

THE LONG ROAD TO PEACE

WHY ENGAGING THE DIASPORA IS ESSENTIAL TO PEACEBUILDING IN SYRIA

SUMMARY

This paper describes the Syrian diaspora in the UK and outlines the potential for Syrians living in the UK to contribute to building peace in Syria. It is intended to help inform relief, development and peacebuilding policy and practice. The target audience for this paper is UK-based policymakers and humanitarian and development actors.

WHY WORK WITH THE DIASPORA?

Peacebuilding does not begin when a conflict ends. It is part of, and formed and shaped by, the response and actions of internal and external actors during a conflict and relief effort. Those who facilitate and deliver aid and development play an important role in building the foundations for peace. They do this through the ways in which they deliver aid, the nature of the support they offer and the networks they use to do so. Building a safer and more peaceful future for the people of Syria requires thinking about the structures of, and laying the foundations for, long-term peace even in the midst of emergency.

A critical actor that is often overlooked in this process is the Syrian diaspora. Already engaged in Syria and connected to a multiplicity of actors, with networks in hard-to-reach areas, the diaspora can offer an important bridge for connecting internal and external efforts that can contribute to peacebuilding. Nonetheless, there are challenges and risks involved in working with the diaspora. Diaspora communities are not homogenous entities. They comprise of a variety of groups and individuals with different and sometimes conflicting interests

and agendas, not all of them aligned with the interests of those seeking to build peace.

The UK is one of the largest donors to the Syrian crisis, with a commitment of over £600 million to the relief effort. However, to date, engagement has been with a limited range of traditional development partners. In order to maximise the reach and impact of its aid, it is important that the UK government and its development partners understand the role played by diaspora actors and act on this understanding to support diaspora efforts to bring about long-term peace and security in Syria.

WHO ARE THE BRITISH SYRIAN DIASPORA?

What do we mean by diaspora?

International Alert defines a diaspora as a body of people who, whilst living outside of their country of origin, maintain a connection to that country and to their wider community – be it financial, emotional, political or practical.

History

Syrians have a long history in the UK, arriving first in the 19th century to

work in the Lancashire mill trade.¹ More recent arrivals have been conflict-fuelled, including those who sought refuge following the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 by Hafez al-Assad. Intimidatory policies of the al-Assad security state since the time of Hafez al-Assad have meant that skilled professionals who disagreed with the regime were forced to seek refuge elsewhere.² Alongside conflict-generated diaspora members, Syrians have also migrated for economic and educational purposes. As such, a range of political opinion and affiliation exists within the Syrian community in the UK. This mirrors the diversity of perspectives and positions held within the Syrian population at large. Currently, the Syrian diaspora population in the UK is estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000, based mainly in London and Manchester.

The Syrian diaspora network overlaps with and is part of a wider network of Arabs and Muslims supporting humanitarian efforts in the region. Therefore, a sense of community and solidarity is not always formed alongside identification with the country. For example, Syrian Kurds have been able to draw on established Turkish-Kurdish networks within the UK. This blurs the lines of

¹ M. Seddon (2012). 'Arab communities in Manchester 1839–2012: A brief history', paper presented at *Manchester Men Series*, Manchester Museum, 28 January 2012. Available at: http://issuu.com/newobjectlessons/docs/arab_communities_in_manchester_1839_2012

² M. Qayyum (2011). 'Syrian diaspora: Cultivating a new public space and consciousness', Policy Brief No. 35, Middle East Institute. Available at <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/QayyumFIXED.pdf>

engagement beyond those who carry a distinctly Syrian identity to wider networks of support and identity.

Conflict lines

In parallel with dynamics in Syria itself, numerous conflict lines exist within the Syrian diaspora. These include conflict lines between regime and opposition sympathisers, between opposition groups who maintain channels of communication with the regime and those who do not, between Muslim Brotherhood supporters and non-violence advocates, and between Arab and Kurdish Syrians. The lines of conflict also relate to tensions and differences within communities that are often presented as monolithic, such as the Alawi, Kurdish or Sunni communities.

Diaspora actors have noted that the framing of the Syrian conflict – especially where a religious vernacular is mobilised – risks the narrative of the conflict being presented as sectarian. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria are seen as having pushed the revolution towards a militarised phase and stand accused of having contributed to a discourse of sectarianism. As a result, they are looked on with a degree of mistrust by those who have advocated non-violence and by minority groups.

