

Mapping Syrian Diaspora in Germany and The Netherlands

2025

Dr. Nora Jasmin Ragab and Sandra Kluivers
COMMISSIONED BY THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Executive Summary.....	3
Objectives and methodology	3
1. Introduction	11
2. Conceptual framework of diaspora mobilization	14
3. Methodology.....	16
3.1. Data collection methods.....	16
3.2. Overview of the sample.....	18
3.3. Data analysis.....	18
3.4. Ethical and practical considerations.....	19
4. Syrian Diaspora mobilization in Germany	20
4.1. Migration and policy context.....	20
4.1.1. Characteristics of Syrian immigrant population	20
4.1.2. Policy context	25
4.2. Mapping the Syrian civil society landscape in Germany	28
4.3. Activities and practices.....	32
4.4. Challenges and opportunities	33
Opportunities.....	33
Challenges.....	40
4.5. Aspirations and motivations for potential (temporary) return	45
5. Syrian Diaspora mobilization in the Netherlands.....	49
5.1. Migration and policy context.....	49
5.2. Mapping the Syrian civil society landscape in The Netherlands.....	55
5.3. Activities and practices.....	56
5.4. Challenges and opportunities	59
5.5. Aspirations and motivations for transnational engagement and potential (temporary) return	66
6. Conclusion and recommendations	71
6.1. Summary of the findings	71
6.2. Recommendations	72
6.2.1. Recommendations on how to engage with and support the Syrian diaspora	72
6.2.2. Recommendations specific on enabling sustainable (temporary) return	75
References	78

Executive Summary

Objectives and methodology

This mapping exercise provides a comprehensive overview of Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany and in the Netherlands, their activities, challenges, and potential contributions to Syria's reconstruction. It also explores the feasibility of a Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) programme. The objectives of the study are to:

- **Develop a comprehensive mapping** of Syrian diaspora organizations and active individuals in the Netherlands and Germany.
- **Profile the Syrian diaspora** with key demographic, professional, and social indicators (e.g., age, education, skills, profession, engagement in diaspora organizations).
- **Assess diaspora interest and readiness** to contribute to Syria's recovery and reconstruction via temporary return or diaspora engagement.
- **Develop specific recommendations** for action regarding future TRQN programme and broader MIDS strategy for diaspora engagement.

The research followed a **qualitative approach** combining desk research, mapping, and fieldwork to generate evidence-based findings and recommendations. A comprehensive mapping exercise was conducted to compile a database of Syrian diaspora organizations, networks, and key individuals in Germany and the Netherlands. In addition, semi-structured interviews with diaspora organizations, key individuals, and relevant institutional stakeholders were conducted to gain deeper insights into diaspora engagement dynamics, opportunities, and challenges.

The study is based on 25 interviews with Syrian diaspora actors in Germany and the Netherlands, reflecting diverse migration trajectories, lengths of stay, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and engagement across a wide range of thematic areas. In addition, seven interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including German and Dutch government officials, international NGOs, and development agencies.

Summary of Key Findings

Germany

Migration and Policy Context

People of Syrian origin had become the third largest immigrant group in Germany, with over 1.2 million people of Syrian migration background residing in the country as of 2024 - in 2023, around 21.2 million immigrants were registered in Germany. Migration has been driven mostly by forced displacement and family reunification, resulting in a young population profile with high proportions of children and youth, but also challenges related to education gaps, unemployment, and low household incomes. While many Syrians have obtained citizenship or secure residence, a significant share remains on temporary permits or without secure legal status, contributing to uncertainty and vulnerability. German migration policy, initially marked by a welcoming approach, has become increasingly restrictive, with recent suspensions of asylum applications

and limitations on family reunification, though diaspora engagement remains a strategic priority for German development cooperation.

Profile and Landscape of Syrian Civil Society

Over the years, a vibrant Syrian civil society has established itself in Germany, one that is politically, culturally, and socially engaged. Its goal is not only to contribute to social and political change in Syria, but also to address the urgent needs of the Syrian population in their country of origin, in neighbouring countries, and in Germany. The mapping exercise identified 87 Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany with an active online presence. The organizational landscape of the Syrian diaspora in Germany is highly diverse, ranging from small volunteer-driven initiatives to professionalized NGOs with transnational reach. While some larger networks and established NGOs operate with permanent staff and transnational activities, most organizations rely on a handful of committed members, temporary project funding, and volunteer labour. Despite their flexibility and ability to mobilize communities, many organizations face structural inequalities shaped by class dynamics and persistent funding insecurity, which is exacerbated by shrinking aid budgets and shifting donor priorities. With regard to activities and priorities, many organizations that were founded in 2011/2012 to influence political processes in Syria or to provide humanitarian aid in Syria and neighbouring countries have, over time, also implemented activities aimed at promoting the involvement and participation of Syrian refugees in Germany. With the fall of the Assad regime, there is now a renewed interest and motivation to contribute to the country's rebuilding. Overall, Syrian diaspora organisations in Germany are highly diverse, engaging in fields ranging from integration, education, health, humanitarian aid, media, culture, and employment support to advocacy, women's empowerment, human rights, peacebuilding, reconstruction and urban development.

The Netherlands

Migration and Policy Context

Syrian migration to the Netherlands has undergone major shifts since 2011, with a sharp increase in arrivals during the civil war, peaking in 2016. As of late 2023, over 165,000 Syrians were registered in the country, forming a young and relatively well-educated diaspora. While asylum applications have declined in 2025—likely due to political changes in Syria and changing asylum policies in the Netherlands—Syrians remain prominent in family reunification cases. Integration has progressed gradually, with widespread participation in language and civic programs, though employment and language barriers persist, especially among older adults. Most Syrians live dispersed across the Netherlands, and many express strong attachments to Dutch society, with high rates of naturalization and a growing second generation. Despite challenges in housing and labor market access, Syrians contribute actively to community life and value safety, education, and freedom in their new home. Similarly to the German policy context, Dutch migration policies around Syrians have only become more restrictive throughout the last decade and narratives around migration and this particular group remain a polarizing subject in Dutch society, as well as Dutch politics.

Profile and Landscape of Syrian Civil Society

Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands are modest in number but highly active and diverse. Emerging largely after 2011, these groups—often starting informally—have gradually professionalized despite legal and financial barriers, including EU sanctions. Their activities span humanitarian aid, health, women’s empowerment, infrastructure, justice, and integration, reflecting shared values of human rights, inclusive dialogue, and community-based rebuilding. While coordination remains limited at the national level, there is growing interest in forming umbrella networks, particularly in sectors like medicine and education. These organizations serve as vital bridges between communities and countries, with many now focused on contributing to Syria’s reconstruction, especially following the fall of the Assad regime and a recent spike in registrations.

