



Syrian American Diaspora Contributions and Engagement in the Syria Humanitarian Response

February 2022

About the American Relief Coalition for Syria

The American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS) is a secular, non-political coalition of eleven Syrian diaspora led humanitarian organizations that provide multi-sector relief inside of Syria, as well as assistance and services to Syrian refugees in regional host countries and in the United States. Together the efforts of ARCS organizations help millions of Syrians, both those who remain in Syria and those displaced as refugees.

The mission of ARCS is to be a voice for US-based Syrian diaspora organizations who are providing humanitarian and development services for Syrians worldwide, through advocacy and empowering local humanitarian actors. ARCS is dedicated to building a model network of diaspora organizations in the United States that will be an impetus for positive change, social welfare and development in their homeland. Guided by its values of humanitarianism, advocacy and collaboration, ARCS and its member organizations shall pursue this mission with compassion, transparency, and generosity.

This report was made possible by grant funding supplied by Oxfam America. Oxfam America is a global organization that fights inequality to end poverty and injustice. They offer lifesaving support in times of crisis and advocate for economic justice, gender equality, and climate action.

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Acknowledgements

The report was researched and written by Rahaf Safi with considerable support and guidance from Hazem Rihawi. The author would also like to thank Shannon Wilson for her support with editing the report.

Thank you to all those who gave their time in interviews, offered comments and feedback, and shared their insights and experiences on this topic. Thank you to the eleven diaspora organizations and to the wider Syrian community for their strength and resilience. Thank you to Elaine Lederman and Roberta Romano for their invaluable support. Finally, thank you to Oxfam America and to Ali Al Jundi for ensuring that this research was prioritized and funded to offer critically important insights to the humanitarian community on the role of diaspora organizations.



Photo courtesy of Syria Forum USA

List of Acronyms

ARCS	American Relief Coalition for Syria
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization
IO	International Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration Organization
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHCR	The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees



List of the ARCS Member Organizations

Organization Name	Website
Big Heart Foundation	https://www.bigheart.org/
Karam Foundation	https://www.karamfoundation.org/
MedGlobal	https://www.medglobal.org/
NuDay Syria	https://www.nudaysyria.org/
Rahma Worldwide Aid and Development	https://www.rahmaww.org/
Syrian American Medical Society	https://www.sams-usa.net
Syrian American Engineers Association	https://www.saea-us.org/
Syrian Community Network	https://www.syriancommunitynetwork.org/
Syria Forum USA	https://www.syrianforumusa.org/
Syria Relief and Development	https://www.srd.ngo/
Swasia Charity Foundation	https://www.swasia.org/

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.

I. Introduction

Over ten years have passed since the peaceful protests in Syria began, which had been met with a brutal response by the Syrian government. The level of destruction, the death toll, the number of people forcibly disappeared, and the extent of human misery overall has only been broadly estimated. With the prospect of the war shifting into a period of justice and accountability remaining elusive, tracking the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis has been a pronounced challenge to organizations working to meet people’s humanitarian needs. Over half of the country’s pre-2011 population of 22 million has been displaced. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 6.7 million Syrians are internally displaced and 6.6 million are registered refugees, with 85 percent hosted in countries neighboring Syria.² The number of people killed remains inaccurately reported, with the UN stating in 2021 that, based on its very strict methodology that requires the full name of the deceased, an established location, and date of death, it has only identified a list of 350,209 deaths, while recognizing that this the number is an undercount.³ Some groups estimate that the number of people killed far exceeds half a million lives. Moreover, those who have been forcefully disappeared by the Syrian government, and by armed groups, remains unknown.

The impact of the war resulted in great humanitarian needs inside Syria. In the 2022 Global Humanitarian Overview, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported an estimated 14 million people need assistance with a funding requirement of \$4.2 billion to meet these needs. Additionally, the report states that 12.4 million people in Syria “do not know where their next meal will come from – a level of food insecurity higher than any time during the country’s decade-long conflict.”⁴ The decade-long conflict resulted in damaged and destroyed infrastructure that has made delivering humanitarian aid and basic services immensely difficult. Moreover, the displacement and deliberate targeting of Syrian experts has led to a significant brain drain in Syria creating an additional barrier to providing basic services.⁵ In fact, one of the key issues reported by OCHA is “the scarcity of technical staff required to deliver and maintain basic services, due to displacement, death and/or impairment, and the lack of technical training.”⁶

The humanitarian response for the Syria crisis is governed by two different processes: the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP),⁷ which is for Syria and covers vulnerable civilians living in their homes and internally displaced persons; and, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP),⁸ covering countries hosting Syrian refugees. Over the past decade, both responses have

² Latest data is available through UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>

³ Nebehay, Stephanie. (September 2021). “U.N. issues new Syria death toll”, *Reuters*.

⁴ UN OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2022, available: <https://gho.unocha.org/>, pg 27. Additional information on food insecurity in Syria is available through the World Food Programme Situational Reports, see for example: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/7518dceb2cac4b9db14c076bc0147f7e/download/>

⁵ Ackerman, X and Unaldi A. (October 2015). “This is What the Syrian Brain Drain Looks Like”, *TIME Magazine*.

⁶ *Ibid*, pg 111.

⁷ Documents associated with the Whole of Syria approach, including the HRP and HNO, are available: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria>.

⁸ Information and resources related to the 3RP are available: <https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/>.

grown to account for the growing needs, but the funding gaps remain significant, with only about half the response plan's appeal being met each year since its launch in 2012.⁹

In both approaches, there have been attempts to include key aspects from UN Secretary General's call for humanitarian action to be "as local as possible, as international as necessary"¹⁰ that was announced during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, during which the Grand Bargain was launched.¹¹ Since then, there has been a whirlwind of conversations and initiatives around what is now referred to as a shift to a localization agenda – a process of strengthening resilience in local communities so that the humanitarian response is locally led.

Within this shift to a localization agenda, an understanding around the role of the Syrian diaspora in the HRP and 3RP has remained limited. Given the breadth of the localization agenda, the lack of research and understanding of the role of diaspora groups creates a gap among humanitarian and development actors over how diaspora groups work with and influence local groups in their countries of origin. Without this understanding, it remains unclear how formalized coordination and networks of operation in humanitarian response plans can better maximize their impact to support local communities by ensuring the role of diaspora groups is not overlooked in the overall approach and mechanism.

As such, the purpose of the report is to fill this gap by presenting a case study on the role of Syrian American diaspora organizations in the Syria humanitarian response. The goal is to describe the contributions and experiences of the eleven Syrian American diaspora organizations that are member organizations of the American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS) network.¹² In addition to the US, there are Syrian diaspora organizations worldwide contributing to the humanitarian response in Syria and neighboring countries. Of note, there are additional Syrian American diaspora organizations that are not members of or affiliated with ARCS and are thus outside the scope of this report.

