On Exile And Expertise

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Or: Why Dia$pora Engagement Works Be$t When It Isn't Designed for Them

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Syria currently holds one of the most well-educated, well-established and productive diaspora communities in Europe. In the 15 years since the revolution in 2011 and the subsequent outbreak of the civil war, over a million Syrians fled to Europe (InfoMigrants, 2024), where they entered the job market, graduated from universities, or started their own businesses.

In addition, many Syrians fleeing to Europe, met and, often for the first time, intermingled with fellow Syrians from different parts of the country and different communities (Herzog and Ott, 2025). Both the hard skills learned through study, employment or entrepreneurship, and the soft skill

of getting to know your neighbour and humanising the 'other', can prove invaluable for the reconstruction and recovery of the post-war Syrian state.

With the fall of Assad in December 2024, and the takeover of government responsibilities by a loose coalition of actors, some of whom former Hayat Tahrir al Sham, the Syrian state and people are now embarking on the difficult path of reconstruction, reconciliation and (economic) recovery. There is a need for support in rebuilding the country, the society and the economy, which the diaspora community can partially offer.

However, as seen in past rebuilding efforts, externally designed diaspora mobilisation tends to produce elite capture and legitimacy backlash; the highest-value role for diaspora is enabling functions that are demand-driven, modular, and accountable to in-country institutions. How best, then, to help facilitate the mobilisation of these skillsets by the Syrian diaspora community, and how to avoid the pitfalls of earlier recovery efforts involving diaspora communities?

The Syrian Community in Europe

The Netherlands is home to between 150.000 and 165.000 Syrians. This number includes some 70.000 refugees. As of 2023, more than half of this number was actively working in one way or another, primarily in hospitality and transport (DutchNews, 2023). In Germany, this number reaches up to 68%, on a population total of 1 to 1.3 million (InfoMigrants, 2024). In addition, a significant number of the non-working Syrians still hold academic degrees from their home country, their host country, or both (Betts et al., 2018). This makes the Syrian diaspora well-educated and generally well-employed (Masri et al., 2021).

Simultaneously, the Syrian state is facing a plethora of issues. Fourteen years of civil war have resulted in a significant brain-drain, with many of the émigrés hailing from cities with large, educated populations (Frontline, 2019). This brain-drain has coincided with the large-scale destruction of infrastructure, much of which, including irrigation systems and agricultural and industrial compounds, critical for the country's economic recovery.

An approximate 50% of the country's infrastructure has been destroyed, of which some 48% critical infrastructure in the energy, water and sanitation sectors (UNDP 2025; WBG 2025). Syria has a stark need for vocationally and academically trained professionals to help rebuild both this physical and the societal infrastructure that would be necessary to function as a state, but is demographically depleted of skilled workers.

This situation provides us with both a demand, as well as a potential supply. Many Syrians living in Europe communicate the wish to 'do something for their homeland', if not eventually return to rebuild themselves (IOM, 2025). This apparent match between domestic need and external expertise is compelling. Yet, past experience demonstrates that without

careful design, diaspora mobilisation can generate new hierarchies and legitimacy problems rather than institutional renewal.

Diaspora Mobilisation in History

Diaspora involvement in rebuilding and reconstruction has a long and turbulent history (EUDiF, 2025). As displacement comes as a natural effect of conflict, wars and civil strife generally see the development, if not enlargement, of a diaspora community. This has been true for Iraq, Afghanistan, the World Wars, or any recorded conflict going back to the Assyrian conquest of Samaria (Aleshkovski, Botcharov & Grebenyuk, 2021).

The refugee phenomenon is a condition of conflict, and a prolonged and expanded refugee population naturally settles, and forms a diaspora (Van Hear, 2003). The involvement of these diasporas in the processes that constitute post-conflict resettlement and reconstruction also hails from a lengthy historical tradition, exemplified by Cyrus the Great's decision to allow the Judeans to return to their ancestral homeland to rebuild (Simkovich, 2025).

The mobilisation of diasporas in reconstruction efforts has also come up in modern and postmodern examples. After the destruction of the first world war, returning refugee populations were crucial in rebuilding heavily destroyed Belgium (Schrover, 2017). Similarly, the Iranian revolution of 1979 saw large numbers of exiled communists return to their home country in an effort to help build the new republic (Haliday, 1980). Scholarship on the practice of active diaspora mobilisation and its effects, however, has been relatively new (Koinova, 2018), with authors mainly basing their writing on the experiences of post-9/11 conflict- and post-conflict reconstruction.

In these works, light has been shed on both the positive (Smith and Stares, 2007; Orjuela, 2008) and negative (Perritt, 2008; Kaldor, 2001) aspects of diaspora involvement in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Authors such as Kaldor (2001) shed light on the risk of diaspora communities radicalising from abroad, maintaining conflict networks or building conflict-prone institutions. These risks are real and to be taken seriously (Koinova, 2018).

Nevertheless, the pressing contextual realities of a context like Syria's, as described above, can tip the scales towards an argument for diaspora involvement. Researchers highlight the potential for a diaspora's role in development (Kapur, 2004) and reconstruction (Kleist, 2008). In addition, examples from a multitude of contemporary contexts show that knowledge, skills and expertise provided by diaspora communities positively contribute to long-term peacebuilding, addressing root causes of conflict beyond immediate humanitarian aid (EUDiF, 2025).

Diaspora Instrumentalisation: Iraq and Afghanistan

These positive experiences, however, do not take away the potential pitfalls exemplified by the lived experiences from the past twenty-five years of

international interventions. Efforts to mobilise (if not instrumentalise) diaspora communities following the fall of the regimes in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) created unforeseen issues exacerbating existing social and societal fissures.

Externally imposed diaspora mobilisation, in these cases, has proven a major pitfall. When external sponsorship elevates a narrow circle of elite diaspora gatekeepers without strong domestic accountability, it risks producing a new insider–outsider hierarchy. This, in turn, fuels resentment among those who remained, exacerbates (or even adds to) social tensions, and ultimately weakens the legitimacy of the very institutions such mobilisation is meant to support.

Iraq

Trusting the voices of diaspora leaders, as well as their own instrumentalist designs, the US and UK took political and socio-economic measures shaping post-Saddam Iraq to the designs of exiles who, in some cases, hadn't been living in the country for decades. These measures empowered the (often well-educated and well-established) diaspora organisations, leading to the build-up of institutions favouring diaspora. This is exemplified by the fact that six of the seven modern Iraqi prime ministers have lived in diaspora (of whom four in the UK). Similarly, the upper echelons of the Iraqi civil service are still filled with former exiles, often outranking Iraqis who have stayed behind.

Any intervention mobilising the Syrian diaspora community is at risk of making the same mistake. As shown by Kadhum (2021), this instrumentalisation of diaspora communities by the US and UK in Iraq manifested a new layer in Iraqi society. A new, Western-educated elite, competing within the existing power structures with those Iraqis who stayed behind.

This has led to resentment and dissent further fracturing Iraqi politics and society. Simultaneously, diaspora members who returned experienced a sense of culture shock as to how Iraqi society had changed. These cultural differences between diaspora and stay-behinds exacerbated the insider/outsider dynamics that fuelled the creation of this elite that, to many, felt disconnected.

As such, the Iraqi case demonstrates that when diaspora mobilisation is externally driven, elite-centred, and insufficiently grounded in domestic social realities, it risks entrenching new hierarchies, deepening insider/outsider divides, and undermining the very legitimacy it is meant to support. In looking at potential roles for diaspora communities in Syria, this is something to avoid.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, too, Afghan diaspora communities were quickly and wilfully mobilised by the US and their new Afghan allies, with newly instated president Hamid Karzai appealing directly to the Afghan diaspora for investments, support and remigration (Van Hear, 2003). The role of this

diaspora in the bumpy process that was the building of an Afghan state has, however, been contested.

Kouser Fatima (2014) argues that the Afghan diaspora community provided both financial resources and technical expertise that were much needed in post-Taliban state building. However, she notes that the individualistic attitudes of diaspora leaders, who often prioritised their own tribes or communities, impeded the extent of positive impact made. Mirroring the observation made by Koinova (2018), Fatima noticed how US and Afghan policy makers seem to have underestimated the impact of how the diversity within the Afghan diaspora (reflecting ethnic and tribal divisions in the country) created challenges for cohesive engagement in reconstruction.

Syria, as starkly shown during the fourteen years of civil war, is diverse. The country is home to a multitude of ethnic groups and religious denominations, as well as large urban ánd rural communities and an array of local and political identities (US State, 2017). Even in the dialects of spoken Arabic there are stark differences between the soft Damascene, the rhythmic Aleppo accent and the slightly coarse vocab found in the East.

