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Mapping the Syrian Diaspora: A Global Player in the Reconstruction of Syria

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Before 2011, the Syrian diaspora worldwide was estimated at 18 million people who migrated over more than a century and have mostly contributed actively to their host communities. This old diaspora has now increased with the wave of Syrian refugees who fled - and continue to flee - Syria because of the ongoing conflict. Over the past seven years, seven million Syrians - not all registered refugees - have fled the country out of a total population of 24 million before the conflict.

The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) conducted a research project between Spring 2017 and 2018 to study Syrian diaspora around the world after the 2011 uprising, map its features and explore the interactions of Syrian migrant communities with the conflict in Syria.

To draw a map of these interactions, ARI commissioned a group of researchers to prepare studies on Syrian diaspora in North America, Latin America, and Europe. Regarding the Middle East, researchers conducted studies on the presence of Syrians in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Egypt as well as Gulf States, with Qatar and the UAE as case example.

Furthermore, ARI prepared three papers on the experiences of other diaspora groups in the region, namely the Armenian, the Palestinian, and Lebanese, with a view to comparing them with the Syrian case and draw lessons from them.

Finally, ARI shared a questionnaire with the researchers to use with Syrian personalities (academics, businesspeople, engineers, etc.) so as to explore the motives that could encourage or deter them from contributing to channel the potential of the Syrian diaspora to help in the recovery of the Syrian society in Syria and abroad.

Researchers also focused on the living conditions of Syrian communities, new and old, in diaspora countries. The ensuing report draws a new globalized network of relationships characterized by the following:

First: The difference between diaspora and asylum. Syrian diaspora worldwide is known for its long presence and economic vitality as well as its social and political integration in the host countries. Suffice it to mention former Argentinian president Carlos Menem, singer Paula Abdul, American ice hockey player Brandon Saad, and contemporary artist Diana Hadid as examples of world-famous people of Syrian origin. In the Arab region, it is worth mentioning the historical intersections between societies, through marriage, cross-boundary kinship, and business relationships that developed prior to the establishment of borders among Arab countries. It would suffice in this context to mention singers Asmahan and Farid Al Atrash, and the first Jordanian prime minister Rasheed Talee, who were all Syrians that settled in Egypt and Jordan.

This delightful picture of Syrians around the world was soon reversed after 2011 in favour of a negative stereotype based on forced displacement. Hardly had a few months passed after the militarization of the Syrian revolution than massive waves of displacement ensued and with it the rise of the issue of Syrians refugees as a burden on host communities and at the international scene. This stereotypical image was exploited for political ends to obscure the many positive aspects resulting from the economic, social, and cultural interactions on the ground.

In the contrast between diaspora and asylum, one should note that asylum is a forced, collective occurrence imposed on individuals often seen as a group. Diaspora, on the other hand, assumes the narrative of private individuals who made their unique paths towards settlement in the host community. This begs a fundamental question: how does asylum change from a forced displacement imposed on a group of individuals into a situation in which individuals can carve their own initiatives?

Second: the Syrian diaspora is subject to a lot of betting and bidding. This is true at all levels and across the Syrian spectrum. Political actors of different views are trying to attract the diaspora to pressure regional and international actors. Economic actors seek to lure its capital and qualified professionals to their benefit. And different social groups are betting on those displaced, either in Syria or across the border, to gain various forms of support, particularly in the finance and development sectors.

Third: The role of the rule of law in mobilizing the Syrian diaspora. Where of the rule of law exists and where societies enjoy freedom of speech and social justice, active Syrian communities have been able to form a network of solidarity that connects the Syrian diaspora with Syrians in neighboring states and Syrians inside Syria. This is true regardless of the political backgrounds of those active in such networks, particularly in the Americas and Europe.

In the Middle East, the situation of Syrians vacillates between humanitarian solidarity, social resentment, political investment, and a source of financial capital. This fluctuation is characterized by a fragile legal and administrative condition of Syrians regardless of their economic and social status. As such, they remain hostage to the regional situation.

Fourth: Where conditions and capabilities are present, initiatives multiply and diversify at the civil, humanitarian, regional, family-based, sectarian, ethnic levels. The common thread connecting such initiatives, however, is often missing, particularly one that goes beyond the narrow affiliations to the family, the sect, and the village towards a citizenly belonging. Such contributions and initiatives are often sparse and uncoordinated.

Members of the “old diaspora”, that is Syrians who were in diaspora countries before 2011 and completed their integration in host societies, generally enjoy financial capabilities, professional qualifications, knowledge, and networks which form a greater power that can be used in the reconstruction of Syria and the recovery of all Syrian social groups. This makes them a key player in the future of their homeland. However, this is contingent on the extent to which the Syrian diaspora can organize and work to develop collaborative mechanisms and tools in a way that individual effort is transformed into a collective force and strategic actions at the international level.

With this in mind, ARI held a meeting on 13 April 2018 in the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris that gathered prominent Syrian figures to launch “Global Syria”, a collective Syrian initiative at heart whose aim is to serve, help and enhance Syria’s future, shorten its recovery, and enable its renaissance

Business people, philanthropists, artists, academics, writers, and representatives of successful civil society organizations came together and discussed what they can do to take action collectively for the benefit of all members of Syrian society, especially how to work together to help a young generation of Syrian men and women to reach their full potential in spite of the tragedies they have experienced, and how they can help build smart communities in different fields. There was a strong consensus in favour of promoting an open, connected, and democratic society with gender parity and diversity as top priorities. The group signed a Code of Ethics to express its commitment to promote public integrity and transparency in their activities.

ARI presented the results of the research project and the outcomes of a workshop that was held on 12 April 2018 at Collège de France, using facts and figures to highlight the potential of the Syrian diaspora. Discussions revolved around practical projects the diaspora could undertake to engage Syrians inside Syria and outside, the main hurdles that the diaspora could face in its efforts, and how to overcome them. Discussions also tackled economic, educational, social, and cultural organizations that other diaspora communities developed and their role in supporting the resilience of the population at the community level in the homeland, and the key role technology can play in these efforts.

Discussions led to articulating some recommendations to the policy community worldwide as well as to members of the Syrian diaspora on concrete ways of leveraging the diaspora’s expertise, networks, and resources to alleviate the suffering of Syrians now, and define strategies for the future. The meeting allowed a reflection on the role of host counties and international organizations such as the European Union, the World Bank, and UN agencies. As strategic players in the reconstruction process of Syria, they will hold considerable power in deciding the fate of post-conflict Syria.

Now is the right time for the Syrian diaspora to unite to unlock the soft power it holds and shift part of the decision-making power of outside players to its side.

ABOUT ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

1. We **produce** original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
2. We **empower** individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
3. We **mobilize** stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

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



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