prime Minister Rasmussen explains the policy of Denmark with regard to the war in Syria as: "It's not something Denmark will contribute to in the form of soldiers. But we stand on the right side of this conflict. We do that in the fight against IS Islamic State, where we are deeply engaged, and we do it against the Assad Regime".

Denmark is another country where right-wing populist movements gained strength after the Europeanization of the Syrian 'crisis' in 2015. Accordingly, it is one of the countries with a relatively restrictive approach to asylum in Europe. As part of a growing anti-immigration agenda, the Danish government has taken harsh measures against refugees with controversial practices such as seizing assets of newly arrived refugees and reducing the welfare benefits afforded to refugees (Kvist, 2016), or plans for 2021 to house rejected asylum-seekers with criminal records in a return centre situated on a remote island, together along with foreign fighters without Danish nationality.

More recently, in February 2019, the Danish government approved another controversial bill that explicitly shifts the focus of Denmark's asylum policy from integration to repatriation. By placing emphasis on the "temporary" status of residence permits handed to refugees, the bill aims to reduce the number of refugees who stay in Denmark indefinitely. These restrictive anti-immigrant policies leave asylum seekers as well as refugees with a feeling of transience and undermines their intention to invest in a future in the country. It also gives a clear and consistent message to new asylum seekers to avoid coming to Denmark.

The Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing was established in 2016 and took charge of issues related to migration management. The Ministry also deals with asylum issues, residence permits, family reunification, and integration of refugees into the labour market and education system. The Ministry gets advice from the Council for Ethnic Minorities on issues concerning immigrants, refugees and integration. The Council for Ethnic Minorities is a national council that promotes the rights of ethnic minority groups to prevent discrimination or marginalization of ethnic minorities. The Council also focuses on democratic participation and active citizenship among ethnic minorities, among others. Some progress has been made in terms of political engagement with the establishment of the new Dialogue, Citizenship and Ethnic Equality Fund (Puljen til styrkelse af dialog, medborgerskab og etnisk ligebehandling) which offers grants to foster immigrant participation in politics, elections, organizations and leisure activities and to combat ethnic discrimination (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).

### 6.1.3. Existing support mechanisms for Syrian CSOs

In the United Kingdom, diaspora organizations can apply for thematic funding opportunities administered by the Department for International Development (DFID). However, Syria is not one of the target countries of accessible grant calls at the time of this writing (Department for International Development, 2019). One of the key international actors supporting diaspora engagement is International Alert (IA), with targeted support to diaspora groups in the UK. Building on past experiences with Sri Lankan diaspora, they launched the Syrian Platform for Peace, with a perspective to create space for "diaspora members to coordinate, learn from each other, and jointly work to influence policy and media discussions on Syria" (International Alert, 2019).

In 2007, France has significantly improved its diaspora engagement policies after the adoption of a major migration and development instrument "concerted management agreements for migration flows and co-development" that aims to harness the skills of diaspora and migrant (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). The

instrument devises policy strategies to harness the skills of diaspora and migrants mainly concerned with identification and transferability of key skills and improved coordination with labour market stakeholders in destination and origin countries (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs & OECD, 2012). However, there are limited public funding opportunities for diaspora organizations and those eligible to access them are typically those organizations that are already well established and resourceful. The majority of the organizations in France are voluntary based and rely on donations and fundraising events.

In Germany, Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German International Cooperation agency, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) are the key actors extending targeted support for diaspora engagement with a perspective to promote the developmental potential of migration. Centre for International Migration and Development (CIM) is a joint program run by GIZ and BMZ, with thematic focus on, among others, diaspora cooperation. The CIM offers targeted support on five different levels: (1) annual funding of up to EUR 44,000 per project for small-scale projects, (2) advice on submitting applications, project management and PR work (3) training on methods for successful knowledge transfer in preparation for project implementation, targeted assistance in planning (4) implementing and sustainably anchoring projects in local structures and (5) organization of exchange, networking and specialist events (Centre for International Migration and Development, 2019). Additional funding opportunities are accessible through general BMZ funding schemes. Regarding policies and programs specifically targeting Syrian diaspora actors in Germany, one can observe increasing involvement by German government institutions and other stakeholder in recent years. In 2013, the German Federal Foreign Office provided financial funds to Berghof Foundation to facilitate the establishment of an umbrella organization of German-Syrian relief organizations in Germany (Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine eV, VDSH). Within the project “Capacity building for civil society actors in Syrian relief aid”, supported by the German International Cooperation (GIZ) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), members of VDSH received training in project management, accounting, and proposal writing to promote professionalisation as well as capacity development of Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany. Moreover, selected projects have received seed funding for a six-month period to implement relief projects inside Syria or its neighbouring countries (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).

In Denmark, Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is the key actor providing direct and indirect support to diaspora communities through its Diaspora Programme launched in 2010. The objective of the program is to promote diaspora engagement in multiple geographies and thematic areas. The thematic areas include facilitating enhanced coordination; capacity development; voice amplification; network facilitation; as well as knowledge production and sharing (DRC, 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers funding opportunities in the field of development, which is operationalized by The Civil Society in Development. However, the high level of requirements of grant application procedures hinder small scale and grassroots organizations’ access to funding under this scheme (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017).

## 6.2. Key challenges and opportunities for diaspora CSOs in Europe

Drawing on the triadic political opportunity approach proposed by Chaudhary & Moss (2016), the external and structural conditions that interfere with the space and activities of Syrian CSOs in Europe are analysed in three layers: host country, homeland, and international political contexts. The discussion centres on the challenges and opportunities faced in the three different contexts in the fields of advocacy, justice and reconciliation, woman empowerment, social cohesion, and humanitarian work that arise from or manifests itself in these multiple political contexts and their interaction.

### 6.2.1. Home country level: Challenges and opportunities facing diaspora CSOs in relation to homeland Syria

In the field of **justice and reconciliation**, the majority of the participants consider justice as a precondition or an integral component of the long process of reconciling opposing parties. The usage of the term 'reconciliation' is met with criticism in this context as well as in the region (See Box 1). As one workshop participant in Berlin put it:

**“Reconciliation, on the other hand, is not an innocent term, it is used by the Assad government to surrender some groups. Therefore, the correct usage would be justice or reconciliation. Our motto is to achieve peace, we all agree on that, but justice cannot be realized with reconciliation. Reconciliation cannot be accepted without justice.”**

It is in this context that the debates were mostly centred on the pursuit of justice. The extensive documentation of violations with the engagement of activists, civil society organizations, citizens, lawyers and victims is a strong advantage as it ensures that victimization is recorded and remembered. Indeed, the Syrian war is considered the most documented conflict in history with thousands of videos, victim testimonies, and pictures uploaded on the internet and in social networks (Kabawat & Travesi, 2018). According to the latest monthly report of Violations Documentation Center Syria (2019), 191,357 conflict-related deaths have been documented and verified by victim identification since mid-March 2011.

Only one interviewee expressed desire for concerted efforts at reconciliation. He argued that, justice for the victims cannot go beyond materialist compensation because the perpetrators are diverse and difficult to identify, which will not fully satisfy the demands for justice. Based on this, he argues that a political transition that ends violence and produces stability. In his words:

**“To achieve peace, from my point of view, is more important than achieving justice in general. How are you going to achieve justice? Who is going to bring justice? [...] if I lost one of my family members, what will be the compensation? It's going to be materialistic. You don't know who is behind the killings. There are thousands of militias and thousands of members. When you say compensating for the losses of victims, they can compensate my family only materially [...] I think peace is more important to bring stability to country, to rebuild the country.” (U2, Skype)**

In **cross-border humanitarian operations**, the geographical difficulties in delivering aid and suspension of some projects due to changing conflict dynamics inside Syria are among the challenges that face Syrian CSOs in this field. It is often reported by humanitarian actors on the ground that the lack of coordination among acting entities coupled with difficulties in getting access to certain areas and the interference of fighting parties in the delivery of humanitarian assistance leads to an unequal distribution of aid as some parts of the population in need cannot be reached sufficiently.

Among the participants that have operations inside Syria, a common concern is the lack of formal money transfer channels impeding the work on the ground. The economic sanctions imposed by the EU and USA on Syria caused many banks to restrict the transactions and even shut down bank accounts in Syria. The banks face the risk of heavy fines for violating sanctions and they fear jeopardizing their professional reputation for supporting terrorism. As a result, money transactions made by Syrian organizations are monitored closely as a strategy to prevent funding for terrorism. A study conducted by the Syrian Network for Relief and Development (CODSSY) and three of its member organizations ASML/Syria, Initiative for a New Syria and Women Now for Development

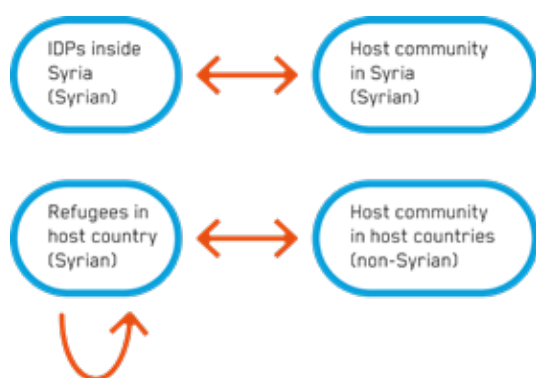
revealed that most of Syrian organizations based in France and other European countries like Germany and the UK experienced serious financial obstacles when opening a bank account or transferring money related to Syria. According to the study, measures implemented by banks not only pose a practical challenges to organization when it comes to implementing their work, but also have unintended yet often

serious consequences for the people inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries, who highly depend on the financial contributions from organizations based abroad. It is reported that many organizations and individuals resorted to informal channels of money transfer in the absence of formal channels. There is also a fear among Syrian CSOs of being stigmatized and accused of supporting terrorism when formal channels of sending money are used. In particular the sectarian dimension of the conflict and actors such as ISIS have contributed to a discourse of securitisation in which humanitarian aid tends to be seen only in the light of supporting conflict actors and not to those suffering from the consequences of the conflict.

Some good practices of **women empowerment** were highlighted in the northern region controlled by Kurdish authorities alongside initiatives by independent CSOs in some government-controlled areas. Kurdish political movements' progressive interpretation of gender equality is creating a political opportunity structure enabling political participation and mobilization of women in Northern Syria. The impact of customs and traditions on women, the weak representation of women on the formal level, and the absence of laws that protect and support women in many other parts of Syria are some of the challenges expressed by the participants in this regard.

