

PEACE AND SECURITY

# STRATEGIES FOR EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT WITH SYRIAN DIASPORA CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

by **Erwin van Veen** and **Beatrice Noun**  
September 2021



The 'battle' for the political future of Syria is only beginning. Syrian diaspora CSOs can play a significant role in establishing conflict histories, governance capabilities and ideational narratives to the Assad regime.



The increasing relevance of Western countries as operating bases offers especially European Union-based actors an opportunity to build a strong partnership with Syrian diaspora CSOs in the long term pursuit of a 'meaningful political transition'.



Realizing this potential requires a stark strategic shift in supporting Syrian CSOs from short term, project based and output focused subcontracting to long term, program oriented and capability focused partnership.



# Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>ON DIASPORAS AND THE EVOLUTION OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY</b>	<b>3</b>
	The evolution of Syrian (diaspora) civil society after 2011 .....	3
<b>3.</b>	<b>CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF SYRIA</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SYRIAN DIASPORA</b>	<b>8</b>
1	Influencing EU policies and initiatives on Syria.....	8
2	Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries .....	9
3	Curating a 'memory for the future' .....	9
4	Support for Syrian CSOs in Syria on less risky political issues .....	10
5	Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future ..	10
6	Creating synergies between strategic roles and objectives .....	10
<b>5.</b>	<b>BARRIERS TO STRATEGIC EFFORTS BY SYRIAN DIASPORA CSOS</b>	<b>11</b>
1	Limited strategic focus .....	11
2	Short-term funding .....	11
3	Financial account and flow difficulties .....	12
4	Unclear / underdeveloped connectivity with Syria .....	12
5	Low levels of connectivity among Syria diaspora CSOs .....	12
6	Bureaucratic requirements not reflective of conflict realities .....	12
7	Capacity building tends to be 'insincere' .....	13
<b>6.</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>16</b>

## 1

# INTRODUCTION

During much of the Syrian conflict, civil society organisations have multiplied and grown after years of struggling in the barren soil of the Assad regime.<sup>1</sup> Such organisations facilitated early civic resistance, created a blossoming media landscape that narrated the war as well as the country's deprivations, and provided essential services. Today, the space for civil society activity across Syria is being severely reduced once more despite variations in conditions between the northwest, northeast and Assad-held areas. As a result, Syrian diaspora civil society organisations (CSOs) are growing in importance. In fact, the reduction of civil space in Syria itself is putting much of the challenge of maintaining the civic spirit of the revolution against Assad, as well as the pursuit of peaceful resistance, on the shoulders of these organisations.

However, Syrian diaspora CSOs struggle in the face of contextual factors (such as limited room for CSO action due to the state of the conflict), critical dependencies (such as diminishing host-country hospitality, the short-term nature of donor funding and 'chilling effects' from sanctions), internal constraints (such as a lack of strategy, limits to professionalism and hard-to-maintain networks), and a measure of emotional/professional fatigue (cf. Diker and Ragab 2019).<sup>2</sup> In brief, the role of Syrian diaspora CSOs is becoming more important as their ability to fulfil it declines.

It is in this context that the report examines what purpose support from EU-based actors<sup>3</sup> for Syrian diaspora CSOs active in the area of governance can serve and how such support can be improved. It examines this question because the 'battle' for the political future of Syria remains in full swing, even though the military battle for Syria has been largely lost by revolutionary forces. Diaspora CSOs can play a significant role in establishing ideational, social and conflict narratives, developing civic capa-

bilities and mindsets, and supporting limited governance alternatives to the Assad regime, but only if they are strategically supported and collaboratively organised.

The report focuses on diaspora CSOs because of the constrained scope for CSO activity inside Syria beyond the humanitarian sphere and because of limited access to regime-held Syria. Specifically, the brief focuses on diaspora CSOs active in the area of governance – here, human rights, democratisation, media, women's rights and accountability – because it is in this realm that crucial matters of collective and individual rights, freedoms and duties acquire meaning. In terms of its methodology, the report is based on a review of existing research into the evolution and role of the Syrian diaspora (focusing on CSOs) and interviews with Syrian diaspora CSO representatives and European diplomats, as well as a workshop.<sup>4</sup>

To develop meaningful proposals for the engagement of EU-based actors with Syrian diaspora CSOs, Section 2 outlines general factors that influence the interaction between a diaspora and its home country, applies these to Syria, and briefly surveys the evolution of Syrian civil society since 2011 with the aim of distilling broad parameters for external engagement. Section 3 examines the space for civil society activity in different parts of Syria (Assad-held, northeast and northwest) with a view to establishing what CSOs – both inside Syria and in the diaspora – might accomplish. Section 4 outlines a number of strategic objectives for European engagement with Syrian diaspora CSOs. Next, Section 5 discusses barriers that must be overcome to ensure Syrian diaspora CSOs can operate more strategically. Finally, Section 6 outlines different European engagement strategies with Syrian diaspora CSOs that can achieve (some of) the indicated objectives in a manner that is cognisant of broader engagement parameters and barriers.

<sup>1</sup> By 'civil society', the report refers to groups of citizens that organise independently of state authority or structures on the basis of a shared interest that they seek to realise via collective action. For a more grassroots definition of the term that drops the organisational requirement and focuses on civil society as a non-state resistance method against oppressive statehood, see Abu-Assab (2020). For an in-depth exploration of the historical context of civil society organisations in Syria, see Kawakibi (2013).

<sup>2</sup> A great number of interviewees expressed these aspects in slightly different constellations.

<sup>3</sup> By 'EU-based actors', the report refers to all governmental entities, organisations and individuals that support Syrian diaspora CSOs active in the area of governance.

<sup>4</sup> The report is based on a short review of the existing literature on the development of Syrian (diaspora) CSOs since 2011; 17 interviews with representatives of Syrian diaspora CSOs active in the areas of human rights, democratisation, media, women's rights and accountability; five interviews with diplomatic representatives of the Dutch, German and French foreign ministries, as well as the European Union; accounts of two side events at the EU-hosted Brussels-V conference; and a validation workshop. The interviews with Syrian diaspora CSO representatives constitute a roughly representative sample of a long-list of more than 80 organisations based on the different governance areas indicated and a focus on larger organisations.

## 2

## ON DIASPORAS AND THE EVOLUTION OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

A substantial literature exists on the role(s) that diaspora communities, diaspora CSOs and individuals in the diaspora can play in the political and socioeconomic development of their home countries. Examples of such communities in the Middle East include the Kurdish, Iranian, Palestinian, Lebanese and Jewish diaspora that evolved at least in part in function of respectively: anti-Kurdish policies across the region; the 1979 Iranian revolution; the Israeli occupation of parts of Palestine, protracted political crises in Lebanon; and various periods of imperial rule over the area of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Generally speaking, diaspora communities originate in the occurrence of negative developments in home countries that produce sufficiently high levels of violence, social tension or economic crisis to stimulate emigration and/or flight. Such developments can be specific events (such as the 1948 war for independence in Israel/Palestine or the 1979 Iranian revolution), as well as longer-term trends (such as Lebanon's protracted political-economic crisis since 1990).

