

# **RESEARCHING INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT**

**Working Paper No. 14**

## **Supporting Internally Displaced People: Transnational Solidarity and the Syrian Diaspora**

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## **Abstract**

*The Syrian uprising in 2011 was a transformative event that triggered collective action by the Syrian diaspora to contribute to social and political transformations in the country. The escalation of the humanitarian crisis and outpouring of refugees led to further mobilization and collective solidarity efforts by the new Syrian diaspora, who worked together with old Syrian diaspora communities to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian population, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Syria and Syrian refugees in host countries around the world.*

*Through background research and selected case studies, this research highlights how the diverse Syrian diaspora has been a key leader and partner in the humanitarian response inside Syria. It shows that the diaspora's cohesiveness, drive, and commitment to the homeland has led to the creation of countless diaspora-led initiatives, NGOs, charities, associations, and foundations to provide humanitarian assistance in Syria, with different forms of social solidarity and transnational humanitarianism resulting on the ground from these initiatives. With its unique connection to affected populations and understanding of its home country, the paper shows how the diaspora has played a vital role in humanitarian relief and development for IDPs in Syria.*

## **Keywords**

Humanitarian; diaspora humanitarianism; transnational solidarity; protection; IDPs

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## 1. Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the diverse roles played by Syrian diaspora organisations and initiatives in relation to internal displacement. In the context of the Syrian diaspora humanitarianism and solidarity patterns, its primary aim is to shed light on the development of solidarity mechanisms between the affected populations of Syrians inside Syria and the Syrian diaspora in hosting countries. The diaspora entities studied encompass diaspora-led organizations and associations, whether formally or informally constituted, that integrate members of the diaspora, and which operate inside hard-to-reach zones in almost every Syrian province and in neighbouring and other countries of settlement.

## 2. Framing Research on the Syrian Diaspora

“Diaspora” is defined as a dispersed collective residing outside their country of origin who “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”.<sup>1</sup> Key concepts and research on diaspora communities have been developed by work such as the pioneering book on *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist.<sup>2</sup> Given the limited scholarship on transnational practices by diaspora communities in conflict and displacement settings, this book also provides an important analytical framework for examining diaspora and ‘transnational’ social spaces, fields and formations in these contexts. Work by Glick and colleagues on the role of the Peruvian diaspora in responding to the impact of the El Niño phenomenon in Peru during the 1990s points to the need to understand key groups within the diaspora and their impact in shaping such transnational practices.<sup>3</sup>

Against that backdrop, this paper assesses the different solidarity-based initiatives developed by the Syrian diaspora in response to the wave of internal displacement provoked by the Syrian crisis. However, it is important to remember that the Syrian diaspora was already substantial in size before the Syrian crisis broke in 2011. Some estimated the size of the Syrian diaspora at 20 million people worldwide, i.e. larger than the Syrian population inside Syria.<sup>4</sup> The Arab Reform Initiative, for instance, refers to hundreds of thousands of Syrian doctors working across the Gulf region in that era, alongside some 6,000 Syrian doctors in France, 20,000 in the USA, and more

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Sheffer (2003), *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Faist and Rainer Bauböck (2010), *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Schiller, Nina Glick, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1995), From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration. *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Zaki Mehchy and Ahmer Mahdi (2010), General Overview of Migration into, through and from Syria, CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2011/41, Technical Report, Migration Policy Centre.

than 60,000 in Germany.<sup>5</sup> The estimates by other scholars as to the scale of the Syrian diaspora population are more modest but nonetheless sizeable, e.g. about 4,180,444 individuals by 2007.<sup>6</sup> However, whatever the precise figures, the large size of the Syrian diaspora before the crisis helps to explain its high level of engagement and transnational solidarity after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, both by the old Syrian diaspora and by newly arrived Syrian refugees in Europe, Turkey and other hosting countries.

