

Syrian Diaspora Engagement in Austria

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Basic issues: discussion papers on development policies, international cooperation and south–north cultural exchange, as well as antiracist campaigning.

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FOREWORD

Diaspora communities play an important role in economic, social and political development in their country of origin as well as in their host countries. Their transnational involvement is diverse, ranging from remittances to their families, to projects in the health and education sectors, to humanitarian aid or investments in the economic sector. Support from the diaspora is particularly important in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2023 earthquake in the Turkish–Syrian border region. In addition to financial support from the diaspora, in the case of Syria in particular, political commitment to the legal processing of war crimes and crimes against humanity is of great importance. VIDC Global Dialogue has already honoured this commitment by hosting an event and producing an episode of our podcast, *Blickwechsel*, in 2021.

VIDC Global Dialogue 2022 organised the networking conference *Syrian Women Leading the Change*, a forum in which women of the Syrian diaspora from all over Europe came together to network and exchange information about their work and daily challenges.

As part of its focus on migration and development, VIDC Global Dialogue sheds light on the diaspora engagement of different communities with the aim of learning more about the potentials, priorities and needs of the diaspora, making the primarily voluntary engagement of the diaspora more visible and supporting their demands on Austrian organisations and institutions.

This study examines the engagement of the Syrian diaspora community in Austria, which has grown to around 68,400 people, particularly since the violent suppression of the 2011 uprisings by the Assad regime and the subsequent refugee movement.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Studie zielt darauf ab, die Entwicklungen und Aktivitäten in der syrischen Diaspora in Österreich zu erforschen. Die Untersuchung dieses Gebiets kann zur Entwicklung von Strategien beitragen, die die Beteiligung der syrischen Diaspora an zivilgesellschaftlichen Aktivitäten unterstützen und erleichtern. Dies kann das Potenzial der syrischen Diaspora zum sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Engagement in Österreich steigern und ihre Fähigkeit zur Mitgestaltung der Zukunft Syriens fördern. Darüber hinaus zeigt diese Studie die Lücken in der Beteiligung der syrischen Diaspora auf und identifiziert Bereiche, in denen mehr Unterstützung und Ressourcen benötigt werden. Staatliche und nichtstaatliche Institutionen in Österreich können sich auf diese Studie stützen, um ihre Interventionen innerhalb der syrischen Gemeinschaft in Österreich entsprechend zu planen. Diese Studie soll als Bezugspunkt dienen, auf dem zukünftige Forschung aufbauen kann.

Die Hauptforschungsfrage lautet, wie die syrische Diaspora in Österreich organisiert ist, wie und in welchen Bereichen ihre Mitglieder aktiv sind und mit welchen Hindernissen sie bei ihren Aktivitäten konfrontiert sind. Der Schwerpunkt liegt auf der Darstellung der Aktivitäten der Diaspora in den Bereichen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, humanitäre Hilfe, soziales Engagement und politischer Aktivismus.

Das Engagement von Syrer*innen in Österreich ist geleitet von einem tiefen Verantwortungsgefühl gegenüber anderen Syrer*innen, insbesondere jenen, die ihr Leben im Krieg oder auf der Flucht verloren haben und jenen, die noch in politischer Gefangenschaft oder in Flüchtlingslagern sind. Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement bietet darüber hinaus die Möglichkeit, mit anderen in Kontakt zu treten und hilft dabei, ein Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit wiederherzustellen und die syrische Identität neu zu definieren. Zivilgesellschaftliche Aktivitäten tragen durch den Aufbau beruflicher Erfahrungen und eines Beziehungsnetzwerks auch dazu bei, berufliche Möglichkeiten zu schaffen. Darüber hinaus sehen einige ihre Beteiligung an Diasporaarbeit als Möglichkeit, ihre Integration und ihren Erfolg in der österreichischen Gesellschaft zu zeigen, indem sie informelle Führungspositionen in ihrer Community einnehmen und

ihre Stellung nutzen, um auf die öffentliche Meinung in Österreich Einfluss zugunsten der Diaspora auszuüben.

Die syrische Diaspora in Österreich engagiert sich **in erster Linie auf individueller Ebene** durch finanzielle Hilfe, hauptsächlich an Familienmitglieder, zur kurzfristigen Hilfeleistung. Initiativen innerhalb der Diaspora sind oft informell und spontan, entsprechend den Entwicklungen in Syrien. Von Syrer*innen geführte Organisationen in Österreich **konzentrieren sich eher auf die syrische Diaspora in Österreich als auf Menschen in Syrien**. Ihre Bemühungen zielen hauptsächlich darauf ab, die Lücken in der staatlichen Unterstützung für Syrer*innen zu schließen und durch kulturelle und künstlerische Projekte sowie Sprachkurse ein Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit unter einander zu fördern. Trotz der oft unsichtbaren Spaltungen in der syrischen Community gibt es unter Syrer*innen in Österreich ein gemeinsames und tiefes Gefühl des Stolzes und der Dankbarkeit für die Syrer und Syrerinnen, die in Österreich arbeiten oder an Universitäten studieren. Es wird die Bedeutung individueller Aktivitäten anerkannt, die für viele eine Motivation sind und als Vorbild dienen, um kollektiv tätig zu werden, individuelle Anstrengungen zu vereinen und von den unterschiedlichen Erfahrungen in der Community zu profitieren. Es geht vielen darum, Unterstützung für Einzelpersonen anzubieten, denen oft ein unterstützendes Umfeld fehlt oder die unter demoralisierender Kritik von anderen Mitgliedern der syrischen Gesellschaft leiden.

Herausforderungen bei der Arbeit in der Diaspora, die aus den Erfahrungen der Menschen in Syrien resultieren, sind Traumata, die Verstreutheit der Familien in verschiedene Länder, was zum Verlust von Unterstützungssystemen führt, das Misstrauen innerhalb der eigenen Community und gegenüber staatlichen Einrichtungen. Schwierigkeiten, mit denen Syrer*innen in ihrem Engagement in Bezug auf den österreichischen Staat konfrontiert sind, sind bürokratische Hürden, ihr oft unsicherer rechtlicher Status und begrenzte Möglichkeiten zur politischen Teilhabe aufgrund des rechtlich schwierigen Zugangs zur österreichischen Staatsbürgerschaft. Darüber hinaus stehen Syrerinnen und Syrer unter Zeitdruck, da sie die Sprache lernen,

arbeiten und sich um ihre Familien kümmern müssen, während das Engagement innerhalb ihrer Community größtenteils unbezahlt ist. Das Fehlen von Finanzierungsmöglichkeiten und das mangelnde Wissen über Finanzierungsmöglichkeiten sind erhebliche Hindernisse. Frauen stehen vor zusätzlichen Herausforderungen, wie traditionelle Geschlechterrollen, die ihnen die Hauptlast der Pflegearbeit zuschreibt.

Um das Potenzial des Engagements der syrischen Diaspora zu fördern, werden folgende Empfehlungen, gerichtet an den österreichischen Staat und an österreichische Organisation abgegeben:

- Erhöhung der Finanzierungsmöglichkeiten
- Verbesserung der psychologischen Unterstützung

- Unterstützung bei Professionalisierung, Kapazitätsaufbau und Organisationsmanagement
- Erhöhte Beteiligung von Syrer*innen an Planung und Umsetzung von Projekten
- Bedachtnahme auf Perspektiven der Diaspora auf Integration und interkulturellen Dialog

Im abschließenden Teil der Studie werden syrische Diaspora Organisationen kurz vorgestellt.

الملخص التنفيذي

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى بحث تطور المجتمع السوري وأنشطته في النمسا حيث أن لبحث هذا المجال أهمية في تطوير السياسات والقوانين التي يمكن لها أن تعبد الطريق أمام السوريين والسوريات لمشاركة فعالة وذات معنى ضمن مجتمعهم في النمسا وضمن النشاطات المتعلقة بالشأن السوري. علاوة على ذلك، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على التحديات والثغرات في مشاركة المجتمع المدني السوري. وتحاول تحديد المجالات التي تحتاج إلى دعم أكبر يمكن للدولة في النمسا أو المنظمات الغير حكومية تقديمه. يمكن للمؤسسات الحكومية وغير الحكومية في النمسا الاعتماد على هذه الدراسة للتخطيط لمشاريعها التي تستهدف السوريين والسوريات في النمسا بشكل أفضل. حيث أن أحد أهداف هذه الدراسة أيضاً أن تكون نقطة مرجعية للاستفادة منها في البحوث المستقبلية حول السوريين والسوريات ونشاطهم في النمسا وأوروبا.

السؤال البحث الرئيسي هو كيف ينظم السوريون والسوريات أنفسهم في النمسا، كيف ينشطون وما هي دوافعهم وأهدافهم وما هي العقبات التي يواجهونها على المستوى الفردي والمؤسستي. جزء من هذه الدراسة يركز على المبادرات والمنظمات التي أقامها السوريون والسوريات في النمسا في مختلف المجالات وتقديمها للقارئ.

إحدى الدوافع الرئيسية وراء المشاركة المدنية للسوريين في النمسا هو الشعور العميق بالمسؤولية لدى السوريين في النمسا تجاه السوريين ممن قضاوا خلال النزاع في سوريا أو من فقدوا حياتهم على طريق اللجوء أو المعتقلين والمعتقلات منهم والغالبية العظمى التي ما زالت في مخيمات اللجوء. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تقدم المشاركة المدنية أيضاً فرصة للتواصل مع الآخرين وتساعد في استعادة الشعور بالانتماء وإعادة تعريف الهوية السورية التي تجمعهم. ويساعد هذا النشاط المدني أيضاً في إيجاد فرص مهنية أوسع حيث يساهم في بناء وتراكم الخبرات المهنية وبناء شبكة العلاقات. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يرى البعض هذه المشاركة وسيلة لإظهار اندماجهم ونجاحهم في المجتمع النمساوي من خلال دورهم كقادة مجتمعيين ووصولهم لمراكز لها تأثير أيضاً على الرأي العام النمساوي.

تعتبر مشاركة السوريين في النمسا في الدرجة الأولى مشاركة فردية تتجلى من خلال تقديم مساعدات ودعم مالي لأهاليهم وأصدقائهم في سوريا وغالباً ما تكون المبادرات عفوية وتفكر للهيكليّة المعقدة وتتبع للأحداث على الأرض في سوريا.

من ناحية أخرى تركز المنظمات التي يديرها سوريون في النمسا بشكل أساسي على المجتمع السوري في النمسا، بدلاً من أن تكون مرتبطة بشكل كبير بالسوريين داخل سوريا. تهدف جهود هذه المنظمات بشكل رئيسي إلى ملء الثغرات في الدعم الذي تقدمه الدولة للسوريين الواصلين حديثاً وتعزيز شعور الانتماء بين السوريين من خلال هذه المشاريع.

من أكبر التحديات التي يعاني منها السوريون في النمسا هو استمرار وجود الانقسامات التي نشأت في سوريا منها السياسية ومنها المناطقية وغيرها مرتبطة أيضاً بالعرق والدين. تساهم هذه الانقسامات بخلق وتعزيز شعور عميق بانعدام الثقة فيما بينهم واتجاه الدولة في النمسا.

رغم هذه الانقسامات التي غالباً ما تكون غير ظاهرة على السطح، هناك شعور مشترك وعميق لدى كافة السوريين بالفخر والامتنان للسوريين والسوريات الذين ينشطون ويعملون ويدرسون في الجامعات في النمسا وهناك اعتراف بأهمية النشاط الفردي الذي يكون حافزاً للكثيرين ويريق وأمل للوصول لمرحلة من الجماعية في العمل والقدرة على توحيد الجهود والاستفادة من الخبرات المكتسبة في جميع المجالات وتقديم نوع من الدعم والاحتواء لهؤلاء الأفراد المبدعين الذين غالباً ما ينقصهم وجود محيط داعم أو يعانون من تحبيط المعنويات والانتقادات غير البناءة من باقي أفراد المجتمع السوري.