For Syrian Kurds, diaspora space in the UK has allowed them to strongly voice their concerns about Arab chauvinism, which does not consider the Kurds to be properly Syrian:

“Before 2011 we had no real relationship with Arab Syrians. They have always been antagonistic towards us [Kurds] and our demand to be recognised as a people. The proof of this is that on the first anniversary of the current revolution, we attended a protest in London and took the opportunity to commemorate the anniversary of our 2004 uprising against the regime. We have suffered longer than anyone under this regime. We raised our [Kurdish] flag and the other Syrians attacked us for it. They don’t even recognise our suffering.”³

A further point of divergence is between opposition actors who

maintain channels of communication with the regime and those who do not. The decision to operate openly in regime-held territory leads others within the opposition movement to question the credibility of organisations that choose to do so. Similarly, the regime maintains a mistrust of organisations operating in non-regime-held areas. Suspicion of actors working from different political and socio-cultural perspectives has resulted in very little success in forging a unified approach by diaspora actors opposed to the regime. Attempts to do so have been unable to move beyond anything other than a ‘talking shop’ without being able to agree on basics.

Diaspora actors and indeed the wider opposition movement thus find themselves at an impasse:

“The spirit of initiatives is sort of dead. Sadly, we are now at a stage where populists and intellectuals have turned to what we can describe as a ‘lamenting’ discourse. Every initiative to break the deadlock we are in is looked at negatively – there’s nothing constructive. The longer this goes on, the more we begin to see the shared sense of belonging [to Syria] become fragmented. People become insular and develop a localised ‘my area’ mentality rather than thinking about the country as whole.”⁴

By focusing specifically on links with a territorial homeland, there is a risk of ignoring other equally significant aspects of identity, including gender, class, professional networks and religion. It is for this reason that a more nuanced perspective is required. The fluidity and complexity of diaspora actors and their engagement with events inside Syria need to be understood in order to identify opportunities for supporting and maximising positive engagement.

Civil society response networks

Much as civil society formations arising out of activist networks have been in a state of flux inside Syria since the uprising began, a similar process has occurred with Syrians

living in the UK. The early days of the revolution brought with them expressions of solidarity, usually in the form of protests outside the Syrian embassy in London or at rallies organised across the country. Forums and networks, hitherto inaccessible and unimaginable, were opened up to discuss the legitimacy of the Syrian regime and the direction in which the country should move forward. Advances in telecommunications eased access to information about events in Syria, which were shown in real time through the use of Skype and social media, particularly Facebook. This reduced distances between activists inside Syria and those who supported them abroad, keeping them abreast of developments.

As it became increasingly evident that a humanitarian crisis was unfolding the longer the uprising continued, attention switched to meeting the needs of the growing numbers of displaced and wounded people. Diaspora actors mobilised personal and professional networks to reach communities close to their hometowns. Syrians based in the UK have established relationships with local relief committees, local administrative councils and community-based initiatives to provide humanitarian relief, engage in development projects and build a parallel health infrastructure in areas where the al-Assad regime has withdrawn.

Due to limited capacity and problems of access, Syrian civil society networks based abroad have difficulty operating in regime-held areas. The security apparatus of the Syrian state makes such efforts challenging and they are often limited in scale. Efforts have been made to provide support to self-help initiatives in areas witnessing the arrival of large numbers of internally displaced people. For example, using professional and personal networks, Syria Relief has helped to support the establishment of child-friendly spaces in the city of Suweida.

In the other direction, civil society actors inside Syria have drawn on

³ International Alert interview with UK-based Syrian diaspora representative, June 2014.

⁴ Ibid.



A humanitarian bakery in Turkey transports bread to Syrians, 2013. Courtesy of IHH, Creative Commons

relationships with diaspora to build partnerships and alliances with civil society actors abroad. The diaspora is thus characterised by a rich social and cultural web of intersecting relations. In this context, the binary 'insider' and 'outsider' notions often used to describe diaspora relations with countries of origin become redundant.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKING WITH THE DIASPORA FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

The nature of diaspora engagement is characterised by a fluid and evolving network that does not sit firmly either inside or outside of the country, but which is part of the continuum of an emerging Syrian civil society. Diaspora groups and networks therefore offer multiple entry points and connections to support peacebuilding in Syria, as illustrated by the following advantages.

Diaspora groups have physical access to communities within Syria and therefore an understanding of on-the-ground realities

The diaspora has physical access to areas that conventional humanitarian and development actors can find hard to reach. It can also offer a different perspective on the dynamics and context on the ground as well as access

to information that comes directly from people living in Syria. The diaspora can therefore provide access to goods and services, reaching people in need of support who would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to reach. This can be useful for planning, understanding contextual nuances and identifying who else communities turn to for support.