Insofar as it concerns interaction dynamics between diaspora communities and home-country political orders and society in (post) conflict settings, these vary case by case and research on the variation is limited. Nevertheless, a few general factors can be distinguished that influence the frequency, intensity and quality of engagement between diaspora communities and home country governments, as well as societies.

These include: a) the extent to which diaspora engagement is welcomed in home countries (in the official, institutional and social senses); b) the extent of political and socio-religious divisions within the diaspora; c) the level of transnational repression to which the diaspora is exposed; d) geopolitical agendas that view diaspora organisations as useful allies (or not); and e) windows of opportunity for more constructive engagement that open or close (cf. Sarsar et al. 2019: 52–75; Moss 2020: 1669–1694; Koinova 2018:

1289–1308; Voller 2020).<sup>5</sup> Table 1 below contextualises these factors for the Syrian diaspora in relation to the Assad-held areas of Syria.

Table 1 suggests that the frequency and intensity of Syrian diaspora engagement in their home country will remain limited in the short to medium term while the quality of such engagement is likely to remain largely adversarial, at least in relation to the Assad regime (Gharibah 2020; ECFR 2020). The actual space for CSO activity across different parts of Syria is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

### THE EVOLUTION OF SYRIAN (DIASPORA) CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER 2011

The evolution of Syrian (diaspora) CSOs since 2011 has been an intense steeplechase across massive parallel internal and external challenges. Before the revolution, the space for CSO activity in Assad's Syria was limited to the pursuit of relatively innocuous topics or secretive undercover work in a very restrictive legal environment and a highly supervised political one due to the authoritarian nature of the Assad regime and the view of Ba'athist ideology on the organisation of society. As a result, most 'CSOs' were regime-linked, charitable (e.g. religious) or informal while an independent sphere for collective civic action beyond the authority or control of the state barely existed (Khalaf et al. 2014; Collins undated).

Starting from such a low base makes it unsurprising that the CSOs that emerged in Syria after 2011 faced a number of internal challenges. These ranged from an absence of equipment, expertise, funding, constituencies and topical focus, an unfamiliarity with inter-CSO collaboration, and a lack of professionalism and organisational development (Khalaf et al. 2014; Collins undated). Moreover, these challenges had to be addressed in the pressure cooker of escalating violent conflict and against the backdrop of Syria's pre-conflict social structures that were, at least in part, as suggested by a number of interviewees, relatively patriarchic, (religiously) con-

<sup>5</sup> Moss also identifies battlefield-related factors that influence diaspora engagement with the home country (access to frontlines and needs of the rebellion). However, these no longer seem relevant here given the state of the Syrian conflict and the nature of the remaining fighting parties. Note that a comprehensive review of literature on the role of diaspora communities in (post-) conflict societies has not been conducted for this report.

Table 1  
**Selected factors influencing interaction dynamics between a diaspora and the home country government, applied to Syria**

Factor	Syria	Implication(s)	Notes
(1) Extent of diaspora welcome in home country (govn't ideology)	Low	Individual and collective diaspora engagement in Syria remains high risk due to level of regime social control.	'Syria has become a stronger and more homogeneous society' (Bas-har al-Assad's <a href="#">view</a> on flight and refugees)
(2) Extent of diaspora welcome in home country (citizens)	Unknown	Either way, financial aid and support via diaspora remains essential to survival for many.	There are no reliable data on this issue, but this is likely to vary by area
(3) Extent of diaspora welcome in home country (govn't policy)	Low (there are no tailored policies or institutions in place)	Individual diaspora returnees have to fend for themselves; organisational diaspora engagement is not encouraged	Loyalty to the regime on an individual basis remains the overriding criterion for any kind of government support
(4) Level of divisions within the diaspora	Medium (key divisions: a) diaspora before/after 2011, b) revolutionary divisions and c) different opposition platforms)	Diaspora elements and CSOs closer to regime are likely to have better access to Syria  Diaspora divisions make inter-CSO collaboration more difficult	No diaspora is a monolithic whole and the Syrian diaspora is no exception This issue is in need of more analysis (Kodmani 2018) *
(5) Level of transnational repression of diaspora	Medium (no targeted assassinations, but plenty of intimidation and harassment)	Fear is widespread in the Syrian diaspora due to regime intimidation of activists whose family stayed behind in Syria, regime lobbying, pressure from Syrian embassies, and informants among the diaspora. It risks leading to self-censorship.	Intimidation may take the form of more physical threats in the future if the regime uses e.g. Hezbollah or Iranian intelligence networks
(6) Alignment with key geopolitical agendas	High for US, UK & EU (but these agendas are not actively pursued) High also for Turkey (but this agenda has shifted from anti-Assad to anti-Democratic Union Party – PYD)	with Syrian diaspora CSOs is a possibility (including financial)  US and UK fears of Islamist extremism limit support for diaspora CSOs due to fear of seepage and/or downstream relationships  Turkey solidifies a new division in Syria by holding on to its areas in the north and harnessing CSOs to its agenda	Ideational support in US, UK or EU has so far not triggered long-term strategic engagement with Syrian diaspora CSOs  Turkey pursues its own agenda which is no longer centred on removal of the Assad-regime
(7) Windows of opportunity for more constructive engagement	Low (there are no signs of a negotiated solution to the conflict being possible)	No one expects the Constitutional Committee negotiations or sanctions to produce regime concessions	The Presidential elections in Syria indicate the road ahead, which is one of regime re-entrenchment

\* A number of interviewees also referred to the existence of divisions within the Syrian diaspora.

servative, gendered, sectarian and/or tribal (Seurat 2012; Hadidi et al. 2018; Kawakibi and Sawah 2013).<sup>6</sup>

As well as a rapid emergence of CSOs inside Syria, the number of Syrian *diaspora* CSOs increased substantially after the

first few years of conflict. This has largely been the result of the decreasing territorial and ideational possibilities for working within Syria, which were, in turn, a consequence of the alternation of successful extremist and regime offensives. Inevitably, a number of the limitations characterising the emergent CSO landscape inside Syria were replicated in the diaspora CSO landscape – such as engaging in limited collaboration with other CSOs and having an overly strong

6 The substantial popular support for national and transnational Islamist groups during the uprising against Assad is another dimension to consider.

operational focus (Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2019: 1930–1949).<sup>7</sup>

Such issues notwithstanding, the proliferation, diversity and activism of CSOs inside and outside Syria has been nothing short of remarkable if one bears in mind the long authoritarian and conflict contexts from which they emerged. The long shadow of these contexts also indicates that organisational development and professionalisation of Syrian CSOs remains essential for their further growth and future relevance, but that their capacity to engage in such trajectories is modest. Both issues are discussed below.

Another matter that should be noted in terms of the evolution of the Syrian diaspora, which also happens to be in need of further research, is that those Syrian diaspora CSOs that have evolved over the past few years from a European or US base might espouse values and objectives that do not necessarily fully resonate across parts of Syria itself given the country's war-torn, divided and probably more conservative social outlook. Such social tension is healthy in peaceful societies but creates risks of further social polarisation if Western donors push diaspora CSOs to pursue the values underpinning their own agendas. The complication here is that the relevance of Europe and the US as operating bases for Syrian diaspora CSOs will increase over the next few years due to the fact that the available space for Syrian diaspora CSO activity in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq is decreasing (Diker and Ragab 2019). Ultimately, Syrians themselves will be the best judges of what kind of civil society work in both ideational and practical terms might be possible both outside and inside Syria – provided that good links and strong dialogue are maintained between diaspora CSOs and CSOs inside the country.