Challenges

Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany and in the Netherlands face a range of structural and operational challenges that hinder their ability to contribute effectively to the rebuilding of Syria. Financial and legal barriers, particularly EU sanctions, complicate formal registration and access to banking services, while many organizations operate with limited funding, relying heavily on volunteer labour and small project grants. The infrastructure situation inside Syria further restricts impact, with persistent shortages in electricity, water, and medical equipment. Safety concerns, ongoing violence, and distrust in Syrian authorities make it difficult to plan and implement projects, and also affect the emotional well-being of diaspora members, potentially discouraging civic engagement in their countries of residence. Additionally, restrictive migration policies and precarious legal statuses in Europe limit the capacity of diaspora actors to organize and advocate effectively.

Fragmentation within the diaspora, which is driven by ethnic, regional, and political divisions, also poses a barrier to collaboration and coordinated action. Some organizations report difficulty accessing decision-makers in countries like Germany, and feel their expertise is undervalued, which undermines efforts to promote Syrian-led reconstruction approaches. Civic and political space remains limited, both in Syria and within diaspora communities, with fears that human rights work may be suppressed. Gender-specific obstacles further complicate engagement, as women face structural barriers in both the Germany, the Netherlands and Syria. Despite these challenges, many organizations remain committed to justice, inclusion, and long-term recovery, though their ability to scale and sustain efforts depends on addressing these systemic constraints.

Opportunities

Despite significant challenges, Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany and in the Netherlands possess unique strengths that position them as valuable contributors to Syria’s reconstruction. Many members bring professional expertise in fields such as medicine, engineering, and education, and are actively preparing missions and knowledge transfer initiatives. Their strong motivation, long-term commitment, and diverse skill sets enable them to address complex needs both in Syria and in their countries of residence. Some organizations maintain active operations inside Syria or have close ties to local communities, allowing for responsive, community-based

development. These networks are often inclusive and gender-sensitive, ensuring that aid and engagement reflect the realities of vulnerable groups.

Diaspora organizations also play a vital role in promoting justice, accountability, and inclusive governance. Their advocacy efforts, combined with cultural and faith-based engagement, help preserve identity and support social cohesion. The presence of Syrian communities across multiple European countries offers opportunities for transnational collaboration, and many organizations are exploring cross-border networks to amplify their impact. With access to professional knowledge and strong local connections, these groups are well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to Syria's recovery, provided that enabling conditions and support structures are strengthened.

Recommendations I - Supporting Syrian Diaspora Organizations

Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany and the Netherlands are deeply committed to contributing to both local integration and the reconstruction of Syria. However, they face persistent barriers that limit their growth and impact. Key areas of support identified through consultations include financial and logistical assistance, capacity building, visibility and networking, legal advocacy, and collaboration with international actors such as IOM.

Financial and logistical support remains a critical need. Organizations struggle with high costs for sending aid to Syria, navigating shipping routes, and opening bank accounts due to sanctions. These constraints hinder their ability to receive donations, apply for legal status, and operate effectively. To effectively support Syrian diaspora engagement, governments could begin by addressing the financial and logistical barriers that many organizations face. This includes resolving banking restrictions linked to international sanctions, and/or providing flexible funding options for informal and grassroots organizations would also help sustain their initiatives. In addition, establishing secure and cost-effective channels for the shipment of humanitarian aid and medical equipment would significantly enhance the reach and impact of these efforts.

Capacity building and organizational development are also essential. Grassroots and newly established organizations require assistance in structuring operations, applying for funding, and forming strategic partnerships. Offering training in project management, fundraising, and strategic planning would empower diaspora organizations to operate more effectively. Recognizing the emotional toll of humanitarian and advocacy work, governments should also support initiatives that promote emotional resilience and prevent burnout. A dedicated Diaspora Support Office within relevant ministries within the Syrian authorities could provide guidance on legal registration, access to funding, and partnership development. Furthermore, governments can facilitate training and mentorship programmes in collaboration with diaspora professionals in fields such as medicine, engineering, and organizational development, while also ensuring access to infrastructure and safe spaces for diaspora-led activities inside Syria.

Visibility and networking are shared priorities. Many organizations seek to increase their presence within Dutch and German societies and connect with similar diaspora groups across Europe. Strengthening ties with local institutions and creating platforms for collaboration would enhance integration and mutual support. Additionally, enhancing visibility and fostering connections between diaspora organizations and Syrian institutions is key to building trust and

collaboration. The Syrian authorities could organize annual diaspora forums in Syria to showcase projects and encourage dialogue. Media campaigns that highlight the contributions of diaspora actors to Syria's recovery would help raise public awareness and appreciation. Promoting local partnerships between Syrian institutions and diaspora organizations would also support cultural exchange and integration, strengthening the social fabric and mutual understanding.

Legal and policy advocacy is another area where diaspora organizations need support.

Groups working on justice and documentation initiatives require access to policymakers and judicial institutions. Advocacy around gender equity and the implementation of national action plans aligned with international frameworks is also seen as vital to ensuring Syrian voices are represented in broader policy discussions. Actively involving diaspora communities in the drafting of national development strategies and supporting gender equity and minority rights within diaspora programming would align efforts with broader human rights goals. Facilitating access to judicial and policy institutions for diaspora organizations engaged in advocacy would help amplify their voices in national decision-making. Aligning domestic policies with international frameworks would further reinforce Syria's commitment to inclusive development and human rights, creating a more enabling environment for diaspora engagement.

Recommendations II - Enabling Sustainable Temporary Return: TRQN Programming

Most organizations expressed interest in participating in a TRQN programme, especially for short-term, mission-based returns. Evaluations of IOM's TRQN and CD4D programmes show that diaspora professionals can play a vital role in rebuilding priority sectors in fragile states like Syria. Their contributions, especially in training and capacity building, have been well received by host institutions and governments. For Syria, a focused and context-sensitive approach is essential, targeting specific sectors and institutions where qualified diaspora professionals can have the most impact. **Flexible assignment models, combining short-term in-person missions with virtual engagements,** have proven effective in maintaining continuity and expanding reach. **Digital tools and exchange visits further strengthen cooperation,** while robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks, grounded in clear Theories of Change, are key to ensuring long-term success.

To enable meaningful engagement, **Syrian diaspora organizations emphasize the need for financial and technical support,** including coverage of travel and accommodation costs, and logistical coordination inside Syria. Advocacy is also crucial to ensure that return policies are safe, dignified, and rights-based, and that short-term visits do not jeopardize protection status. **Co-creation with diaspora organizations is essential for programme relevance and sustainability,** as these groups possess deep contextual knowledge and trusted networks. Area-based approaches, focusing on urban hubs like Aleppo and Damascus, can enhance impact by leveraging existing infrastructure and safety conditions.

