

Executive Summary

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is entering its eleventh year. The war in Syria, and the ensuing grievances that resulted from death, displacement, and injustice, remain unresolved and a shift to justice and accountability remains elusive. The decade of war has displaced over 12 million people, with nearly half across Syria and the other half primarily to Syria's neighboring countries. With over 13 million people in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance¹ the institutional humanitarian system has been leading a multi-sector approach across the region and within the divided country to respond to those needs. One of the critical groups in this response has been the Syrian diaspora.

At the beginning of the humanitarian crisis, Syrian diaspora organizations quickly mobilized to create a structured, coordinated approach to respond to the humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees, as well as to internally displaced persons and local communities across Syria. Having a connection to their country of origin enabled ease of communication between them and local communities. Their fast response and capacity allowed them to collect and disperse funding rapidly. The Syrian American diaspora organizations remain active in raising funds, providing direct services, partnering with international aid agencies, advocating for principled action and access through their government representatives in the US, and working to bridge divides between locally led responses and international agencies. Although their work has been central to the response, raising nearly one billion US dollars for aid services, modest research describes their role in the aid system.

As such, the purpose of this report is to present the contributions and role of a select group of eleven Syrian American diaspora organizations who are members of a network known as the American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS). They all have formal structures and are registered in the US as not-for-profit organizations. The diaspora organizations in the ARCS network are involved in multiple areas of intervention including livelihoods, health, emergency assistance, and resettlement in the US. Experiences across all eleven organizations vary, some providing many different types of direct assistance across multiple locations where Syrians have been displaced, while others provide limited services. They are frontline responders, but also work with local groups to strengthen their ability to respond to the growing needs of the protracted crisis.

Syrian American diaspora organizations play a central role in localization. The transnational identity, and personal links with local communities, opens additional pathways to strengthen local resilience during an ongoing and protracted humanitarian crisis. The report is divided into three sections to illustrate a narrative of why it is important to consider the role of diaspora groups and how these eleven diaspora organizations have been able to rapidly respond to the humanitarian needs of Syrians. The research and analysis are based on a mixed methods approach, including interviews that were conducted with all eleven diaspora organizations in the ARCS network. By understanding the contributions of these organizations, the goal of this report is to contribute to the conversations around the changing humanitarian system by helping to identify potential spaces for engagement between diaspora and institutional aid actors.

¹ OCHA 2021 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview.