



# The Engagement of the Syrian Diaspora in Germany in Peacebuilding

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## Introduction

In past decades there has been growing interest in Diaspora engagement in development, however, this topic is discussed controversially. On one hand, Diasporas can have a positive developmental effect on their country of origin through civil society engagement in form of social, cultural and political projects, as well as economic transfers. Diasporas have sometimes been recognized as “agents for development”. As a result, some countries of residence, as well as countries of origin, are starting to implement policies that aim to mobilize Diasporas and encourage their engagement in development (Castles & Miller 2009). According to Vertovec (2005), “over the past 25 years, Diasporas have increasingly become significant players in the international political arena” (p.1). Due to the

changing nature of conflicts after the Cold War, however, researchers have increasingly emphasized the role of Diasporas in contemporary conflicts (Demmers 2007). Diasporas have also been described as “long distance nationalists” (Anderson 1994), who can exacerbate conflict. Smith (2007) asks a key question which highlights this debate: are Diasporas peace makers or peace breakers? He concludes that Diasporas can be both peace makers and peace wreckers depending on the specific circumstances. As Diasporas are not homogenous groups, they also can be both simultaneously. Regrettably, there is limited research on this discourse available (Sinatti 2010).

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An empirical case study has been carried out in order to analyze the peaceful movement in the Syrian Diaspora in Germany and its engagement in the contemporary conflict. Thirteen in-depth interviews have been carried out with members of the Syrian Diaspora in order to shed light on their motivation, perceptions of peace, and the activities the Diaspora carries out to promote it. Even though it is not assumed that Diaspora engagement in conflict settings is always positive and constructive, the goal is to identify actual cases and potentials for constructive involvement of Diasporas. With outlining the case of Syria, it is one of the first studies that analyze Diaspora engagement in the context of the Arab Spring. In this policy brief a profile of the Syrian Diaspora and its peacebuilding potentials are presented. On the basis of the results it provides an overview of the peacebuilding activities and then outlines the Diaspora engagement policies in Germany. Finally policy recommendations are given in order to address the identified challenges and to support constructive Diaspora involvement.

### Profile of the Syrian Diaspora in Germany

According to data from the German Federal Statistical Office, there were a total of 32,878 Syrians registered in Germany in 2011, of whom 18,562 (56%) were male and 14,316 (44%) female. This number does not include Syrians who are naturalized in Germany; therefore one can assume that the total number of people with a Syrian background is even higher. The average age of Syrian citizens residing in Germany was 29 years, and the average length of stay was 9.2 years. For those with a temporary permit, the majority arrived with the purpose of family reunification (6,626) and due to humanitarian reasons (4,938), while 2,053 came to Germany to seek education or employment (458) (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012). Unfortunately, the data from the German Federal Statistical Office does not provide separate information for Syrian nationals on educational level, labor market performance, or other socio-economic key statistics and, therefore, no broader picture of the socio-economic integration of the



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Syrians in Germany can be given. Based on the results of the empirical case study, the Syrian Diaspora is characterized by heterogeneity in terms of religion, ethnicity and political aspirations. The rich diversity of the Syrian society is therefore also reflected in the Diaspora.

The initial mapping of Syrian Diaspora organizations in Germany, involving internet research and the use of the Register of Commerce database, revealed several Syrian Diaspora organizations. In general there were 2 main categories of organizations, which differ in their history, implemented activities and major goals. First, there are German-Syrian Associations, which were established in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. In general, these organizations aim to support and strengthen the relationships between the Syrians living in Germany, promote their integration and strengthen ties to the country of origin. Moreover, the goal is to encourage cultural exchanges and deepen the relations between Germany and Syria through promotion of cooperation and exchanges at different levels. In addition, there exist organizations along ethnic lines, such as Kurdish associations and Syrian Orthodox Churches and associations

(mostly Arameans). In addition to these organisations, numerous initiatives and organizations developed at the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, which explicitly aim to contribute to peacebuilding and the solution of the conflict. In the following section, a summary of the analysis of the peaceful movement is given.

### The Syrian Diaspora and its Engagement in Peacebuilding

The case study of the Syrian Diaspora provides a detailed, in-depth understanding of Diaspora engagement in peacebuilding. The peaceful movement of the Syrian Diaspora is characterized first and foremost by a new public consciousness. When Syrians met at the first demonstrations in Germany, they came together, discussed and shared their opinions. Several initiatives and organizations developed at the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The initial mapping exercise, as described above, uncovered 14 organizations, from which 9 are officially registered. In addition to the more formal organizations, informal coordination committees



developed in many cities in Germany, in order to discuss the situation in Syria and plan activities in their region. In general, the organizations explicitly aim to contribute to peacebuilding and the solution of the conflict. They mainly implement activities in the fields of awareness raising, human rights and humanitarian aid. Within these organizations all political directions, from the left and liberal democratic, up to the right are represented and often religious as well as ethnic boundaries were overcome. Interestingly, it was thus not due to ethnicity, religion or political similarities, but it was the uprising which united the Diaspora. Comparing this with the existing literature highlights that ethnic identity groups play a minor role in the conflict and in Diaspora engagement. Likewise, the uprising in Syria, the peaceful movement within the Syrian Diaspora, is therefore characterized by heterogeneity in terms of religion, ethnicity and political aspirations.