The group discussions yielded three layers of interactions that fall under the field of **social cohesion** in the Syrian context: (1) social cohesion of IDPs and host communities inside Syria, (2) social cohesion of refugees and host communities in host countries, and (3) social cohesion among refugees in host countries. The discussions in Europe revealed that for many the approaches to social cohesion in host countries often neglect the diversity within refugee populations. It is perceived that programs fostering social cohesion and inclusion in the host country tend to consider the Syrian population as a homogenous group, neglecting potential lines of conflict present in the Syrian society both at home and abroad. As such, the discussions highlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding of social cohesion that takes into account the diversity among refugees from Syria and promote encounters among Syrians of different backgrounds, rather than only focussing on programs that foster the migrant's integration in host countries. It is argued that achieving peaceful co-existence of diverse groups from Syria is a precondition to social cohesion with host country nationals.

**Figure 4. Layers of social Interaction in the Syrian context**



### 6.2.2. Host country level: Challenges and opportunities facing diaspora CSOs in relation to host countries in Europe

Freedoms in Europe, especially freedom of speech and media, were highlighted as enabling factors to activate the Syrian CSOs role in advocacy. The participants stressed that they can benefit from the educational opportunities, wider range of networking, and democracy in Europe. In the field of **advocacy**, one of the challenges on the host country level is argued to be the Syrian community's limited interest in

civic engagement. In the UK context, it was mentioned that there was strong and vocal support from the local population, in particular at the onset of the conflict. There is still a quite active solidarity movement, which mobilise the public in the UK for issues concerning Syria, whereas advocacy work done by Syrians themselves is considered as marginal. Some participants argued that it stems from disbelief in the power of advocacy while others suggest that it is simply a matter of time and priorities as people need to settle first while being an active community member comes next. The authoritarian government, the non-existence of an independent civil society in the pre-2011 Syrian context and along with that the lack of experiences with political participation and civic engagement, was likely to prove a barrier to mobilize the broader Syrian community. As such, a general mistrust towards political institutions and action perhaps deter many Syrians to become politically involved even from abroad. Furthermore, advocacy requires visibility and visibility comes with a risk for non-citizens without permanent residence. In particular, in origin context, in which political engagement is violently repressed, being openly engaged in the host country may come with a fear of negative consequences. Non-citizen migrants and refugees are relatively vulnerable due to their condition of deportability and their insecure status. There are past experiences of refugees being arrested and deported based on false accusations of human trafficking after attending a pro-refugee protest in Vienna (Johnson, 2015).

Therefore, participants agree that it is not fair to expect full engagement of newly arrived refugees in advocacy events. In addition, some of the participants in the UK stated that there are 'dangerous zones' around this space for free speech, implying the stigmatization of Muslims as could-be-terrorist. As one participant put it: "If I say Assad killed more people than ISIS, it causes a shock." Indeed, it is likely that this fear stems from to the popularity of pro-Assad narratives among some political faction in the UK context. Some factions of the left-wing are said to be buying into regime propaganda of the Syrian government, including well-known public figures, newspapers, and journalists. To put it simply, they justify their pro-regime stance with narratives similar to that of Russia, as if fighting against Western occupation of Syria. Despite being a small and disunited faction, they have a solid presence in media. It could be in this context that the weak support from the political actors in the UK emerge as a challenge in the field of advocacy. Further, the limited discursive opportunities tend to be highly connected to the securitization of the Syrian conflict. It was perceived that solidarity and support for the Syrian cause was high at the beginning of the conflict, in which Assad was framed as the main enemy in media and public discourse yet diminished over time with the rise of ISIS and sectarianization of the Syrian conflict. Hence, 'compassion fatigue' is another commonly pronounced phenomena referring to the waning sympathy of the general public towards Syrian refugee. While most of the participants recognized the decreasing sympathy of West towards the Syrian cause, the need for sympathy versus empathy created a dichotomy between civil society actors during the workshop discussions. While some participants defined it as a necessity to gain the sympathy of the general public to gain an advantage on the political and economic level by influencing policies, others found this need baseless because sympathy means caring just enough to feel bad, but not enough to want to support actively. It was also argued that the loss of sympathy is linked to the leap of ISIS-led terrorist attacks from Middle East to Europe, especially in 2016 and 2017.

Most of the participants, with some exceptions as in the case of CSOs in Denmark, praised the attitudes of host governments regarding their support to establish associations that support social cohesion. European countries are said to offer refugees a decent life with education and employment opportunities and a safe space for freedom of speech. The shifting focus of Danish asylum policies from integration to return represents a fundamental challenge in building a cohesive society. It is argued that the Syrian community feels unstable in the country and cannot invest in their future under these circumstances. In addition, access to certain fields of education and vocational education opportunities are also limited. This shift will presumably exacerbate the level of social and economic participation of refugees. In contrast, participants from Germany, perceive that there is no strong emphasis on return but through limitations on family reunification, it is argued that the system is indirectly encouraging repatriation.

In general, it was perceived that integration opportunities not only vary across the different host countries and within them, but also depend on the age, legal status, and socio-economic characteristics of the refugee. In The context of the UK and especially England, the widespread tendency of the media to link Muslim communities to terrorism has a negative impact on the perception of locals about Syrians. On the other hand, different cities and regions react differently towards refugees, and it is said that the xenophobic attitudes are not targeting a specific group of migrants, rather, all non-British groups experience similar challenges. An interesting dialogue took place when a question was asked by a participant “Do we have the same rights and opportunities as the English people in this country?”, another responded: “We will never be local English men. <sup>-17-</sup> But we have great opportunity and next generation will be better.”

The open nature of Syrians and their eagerness to participate in their new communities is an opportunity that can support the work in the field of social cohesion. However, the different and opposing political views and fragmentation among Syrians in Europe and Syria were points referred to as challenges. Yet, it also led to a schism between participants on whether diversity presents an opportunity or a challenge in the host country context. While some argued that it is an opportunity for people of Syria to be able to talk about their differences in exile, others were critical about the religious or ethnic categorization of Syrian refugees by the media and international community which, as a result, acts against their unity intentionally or unintentionally.

The high number of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) cases among the community and insufficient support mechanisms for their recovery is worrying. What may hamper the process of psycho-social support is the lack of cultural acceptance for psychological illness. Refugees may fear being stigmatized within the community if they seek psycho-social support. The interpreters and translators in the process of psychological support play a vital role in keeping the essence of the painful stories shared by refugees. It is argued that the scale of the tragedy experienced by Syrians could only be fully comprehended by another Syrian. In this regard, the participants implied that the non-Syrian interpreters and even non-Syrian psychiatrists/psychologists may harm the treatment process.

Syrian civil society organizations in Europe could benefit from the freedom, democracy, and the laws that support **women participation** and equal opportunities for women and men. Yet, a recurring theme was the lack of representation of women on political and economic life. On the other hand, it is promising that

17 - Here, it should be noted that all the participants in the London workshop were male.

women gain new roles in Europe which contribute to their social and economic empowerment but in the absence of renegotiation of domestic chores and childcare, it only adds an extra layer of burden on women rather than a genuine process of empowerment.

The philanthropic contributions of wealthy Syrians in Europe represent an important source of funding in **relief operations**. These are usually Syrians who moved to Europe before the conflict. Media coverage from 2016 affirms the key role of Syrian philanthropists in cross border operations as “they are not bound by the same restrictions as institutional donors and they are able to navigate the security situation far more effectively than international aid groups”<sup>18</sup>. The support of the private sector with corporate responsibility projects is also considered a potential channel of funding for supporting refugees in host countries.

With regard to **justice**, it is possible to build cases against Syrian regime officials and military officers through the use of universal jurisdiction laws in Germany and France, whereas the justice system in the UK and Denmark does not accept these cases. In the UK context, it is stated that Brexit may also present a drawback in terms of losing access to European human rights legislation.

### 6.2.3. International level: Challenges and opportunities facing diaspora CSOs in relation to international community

Discussions on the **humanitarian work** yielded that international donors played a vital role in supporting Syrian CSOs in Europe and in many occasions constitute an opportunity for them to enhance their humanitarian operations. However, donors are expected to shift interest towards more entrenched concerns with longer-term strategies alongside the humanitarian needs. It is perceived that funding is mainly available for short-term support and relief and not for development and empowerment of the target population. In addition, some of the donors' use of funding as a means of pursuing a certain agenda is criticized in this sector as well as in other sectors. The politicization of funding poses an ethical dilemma for civil society that causes them to question the extent to which they can sacrifice their principles and vision to get funding. Also, access to and availability of funding for humanitarian aid varied across the different host countries. Whereas participants from Germany and the UK generally felt supported in this field, Syrian CSO in Denmark expressed difficulties in generating funding. In addition, the eligibility criteria and the high level of donor requirements is hard to comply with for small scale organizations. It seemed that the level of capacity and experience of the organization matters, with more professionalized organizations being better equipped to acquire funding from donors. The increased opportunities for funding and the large presence of INGOs also led to the **professionalization of CSOs**. Many NGOs became subcontractors of UN agencies or INGOs and extended the latter's reach and staff capacity while building on their technical capacities, enhancing their knowledge of different methods, and ensuring a somewhat continuous flow of funding. However, these vertical asymmetries and dependencies led to **marketization of the humanitarian system**, entailing a hostile and competitive environment, which impeded the level of coordination and communication among Syrian CSOs.

The space allocated for civil society organizations during Syrian **peace negotiations** is argued to be biased by the workshops' participants. It is perceived that the CSOs attending peace negotiations are selected based on the political agenda of parties involved in the conflict. It is argued that there are civil society organizations that serve as extended apparatuses of political parties, representing certain interests while the independent rights-based organizations are typically excluded from peace talks. The selection of invited parties by regional powers is already imposing a certain politicization from above while expecting Syrian CSOs to be depoliticized and neutral. The decisions taken on the international level also concern humanitarian operations, but their presence is often overlooked. For example, one interviewee said:

18 - The Arab Weekly. 2016. Syrian philanthropists try to ease their homeland's suffering <https://theArabweekly.com/syrian-philanthropists-try-ease-their-homelands-suffering>

**“When Astana decision was made between Russia, Iran and Turkey, it affected us in a very negative way. [...] If we are speaking about a buffer zone, we need to change our warehouse places, shift our offices, change our beneficiaries and all of this means cost. But no one takes them into consideration during the negotiations.” (U2, Skype)**

In terms of **justice and reconciliation**, a recurrent theme was a sense of distrust in the political interests of the international powers, which can hinder their progress towards the achievement of justice. It is acknowledged that all sides to the conflict have committed serious crimes under international law and the actors working in this field should remain tied to the principles of neutrality towards fighting parties. A rights-based Kurdish Syrian organization with experience in documenting violations in Northern Syria strongly emphasized their independent political stance and made a distinction between justice and politics:

**“We consider ourselves very independent but not neutral [...] But independence could also be a problem on one side because we are documenting all violations against human rights, we are neutral about the violations. No matter if they are from Kurdish forces, from Daesh or the regime. We are neutral in a positive way when it comes to justice. The dark side of independence is that everyone becomes your enemy” (GR-1, Skype).**

It is widely accepted that the dynamics of the Syrian conflict deepened the divisions in the society along religious, sectarian, and ethnic lines, and these divisions are reinforced by the stakeholders’ tendency to categorize refugees with their ethnic or religious backgrounds. On the other hand, the high interest of donors to fund projects on gender and the growing number of organizations that include gender in their agenda is seen as an opportunity.

## Politicization of terms

### **Social Cohesion**

Some discussants pictured the concept of integration and social cohesion as an elite phenomenon that has an ambiguous meaning for most of the refugees. The concept seemingly carried a negative connotation that was associated with acculturation and assimilation, fueling the fear of losing cultural identity and traditional values for refugees. It also appeared as a contested term within the context of Syria, which is arguably based on the tendency to view social cohesion as a precursor of reconciliation efforts that could potentially harm the process of justice. It is important to note how words that typically carry positive connotations, such as reconciliation and social cohesion, become politicized and degraded within this specific social context. As the terms social cohesion and reconciliation are connected to the government discourse, there is the perception that the usage of these terms can lead to a normalization and legitimization of the Syrian regime.

A boy pulls a lever as he fills water containers, in the rebel held besieged town of Douma, eastern Damascus suburb of Ghouta, Syria, June 23, 2016. Photo credit: Bassam Khabiehh



## 6.3. Needs and resources of Syrian diaspora CSOs in Europe

The discussions on the needs and resources not only reflected the diversity of Syrian diaspora CSO in Europe, but also the different opportunities and challenges present in the different host countries. Commonly mentioned assets are established networks and relations with international organizations, long years of experience and continuous commitment, easy procedures for licensing, social media, and alternative funding channels. The discussion on needs revealed desires for better coordination with NGOs and INGOs and between supporting entities and beneficiaries. In addition, funding, capacity building, trained human resources, and updated database were among the needs discussed.

**Table 11. Needs and resources of Syrian diaspora CSOs in Europe**

Resources	Needs
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**Table 11. Needs and resources of Syrian diaspora CSOs in Europe**

<p><b>Host country setting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good level of governmental support for civil society organizations regardless of their type and status</li> <li>• Syrian CSOs are well integrated into new European communities.</li> <li>• Advanced culture of charity to learn from (UK)</li> <li>• Project development and implementation</li> <li>• Ability to produce feasible and innovative project ideas</li> </ul> <p><b>Funding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The interest of private sector</li> <li>• Donations of Syrian businessmen</li> <li>• Crowdfunding opportunities (gofundme.com)</li> </ul> <p><b>Human resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skilled human resources present in the Syrian emigrant population</li> <li>• Experienced staff specialized in writing proposals and interim - annual activity reports.</li> <li>• Energy and experience of the newcomers (those who have been engaged inside Syria)</li> <li>• Existence of alliances and umbrella organizations (could also be a challenge)</li> <li>• Benefiting from the credibility and knowledge of 'old' diaspora</li> <li>• Tendency towards increased cooperation "we have learned to talk to each other"</li> </ul> <p><b>Solidarity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations' members' level of commitment to the Syrian cause</li> <li>• Good level of cooperation and exchange with other communities including Pakistani, Iranian groups. (in UK)</li> <li>• Large number of volunteers</li> <li>• The acceptance of host country civil society and their support for refugees</li> <li>• The dispersal of Syrians all over the world, spreading the culture of justice</li> </ul> <p><b>Tools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensive use of social media channels (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp) (in Denmark)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Organizational needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational and administrative capacity-building</li> <li>• Developing appropriate governance structures to allow for development of a strategic vision and clear goals and make the organization less dependent on personal leadership</li> <li>• Infrastructure, office space (insufficient)</li> <li>• Project development and implementation</li> <li>• Project management training</li> <li>• Technical teams for proposal writing</li> <li>• Legal training for pursuit of justice and for support of refugees</li> <li>• Ability to meet donor demands without making compromises and staying focused on organization's goals</li> </ul> <p><b>Funding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fundraising skills and network</li> <li>• Long-term sustainable projects and alternative funding ideas to overcome reliance on donors</li> <li>• Greater access to businesspersons to leverage resources from the Syrian community</li> </ul> <p><b>Civic Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher participation of Syrian community in civil society work, mobilization of the youth</li> <li>• Better coordination of volunteers engaged in organizations</li> <li>• Community centres to build trust among Syrians, to spread the culture of community and protect cultural identity.</li> </ul> <p><b>Coordination</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination without competition</li> <li>• Creating time and opportunities to come together</li> <li>• Networking: gaining tools to reach experienced actors/ organizations</li> <li>• Developing more partnerships on a project level</li> <li>• Exchanging experiences: sharing good/bad practices, listening to each other.</li> <li>• Lack of an elite that could lead/guide the Syrian community (in Germany)</li> </ul> <p><b>Human resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilization of skilled human resources</li> <li>• Motivated and committed volunteers</li> </ul> <p><b>Other needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having free time to work (most of the staff have other occupations)</li> <li>• Database of high-skilled Syrians in host countries</li> </ul>
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When it comes to the contextual level, organizations in Denmark perceived themselves as disadvantaged by the laws and the restrictions imposed on them and generally highlighted the lack of funding opportunities, unlike other organizations based in Germany or France where the host country context was perceived as relatively enabling and supportive. In addition, divergent needs and resources are related to the level of capacity and professionalisation of organizations. As such, the lack of human resources was much more pronounced in the case of smaller diaspora CSO, who heavily rely on voluntary work, whereas more professionalized organizations are able to attract qualified staff with administrative and management skills.

When it comes to strategic development, the participants were self-critical for keeping their hopes alive for a political transition until recently, which interfered with their ability to reflect upon a wider range of future scenarios in the longer-term. Many felt they are still operating in a crisis mode in which the complex nature that plays out in Syria, its neighbouring countries and in Europe, is experienced as a multi-layered crisis, in which diaspora CSOs try to react and address as many aspects as possible, becoming engaged in

various conflict fields as once. This complexity kept the civil society less occupied with long-term advocacy strategies and more focused on short-term goals. It is in this context the necessity to learn from the mobilization of other groups with similar experiences becomes more prominent.

The advanced culture of charity in the UK is perceived as an asset that could provide good soil for the development of Syrian civil society. The participants voiced their desire to benefit from the experience and knowledge of British organizations rather than, 'trying to reinvent the wheel'. One example in this regard is Oxfam, which provided trainings to Syrian charities in relief work. At the same time, it was emphasized that Syrian CSOs generated a lot of experience and knowledge over the past years, an expertise of which also 'conventional' actors can learn much. Hence, knowledge sharing should not be perceived as one-way process but as an opportunity for mutual learning in the humanitarian and development sector.

While the presence of Syrian businessmen in Europe and the interest of private sector in supporting projects related to the inclusion of refugees were highlighted as important resources, the discussions also showed that these alternative sources for generating funding have not been fully exploit yet. Creating greater access to businesspersons was hence seen as a need to leverage resources from the broader Syrian community. Likewise, the great pool of human capital present in the Syrian emigrant population was seen as a tremendous asset, yet efforts are needed to mobilise skilled human resources for diasporic collective action.

Throughout the discussions in the UK, a high level of religion-based solidarity is observed unlike in the other workshops. This is potentially linked to the fact that religion is one of the key factors shaping the charity culture in the UK. The participants received the support they got from Pakistani and Somalian groups very favourably, but they were also self-critical about their lack of empathy and ignorance about different causes and struggles prior to the Syrian conflict. The progressive dialogue and cooperation with different Muslim solidarity groups is perceived as an advantage, as it provides a learning opportunity for Syrian CSOs in the UK. However, the high level of religious and ethnic fragmentation in Syrian civil society, despite ongoing initiatives to unite and coordinate, is yet to be overcome.

The dispersal of Syrians all over the world help spread the culture of justice and accountability and provide the necessary conditions to achieve justice in international courts. In this regard, the participants mentioned the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust as crucial examples to learn from.

## 6.4. Future scenarios for diaspora mobilization in Europe

Against aforementioned structural constraints and organizational needs, the manoeuvrability of Syrian civil society actors in response to the changing realities inside and outside Syria is noteworthy. Over the years, the number of organizations in Europe quickly grew and their responses evolved in line with the emerging needs (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). The protracted nature of the conflict urged humanitarian organizations to search for more sustainable solutions to address humanitarian needs, such as building hospitals rather than makeshift hospitals (UK-1, Skype). Some community-based organizations shifted the focus towards advocacy. For example, in their accounts of the events surrounding the international negotiations for the future of Syria, one interviewee from Germany, previously working mainly on community empowerment and awareness raising projects, explained the evolving mission of her organization:

**“The international community is going to have a political solution for Syria, but they [Syrian people] aren’t ready. So now, we have to raise awareness about political rights to prepare people to be part of this process. And to be aware what is happening in the international community about Syria's future. [...] So we decided in 2018 to change our strategy to work on civil and political rights and to promote freedom and peaceful association right as well as to raise awareness on political freedoms and rights in Syria.” (G1, Skype)**

While discussing different scenarios of future conflict developments inside Syria, it has been argued that many of these realities are or have been already present throughout the conflict cycle, be it the strict rule of the Syrian government, a protracted conflict situation, or a divided country ruled by different occupation powers. While recognizing the benefits of rapid adaptation to the changing conditions, respondents underline the necessity to learn from the past and present and to take on a proactive role with a long-term vision through analyzing the hurdles that are facing them rather than solely reacting to the happenings. Therefore, it becomes vital to create a space for reflecting on strategies and joint future actions (rather than reactions). What are the potential strategies and actions envisioned by organizations based on possible scenarios in Syria? What role Syrian CSOs are likely to play given the probable scenarios for Syria and how will this newly emerged civic sphere evolve further?

There is a vicious circle of conflict and fragmentation triggering each other. The longer the conflict continues, the larger the chance that these fragmentations exacerbate. Continued violence and more fragmentation can weaken civil society. Many participants feel that Assad regaining his legitimacy can mark the end of an independent civil society inside Syria, but also potentially abroad. In a scenario with the Syrian government - either with or without Assad-, it is very likely that organizations inside Syria will lose their autonomous power and either become dependent or close down. If civil society work will be able to continue, it will be only within the small margins accepted by the government and limited to certain sectors. If Syria is governed in some form of a federal system, it is probable that the Northern region under Kurdish authority will become an international safe zone with protected borders that guarantees prevention of foreign intervention which could offer relatively more space for civil society, but the autonomy of civil society in this region could also be challenged by multiple actors.

