



CONFERENCE REPORT
**DIASPORA SUPPORT
TO DURABLE SOLUTIONS**
– SYRIANS IN EUROPE
BERLIN 24.11.17

Organised by

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INTRODUCTION

Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme (DRC) organized the conference "Diaspora and Durable Solutions" on 24th of November in Berlin, in collaboration with the Durable Solutions Platform (DSP) and the BMZ funded GIZ project "Qualification initiative for Syrian Civil Society, Women and Community Representatives (QICS)". The conference brought together representatives of diaspora organisations in Europe, humanitarian and development practitioners, as well as a government representative to discuss durable solutions to Syrian displacement. Millions of Syrian people have been displaced by the ongoing violence in their home country. 6,3 million people have been internally displaced, having fled their homes to live in safer parts of Syria and more than 5 million have fled Syria since 2011, seeking safety in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and in Europe. But as the situation in many parts of Syria may remain unsafe for a long time yet, displaced Syrians are increasingly in need of durable solutions (local integration, resettlement, or voluntary return) to their displacement. The conference was part of a project to map, study and engage with Syrian diaspora organizations in Europe on the main challenges Syrians are facing in finding durable solutions.

PANEL I SYRIAN DIASPORA ORGANISATIONS IN EUROPE VS IN THE MENA REGION

Moderator

Dr. Saskia Baas (Specialist, Durable Solutions Platform)

Panellists

Fadi Al-Dairi (Director Hand in Hand for Aid and Development),
Hozan Ibrahim (Executive Director, Citizens for Syria), Nora Jasmin
Ragab (PhD fellow, UNU-MERIT/Maastricht University)

Highlights from the discussions

- In the region, the importance of ensuring protection and safe returns of Syrians displaced in the neighbouring countries was stressed. Peace talks and negotiations should include protection guarantees and ensure access and safety for those who wish to return.
- In Europe, large-scale return and sustainable reintegration seems not a likely scenario in the near future and, hence, there is a need for promoting integration opportunities and a welcoming culture for those seeking protection in Europe. Herein, governments could learn from past experiences of forced displacement to guide their measures tackling the challenges of integration.
- At the same time, diaspora organisations already contribute to the strengthening of local structures, by being engaged in projects that foster various fields of development such as education, health, gender equality, civil society and livelihood opportunities, both inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries. This may contribute to opportunities for return and reintegration in the future.
- To ensure sustainable return it seems crucial to tackle the societal divisions that have evolved among Syrians, in order to prevent revenge-related violence and reoccurring phases of instability. International organisations could engage in strengthening the networks of Syrian diaspora groups, by providing a space for building trust and social capital that facilitate messaging based on a more unified voice.

PANEL II THE ROLE OF THE SYRIAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE IN SUPPORTING DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Moderator

Anne Bathily (Senior Strategic Advisor, UNHCR Regional
Representation for Northern Europe)

Panellists

Stephanie Deubler (Technical Advisor, Sector Project Forced
Displacement, GIZ) Nils Stützle (Policy Advisor, Federal Ministry of
Interior, Germany), Dr. Zedoun Al Zoubi (CEO, Medical Care and
Relief Organisation, UOSSM)

Highlights from the discussions:

- The conflict has engendered various divisions within the Syrian society, ranging from the political polarisation (pro and anti-regime) to dichotomies between rural versus urban population, minorities versus majority, secular versus religious, as well as between people inside versus outside Syria. Given that these divisions are reproduced in the diaspora, rebuilding social capital among Syrian diaspora groups is seen as crucial to fight fragmentation both abroad and in Syria. Creating a space for rapprochement, reflection and dialogue in the diaspora can be part of the solution to the conflict inside Syria.
- In contrast to government agencies – which have to stick to their mandates - diaspora groups are more flexible, by addressing the various aspects of the Syrian crisis both in the host countries and in. Regarding the contribution of Syrian diaspora groups in finding durable solutions to Syrian displacement, they not only support the integration of Syrian newcomers in the host country but also strengthen local structures in Syria which will foster sustainable reintegration of returnees in the future.
- In the host country, Syrian diaspora members can help to build a bridge between the needs of Syrian newcomers and the support structures offered by the respective government agencies and civil society actors, due to their intercultural and linguistic competences.
- The notion of partnership and collaboration, meaning that Syrian diaspora groups should also be included in decision and policy making, rather than being only used as a service provider and implementing partner, was stressed throughout the discussion.