This research highlights the key facets of the Syrian diaspora's engagement with the waves of internal displacement in the context of the crisis in Syria. It is based on the author's experience both within and outside Syria, with community-based organizations and diaspora members and associations in Turkey, Lebanon and Europe. The methodology involved triangulation of secondary sources, including desk-based literature review of recent resources, examining cases of diaspora organisations from different locations, local organisations and conventional actors, as well as six formal and informal semi-structured interviews with diaspora organisations, local organisations, and humanitarian workers. Ultimately, this research draws more attention to the growing and developing role of diaspora communities, including both refugees and migrants, in connecting with problems of internal displacement in their homeland. It aims to contribute to the limited existing scholarship on diaspora humanitarianism and diaspora in protracted crisis and to raise awareness regarding *humanitarian* interventions by the diaspora in the conflict settings.

### **3. Diaspora Humanitarianism and Solidarity**

Since 2011, volunteerism among the Syrian diaspora has proliferated.<sup>7</sup> This has been particularly evident since the large-scale population displacement that took place during and after the Russian interventions in Syria in 2015. Increasingly, both old and new Syrian diaspora communities in the USA, the Arab region and Europe have mobilised voluntary efforts among their personal networks to deliver emergency humanitarian aid. Much of these diaspora efforts have become increasingly organised and professionalised.

As a result, a large number of Syrian diaspora-led organisations now exist and operate as first responders to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Syria. In providing various humanitarian assistance, remedial education, livelihoods, health, and many social services, these Syrian diaspora organizations have been vital in compensating for the absence of the government in many cities and areas in Syria.<sup>8</sup> Despite the security, political and logistical challenges involved

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<sup>5</sup> Bassma Kodmani (December 2018), *The Syrian Diaspora, Old and New*, Arab Reform Initiative.

<sup>6</sup> Jamal Barout (2008), *External Migration in Syria* (in Arabic, written in cooperation with the IOM office in Syria) (unpublished).

<sup>7</sup> Jomana Qaddour (2013), *Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria*. *The Washington Quarterly*.

<sup>8</sup> Zaidoun Al-Zoua'bi (February 2015), *Syrian Civil Society Organizations Reality and Challenges*, Citizens for Syria Organization.

in this work, they are promoting innovative models of humanitarianism based on solidarity efforts and close cooperation between the Syrian diaspora on the one hand and affected populations and local civil society actors across Syria on the other.<sup>9</sup>

In tandem, many Syria-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have made considerable efforts to connect with a broad range of community-based organizations in countries where the Syrian diaspora is located. They attempt to coordinate fundraising campaigns to respond to the continuous waves of forced displacement in Syria. In each host country, these efforts have allowed the Syrian diaspora members and other NGOs to fundraise, collect donations and relief supplies to fill shipping containers with humanitarian supplies for Syrian IDPs and refugees. The supplies include food, clothing, medicines, medical supplies, and equipment – and sometimes containers of ambulances and medical equipment for the hospitals in Syria, as well as donated educational supplies to Syrian schoolchildren living in IDP camps.

In Turkey, for example, there are now over 2,000 Syrian-led organizations, according to former UN Development Programme (UNDP) and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) officials in Gaziantep.<sup>10</sup> The majority of these organizations run projects in Turkey or do so inside Syria through cross-border humanitarian operational mechanisms, working together with local partners to provide relief items, shelter support and protection assistance to internally displaced persons and other vulnerable people in the camps in Northwest Syria. The diaspora presence is also significant elsewhere in Europe. In France, for example, the reported number of Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs has reached about 400 organizations and all of them are officially registered, according to several individuals consulted.<sup>11</sup>

Despite widespread fatigue and financial exhaustion among diaspora groups over the past 10 years, the continuing activism of these diaspora-led NGOs remains important. They retain a crucial role in running the cross-border humanitarian operations through Turkey and Iraq that support internally displaced persons and besieged people inside Syria. For instance, several France-based Syrian NGOs report that, financed by donations generated from the Syrian diaspora and French people, they continue to send aid containers to Syria on a monthly basis.<sup>12</sup> These donations range from cash to containers of clothes, medicines and medical aid donated by local French hospitals and charities, as well foodstuffs and winter assistance.