Cross-border collaboration among diaspora organizations in Europe offers further opportunities to strengthen networks and coordinate efforts. Most diaspora professionals prefer short-term assignments of 2–6 weeks, with some open to longer stays, provided there is flexibility. These durations allow for meaningful contributions while accommodating responsibilities in Europe. With the right support and inclusive programme design, temporary

return initiatives can harness the diaspora's expertise and motivation to contribute to Syria's recovery in a sustainable and impactful way.

There is strong interest in partnering with IOM, particularly in areas such as funding, capacity development, joint programming, and networking. Organizations envision co-developing initiatives in reconstruction, justice, and protection, and see IOM as a key actor in facilitating connections across diaspora communities and with stakeholders in Syria. In terms of enabling sustainable (temporary) return, diaspora organizations emphasize the need for a multi-dimensional approach. **Advocacy and policy engagement should ensure that return is safe, dignified, and rights-based, informed by accurate assessments of conditions in Syria.** This includes upholding non-refoulement and protecting legal status during short-term visits.

There are also a number of key sectors that have been identified as core to a successful and sustainable rebuilding of Syria. Three of the most prevalent sectors and how Syrian diaspora organizations can contribute to the rebuilding of these are outlined further below:

Sectoral focus I: Health and medical sector

Syrian diaspora organizations in both countries are actively engaged in addressing urgent health needs in Syria. Their efforts include sending medical equipment, organizing field missions, and training Syrian medical students and professionals. One organization in the Netherlands noted, "*In Syria, the hospitals have a lack of everything: medicines, equipment, technology,*" highlighting the severity of the crisis. Diaspora doctors are planning short-term missions to perform specialized surgeries and provide hands-on training. There is also a strong emphasis on empowering female healthcare professionals and integrating gender-sensitive practices into medical support. These initiatives are grassroots-driven and rely heavily on personal networks and volunteerism. IOM can play a pivotal role in scaling these efforts by facilitating logistics, securing funding, and formalizing partnerships with local health institutions.

Sectoral focus II: Infrastructure

To effectively mobilize Syrian diaspora organizations in rebuilding Syria's infrastructure, the Syrian authorities can prioritize removing financial and logistical barriers that currently hinder their contributions. This includes addressing sanctions-related banking restrictions that prevent organizations from receiving formal donations and operating legally, as well as providing flexible funding mechanisms that accommodate informal and grassroots initiatives. There are a number of diaspora organizations that contain engineering knowledge and who wish to contribute, but who run into these obstacles and are thus unable to. The authorities can further support infrastructure-focused efforts by offering customs and transport assistance for diaspora-led projects, particularly in critical sectors such as health and education. Establishing secure, official channels for the shipment of humanitarian aid and medical equipment would significantly enhance the capacity of diaspora actors to deliver tangible support. In this effort, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) can serve as a strategic partner by facilitating coordination between diaspora organizations and Syrian institutions. IOM's experience with temporary return programmes such as TRQN and CD4D positions it well to support infrastructure-focused missions through technical assistance, capacity building, and matchmaking between diaspora professionals and host institutions.

Sectoral focus III: Transitional justice and social cohesion

To advance transitional justice and foster social cohesion in Syria, it's recommended that the authorities actively engage Syrian diaspora organizations that have long been involved in documentation, advocacy, and community-building. These organizations possess deep contextual knowledge and maintain trusted networks both within Syria and abroad. The authorities can support their efforts by facilitating access to judicial and policy institutions, and by creating inclusive platforms for dialogue and collaboration. Recognizing the contributions of diaspora actors in justice and reconciliation processes, particularly those focused on gender equity, minority rights, and survivor-led initiatives, will help ensure that transitional justice efforts are representative and rights-based. In partnership with IOM, the Syrian authorities can co-develop programmes that support truth-telling, legal reform, and community healing, while also promoting conflict transformation within diaspora communities. By aligning national policies with international human rights frameworks and enabling diaspora participation in shaping Syria's future, the authorities can lay the groundwork for a more just and cohesive society.

In addition, supporting Syrians on matters of mental health is essential to any transitional justice and social cohesion strategy. Many individuals and communities have endured prolonged trauma, displacement, and loss, which continue to affect their well-being and capacity to engage in reconciliation processes. Programming should therefore include psychosocial support and trauma-informed approaches, ensuring that healing and resilience are prioritized alongside legal and institutional reforms. By integrating mental health considerations into policy design and implementation, the authorities and its partners can foster more inclusive, empathetic, and sustainable pathways toward justice and social cohesion.

Recommendations III - the Development of a Diaspora Engagement Strategy

Engaging diasporas as a national government for reconstruction and development is not a one-way process; governments must also recognise and respond to the needs and aspirations of diaspora communities. When governments place too much emphasis on obligations and the leverage of resources while neglecting rights, they risk undermining trust and sustainable diaspora involvement. Effective diaspora engagement strategies therefore require a comprehensive legal framework that not only regulates government action but is also designed with practical implementation in mind, ensuring the measures move beyond rhetoric and become operational realities (Ragab & Diker, 2021). While IOM (2021) offers concrete guidance on building trust, mobilizing resources and ensuring sustainability of diaspora engagement, these are following recommendations to be considered in the short-term:

- **Develop the diaspora engagement policy through a participatory, co-created process:** Past state–diaspora relations in the context of Syria were marked by repression and mistrust, which still shape origin-state diaspora dynamics. A joint design with diaspora actors, helps to ensure that legitimacy, ownership, and trust are built into it from the start. Formats such as structured consultation, working group committees and digital engagement platforms can facilitate the co-creation process.
- **Building trust based on an inclusive approach:** The Syrian diaspora civil society is highly diverse, politically active, and possesses expertise in areas such as health, education, justice, accountability, human rights, civil society, reconstruction, and culture. Many

organizations have already engaged in knowledge transfer, advocacy, and professional networking. However, mistrust toward transitional authorities and risks of exclusion remain major obstacles. Respecting diversity within the diaspora (political views, generational differences, ethnic/religious backgrounds) by creating inclusive platforms and autonomous institutions is crucial to leverage the potential of the diaspora to tackle the various needs inside Syria.

