



## Executive Summary: 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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The full study can be accessed here: <https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/portal/>

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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

## Disclaimer

The views set out in this report are those of the authors and do not reflect the official opinion of the Danish Refugee Council, GIZ, FDFA or Maastricht University. Furthermore, terminology used throughout the report should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal or political position.

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

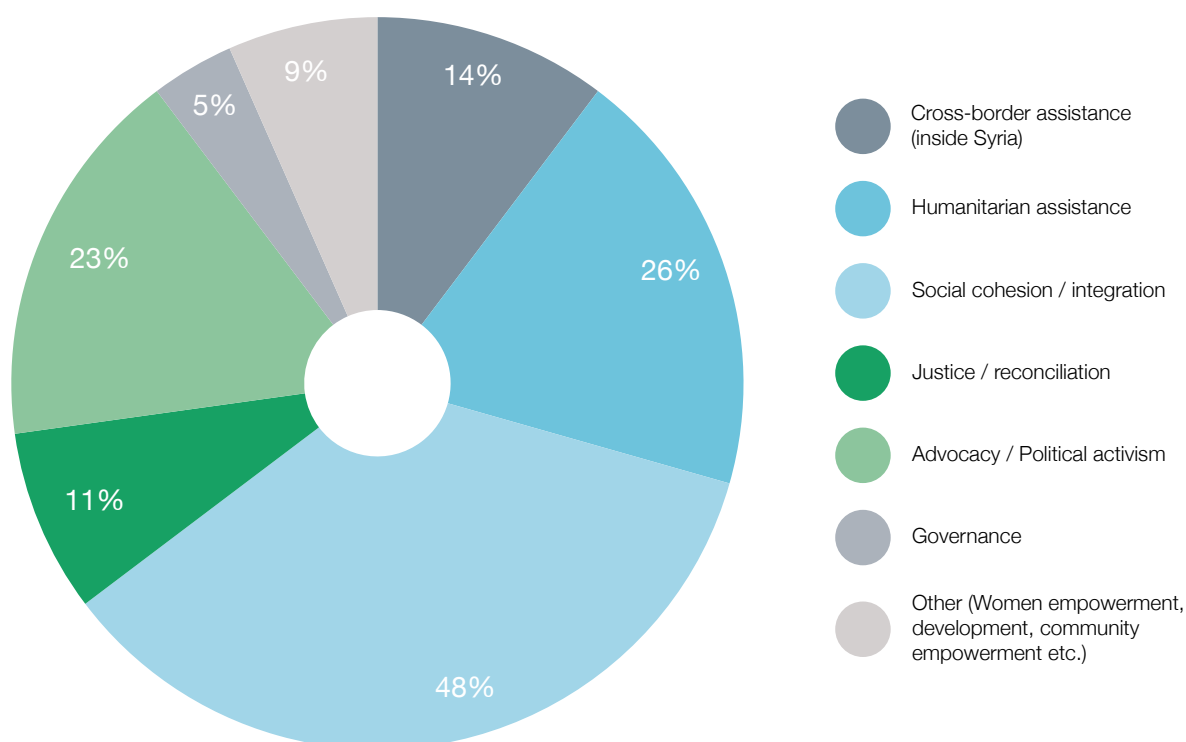


# About the Research

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.

This briefing provides the key findings of the research project that explored the future roles and conditions of Syrian civil society outside Syria, in light of the changing realities inside Syria as well as in the selected host countries, namely; **Lebanon, Turkey, Germany, France, Denmark and the United Kingdom**. Through **10 semi-structured interviews** and **5 workshops attended by 71 Syrian civil society actors**, the study aimed to shed light on the challenges and opportunities arising from the changing realities inside Syria, in the host countries and on the international level and explore possible future scenarios, joint strategies and plans for action for the Syrian civil society in the respective host countries. In addition, the comparison of diaspora groups in two distinct regional settings (Europe and the Middle East) revealed 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.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Syrian CSOs' fields of activity**



# Challenges and Opportunities for Syrian diaspora CSOs in the Middle East and Europe

The challenges and opportunities faced by 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.