The research methodology for this study involved a review of primary and secondary sources, including UN documents, gray literature, and academic publications. The resulting literature review informed the development of the qualitative and quantitative research tools that were employed for this study. A total of fourteen qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with six female and eight male key informants, were conducted remotely via the telecommunications platforms Zoom and Google in October 2021. With one exception, all interviews with ARCS members were conducted with the head of the organization. Additional interviews were conducted with Oxfam America, as an international non-governmental organization that engages extensively with diaspora organizations, as well as with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the leading intergovernmental organization in the field of migration within the UN System. The quantitative research consisted of a ten-question survey that was sent to the nine ARCS members who have aid programs responding to the needs of internally displaced Syrians, Syrian civilians in

⁹ Details about Syria Humanitarian Response Plan funding, including the appeal total and acquired funds, available: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1044/summary>.

¹⁰ Report of the Secretary General for the World Humanitarian Summit (February 2016), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Secretary-General%27s%20Report%20for%20WHS%202016%20%28Advance%20Unedited%20Draft%29.pdf>.

¹¹ Official website for the Grand Bargain: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>.

¹² Complete list of the organizations is available on page 5 of this report.

their local communities, and Syrian refugees. A total of eight organizations completed the survey. The qualitative review also included a financial review of all the member organizations' US Internal Revenue Services (IRS) tax documents (Form 990). Both the qualitative and quantitative data were collated and analyzed to identify major trends and findings that form the basis of this case study.

The second section of the report looks at definitions of the term 'diaspora' to understand who is considered part of this group and why they are important to study. Following that section, the report presents the analysis of the contributions of the Syrian American diaspora organizations who are members of the ARCS network. The final section examines the central role of diaspora groups in the localization process.



Photo courtesy of SRD

II. Defining “Diaspora”

Despite the growing use and reference to the term *diaspora* in humanitarian work, the concept itself has been ascribed to a variety of interpreted definitions. Though the term “diaspora” is often used to broadly reference migrant groups, there is no one clear and consistent definition used to describe who comprises the migrant group and how they differ from other migrant groups. In fact, the term is often used loosely and synonymously with other terms, such as immigrants, migrants, exiled individuals, and a list of those either deliberately moving from or displaced from their homeland.

In general, the diaspora sits in a unique place where they are connected to the area in which the disaster has occurred and thus have a deep understanding of the country’s context, culture, and language, while also being connected to the country where they have family currently residing or their family recently or historically migrated from their country of origin.¹³ The strong connection to both countries enables them to create a bridge between both contexts given their cultural competence, social connections, and language skills that can connect them to both contexts seamlessly.

Considerable academic literature has been written on the impact of migrants in their home countries during disasters. The literature often explores how through family, material, and psychological ties, diasporas remain linked to their country of origin and are more likely to respond to crises as they occur.¹⁴ One of the main ways described in almost all studies on the role of diaspora groups in the aftermath of a crisis in their homelands, is remaining connected through remittances where they provide lifeline support to victims before international relief resources are available.¹⁵ Additionally, diaspora groups play a role in influencing emergency aid in their host country by providing channels of information to their government, influencing and lobbying their government representatives, forming local organizations in their host country, and supporting policy formation and political engagement.¹⁶

Those who make up diaspora humanitarian organizations will vary depending on the context. Thus, it is imperative when identifying diaspora groups to understand them within the local context in which they are providing services. Syrian American diaspora groups, both formal organizations or as community groups, have been involved in humanitarian action – whether through the international humanitarian mechanism or on their own through family connections in Syria – the question then is how international agencies ensure their engagement and support is included within the formalized humanitarian response mechanism.

¹³ Author’s interview (October 2021), with Oxfam America, via Zoom.

¹⁴ Leblang D (2017) “Harnessing the diaspora: dual citizenship, migrant return remittances.” *Comparative Political Studies* 50, 75–101.

¹⁵ See, for example, the following study, which also references others that study the role of diaspora and remittances: Yang D (2008) Coping with disaster: the impact of hurricanes on international financial flows, 1970–2002. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy* 8, 1–45.

¹⁶ Platte, Hendrik (2019), “No calm after the storm—diaspora influence on bilateral emergency aid flows”, *Political Science Research and Methods* (2021), 9, 275–291.

For the purposes of this report, defining diaspora humanitarian organizations centers is critical to understanding who makes up the Syrian American diaspora humanitarian organization, and in particular, their interaction with the context in Syria. As such, the following broad definition by IOM of the term “diaspora” serves as a reference to understand how this group generally differs from other humanitarian organizations:

Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands, and to each other, based on a shared sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country.¹⁷

In line with this definition, all Syrian American diaspora organizations interviewed for this report described a strong connection to their heritage homeland, though, they view that connection differently based on whether they were themselves immigrants or children of immigrants from Syria. Some interviewees described their connection to Syria as children of descendants, while others had migrated from Syria and maintained a strong connection to their homeland, even if they themselves were not raised in the country.

Since the start of the war, all interviewed diaspora organizations reported traveling to the region or to Syria to support their operations on the ground. Two of them described frequently entering Northwest Syria despite the risks and challenges but felt it critical to remaining connected to the work and to not passing on the risk to their teams without having an intimate knowledge of the challenges they are facing.

Given this type of very close interaction with the local community, in the context of humanitarian spaces, defining diaspora organizations can at times be blurred with that of local groups. As one of the ARCS member organizations shared,

We are more than just diaspora organizations. We are a mix between local and diaspora. There is more connection to the [work on the] ground and that varies from one [organization] to the other. The ones who focus on visiting the field inside Syria, especially by leadership and senior staff are more connected to the ground than those who manage needs from Turkey. There is a spectrum based on how you manage from the ground.¹⁸

The spectrum of Syrian diaspora humanitarian groups creates a wide range of organizational structures in which some groups can clearly be distinguished as external to locally led groups while other organizations appear to be locally led and with the diaspora connection facilitating access to resources. However, unlike local groups, diaspora have a global connection,¹⁹ enabling them to have direct access to another country’s government structures. Nonetheless, even with this connection it is difficult to broadly generalize the influence of diaspora groups without understand their connection to the response and to local groups.

¹⁷ Glossary on Migration (2019), available: <https://www.iom.int/glossary-migration-2019>, pg 49.

¹⁸ Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #3.

¹⁹ Author’s interview (October 2021) with expert at Oxfam.