العديد من السوريين يساهمون في منظمات المجتمع المدني النمساوية، ولكن غالباً ما يكون عملهم يقتصر على مهام الترجمة أو التنسيق والتواصل، دون الحصول على فرصة كبيرة للتأثير على العمل الذي تقوم به المنظمات والذي يؤثر على مجتمعهم. ولعل ذلك ليس سببه نقص الخبرات والقدرات لدى السوريين والسوريات ولكن يعود لسيطرة أفراد المجتمع المحلي على الموارد وإمكانيات الوصول التي غالباً لا يحصل عليها السوريين القادمين الجدد. بالإضافة أيضاً لوجود تحفظات من قبل المجتمع النمساوي حول المقدرات اللغوية أو الخبرات العملية لدى السوريين. وهناك أيضاً عوامل تقنية مرتبطة بالاعتراف بالشهادات والخبرات العملية المكتسبة في سوريا.

في الفصل الخامس، سيتم التعريف ببعض منظمات الجالية السورية النشطة في النمسا. تتنوع هذه المنظمات من المبادرات الثقافية والاندماج إلى منظمات تقديم المساعدة الإنسانية والمنظمات التي تعمل في تمكين النساء وفي مجالات العمل التنموية.

من أجل تحقيق الاستفادة المثلى من إمكانات السوريين والسوريات في النمسا يمكن تطبيق هذه التوصيات التي تتوجه للدولة النمساوية والمنظمات الغير الحكومية العاملة في المجال:

- رفع مخصصات الدعم والتمويل
- زيادة الدعم النفسي
- بناء القدرات ومأسسة العمل المجتمعي
- تقديم الدعم الإداري والمالي

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study explores the development and activities of the Syrian diaspora in Austria. Research in this area is intended to inform the development of policies that support and facilitate the involvement of the Syrian diaspora in civil society activities. This can help boost their potential for social and economic contributions in Austria and foster their ability to contribute meaningfully to shaping Syria's future. Furthermore, this research highlights gaps in the engagement of the Syrian diaspora and identifies areas that require more support and resources. Governmental and nongovernmental institutions in Austria can rely on this study to plan appropriate interventions within the Syrian community in Austria. This study is intended to serve as a point of reference for future research.

The study's main research question concerns how the Syrian diaspora in Austria is organised, how and for what purposes its members are active and which obstacles they face in their diaspora activities. The study focuses on portraying the activities of the diaspora in the areas of development cooperation, community work, humanitarian assistance and political activism.

The engagement of Syrians in Austria is guided by a deep-seated sense of responsibility towards fellow Syrians, especially towards those who lost their lives during the conflict in Syria, those who have lost their lives on the way to seeking refuge and those who are still detained for political reasons.

The Syrian diaspora in Austria **primarily engages on an individual level** by providing monetary aid, mainly to family members, for short-term relief. Initiatives within the diaspora are often informal and spontaneous, corresponding to changes in Syria. Syrian-led organisations in Austria **focus primarily on local activities rather than activities in Syria**. Their efforts mainly aim to bridge the gaps in support provided to Syrians by the

state and to foster a sense of belonging among fellow Syrians by offering language courses and opportunities to participate in cultural and artistic endeavours.

Many challenges in diaspora work stem from people's lived experience in Syria and include trauma, a lack of support systems, and mistrust within the community and towards state entities. Members of the Syrian diaspora face additional challenges in relation to the Austrian state, including barriers imposed by bureaucracy, uncertain legal status and the limited ability to participate in politics due to the difficulty of accessing citizenship. Furthermore, Syrians face time constraints since diaspora engagement is mostly unpaid, and they must attend to other priorities, such as learning the language of their host country, working and taking care of their families. The absence of funding and the lack of knowledge about funding opportunities are perceived as major obstacles. Finally, women face additional challenges, such as those posed by traditional gender roles and bearing a greater share of the burden of care work.

To foster the potential of Syrian diaspora engagement, recommendations by the authors are made to both Austrian state and Austrian civil society organisations active in Austria. The most urgent recommendations are as follows:

- Increase funding allocations and access to funds
- Enhance psychological support
- Support professionalisation, capacity building and organisational management
- Increase the involvement of Syrians in the planning and implementation of projects
- Emphasise diaspora perspectives on integration and cross-cultural dialogue

The last section of the study lists the profiles of Syrian diaspora organisations that are active in Austria.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study explores the development of the Syrian diaspora in Austria, with a focus on the activities of Syrian civil society in Austria. While research on Syrian civil society engagement in other European countries has been conducted,¹ this topic is still understudied in Austria. Research in this area may inform the development of policies that support and facilitate the involvement of the Syrian diaspora in civil society activities. This can help boost the potential of the diaspora to make important social, political and economic contributions in Austria while fostering their ability to contribute meaningfully to shaping Syria's future.

This study highlights gaps in the engagement of Syrian civil society in Austria and identifies areas that require more support and resources. Both governmental and nongovernmental institutions in Austria can rely on this study to plan their interventions accordingly within the Syrian community in Austria. This study is intended to serve as a point of reference for future research.

The word 'diaspora', literally meaning 'scattered or spread about', was first used to describe the Babylonian exile of Jews thousands of years ago. Since its first documented use in 1594,² the word has acquired a broader meaning, being used to describe ethnic or religious groups scattered from their homelands due to traumatic events or displacements.³ Today, different definitions of the term are used, with partly overlapping and partly diverging criteria.

One criterion that is crucial in all definitions is the dispersal of people from one place to several places.⁴

However, except for this general criterion, scholarly divergence has created two types of definitions, both of which denote a diaspora. The first definition considers the traumatic experiences of flight and displacement as constitutive elements of a diaspora.⁵ The second definition includes those who were not forcibly dispersed but introduce different criteria, such as a collective memory and commitment to the restoration or maintenance of the homeland, aspirations to return, some alienation from the host society and a collective consciousness and solidarity.⁶ These criteria are worded slightly differently by Van Hear, who, instead of a collective consciousness and solidarity, refers to 'some kind of exchange – social, economic, political or cultural', and instead of describing a partial alienation from the host society and a memory of and commitment to the homeland, refers simply to an 'enduring presence abroad'.⁷

While most study participants are members of the diaspora according to either definition, some study participants did not flee from Syria, and others did flee from Syria but now have few to no remaining ties to Syria; they still consider themselves Syrian. Instead of arbitrarily choosing one 'correct' definition for the social phenomenon we have come to call diaspora, we propose viewing both of those (in large parts intersecting) groups as members of the Syrian diaspora, while keeping in mind that this deliberately blurs the line between those who experienced the trauma of war and those who left Syria before the war began. While both

- 1 Ragab, Nora Jasmin and Amer Katbeh: Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe: Mapping their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, in: Arab Reform Initiative, 05.12.2018), <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/syrian-diaspora-groups-in-europe-mapping-their-engagement-in-denmark-france-germany-sweden-switzerland-and-the-united-kingdom/>. [31.01.2024]; Nasser-Eddin, Nof: Gender Performativity in Diaspora. Syrian Refugee Women in the UK, in: Jane Freedman, Zeynep Kivilcim and Nurcan Özgür Baklacioğlu (eds.), *Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, Routledge, London 2017; Kodmani, Bassma and Hana Jaber: *Mapping the Syrian Diaspora: A Global Player in the Reconstruction of Syria*, in: The Arab Reform Initiative, 05.12.2018.; van Veen, Erwin and Beatrice Noun: *Peace and Security Strategies for European Engagement with Syrian Diaspora Civil Society Organisations*, Clingendael Institute, The Hague 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep36826>. [25.01.2024]
- 2 Merriam-Webster: diaspora, in: Merriam-Webster, undated, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diaspora>. [30.01.2024].
- 3 Nieswand, Boris: Was ist eine Diaspora? [What is diaspora?], in: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 05.02.2018, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/kurzdossiers/264009/was-ist-eine-diaspora/>. [31.01.2024]
- 4 See, for example, Van Hear, Nicholas: *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, Taylor and Francis Group, London 1998; Safran, William: *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, in: *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1991, p. 83; Chaliand, Gerard and Jean-Pierre Rageau: *The Penguin Atlas of the Diasporas*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1995.
- 5 Chaliand and Rageau, 1995.
- 6 Safran, 1991, 83 f.
- 7 Van Hear, 1998, p. 6.

groups are considered part of the diaspora, differences remain between those who fled and experience different hardships due to their war- and flight-related traumas and who therefore require different kinds of support (cf. 3.6.).

Due to the indistinct nature of the term diaspora, Van Hear proposes instead a more inclusive term of a 'transnational community'.⁸ While in the case of the Syrian community in Austria, the vast majority of community members are part of the Syrian diaspora, according to at least one of the above-mentioned definitions, it should be mentioned that there are also community members who are part of, yet not part of, this broader transnational community of Syrians.

The Syrian community in Austria is understudied mainly because it is a relatively young community within the country. In 2002, the number of Austrian residents born in Syria was no more than 1,784, of whom 633 held Syrian nationality. Since then, the number of Syrians living in Austria has increased significantly and is now a hundred times larger than it was twenty years ago. Currently, 68,400 Syrians reside in Austria, 64% of whom are men, with an average age of 26.3 years for all genders. The majority of Syrians residing in Austria arrived as refugees from 2014 onwards.⁹

As a country, Syria remains unsafe for the majority of its population, especially those who oppose the Assad regime. Due to the risks to their lives, Syrian refugees are unable to return to Syria, even though the scale of the conflict on the ground has significantly decreased.¹⁰ To understand why Syrian refugees have settled in such significant numbers in Austria and Europe more generally, it is essential to delve into the events surrounding the 2011 Syrian uprising, which is often referred to as a revolution by Syrians who oppose the Assad regime, which has been in power since 1970. This uprising was part of the broader 'Arab uprising' movement. While the uprising initially began as a peaceful demand for freedom of speech and fundamental rights for the Syrian people, it was met with extreme violence that result-

ed in hundreds of thousands of deaths and detentions among the civilian population and ultimately spiralled into a war.

Today, the conflict in Syria is highly complex and involves many regional and international powers on the ground and three different areas of power divided between the following factions: (1) the Assad regime, the sole recognised representative of Syria under international law; (2) the opposition backed by Turkey; (3) and the areas held by Kurdish groups. Over the course of the ongoing thirteen-year conflict, atrocities and crimes have been committed by nearly every party involved. As of mid-2023, 306,887 individuals had been killed in the war.¹¹ To this day, the Assad government maintains its grip on Syria through violence and fear, and 96,103 individuals have been politically detained or forcibly disappeared as of August 2023.¹² Notably, these numbers do not encompass the 16,610 people who have been forcibly disappeared by the other parties involved in the conflict.¹³

Many research participants stated that they do not see themselves returning to Syria any soon and that they are concentrating on building their future in Austria, eager to become active members of society, even though it is not always easy due to language barriers and the general atmosphere of an increasingly unwelcoming culture in Austria. As one participant said, 'We live here, and our future is here, but it is our duty to provide help and support to our people inside Syria'.

The moral obligation that Syrians in Austria and Europe generally express towards Syria is oftentimes related to the fact that most are themselves survivors of crimes or are relatives of victims of such crimes. On the one hand, responsibility towards victims who have lost their lives or are still missing or detained is a powerful source of motivation; on the other hand, many Syrians report feeling 'survivor's guilt'.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ÖIF: Syrische Bevölkerung in Österreich [Syrian population in Austria], Österreichischer Integrationsfonds, 2023, p. 7.

¹⁰ Frelick, Bill: No, Syria Is Still Not Safe for Refugee Returns, in: Human Rights Watch, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/29/no-syria-still-not-safe-refugee-returns>. [31.01.2024]

¹¹ UN Human Rights Office: Behind the Data: Recording Civilian Casualties in Syria, in: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 11.05.2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/05/behind-data-recording-civilian-casualties-syria#:~:text=From%20the%20total%20estimate%20of,according%20to%20UN%20Human%20Rights>. [31.01.2024]

¹² Syrian Network for Human Rights: Record of Enforced Disappearances, 04.08.2023, <https://snhr.org/blog/2023/08/04/record-of-enforced-disappearances1/>. [31.01.2024]

¹³ Ibid.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Question

The study's main research question concerns how the Syrian diaspora in Austria is organised, how and for what purposes its members are active and which obstacles they face in their diaspora activities. The research focuses primarily on the activities of the diaspora in development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, community work and political activism.