The contextual dynamics in European countries are relatively stable and enabling for Syrian civil society. However, the media portrayal of refugees either as victims or a threat to public security and the waning interest of non-Syrians in the Syrian cause is likely to negatively influence designing of policies that safeguard the rights of refugees. In the case of Denmark and France, tightening of regulations on refugees are alarming. It is difficult to predict how the conflict will unfold, but in the foreseeable future, it is perceived to be unlikely that the conditions for safe and voluntary return of refugees will be met. The tendency of the international community to encourage refugee returns is of particular concern. The ill treatment of returned refugees to Syria has been widely reported. One of the interviewees commented:

**“If Assad regime stays, a lot of refugees around the world, we can't get back to Syria. After Assad got back some areas in his control, in his first speech he threatened all people and called them you are the enemy of Syria. This is not acceptable for us and a lot of other Syrians.” (G1, Skype)**

The ‘end’ of conflict will possibly increase such pressures on refugees especially in countries like Denmark with controversial policies that incentivize return. There is a growing mistrust in the international system, particularly after normalization of regime’s relations with several Arab countries and the announcement of withdrawal of US troops from Syria. Regarding the so-called international rehabilitation of the Syrian government, one interviewee said:

**“We trusted countries like Britain, USA, quite few countries they all said ‘yes, we want to get rid of Bashar Assad’. Then all in a sudden they are changing. Their intentions were never to get rid of him, I think it’s more like to weaken him. So that is how we feel.” (U1, Skype)**

### 6.4.1. Strategies and solutions

In general, there was a strong desire for finding new ways of communication and meaningful dialogue to connect the different geographies inside Syria and overcome the profound disconnection of Syrians inside and outside Syria. With regard to cooperation, the necessity to have a strong and unified voice is underlined and the existing alliances and coalitions in European countries are recognized as important resources. Some are issue-based networks focusing on particular fields of action such as advice or connecting actors with specific profession while others seek to unite and represent Syrian diaspora CSOs in different host countries. However, given the diversity of diaspora CSOs in Europe the representation and legitimization of the different networks are not necessarily accepted among all, but indeed is also contested by some actors. Another critique has been raised regarding the questions whether these alliances are formed with a genuine desire to facilitate cooperation and communications. One of the interviewees argued the financial motivations behind some of the alliances, and accuses the donor industry for promoting it:

**“International community was also a reason of this failure of coalitions, because they say we don't give you funding if you don't make alliance with other organizations. So they just do this just to get funds, without any real issues. They try to find some weak organizations, and say we are representing twenty organizations and get the fund for themselves” (G1, Skype)**

While these points highlighted the challenges related to networks and alliances, it is nevertheless argued that forms of coordination, cooperation and dialogue are crucial to build a strong basis for exerting influence inside and outside Syria.

In the scenario in which the **current government regains control over the whole country**, the workshops rendered a vibrant discussion on the potentials and limits in working with the civil society inside government-controlled areas. While some argued that it is crucial to empower civil society actors that align with values of democracy and freedom, others see no space for an independent civil society in government-controlled areas and fear a co-optation by the current regime. Yet, most of the respondents distinguish the people living in government-held areas from the government itself and it is widely recognized that access to communities inside Syria will mainly be feasible through organizations and local actors in each region. The very fact that open discussions on this sensitive topic have been feasible in the context of the workshops, however, shows that different positions and political divides are not necessarily deeply entrenched, but that spaces for debates and contestations are present and possible among diasporic CSOs in Europe.

For those actors for which working in government-controlled areas is not an option, and as such access to Syria is shrinking, diaspora humanitarian organizations in Europe may still find some space for operating in the neighbouring countries, by addressing the needs of the target population in these contexts. However, organizations that have not yet established a presence in these countries, will likely face challenges when competing for resources and support with other actors in the region, as one respondent notes:

**“And perhaps there is also the problem that it is not yet quite clear whether the German donors, because they invest so much in the neighbouring countries via the usual suspects, via the big INGOS, via huge German NGOs or via the UN organization, whether they see the added value at all in the small Syrian organizations” (G2, In person).**

Limited access to Syria or narrow pathways and opportunities to operate in the region, may shift the focus of some organizations from direct actions inside Syria towards exerting an indirect influence in form of raising awareness in the European public or lobbying to influence the host country's or international decision making on the political cause. As many organizations became humanitarian due to the need to relieve suffering of the Syrian population, the continuation of the authoritarian practices of the Syrian

regime, some argued, may compel CSOs to shift away from the crisis-mode and relief work towards rediscovering their political identities, hence, re-politicizing the space of diasporic action. As one interview respondent noted:

**“It all started as a rather political organization, so that the whole associations emerged out of demonstrations. And then, at some point, the associations that were founded did the humanitarian work and the demonstrations. These were always the two pillars. And then we always fought a bit as an umbrella organization, ok, don't make so many demonstrations, or we won't get involved in demonstrations and we won't make any political statements, because we are humanitarian. And as humanitarian we must remain neutral, we must not take sides. The whole conflict has led the entire humanitarian system ad absurdum. The entire international community was pulled through the arena with a nose ring and ridiculed by the regime. And we always had to keep silent [...] And now we have the opposite again, when we now say that we will not participate in this normalization in the reconstruction that will eventually come, then we can also be political or then we must also be political” (G2, in person).**

The discussion during the workshops revealed that the actions in the field of advocacy should benefit from the enabling environment in Europe, engage new young cadres and organize peaceful demonstrations, spread shared values such as non-violence, launch campaigns against external interference in Syria and advocate for the property rights of refugees, rights of detainees and opposing the reproduction of the regime as a legitimate representative of Syria. Another suggestion is to lobby their respective host governments to prevent re-opening of the Syrian embassy and press for admitting more refugees. In this context, the key objective of Syrian organizations can be to ensure ongoing international support and strengthen international ties with a perspective to downgrade the legitimacy of the Syrian regime. Syrian human rights groups can continue the pursuit of justice in international courts and it needs to be firmly established that returns are not possible without justice. One of the suggestions which have arisen in this discussion was the use of commemoration practices as tools for advocacy. Commemorative strategies such as the organization of commemoration events (chemical attacks and other massacres) and highlighting the symbols and the martyrs of the revolution were mentioned. Furthermore, documentation of violations is accompanied by documentation of history to ensure that humanity will remember the committed crimes. It should be noted that commemoration and memorialization are important immaterial components of transitional justice, which takes place in the aftermath of mass atrocities during a transition. Therefore, the willingness to employ these practices can be interpreted as a departure from past to present, demonstrating some sort of readiness to confront and recognize the events as part of the ‘past’.

A scenario with **recurring phases of conflict, instability and insecurity** for most require concerted efforts that target opening up humanitarian corridors and protection of civilians. The needs of internally displaced persons, women and children, persons with disabilities, victims and their families should be addressed through relief and empowerment projects. Given that Syrian CSOs gained a lot of experience and developed a diversity of skills related to humanitarian work over the past years, these could be capitalized and built on further as the conflict continues. In addition to relief, supporting local development through the strengthening of local structures and leaders was mentioned as a crucial area to counteract the instability and insecurity caused by recurring phases of conflicts. In order to work against sectarian forces that mobilise power along ethnic or religious divides, building a collective Syrian identity was highlighted as a field of action on the societal level. Since in this scenario, serious war crimes, crimes against humanity and violations of human rights most likely will continue on a large scale, the documentation efforts by Syrian human rights groups as well as a victim led justice process are seen as crucial to ensure accountability of the perpetrators and justice for the victims, the detainees and their families. Advocacy could focus on mobilising European public and lobby host countries and the international community against militarisation and foreign interventions

In a scenario with a **federal system**, there is a tendency to shift emphasis on fostering dialogue among cantons to maintain the unity of Syria to some extent. Local development, peacebuilding and reconciliation projects, in addition to civic educations and campaigns are seen as crucial fields of action to foster a collective Syrian identity and to counteract potential societal division resulting from a regionalisation of the conflict. Further, exchange of experiences and establishing partnerships with influential local actors outside the regime-controlled areas can provide the Syrian diaspora CSOs in Europe access to Syrian communities inside cantons. Building enhanced coordination mechanisms among Syrian organizations and increasing communication and coordination with entities in the different regions can improve the outcome of the efforts. A target of advocacy work could aim at fostering the active participation in the formulation of the constitution and amendment of the laws issued during the war. In a scenario with divided Syria, it was seen as crucial to maintain the independence of organizations from political authorities on the regional level based on the concerns that the existence of multiple powers in the territory may cultivate new forms of authoritarian rule in the region and reproduce non-democratic practices. This particular discussion revealed the need to avoid repeating the mistake of tolerating authoritarian practices that are sustained by strict taboos.

A scenario, in which the end of the conflict includes a **political transition**, will allow to energize local development projects and focus on rebuilding the economy of the country by attracting investors. The advocacy efforts will target imposing pressure to hand high-ranking government officials and other criminals to justice in addition to working on achieving the participation of Syrians abroad in the elections. If the demands for justice are met and reconciliation begins, returns should be facilitated for those who wish to go back to Syria and circular migration should be promoted so that Syrians in host countries visit homeland regularly and transfer skills and knowledge and support rebuilding the country. This could help develop new transnational ties between Syria and the host states and support progress of the country. In the long run, it is argued that the image of Syria should be restored to attract tourists as well as Syrian and non-Syrian investors, by benefiting from the dispersal of Syrian communities across the world.

# 7. A comparative assessment of Syrian diaspora groups in exile

As discussed in the theoretical dimensions of the study, the opportunities and constraints encountered in receiving contexts influence and shape diaspora mobilizations. The political opportunity structures encountered by Syrian collectives vary greatly between different host states and even inside some host states, as these tend to be influenced by the positions diaspora civil society actors inhabit in a specific context in the transnational field. The following sections provide some comparative insights, focussing on the spatial, temporal and contextual dimension of diaspora mobilization, outlined in Chapter 2. It needs to be noted however, that the comparison seeks to highlight some general patterns and trends, while at the same time the diversity of the civil society landscape in both Europe and the region has to be acknowledged. Hence, the findings of this section should not be treated as representative of the Syrian diaspora civil society as whole, but rather as contributing to a more complex understanding of diaspora mobilization trajectories.

## 7.1. Contextual dimension

Comparing the types of governments present in the host countries, these present very distinct opportunities for Syrian diaspora CSOs not only when it comes to framing their cause and taking action, but also for the ability to mobilize around collective and sub-group identities. The relatively pluralist and democratic political and societal context in Europe tends to enable collectives to unfold their sub-identities whereas the governments in the region do not allow for such space. Particularly in Germany and in Denmark, there is a large presence of Syrian Kurdish organizations whereas the ethnic and sectarian divisions in the domestic political context of Turkey reflect onto civil society and constrain mobilization of certain sub-groups, especially Kurdish Syrians. In Lebanon, the fear that Syrians mobilize along clan and community based political sympathies is seen as a threat to destabilize the already fragile system, in which political power is distributed on a confessional basis. Yet, the need to connect the different geographies and to overcome the social, cultural and political divides have been emphasized in both contexts.

