

Diaspora, transnational networks and migration among Syrians and Iraqis

A review and analysis of
available literature

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) – Middle East & Eastern Mediterranean, provides quality mixed migration-related information for policy, programming and advocacy from a regional perspective.

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Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme facilitates, supports, and enhances the role of diasporas as effective agents of humanitarian assistance, recovery and development.

The Programme implements projects that support diaspora-led initiatives, facilitate improved coordination, and develop the capacities of diaspora organisations. Since its creation in 2010, the Programme also continues to contribute to the research agenda by documenting and sharing experiences on diaspora engagement to better understand the role of diaspora-led development and humanitarianism.

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Introduction

In addition to the recent arrival of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis in Europe due to violence and conflict, substantial Middle Eastern diaspora communities have settled in Europe for decades. The presence of these communities signifies a long history of migration between the Middle East and Europe, upon which recent movements build.

What is the relationship between family, friends and social networks already in Europe, particularly from Syria and Iraq, and those en route or newly arrived from the Middle East? To what extent are individual migration decisions affected by transnational social networks, including well-established diaspora communities as well as those who have recently arrived at an intended destination? What support do those networks provide to people on the move before their journey, en route and upon arrival in Europe, and what potential exists to change their role?

Despite the range of literature available on diaspora, including their networks, associations and linkages with communities in country of origin/heritage, there is limited analysis of the direct links between diasporas, other transnational social networks, and mixed migration flows, particularly in the Middle East. Jeff Crisp, an associate with Oxford University's Refugee Studies Centre, has noted the role that transnational social networks and diasporas can play in providing resources, information and support to migrants¹. The Mixed

Migration Centre East Africa and Yemen² together with Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme recently published a discussion paper exploring diaspora perceptions and the role of such in recent mixed migration trends³. However, little additional, in-depth research and literature is available.

This briefing paper, produced in collaboration with Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme⁴, aims to review literature regarding the relation between diasporas, other transnational social networks and mixed migration, as it pertains to migration flows from the Middle East to Europe, and focusing on migration that takes place irregularly and informally. Beginning with an overview of the concept, scale and location of diaspora communities, the paper delves into what we know about the role, if any, that diaspora and/or other transnational social networks play before, during and after the journey to Europe, and concludes with the identification of gaps in the literature and recommendations for future research.

This paper draws upon academic literature, humanitarian reports, media articles and statistical information from Eurostat, as well as findings from engagement with diaspora communities at Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme in Copenhagen. It draws attention to information gaps related to diasporas and other transnational social networks and irregular migration in the current Middle East context, while pointing to priorities for further investigation.

1 Crisp, J. "Policy Challenges of the New Diasporas: migrant networks and their impact on asylum flows and regimes"

2 At time of publication, the Mixed Migration Centre East Africa and Yemen was known under the name of Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat East Africa and Yemen

3 Mixed Migration Centre East Africa & Yemen (2017), "Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection"

4 Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme facilitates, supports, and enhances the role of diasporas as effective agents of humanitarian assistance, recovery and development. The Programme implements projects that support diaspora-led initiatives, facilitate improved coordination, and develop the capacities of diaspora organisations. Since its creation in 2010, the programme also continues to contribute to the research agenda by documenting and sharing experiences on diaspora engagement to better understand the role of diaspora-led development and humanitarianism. For more information, visit www.drc.ngo/diaspora

Due to a lack of data, this paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive report on the scale and location of all Middle Eastern diaspora communities and other transnational social networks in Europe. It instead focuses on the perspective of Syrians and Iraqis, in terms of how they utilise the presence of friends, family, social networks and diaspora communities in Europe during the migration process. The described role of these networks in providing information, supporting decision making and accessing resources is analysed. The paper finds that there is a need for more research about the direct links between established diasporas and new arrivals, and about the role of diasporas and other transnational social networks in migration, including a focus on how the networks and diasporas themselves view those dynamics. The paper also finds that, despite existing relevant studies⁵, there is room for a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of the Syrian and Iraqi communities in Europe.

Figure 1 – Number of asylum applications in EU countries by year and nationality⁶

Asylum applications 2015	Asylum applications 2016	Asylum applications 2017	Total
Iraq			
121 535	126 915	47 525	295 975
Syria			
362 775	335 160	102 385	800 320
Total			
484 310	462 075	149 910	1 096 295

Key Findings

- Diasporas and other transnational social networks influence decisions about whether to migrate and where to go. The decision about whether to migrate is complex and depends on several factors, these include messages provided actively by diasporas and other transnational social networks as well as the sharing of their experiences⁷. The presence of family, friends and social networks in destination countries presents a key factor in decisions on where to travel
- Diasporas provide significant financial support to countries of origin through remittances, but it is not clear whether, and to what degree, established diasporas and new arrivals finance migration journeys specifically
- Formal diaspora organisations have the capacity to play an important role in the support and integration of new arrivals, but their role varies significantly depending on countries of origin and destination
- More research is needed for a more detailed understanding of the relationship between long-standing diaspora communities, other transnational social networks and Syrians and Iraqis en route to and newly arriving in Europe

5 Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme and Maastricht University (2017) "[Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe – Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom](#)"; Ragab, Nora Jasmin, Laura Rahmeier, and Melissa Siegel (2017) [Mapping the Syrian diaspora in Germany: contributions to peace, reconstruction and potentials for collaboration with German development cooperation](#), Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 23 January 2017; CARIM (2012) [Migration profile: Syria](#), January 2012

6 Eurostat (2017) Countries of origin of (non-EU) asylum seekers in the EU-28 Member States, [2015](#), [2016](#) and [2017](#)

7 It should be noted the sharing of information on social platforms such as Facebook does not necessarily happen with the intent to encourage migration.