2.2 Data Use and Collection

The data used in this study include previously published academic literature on diaspora engagement and the Syrian diaspora, as well as statements given by the research participants. For collecting the information different methodologies were used: interviews, focus groups, participant observation and surveys. All research participants are people of Syrian origin currently residing in Austria (for the definition of 'diaspora' used in this study, see Section 1), with the exception of one non-Syrian expert in litigation related to pursuing criminal liability for international crimes committed in Syria.

Data were collected between June and October 2023. Three focus groups were conducted: one in Salzburg with five participants, one in Linz with nine participants (five from Upper Austria and four from Lower Austria), and one in Vienna with eight participants. Additionally, five individual interviews were conducted with active Syrian diaspora members, of which four were conducted with participants residing in Vienna, and one was conducted with a participant residing in Upper Austria.

Members of the Syrian diaspora filled out forty-two surveys for individuals, and ten active organisations filled out a survey for Syrian diaspora organisations. Participant observation was conducted while attending events hosted by and meetings between diaspora organisations.

Geographic Distribution

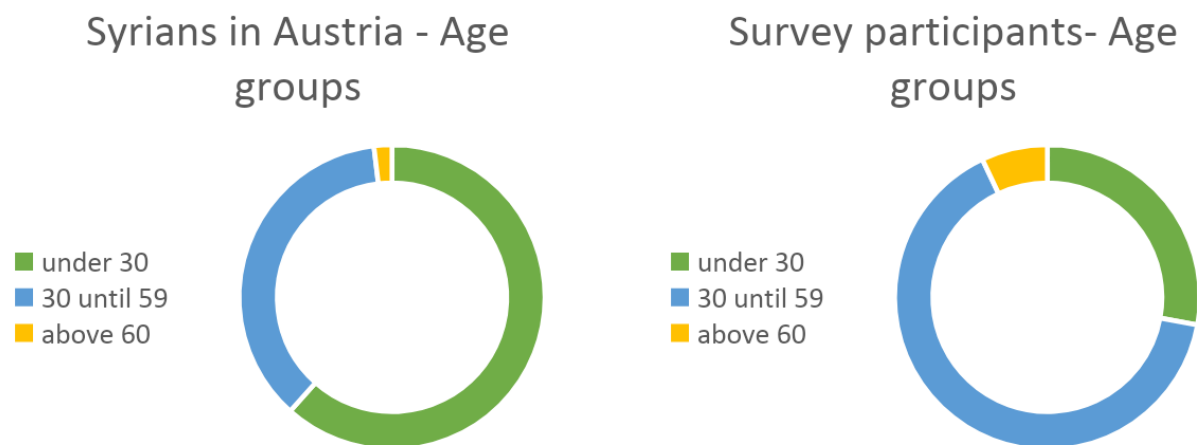
Concerning the geographic distribution of the collected data, the middle column of the following table shows the percentage of Syrians living in the Austrian provinces, and the right column shows the number of interviews (focus groups and individuals) conducted combined with the number of survey responses gathered.

Province (Austria)	Syrian nationals living in the province (%) ¹⁴	Survey and interview data gathered from participants living in the province (%)
Burgenland	1.0%	1.5%
Carinthia	3.4%	0.0%
Lower Austria	8.6%	5.9%
Upper Austria	12.0%	10.3%
Salzburg	6.4%	7.4%
Styria	9.5%	0.0%
Tyrol	7.1%	0.0%
Vorarlberg	5.1%	2.9%
Vienna	46.9%	72.0%

Table 1 A comparison of Syrian nationals living in Austrian provinces and the percentage of survey and interview data gathered from participants in the same provinces.

The table shows the proportion of Syrians in the total population of the respective federal state in comparison to the participants in this study and their place of residence. The table shows a strong concentration of Syrians in Vienna, whereas very few Syrians settle in Carinthia, Lower Austria or Tyrol. This is in line with overall trends of migration: The percentage of people living in Vienna who were not born in Austria is twice

¹⁴ ÖIF, 2023, p. 7.



Graphic 1: A comparison of Syrian nationals living in Austria¹⁷ and the percentage of survey and interview data gathered from participants according to age groups

as high as in the rest of the country.¹⁵ Reasons for that range from a wish for more connection with people of one's own origin, to the better access to German classes, to more opportunities for those not yet fluent in German.¹⁶

Age

Concerning age, Syrians in Austria tend to be quite young, with the majority (61.6%) aged under thirty years old, 36.5% aged between thirty and fifty-nine years old and less than 2% aged sixty or older. For reasons of courtesy, we chose not to ask interview or focus group participants to disclose their ages; thus, all data related to participant age refer only to survey participants.

The majority of interviewees came from the 30 to 59 age group, while the majority of Syrians in Austria belong to the under-30 age group. This divergence can be explained by a variety of factors:

- a. Several research participants stated that they felt time constraints limited their diaspora activities, especially due to work and family related obligations. Work-related time constraints are less likely to affect the 'above 60' age group.

- b. Younger Syrians, especially those who have not been in the country for long, might feel as if they have less insight into the topic of diaspora engagement due to their young age.

- c. Several research participants explained that they needed a personal connection to the person inviting them to an activity to foster the trust required to participate. In focus groups, people often attend because the head of an organisation or an influential person in their community asks them to participate. Since organisations tend to be headed by people with more life experience, this likely caused older Syrians to be overrepresented in the study.

Gender

Concerning gender, 64.1% of Syrians in Austria are male and 35.9% are female. This stark difference can be attributed to the fact that obtaining asylum in Austria is not possible from abroad and requires that one first enter Austria. As fleeing from Syria to Austria is an extremely risky undertaking, more men than women attempt it, with many expressing hopes of bringing their family through the legal instrument of family reunification; however, legal reforms have made the legal re-

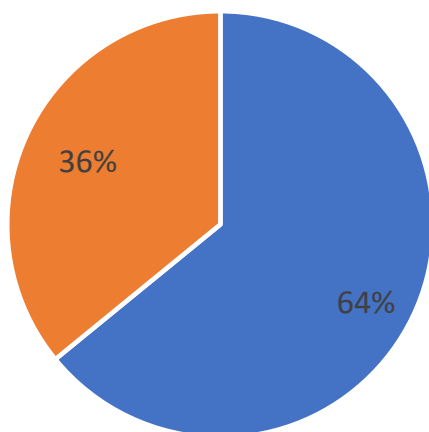
¹⁵ ÖIF: Wien. Zahlen, Daten und Fakten zu Migration & Integration [Vienna. Number, dates and facts on migration & integration], Österreichischer Integrationsfonds, 2020.

¹⁶ Cf. Tahiri, Murtaza: Warum so viele Flüchtlinge nach Wien wollen [Why so many refugees want to go to Vienna], in: Profil, 12.07.2016, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/warum-fluechtlinge-wien-stadt-mindestsicherung-7033200>. [25.01.2024].

¹⁷ Breakdown by age group of all Syrians in Austria was taken from ÖIF statistics, ÖIF, 2023, p. 6.

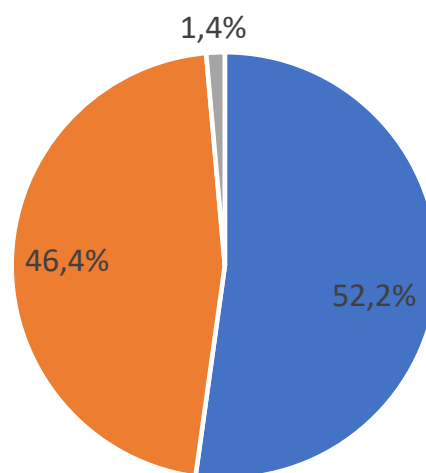
Gender of Syrians in Austria (%)

■ Male ■ Female



Gender of Research Participants (%)

■ Male ■ Female ■ Non-disclosed



Graphic 2: A comparison of Syrian nationals living Austria ²⁰ and the percentage of survey and interview data gathered from participants according to gender

quirements for attaining family reunification increasingly difficult in recent years.¹⁸ This legal situation, especially the mandatory three-year waiting period before family reunification for those people who have been issued the status of subsidiary protection,¹⁹ has led many men who came in the hope of bringing their family to remain separated from their families, who often reside in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey or Jordan. This report does not intend to further explore this issue, but since several study participants raised this topic unsolicited, we felt compelled to mention it.

As the graphic 2 shows, this study is based on the voices of 52.2% male, 46.4% female and one participant who preferred not to disclose their gender identity. This difference stems from the fact that women, who are particularly active in feminist organisations were eager to talk to us, while accessing men was more difficult due to the more religious and conservative tone of male-dominated diaspora activities.

2.3 Data Analysis

Our research revealed that Syrian diaspora organisations are active in various sectors. The profiles of those organisations whose work centres on development cooperation, humanitarian aid, integration, advocacy, consulting and social work (see Section 5) are based on their self-descriptions. We used statements from research participants to capture current Syrian diaspora activities Austria (Sections 3.1–5) and which obstacles Syrians in Austria face related to diaspora engagement (Section 3.6). Lastly, we formulated recommendations for Austrian civil society, non-Syrian-led organisations in Austria and Austrian state entities on how to foster effective diaspora engagement within the Syrian community (Section 4).

18 UNHCR: Familienzusammenführung, [Family Reunion], undated, <https://www.unhcr.org/dach/at/was-wir-tun/asyl-in-oesterreich/familienzusammenfuehrung>. [31.01.2024]

19 § 35 para. 2 Asylgesetz [Austrian Asylum Law], BGBl. I 100/20005 as amended BGBl. I 56/2018.

20 Breakdown by gender of all Syrians in Austria was taken from ÖIF statistics ÖIF, 2023, 6.

3 FINDINGS ON THE SYRIAN DIASPORA IN AUSTRIA

Most research participants asserted that they were active members of the diaspora and involved in diverse diaspora engagement efforts. Some were politically active or activists, while others were active in educational or cultural matters, matters of religion, child upbringing, sports, empowerment of women, and integration. The most prominent areas of work can be categorised as (1) community work (comprising integration in a broad sense), (2) work in Syria and in adjacent countries with Syrian refugees in the form of humanitarian assistance or development cooperation, (3) political work and (4) cultural work.

In general, the degree of diaspora organisation varied considerably between the different regions in Austria, with Syrians in bigger cities demonstrating more formal organisation and expressing greater feelings of agency. Additionally, across different fields, Syrians reported being active in non-Syrian-led NGOs, where they lend their expertise, skills and motivation to those organisations, as detailed in section 3.5.

3.1 Community Work

The primary motivation for diaspora engagement expressed by the participants is a feeling of responsibility to help other Syrians in Austria, especially newcomers. The diaspora engagement efforts observed in this study revealed a significant focus on helping the diaspora itself rather than helping people in Syria.

Diaspora work that serves other diaspora members tends to manifest as service-oriented activities with a focus on practicalities, such as performing translation tasks and facilitating connections, networking and information access for community members. This type of service-oriented work often takes the form of mutual assistance, through which participants support each other in learning German, dealing with social matters, finding employment and, less frequently, obtaining psychological support. Most integration efforts undertaken by the community can thus be characterised as social work, a type of diaspora work about which most Syrians are highly aware, which signals its importance within the community. In addition to this habitual ad hoc and

individual work, more organised attempts are being undertaken to raise awareness about issues of great practical importance to Syrians in Austria, such as the Austrian educational and vocational system or fostering social entrepreneurship.

Helping other community members with integration matters affords Syrians a chance to leverage their lived experiences to help others. While one might establish an organisation because it gives them a position of power and status vis-à-vis their community or to show off how well-integrated and successful they have become, altruism is the prime motivation for community work. As one participant explained, the question that drives this type of work is often, 'How can I serve the Syrian community in terms of its relationship with the state, the German language and translation? How can I help others access school and university?'