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WORKSHOP 1

NETWORKS

Chair

Hozan Ibrahim (Executive Director, Citizens for Syria)

Panellists

Majd Massouh (Coordinator, Collectif de Developpement et Secours Syrien, CODSSY), Anass Tooma (Coordinator, Syrian Charities and Associations Network, SCAN UK), Lilli Kardouh (Managing Director, Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine e.V, VDSH), Mingo Heiduk (Head of Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme / Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination, DEMAC), Nada Naanaah (Director Danish-Syrian Culture Association)

Highlights from the discussions

The session focussed on how to strengthen efforts of Syrian diaspora groups through the promotion of networks within each destination country and in the transnational sphere.

- It seems important that diaspora networks emerge due to synergies between the members and through a joint effort and ownership by the different diaspora organisations. As funding is often necessary, external actors can facilitate and support the network development through capacity building initiatives. Moreover, the commitment of the founders and the board seems to play a significant role in sustaining the network.
- Most of the networks in Europe are country-based and tend to connect diasporas organisations active in diverse fields such as advocacy, humanitarian aid, development and integration. In addition, some issue-based networks, like Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) and We Exist! have been established, to foster collaboration of diaspora organisations in specific domains such as humanitarian coordination and advocacy.
- Through facilitating access to funding, providing capacity building trainings, fostering representation of Syrian diaspora and raising awareness on the Syrian cause, networks contribute to the empowerment of their member organisations
- Securing of funding, professionalization and the outreach to others have been identified as the main challenges. Introducing membership-fees, can provide a crucial financial basis, that facilitate continuous capacity development and professionalization of the network.
- Networks have many overlapping mandates that can encourage coordination and collaboration between them to exchange ideas and lessons learned. In a more advanced step, a Europe-wide union could be created to co-organize activities and joint actions. To tackle the issues of shifting discourses and xenophobia, it was emphasized that Syrian networks could coordinate and collaborate with other groups, such as Somali or Turkish communities and local citizens' progressive organizations, hence sharing the cause outside the Syrian-national circles.

WORKSHOP 2

ADVOCACY

Chair

Anne Bathily (Senior Strategic Advisor, UNHCR Regional Representation for Northern Europe)

Panellists

Mohammed Al Hammadi (Coordinator, Syrian NGOs Alliance, SNA) Murhaf Saref (Director, Syrian Peace Action Centre, SPACE, and WE Exist Alliance), Haqqi Bahram (Member, The Young Republic) Stephanie Khouri (Advocacy Project Officer, ASML Syria)

Highlights from the discussions

The workshop focussed on how to strengthen advocacy efforts of Syrian diaspora groups in Europe and transnationally.