As both the literature review and qualitative interviews from this study will present, the lack of clarity around the terms “diaspora” and “engagement” leaves a gap among international aid agencies around how to include diaspora organizations in the formalized humanitarian response mechanism. This study provides an opportunity to demonstrate how the Syrian American diaspora organizations have been providing services in Syria’s context. The organizations interviewed for this report are the eleven Syrian American diaspora organizations who are part of the American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS) network. The ARCS network was formed in 2016 to serve as a central platform and voice for Syrian American diaspora-led humanitarian organizations. All eleven member organizations provide support whether directly or indirectly to the Syrian humanitarian response, contributing more than financial support to the crisis.

While ARCS is made up of eleven member organizations, it does not include all Syrian American diaspora organizations. In fact, the Syrian American diaspora community is not a monolith, and is composed of individuals who have varying political opinions. It includes people of various educational and financial backgrounds, but is also a population that is very well educated and has access to a strong network of resources.²⁰ With this variety, groups with an aligning vision for aid and development in Syria came together under the ARCS umbrella network.



Photo courtesy of Syria Forum USA

²⁰ Alloush, Basma. (December 2018). “Syrians in the USA: Solidarity Despite Political Rifts”, *Arab Reform*.

III. Contributions of Syrian American Diaspora Organizations

2.1 Overview of the Organizations

Each one of the eleven Syrian American diaspora humanitarian organizations in the ARCS network have distinct backgrounds and different missions, resulting in a diverse range of activities and contributions to support the Syria humanitarian response. They differ from the types of services provided to the scale, size, and geographic locations of operation, as well as their approach to addressing humanitarian needs and challenges. Other than three, all member organizations, including ARCS itself, were formed in response to the needs and gaps in services caused by the war in Syria. For the other three organizations, two were formed prior to the Syria humanitarian crisis, and they include the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and Karam Foundation. Finally, the third exception is the Syrian American Engineers Association (SAEA), which was formed as a professional development organization for Syrian American engineers unrelated to the humanitarian crisis, with their members opting to provide services by voluntarily contributing their expert knowledge to support diaspora organizations. All the organizations in the ARCS network are registered in the US as nonprofit (non-governmental) organizations, and have clearly established structures for the organization, including for staff and volunteers, as well as for their funding model.

Three of the eleven diaspora organizations are led by females. Similar to other organizations, leading a diaspora organization as a female carries its own challenges. One of the respondents shared that even ten years into the conflict, individuals not connected to the Syrian culture still struggle with identifying how to understand cultural norms, especially related to gender dynamics. She described feeling the frustration of only being included in conversations or meetings with peers within INGOs and IOs to feel like they are trying to meet a representation quota, “I know I’ve been invited because they need a female who is also Syrian [in the room].”²¹ The challenge of feeling like the identity is included when convenient was echoed in some of the other interviews as well, both for male and female diaspora organization leaders.

Finally, the size and scope of each organization varied. What is notable about all organizations is their rapid and sudden growth over the past ten years as they worked to ensure that their teams were formed and trained to provide services in Syria and across the region. Most of the organizations have a small office in the US, with the majority of their programming in Syria and its neighboring countries.

2.2 Geographic Locations

The shift in the dynamics of the war in Syria over the past ten years has also resulted in a shift for areas in which diaspora organization are able to provide services. Currently, Syria is mainly divided into three areas based on the battle lines that have evolved throughout the duration of the conflict. However, these areas include many different actors – both state and nonstate, as well as local and international. These areas are referred to as Northwest Syria (NWS), Northeast Syria

²¹ Author’s interview (October 2021) with female expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #12.

(NES) and, Central Syria. Organizations providing services in Syria operate within the scope of these boundaries, including the international humanitarian aid mechanism that has developed coordination hubs based on these three geographic divisions.

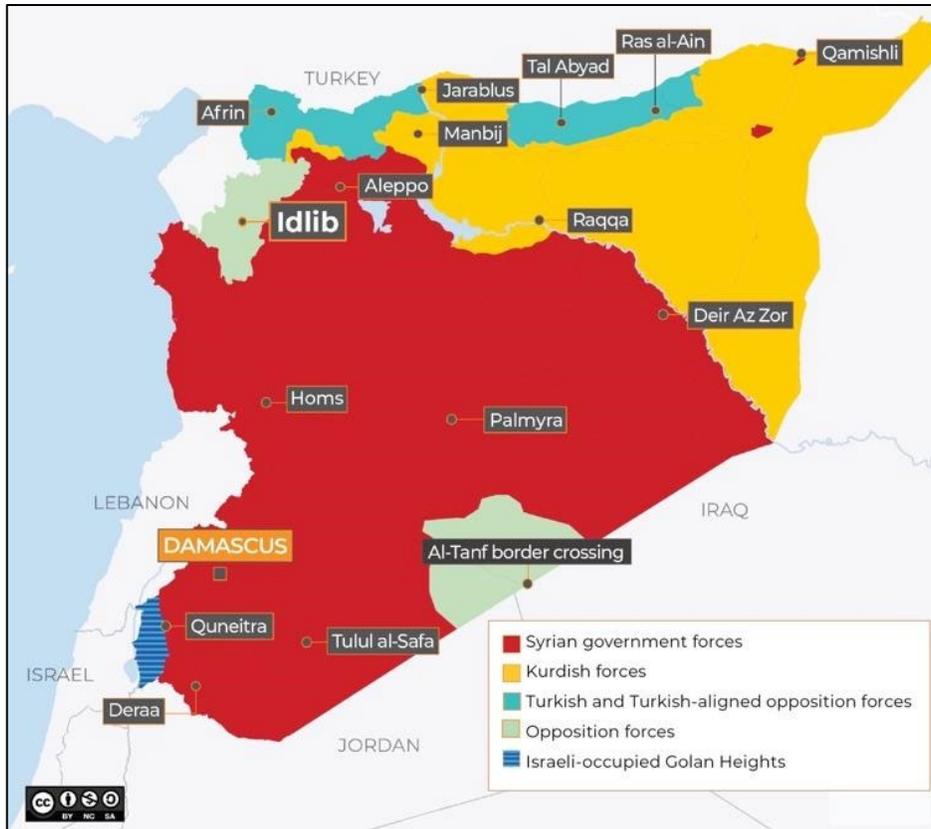


Figure 1 Map of Divisions in Syria

Currently, eight of the nine organizations surveyed with operations in the region work in Northwest Syria. The organizations with programs in Syria’s neighboring countries are providing services to Syrian refugees, and the organizations providing programs in the US are providing integration services to the resettled Syrian refugees.