GOOD CASE PRACTICE

As many newcomers to Austria lack information about the Austrian education system, educational seminars were some of the most important integration measures stressed by the research participants. In such seminars, people who are knowledgeable about the Austrian education system are invited to explain it in a seminar. Participants endorsed such seminars not only for their practical purpose, but because they attract extraordinarily high rates of female participants and centre a politically neutral topic, allowing Kurdish and Arabic participants to come together.

A personal connection to the person organising an initiative is seen by the research participants as a major motivator to attend. People are also more likely to attend initiatives organised by those older than themselves and well-known community members. Research participants emphasised that organising often occurs through WhatsApp or Facebook groups and is executed in small groups, only among people who know each other to have the same political, religious and regional

backgrounds, so networking beyond existing networks of like-minded people with similar backgrounds rarely occurs.

Members of the Syrian diaspora have an overall high level of awareness regarding integration. Participants often pointed out that, from their point of view, state integration policies fail to meet the needs of the Syrian community. It is evident that this overarching concept of integration encompasses different aspects and that the state perceives these aspects differently than affected Syrians do. From the state's viewpoint, integration is framed as 'integration into values' and focuses on acculturation. From the Syrian perspective, cultural differences are less important than integration into the job market. In particular, the lack of knowledge about how the job market functions and the barriers to recognising qualifications acquired abroad were considered hindrances. A lack of knowledge about rights and responsibilities in Austria, as well as a lack of understanding about essential aspects of Austrian life, such as technology and dealing with bureaucracy, were identified as primary integration difficulties. Many Syrians perceive the state's notion of 'integration into the job market' as aimed at driving them into jobs for which they are overqualified, and integration policies do not tackle issues of qualification recognition, ignorance about the job market or how to properly apply for jobs.

This shows that different groups of people interpret the vague concept of integration in different ways, which has created a situation in which many diaspora individuals have begun their own integration initiatives to account for the failure of state-sponsored initiatives to achieve integration results. Many complained that so-called integration and value courses do not include useful tips on vocational training, education or work opportunities; in short, none of the real problems experienced by refugees and migrants are addressed. Consultations on such topics offered by Austrian NGOs were not always experienced as useful by research participants, creating the feeling that some NGOs cared more about the number of consultations they performed than about the outcome quality of those consultations.

At the same time, the lack of funding opportunities for diaspora-led integration initiatives has created the impression that they are doing the job of the Austrian state without being paid for it. One such example is that of computer courses offered for free by someone

from the Syrian diaspora. Because computer illiteracy is a common issue in the Syrian community, the courses were continuously booked out. However, despite the success of this initiative, funding proposals delivered to Austrian state institutions were unsuccessful. As a result, the course provider began offering paid courses, which led to fewer applications, as many Syrians could not afford to pay for computer literacy courses. Scenarios like this have eroded Syrians' ability to trust the earnest will of the Austrian state and civil society to integrate migrants. In particular, the fact that integration courses – some of which are mandatory – are usually taught by Austrians without firsthand experience of flight or migration contributes to a deficit in credibility. Involving a Syrian person with the ability to relate their personal experience and provide input on the material contents of the course would clearly be favoured by members of the Syrian diaspora community, as many research participants expressed.

3.2 Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation in Syria and Adjacent Countries

Few members of the diaspora seriously contemplate returning to Syria while the war is ongoing. Human Rights Watch has documented how Syrian security agencies have arbitrarily detained, kidnapped, tortured and killed refugees who returned to Syria.²¹ Rather than return, some of the interviewees consider simply transferring their resources and skills to Syria – including political experience gained in Austria – and investing monetarily in Syria, but hesitate due to fear of supporting the oppressive regime and the general closure of the market to investors due to the strict sanctions regime applied to Syria. Thus, most of the interviewees reported helping monetarily from a distance out of a obligation to help people currently residing in Syria.

While many Syrians in Austria participate in humanitarian aid or development cooperation, few mentioned their involvement unless specifically asked about it. Many seem unaware that some of their activities are regarded as development cooperation. One interviewee, who has an academic and professional background in development studies, emphasised that his Syrian compatriots have little knowledge of development studies frameworks, which may explain this discrepancy. In

²¹ Frelick, 2023.

fact, research suggests that, at times, ‘diaspora support accounted for close to 80% of the needs of forcibly displaced civilians’²² in Syria.

An explanation for diaspora individuals downplaying their involvement in humanitarian aid is that Syrians are culturally reluctant to speak about their engagement, and are afraid that their aid might violate the complex sanctions enforced against the Syrian regime and want to uphold the dignity of aid beneficiaries, especially as those receiving such aid are often family members. Thus, there is a preference for anonymous donations. The fact that remittance flows pass through informal transfer systems also increases the likelihood of researchers or development professionals underestimating the influential role of remittances.²³ While there have been some efforts to raise awareness about remittances within the community, this information does not reach all Syrians in Austria. Considering the high number of Syrians who send remittances to Syria and the legal uncertainty that many experience around this topic, this is an area that requires more awareness within the Syrian diaspora.

Initiatives for humanitarian aid for Syria tend to be informal in nature and organised on an ad hoc basis.²⁴ One participant, for example, organised reading marathons with friends to raise money to create little libraries in cafés in Syria. In response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, initiatives to raise money and necessities for people in Syria were organised spontaneously. The humanitarian catastrophe that continues to unfold in Syria intensifies in times of acute crisis, such as the 2023 earthquake, which forces Syrians abroad to contribute however they can. As an example for such a contribution is a huge campaign to gather aid for areas in Syria affected by the earthquake, which was started by one person who obtained support from a Syrian-led organisation in Vienna. The momentum of a catastrophe on the ground motivates Syrians in Austria to propose ideas and solutions to provide aid to Syria. Nonetheless, this is often a one-time activity. As the head of the Syrian-led organisation that facilitated the aid campaign said, ‘Unfortunately, we couldn’t sus-

tain the donations, although the need on the ground is still big’.

Within the Syrian diaspora, individual engagement prevails strongly over collective engagement, which aligns with previous empirical findings.²⁵ More institutionalised forms of development cooperation are rare within the Syrian diaspora, but exceptions exist, as evident in the example of Smart Academy.²⁶

GOOD CASE PRACTICE

Smart Academy is an Austrian-based social impact company, run by a development professional who is a member of the Syrian diaspora, which offers educational programmes and training courses to foster development efforts that align with municipal, national and international goals for development.

One form of individual engagement is providing monetary aid through personal donations and remittances. Most people interviewed reported supporting people in Syria through monetary aid, and most of them said that this aid is often delivered directly to family and, albeit less frequently, friends. As one focus group participant explained:

“There is a willingness to help and support on the individual level. Everybody helps their family, their friends, their acquaintances. This form of help does not attempt to be a sustainable help, but a temporary help. You transfer a small amount to somebody so he can get through the month.”

There are two reasons that most aid is delivered to friends and family and not to official organisations. First, many Syrians in Austria use what they earn to support their immediate family in Syria and do not have the disposable income available to donate to others in

22 Kodmani, Bassma: The Syrian Diaspora, Old and New, in: The Arab Reform Initiative, 05.12.2018.

23 Dean, Roger: Remittances to Syria, Norwegian Refugee Council Working Paper, 2015 <https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2015-07-nrc-remittances-to-syria-report-final-1.pdf>, p. 2.

24 See similar findings in Kodmani and Jaber, 2018.

25 Kadri, Kutayba: Politische Partizipation von syrischen Geflüchteten in Wien, Masterarbeit, Universität Wien, 2023, p. 68.

26 <https://smartacademy.at/>.

Syria. The support received by relatives abroad is a crucial lifeline for many in Syria. Second, due to negative previous experiences with Syrian organisations, many Syrians abroad have little trust in organisations on the ground. Specifically, members of the Syrian diaspora have concerns about – as one participant put it – ‘corruption and dependency on either the regime or an oppositional group’.

Those participants who hesitated to become involved in humanitarian or development efforts in Syria did so due to the political situation on the ground: the war is ongoing, and fears that any investments made could end up destroyed immediately are high. Many interviewees stressed that the situation in Syria remains in the hands of global powers rather than in those of diaspora or local Syrians. The task of helping Syria seems to some to be too great: ‘In Syria, it is not about money [...]. Our problems are political. If Europe, the United States and Russia cannot fix it, how can I fix it?’

Comments like the last one were made repeatedly, which demonstrates both the lack of agency that (diaspora) Syrians feel they have to act in response to the interests of global powers and an awareness that underdevelopment is not a ‘natural’ situation but the result of unequal global power dynamics. This awareness – that development cannot be brought technocratically through the investment of more money but requires political change – is common sense to those with lived experience in Syria. Since the same regime that has caused the flight of many in the diaspora to Austria is in the process of restabilising, and since aid to government-controlled areas passes through the government, many Syrians are afraid of enhancing the power of a regime they deem illegitimate.

3.3 Political Work of the Syrian Diaspora

Political work undertaken by the Syrian diaspora is highly diverse and ranges from demonstrations, initiatives that are critical of the regime, human rights activism, women’s empowerment, policy and advocacy work and raising Europeans’ awareness of the political situation in Syria.

As a general trend, Syrians who already took a political stance in Syria during the uprising are often still politically active and, from their new homes in Austria, continue to support the Syria-based political movements in which they previously participated. However, such political action appears to be limited to people who were previously interested in politics in their country of origin.

GOOD CASE PRACTICE

The project ‘Ana Aktivistin’, implemented by the organisation Souriat, which aims to empower Syrian women to participate in political activism, enable them to articulate and advocate their political demands in Syria and Austria. Trainings and workshops focus on politics, history and feminism in both Austria and Syria, along with an introduction to the tools of political participation. Participants are provided a safe space in which to discuss the political issues that affect them and translate their results into political action.

In the Syrian diaspora, political work encompasses facilitating international connections between Syrians. Such networks operate internationally as nonlocalised diaspora networks that connect online and are organised around a specific topic or occupational group.²⁷ Examples of such groups include Huquqyat,²⁸ a global organisation of female law practitioners engaged in legal accountability processes related to Syria; Globally Connected,²⁹ a foundation that supports diaspora Syrians in various countries and Syrians in Syria by building networks between them and hosting capacity trainings; and Women Now,³⁰ an association for women’s empowerment and the development of a democratic, free and just Syria, which operates in several EU countries, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria.

When asked how the diaspora could shape Syria’s future, one focus group participant asserted that ‘[o]nly if somebody could go to an international court and sue the [Syrian] state, we could do something’. This participant highlighted the need for justice and accountability

27 Cf. the findings of Ragab and Katbeh, 2018.

28 <https://huquqyat.org/>.

29 <https://globally-connected.org/>.

30 <https://women-now.org/>.

mechanisms in Syria, which are viewed as essential for the peace and reconciliation process.³¹ Bringing criminal proceedings before domestic courts outside Syria is currently the only means of achieving criminal liability. So-called impact litigations or public interest litigations have been brought forward in Germany, France, Sweden and Austria. According to Tatiana Urdaneta Wittek, a founding member of the Centre of the Enforcement of Human Rights International (CEHRI), such litigation depends crucially on the cooperation of the Syrian diaspora members in Europe, who despite fear of retraumatisation and no guaranteed outcome, make their allegations and testify in court, while others are involved in collecting evidence. These individuals are the most important actors in the fight for justice for war crimes in Syria. Syrians in Austria are no exception: in 2018, sixteen torture survivors from Syria filed charges against high officials of the Assad government in Austria.³² Such litigations go hand in hand with advocacy and lobbying efforts to change domestic laws to facilitate the legal prosecution of crimes committed in Syria, to better equip public prosecutors to deal with such cases and to offer assistance with the costs of the legal procedures and the necessary, culturally appropriate, psychosocial support for victims of war crimes. None of this work would be possible without the contributions of diaspora Syrians who drive justice efforts, which take an incredible psychological toll.