At the same time, by working with entities on the humanitarian frontlines in Syria, the diaspora organizations have the capacity to respond directly to community needs and priorities and

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<sup>9</sup> Billie Jeane Brownlee (2015), *The Revolution ‘from below’ and Its Misinterpretation ‘from Above’*. The Case of Syria’s Neglected Civil Society. *Syria Studies* 7 (1).

<sup>10</sup> Zoom Interview with Turkey-based Syrian humanitarian activist, 4 July 2021

<sup>11</sup> Zoom Interview with France-based Syrian Humanitarian Programme Manager affiliated to the Union of Syrian Charity Organizations in France (UOCEF), 15 July 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Zoom Interview with France-based Syrian Humanitarian Programme Manager affiliated to the Union of Syrian Charity Organizations in France (UOCEF), 16 July 2021.

identify what is required to support solutions for displaced populations. Most of these diaspora organizations also work with different actors across the political, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding spheres in different areas to develop appropriate and joined-up interventions for particular communities. At least four different dynamics can be discerned in the solidarity and humanitarian work carried out by the Syrian diaspora for the benefit of IDPs and other populations in Syria: (i) Syrian networks in exile; (ii) innovative diaspora solidarity and mobilization; (iii) diaspora-led life-saving service provision, including medical relief and health interventions; and (iv) advocacy and campaigning. We examine each in turn in the sections that follow.

#### 4. Syrian Networks in Exile

With the growing number of Syrian refugees in Europe and Turkey, the old Syrian diaspora and new Syrian migrant and refugee communities have worked together on different levels to leverage their connections and aid channels with IDP and other war-affected populations inside Syria. Across different host countries and regions, these groups and civil society organizations have come together to create and develop platforms and umbrella networks for coordination, fundraising, information-sharing and advocacy.

In Europe, Syrian organizations have established several platforms and networks that are oriented to addressing and responding to the growing numbers of IDPs in the Northwest of Syria, as well as for aiding Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and in Europe. In France, for instance, numerous Syrian NGOs and charities have established networks, including the *Collectif de Développement et Secours Syrien* (CODSSY) and the Union of Syrian Charity Organizations in France (UOCEF). In the UK, meanwhile, 22 Syrian NGOs in 2013 formed the Syrian Charities and Associations Network (SCAN) as an umbrella entity to facilitate communication between the actors on the ground in Syria and donors and policymakers outside the country. Similarly, across *diaspora* organizations in the USA, Turkey, and Germany, Syrian diaspora groups have organised themselves to varying degrees. However, the most active networks and platforms have been established by the old Syrian diaspora and established Syrian professionals, activists and businessmen.<sup>13</sup>

Other networks are formed as a coalition, such as the Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) that includes member organizations from inside Syria as well as from Turkey and across Europe.<sup>14</sup> As a voluntary body, it was formed in April 2014 by more than 15 member organizations to provide coordination among Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the diaspora and inside

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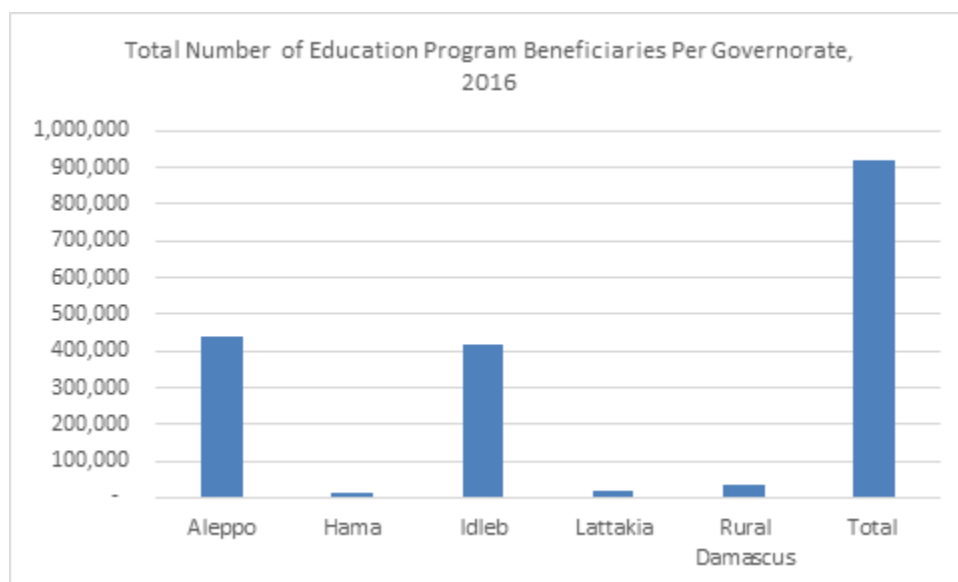
<sup>13</sup> Zoom interview with a London-based staff member of Syrian Charities and Associations Network (SCAN), August 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA), Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SyrianNGOAlliance/> (Accessed: 11 July 2021).