What are diasporas and transnational social networks?

As its use in the academic and political realms has grown in recent decades, the concept of diaspora has been ascribed a variety of definitions. In fact, Rogers Brubaker argues that, in order to accommodate various agendas, the concept has been stretched “to the point of uselessness”.⁸ Oliver Bakewell similarly notes that governments and donors have a tendency to include anyone with ancestral origins in a country as part of its diaspora, an interpretation which assumes a relationship with the ‘homeland’ that may not exist.⁹ Engaging in the academic debate around the definition of diaspora is beyond the scope of this paper, however, a few key definitions are of use in understanding the usage of the term and its limits.

Bakewell proposes a working definition of diaspora based on four key criteria:

1. Movement from an original homeland to more than one country, either through dispersal (forced) or expansion (voluntary) in search of improved livelihoods;
2. A collective myth of an ideal ancestral home;
3. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time, based on a shared history, culture and religion; and
4. A sustained network of social relationships with members of the group living in different countries of settlement¹⁰

Under these conditions he argues that diasporas are distinct from the larger concept of ‘migrants’ and that

not all migrants are necessarily part of a diaspora. The Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination (DEMAC) project acknowledges the inherently transnational nature of diasporas, using Gabriel Sheffer’s definition of dispersed collectives that “maintain regular or occasional contacts with what they regard as their homeland and with individuals and groups of the same background residing in other host countries”.¹¹ Both shared identity and political practice are at the crux of diaspora communities, though this does not mean that such groups are homogenous.¹² On the contrary, diaspora communities are often economically, politically and religiously diverse.¹³

In these and other definitions, the international dispersal of a community, accompanied by ongoing ties and active involvement in a real or imagined homeland, are at the core of the definition of diaspora, and form the core of the term’s usage in this paper.

This framing, however, indicates that membership in a diaspora is voluntary and, as such, not always readily identifiable.¹⁴

Because of the relatively recent nature of the Syrian and Iraqi arrivals discussed in this paper, it is not always possible to identify if they are a part of the ‘diaspora’ in the traditional sense, or just individuals and communities with a shared national background. Recent arrivals often lack sustained connections to their homeland and to each other; their political practices in destination countries are still not formed. Thus, they might not yet form part of a diaspora. Shared identities and political affiliations may be in the process of development.

8 Brubaker, Rogers (2006) “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(1), 18 August 2016

9 Bakewell, Oliver (2009) *Which diaspora for whose development? Some critical questions about the roles of African diaspora organizations as development actors* Danish Institute for International Studies May 2009

10 Ibid

11 Sheffer, Gabriel (2003) as cited in DEMAC (2016) *Diaspora humanitarianism: findings of the diaspora emergency action and coordination project*, December 2016

12 DEMAC (2016) *Diaspora humanitarianism: transnational ways of working*, May 2016

13 Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme and Maastricht University (2017) “Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe – Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom”

14 DEMAC (2016) *Diaspora humanitarianism: findings of the diaspora emergency action and coordination project*, December 2016

To address this disconnect, the paper also refers to a broader category of transnational social networks; encompassing friends, family members and acquaintances of the same nationality. Individuals in such networks may not identify as part of the diaspora and cannot definitively be described as such. Stevens notes that a standard definition of the term social network is elusive, but for his purposes, includes any group of individuals identifiable by a common variable.¹⁵ In this paper, that variable is a shared country of origin.

This paper also considers the role of 'diaspora organisations', a term which refers to "formally constituted entities comprising diaspora members that operate in their countries of settlement and/or countries of origin, and may also work in neighbouring (third) countries".¹⁶ Organisations like Hand in Hand for Aid and Development, operating from the UK and Turkey, are formally established groups that can be categorised as diaspora organisations.¹⁷ When the paper refers to formal diaspora organisations, this is specifically noted.

The Syrian diaspora and other transnational social networks

Four waves of Syrian emigration beginning in the mid-nineteenth century have brought thousands of Syrians to Europe and elsewhere, with only the last wave tied to the conflict beginning in 2011.¹⁸ Though the Syrian government does not make statistics on its 'emigrant population' available, estimates in 2015 put the total figure at roughly 7.3 million, though earlier estimates had been as high as 10 or 20 million.¹⁹

The three significant pre-2011 waves of Syrian emigration included a mid-1800s departure to the United States, South America, Australia and Europe, due to poor living conditions and obligatory military service.²⁰ This was followed by a wave of departures beginning in the 1950s, categorised by the movement of Syrian elites out of the country to escape rigid socialist regime regulations in Syria not found in destination countries in the Gulf, Europe, Lebanon and the United States.²¹ The third, in the 1970s, was mainly notable for labour migration to the Gulf states due to the existence of expanding oil-based economies. This was followed in subsequent decades by labour migration to Lebanon, and smaller flows of asylum seekers to Europe.²²

While the majority of the fourth wave of departures from Syria are living in neighbouring countries in the region, Germany and Sweden are listed among the top ten destination countries for Syrians globally.²³ Prior to the 2011 conflict, some 30,133 Syrian nationals were living in Germany, a number that increased to 637,845 in 2016.²⁴ Sweden is similarly a major destination for displaced Syrians. Sweden hosted 20,758 Syria-born individuals in 2010, increasing to 149,418 in 2016.²⁵ After many years of displacement in the region since 2011, many Syrians moved towards Europe, often due to necessity or as a 'last resort' due to difficult conditions in surrounding countries.