An important example of the role that Syrian diaspora organisations in Europe play in political work related to Syria is the establishment of a United Nations (UN) institution with a humanitarian mandate to search for missing persons in Syria. This unique body was created through a UN General Assembly resolution and could serve as a best practice for other places at conflict in the world.³³ Its establishment was the result of years of advocacy and work undertaken by victims' families and

survivors' associations, whose members all belonged to the Syrian diaspora in Europe, including Austria. These organisations are now known as 'The Charter Families', a reference to the *Truth and Justice Charter*.³⁴ Their success in establishing this UN institution shows how much organised efforts within the diaspora can achieve. Austria could play a role in fostering such diaspora work. As a neutral country, Austria could be a possible destination to host this UN institution and could facilitate the process of revealing the truth about the fates of missing persons in Syria, which is a topic of the highest importance and priority for Syrians.

3.4 Cultural Work

The cultural work of Syrians in Austria is the most visible aspect of Syrian diaspora engagement within the diaspora itself, with highly diverse Syrian cultural work being promoted through music, art, poetry and cultural lectures. One such example of the Syrian diaspora's cultural engagement in Austria is the formation of the NAI Oriental Orchestra:³⁵

GOOD CASE PRACTICE

The NAI Oriental Orchestra is based in Vienna and is a project of Verein für Arabische Österreichische Frauen (the Association for Arabic Austrian Women). Its aim is to build bridges between different cultures through music. In addition to performing music at concerts, the NAI Oriental Orchestra fosters young musical talent and promotes Syrian culture and music.

The creation of social activities, provision of recreational opportunities for the community, administration

31 Impunity Watch (ed.): Truth and Justice Charter, 2021, https://www.impunitywatch.org/wp-content/uploads/wix-legacy/f3f989_ea2bcacb-68664b52a2b9dc090b3c775e.pdf; cf. also the 'Conclusion' of Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation: *Syrien: Im Interesse der Gerechtigkeit. Können Strafprozesse gegen Kriegsverbrecher zu mehr Gerechtigkeit beitragen?* [Syria: In the Interest of Justice. Can Penal Procedures against War Criminals Contribute to More Justice?], undated, <https://www.vidc.org/detail/syrien-im-interesse-der-gerechtigkeit>. [31.01.2024].

32 European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR): 16 Survivors of Torture from Syria File Criminal Charges against High Functionaries of the Assad Government, 29.05.2018, <https://www.ecchr.eu/pressemitteilung/16-folterueberlebende-aus-syrien-stellen-in-oesterreich-strafanzeige-gegen-hohe-funktionaere-der-assad-regierung/>. [05.12.2018]

33 UN: General Assembly Adopts Resolution Establishing Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, Meetings Coverage and Press Release, 29.06.2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12514.doc.htm>. [15.12.2024]

34 Impunity Watch, 2021.

35 NAI Oriental Orchestra – <https://www.youtube.com/@naiorientalorchestra2277>; see also the description for MOSAIC. Das NAI Oriental Orchestra und Gastgeber:innen [The NAI Oriental Orchestra and Hosts], in: Das Muth, 23.04.2023, <https://muth.at/programm/mosaic-2023-04-23/>.

of language programmes (in Arabic and Kurdish), and sponsorship of religious activities are all forms of cultural work undertaken by the Syrian diaspora. The line between integration and cultural work is blurry, and many organisations undertake both at the same time. Since culture is a less disputed area than politics, this area of diaspora work makes it easier for Syrians to meet each other and form a community, thus serving the need for emotional support, which for many has been most prevalent in the years directly after their flight to Austria.

Alongside art, sport is another field that is less politically controversial. The Syrian diaspora in Austria also boasts several sports clubs. In football alone, Syrians founded the SKV Syrien Union Wien,³⁶ SV Rojava,³⁷ and FC Kurd Wien.³⁸ Some of these clubs also offer cultural activities, which demonstrates how sports clubs promote diaspora connectivity off of the field.

Importantly, many Syrians are critical of integration and view it as a one-sided demand by Austrian politicians. Accordingly, they often prefer spaces where people from different cultures can meet and learn from each other.³⁹ Many interviewees wished for Austrian society to be more welcoming to facilitating more sharing between the two communities, and some members of the Syrian diaspora are now leading initiatives that focus on cross-cultural dialogue programmes. Educating Austrians about Syria's diversity is also considered a means of helping Austrians to view Syrians as a heterogeneous group, which is important to the diaspora, because it is distressing when one Syrian does something reprehensible and the blame is placed on Syrians as a whole.

Thus, cultural work takes many different forms in order to fulfil different purposes. While music and poetry e. g. allow people to feel a connection to Syrian culture, sports or other recreational opportunities can be used to connect in a safe way, where political differences can be set aside. Mother-tongue language classes allow younger generations who are raised in Austria to retain a connection to Syrian culture. Lastly, cross-cultural spaces and exchanges are a way to combat the stereotyping that Syrians experience in Austria and that impacts them negatively as a community.

3.5 Syrian Diaspora Engagement in Non-Syrian-Led NGOs in Austria

Members of the Syrian diaspora work with non-Syrian-led organisations in many different areas, from humanitarian organisations to those focused on integration. Non-Syrian-led organisations, such as the Diakonie, Volkshilfe or the Red Cross (among others), are attractive to many Syrians due to the funding opportunities they offer, which are unattainable for many diaspora organisations, which lack the necessary knowledge to access grants. The decision of many Syrians to contribute their knowledge and skills to such organisations has created momentum: Newly arrived Syrians are more inclined to turn to Austrian organisations, as often those organisations have already provided them with services or they already know other Syrians working there.

Syrians have seen the numerous positive effects of working for and with Austrian or international NGOs, including those related to integration, the added value of their language skills, opportunities to promote acceptance of Syrian culture among non-Syrian colleagues and promoting the necessary cultural sensitivity that Austrians working with recently arrived Syrians sometimes lack. The most frequently identified positive effects were the valuable contributions to multicultural society provided by Syrian experiences and perspectives, which deepen the organisation's understanding of certain issues and foster a more inclusive and diverse work environment. Syrian organisation members use their position to alert non-Syrian colleagues to issues and topics that are important to the Syrian community.

However, the impact of Syrians on non-Syrian organisations is limited. Their roles often focus on interpretation activities or are primarily related to auxiliary and assistant tasks. Syrians rarely have leadership roles, participate in planning or making decisions and are instead limited to execution tasks. As a consequence some got the impression that Syrians are not trusted to take care of their community's affairs. If decision-making does not become more participatory, there is a risk that Syrians in these organisations feel as if they merely serve

36 <https://bfv.at/bfv/Verein/1827?SKV-Syrien-Union-Wien>.

37 <https://vereine.oefb.at/SVRoja/Verein/Kontakt/>.

38 <https://www.facebook.com/kurdWien/>.

39 For a recent publication on the subject of how to successfully conduct such intercultural dialogues and which was co-authored by an Austria-based Syrian, see Ahlers, Corina, Natascha Vittorelli, Gustav Glück and Aladin Nakshbandi: *Die Anderen sind wir*, V&R, 2020.

representational purposes. This frustration may lead to resignation if unaddressed, as in the case of one Syrian woman who, after years of volunteer involvement with Austrian NGOs in the field of refugee support, sought out a paid job in that field but was not successful: ‘No matter how good you are, you never end up in the organisational team’. In the end, for her, this experience led to her turning away from this line of work.

In many instances, ‘those in charge of those organisations think that they know better what Syrians need than the Syrians themselves’ stated one participant. There is a noticeable lack not only of Syrians but also of people from the Global South, more generally, who hold positions of influence in organisations that are active in Austria and that work either in the Global South or with individuals from the Global South who reside in the Global North. The lack of representation of People of Colour and people with lived experience in the Global South is affecting the legitimacy of those organisations in the eyes of the Syrian diaspora; moreover, these organisations are not making use of the experience and skills that diaspora individuals bring to the table. This situation has caused Syrians to demand more participation in decision-making regarding activities that involve their communities.

This issue is mirrored in projects focused on the empowerment and integration of Syrians funded by Austrian state institutions. Such projects often focus on fostering artistic talents; however, the nature of these projects, which culminate in art exhibitions, concerts and other events, does not lead to qualified vocational training for youth or the development of transferable skills that help them on the labour market once the project is completed. Thus, these projects do not match the self-identified needs of the Syrian community. Of course, counterexamples also exist, such as those of the young people who received vocational training in nursing from an Austrian NGO that helped them find well-paid and secure jobs after their involvement with the NGO.

Another source of chagrin is the lack of financial compensation many receive for their efforts in Austrian NGOs. When NGOs obtain funding for working with refugees that does not translate into material benefits

for the refugees who support these activities, frustrations rise.

Discrimination, in particular racism, is a wound in the relationship between the Syrian diaspora and Austrian civil society. As one focus group participant in Salzburg stated,

“Neither [Austrian] society nor the [Austrian] state want us to become independent. If they see us as successful, Austrians feel threatened. Teachers, for example, are shocked if our children go to higher schooling.”

Instances where Syrians felt that their Syrian origin made them less deserving of raises or higher positions in the eyes of Austrian colleagues led to anger and resignation for some. Many Syrian women who wear a veil struggle to find jobs, even in lines of work considered ‘progressive’, such as working with NGOs. Such experiences are not isolated cases,⁴⁰ and they erode trust in Austrian society, while the lack of political response to such well-documented problems erodes trust in the Austrian state.

3.6 Challenges in Diaspora Engagement

Challenges experienced in diaspora work, while widely varied, can be roughly categorised as (1) divisions within the Syrian community in Austria, (2) funding and bureaucracy, (3) trauma, the need for psychosocial support and lack of supply and (4) gender and generational differences. The following sections address these struggles in more detail.

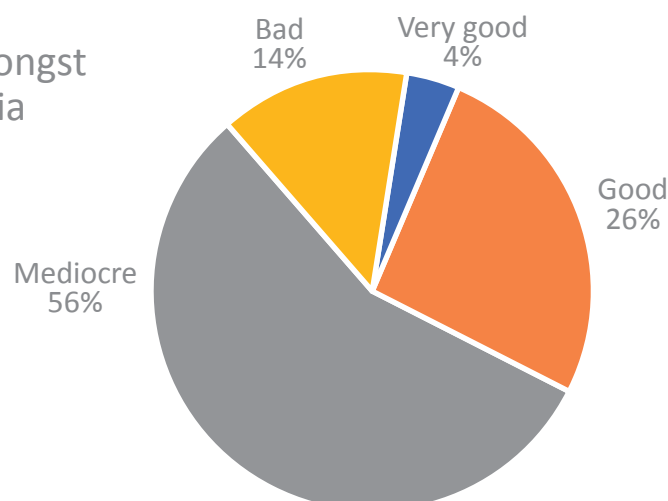
3.6.1 Divisions within the Syrian Community in Austria

Due to the dictatorship, it was not possible to engage in civil society activities and gain experience in democracy in Syria itself.⁴¹ The freedom of movement in Syria is severely restricted. As a result, there is little exchange between the different regions. Therefore, Syrians sometimes experience culture shock and prejudice

40 Cf. Perchinig, Bernhard; Jimmy Perumadan; Bilger, Veronika: Arbeitsmarktintegration von geflüchteten Frauen in Österreich, Deutschland und Norwegen [Integration into the Labour Market of Refugee Women in Austria, Germany and Norway], International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Wien 2022, p. 81 ff; on Syrian women in the UK, cf. Nasser-Eddin, 2017, p. 145.