Regarding the government policies targeting civil society, in Europe and in Turkey, the procedures to set up an organization are fairly easy whereas in Lebanon, Syrians have very limited chances of establishing new organizations. In addition, access to funding opportunities is more limited in Europe than in Turkey and Lebanon. In the European countries, crowdfunding tools and reliance on contributions of members or individual philanthropists are widely pronounced as alternate sources of funding. Gaziantep is particularly well-positioned due to its location as a hub for refugee and humanitarian operations, deployed by a number of international organizations and UN agencies. The proximity of organizations to prominent actors of the donor industry effectively created an 'internationalized' political opportunity structure for diaspora mobilizations, thus, easing the access to funding opportunities. However, current discussions to centralise the UN Coordination in Damascus and changing conditions inside Turkey may challenge the advantaged position of Gaziantep in the future. In addition, in both the region and Europe, it was emphasized that funding opportunities first and foremost focus on short-term relief and that there is a need to gain greater access to funding for projects that foster self-reliance of refugees and advocate for their rights.



## 7.2. Spatial dimension

Syrian organizations in neighbouring countries have relatively less political space in the civil society due to the post-2011 involvement of Turkey and Lebanon in the Syrian conflict. In the shrinking space of civil society in both countries, the sensitivities surrounding the issue of Syrian conflict are treated with caution by the civil society actors. This is in line with Adamson's (2016) distinction of near diaspora and distant diaspora, with the latter typically benefiting from a safer space to mobilize for their political cause while the near diaspora might be exposed to greater threats. The risks involved in the Lebanese context are critical and exacerbated by the support the Syrian government receives from Hezbollah as well as the spillover of the conflict into Lebanese territory. Turkey, on the other hand, controlling a certain area in Northern Syria through direct military involvement, is already imposing its own regulations in the occupied territories. In contrast, civil and political rights including the freedom of speech, association and assembly present in the European host countries are seen as crucial enablers of Syrian civil society engagement. In addition, the principle of universal jurisdiction implemented in some European host states allows prosecution of serious crimes against humanity, regardless of where and by whom the crimes are committed, when the justice system in the home state is unwilling or unable to do so and as such provides important legal mechanism for diaspora groups to pursue trials of home-state perpetrators from abroad. As a result, the potential fields of future action in the European context focused extensively on activating justice mechanisms, advocacy and campaigns that seek to counter the normalisation process that tends to establish the Syrian government as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people. At the same time, the geographical proximity of the neighbouring countries allows for frequent and continuous cross-border movement, and exchange, through which the everyday realities inside Syria are experienced more closely, allowing for a more balanced reflection of the conditions on the ground. It is safe to argue that the more distant the communities are from the government-held areas, the less likely they are to come to terms with the idea of reconciliation. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that knowledge on the context inside Syria in many cases tends to be fragmented, given that networks of the CSOs in the neighbouring countries rarely span across the whole geography of Syria. For instance, Syrian CSOs in Lebanon are often more closely connected to government-controlled areas of western Syria, whereas CSOs in Turkey, and here especially Gaziantep, are stronger embedded in the structures of northern region of Syria. In each region, there exist distinct historical trajectories, which along different economic, social, cultural and political circumstance shape the lived experience of societies that inhabit the space.

## 7.3. Temporal dimension

While the temporal dimension of diaspora mobilization has not been the focus of this study, some insights can be generated based on the discussions in the workshops and interviews, and the literature on Syrian diaspora mobilization. First of all, one can observe that the onset and development of the Syrian conflict triggered large scale collective action, addressing the various needs resulting from the conflict. In Europe, one can observe an increase of Syrian diaspora CSOs since 2011, many of which have been established by Syrians who migrated prior to the conflict. In addition, displacement further contributed to a rise in diasporic structures as some of the newcomers, many of whom have been active in the civil society inside Syria or in the neighbouring countries, continued their engagement in Europe (Ragab & Katbeh, 2017). In contrast, in the region Syrian CSOs have been mainly established by the newcomers, who often accumulated skills, knowledge and experience in civil society work inside Syria before they left. In addition, one can also observe a change in transnational practices. In Europe and Turkey, the mobilization has been initially political in nature, whereas the focus shifted towards humanitarian action mainly in response to the escalation of the conflict and the opening of channels for cross-border operations (Ramadan & Ozden, 2019). With increasing numbers of displaced persons, activities that foster social cohesion and inclusion emerged as another field of engagement both in Europe and Turkey. In Lebanon, political mobilization has

been more marginal, given the political sensitivities and the limited space of the Syrian civil society present in this context. Similar to Europe and Turkey, massive displacement to Lebanon triggered the emergence of different groups and initiatives providing relief to those.

Next to changes in organizational structures and practices, the discussions in both contexts highlighted the institutionalisation and organizational learnings as important trajectories of Syrian diaspora mobilization. For instance, many initiatives started at the very grassroots level, but became formalized and institutionalized over time. While there are great discrepancies in the organizational capacities present within the diaspora CSO landscape, it is generally acknowledged that organizations acquired a diverse range of skills, experiences and context-specific knowledge over the past years, which tends to constitute a good basis on which to capitalise on further. Both in Europe and in the region, discussions highlighted the influence of the conflict dynamics, and how these are reproduced in the diaspora civil society landscape. For many, the revolution was perceived not only as a transformative event triggering collective mobilization of Syrians in diverse geographies, but also as a moment of unification based on collective struggle for a joint vision for the future. Yet, as the conflict escalated the civil society, both inside and outside Syria, became increasingly fragmented and divided, mirroring to certain extent the cultural, economic, social and political divisions present in the Syrian context. As one participant during the workshop in Gaziantep put it:

**“During the revolution we saw people holding signs ‘the people demand’, now we have so many groupings with plenty and diverse demands”.**

Hence, in both context the need for a common, coordinate vision and identity was highlighted to counterbalance the processes of polarisation within the civil society. In this regard, the very fact that a diverse range of actors can voice their different and sometimes opposing position in a workshop setting, was by many identified as an important development within the diaspora civil society.

## 7.4. Reflecting on future scenarios

The shape and nature of the political settlement in Syria will be the main determinant of what the future might hold for Syrian civil society. In this context, Syrian civil society actors in Europe and the region are facing a complex and difficult task as they prepare for Syria’s uncertain future that is shaped by and embedded in a multi-layered political context: Syria with its protracted conflict dynamics, host state context and the international political context. Discussions in both contexts highlighted that many organizations are still operating in a crisis mode in which the complex nature that plays out in Syria, its neighbouring countries and in Europe, is experienced as a multi-layered crisis, in which diaspora CSOs try to react and address as many aspects as possible, becoming engaged in various conflict fields as once. This complexity kept the civil society less occupied with long-term advocacy strategies and more focused on short-term goals. Further, reflections on future scenarios and strategies for action are not only shaped by the different opportunities and constraints present in the host and origin country, but also reflect the diversity of the civil society landscape regarding the different identities, ideologies, interests, and the level of capacity of the actors involved.

The most widely discussed and contested question was whether or not to engage with civil society actors in government-controlled areas. In general, there was a strong desire for finding new ways of communication and meaningful dialogue to connect the different geographies inside Syria and overcome the profound disconnection of Syrians inside and outside the home country. However, there were strong disagreements over the possibility of an independent civil society in government-held areas of Syria, as many fear a co-optation of the CSOs by the Syrian government and thus cooperation with civil society runs the risk of indirectly strengthening the government’s position. Some actors in Europe and in Lebanon see it as crucial to initiate new dialogue channels with independent civil society organizations inside government-controlled areas to gain access to the communities as well as to build a strong civil society

inside. This perception contrasts with that of diaspora groups in Turkey, particularly in Gaziantep, where many displayed considerable resistances to the idea of connecting with the government-controlled areas. Turkish government's uncompromising opposition to the Government of Syria, coupled with its sectarian approach to the conflict is likely to fuel this polarization. This could be interpreted as re-politicization of diasporic organizations within the domestic political context in Turkey, which is in line with the argument that diasporic actors do not act in a political vacuum and the measures they implement and the strategies they choose often match with the host country's policies and the broader public discourse (Al-Ali, 2007; M. Koinova, 2014; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

With regard to future avenues, most organizations in Europe are less likely to switch locations and bases compared to their counterparts in the region. The organizations in the region often are more likely to relocate or extend branches to other geographies if the situation deteriorates in host countries or if the situation improves in home country. The plans range from going back to Syria to moving to Europe or becoming an international organization. Some of the larger Syrian NGOs already broadened their scope of work to serve the medical needs of populations in need in other conflict affected countries such as Yemen and Bangladesh. This could be partly explained by the higher degree of professionalisation of Syrian CSOs that are based or have field offices in the region, which tend to have greater financial, human and organizational resources, being therefore better equipped to adopt more quickly and strategically to changing conditions. The prospect of relocation to other European countries has only been mentioned in the UK context in case of Brexit to keep access to European legislation and more generous EU funds. Yet, none of the organizations have concrete contingency plans because of the ongoing uncertainty about Syria's future.

By contrast, smaller organizations that only have a presence in Europe focus more on thematic fields of work and tend to see a potential to influence the future situation inside Syria indirectly, through awareness raising and influencing public opinion and political decision-making in the host countries. As such, many organizations in the European countries expressed intentions to intensify advocacy efforts, centering around contesting the normalisation of the Syrian regime, the pursuing of justice and accountability as well as the issue of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention. While the relatively enabling environment of freedoms in Europe was seen as an enabling factor, many argue that they face a reduced interest of the European host communities in the Syrian issue which they see linked to the securitization of the Syrian conflict in the media representations. Many perceive that at the latest with the rise of the so-called Islamic state, Syria became not only framed as a harbour of terrorism, but also in particular after ISIS-linked terror attacks in Paris, Brussels and Berlin as a threat to international security, which makes it difficult to mobilise solidarity from the broader public in European host countries. In addition, promoting the inclusion of refugees, advocating for refugee rights as well as building a community with shared values in European host countries were perceived as crucial field of action in the present and the future. Syrian organizations in neighbouring countries have relatively less political space in the civil society due to the post-2011 involvement of Turkey and Lebanon in the Syrian conflict. Under the circumstances mentioned above, it is likely that the advocacy strategies are centred around a narrative that is closely monitored by the government and in line with its position in the war. In addition, the straining of public services due to large numbers of refugees in weak economies of neighbouring countries harbour host community grievances.