15 Stevens, M.R. (2016) "The collapse of social networks among Syrian refugees in urban Jordan," in *Contemporary Levant*, 1(1), 26 April 2016.

16 DEMAC (2016) *Diaspora humanitarianism: findings of the diaspora emergency action and coordination project*, December 2016.

17 *Hand in Hand for Syria*; DEMAC (2016) *Diaspora humanitarianism: findings of the diaspora emergency action and coordination project*, December 2016.

18 Ragab, Nora Jasmin; Rahmeier, Laura; Siegel, Melissa (2017) *Mapping the Syrian diaspora in Germany: contributions to peace, reconstruction and potentials for collaboration with German development cooperation*, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 23 January 2017; CARIM (2012) *Migration profile: Syria*, January 2012

19 Ibid; Dickinson, Elizabeth (2015) *Unexpected humanitarians – the rise and potential fall of Syria's diaspora aid*, IRIN, 16 September 2015; IOM (2004) *Arab migration in a globalized world*

20 Ragab, Nora Jasmin; Rahmeier, Laura; Siegel, Melissa (2017) *Mapping the Syrian diaspora in Germany: contributions to peace, reconstruction and potentials for collaboration with German development cooperation*, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 23 January 2017

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ragab, Nora Jasmin; Rahmeier, Laura; Siegel, Melissa (2017) *Mapping the Syrian diaspora in Germany: contributions to peace, reconstruction and potentials for collaboration with German development cooperation*, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 23 January 2017

24 Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme and Maastricht University (2017) "Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe – Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom"

25 Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme and Maastricht University (2017) "Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe – Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom"

Syrian communities are increasingly present in many other European countries including Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Poland, Spain and the UK.²⁶

Despite their shared links to Syria, many diaspora members, particularly those who left Syria prior to 2011, have coalesced around ethno-religious Kurdish, Aramaic, Assyrian, Syriac or Muslim identities, rather than a shared Syrian identity.²⁷

The Iraqi diaspora and other transnational social networks

While figures for the exact number of Iraqis living in Europe are unavailable, large numbers of people born in Iraq are living in Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In 2005/2006, Germany hosted approximately 74,500 Iraqis;²⁸ this increased to an estimated 237,365 people in 2016.²⁹ Similarly, in 2005/2006, approximately 72,100 Iraqis lived in Sweden, but this number increased to an estimated 132,000 in 2016.³⁰ These numbers, however, do not include descendants of those born in Iraq, making it difficult to gauge the potential size of the diaspora.³¹

Adding to this is a long history of Kurdish migration to Europe from Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran dating to the 1960s.³² The Kurdish diaspora is concentrated mainly in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.³³ In 2002, Östen Wahlbeck estimated that roughly 700,000 Kurds were living in Europe, while others have put the figure closer to 850,000, with 500,000 to 600,000 in Germany alone.³⁴ Some estimates range even higher still, though the national origin of

these individuals is unspecified, making it difficult to determine the number of Kurds who originated in Iraq.

More recently, migration from Iraq to Europe, particularly along the eastern Mediterranean route, has increased significantly since the emergence of the so-called Islamic State and concomitant violence in 2014. More than 117,000 Iraqis arrived by sea in Greece in 2015 and 2016 alone.³⁵ The vast majority were driven to leave by conflict and violence in Iraq, with many choosing to come to Europe to join family and friends.³⁶

The influence of diaspora and other transnational social networks on migration decisions and processes

In general, there is limited specific research regarding the direct relationship between diasporas and other transnational social networks and migrants, and there is no analysis regarding the connection between them for movements between the Middle East and Europe. This lack of analysis is unusual, given the acceptance of a link between diaspora and migration in both theory and popular conception. In academia, theoretical conceptualisations of migration clearly refer to a role for diaspora and transnational social networks in the migration process. Among the broader public, there is a widespread assumption – with some inconclusive supporting evidence – that diaspora and other transnational networks support migration, both financially and in terms of information flow.

26 Ibid; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2017) [Together in the EU: promoting the participation of migrants and their descendants](#); Humanitarian Policy Group and ODI (2015) [International and local/diaspora actors in the Syria response: a diverging set of systems?](#) March 2015

27 Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme and Maastricht University (2017) ["Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe – Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom"](#)

28 OECD (2012) [Connecting with Emigrants: A Global Profile of Diasporas](#), OECD Publishing

29 Statistica (2017) [Anzahl der Ausländer in Deutschland nach Herkunftsland in den Jahren 2016 und 2017](#)

30 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2017) [Together in the EU: promoting the participation of migrants and their descendants](#)

31 Wahlbeck, Östen (2012) "The Kurdish refugee diaspora in Finland" in [Diaspora Studies](#) 5(1), 44-57; Orange, Richard (2015) [Years after finding refuge, Iraqis struggle in Malmo](#), DW, 21 October 2015