41 These findings are supported by van Veen and Noun, 2021, p. 11.

Connection amongst Syrians in Austria



Graphic 3: Connections amongst Syrians in Austria

after arriving in Austria when they meet Syrians from other Syrian regions. The Syrian diaspora is still affected by the political oppression experienced in Syria, even though these individuals are now in a safe environment. Living in a society where anyone might be an informant for a powerful state fosters feelings of mistrust, even towards one's closest family members. The most famous example of this is the oppression by the Stasi in East Germany:

“The consequences of this defamatory erosion of trust and solidarity within groups, as well as of self-confidence and professional and societal development opportunities, were sometimes catastrophic for those affected [...] and in some cases continue to have an impact to this day.”⁴²

In Syria, oppression was and is often carried out by the Mukhabarat, ‘a much less refined version of the Stasi, who at different points in history trained the Syrians in methods’.⁴³ This explains the mistrust that makes it difficult for Syrians to trust the state and each other, which creates barriers to building long-lasting and more inclusive organisations or to coming forward to start an organisation in the first place. The decision to participate in events or organisations, for example, is for many

Syrians based (in part) on personally knowing the person who made the invitation.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the war in Syria is also being waged by several foreign powers. The sense that Syria's fate lies in the hands of global powers, rather than Syrians themselves, makes it difficult for the diaspora to contemplate any positive impact it might have on the country. Some also avoid Syrian initiatives due to fear of foreign influence from Qatar, Turkey or the Muslim Brotherhood. Their influence on diaspora organisations can be subtle at first, making it difficult for individuals to assess new organisations quickly.⁴⁴ In particular, Kurdish participants were very suspicious of religious influences in diaspora activities.

The issue of division has been further complicated by the current Austrian integration strategy, which does not consider strengthening diaspora communities a goal and is rather strictly focused on the prevention of ‘parallel societies’, which leads to little effort directed towards diaspora community building. In consequence, it is more attractive for some Syrians to pursue their activities outside of Syrian-led associations, which are less affected by intra-Syrian divisions and often have access to more financial means.

As evident in the graphic 3, the research participants' views on the state of connection within the diaspora in Austria were mixed overall, with most viewing the state

42 Süß, Sonja: Politisch missbraucht? Psychiatrie und Staatssicherheit in der DDR [Politically Abused? Psychiatry and State Security in the GDR], Ch. Links Verlag, 1999, p. 684; Trobisch-Lütge, Stefan: Psychofolgen bis heute: ‘Zersetzungs’-Opfer der DDR-Geheimpolizei [Psychological Consequences until Today: The GDR-Secret Police's Victims of Corrosion], in: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 07.10.2016, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutsche-teilung/stasi/218417/psychofolgen-bis-heute-zersetzungs-opfer-der-ddr-geheimpolizei/>. [31.01.2024].

43 Malek, Alia: How a Syrian War Criminal Was Brought to Justice, in: The New York Times, 27.01.2022.

44 Neumann, Peter R., Nicolas Stockhammer, Heiko Heinisch and Nina Scholz: Lagebild Extremismus und Migration. Fallstudien aus vier österreichischen Migrations-Communitys [Overview of Extremism and Migration: Case Studies from Four Austrian Migration Communities], Austrian Chancellery & Ministry of Interior, 2022, https://www.bmi.gv.at/bmi_documents/3020.pdf. [25.01.2024], p. 36.

of connection between Syrians as mediocre and a minority viewing it as bad. On a positive note, no participants identified the state of connection among Syrians in Austria as very bad; however, participant assessments of connection quality within the community depended largely on which activity was being conducted, with some interviewees emphasising that working in the diaspora was only possible if they restricted themselves to nonpolitical topics and activities. Thus, while connectivity appears high in relation to economic matters, connectivity appears low in relation to work on issues of justice, political change, human rights advocacy or development cooperation, the latter of which is perceived as inherently political (see Section 3.2). Oftentimes, Syrians expressed pride in their fellow Syrians in Austria, whom they described as hardworking, determined and resilient. Rather than contradicting the general climate of mistrust, this sentiment compliments it, as Syrians perceive each other to have made great achievements not as a community but *individually*, because they do not support each other in making those achievements.

These findings align with previous research on Syrian diaspora groups in six other European countries, which revealed that ‘the same (political, ethnic or religious) tensions that escalated and perpetuate the conflict are reproduced in the Syrian diaspora in Europe’.⁴⁵ In particular, the cleavage between Arab and Kurdish Syrians is noticeable in diaspora work. Kurdish Syrians identified primarily as Kurdish (rather than Syrian) and found it much easier to speak on behalf of the Kurdish community than to speak on behalf of the entire Syrian community. The use of the Kurdish language has been largely suppressed by the Assad regime in Syria,⁴⁶ for which reason a large part of Kurdish diaspora work focuses on teaching the Kurdish language to children in the community. Naturally, such activities are not suited to cooperation with Arab Syrians; however, Kurdish participants have also provided anecdotes of instances where collaboration across ethnic boundaries succeed, for example, in relation to initiatives that focus on women’s empowerment and psychological care.

3.6.2 Funding and Bureaucracy: Overload of Voluntary Work and Lack of Facilities

There is a palpable lack of support from the Austrian state, which is apparent in the shortage of resources, especially in terms of financial assistance, and the absence of connections to decision-makers in the country. A particularly frustrating example comes from an integration and development professional who developed his own integration strategy proposals, on which he based programmes that had considerable success and garnered admirers from abroad but was unable to secure funding from Austrian state institutions. Syrians have the impression as though the Austrian state preferred to set the agenda for programmes aimed at their community rather than allowing the community to have a say in the content of such programmes.

Many participants emphasised the lack of state funding as a major obstacle, and the few funding opportunities available to organisations often increased competition between them.⁴⁷ This competition has led to a mindset that is incompatible with cooperation. The divisive effects of mistrust on the community are amplified through this situation of competing for funding. One example of the negative outcomes of this has been an instance of the use of rumours to turn potential donors away from some Syrian diaspora organisations.

As the concept of donors from the private sector supporting diaspora work is not used by Syrians (or other diaspora communities in Austria), state (and EU) institutions remain the only viable funding options. Empirical studies show that this situation holds true for the Syrian diaspora in Europe in general.⁴⁸

Funding for Syrian diaspora activities across Europe is always limited to short terms, which is an obstacle to long-term projects, capacity building and much-needed professionalisation.⁴⁹ An interviewee offered an example from her personal experience:

‘It was very unfair. It [The project] had this great, positive effect and you have built a community, but as soon as the funding is gone, everything is over. [...] They build people up with those projects and all of a sudden, the funding is gone and so are you.’

⁴⁵ Ragab and Katbeh, 2018.

⁴⁶ Blanche, Fabrice: Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war-geopolitical-study>, [31.01.2024]

⁴⁷ van Veen and Noun, 2021, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

Initiatives to achieve justice for international crimes committed in Syria – an endeavour that relies crucially on the Syrian diaspora – also suffer from funding shortages. Funding from the NGOs that bring such procedures forward depends on private donors, which means it is often short-term and volatile.

Another major problem related to funding is that it is often conditional on specific areas of activity, and these do not always coincide with the needs of the diaspora. For example, people who recently escaped from a war zone urgently require psychological support, but when they turn towards the existing diaspora community activities, they find initiatives focused mainly on arts and culture.

Another result of underfunding is the fact that diaspora work is largely unpaid. Since many diaspora individuals struggle with other aspects of life (e.g. housing, paid work, education and family issues), managing volunteer work alongside other responsibilities is difficult. Many are preoccupied with the emotional challenges of their uncertain legal status, temporary residence permits (limited to one year) or the legal hurdles involved in family reunification.

Diaspora Syrians in Austria experience language to be a major obstacle in their life in Austria. Especially older individuals struggle with language learning. Language becomes an even bigger hurdle in the context of dealing with bureaucracy and Austrian state authorities. The examples of difficulties in dealing with Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl (BFA), or the Department for Immigration and Citizenship in Vienna (MA 35), were mentioned explicitly by research participants. In the context of diaspora work, e. g. to establish an organisation, plan an event or apply for government funding, regulations are difficult to understand. Research participants held a fear – although often not justified – of making any kind of mistake that would allow the municipality to use it against their application. The language difficulties in addition to a general mistrust of the state as an entity (cf. Section 3.6.) and a lack of knowledge regarding laws and the functionality of the state, make bureaucracy an obstacle in diaspora work.

An additional barrier to diaspora engagement is the difficulty of obtaining **Austrian citizenship**. Travelling with a Syrian passport is difficult and makes it hard to network with a global diaspora, as visas are often needed, expensive, and difficult to obtain. Those who do not have Austrian citizenship have severely limited

political rights in Austria and are not eligible to vote in national parliamentary elections, state parliamentary elections, presidential elections, municipal council elections, mayoral elections or European Parliament elections. Additionally, they are not allowed to participate in binding or consultative referenda, popular initiatives [Volksinitiativen] or European Citizens' Initiatives. They are only eligible to vote in workers' councils, the Chamber of Labour and student union elections or through active voting rights in elections of the Chamber of Commerce. While attending public gatherings is allowed, they are not permitted to organise public gatherings themselves.⁵⁰ In short, opportunities for political participation are severely limited for non-citizens.

A significant amount of discourse within the diaspora occurs solely online due to the **lack of physical space** available for workshops and long-term activities. Multiple Syrian diaspora organisations held their first meetings and assemblies in various McDonald's locations. The lack of organisation within the Syrian community, the scarcity of Syrian associations and the absence of safe networking spaces, specifically, were identified as hindrances that limited activities within the diaspora. In particular, there is a shortage of spaces where people can freely express diverse opinions. A participant, who had already succeeded in establishing an initiative in Austria to further education in Syria, said:

“If I had a basis of multiple like-minded people who could contribute something, I would be more motivated and I could do more.”

There is currently no platform to allow people in the diaspora to find each other in order to pursue common ideas or implement projects together (be they in fields such as culture, politics, development or humanitarian assistance), or to allow those within the diaspora who require assistance to connect with those who provide it. Many who are looking for information about integration, education, vocational training, language acquisition, housing and work opportunities have no place to find answers except for Facebook groups, which not always give correct information.

⁵⁰ Kadri, 2023, p. 34.

3.6.3 Trauma, the Need for Psychosocial Support and Lack of Supply

Trauma and other psychological problems related to the war in Syria pose significant obstacles to collective action. One interviewee, a Syrian diaspora psychologist, stressed that severe psychological problems and trauma continue to haunt the community. Furthermore, because families are scattered across different countries due to the war, familial bonds have also broken down for many members of the diaspora. Many members of the Syrian diaspora in Austria still have family members in Syria, and witnessing their hardships places a significant emotional burden on them, which makes it difficult for them to engage in additional activities. There are also legitimate security concerns related to their activism, which they fear could jeopardise the safety of family members still in Syria due to the political power of the current regime.

Dealing with trauma, which is difficult to begin with, is complicated by the fact that the circumstances that caused the trauma have not changed. Many perpetrators of violence and oppression in Syria remain in power, and diaspora Syrians are keenly aware that should they return to Syria, they would likely face the same oppressive and often deadly treatment that they escaped by fleeing abroad. Furthermore, dealing with trauma is a highly individual matter. Some participants avoided work related to the diaspora, because the work triggered their trauma, while others credited trauma with their commitment to diaspora engagement.

Importantly, trauma creates communication and connection difficulties, even for those who have not experienced it firsthand. Even children born to Syrians in Austria can have psychological issues related to their parents' war traumas.⁵¹

3.6.4 Challenges Pertaining to Gender and Generational Differences

It is worth noting that not all barriers to diaspora engagement apply to all members of the diaspora to the same extent. Specifically, many women in the community are especially impacted by a lack of knowledge about women's rights, the intersection of several burdens, and gender roles.

Women, especially those who are married or who have children, often have a harder time accessing train-

ings, workshops and various initiatives, whether these are related to the diaspora or not. Since women tend to be the primary caregivers for children in Syrian society, women with children frequently encounter scenarios where, for example, workshops do not provide child-care, which makes them inaccessible to this population.

Approaches to gender sensibility within Syrian-led organisations vary considerably. Some do not claim to take a gender-sensitive approach at all, which highlights the dominance of male-centric thinking which still exists in the Arab and Kurdish culture, while others emphasise raising awareness about gender diversity or seek to empower women specifically through the activities they offer. Feminist and women-led organisations developed more precise ideas of how to incorporate gender into their work.