## Home country level

The actions and strategies of Syrian civil society are influenced heavily by the dynamics inside the country of origin. Some of the key challenges arising from the situation inside Syria can be listed as below:

- Emerging as a major concern, 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. 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 conducting relief operations. 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. The difficulties in getting access to certain areas and the interference of fighting parties in the delivery of aid leads to an unequal distribution of aid as some parts of the population in need cannot be reached sufficiently.
- One of the recurrent themes is the perceived failure of the UN to uphold the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence in its operations inside Syria. Some participants expressed that the compromises made by UN agencies to comply with the demands of the regime resulted in politicization of aid. This is in line with past studies arguing that the UN-led humanitarian system in Syria emerged as a key vehicle by which the Syrian regime and other conflict actors have effectively turned humanitarian assistance to their own advantage.<sup>1</sup>
- Social inclusion of IDPs in their new localities is also a major concern voiced by some of the participants. Inside Syria, displacement created new geographies in which IDPs are confronted with challenges to participate in the new local context.
- The participants expressed strong commitment to continue advocacy to raise the number of female representatives. Despite increasing visibility in some segments of civil society, women are still underrepresented on decision-making levels in the civil society and in local councils inside Syria. Some good practices of women empowerment were highlighted in the northern region controlled by Kurdish authorities alongside initiatives by independent CSOs in some government-held areas. The impact of customs and traditions on women, 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.

1 - Leenders, R. and Mansour, K. (2018), Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War. *Political Science Quarterly*, 133: 225-257.

## Host country level

The politics of the states hosting Syrians vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict and their relations with the international community is diverse. The challenges and opportunities for Syrian CSOs that arise from or manifest themselves on the host country level within the distinct regional and national contexts can be summarized as below:

- 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. It is perceived that social cohesion programs in the host states tend to view the Syrian population as a homogenous group, neglecting potential lines of conflict both at home and abroad. Furthermore, given the fact that a sense of collective identity barely existed for Syrians in pre-conflict era, the majority of the population had a fragile self-identification. While minority groups such as Kurds, who have been mobilizing around a Syrian Kurdish identity for decades, demonstrate clear signs of strong group-reliance, this may not be the case for majority populations. Therefore, a more nuanced understanding of social cohesion that takes into account the identity struggles as well as the diversity among refugees from Syria is deemed to be necessary.
- Syrian diaspora CSOs providing direct **assistance to asylum seekers and refugees** encounter a number of challenges arising from 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 CSOs 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 women gain new roles in Europe as well as in some parts of the region which contribute to their social and economic empowerment but in the absence of renegotiation of domestic chores and childcare, it may add an extra layer of burden on women rather than contributing to a genuine process of empowerment
- International political structures such as **use of third-country courts to seek justice** proved useful in the cases of Germany and France and it became possible to build cases against Syrian regime officials and military officers, whereas the justice system in other countries does not accept these cases. In the UK context, it is stated that Brexit may present a drawback in terms of losing access to European human rights legislation.
- The relatively stable political environment in the European countries concerned in this study is an enabling factor for **advocacy** work, while the political instability in neighbouring countries does not allow much space and freedom for political mobilization.

## International level

The political context on the international level poses both opportunities and constraints to the Syrian diaspora CSOs. Below is a summary of the main points discussed:

- 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 limited influence on the actual policy development.

- 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 can be 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<sup>2</sup>, 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.

**“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” (Interviewee, May 2019).**

- 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. If this trend continues, there are concerns that the demands for justice will be left aside for the sake of stability in the region. In light of these fears, 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 intensify 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. 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.<sup>3</sup>
- The discussions in the region problematized the **narratives of conflict and peace narratives by the** host countries and international organizations, which can portray parts of Syria as being safe for returns while many refugees continue to face serious risks upon their return.
- The increased opportunities for funding and the large presence of INGOs leads to the **professionalization of civil society sector**. 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 may impede the level of coordination and communication among Syrian CSOs.
- It is feared by some of the participants 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.

2 - Jacoby, T. and James, E. (2010), Emerging patterns in the reconstruction of conflict-affected countries. *Disasters*, 34: S1-S14.

3 - Pankhurst, D. (1999). Issues of Justice and Reconciliation in Complex Political Emergencies: Conceptualising Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. *Third World Quarterly*, 20(1), 239-256.