Syria, as well as social movements responding to the Syria crisis, and to facilitate representation of Syrian NGOs within the humanitarian community and in UN inter-agency mechanisms.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, this coalition works to support and coordinate the member organizations and their projects on the ground. For example, with respect to education projects, several SNA member NGOs work together on implementing a number of educational projects to provide education for children and youth among the affected populations. The core focus is on internally displaced people and involves supplying educational facilities, cash grants for education centres, rehabilitating damaged schools, life-skills training for youth, adolescents, and adults, and distributing kits and cash assistance to support non-formal and formal education. Figure 1 below illustrates the number of beneficiaries of education projects during 2016.

*Figure 1: Author Calculations based on SNA Dashboard 2016, Education Sector*



Importantly, with the growing humanitarian needs in Syria and the need to consolidate efforts and represent the voice of Syrian IDPs and refugees as unified entities became clear, all these networks and platforms have been able to build their networks inside Syria and support locally-led humanitarian organizations. In cooperation with other local aid organisations inside Syria, these networks operate as platforms with member and partner organisations working in the field in various sectors: health, child protection, education, women's empowerment, media and research, human rights and accountability, relief, and social services.

<sup>15</sup> WhatsApp interview with Turkey-based Syrian humanitarian worker and former UN OCHA and UNDP consultant, 14 August 2021.

A large number of these member organizations and networks are led by women and young Syrian activists and professionals, which has contributed to and developed the innovative nature of these organizations, their operational models, and their impact. Additionally, as a successful localization approach, these diaspora-led efforts and presence on the ground have contributed and promoted the localisation of humanitarian efforts and allowed donors and international actors to engage with the IDP populations and identify their needs.

## **5. Innovative Diaspora Solidarity and Mobilization**

One of the most prominent and active Syrian diaspora-led organizations is the Molham Volunteering Team (MVT), that founded in 2012 by a group of dedicated young Syrian activists and students who worked together to respond to the needs of Syrian IDPs and affected populations in the besieged areas of Syria, as well as for refugees in neighbouring countries, namely Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. In response to the escalation of the Syrian conflict and mass displacement since 2012, their core activities have been developed to cover more regions, areas, and sectoral levels. As a Syrian-led crowdfunding and advocacy platform, they have launched hundreds of emergency campaigns to provide humanitarian relief and address the needs of civilians in distressed areas. To date, the MVT team has been able to collect more than \$ 34,000,000, which has been sent and donated by Syrians and other nationalities through MVT platforms and social media channels.<sup>16</sup>

As one of the patterns of transnational solidarity of the Syrian diaspora, MVT is highly innovative in terms of its campaigning and outreach strategies. They have developed a solid institutional framework of crowdfunding for their humanitarian work that has led to the greater mobilization efforts to help Syrian IDPs and refugees and to alleviate their pain. Using every resource and diverse innovative channels of crowdfunding and donations, MVT expanded and assumed a larger role at the local levels and areas of humanitarian aid. The Team now includes 180 Syrian volunteers and staff members from different countries, including Turkey, Germany, and France, along with branches in Jordan, Sweden, and Canada, who work together with Syria-based teams, day and night, to ensure that donations and aid are delivered to Syrians in need.<sup>17</sup>

Considering the massive displacement waves caused by the deadly sieges and fierce military campaigns in different parts of Syria, the MVT is also one of the few regional innovative humanitarian organizations in the Arab region that able to raise funds for Syria-specific humanitarian campaigns, educational sponsorships for students and children, psychological and financial support for orphans in general and displaced orphans in particular, and medical relief