The diaspora has mobilised personal and professional networks to reach communities inside Syria. For some, this is focused around their hometowns; others have linked into and support internal Syrian initiatives that have opened up and introduced them to different parts of the country. They not only provide a link to a single village or town, but are networked with local relief committees, administrative councils and community-based initiatives in

support of the provision of humanitarian relief and engagement in development.

Physical access also brings with it a level of understanding of the context and dynamics in a variety of places, which many traditional aid actors do not have. The diaspora can act as a bridge to the physical realities and discussions that are taking place on the ground, contributing to a relatively nuanced perspective of the conflict and of local needs.

The aid delivered through diaspora networks offers an opportunity to lay the foundations for a peaceful future in Syria

The way in which aid is delivered by diaspora groups lays the structures for a more peaceful future. Working together with the diaspora can offer connections to local civil society

Syria Relief initially built its contacts inside Syria through the professional and personal networks of its trustees across the Syrian diaspora and in their hometowns. It has since tapped into a wide-ranging youth volunteer network, drawing on the many young activists from different parts of Syria who were involved in protests during the first year of the revolution and recruiting them first as volunteers and then as staff. The recruitment of staff from different areas of Syria offers an opportunity to contest dominant conflict narratives around sectarianism. Over time and through necessity, a thick web of relationships has emerged across villages, towns and cities inside Syria.

Healthcare professionals who had already established the **Syrian British Medical Society (SBMS)** before the revolution in 2007 tapped into their professional and personal networks, forging relationships with local coordination committees (LCCs) to send much-needed medical aid and expertise into areas no longer under regime control. Through its professional networks, the SBMS also helped to found the Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organisations (UOSSM), a coalition of 13 different medical and relief organisations bringing together healthcare professionals from the US, the UK, Europe and the Gulf to help coordinate the provision of medical aid – alongside international NGOs – from the Turkish-Syrian border and to advocate for support.

networks, however embryonic, which ensures that the recipients of interventions are involved in shaping how those interventions look and their impact on communities. They offer a vehicle through which to generate discussions locally about the present and the future. Recognising and strengthening Syrian networks and relationships between people on the ground and external actors supports the development of a civil society that can drive change from within.

“You can’t isolate peacebuilding from other projects. Development projects create space for people to work on something considered neutral and of benefit to the community. There is a mutual interest here. So people who aren’t necessarily agreeing politically come together to work on a project which is in their interests.”⁵

Diaspora organisations can play an important role in creating a more nuanced understanding of the Syrian conflict in the UK among the public and policymakers

Sitting within Syria, along its borders and in the UK, the diaspora has a transnational nature that offers the opportunity to raise awareness of support and aid efforts both in Syria and in the UK. This can help to connect Syrians to information about humanitarian, development and political efforts, thereby building avenues for active engagement in shaping the response and future for Syria.

At the same time, the diaspora can play a critical role in keeping

the situation in Syria on the UK public and political agenda. It provides perspectives on the conflict and peacebuilding efforts that diverge from the narrow approach of mainstream media. Offering alternative stories can bring the experiences of Syrians to life and humanises a conflict that is too often discussed in the narrow lexicon of geopolitics.

Some Syrian organisations have also recognised the need to raise awareness among communities in the UK about the nature of the conflict in Syria. This has included speaking at mosques, schools and youth clubs, with the aim of countering attempts by violent extremist groups to recruit young jihadists to fight in Syria.⁶ A notable characteristic of British jihadists is that they often have a very limited understanding of the conflict in Syria and of the cause for which they are fighting.

Individuals within the diaspora are motivated by humanitarian and religious imperatives to support those in need

The UK Charity Commission has voiced concerns over the vulnerability of charities to exploitation by terrorist groups in Syria and the region.⁷ While such concerns may be valid, it is also important to understand the motivational drivers behind the decisions taken by non-professional Muslim humanitarian aid workers to deliver relief aid to Syrians in person. To be physically involved in the distribution of aid is considered

a more pious and meaningful act of worship than simply donating funds to a charitable cause. In fulfilling duties to others in need, the believer’s relationship with God is strengthened. This is a culturally specific understanding of what charitable work entails.

“It is not enough just to give blankets and food. There are other organisations that can do that on a scale we can’t – the UNHCR are doing this. When people like us deliver it ourselves – we visit and we see the people with our own eyes – we know that our help is reaching where it is supposed to and not getting diverted by any of the militias. What’s important is the uplift people get when they see their own people helping them. It’s not enough just to give material support – it’s moral support the people need from us.”⁸

This *human* aspect of aid delivery therefore has an important role to play in a sector that is generally understood to be the domain of highly professionalised international agencies.

LIMITATIONS OF WORKING WITH THE SYRIAN DIASPORA FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

While working with the diaspora presents opportunities, it is important to be aware of the limitations of such engagement as well.