## 8. Conclusion

While host countries are dealing with the acknowledgement of refugees' long-term stay, Syrians have been mobilizing around the Syrian conflict since the beginning. The Syrian uprising in 2011 can be considered a transformative event, which prompted an unprecedented collective action and organization, in particular among the opponents of the Syrian government led by president Bashar al-Assad. The countries hosting Syria's displaced populations witnessed the emergence and strengthening of a vibrant and politically engaged civil society led by Syrians to address pressing demands on the ground. The uprisings in 2011 caused many Syrians to reclaim their sense of national belonging and generated collective action with the aim to, first, play a part in the social and political transformations Syria was going through and second, to respond to pressing needs of Syrian people both in the country of origin as well as of destination.

Diaspora communities are transnationally situated on multiple political contexts and each layer harbours different opportunity structures. These structures shape the needs, aspirations, and practices of the different diaspora groups. Drawing on the triadic political opportunity approach proposed by Chaudhary & Moss (2016), this study documented and analysed the external and structural conditions that interfere with the space and actions of Syrian diaspora CSOs in six host countries on three layers: host country, homeland, and international political contexts. Potential strategies, solutions and fields of action are elaborated in the light of likely scenarios.

The political context on the **international level** poses both opportunities and constraints to the Syrian diaspora. The internationalization of the Syrian conflict led to the entry of a number of regional and global powers in the Syrian territory. The tendency of the international community to dominate the peacebuilding efforts is seen to be reducing the role of Syrian civil society, limiting their space to the voicing of concerns and demands at often self-organized side- events to international conferences, with very limited influence on the actual policy development. In addition, the representation of Syrian civil society on negotiation tables is perceived to be biased, with a preference towards groups that are either ideologically aligned with the inviting parties or humanitarian actors that are demanded to be neutral in line with the core humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality. Yet, the involvement of humanitarian actors upholding principle of neutrality in peace discussions contradict with the very political nature of discussions. Such approach, it is argued, is undermining the political views of involved actors and interpreted as targeted efforts to depoliticize the space given to civil society. What therefore can be observed is a dual process of politicization and depoliticization (Jacoby & James, 2010), in which on the one hand actions of Syrian CSOs get de-politicized due to compliance with humanitarian frameworks and principles, while at the same time co-optation of civil society to reach political goals politicizes the space of action.

It is commonly pronounced that the Syrian War is the most documented conflict in history with thousands of videos, victim testimonies, and pictures uploaded on the internet and in social networks (Kabawat & Travesi, 2018). It is observed that pursuit for justice gains prominence with the increasing likelihood of the government's victory, because there is a growing mistrust in the international system, particularly after normalization of relations with several countries and "announced withdrawal" of US from Syria. If this trend continues, there are concerns that the demands for justice will be left aside. As argued by Rigby (2011), reconciliation can be defined as an act of forgiving, if not forgetting, of past injustices to move towards a shared future in unity. It is therefore likely that the reconciliation efforts of the international community could be perceived as involving a sacrifice of justice for the sake of stability and peace in the region. In this regard, justice is seen by many actors in exile as a precondition or an integral component of the long process of reconciling opposing parties. By contrast, some CSOs based in Syria feel that the conditions inside Syria are not ripe to increase justice efforts due to deep divisions in the society. Without reconciling communities inside, pursuing justice seems out of reach and it may even exacerbate the conflict.

Girls break their fast amidst damaged buildings during an Iftar organised by Adaleh Foundation during the holy month of Ramadan in the town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta on June 20, 2017. Photo credit: Bassam Khabieh



Furthermore, without awareness on the concepts of justice, accountability, and citizenship, efforts towards justice may not correspond to a reality on the ground. It can thus be suggested that there is much greater role for international community with regard to justice, while reconciliation is more of an internal affair, for which international actors can only provide support to domestic actors (Pankhurst, 1999). International political structures such as use of third-country courts to seek justice proved useful in the cases of Germany and France. Such efforts could help the Syrian community regain trust in the international system with regard to justice. Due to greater resources, safety and protection in European destination countries, diaspora groups can contribute to justice-related issues by conducting comprehensive evidence gathering and truth telling, by raising international awareness on war crimes or by being involved in prosecution cases on national or international level.

On the **host country level**, a potential normalization of international relations with the Syrian government is likely to intensify the political nature of diaspora mobilization, particularly in European host countries, with increased advocacy efforts to indirectly influence the homeland's political situation. The European stance to engage in Syria only once the terms on a political transition are agreed upon, might be hampered by the rise of European right-wing parties who may advocate for the normalisation, in order to justify calls for refugee return. The enabling environment of European countries for advocacy work is an opportunity, while the precariousness and political instability in the neighbouring countries do not allow much space and freedom for political mobilization. There are a myriad of concerns regarding host states' asylum policies, ranging from lack of freedom of mobility for registered refugees in Turkey, to regulations that facilitate return in Denmark and France and the tightening rules for family reunification in Germany. Syrian diaspora civil society organizations not only mobilise to create a space for influencing decision-making of host countries on asylum, refugee and integration policies, but also provide direct support to those seeking protection in Europe. If access to the home country is shrinking, engagement and contributions towards the host country may gain even greater importance in the future.

The approach to social cohesion in host countries often neglect the diversity within refugee populations and the identity struggles imposed by the forced migration experience. Previous studies show that traumatic experiences of war and forced migration may cause sociocultural confusion and loss of some aspects of identity embedded in their countries of origin and rebuilding an identity in the new context may take place within a process of acculturation (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Lemessa, 2005). In the context of Syrians, such impact could be compounded by the fact that a sense of collective identity barely existed for Syrians in pre-conflict era. While minority groups such as Kurds, who have been mobilizing around a Syrian Kurdish identity for decades, demonstrate clear signs of strong group-reliance, the majority of the population had a fragile self-identification. Under these circumstances, a more nuanced understanding of social cohesion that takes into account the identity struggles as well as the diversity among refugees from Syria is necessary.

2015 saw the Europeanization of the Syrian crisis and a burgeoning movement in solidarity with refugees when they arrived on EU borders, but the interest of the West seems to fade away gradually, which might decrease funding for civil society. The narratives of conflict and peace are often dictated by the international community, articulated in different ways based on distinct vested interests. They have the potential to portray parts of Syria as being safe for returns while in reality returned refugees face serious risks. Any political compromise in Syria has the potential to incentivize host country emphasis on return.

The actions and strategies of Syrian civil society are also influenced heavily by the dynamics inside the **country of origin**. There is a general sense of an unpredictable and precarious future that dominates the discussions on Syria. The lack of security and stability and the interference of warring parties in aid delivery impedes cross border operations. The neutrality principle in aid delivery is hindered by the Syrian regime and other armed groups who limits access to some areas and populations. The consequence of such politicization is unequal distribution of aid, which leaves parts of the Syrian population disadvantaged.

The regional dichotomies that existed in the pre-2011 context are reinforced by the conflict dynamics and compounded divisions among communities inside Syria. Internal displacement created new geographies in which IDPs are confronted with challenges to participate in the new local context. The mixing of communities could be a chance to achieve the desired realignment of Syrians by exposing them to the diversity of the entire society. However, IDPs tend to settle in specific neighbourhoods, and segregate themselves from the host community, which is interpreted as continuity of local loyalties that is linked to regionalism and the desire to return. In addition, the population swaps aiming at producing demographic changes to establish 'ethnic homogeneity' in certain areas is reshaping the social fabric of entire communities and counteracts the mixing of communities resulting from internal displacement.

The needs and resources of organizations are diverse and context-specific, but mainly centred around coordination efforts, accessibility and availability of funding, technical capacities, human resources, availability and reliability of data and the need to harness advocacy efforts to promote wider solidarity and mobilization. The long years of experience and continuous commitment are core assets sustaining civil society despite the hardships, but the stringent demands of the donors and the technical skills required for grant applications and monitoring procedures pose a barrier to access funding for small size organizations. One of the most pressing need for civil society is coordination among each other, which seems hard to attain due to extensive ideological fragmentation. Marketization of the civil society is reinforcing these fragmentations by creating a competitive environment. Rivalry for funding, different or opposing ideologies, joining mobilizations around ethnic or religious sub-identities and a general sense of mistrust are some of the factors dividing Syrian diaspora groups into small pieces and diminishing chances for a unified voice. The existing alliances and coalitions in host countries are recognized as important assets. However, it is highly disputed whether these alliances are formed with a genuine desire to facilitate cooperation and communications. At the same time, the experiences and encounters of Syrians in exile stimulate awareness and tolerance that could pave the way to finding practical ways of addressing the need to unify. In this context, the majority of Syrian civil society organizations are willing to invent new ways of communication and meaningful dialogue to connect the different geographies inside Syria and overcome the detachment of Syrians inside and outside Syria. Mobilizing around a new Syrian identity emerge as a core component of advocacy efforts to reach a wider community support and to prevent further fragmentation. Given that return is not seen by many as a feasible option in the near future, mobilising and cultivating a diasporic identity is seen as crucial to provide Syrians in the host country with a sense of community and belonging.

Over the past years, the manoeuvrability of Syrian civil society actors in response to the changing realities inside and outside Syria is noteworthy. But it is safe to say that concrete organizational strategies and solutions for likely future scenarios hardly exist for the majority of Syrian CSOs except for a handful of professionalized and well-established Syrian CSOs. The protraction of conflict means business as usual and channels the efforts towards relief and cross border while at the same time it is seen as essential to work towards increased solidarity and dialogue among Syrian people. In a scenario with a federal system, there is a tendency to shift emphasis on fostering dialogue among cantons and creation of social capital to maintain the unity of Syria to some extent. Reconciliation projects, exchange of experiences and establishing partnerships with influential local actors outside the government-controlled areas can provide access to Syrian communities inside cantons. As it appears from the discussions concerning the scenario of ongoing rule of Assad, the post-conflict role of civil society mainly lies in advocacy and justice. Syrian organizations express the desire to strengthen international ties with a perspective to downgrade the legitimacy of the government intensify efforts in the pursuit of justice in international courts and to put the issues of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention on the international agenda. To what extent and under which conditions an independent civil society can exist inside and outside Syria is uncertain. If the current government in Syria regains some form of legitimacy, it may continue to weaken the civil society in exile with negative diaspora engagement policies, as in the pre-2011 context, with the use of surveillance and intelligence measures.

The diaspora civil society organizations are able to sustain themselves mainly through the limited funding opportunities offered by international and intergovernmental organizations, as well as funding raised from membership fees and donations. There is a slight concern that the end of conflict can reduce such opportunities and mark a sharp decline in the actions of civil society. In light of this possibility, one of the potential strategies is investing in the capacities of organizations in government-controlled areas. Whether a space for an independent civil society in government-controlled areas is possible tends to be a contested issue among the different diaspora actors. The current existence of different opportunity structures inside Syria may extend to the future and it could be possible to vitalize the civil society in certain areas that are still offering a certain degree of freedom to mobilize. Thus, the variation of opportunity structures in each locality may imply a slight chance for harnessing an independent civil society in certain regions.