Finally, the present state of the conflict – characterised as it is by the regime holding the upper hand in the military sense and its re-entrenchment of social, economic and political control – makes it clear that the further evolution of Syrian (diaspora) CSOs will be a steeplechase of the marathon variety. As a result, any external engagement with Syrian (diaspora) CSOs for the sake of developing and espousing civic values that mitigate against autocracy will have to be organised for the long term.

On balance, analysis of the recent evolution of Syrian (diaspora) CSOs in a context of enduring conflict and polarisation suggests four broad starting points for organising external support that can help Syrian (diaspora) CSOs play a more strategic role in stimulating positive socio-political developments among Syrian communities abroad and at home:

- The reliable provision of external (donor) support will be essential for the further evolution of Syrian (diaspora)

CSOs (diplomatic, financial and capacity) until more diversified funding models can be developed (e.g. from within the diaspora);

- Such external (donor) support should simultaneously enable organisational improvement and professionalisation of Syrian (diaspora) CSOs (i.e. internal results) and pursue the realisation of 'governance gains' (i.e. external results);
- Such external (donor) support should take into account the various ideational gaps that exist within the Syrian diaspora, between diaspora CSOs and CSOs inside Syria, and between funders and recipients. The key is to be cognisant of the possibility of such gaps existing and to include feedback loops in partnerships, programmes and/or projects for identifying and navigating them;
- Such external (donor) support must be organised for the long term to be effective, that is to say along a generational timeframe. This is because rebuilding social trust and communal networks after the vast destruction of the conflict will be a slow process fraught with risk, reverses and hesitation.

<sup>7</sup> An interesting example is the fragmentation of transitional justice efforts by Syrian diaspora CSOs due to horizontal coordination difficulties, declining perceptions of autonomy and legitimacy in the eyes of Syrians resident in Syria, and significant financial dependencies on donors ('patronage relations').

## 3

## CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF SYRIA

The great majority of interviewees<sup>8</sup> shared the view that there is currently little to no space for CSO engagement on governance issues in regime-held areas.<sup>9</sup> Hemmed in between legislative and regulatory constraints, ever present intelligence organisations and bureaucratic hurdles, the CSOs that operate in regime-held Syria are small networks of individuals – around two dozen activists or so per network at a time (cf. Khalaf 2014)<sup>10</sup> – without legal status that operate on a slack wire between temporary sufferance<sup>11</sup> and arrest with dire personal consequences. While space for CSO activity opened up between 2011 and 2016 due to the general weakening of the regime and its focus on warfighting, it was gradually closed down after 2017 when the regime started re-establishing itself after the Russian intervention of 2015 and the battle for Aleppo in 2016. The exceptions to this situation confirm its true nature, i.e. CSOs directly linked to the regime can operate freely and CSOs active in the humanitarian field are also tolerated as long as the regime maintains sufficient control over their operations (cf. Gharibah 2020; Van Veen et al. 2021).

Very few interviewees saw any meaningful prospects for more inclusive and rights-based politics in Syria over the next five years. Potential gamechangers, like progress in the Constitutional Committee negotiations, the lifting of sanctions or a Russian-US negotiated ‘deal’ to initiate some form of reconstruction in exchange for modest political change – were not considered to be on the cards any time soon. In fact, a great majority of the interviewees expects the already mini-

mal space for CSO operations inside regime-held areas to deteriorate further.

A few interviewees suggested that one way of bringing about greater openness would be for an actor such as the EU to propose a large-scale programme of economic support (focused on recovery and reconstruction) that would be conditioned upon, inter alia, greater space for CSO activity in Syria. But the EU’s current stance of ‘no reconstruction without political transition’ makes it unlikely that such a proposal will be made (cf. Borrell 2021). Yet it is worth bearing in mind that the regime’s growing need for cash and its poor economic situation offers a potential future entry point for EU engagement as long as the inevitable conditionalities that would come with such engagement do not undermine the regime’s powerbase.

Another point of note is that a few interviewees differentiated between regime-held areas in terms of their permissiveness towards CSO operations. Permissiveness was viewed as lowest in parts of Syria the regime never lost (Latakia, Damascus), slightly higher in parts retaken from opposition forces (Aleppo, Ghouta), and higher yet in parts that feature historical particularities and/or freedoms (like Suwayda). But such differences are of degree rather than of kind.

In brief, very limited CSO activity on governance issues is possible in regime-held areas. It nevertheless continues at significant personal risk and with poor prospects, but only as long as it remains small-scale, with carefully chosen topics, frames and labels, and avoids attracting attention in terms of success, volume or visibility. A form of government/regime sponsorship is required for anything beyond this, which will be conditioned upon clear red lines and a *quid pro quo*.

A great majority of interviewees pointed to different sets of operating conditions in the northwest and northeast of Syria. Even though this report focuses on regime-held areas, it is useful to highlight some differences. Generally speaking, there is a somewhat greater space for CSO activity in both areas. Having said that, a fair number of interviewees pointed to greater insecurity in the northwest preventing CSO work beyond the humanitarian sphere while both Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkey impose their own conditions based on their ideologies and objectives. With regards to Turkey, a fair number of interviewees indicated that the

8 Throughout the report, we refer to the weight of evidence behind statements based on our interview findings using the following scale: ‘Very few interviewees’ (1) – ‘A few interviewees’ (2) – ‘A fair number of interviewees’ (3) – ‘A majority of interviewees’ (4); ‘A great majority of interviewees’ (5).

9 Legally speaking, CSOs in the Western sense of independent civic organisations do not exist. Official CSOs in Syria are part of the Ba’ath party (e.g. syndicates), or registered as community-based organisations and/or charities that require government approval to operate.

10 The emergent and precarious nature, as well as limited size, of CSOs in Syria is the logical result of authoritarianism as the key mode of governance.

11 CSOs might be tolerated as long as they do not engage in sensitive political topics (of which there are many), do not engage too openly, and as long as there is something in it for the regime. For example, the intelligence services spot incoming foreign funds if a government-regulated exchange house is used, with sums over 1,000 –2,000 US dollars triggering action. Ways around this include using business fronts, travellers and non-authorized exchange offices.

Table 2

**What can support for CSOs in Syria hope to accomplish in the short/medium term?**

	Likely case	Best case (but unlikely)	Impossible
Regime-held areas	Keep modest local flames of civic reflection and activity alive	Negotiate greater space for CSOs based on large-scale EU recovery support that respects regime power bases	Lay the groundwork for any kind of mass movement, protests or civil society revival
Northwest (HTS and Turkey)	Most CSO activity continues to focus on humanitarian issues due to the desperate situation and divided control between Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkey	Develop an alternative governance model (to the regime) in the area north of Aleppo in partnership with Etilaf, Turkey and EU (cf. Hauch 2021)*	A Western European-style civil society landscape with open debate on rights and quality of governance
Northeast (YPG/PYD)	Limited CSO activity in the area of governance premised on the boundaries of YPG/PYD 'democratic confederalism'	US pressure creates more inclusive governance (involving e.g. the Kurdish National Council and others) and reduces Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) influence resulting in greater space for CSOs	A Western European-style civil society landscape with open debate on rights and quality of governance

**Note:** All 'best cases' are dependent on external state actors making a decisive push, i.e. the EU (regime areas), Turkey (northwest) or US (northeast)

\* Here understood as the EU institutions and EU Member States operating in EU policy context.

clampdown on civil society in Turkey itself is echoed in the parts of Syria it controls, especially with regards to any rights-focused work. In the northeast, a few interviewees pointed to People's Protection Units/Democratic Union Party (YPG/PYD) red lines on issues such as political opposition, authoritarian rule and child recruitment.