- **Harness the diaspora potential for peacebuilding, justice and accountability and social cohesion:** Sectarianization, trauma, and mistrust pose a crucial challenge to Syria's transition towards a just and peaceful society. Diaspora communities themselves have mirrored these fragmentations, but they also have demonstrated capacity to foster dialogue, cultural preservation, and rights-based advocacy. It is therefore crucial to consider diaspora-led initiatives in peacebuilding, transitional justice, and cultural heritage preservation as integral to reconstruction, and not as an afterthought.
- **Facilitate diaspora knowledge and skills transfer for reconstruction:** Syrian professionals and organizations in the diaspora (e.g., medical associations, urban planners, educators) have already engaged in capacity development, training, and knowledge-sharing. Many diaspora members express willingness to contribute through temporary return missions, but structural and security barriers hinder engagement. Instead of ad hoc exchanges, the transitional government should foster **sustained, institutionalized connections** that allow skills to flow both ways, and in a more coordinated way to ensure that aspirations of diaspora meet the needs on the ground in Syria.

1. Introduction

Study Background

After the Fall of Assad regime Syria faces a wide range of challenges in establishing effective governance structures and exercising consistent authority, ensuring safety, addressing urgent humanitarian, and laying the groundwork for meaningful recovery and long-term stability in the country. This is further exacerbated by years of protracted conflict with significant damage to critical infrastructure and undermined institutional capacity, and extremely limited financial and human resources to deliver essential services.

Against this complex backdrop, there is a renewed energy and motivation among Syrian diaspora actors to contribute to the rebuilding and reconstruction of the country. Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) is already occurring organically and provides a positive strategy for supporting the re-establishment of necessary services and benefiting from the skills and expertise of national living abroad.

Established in 1951, IOM is the leading UN agency in the field of migration and works closely with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners. IOM developed a [Diaspora Engagement Strategy](#), which over the years has informed diaspora engagement and development programming. Additionally, IOM hosts an online platform called [iDiaspora](#), which hosts resources for diaspora organizations, as well as multiple forums for diaspora and experts to share insights and knowledge.

It is in this landscape that IOM has designed and implemented diaspora engagement projects. A number of relevant examples are as follows:

- 1) [The Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals \(TRQN\) project](#), (running from 2006 to 2016) implemented by IOM, with the lead being IOM the Netherlands and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The goals of the project were to facilitate short-term return of diaspora professionals to support institutional capacity-building and to promote knowledge transfer and sustainable development. The countries involved in the project were; Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Ghana, Morocco, Armenia, Georgia, Cape Verde and South Sudan. Activities included: matching diaspora experts with host institutions and organizing short-terms assignments to, among others, promote knowledge transfer and expertise building (typically around 3 months). There was a focus on sectors such as health, education, infrastructure and governance.
[Connecting Diaspora for Development \(CD4D\) project](#) (running form 2016 – 2023), implemented by IOM, with as lead IOM the Netherlands, and was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The goals of the project were to link diaspora professionals (primarily with Dutch residency) to institutions in their countries of origin and strengthen institutional capacity through knowledge exchange. Countries involved included Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and Somalia. Activities included in-person and virtual assignments, demand-driven matching with host institutions, and capacity-building in sectors such as education, health, justice, and governance.

Upon the request of the interim government of Syria, IOM is providing technical assistance to key governmental institutions to develop and strengthen their ability to fulfil their respective mandates, by facilitating temporary return of qualified nationals (TRQN) to enable immediate support, transfer of knowledge and mentoring from a variety of qualified members of the Syrian diaspora. The project “Creating a Pathway for Diaspora: Paving the Way for Migration and Development for Syria (MIDS)”, aims to combine the needs of the interim government with IOM’s institutional expertise and aims to establish a programme to build institutional capacity and provide government institutions, at different levels, with the capacities to contribute to good governance and sustainable development, through the recruitment and deployment of qualified diaspora experts, for the benefit of the Syrian population.

Objectives and Research Questions

While the Syrian interim government, supported by IOM, seeks to harness the skills and expertise of the Syrian diaspora to aid reconstruction and state-building efforts, insufficient data exists about the diaspora’s composition, capacities, and willingness to engage. This mapping serves as a **foundational study** to guide subsequent **feasibility assessments and programme development** under the MIDS project, aiming to operationalize temporary returns and broader diaspora engagement in Syria's recovery.

The objectives of the study are to:

- Develop a comprehensive mapping of Syrian diaspora organizations and active individuals in the Netherlands and Germany.
- Profile the Syrian diaspora with key demographic, professional, and social indicators (e.g., age, education, skills, profession, engagement in diaspora organizations).
- Assess diaspora interest and readiness to contribute to Syria’s recovery and reconstruction via temporary return or diaspora engagement.
- Develop specific recommendations for action regarding future TRQN programme and broader MIDS strategy for diaspora engagement.

To achieve the specific objectives the data collection and analysis is guided by the following **key research questions** - clustered into the following themes:

Table 1: Set of research questions

Theme	Research Questions
Demographic and Professional Profile of the Syrian diaspora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the demographic composition of the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands and Germany (age, gender, geographic distribution, ethnic background, length of stay)? • What is the professional and skills profile of the diaspora (education, professional background in Syria and in the Netherlands/Germany, current employment status)?
Structure and Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What Syrian diaspora organizations, networks, associations, or professional groups exist in the Netherlands and Germany? • What are the main goals, areas of focus, and activities of these organizations? • What levels of cooperation exist between diaspora organizations and other stakeholders (e.g. local authorities, international organizations, private sector)?
Engagement and Transnational Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways is the Syrian diaspora currently engaging with Syria? • What sectors or fields are diaspora members most interested in contributing to in Syria's recovery and reconstruction? • How have the diaspora's engagement patterns changed in light of recent political developments, including the fall of the Assad regime?
Motivations, Aspirations, and Barriers for Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What motivates Syrian diaspora members and organizations to contribute to recovery and reconstruction efforts in Syria including through temporary return? • What challenges diaspora actors face in their engagement or in returning temporarily? • What kinds of support, incentives, or assurances would make diaspora members more willing to contribute to Syria's recovery?
Recommendations for Future Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can IOM, through the TRQN and other programmes, best support the diaspora's engagement and ensure alignment with Syria's institutional needs? • How can partnerships between diaspora actors, the interim government, and international organizations like IOM be strengthened to facilitate sustainable contributions to Syria's development?

2. Conceptual framework of diaspora mobilization

During the last decades, diasporas have been more and more recognized as important agents of change, who contribute to sustainable development through the transfer of financial resources, knowledge and skills. IOM defines diasporas as:

“Migrants or descendants of migrants, whose identity and sense of belonging 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” (IOM, 2019).

Importantly, diasporas should not be understood as a natural result of migration with fixed senses of homeland belonging and unified identity, but instead as product of an active process of transnational mobilization. Understanding diaspora mobilization as a process puts emphasis on the dynamic, multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of the concept. Rather than imposing a communal identity based on a homogenizing narrative, it is important not only to investigate the processes through which a diasporic identity is constructed, but also the actors who engage in the construction of “transnational imagined communities” (Sökefeld, 2006). Central to this approach are the questions of how and why people mobilize for certain collective goals, and what political opportunities and constraints provide conditions for transnational mobilization (Adamson, 2008; Chaudhary & Moss, 2016; Koinova, 2012; Sökefeld, 2006).