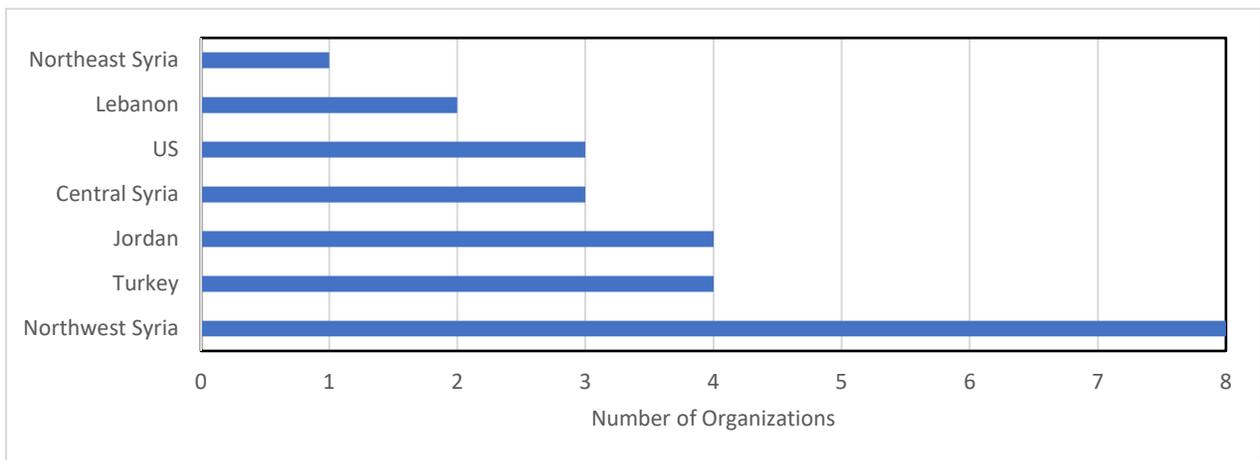


Figure 2 Geographic Locations of Operation of the Syrian American Diaspora Organizations

At the start of the humanitarian response, diaspora organizations were able to provide services throughout the country through their networks with local committees. All the surveyed organizations reported working across the country, including in provinces that are now divided between Northeast and Central Syria through these committees. In some areas where access was restricted for all aid agencies, the diaspora groups were able to respond to the civilians' needs in these areas through local committees that would share the needs and challenges with access to services.

2.3 Areas of Focus

Direct Assistance

One of the main areas of contribution by Syrian American diaspora organizations has been providing direct assistance across almost all sectors, as defined by the UN Cluster System,²² to vulnerable populations in need of assistance. As seen in Figure 3, their work includes health, shelter, education, protection, food and nutrition, non-food items (NFIs), water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), as well as livelihoods, early recovery, and cash assistance. For some organizations, such as MedGlobal and SAMS, their mandate focuses on a specific sector, while for others, they work across multiple sectors.

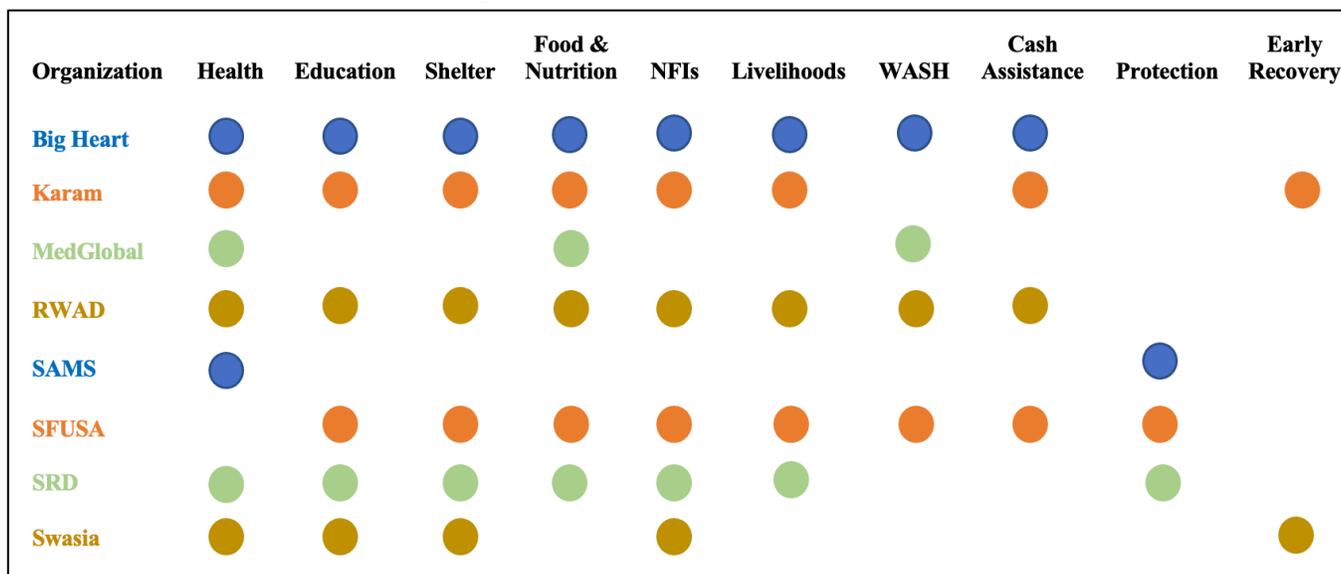


Figure 3 Aid Sectors

The advantage diaspora groups have had in the Syria humanitarian response has been in their ability to rapidly connect with the community. In fact, all interviewed Syrian American diaspora organizations described providing aid services through local networks they set up and strengthened since the humanitarian crisis first began. Their ability to establish these intricate networks began from their personal connection to these communities where their shared identity and language enabled them to work on building trust and connection with the local populations.

²² For an overview of the UN Cluster System: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>.

Moreover, the relationship between the Syrian American diaspora and their homeland leaves them knowledgeable about cultural norms and expectations not only during the implementation of aid programs, but also when designing programs to meet people's needs. In one of these interviews, a member of the Syria Relief and Development (SRD) team shared an example of this experience during the design of family planning programs, a major challenge early in the humanitarian response.²³ She described how SRD introduced sexual and reproductive health as a primary health care service after recognizing that much of the focus was only on emergency care due to a misconception that Syrian families do not need support with family planning. This cultural misconception left the issue neglected and so SRD worked to introduce topics around child marriage, birth spacing, delaying pregnancy, and other important family planning topics that other organizations shied away from previously.