32 Başer, Bahar (2013) [The Kurdish diaspora in Europe: identity formation and political activism](#), Bogaziçi University-TÜSIAD Foreign Policy Forum Research Report

33 Ibid.

34 Wahlbeck, Östen (2002) "The concept of diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities" in the [Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies](#) 28(2) April 2002; Başer, Bahar (2013) [The Kurdish diaspora in Europe: identity formation and political activism](#), Bogaziçi University-TÜSIAD Foreign Policy Forum Research Report

35 REACH (2017) [Iraqi migration to Europe in 2016: profiles, drivers and return – Iraq/Greece](#) June 2017

36 Ibid.

This section briefly outlines the existing literature regarding links between diasporas/transnational networks and migrants. It then analyses existing data and research regarding Syrian and Iraqi diaspora and movements to Europe.

This paper provides the perspective of people on the move only and does not present the perspective of diasporas and other transnational social networks. In doing so, it identifies areas for further research and understanding. To the degree possible, the paper has focused on Syrian and Iraqi populations, but, as disaggregated data on the migration journeys of communities from the Middle East is limited, some literature contributing to the analysis is more general. It should be noted that there are many other groups on the move through or from the Middle East, including Pakistanis, Iranians and Afghans, whose movement and relations with diasporas and/or transnational social networks could also benefit from further analysis.

State of Research on Migration and Diaspora

The existing literature on migration spans a variety of disciplines, including economic, political and sociological. Each of these disciplines provides a different lens for analysing and better understanding the links between diaspora and migration.

Initial theories of migration focused on either macro or micro level economic reasons for migration, notably differentials in wages and

employment rates.³⁷ Individuals would migrate to countries where their skills were best rewarded, and would maximise financial return. Social capital and networks played a relatively limited role in these models. Over time, however, sociologists also developed migration models based on World Systems Theory, in which larger political or systematic shocks, including war and instability, could drive migration.³⁸ As theories of migration grew more diverse, a line was drawn between the initial causes of migration, and the factors that perpetuate existing migration flows.³⁹ Network Theory suggests that sets of interpersonal ties across international boundaries may perpetuate and exacerbate migration flows. It indicates that existing interpersonal networks – including diaspora – may contribute to reduced costs and risks for potential migrants.⁴⁰ Similarly, Institutional Theory suggests that, once a migrant group develops links with and understanding of particular institutions to support or arrange immigrant entry, a migration flow will grow and develop.⁴¹ Both theories suggest that a strong diaspora presence may not instigate migration flows, but is likely to perpetuate and increase them.

De Haas points out that migration is a non-linear diffusion process comprising social, cultural and economic aspects. Each of these factors can play either a positive, reinforcing role or a negative role in the perpetuation of migration. The presence of diaspora and relevant other transnational social networks is a social aspect

37 Lewis, W. Arthur (1954) Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour, *The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies*, 22: 139-191; Todaro, Michel P. (1969) A Model of Labour Migration and Unemployment in Less Developed Countries", *The American Economic Review*, 59:138-148; Borjas, George (1990) *Friends or Strangers: The impact of immigrants on the US Economy*, New York: Basic Books

38 Portes, Alejandro; Walton, John (1981) *Labour, Class and the International System*, New York: Academic Press; Castells, Manuel (1989) *The Informational City: Informational technology, economic restructuring and the urban-regional process*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell; Sassen, Saskia (1988) *The Mobility of Labour and Capital: A study in international investment and labour flow*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

39 Massey, Douglas; Arango, Joaquin; Hugo, Graeme; Kouaouci, Ali; Pellegrino, Adela; Edward Taylor, J. (1993) *Theories of International Migration: A review and appraisal*, *Population and Development Review*, 19:3, 431-466

40 Hugo, Graeme J. (1981) Village-community Ties, Village Norms, and Ethnic Social Networks: A review of evidence from the Third World, in DeJong, Gordon F; Gardner, Robert W. (eds) (1981) *Migration Decision Making: Multidisciplinary approaches to microlevel studies in developed and developing countries*; Taylor, J. Edward (1986) Differential migration, networks, information and risk, in Stark, Oded (eds) (1981) *Research in Human Capital and Development*, Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 147-171; Massey, Douglas S. (1990) *The Social and Economics Origins of Immigration*, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 510:60-72

41 Massey, Douglas; Arango, Joaquin; Hugo, Graeme; Kouacouci, Ali; Pellegrino, Adela; Taylor, J. Edward (1993) *Theories of International Migration: A review and appraisal*, *Population and Development Review*, 19:3, 431-466

in itself; remittances that may contribute to migration journeys is an economic aspect; and flows of information constitute a cultural effect.

The relevance of this multi-dimensional theoretical structure has been confirmed in recent migration discussions. In an issue brief resulting from the second informal thematic session related to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the United Nations notes that drivers may be economic, demographic, environmental, social or political, but that “the drivers of migration interact in complex ways to contribute to individuals’ migration decision-making”.⁴² This approach acknowledges that drivers are varied but often overlap, and cannot be reduced to basic ‘push and pull’ factors.⁴³

The following sub-sections adopt the structure proposed by de Haas to analyse the literature and hypothesize regarding links between Syrian and Iraqi diasporas, other transnational social networks and migrants. Given the paucity of existing literature regarding links between diasporas, other transnational social networks and migration, the paper will adopt a simplified structure: the cultural aspect will be associated with decision making among potential migrants, the economic aspect with financial support for movement, and the social aspect with integration efforts. The authors recognise that this structure is overly simplistic, but hope that it may provide a basis for initial analysis, which can be refined after further research.