- The participants of the workshop first identified priority topics, key stakeholders, as well as effective modes and channels of advocacy. In total, five topics have been selected: 1) Representation of Syrian voices, 2) Legislative obstacles, 3) Rights and obligations of refugees, 4) Responsibility sharing between the EU and neighbouring countries in the context of Syrian displacement and 5) Voluntary return.
- A diverse range of stakeholders have been identified, including government representatives at local, national, EU and international level as well as civil society organisations, UN agencies or INGOs active in humanitarian assistance and development cooperation, and the broader public of the host countries.
- Looking at the resources present in the Syrian diaspora, the existing networks such as We exist! and the Syrian NGO Alliance provide an effective way of coordinating and channelling advocacy efforts and have already established networks with stakeholders including governments, NGOs, and international organisations
- Increasing access inside Syria, facilitating cross-border operations as well as promoting voluntary return are among the key priorities of Syrian diaspora organisations in the region. In the European context, organisations are not only aiming at changing the dominant narrative on the Syrian cause and to enhance the representation of Syrians in policy and decision making, but also to promote inclusion and empowerment of refugees to enable them to participate in civil society and political process in the host countries. Some organisations such as SPACE and ASML Syria, make use of arts and cultural productions to create an alternative space for political expression.
- The discussions revealed that key topics and priorities of advocacy vary across the host country countries, highlighting the difference in opportunities and challenges Syrian diaspora groups are facing in the destinations. This calls for disparate advocacy strategies and channels to be used, to address both opportunities and constrains efficiently.
- Existing networks provide strong resources, since they coordinate, pool, and channel advocacy in and across different countries.
- The main challenge was perceived in the dilemma between the need for recognizing the diversity of opinions among Syrian diaspora groups, while at the same time speaking with a strong collective voice. Further, sustainable advocacy efforts seem to be impeded by the dynamic nature of the Syrian conflict, since the ever-changing environment makes it difficult to develop a long-term vision and strategy.

WORKSHOP 3 LEADERSHIP

Chair

Susanne Lennert (Senior Advisor, Qualification Initiative for Syrian Civil Society, GIZ)

Panellists

Dr. Friederike Stolleis (Senior Advisor, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Department for Middle East and North Africa), Jala Jazaeri (Member, Migrant Advisory Board Potsdam), Yasmine Marei ("Women for common space initiative", Fellow of "Young Leadership Visitors Program 2016" at Swedish Institute Stockholm)

Highlights from the discussions:

This session discussed the role of community leaders to support access to durable solutions and how future (young) leaders can be empowered to play a role in maintaining social cohesion in a post-conflict Syria.

- Different forms of leadership have been discussed, covering individuals, communities and institutions at national level. Individual leadership programs often focus on the development of strategic competences, skills and visions to enable agents to move from reaction to action. For instance, the Syrian Young Leaders Program of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) provides trainings for a selected group of young Syrian adults with the motivation and capability of assuming leadership positions in politics and public life. Next to workshops on soft skills such as presentation techniques, the focus lies on enhancing knowledge on social and political theory.
- Given the historical lack of a culture of civil society and experience with democratic processes in Syria, there seems a strong need for political education that enable members of communities to raise their voice and participate in society. Collective leadership programs can promote the capacity of communities to take action, by building trust and social capital. As one example, the "Women For a Common Space" initiative works with Arabic-speaking women at refugee centres in Berlin. Through workshops covering a diverse range of topics such as belonging and identity, sexuality, women empowerment and the role of women in the camp, the objective is to build a network and to empower women to act, rather than react in society. By recognising integration as a two-way process, the project puts emphasis on the resources and capabilities of refugees, by jointly creating integrations tools with women displaced by conflict.
- It became apparent in the discussion that there is no one-fits-all solution, meaning that different approaches and designs are needed for the various kinds and geographies of leadership.
- Programs should not just focus on the elite or the most visible and outspoken persons, but rather seek to empower people and communities on the ground. Instead of selecting leaders using a top-down approach, programs can provide a space and platform for people to participate in choosing legitimate representations through a democratic process. Hence, promoting empowerment, dialogue and the strengthening of social capital is seen as crucial, to prevent the reproduction of a disconnected political elite.

WORKSHOP 4 FUNDING

Chairs

Lilli Kardouh (Managing Director, Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine e.V, VDSH), Adrien Bory (Project Coordinator, Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme)

Panellists

Majd Massouh (Coordinator, Collectif de Developpement et Secours Syrien, CODSSY), Anass Tooma (Coordinator, Syrian Charities and Associations Network, SCAN UK), Sigrid Schubart-Mirrafati (Advisor, Qualification Initiative for Syrian Civil Society, GIZ)

Highlights from the discussions

This workshop addressed the question on how small and medium size diaspora organisations can access funding.