Treating the diaspora as one, singular group overlooks all these differences, this diversity, and the impact they have on the worldviews and dreams of a future Syria. The Syrian diaspora, much like the Afghan, is not a monolith, and treating this incredibly diverse community as one group comes at the risk of overlooking and oversimplifying the process of post-conflict state building.

From Imposition to Involvement

In addition to these two factors (diaspora dynamics and diaspora diversity), one overarching flaw of these previous approaches is the instrumentality.

Grassroots diaspora initiatives, on which Kadhum (2011) also sheds light, show another image. These initiatives have often been limited in their impact due to various reasons, including limited funding, local conflict and distrust, and the limited reach of individuals and small non-governmental organisations. However, diaspora initiatives have been effective in responding to needs expressed by local communities, often in part due to the direct lines of communication with community representatives (Herzog and Ott, 2025).

The Syrian case shares many of the conditions that have previously rendered diaspora mobilisation both impactful and problematic: a large, educated exile population; deep internal diversity; and significant external interest in shaping post-conflict outcomes. These factors underline the need for an approach to diaspora engagement that avoids instrumentalisation, mitigates elite capture, and recognises diversity within the diaspora itself. The following section therefore turns to a normative proposal for how Syrian diaspora mobilisation might be facilitated in a way that is inclusive,

responsive to locally articulated needs, and attentive to the lessons of earlier post-conflict interventions.

Viable Alternatives

The (limited, but real) successes of grassroots initiatives in Iraq can be replicated in Syria. Through being mindful not to incept a new diaspora elite, not to add to the many social fissures, and not to overlook the diverse nature of the diaspora community itself, a diaspora mobilising itself can be a powerful catalyst. An enabling power, through both providing the knowledge and expertise needed by the Syrian state and Syrian communities, and through showing that inter-ethnic and inter-religious collaboration is indeed possible.

Through the diaspora interacting with their peers and counterparts in Syria, a German-educated Syrian Kurd assisting with an infrastructure project in Druze Suweyda can make a positive impact both physically and psychologically, through building both a canal and the trust needed for the Syrian state to function.

A Syrian diaspora consultation my colleagues and I have held in The Hague this February reflected many of these sentiments. Participants from 15 diaspora organisations argued for a coordination mechanism that could align expertise with needs articulated from within the country. The proposed platform was conceived as a facilitating structure for grassroots initiatives.

Participants proposed mapping skills, connecting professionals, and creating a transparent interface through which Syrian municipalities, institutions and organisations could request technical support. International examples were discussed as inspiration, yet with a clear awareness that any model would need to avoid centralising authority in a narrow circle of self-appointed spokespeople.

The outcomes of the meeting were correspondingly pragmatic. Participants highlighted the need for shared purpose and principles, with particular emphasis on transparency and rotating responsibilities. A shared communication channel was established to reduce fragmentation among existing initiatives, and preparations began for a broader conference involving Dutch and Syrian institutional counterparts. Participants focused on coordination, knowledge exchange and responsiveness to locally defined recovery priorities. In substance, the consultation signalled a shift away from symbolic mobilisation towards structured, accountable cooperation designed to support, rather than supersede, domestic actors.

How to Proceed?

A solution to the conundrums of diaspora mobilisation could thus be to facilitate the diaspora in mobilising itself. Rather than seeing the diaspora community as an instrument in a broader peace building or state building

design, as a tool in recovery and reconstruction, the diaspora can be seen as a platform. A platform through which individual community members and community organisations can present the tools, knowledge and expertise needed to solve the great many issues the Syrian state is dealing with. By bringing these members and organisations together, and by facilitating the alignment of their shared goals and messages towards recovery and reconstruction, a coordinated effort can be made towards the inception of a truly inclusive, truly effective, and truly Syrian future.

Moving beyond rhetoric, priority-setting should rest with representative actors inside Syria. Diaspora professionals can advise and contribute expertise, but decisions on what is rebuilt, and in what order, must be anchored domestically:

Approached as such, diaspora mobilisation shifts the focus from symbolic inclusion to institutional design. The question for policy makers and foundations is therefore not whether to engage the diaspora, but how to redesign their portfolios accordingly.

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