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<sup>16</sup> Molham Volunteering Team (2021), Molham Volunteering Team Transparency File (2021), Available at: <https://molhamteam.com/en/transparency> (Accessed: 11 July 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Skype interview with a Sweden-based member of the Molham Volunteering Team and member of Syrian Women Association, 30 July 2021.



for Syrian IDPs and refugees. According to the team,<sup>18</sup> the donations have covered and funded many humanitarian and relief campaigns and supported more than five million Syrians, including the full sponsorship of 12346 medical cases, 3491 sponsorships of orphans and vulnerable cases, and more than 650 scholarships for Syrian students in the neighbouring countries.<sup>19</sup>

As the humanitarian crisis reached unprecedented levels and the numbers of displaced Syrians rose rapidly within Syria from 2018, the MVT extended their fundraising campaigns to focuses not only on case-based campaigns and immediate aid but also long-term projects for those living in IDP camps and informal settlements in the West of Syria. For instance, on the health front, over the last few years, MVT have established several medical points and clinical facilities at different locations and camps inside Syria to serve internally displaced communities, including offering treatment, basic check-ups and consultations and providing women and the elderly with basic health services. Similarly, on education, the MVT has established and funded many make-shift schools inside IDP camps and informal settlements to provide remedial education opportunities for children, and primary education for boys and girls up to the 6th grade. Another focus of the MVT is building and rehabilitation of schools and other facilities for displaced people inside camps and conflict-affected zones in Syria, as well as in Lebanon and Turkey.

As fighting in Syria forced more people to flee and the alarming level of shelter needs among displaced communities escalated, this tragic situation stimulated MVT team and volunteers in 2018 to start new fundraising for Molham Villages in the relatively safe countryside of Aleppo and Idleb near the Turkish-Syrian borders. The project is aimed at providing decent housing for the most vulnerable displaced Syrian families and those living in the makeshift camps with no protection from winter storms, and severe weather conditions, and as a permanent solution for the displacement catastrophe that has been ongoing for 9 years. Additionally, right after the massive wave of displacement from Aleppo, Rural Idleb and Rural Damascus provinces between 2018 and 2019, the motivation for this project was raised again by MVT and Syrian humanitarians through the questions of why not build them houses instead of leaving them in camps inside Syria? Over a million people are currently displaced within the Northwest of Syria, why not implement permanent solutions?

After years of hard work, indeed, and after enough funds were raised to cover the costs of the first building and by applying the Islamic charitable endowment approach (Waqf), MVT fundraising campaigns for the “Molham Endowment Village” encouraged thousands of individual donations for the Molham Village project. By the end of January 2020, MVT initiated the construction process of the first residential building, each building has 18 apartments.<sup>20</sup> Until

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<sup>18</sup> Skype Interview with Sweden-based Syrian activist and MVT team member, 10 August 2021

<sup>19</sup> Molham Volunteering Team (2021), Molham Volunteering Team Transparency File (2021), Available at: <https://molhamteam.com/en/transparency> (Accessed: 11 July 2021)

<sup>20</sup> Molham Volunteering Team (2020), Molham Village Charitable Endowment (Waqf) (April 2020), Retrieved at: <https://molhamteam.com/en/campaigns/204> (Accessed: 11 July 2021)

this date, with the ongoing construction of these villages and the generous inflow donations of hundreds of Syrian diaspora communities, according to the MVT team, the project relocated more than 500 internally displaced families from the IDPs camps in the Northwest of Syria between 2020 and 2021. Here, it is worth mentioning that, up to the present time, the project is only funded by Syrian diaspora donations, as it aims to sustain and promote solidarity with the affected and displaced families inside Syria.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Diaspora-led Medical Relief and Health Interventions

Syrian diaspora-led medical and health efforts are one of the most remarkable of the diaspora interventions. Across the ten years of the Syrian crisis, they have made an unprecedented contribution, being very agile and able to come up with innovative ways to meet the growing needs of affected populations in different displacement and refugee contexts. With the increasingly limited access to life-saving healthcare following the brutal repression of protests by the Syrian Government (Assad Regime) in 2011, diaspora groups have been able to shift quickly to serve the people in the health arena, with several Syrian medical-based organizations established by the diaspora, mainly in Turkey, Europe, and USA.