The Cultural Aspect: Decision-making

Diasporas and other transnational social networks can contribute to decisions by migrants and potential migrants on whether to leave and where to go. The decision to leave is different than the decision on where to go. This paper assumes that diasporas and other transnational social networks have a greater influence on the latter, and therefore focuses on this part of the decision-making process.

A variety of research and literature points to the influential role that diasporas and other transnational social networks play in the decision-making process for migrants.⁴⁴ The influence of these networks is not straightforward; it consists of many strands including messages actively transmitted by new arrivals and more established diasporas, and those passively transmitted by the fact that new arrivals and diasporas can serve as an example of perceivably successful migration.

For people moving irregularly towards Europe, the fact that others have successfully made the journey before, particularly family, friends and social networks, serves as proof that the journey is indeed possible.⁴⁵ A recent study by MMP⁴⁶ and REACH found that the presence of family and friends in Europe was an influential factor in the decisions of Syrians and Iraqis to travel to Europe, particularly in the sense that such migration was viewed as ‘achievable’.⁴⁷ This finding is in line with research indicating that a culture of migration can be formed through family and social networks.

42 United Nations General Assembly (2017) [Issue Brief #2: Addressing drivers of migration, including adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters and human-made crises, through protection and assistance, sustainable development, poverty eradication, conflict prevention and resolution](#)

43 A significant number of studies have examined the key reasons that Syrians, Iraqis and other refugees and migrants have left their countries of origin, and while the prevailing reasons are typically tied to violence and conflict, there are a multitude of factors that play a role in the decisions of individuals and families to leave home and, in some cases, go to Europe. Though this report does not provide a representative sample of Syrians and Iraqis who have fled their country of origin, similar findings from IOM, REACH, the EVI-MED project, and the University of Warwick show conflict and violence as the most noted drivers of flight. IOM (2017) [MPM flow monitoring survey in Turkey – analysis: flow monitoring surveys November 2016 – January 2017](#); REACH (2015) [Migration trends and patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union](#); d’Angelo, A.; Blitz, B.; Kofman, E.; Montagna, N. (2017), [Mapping Refugee Reception In the Mediterranean: First Report of the Evi-Med Project](#); University of Warwick (2017) [Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat: mapping and documenting migratory journeys and experiences](#).

44 Mixed Migration Platform (MMP) (2017) [Separated Families: Who stays, who goes, and why?](#); MMP (2017) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2018\): Drivers, return and reintegration](#)

45 REACH (2015) [Migration trends and patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union](#)

46 Mixed Migration Platform (now called the Mixed Migration Centre – Middle East & Eastern Mediterranean)

47 MMP and REACH (2017) [Separated Families: who stays, who goes and why?](#)

Negative stories from those who have arrived in Europe may also exert influence on potential migrants. A Danish Refugee Council study with Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey demonstrated this: respondents of the study indicated that for those with knowledge of community members who had died or gone missing en route, significant ‘discouragement’ was expressed regarding their own potential journeys.⁴⁸

Beyond the Middle East, primary research conducted on Somali and Afghan diaspora and people on the move showed that members of the diaspora might well put out messages that seek to actively discourage potential migrants based on their own experiences of the journey and their situations in country of residence, while at the same time still passively serving as a success story for migration. This demonstrates the complicated and intricate nature of the role played by diaspora communities in decisions to migrate.

For those who decide to go, various research shows that their intended country of destination is often selected based on the presence of friends or family members.⁴⁹ In a 2016 study conducted with more than 200 people on the move in Greece, the MEDMIG project found that the presence of family, friends or social networks in European countries appeared to “shape and inform intended destinations above all other factors”.⁵⁰ This was particularly notable among Syrian participants, but also those from Iraq. These findings are echoed by a 2016 UNHCR profiling exercise in which 43% of surveyed Syrians in Greece reported that their choice of destination country was based on the desire to reunite with family members, significantly more than any other identified reason.⁵¹ Iraqis are also motivated to select destination countries based

on the location of transnational social networks. An IOM survey of nearly 500 Iraqis living in Europe (all of whom left Iraq in 2015) showed that 27% of respondents selected a country of destination based on a network of support in that country, the second most common answer following “ease of asylum access” (43%).⁵² More recent research conducted with Iraqis who had left for Europe in 2016 showed similar findings, with 25% of respondents citing family in the country of destination as the primary reason for choosing a destination.⁵³ It should be noted, however, that it is not clear how migrants choose destinations when they have family members and social networks in several countries: do they choose on the basis of the strength of their social networks, or on messages about which country has more welcoming conditions?