Interestingly, a few interviewees highlighted the potential of areas not held by the regime to disprove the regime's assertion that it is the only 'game in town' or 'the best you can get' by setting up viable alternative forms of governance with a more vibrant civil society that could serve as talent pools and incubators for any windows of opportunity for political change in regime-held Syria if and when these open up in the future. While this is a point of view worth considering, it must also be kept in mind that the nature of rule in these areas – between HTS, Turkey and the YPG/PYD – remains

authoritarian even when it is less absolute or pronounced than in regime-held parts of Syria (on Turkish-held areas, Al-Hilu 2021 and Yüksel and van Veen 2019; on YPG/PYD-held areas Netjes and van Veen 2021). In other words, greater CSO space will need to be incentivised and negotiated.

On the basis of the preceding analysis, Table 2 summarises what support for CSOs in Syria can hope to accomplish with the annotation that such support would need to be delivered via diaspora CSOs for reasons of familiarity, network and safety. As a few interviewees rightly pointed out, a mapping of existing contact networks between diaspora and local Syrian CSOs – including a reflection on the quality of these networks and available capacity – would be necessary as the basis for any such partnership between a donor, (a) diaspora CSO(s) and (a) local CSO(s).

## 4

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SYRIAN DIASPORA

In the military sense, the EU has largely stood at the sidelines as the Syrian conflict unfolded in all its brutality. There has been little diplomatic, less political and no EU military involvement in the fight against the Assad regime. Nothing it has done in this area was significant in the sense of being commensurate with the size of the problem. The EU has, however, provided appreciable support in the humanitarian field and to Syrian CSOs – both in Syria and in the diaspora. The EU has also unequivocally signed up to UN resolution 2254 that continues to represent the internationally most legitimate pathway out of the conflict. Correspondingly, EU policy remains that there cannot be any form of diplomatic re-engagement – let alone contribution to the reconstruction of Syria – without a meaningful political transition and a measure of accountability.

Yet today, the EU is confronted with a re-entrenching regime that is not offering any concessions despite the pressure of sanctions and that remains assured of Russian and Iranian military and political support while it slowly re-establishes relations with its neighbours. The Constitutional Committee negotiations are going nowhere despite the initial hope that they might create some negotiated pathway out of the conflict. In brief, the regime is there to stay. Also, roughly a third of the pre-war Syrian population of 20 million has been displaced, with a similar figure having fled the country entirely (UNHCR 2021). Given the poor legal, physical and economic prospects in Syria, there are few indications that many Syrian refugees intend to return any time soon. Succinctly put, the Syrian diaspora will remain and grow. Finally, neither the northwest nor the northeast currently offers a viable platform for a concerted EU strategy against the Assad regime from within Syria due to the respective roles played by HTS, Turkey and the YPG/PYD, even though the presence of the Etilaf in northern Aleppo under Turkish auspices offers a glimmer of hope (Hauch 2021). In sum, the EU will have to execute its Syria strategy pertaining to the Assad regime by denying it access to Europe as major neighbouring political-economic bloc and via diaspora CSOs.

Neither Russia nor Iran has the inclination or means to initiate a nationwide socioeconomic recovery effort. At the same time, the Arab League remains closed to Syria due in particular to the positions of Qatar and Kuwait while the Caesar Act bars the Gulf states from large-scale economic re-engagement with Assad-held Syria. As a result, Syria's politico-economic

situation in the near future is likely to consist of a mix of regime survival, a clientelist and regime-centred predatory economy producing appreciable negative externalities like the drugs trade, a long-term Iranian and Russian presence, limited refugee return, occasional violence (when the frozen conflicts temporarily thaw) and high levels of poverty and destitution among ordinary Syrians. Famine or the large-scale outbreak of disease (beyond Covid-19) cannot be excluded.

Such circumstances notwithstanding, it is likely that both EU institutions and the EU's most significant Member States will maintain their current policy towards Assad-held Syria in the near future. This policy pursues international isolation (no multilateral post-conflict recovery support, no diplomatic re-engagement), seeks to put pressure on the regime (sanctions, accountability initiatives) and provides relief (humanitarian aid in Syria and the region, limited recovery and limited acceptance of refugees) at the same time. The objective of these policy elements is to effect a meaningful political transition as per UNSC resolution 2254 or, failing that, to contain the Assad regime. Both objectives take priority over the recovery of Syrian society.

It is in this context that the question of what EU-based actors might achieve by supporting Syrian diaspora CSOs and how existing support can be improved must be addressed. Based on the great majority of interviews conducted for this brief, five possible roles emerged for Syrian diaspora CSOs in the current EU policy context, which are outlined in Table 3 and discussed underneath.

### 1. INFLUENCING EU POLICIES AND INITIATIVES ON SYRIA

Despite significant engagement with Syrian diaspora CSOs in the context of the five Brussels conferences on Syria and a range of programmatic interventions (cf. Okur and Graham 2020), EU policies/initiatives have not necessarily been based on conflict realities in Syria (Van Veen et al. 2021). In part, this has been a function of the foreign policy interests and domestic politics of key EU Member States. Effective future EU policies on Syria would nevertheless benefit appreciably from: a) granular information on conditions inside Syria, especially given that European understanding of governance and rule in Assad-held areas is minimal at present, and: b) critical counter-voices that reflect the interests of Syrians

Table 3  
**Strategic roles of Syrian diaspora CSOs in relation to EU policy objectives**

Major EU policy elements		
International isolation (no reconstruction, no diplomatic engagement)	Pressure on regime (sanctions, accountability initiatives)	Relief efforts (humanitarian aid, recovery and refugee acceptance)
Possible strategic roles and contributions of Syrian diaspora CSOs		
(1) Influencing EU policies and initiatives on Syria		(2) Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries
(3) Curating a 'memory for the future'		
		(4) Support for Syrian CSOs in Syria on less risky governance issues
(5) Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future		

abroad and/or of those who remain in the country. Facilitating the organisation and enabling the sustainable performance of Syrian diaspora CSO networks in key EU Member States could provide such insight and healthy criticism, provided such CSO networks remain tightly linked with Syria itself. Media diaspora CSOs could feature in this space, as could diaspora CSOs that mix advocacy with evidence gathering, for example by working together with Europe-based think tanks. This contribution links closely with 'Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries' (no. #2) and also with 'Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5).