Programs were designed based on the results of needs assessments as described by all eleven organizations. This allowed the organizations to ensure that they are listening and responding to community needs. One organization, Swasia, described how a needs assessment helped them identify a critical gap in assistance in Northwest Syria. In their assessment, they were informed that the community lacked services for individuals with amputated limbs, who were facing additional challenges with accessing specialized services:

We noticed a tremendous need to respond to the needs of the amputees – unfortunately, a result from the war. We have a center in Afrin, we focus our work on the artificial lower limbs, and we consider it a very successful program. We receive almost 25-30 cases of [individuals who required] artificial lower limbs on a monthly basis, beside [the] other physical therapy cases [we provide]. We found 76-78% [of individuals who receive artificial limbs] can go back to work and their normal life after [they go through the] program. That gives us an indicator that the program is effective [and responding to needs].²⁴

The ability to navigate the context through the shared connection and understanding the needs of the community has resulted in the organizations being able to develop innovative methods to address those needs and gaps in services. For example, Karam Foundation developed a model for Syrian youth to focus on meeting their educational needs while also supporting their leadership development through a trauma-informed lens.²⁵ The idea behind this approach is support refugee children discover their ambitions away from the expectations placed on them as refugees. As the interviewee described through the story of one of the youths at Karam House:

We put limitations on refugees that we would never put on children [not affected by war] ... Yusuf, lived through the siege of Ghouta and the chemical weapons attack. When he was getting his high school education in Istanbul, he made a proposal [to his school] to teach other students about 3D printing [where he was able to explore and develop the skill at Karam House]. He initially was only able to get four children to sign up to learn, but then he made an exhibition [to demonstrate 3D printing] and got 60 students to sign up. He was able to then train the four initial kids to help him [teach the others who signed up]. He

²³ Author's interview (October 2021) with female expert at SRD.

²⁴ Author's interview (October 2021) with male expert at Swasia.

²⁵ Author's interview (October 2021) with female expert at Karam Foundation.

is teaching Turkish students as a Syrian refugee. He created a technology club and the principal found ways to connect and show what Syrian refugee children are able to do [in the community]. When someone is hiring Yusuf, it is because he can code very well.²⁶

Several of the organizations described expanding their work to focus on development and livelihoods while continuing their humanitarian response programs. For example, Rahma Worldwide, shared a project to support displaced persons living in tented settlements by building simple housing units for an estimated twenty-five thousand people. They have also been providing livelihoods training, including training programs for women to provide plumbing services in their neighborhood. Meanwhile, Rahma continues to provide health services, including a focus on persons with disabilities, and distributing food baskets.²⁷ Another organization, SFUSA, maintains relief programs while also providing support with job-placement for Syrians, particularly focused on placing Syrians in think-tanks to produce research on rebuilding Syria's institutions and economy.²⁸

While innovative new ideas are essential for the protracted conflict in Syria, diaspora organizations have also been critical in meeting the medical and health needs of displaced Syrians, particularly those in Northwest Syria. The well documented systematic targeting and attacks on medical and health care facilities²⁹ has resulted in great medical needs and a shortage of both personnel and supplies. The Syrian American diaspora humanitarian organizations specialized in medical assistance provide funds needed to purchase medical equipment and supplies for makeshift field hospitals and medical centers, particularly in the Northwest where there have been high incidences of targeted attacks on medical facilities.³⁰ They also were able to provide knowledge and expertise through Syrian American medical doctors who either travel to provide direct medical care or support via remote health telecommunications platforms.³¹

One of the other key components of support that diaspora organizations have been able to leverage is through pairing specialized experts who may not be operating in the humanitarian sector as volunteers to provide guidance and assistance. Both SAMS and MedGlobal have used this model for relying on medical expertise from doctors who are able to travel the region and those providing virtual medical assistance and guidance. Similarly, the Syrian American Engineers Association (SAEA) supports other member organizations by providing them with guidance on engineering related projects that require technical support and in which a local partner or organization may not have the expertise in-house knowledge. The SAEA engineers provide this as an in-kind service

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Author's interview (October 2021) with male expert at Rahma Worldwide.

²⁸ Author's interview (October 2021) with male expert at SFUSA.

²⁹ There has been extensive documentation of this issues, including medical doctors and practitioners from the Syrian American diaspora organizations who have presented this evidence to the UN member states and have supported investigative journalist, human rights and humanitarian organization compile, collate, and present clearly documented evidence of this issue. See for example, "12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia", (Oct 2019), *The New York Times*.

³⁰ "No Place is Safe for Healthcare" (July 2021), Physicians for Human Rights, available: <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Al-Atareb-Hospital-Attack-PHR-SAMs-Case-Study-July-2021.pdf>

³¹ Author's interview with SAMS and MedGlobal; in additional several studies and articles have been written about the role of the diaspora in supporting medical knowledge and care in Syria, see for example: Taub, Ben, "The Shadow Doctors: The Underground Race to Spread Medical Knowledge as the Syrian regime erases it", 27 June 2016, *The New Yorker*.

where they may support with identifying challenges for makeshift shelters or providing guidance on building field hospitals in Northwest Syria. This enables other organizations who would not otherwise have this expertise available expand their work and projects.