The diaspora is a voice, not the voice
The Syrian diaspora constitutes a critical actor in the region and one that has an important role to play. It should be part of the discussions and decisions that shape the humanitarian and development response by the external community. However, it is important to remember that the diaspora is *a* voice and not *the* voice. Even within communities that are often presented as homogenous, there is no one position on the conflict or on what a peaceful Syrian society should look like.

⁵ International Alert phone interview with Syrian Non-Violence Movement representative, June 2014.

⁶ International Alert interview with Syrian diaspora organisation, June 2014.

⁷ See article: ‘Charity Commission: British charities investigated for terror risks’, *The Telegraph*, 1 November 2014. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11203569/Charity-Commission-British-charities-investigated-for-terror-links.html>

⁸ International Alert interview with Syrian businessperson, May 2014.

"We can't talk about a Sunni community in the UK as if it is one unified community. You have differences within it – some Sunnis are religious, others are secularists and don't like involving religion in what they do. You see this in the social gatherings organised by Syrians for fundraising. You have people who are uncomfortable at a religious gathering and others who are uncomfortable at events where women are not wearing the hijab or where there is alcohol."⁹

Any engagement must carefully consider what representation actually means – who diaspora groups are representative of and the limitations of this. It is important not to rely on individuals or single organisations as the 'voice' of the diaspora but to seek a range of opinions. Recognising that the diaspora, like any other actor, does not hold all the answers and is not always able to provide the access or information requested will help to situate this actor as part of a realistic jigsaw of response.

The Syrian diaspora is only loosely networked and lacks a platform from which to coordinate efforts or to engage policymakers

Civil society inside and outside of Syria is emerging and adapting. The reach of the Assad regime extended

into the diaspora, and it is only since the beginning of the uprisings in 2011 that the Syrian community in the UK has been able to articulate positions contrary to the regime. As in Syria and along its borders, Syrian civil society activity in the UK has mushroomed in the past three years, with events in Syria jolting exiled communities out of inertia. However, diaspora organisations themselves have identified the need for a more effective voice on issues relating to Syria and for better coordination of individual relief and development efforts to strengthen impact.

"Like in Syria, the wall of fear was broken. People started gathering, talking and discussing. It will take time as a community to start listening to one another – we're not used to it. We haven't really done that for 40 years. I mean really as a society we were dead and now we are alive."¹⁰

Syrian diaspora organisations are small in size and scope

Due to their size compared with the 'traditional' international relief and development agencies, diaspora organisations are often overlooked as development partners. Their financial and operational capacity, as well as limited professional experience in aid delivery, significantly restricts

what diaspora organisations can deliver and the type of role they can play. Thinking creatively about how to work with diaspora, beyond using them as intermediaries between local civil society and international aid agencies, is critical to harnessing the value of the work they do.

Those comprising the Syrian diaspora remain intricately connected with the conflict and raise their voices at considerable risk

Many individuals within the diaspora still have family or friends living in regime-held areas of Syria. For these people, the fear of reprisals from the regime is still present and they may avoid public events where the regime is openly opposed. Extra care needs to be taken when working with diaspora organisations to recognise this reality and to mitigate putting the organisation and those associated with it at undue risk.

"There's not much [in the way of initiatives] between Alawis and Sunnis. They [Alawis] are not very comfortable. You have to remember they are under immense pressure – not only from the regime but from family and extended family. If an event is organised, they don't want to be photographed. You don't want to put someone in an uncomfortable position like that."¹¹

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Diaspora actors are involved in a number of initiatives and connected to a range of people, networks and institutions. This presents an opportunity to build spaces for peacebuilding within the present nexus of humanitarian and development engagement. Making the most of this now, and identifying new ways of working with the diaspora alongside traditional relief, development and peacebuilding actors, will help to build a peaceful future for Syria.

The diaspora, for its part, can strengthen its own impact and engagement with policymakers and the wider development and peacebuilding sector by building its own platform from which to engage. International Alert is supporting the development of such a platform for UK-based Syrian organisations and individuals. It is hoped that this platform, to be launched in early 2015, will enable cooperation between Syrian diaspora organisations, provide opportunities for increasing the capacity of these organisations, and support greater coherence and strength of advocacy towards the UK government and others.

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⁹ International Alert interview with UK-based Syrian diaspora representative, June 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid, April 2014.

¹¹ Ibid.

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We work with local people around the world to help them build peace, and we advise governments, organisations and companies on how to support peace.

We focus on issues that influence peace, including governance, economics, gender relations, social development, climate change, and the role of businesses and international organisations in high-risk places.

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