## 2. STIMULATING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF SYRIANS IN NEW HOST COUNTRIES

Even though the majority of Syrian refugees currently live in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, several European countries have welcomed sizeable Syrian populations (e.g. Germany and Sweden). Given the expected persistence of negative socioeconomic and political conditions in Assad-held Syria, large-scale return is unlikely. This means that these Syrian populations will need to be integrated into the labour markets and socio-political systems of their new host countries. In the main, existing host country governmental organisations, procedures and facilities will take care of this challenge administratively in an impartial and rights-based manner. But there is also a case to be made for tailored civic engagement and 'education' to benefit new citizens-to-be due to the particular history of autocratic repression they have lived through, their experiences of violence, and the social structure of Syrian society before 2011. Syrian diaspora CSOs could help rebuild social capital among Syrian refugees settled in their new host countries by promoting greater awareness of democratic norms and behaviours, gender roles and rights-awareness. Stimulating civic engagement will improve host country views of Syria and Syrians while also contributing to the development of diaspora members' skills and mindsets, which could be mobilised in the service of any fu-

ture reconstruction of Syria. 'Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries' (no. #2) links closely with 'Influencing EU policies and initiatives on Syria' (no. #1) and also 'Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5).

## 3. CURATING A 'MEMORY FOR THE FUTURE'

The history of conflict is usually written by its victor. A priori it is unlikely that Syria will be an exception to this rule. However, the conflict has seen a high level of recording and reporting that creates an opportunity for developing a more balanced narrative. Such a narrative is likely to contain elements that are at odds with existing frames of the conflict. These tend to be polarised and leave out important conflict developments – such as the West and its own role in focusing on radical religious groups like Islamic State rather than Assad's brutal autocracy. Accountability initiatives also play a key role in such storytelling as they can link conflict incidents with international legal frameworks in order to arrive at an evidence-based judgment of what has come to pass.

The greatest challenge might be whether a memory of the conflict can be created for future reference that can be shared by the majority of Syrians, including many of those who have supported the regime either passively or actively, excluding top decision makers and major human rights violators. The objective would not be reconciliation but to develop a shared understanding of the consequences of the conflict for Syrian society and how these might be addressed. Based on the narrative and evidence-gathering efforts they have undertaken so far, Syrian diaspora CSOs are well placed to undertake such work, together with more academically oriented organisations, provided views from regime supporters are also taken into account. 'Curating a memory for the future' is linked with 'Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5).

#### 4. SUPPORT FOR SYRIAN CSOS IN SYRIA ON LESS RISKY POLITICAL ISSUES

Even if the space for CSO activity in Syria is limited, a number of interviewees indicated that some governance-focused activity remains possible as long as it does not cross regime red lines and either operates under the radar or maintains informal links with the regime. Issues such as the fate and/or release of political detainees, access to legal documents and legal support, as well as women's rights, appear to be amenable to a modicum of activity, as might local governance-oriented engagement beyond the Damascus / Latakia area, provided it focuses on service organisation and provision. Small steps and engagements might lead to a limited reconstitution of social capital and recovery at the local level with a focus on social matters. With time, the scope for action might increase if an approach can be created in which the regime views CSO activity as a useful complement to its own policies and is able to accept a modest degree of criticism. A controlled and limited social 'revival' might in fact also be in the regime's interest, e.g. by improving local prospects. In a sense, this would represent a return to the situation before 2011 in a bid to undo some of the worst effects of the conflict on social cohesion and civic mindedness. Diaspora CSOs are key channels for supporting such work, provided they can maintain the appropriate networks and provided better modalities can be found to bring small amounts of funding and some expertise into Syria.

#### 5. MAINTAINING / DEVELOPING CAPABILITIES FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE FUTURE

Finally, given that neither political reform nor political transition is likely in the short term, there is a case for creating and maintaining long-term social capabilities for positive change in Syria. These could include networks between Syrian diaspora CSOs, functional experts, entrepreneurs, politicians and researchers. Their contacts, ideas and means can continue to shed light on the situation in Syria and also develop diaspora connectivity, human capital and talent that can be mobilised for any future recovery and reconstruction efforts in the country. Syrian diaspora CSOs could be the initiators and nodes in such professional networks by hosting regular events, offering skills- and experience-building programmes and serving as intermediaries between associated members and other parties. 'Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5) is linked with 'Influencing EU policies and initiatives on Syria' (no. #1) and 'Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries' (no. #2).

#### 6. CREATING SYNERGIES BETWEEN STRATEGIC ROLES AND OBJECTIVES

With the preceding outline of strategic contributions that Syrian diaspora CSOs can make to EU policy on Syria in mind, two further points seem in order. First, such contributions are not mutually exclusive and can be combined into broader engagement strategies. For example:

- 'Influencing EU policies and initiatives on Syria' (no. #1), 'Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries' (no. #2), and 'Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5) can be combined to develop a set of interventions aimed at ensuring a substantial and positive role for Syrians in the policy development and social perceptions of their new host countries. Awareness raising among Syrians, sustained advocacy among local policy makers, and media coverage of both could be key elements of the focus of diaspora CSOs.
- 'Stimulating civic engagement of Syrians in new host countries' (no. #2) and 'Support for Syrian CSOs in Syria on less risky governance issues' (no. #4) could also be linked to develop 'twinning' partnerships in which the knowledge and expertise of Syrians abroad is linked to knowledge and expertise of Syrians in Syria, benefiting the latter while the former maintain insights and connections. With the add-on of an internationally sponsored capacity-building programme of critical skills for Syrian recovery that runs in the background, this could also link into 'Maintaining / development capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5).
- Finally, 'Influencing EU policies and initiatives on Syria' (no. #1), 'Curating a 'memory for the future' (no. #3) and 'Maintaining / developing capabilities for positive change in the future' (no. #5) can create a structural and deep reflection on links between current policy on Syria, the drivers of the conflict, and the socio-political abilities required to deal with the consequences of the conflict in a more productive way than the haphazard Western/European engagement with the conflict itself.

Second, the strategic roles and contributions outlined in Table 3 are all linked to major EU policy elements. It is, however, entirely possible that Syrian diaspora CSOs view themselves as well positioned to take on strategic roles that do not fit EU policy. Only very few interviewees developed thinking in this direction and, when they did, it centred mostly on the need for greater engagement with CSOs inside Syria, including at the price of reaching an accommodation with regime representatives and submitting to their control and financial demands, for the sake of progress and reconciliation in Syria. While there is a useful debate to be had about the utility and humanity of prioritising 'regime change' over 'social reconstruction' and how the one is limited by the other, it is unlikely that any European taxpayer-sourced funding will be available to support such work. In other words, while the objective may be valid, funding for such activities will have to come from sources such as the Syrian diaspora itself (e.g. entrepreneurs) or perhaps philanthropic organisations that do not use public money.

## 5

## BARRIERS TO STRATEGIC EFFORTS BY SYRIAN DIASPORA CSOS

Alongside the complexity of the strategic efforts outlined above, our interviews also highlighted a number of barriers that stand in the way of operationalising such efforts. These barriers result largely from past legacies as well as present models and methods of CSO activity. It needs to be recalled that the landscape for CSO activity in pre-2011 Syria was barren and consisted mostly of 'civil society bodies' controlled by the Ba'ath party. These included professional associations (teachers, lawyers, etc.), media and labour unions and religious institutions. Following the initial protests and subsequent violence of 2011/2012, much emergent CSO activity was of an activist nature and driven by urgent priorities such as organising and facilitating resistance, providing community services and engaging in media reporting (Ramadan and Swehat 2020). In 2015/2016, once the conflict started to turn in favour of the regime, the space for such activities in Syria shrank, with more and more CSOs having to reduce or cease in-country operations.