Fundraising

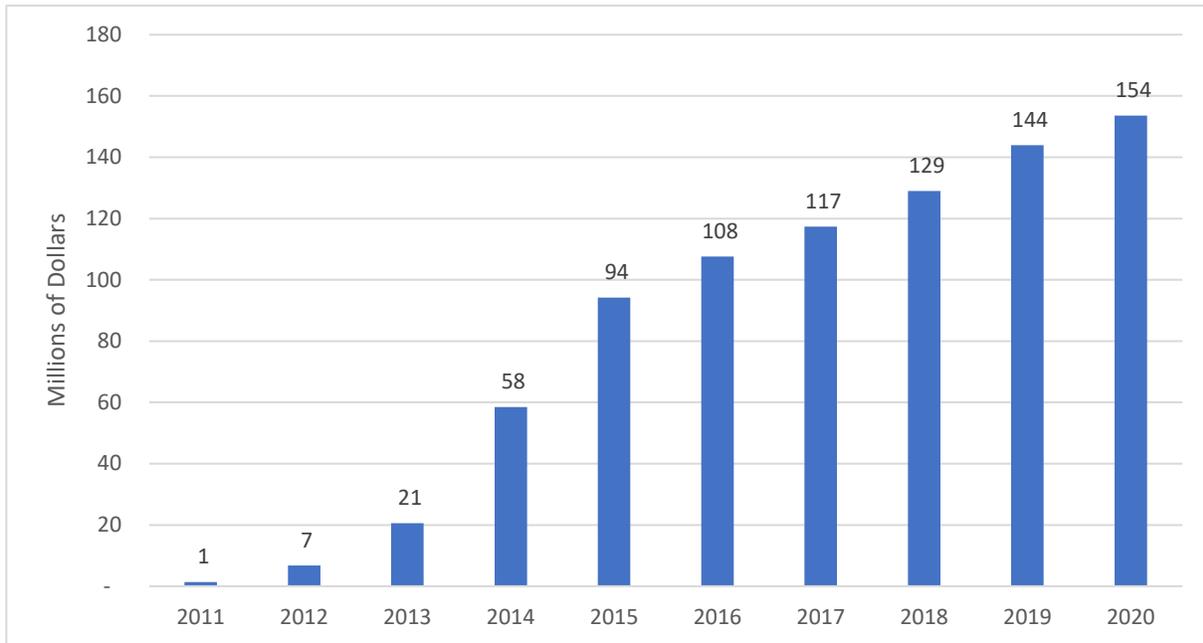


Figure 4 Funding raised over nine years

Since the humanitarian crisis in Syria began in 2011, the eleven Syrian American diaspora organizations have collectively raised and managed nearly one billion US dollars (\$847,692,508).³² In a short period of time, all organizations went from having small operational budgets, in the hundreds of thousands, and quickly grew to managing multimillion dollar projects.

The sources of funding varied across organizations. Three organizations reported that the majority of their funding is received through foundations and philanthropic grants. Two organizations reported almost all their funding received through intermediary grants from INGOs and UN agencies. Two other organizations reported receiving most of their funding from Syrian American diaspora community members, with the rest reporting only about 10 percent of their funding was coming from the Syrian American diaspora community members. Finally, only one of the organizations reported that it receives significant funding and grants through institutional donors.

None of the organizations reported significant challenges with maintaining consistent sources of funding but described a general waning of interest among donors, including for providing large financial contributions for Syria, which were more common and easily secured in the early years of the humanitarian crisis.

³² This sum does not include all financial data from the calendar year 2021, as this report was completed prior to ARCS member organization finalizing their 2021 tax documents. With estimated financials for 2021, the number is closer to \$950 million USD.

Of the ten diaspora organizations that are providing humanitarian assistance, only two have successfully secured funding directly from government donors, which include funding from the US and European Union, with one receiving a small grant. The others reported attempting to apply for grants from the donor countries but have not been able to receive government foreign assistance to fund their programs. Many of the organizations interviewed described speaking with government actors to understand how to make sure their organizations are meeting compliance standards. Though all reported that they have worked to strengthen their compliance systems, they also shared that they continue to confront challenges with directly receiving aid from government donors and instead continue to only be able to receive these grants through

an intermediary IO or INGO that oversees compliance for the government donor. Some of the feedback the diaspora organizations have received for why they are not directly awarded grants include the possibility of corruption within their local networks and the possibility of funds falling into the hands of extremist groups. Though these diaspora humanitarian organizations have worked to provide evidence that demonstrates their risk awareness and analysis, they have not received an indication that they could be selected as a recipient of direct funding. During the qualitative interviews, the organizations attempting to secure government funding all described working to make sure their operations are transparent and accountable to these government institutional donors, yet some have not been able to directly interact with representatives of the agencies to share their progress. This issue is not one unique to Syrian American diaspora organizations, but one that has been recurrently identified in studies on the work on diaspora organizations³³ and also for locally led organizations.³⁴

Like local organizations, diaspora organizations experience challenges with accessing humanitarian funding from government donors independent of intermediary international aid organizations. They also experience similar challenges to all aid organizations in navigating how to garner interest from private donors in supporting their aid programs in Syria. Their ability to connect with the diaspora groups in the US, as well as other private donors, has been critical to funding their projects. Nevertheless, as seen in Figure 4, over a period of ten years, Syrian American diaspora humanitarian organizations were still able to dramatically grow despite confronting similar challenges with fundraising. By the end of 2011, the collective group was operating with approximately one million US dollars in donations. The following year, the figure increased seven-fold and not long after, these diaspora humanitarian organizations were receiving funding and managing multimillion (US) dollar operations in several locations in Syria, across

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Over the decade-long period of the Syria humanitarian crisis, the Syrian American diaspora organizations in the ARCS network collectively raised nearly one billion US Dollars

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³³ “Diaspora Organizations and their Humanitarian Responses in Somalia” (July 2021), *DEMAC with the Danish Refugee Council*.

³⁴ See for example, Barbelet, Veronique (November 2018), “As local as possible, as international as necessary: Understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action”, *ODI*.

multiple sectors. The fast-paced growth was in conjunction to learning and capacity building that strengthened the ability to efficiently and effectively respond to needs on the ground.³⁵

Partnerships and Coordination

All organizations have been involved in coordination efforts with other organizations through partnerships or participating and leading working groups. Of the eight surveyed organizations, six of them participated in the UN-led coordination mechanisms in their countries of operation, with two organizations also co-leading working groups. Additionally, four organizations stated they partner with locally led organizations and provide capacity building and training for grassroots organizations.

Most of the organizations described a challenging experience with international coordination, particularly through the lens of being seen as not “impartial or neutral” in their programs supporting vulnerable Syrians in need of assistance. One organization described being directly told by UN and INGO actors that locally connected organizations are more likely to have mismanagement and corruption.³⁶ All described challenges with their voices not being included and heard among UN and INGO actors involved in the Syria response.

All the organizations stated that forming the ARCS network has been beneficial in unifying their voice as a collective partnership of Syrian American diaspora organizations. While some of them shared, that challenges remain in coordination and in increasing the network’s capacity to move beyond supporting advocacy goals to facilitating partnerships with new organizations and donors, they all felt that the network was crucial to their work. One organization representative described how the Syrian American diaspora within the ARCS network has been better able to coordinate and collaborate with other Syrian diaspora groups across the world, including with Syrians who have fled Syria and are working with diaspora organizations in their new home countries away from Syria.

Advocacy

Advocacy, complemented by direct diaspora engagement with political leaders, has been a core element of the work of almost all interviewed Syrian American diaspora organizations. It has taken several different forms – from media engagements to speaking engagements at the UN level – and has prioritized ensuring humanitarian protection and principled access to civilians who have been displaced, harmed, and deprived of services due to the ongoing conflict.

Advocacy activities have included hosting “Advocacy Days” throughout the year where ARCS member organizations meet with US officials, staffers at Capitol Hill, and other government representatives. It has been with all levels of US government on a variety of issues including Temporary Protected Status of Syrians residing in the US and not able to return to Syria, protection

³⁵ Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #8; Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #6; Author’s interview (October 2021) with female expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #11.