Three organizations have been the most active. The first is the Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA) that was established at the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 during the dramatic increase in the number of injuries. As a medical organization, it was instituted by a group of expatriate Syrian doctors, physicians, and health professionals in various countries around the world.<sup>22</sup> The second is the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), that Founded in 2012 in France. It represents a coalition of Syrian humanitarian and medical organizations in the UK, Turkey, Switzerland, and the Americas, who jointly work together to provide health support and medical care to victims of war in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

The third is the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), which was founded in the 90s in the USA as a professional body to provide networking, educational and professional support to medical Syrian professionals. After the outbreak of the Syria Crisis in 2011, SAMS shifted its efforts to be one of the frontline providers of medical relief in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. It focuses on providing affected people, refugees, and displaced populations essential services and access to a range of medical care services, including primary care clinics, birth and new-born care facilities, inside the camps and through their partners in the hosting areas and countries.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Molham Volunteering Team (2019), Providing Housing - Molham Village (May 2019), Retrieved at: <https://molhamteam.com/en/campaigns/98> (Accessed: 11 July 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Syrian Expatriate Medical Association, Available at: <https://www.sema-sy.org/en/#> (Accessed: 11 July 2021)

<sup>23</sup> Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), Available at: <https://www.uossm.org> (Accessed: 11 July 2021)

<sup>24</sup> Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), Available at: <https://www.sams-usa.net/> (Accessed: 11 July 2021)

Here it is important to highlight that the role of those organizations has been critical in terms of acting fast to save people's lives in conflict zones and saving the lives of millions of Syrian displaced and besieged populations inside Syria, and the refugees in the receiving areas. With the growing needs, hostilities and bloody tragedies, the Syrian diaspora has been at the heart of these humanitarian crises and responsive to these needs and supporting the Syrian affected populations.<sup>25</sup> To illustrate, according to local medical sources, between 30 April 2019 and 29 February 2020, more than 53 medical points, and hospitals and 95 schools were struck in attacks by the Syrian government and Russian forces. The same also has been reported by the Syrian Archive, which documented about 412 separate attacks against a total of 270 medical facilities between 2011 and 2020 - that were intentionally attacked and targeted either by the Syrian government or their allies.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the abilities of these diaspora groups in terms of resources mobilization, appeals, advocacy, and access to networks, their key success is their ability to work on the ground in Syria's hardest-hit areas. In other words, due to the tragedy of the Syrian crisis, especially in the areas controlled by rebels and opposition forces, the role that has been played by these medically oriented/specialized Syrian diasporas have been crucial. As the Syrian crisis has led to the catastrophic destruction of the country's health care infrastructure, for instance, the Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA) has been one of the most prominent supporters that address the growing gaps in healthcare provisions. On the ground in the Northwest of Syria, they are running several fields and specialized hospitals that serve displaced people with various types of secondary health care services, as well as supporting trauma and surgery hospitals, and offering secondary health care services for IDPs and affected populations in the camps and shelters.

With the critical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to Syrian IDPs, diaspora-led health and medical efforts have also been taking different roles. As IDPs faced additional challenges to access hospitals and much needed life-saving care, all of the aforementioned organizations have been working on projects to minimize the impact of the pandemic. Particularly in the displacement camps and slums of northwest Syria, in response to the potentially catastrophic COVID-19 situation, organizations like UOSSM (USA) and USSOM (Canada) have worked in cooperation with WHO and key humanitarian actors to directly contribute to the joint efforts of the COVID-19 Innovative Idlib Response. One of the unique aspects of this initiative is the proactive measures taken by implementing an integrated model that emphasizes priority needs, including the delivery of medical education, training, and

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<sup>25</sup> Syrian Archive (October 2018), Russian Airstrikes Database: Documentation of alleged Russian airstrikes targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, Retrieved at: <https://syrianarchive.org/en/datasets/russian-airstrikes> (Accessed: 15 July 2021)