Not much later, the warm welcome that Syria's neighbours had initially given millions of refugees started to cool off as social pressures increased and Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq faced growing crises of their own. Leaving aside humanitarian activity, a great many interviewees indicated that it has become difficult to work on a governance-oriented agenda in Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq or Jordan, even if it is about Syria. In the Gulf – the destination of a much more modest number of Syrians and Syrian CSOs – such activism has always been close to impossible unless it is in line with prevailing government policy. Even when this is the case, CSO activity remains susceptible to high-level policy changes and clampdown. According to a number of interviewees, the same increasingly pertains to Turkey, which is to say that CSO activity has to be compatible with – or even serve – Ankara's governance priorities in the parts of Syria it occupies.

The result of these developments is that Europe and the US are fast becoming the remaining spaces from which Syrian diaspora CSOs can work unhindered since their legal frameworks are the most permissive and their political cultures fully acceptant of independent CSO work. However, these locations have the disadvantage of being farther away from Syria (especially the US) and being more exposed to the chilling effect of US and EU sanctions. A number of interviewees gave poignant examples of their CSO

bank accounts being closed at short notice, with re-establishment being a Herculean task.

In this context, EU engagement with Syrian diaspora CSOs has been project driven, short term, and based on direct alignment with European policy priorities that are often narrowly defined and not necessarily cognisant of social realities in Syria (as an extreme example, one might consider LGBTQ+ rights). Moreover, many funding opportunities are put on a competitive footing in the form of tenders. While this is understandable from a value-for-money perspective, it does not encourage collaboration between CSOs. In fact, it risks creating further divisions in an already diverse CSO landscape. In other words, there has been a pronounced tendency by EU Institutions and Member States to treat Syrian diaspora CSOs as short-term beneficiaries for the purpose of project execution rather than long-term partners for strategic collaboration. With this in mind, a great many interviewees emphasised five main barriers to more strategic efforts by Syrian diaspora CSOs (cf. Collins undated; Diker and Ragab 2019).

### 1. LIMITED STRATEGIC FOCUS

Neither donors nor Syrian diaspora CSOs appear to demonstrate much strategic thinking, focus or organisation. Insofar as diaspora CSOs are concerned, this is in part a result of their relatively recent establishment, their initial activist nature and donor-driven projectised funding. A number of interviewees also pointed to their own limited efforts to think and engage more strategically with a view to a future that holds some but not much immediate hope. The absence of longer-term thinking strengthens reflexes to 'follow the money' and prevents the articulation of a greater value-added case for the role that Syrian diaspora CSOs might play in developing and maintaining alternative ideational narratives and networks to the Assad regime.

### 2. SHORT-TERM FUNDING

Another critical barrier is the absence of long-term funding for diaspora CSOs. At present, most funding is short term and project based. The main disadvantage of this situation is that it hinders organisational professionalisation and the development of a more strategic focus. This is because significant management attention has to be devoted to fundraising

to ensure business continuity, and also because such a funding situation favours activities with a direct and concrete pay-off over longer-term investments that develop capabilities such as higher levels of professional expertise.

A related issue here is the dependency of Syrian CSOs on public funding from Western governments and/or multilaterals like the EU institutions, which is subject to high standards of accountability. At least in Europe, there seems to be little funding from businesses, diaspora-based subscription and membership models or philanthropic/charitable organisations. This situation risks creating too much financial reliance on a few funders and precludes activities not in line with government priorities or that feature risks beyond the scope of tolerance of such governments.

### 3. FINANCIAL ACCOUNT AND FLOW DIFFICULTIES

A number of interviewees recounted painful experiences of bank account closure and wire transfer difficulties due to the chilling effect of US/EU sanctions, as well as the trouble (and time) it took to re-establish their organisation's financial access. Beyond sanctions, there is also the broader issue of overcompliance by banks with regards to anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering rules and regulations. The word 'Syria' in the name of a CSO can be sufficient cause for a bank to halt a transfer. One interviewee recounted how a wire transfer from a Syrian CSO to an organisation providing VPN services to/from countries like Syria, Iran and Cuba to enable access to information and dialogue resulted in the bank's compliance officer blocking the transfer and closing the account entirely. Complementary to this challenge is the difficulty of actually getting funds into Syria. All official transfer channels are government monitored and informal methods carry a higher risk of e.g. loss, theft or confiscation. As a consequence, an inordinate amount of time sometimes has to be dedicated to basic operations and the level of financial risk taking is limited.

### 4. UNCLEAR / UNDERDEVELOPED CONNECTIVITY WITH SYRIA

A further barrier consists of the limits and difficulties of maintaining networks between Syrian diaspora CSOs and CSOs inside Syria. Such linkages are essential for the credibility of Syrian diaspora CSOs and for their ability to play strategic roles going forward. However, there seems to be limited thinking in place on how such networks can be structured, developed and safeguarded, including the ability to showcase them to prospective funders in a manner that is both safe and convincing. Many such networks appear to be very informal in nature, which is to say based on pre-existing social relationships of trust such as within communities, families, friends or even tribes.

While restrictions on access and size will be inevitable given the constraints on CSO activity inside Syria, they also risk making such networks overly dependent on particular individuals or sets of personal connections, as well as non-scala-

ble. Ultimately, there is a need for more conscious network building and maintenance strategies, as well as a shared understanding between Syrian diaspora CSOs and donors on what such strategies can achieve in the Syrian context. The salience of this issue will grow as time passes, since generational and experience gaps will emerge and widen between those who remained in Syria and those who left the country.

### 5. LOW LEVELS OF CONNECTIVITY AMONG SYRIA DIASPORA CSOS

A number of interviewees readily acknowledged that apart from socio-political tensions within the Syrian diaspora, collaborative networks between diaspora CSOs are currently underdeveloped (cf. in the area of transitional justice efforts, Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2019). In other words, many diaspora CSOs operate in their specific host country and on specific projects but are not well connected to other diaspora CSOs on a more structural basis. A great number of interviewees articulated both a need and a desire for more network activities that would facilitate the formation of more collaborative relationships as a basis for longer-term partnerships – perhaps even mergers (cf. for a positive example, Danish Refugee Council 2017). This should not take the form of networking for the sake of it, according to interviewees, but happen in parallel to directly functional activity such as peer learning, skills training or joint strategy development. This requires dedicated platforms that are funded and operated accordingly (Kodmani and Jaber 2018). While some exist, their capabilities and performance can, according to a number of interviewees, be strengthened significantly.