Whereas participants agreed to a general consensus that women should be included in diaspora work, some are not aware of the structural exclusion of women and the corresponding need for structures that deliberately empower and include women. One interviewee active in the artistic field, stated, 'Women naturally participate in the field of artistic work, so no need to empower them; they empower us'. While the well-meaning behind this statement is obvious, it also shows a lack of understanding for the needs to actively include women. Participants sometimes expressed that the topic of gender sensitivity was imposed on them, leading to friction in cooperation between Austrians and Syrians. An example given was the inclusion of gender sensibilisation in projects, which Austrians insisted on, and Syrians felt unqualified to do.

One interviewee who was actively involved in education about gender, among other things, stressed the importance of education and liberal upbringings for girls and boys, especially the need to equip women with skills that make them fit for the labour market, as the ability to earn one's own money is key to confidence and independence. Additionally, Syrian women might require different support from that offered by dominant (white) feminism. In particular, Syrian women felt more comfortable attending and contributing to activities without men being present. As the interviewed participants explained, while they were criticised for this approach by some Austrians, the approach fostered the trust and confidence necessary for some women to open up to participate in activities.

51 Cf. Sangalang, Cindy C. and Cindy Vang: Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systematic Review, in: J Immigrant Minority Health, No. 19, 2017, pp. 745-754.

At the moment, questions of how to raise children are discussed heavily in the Syrian diaspora within Austria. Women, in particular, are experiencing difficulties for multiple reasons. First, children often speak better German than their parents, which inverts authority within the family and leads to frustration for parents, who have a difficult time speaking up for their children, when they need support e.g. at school. One participant raised the example of Syrian children being sent to schools for children with special needs, even though their behaviour, which was perceived as unusual in Austria, was well within Syrian cultural norms and related primarily to their inability to speak the German language. Second, the **cultural gap** between parents and children is widening, which makes many parents worry, feeling that they do not understand the culture, in which their children live. This emerging cultural gap can create conflict of values not just between the host community and the diaspora, but also between different generations of the diaspora. One research participant e.g. explained that different views on the LGBTIQ+ community can spark conflicts between diaspora Syrian parents and their children. Third, many Syrian parents are concerned about what kind of support they can seek without repercussions from child protective services. Some are afraid that obtaining a divorce or seeking psychological help will lead to their children being taken away due to negative experiences or rumours concerning child protective services.

Members of the diaspora have expressed that workshops on topics about which Syrian mothers are concerned would be highly appreciated. Nevertheless, some of the existing workshops offered by Austrian state entities fail to recognise the unique needs of women in the diaspora and do not provide appropriate support for their current situation. State-sponsored workshops on sexual pedagogy, for example, were deemed insufficient to meet the needs of the community and overwhelmed the community members with foreign concepts. Reaching those who are sceptical of foreign concepts requires an approach that is moderate, sensitive to cultural taboos and appropriate for children and parents alike. Closer cooperation with the diaspora might help close the gap between the support that is required and the support that is offered.

Generational conflicts further complicate cooperation within the Syrian diaspora beyond questions of childcare. It is likely that the generation of Syrians born or brought up from a young age in Austria will communicate better in German than they do in Arabic or Kurdish, while older Syrians often struggle to master the German language. Several of the Syrians interviewed who arrived in Austria in the 1990s pointed out a large gap between Syrians who left before the war and those who suffered through the war, as the latter often struggled with traumas not experienced by the former. Syrians who have been in Austria for a longer time reported that their children did not know how to properly communicate with children who recently arrived from war-torn Syria and displayed anger or other behavioural issues, which in turn led them to avoid activities with other Syrians. Even for those who arrived in Austria after the Syrian war began, as more and more of their friends and family have fled Syria too, ties with Syria have become weaker, and the gap between diaspora Syrians and people in Syria has widened:

“I think there is this gap between those in Europe and those in Syria. Here, people experience depression; there they don’t have electricity and water. We no longer understand each other. I don’t have any more friends in Syria.”

The Syrian diaspora in Austria has expanded through multiple waves of refugee movement to Austria, each of which has faced slightly different challenges. Due to having more lived experience with the war in Syria and the increasingly difficult flight routes to Europe, later arrivals (from 2017 onwards) require more psychological and educational support than previous arrivals. Furthermore, some animosity exists between pre-2011 diaspora members and those who fled after the war began, although many pre-2011 diaspora members used their considerable time and knowledge to engage in diaspora work by helping post-2011 diaspora members considerably, which demonstrates how important it is to avoid making generalisations.⁵² In a 2017 study on various Muslim ethnic groups in Austria, Syrians displayed a higher level of attachment to their country of

52 See possible explanations for animosity proposed by Kodmani and Jaber, 2018.

origin than other diaspora groups.⁵³ While those results are at least partially attributable to many Syrians having only recently arrived in Austria, Syrians who have been living in Austria since the 1990s also feel highly attached to Syria, especially in times of crisis, such as the 2023 earthquake, when diaspora engagement for Syria also increased in this group.

In conclusion, the challenges vary from divisions within the Syrian community in Austria, struggles concerning funding and bureaucracy, trauma, the need for

psychosocial support to gender and generational differences. Those issues often intersect and affect everybody to a different degree based on one's gender, age, and social status. Despite the multitude of challenges faced by Syrians in their attempts to organise as a diaspora, the positive aspects of collective engagement outweigh those challenges, because there is a clear wish within the Syrian diaspora in Austria to engage more in civil society.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the interest of encouraging diaspora engagement within the Syrian diaspora community, we make several recommendations in the following order: (1) recommendations that apply to both the Austrian state and organisations active in Austria; (2) recommendations that apply to the Austrian state in particular; and (3) recommendations that apply to Austrian civil society organisations.

4.1 General Recommendations

Support in Professionalisation and Capacity Building

The potential for development cooperation within the Syrian diaspora is currently underused. Syrians in Austria possess an excellent understanding of the political dimensions of development work and recognise underdevelopment both as a discourse and as the result of unequal local and global power dynamics. Their understanding of development expands beyond a technocratic one; however, this study has demonstrated a great deal of anecdotal evidence that indicates how many Syrians in the diaspora have not acquired the technical skills needed for strategic development coop-

eration. Skills such as operating data reporting systems or conducting risk analysis can be learned, but established organisations in the field of development cooperation must devote time and resources to teaching these skills. Education on project management and proposal writing would significantly increase the diaspora's ability to secure funds and use its position in Europe to strategically lobby for and mediate development efforts in Syria. Advocacy, as a type of diaspora work, is notably scarce in Austria; however, it can be amplified through capacity building in this area.

Support in Organisational Management

Establishing an organisation, obtaining funding, maintaining initiative and networking with other initiatives are considerable problems for diaspora engagement in Austria. Existing Austrian civil society organisations and Austrian state institutions are equipped with the knowledge required to advise emerging Syrian diaspora initiatives on matters of financial administration, organisational management and related concepts. Advising Syrian diaspora organisations on these matters could prove vital to furthering their impact.

⁵³ Filzmaier, Peter and Flooh, Perlot: Muslimische Gruppen in Österreich. Einstellungen von Flüchtlingen, ZuwanderInnen und in Österreich geborenen MuslimInnen im Vergleich [Muslim Groups in Austria. Attitude of Refugees, Immigrants and Austrian-Born Muslims in Comparison], ÖIF-Forschungsbericht, Wien, 2017, p. 21.

Considering Syrian Diaspora Perspectives on Integration and Facilitating Them

This study has revealed a significant discrepancy between integration as envisioned by the state and integration as needed by the Syrian community. Future integration policies should consult those most affected to assess the status quo and the needs of communities to improve those policies. Integration courses and similar initiatives would improve tremendously if people from the affected communities were involved in the creation of course material and the execution of such courses.

Several participants praised ‘buddy’ or mentorship systems wherein recently immigrated Syrians are paired with an Austrian person to help them navigate their lives in a new country. The chance to receive tailored advice on how to access health services, the educational system or the job market helped many, who had the chance to participate in such kind of projects. Receiving this type of support from the host community improved the integration and level of diaspora activity. Thus, the state should support such initiatives, and ideally, Syrian-led NGOs should also investigate offering these mentoring programmes.

While most diaspora Syrians informally help other diaspora members, no formal institutionalisation of mutual assistance in the areas of bureaucracy, education, translation tasks and similar issues exists. A platform to facilitate networking and knowledge exchange within the community would help active Syrian diaspora members tremendously as long as impartiality is guaranteed. Such a platform could facilitate the giving and receiving of assistance with bureaucracy, translation tasks, or other areas of community work. Both the Austrian state, especially through the Österreichischer Integrationsfonds (ÖIF), and Austrian civil society organisations are in an ideal position to guarantee such neutrality and could, through their platforms, formalise the work that diaspora members are currently doing in their personal time, on a voluntary basis, for the benefit of others.

Provision of Funding

The state should make funds available for diaspora work to make use of the diaspora’s potential to positively influence Syria’s future and the community’s integration into Austrian society. Fully funded opportunities where participants receive remuneration provide motivation to participate in diaspora work. Thus, creating

more accessible funding opportunities would increase the number of Syrians who can afford to participate in diaspora engagement. Austrian organisations with mandates to further integration, development cooperation or humanitarian aid in Syria should also consider supporting Syrian diaspora organisations financially (especially in the form of subfunds) or materially, such as by offering physical spaces in which to conduct diaspora work. Many interviewees stressed that even assistance with renting rooms for their activities and meetings would allow them to increase their work in scope and frequency. Funding would allow diaspora initiatives to work in the long term, invest in building member capacity and professionalise their activities, all of which are critical for improving the efficacy of diaspora engagement.⁵⁴ Research participants exhibited a high degree of understanding in relation to the prerequisite audits required before receipt of funding but explained that they did not have the chance to apply for state funding due to a lack of opportunities offered by the state and its institutions.

4.2 Recommendations to Austrian State Institutions

Cooperation in Cross-Cultural Initiatives

From the perspective of the diaspora, successful integration initiatives involve the active participation of both Syrian and Austrian individuals. Cross-cultural events and dialogue programmes are important for reducing stereotypes on both sides but require involvement from Austrian civil society. Whereas diaspora organisations have established the trust and connections required to motivate Syrians to attend, local Austrian state institutions at the community or district level should do more to motivate Austrians to participate in these initiatives. Syrians involved in such initiatives have noticed that Austrians are more involved in activities or events when those are promoted or cohosted by municipal councils.

Provision of Psychotherapy

Psychological therapy is required for many Syrians to deal with trauma, and many participants lamented that therapy is unavailable to them. As one participant explained, ‘Every Syrian needs intensive therapy in their mother tongue and without waiting times’. Participants linked therapy to becoming more active in the dias-

⁵⁴ van Veen and Noun, 2021, pp. 11 ff.

pora and more integrated overall. As stressed by Oula Khattab, a professional in the field of psychosocial support for refugees, in an interview, psychological recovery is key to successful diaspora engagement, and therapy sessions should ideally be obligatory for newcomers and be available as an option for refugees who have been in Austria longer. For those who have survived war, displacement, sexual violence and those whose relatives are still affected by the situation on the ground in Syria, there are insufficient options for accessing psychological treatment. The state should provide the required psychological support while also training individuals within especially affected communities, such as the Syrian diaspora community, to deliver those services as well. Members of the Syrian diaspora are well suited to providing psychosocial support to members of their own community because they can deliver it in a culturally appropriate way that avoids frustrations and retraumatisation while avoiding triggering the mistrust that people have developed due to the political circumstances in Syria. If the Austrian state is sincerely interested in prosecuting international crimes committed in Syria, this is only possible with the aid of culturally appropriate psychosocial support for victims.

4.3 Recommendations to Organisations Based in Austria

More Diaspora Participation in Decision-Making and Planning

Initiatives concerned with integration should take cooperation with diaspora initiatives into consideration due to their existing networks and the preestablished trust between members, which constitutes an important motivating factor for Syrians who are considering whether to participate in an activity or not. However, such initiatives must not make use only of diaspora organisations (or diaspora individuals) for their connections and translation skills but must actively involve them in the planning and organisation of activities to tailor activities to the needs of the community.