Presence of transnational social networks or a diaspora community in the country of destination are seen as a desirable advantage by people on the move, based on the expectation that such social ties will provide not only financial support and resources – both along the journey and upon arrival – but, perhaps more importantly, information and social support. A recent issue brief from informal sessions of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, acknowledges that modern flows of communication between diaspora communities and potential migrants “are some of the most powerful enablers of international migration, regardless of whether the information is factual”.⁵⁴ This assertion is shared by Jeff Crisp, who, in 1999, under UNHCR’s Policy Research Unit, noted that ‘transnational social networks’ act as “an important source of information to prospective asylum seekers” and that such information may contribute to decisions to migrate, regardless of the validity of such information.⁵⁵

48 Danish Refugee Council (2016) [Going to Europe: A Syrian Perspective](#)

49 University of Warwick (2017) [Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat: mapping and documenting migratory journeys and experiences](#); MMP and REACH (2017) [Separated Families: who stays, who goes and why?](#); REACH (2015) [Migration trends and patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union](#); EASO (2016) [The Push and Pull Factors of Asylum-Related Migration](#).

50 MEDMIG (2016) [Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU: drivers, decisions and destinations](#)

51 UNHCR (2016) [Profiling of Syrian Arrivals on Greek Islands in January 2016](#)

52 IOM (2016) [Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: February 2016](#); IOM (2016) [Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration](#)

53 REACH (2017) [Iraqi migration to Europe in 2016: profiles, drivers and return – Iraq/Greece](#) June 2017

54 UN (2017) Issue Brief #2: [Addressing drivers of migration, including adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters and human-made crises, through protection and assistance, sustainable development, poverty eradication, conflict prevention and resolution](#)

55 Crisp, J. (1999) [Policy challenges of the new diasporas: migrant networks and their impact on asylum flows and regimes](#), UNHCR.

Syrians, Iraqis and various other groups who have travelled or are currently travelling to Europe, report that members of transnational social networks who have made the journey before have offered information, not only about life in the destination country, but also regarding routes, challenges, expenses and asylum claim procedures.⁵⁶ Iraqi participants in an IOM study felt they could rely on the information of Syrians and Iraqis who had made the trip before them, and said that this contributed to the decision to make the journey. The MEDMIG project found that among Syrian respondents in Greece, almost daily contact was kept with friends and family already in Europe.⁵⁷ In early 2016, UNHCR found that 20% of Syrian respondents in Greece listed family and friends in a destination country as an information source throughout their journey.⁵⁸ In one example from REACH/MMP, Iraqi family members already in Sweden were consulted as part of a family plan to send two children to Europe, an illustration of the ways in which family living abroad can play a significant role in the journey decision-making process.⁵⁹ In some cases, people simply feel 'more confident' about what their arrival experiences in a destination country will be like by knowing that family and friends are already there. This is in line with network theories on internal migration dynamics⁶⁰.

Concerning the actual destination, an IOM study of Iraqis who travelled to Europe in 2015 found that Germany, Finland and Sweden were the top intended countries of destination prior to departure, while a later study by REACH found that in 2016, Germany, the Netherlands and the

UK were the top destinations (though 18% of respondents indicated that 'any safe country' was desirable).⁶¹ Germany has similarly been found to be the preferred country of destination for Syrians, followed by Sweden.⁶² As noted earlier in the paper, most if not all of these countries have historical Iraqi and/or Syrian diaspora communities, indicating that Syrians and Iraqis may consistently be choosing country destinations where they already have family.⁶³

The Economic Aspect: Financial Support

According to World Bank figures, some 1.6 billion USD in remittances were sent to Syria in 2016, with roughly 986 million USD sent to Iraq in the same period.⁶⁴ Remittances were sent primarily from Germany, Sweden and France in the case of Syria (27 million, 19 million and 8 million USD sent respectively).⁶⁵ Iraq also received significant remittance income, including 58 million USD in remittances from Sweden, 56 million from Germany and 33 million from the UK.⁶⁶

Remittance income is used for a variety of purposes in countries of origin. These include but are not limited to, meeting basic needs, investing in household assets, celebrating major family events and, potentially, funding migration journeys. The dynamics of remittances in fragile and conflict-affected states are not fully understood, and particularly the precise role of remittances in supporting migration journeys requires further research.⁶⁷

56 DRC (2016) [Going to Europe: A Syrian Perspective](#); IOM (2016) [Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration](#)

57 MEDMIG (2016) [Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU: drivers, decisions and destinations](#), September 2016.

58 UNHCR (2016) [Profiling of Syrian Arrivals on Greek Islands in January 2016](#)

59 MMP and REACH (2017) [Separated Families: who stays, who goes and why?](#)

60 De Haas, Hein (2010) "The Internal Dynamics of Migration Processes" A theoretical inquiry, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36:10, 1587-1617

61 IOM (2016) [Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: February 2016](#); REACH (2017) [Iraqi migration to Europe in 2016: profiles, drivers and return – Iraq/Greece](#) June 2017

62 IOM (2016) [Mixed Migration Flows in the Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond – Analysis: Flow Monitoring Surveys, January – November 2016](#).

63 It should be noted that this is correlation and not necessarily causation, as all of these countries have high standards of living which are likely a factor in the decision-making process.