### 6. BUREAUCRATIC REQUIREMENTS NOT REFLECTIVE OF CONFLICT REALITIES

A majority of interviewees observed that donor funding often comes with bureaucratic requirements that are not aligned either with the emergent state of many Syrian (diaspora) CSOs – i.e. organisations are young and in development – or with the state / nature of the Syrian conflict. Such requirements can make it unnecessarily difficult for CSOs to qualify for European funding. Consider, for example, a grant-making scheme for CSOs working on governance in Syria that requires lead applicants of consortia to be registered in Syria (and hence operate under regime supervision). Alternatively, consider the fact that funding from Official Development Assistance (ODA) sources typically requires an organisation to be based in an ODA-eligible country while many diaspora CSOs are based in Europe or the US. They do, however, work in Syria... In other words, the rules must be interpreted, sometimes creatively, and this requires bureaucratic goodwill that can be in short supply. As European foreign policy teams working on Syria have seen quite some turnover given the long duration of the Syrian conflict, with new incumbents being less informed about or engaged with the conflict, a more technocratic approach tends to be the default at present. To extrapolate provocatively, Syrian diaspora CSO activity is subject to political control in Syria's neighbourhood and to bureaucratic/financial control in the EU and US.

## 7. CAPACITY BUILDING TENDS TO BE 'INSINCERE'

A great majority of interviewees remarked that donors typically and primarily view capacity building of Syrian diaspora CSOs – and of CSOs in Syria by Syrian diaspora CSOs – as a means to improving organisations' abilities to comply with donor transparency and accountability requirements. Moreover, donors often require that their own capacity-building templates are used. In other words, they fail to recognise that Syrian CSOs need capacity building themselves in order to mature and develop their professionalism. From this perspective, the aim of capacity building is not so much to deliver skills through local teams in Syria, for example, but rather – or

at least also – to develop the competences and skills of the teams themselves.

A number of these barriers result from an interplay between conflict constraints (mostly within Syria), external engagement models and bureaucratic requirements (mostly funders), and limited diaspora CSO efforts (mostly internal). While some interviewees argued that funders must up their game first, others were introspective and pointed to the need to strategise and professionalise diaspora CSOs from within first. Whichever the case may be, a great many interviews made clear that these barriers – combined with the emotional fatigue that is the result of years of frenetic activity with decreasing hopes for the immediate future – stand in the way of more strategic efforts by Syrian diaspora CSOs.

## 6

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding analysis suggests that there is currently little basis for a durable long-term approach to the evolution of Syrian diaspora CSOs in pursuit of one or several EU policy objectives. If EU-based actors, including the FES, want to engage Syrian diaspora CSOs as actors that can help create an ideational and practical counterweight to the Assad regime in the realm of governance, as well as act as a source of talent, networks and capabilities for when more propitious windows for political change open up, a major strategic shift is required. Such a shift will need to adjust funding conditions for individual Syrian diaspora CSOs and create a number of collective facilities for such CSOs to stimulate their long-term development. As EU-based funding entities are diverse in terms of the scale and scope of their engagement, it is helpful to break such a shift down into basic, advanced and high levels of ambition so that different entities can contribute at different levels on the understanding that making lower-level improvements is required in order to achieve higher-level improvements.

### BASIC IMPROVEMENTS THAT CAN BE UNDERTAKEN BY INDIVIDUAL FUNDERS

At a minimum, individual EU-based entities need to make these adjustments with regard to their funding of Syrian diaspora CSOs:

- Put funding on a longer-term basis to enable Syrian diaspora CSOs to attract capable staff, engage in more strategic thinking, and prevent acquisition cycles from driving organisational activity (think in the order of a 6–10 years' contractual timeline). This might result in funding fewer organisations, but those that remain will have greater staying power in view of the likely long-term conflict stalemate that is taking shape. It would also give Syrian diaspora CSOs a decent period to develop alternative funding sources from within the diaspora.
- Allow a substantial part of funding to be used for organisational professionalisation and development, i.e. to serve as core funding that covers basic salaries, overhead and other organisation-wide needs (in the order of 30%).
- Enable Syrian diaspora CSO recipients to spend part of the funding they receive on network and alliance building and on partnership activities to enable new contacts and relationships to grow once they are organically established (in the order of 10–20%).

### ADVANCED IMPROVEMENTS THAT CAN BE UNDERTAKEN BY COALITIONS OF FUNDERS

More ambitiously, European funding entities can team up in 'coalitions of the willing' to provide collective facilities that Syrian diaspora CSOs can tap into if they meet certain criteria and clear a pre-established vetting process successfully. Such facilities are likely to be too complex or too large for many European funding entities to create individually, but EU institutions could either provide them as a 'collective service provider' or coalitions of individual funding entities could do so:

- Create a Europe-based, Syrian-run and internationally supervised trust fund that pools resources for Syrian diaspora CSOs, operates on the basis of an integrated set of procedures aligned with the state of Syrian (diaspora) CSO development, tailored to take account of existing conflict limitations and is permanently open for grant applications based on preset criteria – subject to regular replenishment (The Syrian Recovery Trust Fund can serve as a template of sorts). Such a fund would have several advantages:
  - Reduce the level of competition for funding between Syrian diaspora CSOs by removing a variety of short-term funding allocation cycles from the equation and increasing the amount of funding available in a single place.
  - Lower transaction costs by functioning as a one-stop-shop.
  - Allow the gradual development of relationships of trust between diaspora CSOs that do well with the funding allocated to them, and the trust fund governance mechanism.
  - Set clear funding criteria, including a requirement for proposals to be strategic in nature, demonstrate inter-CSO networking, and feature clear connections into Syria while being based on current Syrian social and conflict realities.

- Guarantee banking access for Syrian diaspora CSOs based on thorough prior vetting. This could be realised at the national as well as the European level. For example, a facility can be created via which vetted diaspora CSOs can maintain an account with the Central Bank of the country involved, transactions from which are guaranteed by the government (a bit like a letter of credit). Currently only France seems to have ‘a right to an account’ enshrined in law but even there the procedure is said to be (too) time consuming.
- Fund (a) network hub(s) – or scale an existing one up – that serves a country (e.g. all Syrian diaspora CSOs active in Germany) or a theme (e.g. all Syrian diaspora CSOs active in the area of women’s rights). Enabling individual diaspora CSOs to spend part of their funding on networking activity is likely to create a lot of organic connections (see above). Organising such connections outside and inside Syria can be supported by creating or developing a platform endowed with a small secretariat that is tasked with: a) sustaining a diaspora CSO network; b) stimulating experience sharing, and; c) building network capacities.

the realism of EU policy related to the Syrian conflict and develop innovative proposals to implement such policy.

All these recommendations are based on the twin assumptions that a) EU institutions, Member States and other European actors have a collective interest in putting their policy regarding Syrian diaspora CSOs active in the area of governance on a more strategic footing as part of their broader intention to contain the Assad regime and maintain alternative governance capabilities, networks and narratives; b) that Syrian diaspora CSOs are willing and able to engage with EU policy and priorities. Should one of these conditions not be met, it is likely that the current fragmented state of both funding and Syrian diaspora CSO organisation will persist.