In that sense, diaspora organizations can be considered as important agent of transnational mobilization. Bush (2008) defines diaspora organizations as “complex, formal, informal or semi-formal organizations that articulate and pursue goals that are asserted to be representative of the interests and aspirations of ‘the diaspora’ as a whole” (p.195). Diaspora organizations range from hometown associations, religious and cultural clubs and development, humanitarian or human rights organizations to political parties and activists, academic networks, and media outlets (Kleist, 2015; Sinatti & Horst, 2015). Importantly, diaspora organizations should be considered as **heterogeneous actors**. This diversity is not only reflected in organizational aims and activities, but also in the lived experiences and positionalities of their members. Members of diasporas may face different social, economic and political circumstances and conditions in the residence country that, along with different trajectories of displacement and contextual aspects in the country of origin, shape identities, political orientations and their capacity of engagement. Hence, diaspora community mobilization is often accompanied **by different power and exclusion dynamics that engender distinct spaces of representation, participation, and leadership**. Ang (2003) argues that diasporic identity “can be the site of both support and oppression, emancipation and confinement, solidarity and division” (p. 3). Therefore, diaspora groups and their respective institutions are seldom unified and homogenous and there is a need to understand the different aspirations and institutions of diaspora groups as well as the underlying factors such as class, professional, ethnic and gendered hierarchies that create fragmentation, power relations and competition among diaspora groups (Cochrane, Baser, & Swain, 2009; Smith, 2007).

Moreover, **transnational perspective** of diaspora engagement highlights that diaspora actors are embedded in and contribute to social, economic, and political processes and networks across geographic spaces (Glick Schiller, 2013). As diaspora organizations tend to be embedded in

multiple societies at once, they may engage in both the origin and residence contexts simultaneously. Transnational practices of diaspora actors, hence, can be considered not just as a form of civic participation in the country of origin, but as a crucial part and voice of the civil society in the country of residence (Horst, 2018; Koopmans, 2004).

Diaspora studies also highlight a **temporal dimension** of diaspora engagement as involvement might be sparked by developments and transformative events in the country of origin and result in actions that seek to influence the social, cultural, economic and political processes in the homeland. Over time diaspora actors may become more embedded in the local civil society structures and networks which enable or motivate them to pursue social, cultural and political actions oriented towards the country of settlement (Quinsaas, 2019; Ragab, 2020).

Finally, the space and nature of diaspora mobilization depends on the **opportunities and constraints diaspora actors encounter in the country of residence, the country of origin, and the international sphere**. Within the residence country context, immigration regimes and multicultural policies shape the opportunities for diaspora mobilization, with more open and democratic countries that promote cultural pluralism often providing more freedom for diaspora groups to engage in diasporic politics and to cultivate, practices and mobilize their national, religious and ethnic identities (Baser, 2014; Giugni & Passy, 2004; Kadhum, 2014). Regarding the discursive dimension, diaspora groups may experience more space for mobilization, if their cause and demands are perceived as justified within the broader political and public debate (Koinova, 2014; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Finally, funding institutions and specific support structures in the country of residence shape and influence the capacity of diasporas to engage in transnational practices and to contribute to the development and reconstruction process (Warnecke, 2010).

At the same time, countries of origin can implement long-distance policies targeting their population abroad that can be both facilitating and constraining diaspora involvement. Some countries seek to control their emigrant population through surveillance and other forms of repression, limiting the opportunities of diasporas to engage in the origin country's political process (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). On the other hand, states may implement diaspora engagement policies that leverage the potential contributions of diaspora groups to the origin country's development and provide means of political engagement through, for example, overseas-voting (Burgess, 2014). Besides policies, critical social and political events, such as revolutionary struggles, conflicts or natural disaster, can shape and influence diaspora consciousness and mobilize members to take action (Hammond et al., 2011; Hess & Korf, 2014; Khayati, 2012; Koinova, 2011).

In addition to institutional and policy contexts, diaspora mobilization is also shaped by family and community ties as well as cultural and religious norms. Expectations of solidarity, reciprocity, or collective responsibility can create both motivation and social pressure to "give back" to the country of origin, often influencing the intensity and direction of engagement. These dynamics vary across context and individual experiences, often shaped by cultural traditions, family wellbeing, time spent abroad, or religious considerations (Al-Ali et al., 2001).

In sum, diasporas and their organizations are not static entities but dynamic and context-dependent actors whose engagement is shaped by multiple and intersecting factors across time

and space. Their mobilization reflects a complex interplay of individual trajectories, collective aspirations, institutional conditions, and broader socio-political developments in both countries of origin and residence. Rather than assuming coherence or unity, it is essential to approach diaspora engagement as a field marked by heterogeneity, contestation, and negotiation—both within diaspora groups and in relation to external actors. Recognizing this complexity is key to understanding how diasporas contribute to transnational social change, and to fostering more inclusive and effective forms of support, collaboration, and policy engagement.

2. Methodology

To develop an evidence-based study and recommendations, the research made use of a **qualitative data collection strategy** which encompasses a desk study and primary data collection. The desk review allowed to map Syrian diaspora organizations and key individuals in Germany and the Netherlands and to take stock of the literature on Syrian diaspora engagement towards sustainable development and rebuilding. In the second step, this data has been complemented by the results of field research. In the following, we will outline initial ideas concerning the mapping of Syrian diaspora organizations and key individuals, the methodological approach including data collection tools, selection of interview partners, as well as methods of data analysis.

2.1. Data collection methods

As a first step, a **literature review** on diaspora engagement in conflict-settings and their contribution to development and rebuilding has been conducted. Furthermore, extensive desk research identified existing research and mappings of the Syrian diaspora to generate an overview of the potential role and contribution of the different Syrian diaspora groups in the respective residence countries. Additionally, desk research examined the policy space of Syrian diaspora mobilization in each residence destination country, including responsible institutions, their mandates and programmes, in order to identify distinct contextual aspects of each country, shaping diaspora engagement.

In addition, **secondary data and statistics** have been reviewed and analysed to provide an overview of the demographic and socio-economic composition of the Syrian immigrant population in Germany and the Netherlands. Data has been retrieved from the respective Statistical Offices, the Offices for Migration and Refugees, the central register of foreign nationals and other public data sources.