64 World Bank (2017) [Annual remittances data](#), October 2017

65 World Bank (2016) [Bilateral remittance matrix 2016](#), October 2017

66 Ibid.

67 IOM (2009) [In pursuit of the southern dream: victims of necessity](#), April 2009

However, indicative figures exist on the topic:

A series of surveys from IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix in 2017 (interviewing 5,329 people in the period February-June 2017) show that 39% of Syrians interviewed received money from relatives abroad to fund their journey to Europe, with 12% of Iraqis reporting the same.⁶⁸

Anecdotal evidence from research conducted with people on the move along the eastern Mediterranean route and in Serbia also reveals situations in which Syrians and Iraqis in Europe have sent financial resources to facilitate the journeys of family and friends at home.⁶⁹ In some cases, remittances were reportedly sent to people en route to Europe, as well as before the journeys began.⁷⁰

Supporting the above, research on other communities, the Ethiopian and Somali diaspora, show that diasporas may play a role in financing the migration journeys of friends and families. However, a pilot research on Afghan and Somali diaspora indicates that financing may take place mainly under duress, with smugglers extorting payment from diaspora members, often at the last minute.⁷¹

While this data is not representative it points to the possibility that transnational social networks in Europe are likely a source of funding for Syrians and Iraqis attempting to move to Europe.

The Social Aspect: Support upon arrival

The role of transnational social networks and diaspora communities in supporting new arrivals often extends long after arrival in the destination country. Concrete collaboration with diaspora actors, as well as several studies conducted at Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme, points towards the long-standing role that diasporas play in supporting the settlement of new arrivals, both formally and informally.⁷²

From an academic perspective, the importance of social networks and social capital in the successful settlement and integration of migrants is well established. Stevens notes the correlation between social networks and emotional wellbeing in urban refugee populations, citing Landau and Duponchal's 2011 study, in which the local presence of family and friends far outstrips other indicators such as access to humanitarian aid, education and even legal status, as an indicator of economic and emotional wellbeing.⁷³ Similarly, Ager and Strang, while exploring varied and often widely different understandings of 'integration', argue that social networks and social capital are closely linked to 'successful integration'.⁷⁴ Crisp, however, points specifically to the support that family and friends provide with regards to employment, citing Blaschke's study of irregular migrants in Germany.⁷⁵ Based on the study, Blaschke argues that "concrete points of access to the labour market are found with the help of friends and acquaintances", rendering people on

68 IOM (2017) *Analysis flow monitoring surveys*, June 2017

69 MEDMIG (2016) *Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU: drivers, decisions and destinations*

70 MMP and DRC (2017) *Life in limbo: the consequences of thwarted mobility for refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants in Serbia*, September 2017

71 Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat East Africa & Yemen (2017), "*Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection*"

72 www.drc.ngo/diaspora; Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme (2017) Conference Report "*Diaspora Support to Durable Solutions – Syrians In Europe*", Nov 2017; Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme and Maastricht University (2017) "*Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe – Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom*"; DEMAC (2016), "*Diaspora Humanitarianism: Findings of the Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination Project*"

73 Stevens, M.R. (2016) "*The collapse of social networks among Syrian refugees in urban Jordan*," in *Contemporary Levant*, 1(1), 26 April 2016; Landau, L.B. and Duponchel, M., (2011) "*Laws, policies, or social position? Capabilities and the determinants of effective protection in four African cities*," in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24 (1), 22 January 2011

74 Strang, A; Ager, A. (2010) "*Refugee integration: emerging trends and remaining agendas*," in *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23(4), 27 November 2010; Ager, A. and A. Strang (2008) "*Understanding integration: a conceptual framework*," in *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2), 17 April 2008.

75 Crisp, J. (1999) *Policy challenges of the new diasporas: migrant networks and their impact on asylum flows and regimes*, UNHCR

the move dependent on their embeddedness in social networks in country of settlement.⁷⁶

The perspectives of these scholars and researchers are reflected in the benefits that people on the move perceive to be inherent in having family, friends and social networks in a country of arrival, often a motivator in selecting a destination country. MEDMIG's 2016 study found that some respondents along the eastern Mediterranean route felt "more confident about what would happen to them on arrival" when their destination country was home to family and friends.⁷⁷ There is a general sense among people on the move along this route that support will be provided by members of transnational social networks, whether it be social, financial, subsistence or otherwise.

In addition to these relatively informal networks of support upon arrival in a destination country, more formal diaspora organisations also provide integration support and services in a variety of European countries. As described above, diaspora organisations are categorised as "formally constituted entities comprising diaspora members that operate in their countries of settlement and countries of origin, and may also work in neighbouring (third) countries".⁷⁸ A recent Maastricht University study which attempts to map the Syrian diaspora in Germany, looks specifically at diaspora organisations, finding that more than a third of the 19 organisations interviewed for the study implement integration focused initiatives in Germany.⁷⁹ While not representative of the German organised diaspora as a whole, the study found that the integration support ranged from advisory

services and legal advice, to the promotion of intercultural dialogue, assistance with government agencies and doctors' visits, addressing social injustices and supporting professional integration. The authors of the study argue that given recent increases in the number of Syrian refugees arriving in Germany, diaspora organisations are interested in supporting integration as a mechanism to ultimately better their ability to contribute to peace and development in Syria itself.⁸⁰

A broader study examining the Syrian diaspora in six European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) similarly found that diaspora organisations founded since the 2011 onset of the Syrian conflict have turned their attention increasingly towards integration services for newcomers in addition to sustained humanitarian and development work in Syria.⁸¹ Diaspora organisations in Sweden and Denmark, in particular, are focusing more on activities in the host country than in the country of origin, with groups in France, Germany and the United Kingdom also offering significant cultural and integration services for newcomers. However, Syrian diaspora organisations in Denmark, Sweden, the UK and various other countries also showcase a focus on humanitarian response, advocacy and development, displaying the broad focus of diaspora engagement, with activities not exclusively confined to supporting new community arrivals.⁸²

There are also formally organised Iraqi diaspora communities in Germany, Sweden, the UK and other European countries, though it is unclear the specific role they play in the integration of new arrivals.⁸³

76 Jochen, B (1998) "Addressing the employment of migrants in an irregular situation: the case of Germany", paper presented to the Technical Symposium on International Migration and Development, The Hague, 29 June - 3 July 1998 as cited in: Crisp, J. (1999) [Policy challenges of the new diasporas: migrant networks and their impact on asylum flows and regimes](#), UNHCR

77 MEDMIG (2016) [Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU: drivers, decisions and destinations](#), September 2016.