- The discussion of the workshop revealed a wide range of potential funding sources, including donations, crowd-funding, contributions by religious institutions such as mosques and churches, as well as public funding at different levels (local, national, EU, and international).
- In particular, national and EU funds are difficult to access by small and medium organisations due to their strict regulation and bureaucratic burdens. Many of the small and medium organisations lack the skills in application writing and the capacity to manage projects with a considerable budget. As national and international donors also highly depend on the governmental regulations and strategies, including accountability issues and standards, professionalization and capacity development should be supported, to facilitate access to public funding schemes. At the same time, greater professionalization often comes along with more bureaucracy and less flexibility, which needs to be taken into account in the organisational development.
- Umbrella organisations and other networks can facilitate access to funding. Some diaspora networks provide training and support in proposal writing, by also promoting peer-to-peer learning and solidarity among member organisations. Often umbrella organisations are seen as legitimate focal point by international donors, INGO and national governments, and tend to have better access to donors.
- A need for a shift in funding mechanisms has been identified. Syrian organisations tend to be paid for services performed, but not perceived as equal partners with unique capacities. Bigger or fixed overhead is needed for both, networks and individual organisations, to sustain and develop.
- Some organisations with Syria in the name experienced that banking accounts have been closed and money is becoming more and more difficult to transfer. This poses not just a practical challenge on the involvement, but also has unintended yet severe consequences for the people inside Syria, who depend on the support by the diaspora.



CONCLUSION

Through an intra-diaspora dialogue, the conference enabled knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer learning between the different diaspora groups, and facilitated networks among the groups and with other international actors, including UNHCR, IOM, GIZ, DRC, NRC and IRC. Given the societal and political division arising from the conflict, which are also present in the diaspora, rebuilding social capital and fostering the ability to work together, through building trust and networks have been identified as some of the major future tasks. Rather than struggling for “representativeness”, representation of the Syrian diaspora should highlight the opportunities and potentials of the diversity of voices, knowledge, and experiences. In contrast to international actors, diaspora groups do not have to stick to specific mandates and are therefore able to address the various aspects of the Syrian crisis in Syria, the neighbouring countries and in Europe. Given this diversity of diaspora actions, there is a need for a “whole of government approach” and joint activities performed by diverse ministries, public administrations and public agencies in order to provide common and durable solutions to Syrian displacement.

RECOMMENDATIONS & WAY FORWARD

In summing up the discussions during the conference, concrete recommendations for future actions for policy makers and representatives of governments, intergovernmental institutions, civil society, academia and diaspora organizations include:

- **Tackling the societal divisions** that have evolved among Syrians, through the promotion of networks, dialogue and social capital building.
- **Increasing the access of Syrian diaspora groups to decision-making processes**, by strengthening advocacy networks and by acknowledging potentials of the diversity of voices, knowledge, and experiences.
- **Support leadership** at different levels (e.g. individual and community) to develop strategic competences, skills and visions to enable diaspora agents and communities to move from reaction to action. A bottom-up approach that aims at empowering people and communities on the ground seems crucial in this regard.
- **Increasing the access of diaspora organisations to funding opportunities** of conventional donors and grants. Larger NGOs or/and umbrella organisations can play a role in accessing more complex funding and providing funding to partners/members. This requires a shift in collaboration, by moving away from seeing diaspora groups purely as implementing partners towards empowering and developing the capacity of civil society actors. Sharing information on different funding streams and providing trainings and peer-to-peer learning opportunities on grants applications is also desirable.
- **Establishing a platform for networking** that promotes diverse forms of cooperation and knowledge transfer among diaspora and international organisations. It could be facilitated through the establishment of knowledge transfer database that encompasses skills and capacities of the diaspora representatives and integration, development and humanitarian practitioners.

DRC's Diaspora Programme is currently fundraising for follow up activities based on those recommendations, in close contact with diaspora organisations and the Durable Solutions Platform aiming at supporting and facilitating the role of diaspora organisations in finding durable solutions for displaced Syrians.

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