<sup>26</sup> Syrian Archive (March 2021), Targeting Health: Attacks Against Medical Facilities in Syria, Retrieved at: <https://medical.syrianarchive.org/> (Accessed: 15 July 2021)

financial support for physicians and other healthcare workers. Other projects help by providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to healthcare workers, supporting the provision of hygiene kits to healthcare workers, the establishment of isolation centres for patients at different healthcare centres and points in northwest Syria.<sup>27</sup>

## 7. Advocacy and Campaigning

Building on this range of initiatives by diaspora organizations, Syrian diaspora-led organizations have also been very active in the area of advocacy and campaigns, especially in relation to women empowerment, youth empowerment, leadership and human rights and accountability. In light of the massive displacement waves in Northwest Syria during the last few years, one of the most prominent campaigns to have started in 2020 is Voices for Syrians. This consists of gathering of Syrian civil society actors who are active across the political, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding spheres to protect and improve the quality of life of displaced Syrians inside Syria and refugees outside Syria. Its key aims are to provide a platform for cooperation, consultation, and coordination on issues of common concern about the Syrian displacement crisis in Syria.

Moreover, amid the increasing pressure in Lebanon, Turkey, and Denmark on Syrian refugees to return, many Syrian organizations in Europe and Turkey work on resisting and countering these recent campaigns and advocating for a safe return for Syrians and against unsafe returns to Syria. Organizations like Women Now for Development, Dawlaty, and Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD) have published several reports about the current unsafe conditions for return in Syria, highlighting the conditions for a safe and dignified return of refugees to their areas of origin, by also screening films and interviews about the displaced people, women and vulnerable groups inside, with infographics and posters about the torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary and unlawful detention which forced many Syrians to flee Syria, seek asylum and be refugees.<sup>28</sup>

The Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) has also been very active in publishing and documenting the unlawful siege of Eastern Ghouta and attacks on civilians that was laid by Syrian Government forces in April 2013. Particularly in 2018, following the Syrian government and Russian offensive and bombardments against the population of Eastern Ghouta, SNA member organizations worked on several campaigns to respond to the emergency needs of the forcibly evacuated Syrians from eastern Ghouta to North Syria. During this period, the team developed a live tracking report to show lifetime of the 90,000 forcibly evacuated Syrians from eastern Ghouta to Idleb according to their date of arrival, first destination, and gender, as a tool to show

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<sup>27</sup> Skype interview with France-based Syria USSOM Medical Team member and founding team, 20 August 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD) (2020), We Are Syria, Retrieved at: [https://syacd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SACD\\_WE\\_ARE\\_SYRIA\\_EN.pdf](https://syacd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SACD_WE_ARE_SYRIA_EN.pdf).

the ongoing displacement of people, their vulnerabilities, and the Syrian humanitarian crisis escalation.

## **8. Conclusions**

As partners in responding to the impact of the crisis in Syria, the Syrian diaspora's unique connection with, and understanding of, their home country gives this diaspora a vital role in undertaking humanitarian relief and development efforts with IDPs and other affected communities inside Syria. Moreover, beyond the merely humanitarian components of this response, these diaspora organizations and their local partners have also been developing crucial bottom-up approaches to support the resilience of IDPs, as well as wider peacebuilding and community cohesion, by contributing to the development of a new Syrian civil society that engages affected communities, local actors, and community representatives.

On the advocacy front, the Syrian diaspora has been showing increasingly higher levels of organization and mobilization. This has helped to promote their collective contributions, solidarity and social cohesion, and their ability to achieve impacts inside Syria as bridges and mediators between international organisations and IDPs and other conflict-affected populations in Syria. Despite funding limitations and challenges, the continuity of diaspora engagement and support to IDPs and other affected populations in Syria is evidence of the promising role that, as social and development actors, the diaspora can play in the peaceful future of Syria. Researchers and policymakers interested in the response to internal displacement in Syria should carefully consider how the different modalities of interventions by diaspora communities have contributed to humanitarian operations, mediation, and the stabilisation of conflict-affected areas.

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