For Austrian organisations that aim to empower refugees and migrants, those committed to supporting integration or those that work in Syria, employing Syrians is key to reaching their goals, legitimising their efforts and positively impacting the Syrian community. It is imperative to employ Syrians not only as translators but also in positions that have a tangible impact on the work of these organisations.

Enhancing Cooperation between Diaspora and Non-Diaspora Organisations

Cooperation between organisations – both diaspora-to-diaspora organisations and non-diaspora organisations – must be increased. Enhancing cooperation may involve sharing best practices, networking and capacity building or, most importantly, sharing access to physical spaces. Networking opportunities drive people to become more actively involved in the diaspora and can thus be used to increase engagement.

5 SYRIAN DIASPORA ORGANISATIONS IN AUSTRIA

The following section provides a comprehensive overview of Syrian-led organisations active in Austria at the time of publication. It is important to note that, in addition to organising along the collective identity of being Syrian, many members of the diaspora also organise based on a shared language (Arabic or Kurdish) or on a shared orientation towards providing services that address the needs of other refugees and migrants. An overview without any claim to completeness.

Arabische Studierende in Österreich

Active in Vienna (physical);
throughout Austria (online)

Founded in 2018

Description

The goal of this initiative is to help every Arab student who wants to enter university reach their goal.

Projects and Activities

Our activities take place mostly online. We answer questions and help students access information.

Contact

<https://m.facebook.com/groups/1858236957593401/?ref=share> | arabische.studierende@gmail.com
+43 6886 0296 869



Brücke des Friedens

Active in Vienna

Founded in 2016

Description

We work on building bridges of communication and peace with the Austrian community. Our priority is to support the diverse Syrian community in Austria and to assist newcomers in areas insufficiently addressed by state responses to migration. Women play a crucial role in our organisation through management, organisation and participation.

Projects and Activities

We offer German and Arabic language courses and organise language cafés and opportunities for cultur-



al exchange. We also assist students through support projects in various subjects. Our mission is to foster a wholesome environment for the well-being of youth, children and families in Austria. We organise events on social and cultural occasions.

Contact

<https://www.facebook.com/Diebrueckedesfriedens/>
info@brueckedesfriedens.at | <https://www.instagram.com/brueckedesfriedens/>

Dein Rechtsberater

Active in Austria (online)

Founded in 2016

Description

The Dein Rechtsberater Facebook page was launched to promote legal awareness and communication. Legal questions concern many people from various backgrounds and segments of society. Because prevention is better than cure, we launched this page as legal practitioners under the supervision of a group of lawyers and in collaboration with several law firms that prioritise serving the community, whether they be Arabs, Kurds or Austrians of Syrian origin. On this page, we answer legal questions and connect people with lawyers to support cases that are beyond our expertise.

Projects and Activities

Legal Services – We provide advice through seminars and workshops on law and investment in Austria, and we offer private consultations for those interested.

Legal Consultations – We respond to all legal questions and inquiries about living in Austria through private messages sent to the Facebook page, with an absolute commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of the query and respecting the inquirer's privacy.

Legal Highlights – We offer explanations of Austrian laws and introduce newcomers to them.

Contact

<https://www.facebook.com/dein.Rechtsberater> | joan.kahlo@gmx.at | +43 6811 0351 584



Hoffnung ohne Grenzen

Active in Vienna

Founded in 2020

Description

Our initiative offers consultancy in all topics concerning medical and psychological needs, educational matters, questions about state welfare, vocational training and employment, as well as requests for translation. Our hotline operates in six languages.

Projects and Activities

In addition to operating the hotline, our initiative runs multiple Facebook groups to facilitate community members helping each other obtain information related to work, (vocational) training, education, bureaucracy and integration, while continuing to provide medical and psychological support. We have also started offering workshops abroad.

Contact

Facebook: [Hoffnung ohne Grenzen](#) |
mr.jbr@hotmail.com | Hotline: 06602089052



Infograt – Alnimsa Media

Active in Vienna;

throughout Austria (online)

Founded in 2015

Description

We are an accredited media organisation that takes into account the specific context of the Arabic-speaking community and the particular connotations of the word 'foreigners' in Austria. We understand integration as a constructive process that needs to be built on credible and objective content to avoid exaggeration.

Projects and Activities

Our team works on comprehensive coverage of political, economic, sports and cultural events that occur in Austria and presents them to the Arabic-speaking community. This includes analytical news coverage that tracks developments and updates in Austria and Europe.

Contact

<https://www.infograt.com> | ig@infograt.com |
 +43 676 6515 7005



Infinity Bridge

Active in Salzburg

Founded in 2023

Description

We are an NGO created to enhance communication, understanding and cooperation between people from different cultures in Salzburg. Our larger goal is to achieve peaceful coexistence by building a community that supports its members and provides them with collective care.

Projects and Activities

To achieve our goal, we offer language courses and services for asylum seekers and newcomers to prepare them to engage in the labour market, such as help on how to write a CV or how to look for a job or an apartment. We also organise trips to important historical and tourist locations in Austria.

Contact

hayatmoosa@hotmail.com | +43 650 9584451



Kunst für die Freiheit

Active in Vienna

Founded in 2021

Description

We are an organisation dedicated to supporting artistic expression, promoting cultural understanding and empowering youth. We believe in the transformative power of art as a driving force for personal and social development, and we strive to harness its potential to enhance freedom and justice.

The organisation was founded by a group of Syrians in Austria, who are deeply committed to promoting art and culture as a means for human development and social change.

Projects and Activities

We aim to achieve our goals through organising art exhibitions and cultural exchange projects across Europe, as well as offering courses in visual arts, Arabic calligraphy and music.

Contact

<https://www.facebook.com/barghoud.art> |
kfreiheit@gmail.com | +43 688 9922911



Kurdischer Verein für Kultur und Integration – Linz

Active in Upper Austria

Founded in 2019

Description

An organisation of Kurds in which Syrian men and women in Upper Austria support the integration of Syrian communities while preserving Kurdish identity and culture. We have a vision of peace and embrace equality.

Projects and Activities

We carry out various community activities, including events for children, regular meetings and Kurdish language courses. Annually, we organise celebrations on holidays and social occasions, such as Nowruz, which we see as an invitation to peace and interaction among people and cultures. Women play an essential role in our organisation and its administration, and our activities focus on supporting and increasing their participation.

Contact

<http://kurdischer-verein-fur-kultur.business.site/?m=true> | kurdischervereinlinz@gmail.com

+43 677 64719550



MIA – Migrantinnen Integration Arbeitsmarkt

Active in Vienna

Founded in 2021

Description

We are ourselves immigrants and we see the struggles that people have in Vienna. We do what we can do to help people achieve something and live better. Through workshops and women's empowerment trainings, we try to create a platform where migrants are enabled to fully realise their potential and seamlessly integrate into the Austrian labour market and Austrian society.

Projects and Activities

We organise events and workshops and offer consulting related to integration and to migrant job-seeking. In cooperation with other organisations, we also offer workshops on the Austrian educational system. We are active in Vienna. We are open to all migrants, but since we have a Syrian background, we mostly work with Syrians, especially women.

Contact

<https://migintarb.org> | verein.mia@gmail.com



Kurdischer Verein für Kultur und Integration – St. Pölten

Active in Lower Austria

Founded in 2023

Description

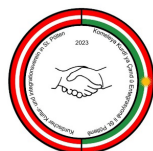
We are committed to fostering Kurdish culture and language in St. Pölten and Austria at large and to supporting Kurdish migrants and refugees with integration into Austrian culture, society and the job market.

Projects and Activities

In order to reach our goals, we organise presentations, talks and excursions, as well as conduct public readings, concerts, exhibitions and more.

Contact

gargari.kawa@gmail.com | +43 699 12274069



Syrian Women for Justice and Peace – Souriat

Active in Vienna

Founded in 2019

Description

As an independent civil society initiative concerned with human rights, especially women's rights, Souriat works on empowering Syrian women to increase their participation in efforts to achieve justice and peace. We envision a future where Syrian women actively participate in the process of achieving justice and sustainable peace in Syria and all over the world and where equal participation of women is ensured in all public matters.

Projects and Activities

To achieve our goals, we focus on building capacities and fostering dialogue among women and young women. We conduct seminars, discussions and lectures to raise awareness of legal and feminist issues. We aim to bridge the gaps between Syrian women and host communities by enhancing legal knowledge, capacity building and breaking stereotypes.

Contact

www.souriat.org | <https://www.instagram.com/souriat-verein/> | contact@souriat.org



Takaful Austria

Active in Vienna;
abroad (Syria and Turkey)

Founded in 2019

Description

We are a humanitarian charity based in Austria that serves refugees and displaced individuals in northern Syria. We collect donations to purchase necessities and rebuild apartments for those who have lost their homes. We have provided joint services with some charitable associations in Africa and Yemen. Additionally, we have participated in providing services to our people in Sudan, Libya and Morocco.

Projects and Activities

We provide sponsorships in various forms, including medicine and food baskets. We have projects to replace tents with small apartments. We offer supplies for child and infant care, purchase Eid clothes for children, provide winter necessities and launch campaigns by associations in case of urgent needs, such as earthquakes or other natural disasters.

Contact

www.takaful-austria.org | office@takaful-austria.org |
+43 688 6048818



Verein Arabische Österreichische Frauen

Active in Vienna

Founded in 1977

Description

We are focused on strengthening the bonds between families in the Arab communities in Austria, providing insights to the new generation of Arabs in Austria about their cultural identity, executing activities in the fields of culture and cultural heritage, as well as raising awareness on the following issues, in order to overcome them: the various difficulties Arab women are confronted with, the problems of Syrian refugees in Austria, in the borderland between Syria and Turkey and the situation of the displaced within Syria.

Projects and Activities

To achieve these goals, we host a variety of activities, including cultural encounters, book fairs, film weeks and musical workshops featuring the NAI Oriental Orchestra. We also offer language courses in Arabic and German and conduct workshops for psychological support. Our Stop the War movement and Balsam project for Syrian refugees exemplify our commitment to Syria. To support people in Syria and Syrian refugees in Turkey (especially in the borderlands), we have facilitated development projects in the fields of education and medical support and have delivered local humanitarian assistance.

Contact

www.arabaustrianwomen.org | mtkiriaky@gmail.com
| www.facebook.com/arabaustrianwomen



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7 APPENDIX – INTERVIEW GUIDELINE USED (INCLUDING FOR FOCUS GROUPS)

Main Question 1

Which forms of engagement do you see as prevalent in the Syrian community in Austria? Do you see an increase/decrease of organised engagement (associations, initiatives, official networks) or in individual efforts?

Subquestions

- How is the Syrian diaspora in Austria involved in development cooperation (in Syria or in countries with a significant Syrian population)? How do you evaluate these efforts?
- How do Syrians in Austria see their role in building Syria's future?
- How do Syrians in Austria mainly help or try to help Syrians inside Syria?
- How do Syrians look to their fellow Syrians in Austria? How do they see the role of Syrian civil society in Austria?

Main Question 2

What are the key challenges and obstacles that you face in diaspora engagement?

Subquestions

- How do you think other Syrians in Austria can become more active in diaspora engagement?
- How do you think Syrian women in particular can become more active in diaspora engagement and what obstacles do they face?
- What obstacles do Syrians in non-Syrian-led organisations face? What roles do they play in those roles?

- Do you see any correlation between the situation in Syria changing (e.g. when there is fighting on the ground, in the aftermath of the earthquake or during COVID-19) and the level of engagement of Syrians in Austria towards Syria?
- How is gender sensibilisation happening in the Syrian community in Austria? What could be done to improve this?

Main Question 3

What – as specifically and doable as possible – is needed to support the Syrian diaspora in its current and future activism?

Subquestions

- Which support from the Austrian state would help foster effective Syrian community engagement?
- Which support from Austrian civil society would help foster effective Syrian community engagement?
- How do you experience and evaluate cooperation with Austrian (non-Syrian) organisations?
- How do you experience and evaluate the cooperation with – if applicable – other communities in Austria (e.g. faith-based, language-based)?

www.vidc.org