³⁶ Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #6.

of Syrian refugees around the world, issues with the US travel ban placed on Syrians, the emergency humanitarian response programs in the region, the UN Security Council cross-border resolution(s) for humanitarian aid, and stabilization and development programs, to name a few.

Diaspora groups have been able to use their work on the ground to guide the collection of evidence, document international humanitarian law violations, and use the information to guide their advocacy initiatives. This was especially important during sieges that left civilians without access to humanitarian aid and when attacks on medical facilities prevented doctors from being able to provide medical care without being targeted by the Syrian government and its allies' aerial forces. As one of the organization leaders described:

“We have people inside who have learned to convey information through Skype and WhatsApp in the field. We kind of mounted a significant response and forced the US administration to focus on it, talking to the media, getting the pictures out, reporting and documenting on these issues and then translating that into change in policy. The same thing happened during the sieges of Ghouta, and North Homs, the Northeast, and Daraa. The reporting about the siege ... because we had free flow communication and were struggling to get medical supplies and medication [into the area].”³⁷

Syrian American diaspora organizations also shared that working together in a network has enabled them to identify challenges they experience and quickly mobilize to determine how best to advocate to address these issues. The diaspora humanitarian organizations have been able to share the challenges they face on the ground with community members in the Syrian American diaspora to lobby their representatives as constituents. One of the interviewed individuals described the role of the broader Syrian American diaspora community's role in supporting the humanitarian crisis in Syria:

“I would like to think that [members of the Syrian] diaspora [as individual citizens] have played an important role in lobbying. They have extensive relationships— from the outset they rallied together to fundraise for a lot of candidates [running for US political office] and take the opportunity when they fundraise to work with them. They have helped to organize viewings for documentaries and tried to bring in filmmakers and get the attention of celebrities so that [US policymakers] can think about [Syria].”³⁸

All interviewed individuals stated that forming a coalition to bring them together has been beneficial to their advocacy work. In fact, the formation of a coalition came together in the wake of responding to shrinking humanitarian spaces in Syria and across the region. In coming together to address challenges on the ground, one organization described that the formation of ARCS served as a space for diaspora organizations to come together and discuss challenges they are collectively confronting, such as issues with banking and transferring funds into Syria and identifying new sources of funding.

Additionally, as a transnational coalition, ARCS not only is able to serve as a voice for Syrian Americans when meeting with US Government representatives to describe challenges in the Syria

³⁷ Author's interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #3.

³⁸ Author's interview (October 2021) with female expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #9.

humanitarian response, but also as part of a larger worldwide network of Syrian diaspora organizations that push their respective governments to ensure that important issues related to the Syria humanitarian response do not get neglected and forgotten. This issue, in particular, has been salient in many other diaspora networks as well, and in fact, specifically highlighted in the literature as a critical aspect of strength with diaspora groups.³⁹ Where international humanitarian organizations are focused on many different crises and have to balance their advocacy work and time with US representatives, Syrian American diaspora groups solely focus their attention on Syria. For these diaspora groups, advocacy is not just ensuring principled access to aid, but also “about the day after the humanitarian aid stops flowing. We do care about the culture we are creating.”⁴⁰

Community Engagement

Syrian American diaspora organizations maintain strong connections in their communities of origin and their host countries. They are able to provide direct assistance to those in Syria while staying engaged with the Syrian community in the US. Early into the crisis, all interviewees described a strong engagement and commitment by diaspora community members. However, as the duration of the conflict increased, many noticed that they faced challenges with maintaining momentum among diaspora members. Some attributed this decrease not a result of a lack of interest, care, or commitment to what is happening in Syria, but because of emotional and psychological drain, as well as a general sense of burn out. As one of the organizations stated,

At the beginning, the Syrian American diaspora pushed hard in terms of advocacy and media, and fundraising, getting there on the ground. We saw incredible energy. But now within the community it is hard to talk about Syria in social gatherings. People are burnt-out and the numbness is real. How do you deal with the collective trauma?⁴¹

Nonetheless, the member organizations continue to find ways to maintain engagement with the Syrian American community. One organization shared how when coupling engagement on short-term humanitarian assistance with engagement on Syria’s future, including livelihoods and early recovery, they were able to find success with community engagement. In particular, the interviewee shared,

If they are presented with a true comprehensive vision that is more encompassing of Syria and presented with someone who understands this context well and who designed their programming with that in mind, there is a lot of interest, money, and thirst for the type of proactive approach that understands the context for the extremely miserable and dire situation, but that also constantly identifies margins for which Syrians can regain agency for local economies and how to empower themselves through that. For example, the industrial zone idea, there are a lot of Syrian American donors who would be interested in investing in this. People are thirsty to see something more forward thinking, has vision and money for it.⁴²

³⁹ See for example, group advocacy focus on their country

⁴⁰ Author’s interview (October 2021) with female expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #9.

⁴¹ Author’s interview (October 2021) with female expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #5.

⁴² Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #8.

In addition to working on engaging the diaspora with the internal and regional displacement, diaspora organizations also work in the US to support the resettlement and integration process of Syrian refugees in the US. One of these organizations, the Syrian Community Network, formed solely to support the transition and integration of Syrian refugee families into the existing Syrian networks in the US to help give them a smooth transition.



IV. Bridging the Local and Global Divide

Syrian American diaspora organizations, along with other Syrian diaspora organizations, are visibly involved in responding to humanitarian needs of vulnerable Syrians impacted by the humanitarian crisis. They not only provide the direct assistance through the local networks in Syria and in refugee hosting countries, but also raise funds to support their operations, engage the broader Syrian diaspora in the US and around the world, as well as advocate with their US representatives and policymakers to ensure that the crisis in Syria is not forgotten. These diaspora organizations not only serve to create a bridge between the local and global divide but are essential in understanding how local organizations in Syria can be strengthened and supported given the challenging circumstances in Syria. Thus, their role is critical in connecting local and global divides, a critical issue that was highlighted during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit as a core challenge for international humanitarian operations.

During that summit, the Grand Bargain was announced as a new agreement that would bring together the largest donors and humanitarian organizations “who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action.”⁴³ One of the key themes of the Grand Bargain has been a shift to more locally led humanitarian responses, often referred to as the localization agenda. Since then, while there have been many discussions about defining the localization agenda and identifying how best to support communities, action around shifting the role from international groups to locally led groups has been modest and varied in Syria.