# Needs and Resources of Syrian diaspora CSOs in the Middle East and Europe

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 difficult to attain due to different or opposing ideologies, joining mobilizations around ethnic or religious sub-identities coupled with a general sense of mistrust. Marketization of the civil society is reinforcing such fragmentations by creating a competitive environment for funding and diminishing chances for a unified voice. The existing alliances and coalitions in host countries are recognized as important assets. However, it is disputed whether these alliances are formed with a genuine desire to facilitate cooperation and communications. Mobilizing around a new Syrian identity emerge as a core component of advocacy efforts to reach a wider community support and to prevent further detachment of Syrians inside and outside Syria.

**“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”**  
(Interviewee, March 2019)

## 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 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. Future strategies and solutions reported by Syrian CSOs in light of different scenarios are not only shaped by the different opportunities and constraints present in these different layers, 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.

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. Discussions in both regional contexts highlighted that many organizations are still operating **in a crisis mode**, in which diaspora CSOs try to address as many issues as possible, becoming engaged in various conflict fields at once. Yet, this complexity kept the civil society less occupied with long-term advocacy strategies and more focused on achieving short-term goals in a reactive manner. Under these circumstances, it can be said that concrete organizational strategies and solutions for likely future scenarios hardly exist for Syrian CSOs with only a few exceptions.



Whether a **space for an independent civil society** in government-controlled areas is possible in a likely future tends to be a contested issue among the different diaspora actors. However, the mere fact that it has been possible to openly discuss these seemingly hard to touch issues in the workshops may serve to illustrate that such positionings are not as indisputable as popular views might suggest. 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 while others, particularly in Turkey, are highly sceptical about the chances of harnessing an independent civil society in government-held areas of Syria, as they 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. Here, it is worth to note 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.<sup>4</sup> Turkey, having gone through a remarkable period of upheaval in its domestic and foreign politics, asserts great pressure on the Turkish civic space, particularly on groups that are not ideologically aligned with the government, in an effort to centralize control.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Turkey maintains a relatively strong opposition to the Syrian government with no potential for normalization in sight. Taken together, it is possible to argue that the unwillingness of some Syrian organizations in Turkey to build ties with non-state actors in government-controlled areas could be a partial reflection of the fear of coming into an ideological conflict with the government which may make them vulnerable to state interference. 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 CSOs that oppose to the Syrian regime. In this context, some actors view building a strong civil society inside as the last chance to increase the margins of freedom in Syria if there is no alternative political solution. In European host countries concerned in this study, the potential normalization of international relations with the Syrian government is likely to intensify the political nature of diaspora mobilization 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.

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 prospect of relocation or extension of operations to other countries in Europe, has only been mentioned in the UK context due to concerns about Brexit which may hinder organizations' access to European legislation and more generous EU funds. On the other hand, the organizations in Turkey and Lebanon 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. Depending on the financial capacities and the existing transnational ties, another potential pathway for well-established humanitarian organizations could be building on their capacities to become international players, which may cause a partial loss of diasporic identity. Some of the larger Syrian NGOs already broadened their scope of work to address the needs of populations in other conflict affected countries such as Yemen and Bangladesh. This difference 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 compared to some less professionalised organizations in Europe.

4 - Koinova, M. (2014). Why do conflict-generated diasporas pursue sovereignty-based claims through state-based or transnational channels? Armenian, Albanian and Palestinian diasporas in the UK compared. *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(4), 1043–1071.

5 - Center for American Progress, Istanbul Policy Center, and Istituto Affari Internazionali. (2017). *Trends in Turkish Civil Society*.

**“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 [Syrian] CSOs have very limited choices after these 8 years.” (Interviewee, January 2019)**

By contrast, smaller organizations that only have a presence in Europe without field offices in the region 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 stable political environment 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 European cities 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 mainly due to the post-2011 involvement of Turkey and Lebanon in the Syrian conflict as well as the domestic political conditions in both countries. Under these circumstances, it is likely that the advocacy strategies become centred around a narrative that is closely monitored by the government and in line with its position in the war.



# Comparative assessment of Syrian diaspora groups in the Middle East and Europe

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 comparison seeks to highlight some general patterns and trends, while acknowledging the diversity of the civil society landscape in both Europe and the region.