The diaspora civil society organizations in Turkey and Lebanon often are more likely to relocate or extend branches to other geographies. The possible pathways include registering inside Syria, moving to Europe and extending transnational ties, extending branches in other host states or becoming an international organization and resuming operations in other missions, which means a partial loss of diasporic identity. Accordingly, each strategy corresponds to diversification of the scope of activities as well as changing missions and target populations. For diaspora civil society organizations in Europe, the likely future scenarios tend to impact and diversify the fields of activities of CSOs as a means to adapt to changing conditions rather than wider changes in organizational structures and locations.



## 9. Policy recommendations

The international aid community played an important role in supporting Syrian CSOs through partnerships, funding opportunities, training programs and coordination efforts. There are important initiatives to engage Syrian civil society in discussions on the political level such as UN-led talks in Geneva and Brussels Conferences co-chaired by the EU and UN. There are a number of further steps that can be taken:

**Democratizing decision-making processes at the international level.** A future political settlement in Syria should be Syrian-led with decision-making roles in justice, return & reintegration and reconstruction. A top-down agreement faces the risk of breaking down due to lack of nuanced understanding of the Syrian context, whereas local and grassroots ownership in peacebuilding can render it successful and durable. A greater representation of Syrian civil society in international decision-making processes should be selected in a transparent and democratic manner. The selection mechanisms should facilitate representation of different political (independent) voices and allow space for bottom-up politics.

**Focusing on justice, treating reconciliation with caution.** International community should make a meaningful effort to keep the issues of justice and accountability for Syrian victims, including victims of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention alive. Increased donor support, whether on a financial level or at the level of capacity building, should target Syrian civil society's efforts for documentation of violations. The use of third-country courts to seek accountability should be facilitated. The notions of justice and reconciliation should not be conflated, and the international community should recognize the sensitivity of the term reconciliation. The desire to achieve an end to the conflict and reconciliation may harm the process of justice, which is seen as a precondition for reconciliation and sustainable peace.

**Localization of aid.** International organizations and donors should be supportive of contracting local organizations and delivering aid through local Syrian run initiatives. There are hundreds of local Syrian organizations on the ground, with better grasp of their communities' needs and enhanced access to the target population. Establishing true partnerships with them to deliver aid and services will ensure a mutually beneficial outcome by easing the access of international organizations to local communities and increasing efficiency and sustainability of aid delivery on the one hand and developing capacities of local organizations on the other hand. Syrian CSOs should be treated as stakeholders in their own assistance and included in the design of programs rather than reducing their role to mere service providers.

**Preventing brain drain from local civil society.** International organizations should consider the consequences of hiring qualified local staff and the possible harm they may cause to local civil society. The local CSOs typically lose their most qualified staff to the INGOs, who offer much higher salaries in comparison to their local counterparts. As a result of this brain drain from local organizations, the division between local and international NGO staff widens and local organizations strive to sustain their activities without their qualified staff. The rhetoric of enhancing capacities of local civil society should be accompanied by a commitment to help local organizations attract qualified staff to properly respond to future crisis. Building the capacities of local Syrian CSOs may contribute to a shift in the power imbalance of the humanitarian system, by enhancing their competitive position to attract and maintain qualified staff.

**Tackling the misconceptions about civil society inside.** The international community and Syrian civil society in host countries should overcome the misconceptions about CSOs operating in government-controlled areas. The organizations working in government-controlled areas are not necessarily pro-regime and categorizing them as such can only work in the advantage of the Syrian government. There are different opportunity structures that can expand the degree of collective action inside Syria as some

areas held by the government still offer a certain degree of freedom to mobilize. In light of possible future scenarios inside Syria, recognizing the existence and importance of a civil society that upholds pluralistic and civic values inside regime-held areas and opening channels of dialogue with these geographies is an investment in the future of civil society Syria. At the same time, the potential of co-optation by the current government and the security risk that independent civil society organizations face in government-controlled areas should not be underestimated. Cooperation therefore should follow the acquiring of contextual knowledge, creating trust and acting in a conflict-sensitive manner.

**Creating common spaces.** It is critical to establish platforms and organize networking events that bring together Syrian-led organizations. The international community and well-established Syrian CSOs should work on creating common spaces for CSOs and the wider network of stakeholders that allows a space for reflecting on strategies and joint future actions rather than reactions. These platforms and networks should be transnational in nature connecting the different geographies, not only to keep diaspora CSOs connected and aware of the realities on the ground but also to provide a space to generate a strong collective voice based on shared values.

**Less paperwork, more funding.** The high bureaucracy of grant applications and complicated procedures hinder the access of small scale and less professionalized Syrian CSOs to funding opportunities. Multilingual and simpler application forms and reduced reporting duties to donors could prevent concentration of aid in a small number of professionalized civil society organizations and empower new ones. More structural long-term grants that cover indirect costs (overhead) and human resource costs are vital for the survival of small and primarily volunteer based organizations in the long run. To enable small organizations' access to resources, donors can launch funding opportunities for well-established and more resourceful Syrian organizations who can contract smaller Syrian CSOs and grassroots and supervise their projects.

**Easing sanctions that affect civil society.** The restrictions on money transactions to Syrian organizations is impeding the work of many Syrian civil society organizations inside and outside Syria and hampering the delivery of aid. Stakeholders should enter in dialogue with financial institutions to facilitate financial transfers and to mitigate the negative impacts of “de-risking” measures on the support of livelihoods, economic stability and other economic and social development benefits of diaspora contributions. Negotiating more reasonable sanctions on Syria is critical for sustaining the work of Syrian CSOs.

**Regular assessment of needs & reliable data.** Stakeholders should regularly conduct and share needs assessment studies to develop projects that respond to the latest needs on the ground. Availability of reliable data sources and a solid coordination mechanism will help reduce duplication of services and respond to the needs gaps that are not addressed by any organization. In emergency cases, it is important to have instant access to a reliable data source for front-line responders in order to act efficiently. There is also diminishing confidence in available data sources. Developing online platforms that accelerate evidence-based responses in emergencies could be useful.

**Host countries** covered in this study (Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Denmark) have taken their fair share of responsibility to provide solutions for Syrian refugees to varying degrees. Each host country context offers opportunities and challenges for Syrian CSOs and refugees. The following recommendations to host states can enhance Syrian CSOs and target populations:

**Shift towards long-term response.** Ongoing humanitarian response should be complemented by long-term planning to promote self-reliance of refugees and reduce the risk of aid dependency. The imperatives of the humanitarian system tend to portray refugees as passive recipients of aid rather than resourceful actors in their own future. Additional funding should be channelled to foster the empowerment and self-reliance of the Syrian population. More inclusive host country policies on refugee education and labour market integration can reduce the risk of aid dependency while preserving the development

gains of migration. By collaborating with Syrian organizations active in integration, other stakeholders can support the efforts of the Syrian CSOs to contribute to integration, civic engagement and human capacity development.

**Social cohesion.** Host states and donors should recognize the heterogeneity of Syrian refugees and as well as the identity struggles associated with the experience of forced migration. The traumatic experience of war and forced migration may complicate further the fragile self-identification of Syrian community. Harmonizing with the new society, as equals, initially requires reconstruction of self-identity before exposure to the new context. Yet, identity reconstruction is more of an in-group affair that should be dealt with by Syrians themselves. It can thus be suggested that donors and host states should provide support to Syrian organizations and actors in their identity building efforts.

**The right to return and the wish to remain.** Host countries should refrain from circulating discourses that tend to carry a notion of an obligation to return, but rather design policies that recognize the right to return, but also the potential of a wish to remain. Host countries both in Europe and in the region should consider providing the option of refugees to stay in the countries regardless of how the conflict ends. Understanding return from a rights-based approach highlights the importance of creating a safe and secure environment for sustainable return and reintegration in the future. Syrian CSOs' advocacy efforts tackling the right to return but also the right to protection (and thus remaining) while it is unsafe to go back should be promoted by offering a platform to engage with key stakeholders in host country and at the international level.

Syrian organizations are stakeholders in their own assistance and the agents of change in the future of Syria. However, to realize their potential, there are further steps that can be taken. Below are points raised in the discussions by the actors themselves:

**Strategic & coordinated approach.** While recognizing the benefits of rapid adaptation to the changing conditions, respondents underline the necessity to learn from the past and present and to take on a proactive role with a long-term vision through analysing the hurdles that are facing them rather than solely reacting to the happenings. It is critical for Syrian CSOs to think independently and act together to influence policy. A safe space for dialogue and the use of scenario building workshops can provide a space for discussing and reflecting on possible developments in (post-conflict) Syria, joint strategies and plans for action of the Syrian civil society. In contexts of change, complexity and uncertainty, this reflexive process allows stakeholders ranging from policy makers, academics and international organizations, as well as the private sector and Syrian CSOs to share knowledge, challenge and transcend given assumptions and to investigate policy alternatives and their consequences.

**Solidarity for capacity.** Some Syrian CSOs successfully mastered the path towards professionalisation and established themselves as key players within the humanitarian response in Syria and are now part of important coordination bodies and international decisions structures. Organizations working on a lower capacity can benefit from peer-to-peer learning opportunities, in which well-established Syrian CSOs share their experiences and extend thematic and technical assistance to smaller ones. At the same time, established Syrian CSOs could learn from the grassroots experience of smaller organizations. In addition, designing and implementing joint projects that could harness these synergies efficiently could improve coordination between diverse actors in Syrian civil society.

**Mobilizing youth.** Participation of youth should be promoted further to harness more civic energy by offering training programs targeting youth workers, facilitating their systematic engagement in all stages of civil society work, enhancing their engagement with international community through participation in events and recognizing the abilities and skills of youth and working in reinforcing it.

**Increasing representation of women.** Women are recognized as important actors in the Syrian civil society movement, but they are underrepresented particularly in managerial levels in Syrian CSOs. Diverse organizational structures and processes can produce social positions based on, among other things, hierarchies of class, profession, generation and gender, risking the reproduction of pre-existing societal power asymmetries within Syrian civil society mobilization. The intrinsic dynamism of Syrian civil society presents an opportunity to improve structures and processes of governance to embed gendered perspective in all aspects of civil society work. It is vital to work with women and women-led organizations in order to mainstream a gender sensitive approach.

**More research.** Syrian civil society should develop partnerships with universities and promote research on relevant issues. It is critical to achieve the much-needed wedding of academia and civil society as a way to build on the knowledge of civil society and frame it academically. Action and advocacy are more efficient and credible when based on factual and neutral evidence.