While there have been some initiatives by international organizations in Syria to support locally led programming, one of the key remaining challenges is with shifting the burden of risk onto both diaspora and local organizations. The Northwest territories in Syria remain the most insecure area in the country, with both air raids and ground assaults. Consequently, international organizations and their staff are often unable to access the area, both due to the violence and aerial attacks, as well as the limitation of crossing the border from Turkey to Syria. Many of the diaspora organizations interviewed described how international organizations, resultingly, have been engaged in what is referred to as risk shifting. This occurs when international actors pass on the risk of operating in a dangerous context to local staff and local organizations by relying on them to implement all the work. This is especially true given that the work in Northwest Syria is cross-border. As one organization described:

This is...what the INGOs have been doing. They hired people inside Syria, and they transferred the risk that they are supposed to take to the Syrian humanitarians and made it a norm in the context of Syria. Before Syria, INGOs used to send their own staff to countries in conflict, but that has changed in the Syrian context because of targeting – intentional and systematic – because of the complexity of the situation and because of the difficult access to areas controlled by the opposition.⁴⁴

⁴³ More information is available: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain>

⁴⁴ Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #3.

In addition to risk-shifting, another organization described lack of risk sharing by international organizations when it comes to compliance agreements for country operations. For example, where a large international (including non-governmental) organization might have easier access to government authorities, such as in Turkey, to obtain work permits for their staff, they may not offer this support to the diaspora organizations they are funding through a subgrant, which may delay work or create challenges for the diaspora organization as it waits to receive the work permits in a timely manner to begin the projects. Rather than lifting up the response, some diaspora organizations described international organizations as standing on the sidelines when they could instead be providing this simple support.

Without addressing the risks diaspora and local organizations confront, the ability to transition to a more localized agenda remains difficult. Moreover, a localization agenda that does not account for the role of diaspora organizations dismisses the link between individuals who have migrated, been exiled, or resettled but remain connected to their homeland. Syrian American diaspora organizations are on the frontlines, working directly in local communities to provide short- and long-term support to the growing needs.

When the Syria crisis started, diaspora groups, despite the fact they are not professional agencies and may not have known all the professional tools, were the first to respond by collecting all the supplies to support Syrians in besieged areas and this is why we believe they are a critical role in the response. On the other hand, we see other roles like advocating in the US, UK, UN where they bring the facts from the ground and advocate for the people. INGOs have limits, you see, many things happening now with UN humanitarian support must go through the government and there are many reports about the effectiveness and fairness of this, such as whether it is going to the right people.⁴⁵

Localization is not just about ensuring that local groups are leading the implementation of programs, but that they are also able to apply for funding without an intermediary IO or INGO that would be collecting the funds on their behalf.

Another localization challenge is through procurement, where the priority should be on using local supply chains to support the local economy instead of outsourcing materials from other countries when the material is available locally. For example, in Northwest Syria, despite the ongoing war, there are areas where people are relying on selling merchandise to sustain their livelihoods but have not been able to receive that support from IOs and INGOs. As one organization described:

“[In Northwest Syria], you see that there is an opportunity – tens of thousands of food baskets are distributed in that area and a majority of them are procured from Turkey – no reason why procurement should not be localized. These are raw materials that are actually available and manufactured inside Syria.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, despite the central role of diaspora groups, it is equally important to note that the localization agenda is not fulfilled by simply shifting to partnerships with diaspora organizations

⁴⁵ Author’s interview (October 2021) with expert at Oxfam.

⁴⁶ Author’s interview (October 2021) with male expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #8.

and not including locally led organizations unaffiliated with diaspora networks.⁴⁷ While the Syrian American diaspora groups have been attempting to create links and connect with local partners, there are many community based organizations and locally led groups that continue to operate independently of diaspora groups. Where diaspora groups can provide support, is in helping these local groups learn about and become connected with the humanitarian mechanism, and international humanitarian organizations can be better introduced to these local partners through the support of diaspora organizations.⁴⁸

“We are here to stay”

In line with literature, all interviewees shared the importance of their work in meeting short-term emergency needs of Syrians, with the desire to ensure that development activities strengthen the long-term vision for Syria. Every individual interviewed shared that their goal and focus will always remain on the long-term transition of Syria from a state of war to one of justice, accountability, and sustainable development for people.

During the onset of this humanitarian crisis, diaspora organizations were able to quickly tap into their US network of Syrian American diaspora community members to support the response to that emergency. In the waves of violence that occurred throughout the ten years, diaspora organizations were able to turn to community members to solicit unrestricted funding that would help with focusing programs on emergency response while also having the flexibility to develop early recovery and livelihoods programs that have received less support from government donors and international organizations. The diaspora organizations are able to create that link between their work in communities with the diaspora community in the US who is interested in supporting their homeland through local networks. As one interviewee described:

Later when we worked with refugees and IDPs and visited the camps in northern Syria across the border from Turkey, the biggest shock, not so much a shock, [is] that moment when you see a split between the international response and what we wanted as Syrians and that was very clear in the intention. When I walk into an IDP camp our goal is for it to not exist tomorrow. This is a big gap between us [international and diaspora groups]. For them to set up a camp, they have to know this needs to exist. They need to know it is worth it to build the infrastructure for a camp. This isn't just Syria. I want people to go home. I think a lot of organizations in ARCS have this [mindset] and engage in humanitarian activism.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Author's interview (October 2021) with expert at IOM.

⁴⁸ Author's interview (October 2021) with expert at IOM.

⁴⁹ Author's interview (October 2021) with female expert at Syrian American Diaspora Organization #5.

Conclusion

Diaspora organizations are unique in their ability to bridge two separate worlds: one where humanitarianism is valued but may appear disconnected from the reality on the ground when it does not prioritize local voices and needs, and the second where local voices are not being heard on the international platform. As the report demonstrates, the Syrian American diaspora humanitarian organizations have been able to engage on both fronts: working with UN agencies, other IOs, and INGOs to make sure that they are not disconnected from the reality on the ground in Syria, while also making sure that their representatives and other US officials are listening to Syrian voices and ensuring they are heard. They are strongly connected to local networks and organizations.

As part of the localization discourse, diaspora organizations are central and not fringe actors. And depending on the context, they may be playing a critically vital role in ensuring that local organizations are able to connect with international organizations given the challenges in conflict context that may leave local organizations unable to access opportunities and support outside of the diaspora networks. As such, localization approaches by the international aid agencies cannot be a cookie-cutter process when looking at the role of diaspora organization in a humanitarian response. The idea behind strengthening the resilience of local communities to respond to crises inherently requires developing a localization agenda that recognizes that each context will have different needs and require different approaches.

Syrian American diaspora organizations have collectively raised and managed nearly one billion US dollars and continue to raise funding for their programs. They operate across almost all UN clusters, remain connected to communities, and develop long term visions that inspire their commitment to ensuring sustainable development and progress are a critical component of their work. In other words, as they respond to the short-term needs they also focus on long-term development and support for Syrians.



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