Another important component of the research methodology constitutes the **mapping of Syrian diaspora organizations and initiatives** as well as **individually engaged persons**. The mapping exercise aimed at compiling a comprehensive database of Syrian diaspora actors in Germany and the Netherlands (organizations, networks, key individuals and experts), in order to identify key characteristics of Syrian civil society in the selected countries of residence. In addition, it provides a basis for the sampling of research participants.

Figure 1 Syrian diaspora actors mapping



The mapping started by assessing the common register portal of the German federal states (www.handelsregister.de), as well as the Dutch Handelsregister (Kamer van Koophandel, <https://www.kvk.nl/en/search/>). Using social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram represented an important next step to identify more informally organized actors and key active diaspora initiative. Different keywords, e.g., Syra or Syrian (in German, English, and Dutch), were used in Google and on social media to find Syrian organizations or initiatives and other relevant actors. It is important to highlight that this approach only identified organizations that highlight their national identities in their names. While desk research helps to identify highly visible actors, snowball sampling through the outreach to existing contacts, IOM staff and potential gatekeepers within the diaspora communities enabled the identification of relevant informal and less publicly visible groups or initiatives as well as individuals who could give added value to the programme.

Given that diaspora groups and their respective institutions are seldom unified and homogenous, there is a need to understand the different aspirations, narratives and institutions of diaspora groups as well as the underlying factors such as class, professional, ethnic and gendered hierarchies that shape their practices and interactions. Consequently, **semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives from Syrian diaspora** organizations and key individuals, such as political activists and community leaders, have been conducted to gain further insights into the more underlying dynamics of mobilization, including potential lines of conflict and divisions within the diaspora communities. The interviews were semi-structured based on an interview guide and have been conducted in person, online via Microsoft Teams or phone. The interviews focused on the organization's work/individual engagement, the opportunities and challenges respondents face, and any relevant insights they may have on potential for temporary return initiatives and on potential cooperation with IOM

Finally, **interviews** were also conducted with **relevant stakeholders** (e.g. German context: GIZ, BMZ, DRC, Dutch context: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and RVO) to gain an overview of diaspora engagement policies and programming (generally and specifically for Syrian diaspora) in Germany and the Netherlands.

2.2. Overview of the sample

The mapping of Syrian diaspora individuals and organizations has been used as a basis for selecting the research participants. An invitation to all organizations and individuals listed has been sent. In addition, the technique of “**purposeful sampling**” for the selection of participants has been used, in which participants are chosen based on certain traits or qualities. In that, the study aims for heterogeneity in the sample in order to take into account the diversity and complexity of Syrian diaspora’s engagement. With regard to characteristics the sample aimed to include a representation of:

- ❖ **Migration experience:** to understand how the migration experience shapes the aspirations and capacities with regard to the engagement (e.g. forced or voluntary, first and second generations);
- ❖ **Different age groups:** to shed light on intergenerational differences and similarities;
- ❖ **Minorities (e.g. ethnic or religious minorities, women):** to include perspective and experiences of groups at risk of marginalisation and to shed light on power structures and social political dynamics of diaspora engagement.
- ❖ **Sectors of involvement and expertise:** to explore the diverse areas of involvement as well as sector-specific opportunities and challenges (e.g. climate & energy, digitalisation, employment promotion & entrepreneurship, education, health, human rights, integration, peacebuilding & democratisation)

In total, 25 interviews with diaspora actors have been conducted, including 19 in Germany and 6 in the Netherlands. The diaspora respondents had diverse reasons for migration, ranging from work and education to conflict induced migration or political persecution. The duration of stay in the country of residence at the time of the interviews ranged from three to 58 years, hence, covering various phases of Syrian immigration. However, the majority of respondents migrated after the outbreak of the war. With 64 per cent male are being slightly more represented in the sample. With regard to ethnic or religious belongings, the study was able to capture a great diversity, including respondents who (at least partly) identified themselves as being Kurdish, Palestinian, Christian, Muslim, or Druze. The organizations represented in the sample are engaged in a wide range of thematic areas, spanning integration and participation, peacebuilding and social cohesion, media and culture, infrastructure and urban design, women’s empowerment, health, development, and human rights.

In addition, seven interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholder, including government representatives and professionals, as well as international NGOs and development agency representatives.

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a technique for summarizing and organizing text that involves using multiple coding levels as a strategy for categorizing qualitative data. The process of coding involves the labelling of similar text passages with a code in order to prepare the transcripts and field notes for comparisons and for the identification of patterns during the further analysis. The main aim is to discover patterns and to develop themes that categorize the issue under study into generic concepts and to a more

generalisable theory or system of explanation and interrelation. Given the explorative nature of the research, the coding will follow deductive/inductive approach.

A **code book has been developed** before the coding process, which was guided by the conceptual framework and research questions. The bottom-up and data driven inductive approach was used to discover themes and categories not considered by the current body of literature.

2.4. Ethical and practical considerations

The research was conducted within a tight timeline, with only a six-week window in July and August to plan and carry out interviews. These months are traditionally associated with summer holidays, particularly in Europe and especially in the Netherlands, which led to delays in responses and limited availability among diaspora organizations. Despite this, there was still a high response rate, however it is important to note this contextual limitation. Privacy and trust were also central concerns. A significant number of respondents in the Netherlands preferred not to be recorded during interviews, citing apprehensions about how their information might be used and who would have access to it. These concerns were particularly pronounced given the active presence of international organizations in Syria and the lingering distrust toward Syrian authorities.

Moreover, the findings must be interpreted in light of recent developments in Syria, including the massacre in Sweida and ongoing sectarian violence. These events occurred during the research period and likely influenced participants' perspectives on return and reconstruction. The emotional and political weight of such incidents shaped the tone and content of many responses, underscoring the need for contextual sensitivity when analysing and presenting the results.