78 DEMAC (2016) [Diaspora humanitarianism: findings of the diaspora emergency action and coordination project](#), December 2016

79 Ragab, Nora Jasmin; Rahmeier, Laura; Siegel, Melissa (2017) [Mapping the Syrian diaspora in Germany: contributions to peace, reconstruction and potentials for collaboration with German development cooperation](#), Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 23 January 2017

80 Ibid

81 Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme (2017) Syrian diaspora groups in Europe: [mapping their engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom](#)

82 DEMAC (2016) [Diaspora humanitarianism: findings of the diaspora emergency action and coordination project](#), December 2016.

83 Candan, Menderes (2012) [The Iraqi diaspora in Germany and its role in reconstruction in Iraq](#), Centre on Migration Policy and Society, 11 December 2012; [Iraksiska Riksforbundet I Sverige](#) (Iraqi National Association); [Iraq Britain Business Council](#).

Conclusion

Diaspora communities and other transnational social networks are only one factor in the complex phenomenon of Syrian and Iraqi movement and migration to European countries. A limited number of studies and anecdotal accounts have allowed this paper to outline the role of family, friends and social networks, as well as more formal diaspora organisations, in supporting the decision making and journeys of people on the move. Despite this, significant gaps remain in our understanding of these relationships.

Existing research indicates that Iraqis and Syrians on the move are influenced by social, cultural and economic ties with diaspora and other transnational social networks already in Europe. The influence of diaspora and other transnational social networks on the decision to migrate can be both positive and negative, depending on the experience of the individual in question. With regard to location, their role appears to be definitive – migrants move to locations where diaspora communities and

other transnational social networks already exist. In terms of financing, links between diasporas, other transnational social networks and migrants are uncertain and could be explored further. In terms of support upon arrival, diasporas and other transnational social networks appear to play a positive role in supporting new arrivals.

The majority of research shows diaspora engagement to support new arrivals in a destination country is prevalent, but may vary significantly depending on the country of origin and the strength of diaspora groups in the country of destination.⁸⁴ Additional research is imperative to not only map out the new parameters of diaspora communities and other transnational social networks following increased arrivals in recent years, but also to obtain a more holistic understanding of their relations to the recent and ongoing arrivals.

Recommendations for future research and investigation of this topic are outlined below.

84 DEMAC (2016) [Diaspora humanitarianism: transnational ways of working](#), May 2016

Recommendations

Areas for future research

- This paper is written with a focus on diaspora communities and other transnational social networks from the perspective of people on the move or those who have recently arrived in Europe. Additional research to better understand the perspective of diaspora communities themselves (particularly longstanding ones) and other transnational social networks towards recent arrivals, and the role they see themselves playing in irregular migration to Europe, would help to fill gaps in the literature. One such attempt (looking at diasporas specifically) has been made by the Mixed Migration Centre East Africa and Yemen⁸⁵ in collaboration with Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme, but this provides only indicative findings, and further research is needed⁸⁶.
- Limited data on the financial connection between diaspora communities, other transnational social networks and people on the move could be supplemented by a study of the financial support provided by transnational social networks and diaspora communities in Europe to facilitate migration journeys from the Middle East. Do those who have already arrived in Europe have the financial capacity or will to support those who aspire to make the journey? Do long-term members of the diaspora have different perspectives on such journeys than newer arrivals? And how – if at all – can the use of remittances to finance journeys be factored in, whether that use be intended by the sender or not?
- Further analysis of new arrivals to Europe, particularly of Syrians arriving after 2011 and the extent to which they identify as part of the diaspora or choose to participate in formal diaspora organisations. This will help researchers and humanitarian responders in countries of destination to better understand the capacity and will of Syrians in Europe to support newcomers upon arrival to Europe.
- A follow-up study with Syrian and Iraqi arrivals of 2015 and 2016 to understand whether their expectations of support from family and friends were validated, and if they connected with, or identify themselves as, a more longstanding diaspora community.
- Further analysis regarding the diasporas of other groups on the move between the Middle East and Europe, including Afghans, Pakistanis and Iranians, and their relationships.

85 Until recently known under the title of Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat East Africa and Yemen

86 Mixed Migration Centre East Africa & Yemen (2017), "[Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection](#)."



The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) was established in February 2018. It brings together various existing regional initiatives – hosted or led by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) – engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration issues into a new global network of mixed migration expertise.

The Mixed Migration Centre - Middle East & Eastern Mediterranean, provides quality mixed migration-related information for policy, programming and advocacy from a regional perspective. Our core countries of focus are Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Israel/OPT and Greece.

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