Analyzing the ways in which the Syrian Diaspora contributes to the peacebuilding process, the study revealed that the Syrian Diaspora is engaged in the economic, political and social sphere. In the current stage of conflict, remittances and donations are seen as one of the most important contributions economic wise. Around € 30,000 are sent monthly from the Diaspora in Germany in order to support families in Syria and those who have fled to neighbouring countries, as well as the peaceful movement. This finding therefore prompts a re-thinking of the debate on remittances in conflict, which is mostly dominated by the view that financial contributions are used to finance rebel groups (Collier and Hoeffler 2002; Byman et al 2001). It highlights the importance of supporting the transfer of remittances in times of conflict, since they are often the sole source of income for many families. Regulation measures might therefore even worsen the situations of those in need, rather than providing actions against the financing of armed groups. In the political sphere, the main aim is to raise awareness in German society and to lobby against governance practices of the regime in order to influence decision making on the Syrian case. The analysis, however, also showed that Diaspora do not act in a political vacuum. Lobbying might therefore be more successful if the interests of the Diaspora match the interest of the receiving government or the international community (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006). Yet, it seems questionable to what extent Diasporas are able to influence foreign policy. In the social sphere, the findings showed that in particular providing humanitarian assistance is the major task of the Syrian Diaspora at this stage of the conflict. For the future the support and promotion of the civil society is seen as crucial in order to achieve sustainable peace in Syria. Due to their context-specific knowledge and their wide access through extended networks, Syrian Diaspora organizations could function as bridge builders linking persons in need with humanitarian aid.

The case study also revealed, however, that there are several factors which influence Syrian Diaspora engagement and determine their options for action. Beside the agency and capacity of the Diaspora, the political opportunity structures in the country of residence as well as in the origin country provided both constraints and opportunities shaping what the Syrian Diaspora can and cannot do. In particular, the lack of support from the German Government and the International Community, both financially and politically was seen as a major influencing factor.

### Diaspora Engagement Policies in Germany

The interest in Diaspora engagement in Germany developed in the mid-2000s, where the state recognized the possible positive interaction of migration and development. As a result several initiatives and projects were established to support transnational activities of Diasporas in Germany. In 2003, two conferences on “Migration and Development” were held by the GIZ (former GTZ), the German development agency, in order to get a better understanding of the Diaspora landscape in Germany and to analyze opportunities for cooperation (Sinatti 2010).

In 2007, the GIZ established the “Migration and Development Sector Project” (Sektorvorhaben), which implemented a pilot program on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to enhance Diaspora non-profit engagement. The aim of this program is to support these organizations in the implementation and financing of development projects in countries of origin. Another example is the program “Migration and development on the local level”, implemented by the state-owned non-profit organization InWEnt. The aim of this program is to improve networking between German development initiatives, local institutions and Diaspora organizations. In addition, there are several initiatives at state level, some federal states in Germany, such as North Rhine-Westphalia, support transnational engagement by providing capacity building activities and financial resources (Sinatti 2010).

In general one can observe that these programs focus on Diaspora engagement in development, with the aim to provide funds, foster the professionalization of Diaspora organizations, and improve their networks. The only project that targets Diaspora engagement in peacebuilding is the program “zivik”, managed by the Federal Foreign Office and the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, IFA). It promotes and supports peace-related projects, implemented by Diaspora organizations in their countries of origin (Fahrenhorst et al. 2009).

### Conclusion and Recommendations for Policies

The study revealed that, in the case of the Syrian Diaspora, there are many peacebuilding potentials, yet there is a lack in policies and programs that explicitly support peacebuilding activities of Diasporas in Germany. Therefore the following recommendations are made:

- Policies that facilitate and promote the *transfer of remittances* should be implemented, since those and other financial contributions of Diasporas are important sources of income that ensure livelihoods during the conflict. However, these policies should not be limited to the formal transfer system since informal ways are often the sole option to transfer money to conflict-affected countries. It is therefore recommended that, in particular for registered organizations, softer regulations should be adopted if the organization is able to prove accountability.
- Further, it is suggested to provide *financial support and opportunities for cooperation*, since Diaspora organizations can function as important intermediaries. Due to their wide access through extended networks, the Syrian Diaspora organizations are able to link the persons in need with humanitarian aid. Moreover, involving members of the Diaspora in the policy process can lead to more efficient outcomes since they often possess context-specific knowledge.
- Besides the financial policies and measures for cooperation, non-monetary benefits could also promote and encourage

Diaspora engagement. The case study revealed that many respondents did not feel supported by the German government, although they put a lot of time and efforts in order to contribute to peacebuilding and to the solution of the conflict. Both, *public recognition and appreciation of Diaspora engagement* are therefore important measures to value the potentials of the engagement of the Syrian Diaspora.

- Finally, in the case of Syria, the Diaspora is fragmented since its members are either for or against the regime, almost no one is neutral. *Promoting dialogue* between the two fractions could be step towards a peaceful solution within the Diaspora. This can further function as a basis for moderation and negotiations and therefore support the peacebuilding process in the long term.

A major limitation of this study, however, is that it exclusively focuses on the peace movement within the Syrian Diaspora. Even though this enabled us to identify the potentials for, and the challenges, of the constructive involvement of Diasporas, further studies should include also the organizations and perspectives of members from the rest of the Syrian Diaspora. The different Diaspora organizations, with different ideas, values and perspectives on the conflict should be regarded as a strength rather than a problem. Since the idea of democracy is to allow for different opinion, this should be also the case for Diasporas in general. This policy brief therefore suggests that further research should identify potentials for dialogue within the Diaspora rather than judging whether a Diaspora is a peace-maker or a peace-wrecker.



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