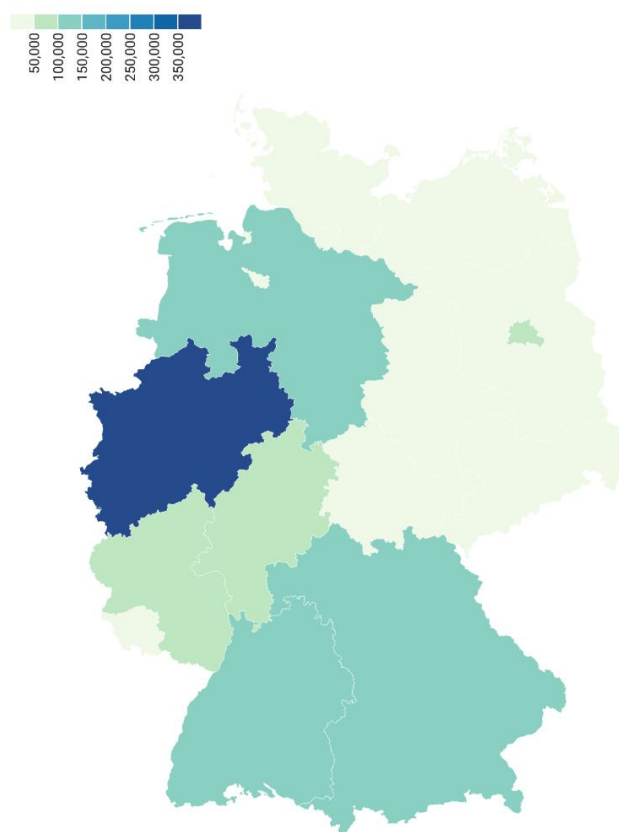
3. Syrian Diaspora mobilization in Germany

3.1. Migration and policy context

4.1.1. Characteristics of Syrian immigrant population

Germany has become Europe’s largest residence country for Syrian immigrants, with an estimate of 1.223,000 people with a Syrian migration background¹ living in the country in 2024 up from 30,133 in December 2010, the year before the eruption of the war in Syria. After Turkish and Polish immigrants, people with a Syrian migration background represented the third largest immigrant group in Germany in 2024 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

Figure 1: Total population with a Syrian migration background in 2024 by state



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a

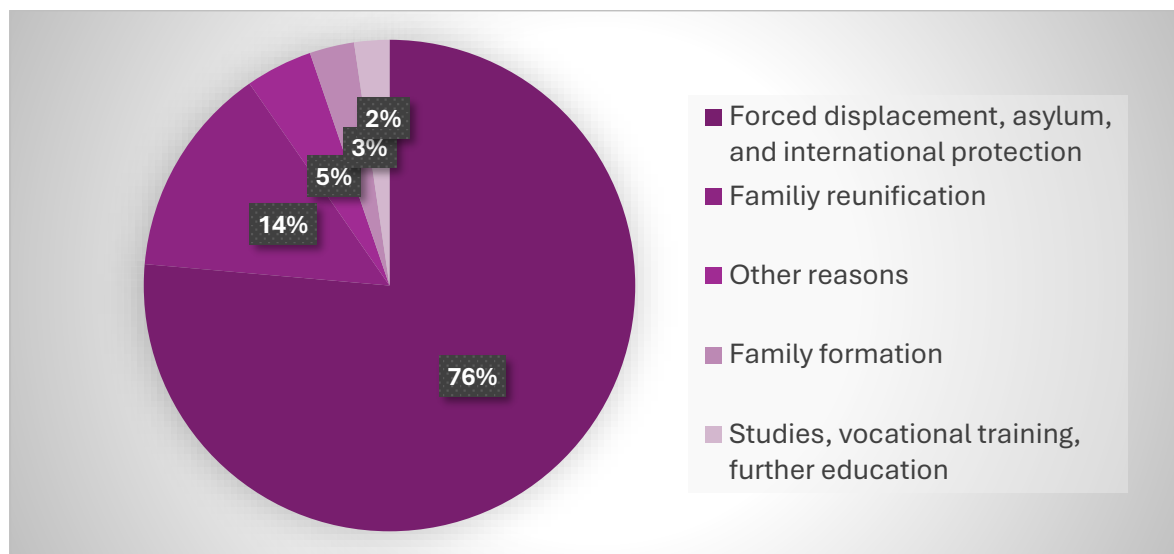
Looking at the geographical distribution, North Rhine-Westphalia, with 361,000 people of Syrian migration background, accounts for the largest number of Syrian citizens residing in Germany in December 2024, followed by Lower Saxony (128,000), Baden-Wuerttemberg (123,000) and Bavaria (199,000). In Eastern Germany, the number of persons with a Syrian migration background remains much lower, which may mirrors broader migration patterns and differences

¹ According to the Federal Statistical Office of Germany “a person has a migration background if they themselves or at least one of their parents do not have German citizenship by birth.”

in population density (Figure 1: Total population with a Syrian migration background in 2024 by stateFigure 1) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

When it comes to the reason of migration, the data shows that the vast majority of Syrians migrated to Germany due to forced displacement, asylum, or the need for international protection (728,000). Family reunification is the second most common reason, accounting for 133,000 people. Smaller numbers migrated for other reasons (42,000), to start a family (28,000), or for studies, vocational training, and further education (22,000). This highlights the central role of protection and family-related motives in Syrian migration to Germany, while educational migration remains limited (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

Figure 2: Main reason for migration to Germany of people with Syrian migration background, 2024



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025

Looking at the migration status, 80 per cent have an own migration experience, while 20 per cent were born in Germany. Moreover, 297,000 (25%) people with a Syrian migration background hold the German citizenship. According to naturalization statistics, around 36,000 Syrians were naturalized in 2024 alone, accounting for the largest share of all naturalizations at 30 per cent (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

According to the central register of foreigners (Ausländerzentralregister, AZR), the vast majority of Syrian citizens in Germany had a temporary residence permit (72%) in 2024. Around 60.5 per cent of Syrian citizens received temporary protection based on humanitarian grounds, followed by 97,765 persons who received a residence permit for family reasons. Around 96,190 were granted residence based on their submission of an application for a residence permit. Next to that, 108,005 Syrian citizens were still residing in Germany without a residence permit (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b). This category also includes registered asylum-seekers who have not yet filed an application for asylum or who have not yet been granted a preliminary residence permit on grounds of seeking asylum (Aufenthaltsgestattung) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016).