**No new taboos.** Based on learnings from the past experiences, Syrian civil society should avoid producing new taboos inside Syria. The multiple actors in the Syrian territory pose the risk of reproducing authoritarian practices in a likely future. It is important to avoid narratives that embolden new authoritarian structures.

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## Appendix A: Workshop agenda (Lebanon and Turkey)

Time	Topic	Content
10.00am	Introduction	Schedule and methodology of the workshop Introduction and mapping of participants with regard to activities, locations, etc.
10.30am	Exploring the space of Syrian civil society in Turkey	Joint reflection on the past, current and future challenges and opportunities of the Syrian civil society in Turkey and Syria
11.00am	Coffee Break	
11.30am	Exploring the resources and needs	Joint reflection on the past, current and future resources and needs of the Syrian civil society in Turkey and Syria
12.30pm	Lunch Break	
1.30pm	Scenario-building	Development of Scenarios regarding future fields of action and spaces of influence
2.30pm	Coffee Break	
3.00pm	Strategy plan for action	Joint reflection on the future role of Syrian Civil Society and development of concrete strategies for action
4.30pm	Closing	Wrap-up main findings of the workshop Feedback of participants and next steps
5pm	End of Workshop	

# Appendix B: Workshop agenda (Germany and the UK)

Time	Topic	Content
10.00am	Introduction	Schedule and methodology of the workshop Introduction of participants with regard to activities, locations, etc.
10.30am	Challenges and Opportunities of the Syrian civil society in UK	Joint reflection on the sector-specific challenges and opportunities of the Syrian civil society in the UK
12.00am	Coffee Break	
12.30pm	Needs of Syrian civil society in the UK	Joint reflection on the past, current and future needs of the Syrian civil society in the UK
1.15pm	Lunch Break	
2.15pm	Resources of Syrian civil society in the UK	Joint reflection on the past, current and future resources and strengths of the Syrian civil society in the UK
3.00pm	Scenario-building brainstorming	Development of Scenarios regarding future of Syria
3.30pm	Coffee Break	
4.00pm	Strategy plan for action	Joint reflection on the future action plans of Syrian CSOs based on potential future scenarios in Syria
5.00pm	Closing	Wrap-up main findings of the workshop Feedback of participants and next steps
5.30pm	End of Workshop	

# Appendix C: Interview guidelines

## **Introductory question**

What motivated you to become engaged in the civil society?

## **Basic Organizational Information**

Now, I would like to ask some basic information about your organization

In what year was your organization established?

What is your role in this organization?

Do your organization have any other branches/offices? Where?

What would you say is the goal or the “core mission” of the organization?

Has it changed over time?

What kind of organization do you consider [name of organization]? How do you identify your organization? For instance, would you consider it a humanitarian organization, political organization, a professional network, a religious organization, etc.?

Follow up: How do you define civil society?

## **C. Activities and Representation**

What kind of activities and projects does your organization implement both in Syria and in [host country]?

Have these core activities changed over time with developments in Syria, or host country context or globally?

Why have these activities become the focus of your organization? What inspired these activities?

Is the organization part of any larger network of organizations, like an umbrella organization for all Syrian diaspora organizations, or a transnational migrant platform, or something similar? Why or why not?

Are any of your organization’s activities run in cooperation with other organizations or institutions, either in [host country], other countries or in Syria? If so, which ones and how? [In other words: does your organization cooperate with others to implement certain programs/activities?]

Do you think your organization is representative of the Syrian population in [host country] ? Why?

## **D. Host Country Context Civil Society Landscape**

How do you perceive the regulations to set up an organization in [host country]

What do you think about the conditions of civil society in general in [host country]

How are your relations with local civil society actors in [host country]

How does it contribute to your work?

How are your relations with international organizations in [host country]

How does it contribute to your work?

### **E. Current Challenges and future Scenarios**

What is your view on the emergence of Syrian civil society in [host country]?

In your opinion, how does the current stage of the conflict influence the space and nature of Syrian civil society in [host country]?

What are the strengths and resources of Syrian civil society?

In your opinion, what are the major challenges faced by the civil society in general in [host country]?

Do all of these challenges apply to Syrian organizations? Are there any specific challenges faced by Syrian civil society?

What are the potential future scenarios in Syria? What do you think will happen in the medium/long term?

What would be your role as an organization in a possible future scenario for Syria?

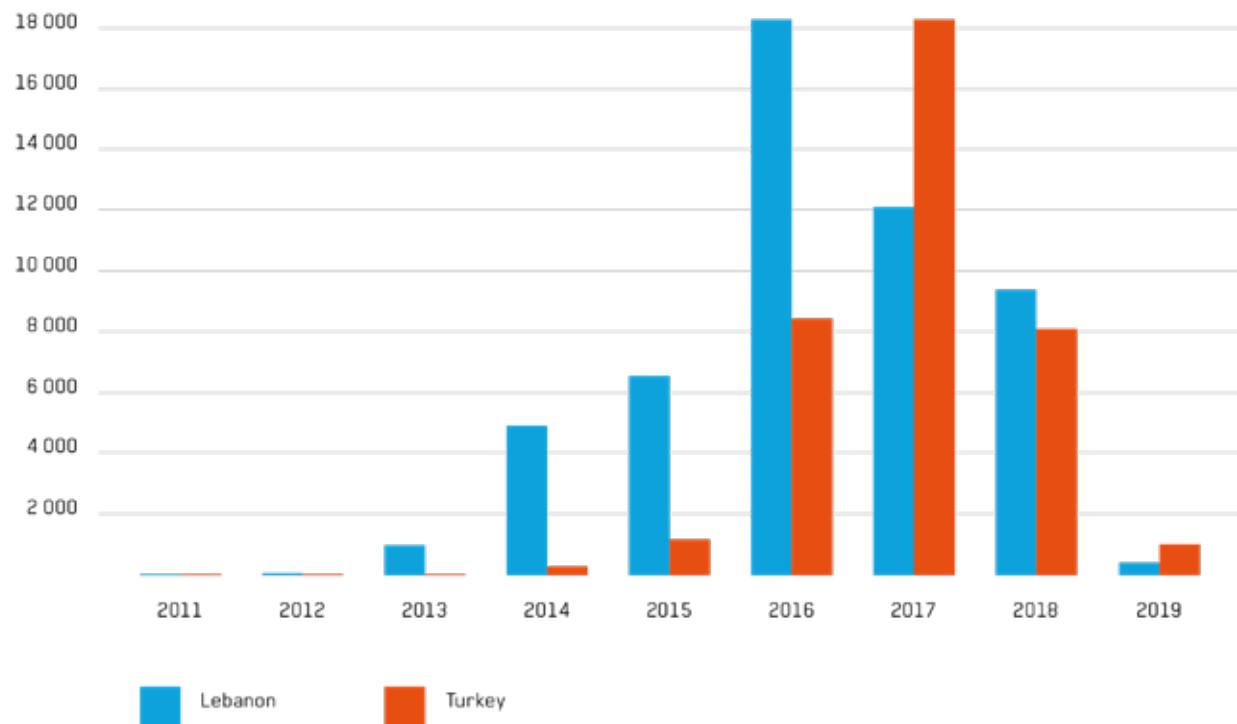
Do you think civil society can play a role in shaping the future of Syria?

Do you see yourself and your organization as actors of change in the future of Syria? How?

What would be your recommendations to stakeholders to promote a constructive involvement and cooperation with the Syrian civil society in exile?

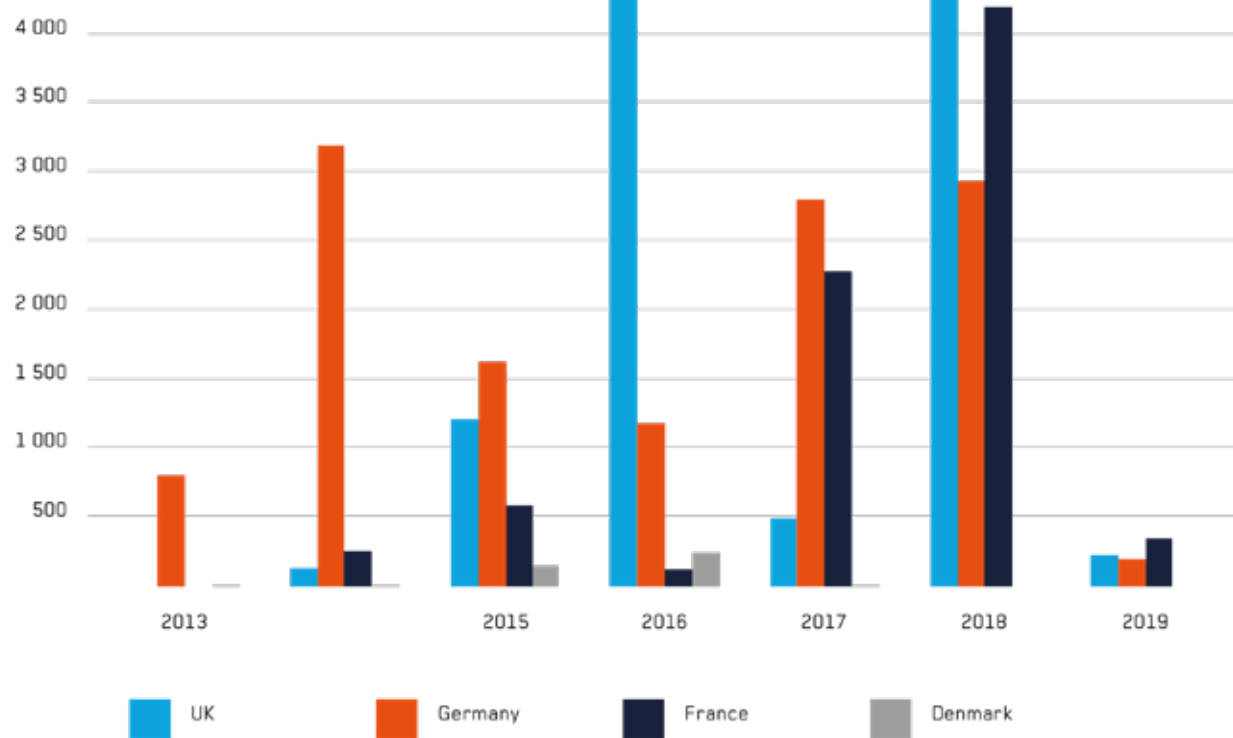
Is there any other important information, you think I should know?

## Appendix D: The number of Syrian refugees resettled from Turkey and Lebanon



Source: UNHCR Resettlement Data, 2019. Accessible on: <https://rsq.unhcr.org>

## Appendix E: Syrian refugees resettled to the UK, Germany, France and Denmark



Source: UNHCR Resettlement Data, 2019. Accessible on: <https://rsq.unhcr.org>