## Contextual dimension

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 such as 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, the regulations to set up an organization are perceived to become more difficult in Lebanon, whereas in Turkey, establishing an organization is relatively easy but there are concerns about the stricter enforcement of the regulations concerning associations, such as unannounced visits that can result in detention of those that do not possess work permits. In Europe, the hardships of setting up an association is at a minimum level. In addition, access to funding opportunities is more limited in Europe than in Turkey and Lebanon. Membership fees, the contributions of individual philanthropists, crowdfunding tools and private sector funding are widely pronounced as alternate sources of funding in the European countries. The humanitarian work is generally well-funded in both the region and in Europe, except for the case of Syrian CSOs in Denmark with limited possibilities to generate funding. In this regard, the organizational capacity and experience matters, with more professionalized organizations being better equipped to acquire funding from donors. In addition, in both the region and Europe, it was emphasized that funding opportunities mostly 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.

## 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 as well as the turbulence in domestic politics in both countries. 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. The risks involved in the Lebanese context are critical and exacerbated by the support the Syrian government

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

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 more 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 more deeply 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.

**“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 we are 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.”**  
(Interviewee, May 2019)

## 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.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, in the region Syrian CSOs have been mainly established by the newcomers. 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

6 - Ragab, N. J. & Katbeh, A. (2017) Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe - Mapping their engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, Copenhagen, Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme.

7 - Ramadan, O. & Ozden, S. (2019). Syrian Women's Perspectives on Life in Turkey: Rights, Relations and Civil Society. Badael Foundation. 2019, Istanbul.

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.

**“During the revolution we saw people holding signs ‘the people demand’, now we have so many groupings with plenty and diverse demands”. (Workshop participant, Gaziantep, December 2018)**

Hence, in both context the need for a unified 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 progress within the diaspora civil society.



# Policy Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, sets of policy recommendations are developed for the international community concerned with the Syrian issue, host states and Syrian CSOs.

## International community

- **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 greater representation of Syrian civil society in international decision-making processes should be selected in a transparent and democratic manner.
- **Focusing on justice, treating reconciliation with caution.** International community should increase efforts to keep the issues of justice and accountability for Syrians, including victims of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention alive. The notions of justice and reconciliation should not be conflated, and the international community should recognize the sensitivity of the term reconciliation.
- **Localization of aid.** International organizations should be supportive of contracting local organizations and delivering aid through local Syrian run initiatives and include them in the design of programs.
- **Preventing brain drain from local civil society.** The local CSOs typically lose their most qualified staff to the INGOs, who offer better salary packages. The rhetoric of enhancing capacities of local civil society should be accompanied by a commitment to help local organizations attract and sustain qualified staff.
- **Tackling the misconceptions about civil society inside.** The CSOs in government-held areas are not necessarily pro-regime and categorizing them as such can only work in the advantage of the Syrian government. Recognizing the existence of a civil society that upholds pluralistic and civic values inside regime-held areas and opening channels of dialogue with them could be 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-held 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 to allow space for reflecting on strategies and joint future actions rather than reactions.
- **Less paperwork, more funding.** The high bureaucracy of grant applications and complicated procedures hinder the access of less professionalized Syrian CSOs to funding opportunities. Multilingual and simpler application forms, reduced reporting duties to donors, longer-term grants that cover overhead and human resource costs are vital for the survival of smaller organizations.
- **Easing sanctions that affect civil society.** The restrictions on money transactions to Syrian organizations is impeding the work of many Syrian CSOs inside and outside Syria. Stakeholders should enter in dialogue with financial institutions to facilitate financial transfers and to mitigate the negative impacts of “de-risking” measures.

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

- **Regular assessment of needs & reliable data.** Stakeholders should regularly conduct and share needs assessment studies in a coordinated manner to help reduce duplication of services and respond to the needs gaps that are not addressed by any organization.

## Host countries

- **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.
- **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 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.

## Syrian organizations:

- **Strategic & coordinated approach.** Respondents underline the necessity 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. A safe space for dialogue and the use of scenario building workshops can provide a space for discussing and reflecting on joint strategies and plans for action.
- **Solidarity for capacity.** Organizations working on a lower capacity can benefit from peer-to-peer learning opportunities, in which well-established Syrian CSOs extend thematic experiences and technical assistance to smaller ones. At the same time, established Syrian CSOs could learn from the grassroots experience of smaller organizations.
- **Mobilizing youth.** Participation of youth should be promoted further to harness more civic energy by offering training programs targeting youth workers, facilitating their engagement in all stages of civil society work.
- **Increasing representation of women.** Women are underrepresented particularly in managerial levels in Syrian CSOs. 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. Action and advocacy are more efficient and credible when based on factual and neutral evidence.
- **No new taboos.** 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 inside Syria.