## SOPHISTICATED IMPROVEMENTS THAT CAN BE UNDERTAKEN COLLECTIVELY

Finally, a number of larger collective facilities can be created by a comprehensive range of European funding entities teaming up – for example, facilitated by an EU institution in Brussels:

- Put an EU-wide skills and capacity-building scheme in place that stimulates knowledge accumulation by Syrian diaspora CSOs and facilitates knowledge transfer into Syria on governance-related issues. Such a scheme can easily be tied to one or several network hubs and operate based on a sort of draw down mechanism in which diaspora CSOs have access to capacity building in inverse proportion to their size and level of professionalism.
- Develop confidential standards for the sorts of networks that Syrian diaspora CSOs can seek to build with CSOs inside Syria, including reflection on the kinds of diplomatic, expert and financial support such networks require to develop and grow – beyond the intimate relational, cultural and language connections that are uniquely available to Syrian diaspora CSOs. Such discussions and standards would have to be tied to the EU’s broader diplomatic strategy and can be used to cautiously explore local points of connection with regime interests while staying away from any intelligence influences – since that would fatally compromise such efforts.
- Create a network for applied research and evidence-based advocacy to inform EU policy development on a structural basis that sees Syrian diaspora CSOs collaborate with key EU knowledge institutions in a bid to increase

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu-Assab, N.** (2020): *Civil Society: A tool for resistance*, Aljumphuriya, [online](#)
- Al-Hilu, K.** (2021): *The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies*. Florence: EUI
- Borrell, J.** (2021): Speech by High Representative/Vice Chair to the European Parliament on March 10; available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_de/94591/Syria](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_de/94591/Syria) (accessed on 6.24 2021).
- Collins, M.** (undated): *Syrian Civil Society: A closing door*. London: Christian Aid.
- Danish Refugee Council** (2017): *Diaspora support to durable solutions – Syrians in Europe*. Berlin: DRC conference report, [online](#).
- Diker, E. and N. Ragab** (2019): *Diaspora Mobilization in Contexts of Political Uncertainties: Exploring the potentials, limits and future roles of the Syrian civil society in the Middle East and Europe*. UNU-Merit and Maastricht University.
- ECFR** (2020): *Syrian voices: Where next for European policy?*. European Council on Foreign Relations, [online](#).
- Gharibah, M.** (2020): *Reality and Prospects for Civil Society Actors in Regime-held Syria*. London: Chatham House; available [online](#).
- Hadidi, S., Z. Majed and F. Mardem-Bay** (2018): *Dans la tête de Bachar al-Assad*. Paris: Actes Sud.
- Kawakibi, S.** (2013): *Syrian voices from pre-revolution Syria: Civil society against all odds*. The Hague: Hivos, Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia.
- Kawakibi, S. and W. Sawah** (2013): *The emergence and evolution of Syria's civil society*, in: Kawakibi, S. (ed): *Ibid*.
- Khalaf, R., O. Ramadan and F. Stolleis** (2014): *Activism in difficult times: Civil society groups in Syria (2011–2014)*. Istanbul/Beirut: Badael Foundation.
- Kodmani, B.** (2018): *The Syrian diaspora: Old and New*. Paris: Arab Reform Initiative.
- Kodmani, B. and H. Jaber** (2018): *Mapping the Syrian diaspora: A global player in the reconstruction of Syria*, Research Paper. Paris: Arab Reform Initiative.
- Koinova, M.** (2018): *Critical junctures and transformative events in diaspora mobilisation for Kosovo and Palestinian statehood*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(8).
- Moss, D.** (2020): *Voice After Exit: Explaining Diaspora Mobilization for the Arab Spring*, *Social Forces*, 98(4).
- Netjes, R. and E. van Veen** (2021): *Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict*. The Hague: Clingendael, 2021.
- Okur, P. and T. Graham** (2020): *Civil society in the Syria Crisis*, Report on the online consultations for the Brussels IV Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, Upinion.
- Ramadan, O. and Y. Swehat** (November 2020): *Approaches to Syrian Civil Society*, Aljumphuriya, [online](#).
- Sarsar, C., C. D'Hondt, M. Teresia Di Lenna, A. al-Khulidi and S. Taha** (2019): *The political participation of the diaspora of the Middle East and North Africa before and after the Arab uprisings*, *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 3(1).
- Seurat, M.** (2012): *Syrie, l'État de barbarie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Stokke, E. and E. Wiebelhaus-Brahm** (2019): *Syrian diaspora mobilization: vertical coordination, patronage relations, and the challenges of fragmentation in the pursuit of transitional justice*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(11).
- UNHCR Syria emergency**: <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (accessed 28 June 2021).
- Van Veen, E., A. Di Pietrantonio Pellise, N. Ezzeddine and P. Napolitano** (2021): *Band-aids, not bullets: EU policies and interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars*, The Hague: Clingendael.
- Voller, Y.** (2020): *Advantages and Challenges to Diaspora Transnational Civil Society Activism in the Homeland: Examples from Iraqi Kurdistan, Somaliland and South Sudan*. London: LSE Conflict Research Programme.
- Yüksel, E. and E. van Veen** (2019): *Turkey in northwestern Syria: Rebuilding empire at the margins*, The Hague: Clingendael.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Erwin van Veen** is a senior research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit where he leads a team that analyses the political economy of conflict in the Middle East. His own work focuses on security problems in processes of state development and geopolitical competition.

**Beatrice Noun** used to work for Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit as a junior researcher with an emphasis on the nature of civil society and the prospects for political reform in Lebanon and Iraq.

## IMPRINT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung P.O. Box 116107 Riad El Solh | Beirut 1107 2210 | Lebanon

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of FES.

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be printed, reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

The report was commissioned by the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in Beirut and has been independently researched by the Clingendael Institute. Our sincere thanks go to Katia Schnellecke and Dara Foielle (FES) for their support and patience. We would also like to thank Abullatif Sleibi (Clingendael) for his excellent support. The report

furthermore benefited from a critical review by Lars Hauch (independent researcher) as well as several well-known representatives of the Syrian diaspora CSO community to whom we remain indebted.

## STRATEGIES FOR EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT WITH SYRIAN DIASPORA CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS



The military stalemate of the Syrian conflict, regime re-entrenchment and absence of viable prospects of an internationally negotiated solution indicate that the path towards political reform will remain closed for a while to come. The containment or defeat of most revolutionary forces, the limited territorial presence of and foreign restrictions on Syria's various 'opposition governments', as well as rapidly diminishing space for civil society activity across the country also indicates that Syrian diaspora civil society organisations (CSOs) will soon be the only actors capable of maintaining the civic spirit of the revolution against the Assad regime and offer corresponding ideational alternatives. Finally, the mix of instability in neighbouring countries and decreasing hospitality towards Syrian refugees will make the US and Europe the centre of Syrian diaspora activity insofar as it relates to governance issues such as human rights and accountability.



In light of the existing US and EU policy of 'no engagement without a meaningful political transition', this situation creates both a need and an opportunity to establish a partnership between EU policy makers and Syrian diaspora CSOs. The aim of such a joint venture would be to pursue micro strategies capable of planting and watering seeds that can contribute to a form of governance transformation in Syria in the long term.



Yet, current engagement of EU-based funding entities with Syrian diaspora CSOs is short term and project based. It is not strategically organised in a manner commensurate with EU policy objectives. While bringing about a more strategic approach can be accomplished at different levels of ambition, these have in common that funding for individual Syrian diaspora CSOs must be put on a 6-10 year basis as a critical enabler. Such funding should moreover enable organisational development and professionalisation of Syrian diaspora CSOs, strengthen platforms that bring them together in collective action, and create shared facilities to stimulate their collective development. Without such changes, the strategic opportunity to build a partnership for better future governance is likely to remain unrealised.