Table 2: Residence Status of Syrian Citizens in Germany, 2024

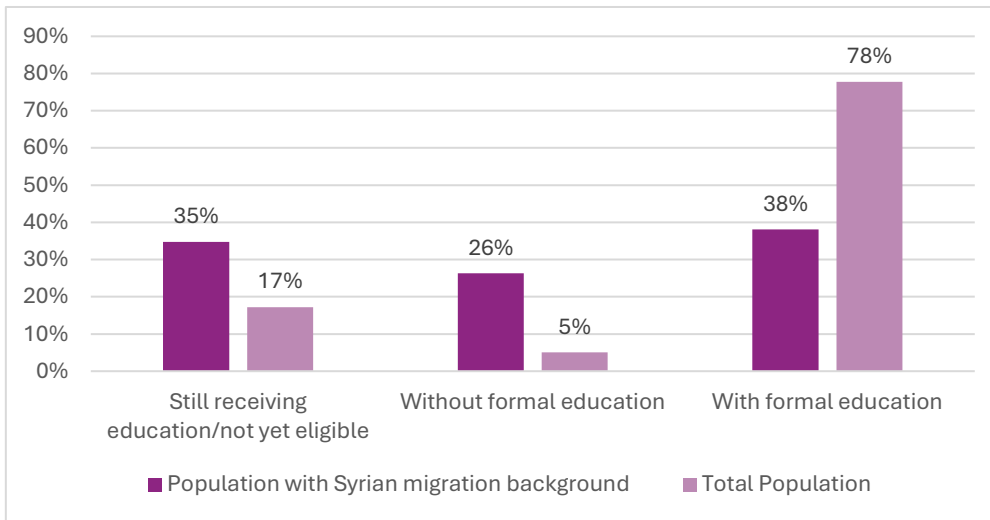
Permanent Residence Permit	71,305
Temporary Residence Permits	699,020
Education	2,785
Work	4,095
Humanitarian grounds	589,890
Family reasons	97,765
Special residence rights and national visas	4,480
No residence permit required	535
No need for residence permit, Stateless Persons	15
EU Mobility	520
Application for residence permit submitted	96,190
Without residence permit	108,005
Exceptional Leave to Remain (‘Duldung’)	9,155
Temporary residence permit (‘Aufenthaltsgestattung’)	58,475
Without Status	40,375
Total	975,060

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b

Looking at the demographic composition, men account for 57.5 per cent of the Syrian immigrant population in Germany in 2024. Compared to the total population residing in Germany, the Syrian immigrant population exhibits a very young population profile, with children under 18 accounting for more than a third of the population (35%). The average age of persons with Syrian migration background lies at 26.5 years, in contrast to a mean of 43.9 years for the total population in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

The education profile of the Syrian immigrant population appeared very polarized. Due to the relative youth of the population, a much higher proportion of persons with a Syrian migration background was still receiving education or was not yet required to attend school (35%) in 2024, compared to 17 per cent of the total population. The proportion of Syrians without any formal education was at 26 per cent in comparison to 5 per cent of the total population (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

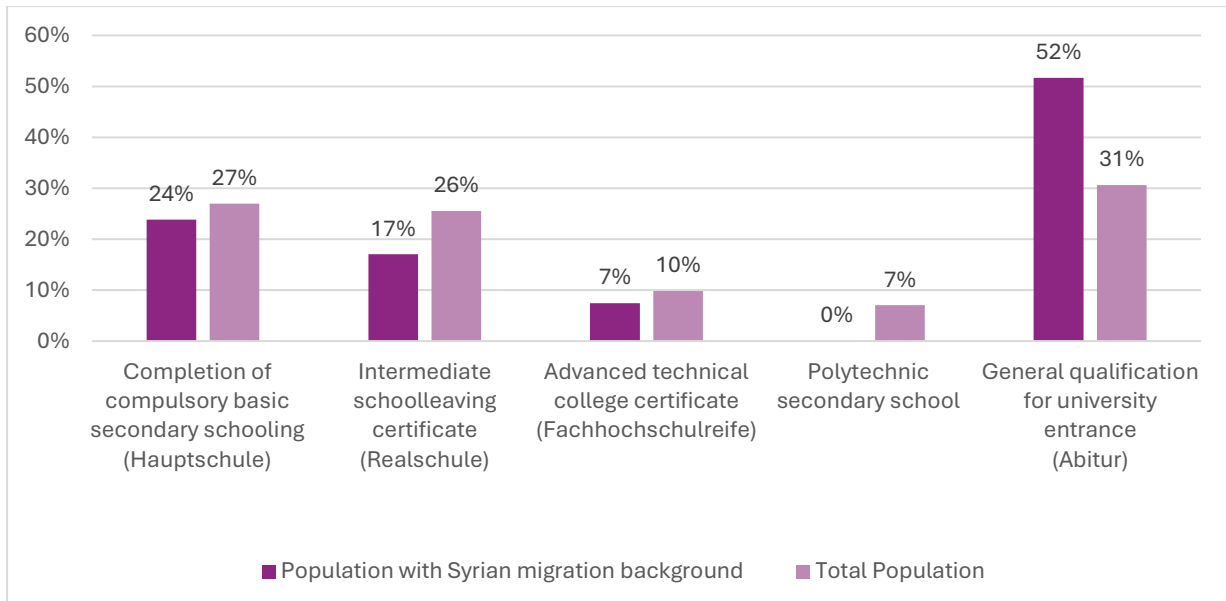
Figure 3: Educational status of persons with a Syrian migration background, 2024



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a

Yet as Figure 4 shows, among those with education the share of persons with a completion of compulsory basic secondary schooling (Hauptschulabschluss) was slightly smaller within the Syrian immigrant population (24%) when compared to the total population (27%). In addition, the percentage of Syrians with a general qualification for university entrance (Abitur) (52%) exceeded that of the total population (31%) significantly (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

Figure 4: Secondary school qualifications of persons with a Syrian migration background, 2024

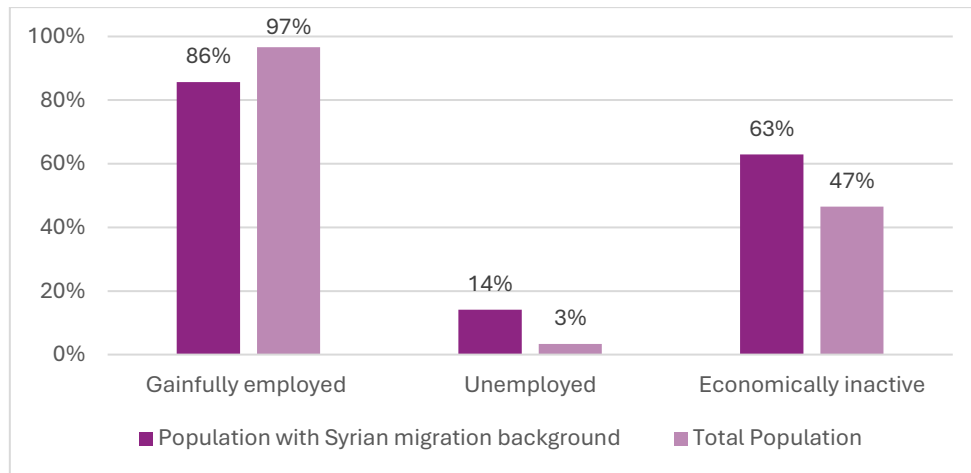


Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a

The demographic characteristics resulted in an economic situation for the Syrian immigrant population that was different from that of the general population. As Figure 5 illustrates, the population group with a Syrian migration background displayed a higher proportion of

economically inactive people, which can be partly attributed to the fact that children and people still gaining an education made up a considerable part of Syrian immigrants in Germany. Yet, out of the economical active population, people with a Syrian migration background had a higher unemployment rate (14%) compared to the total population (3%) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

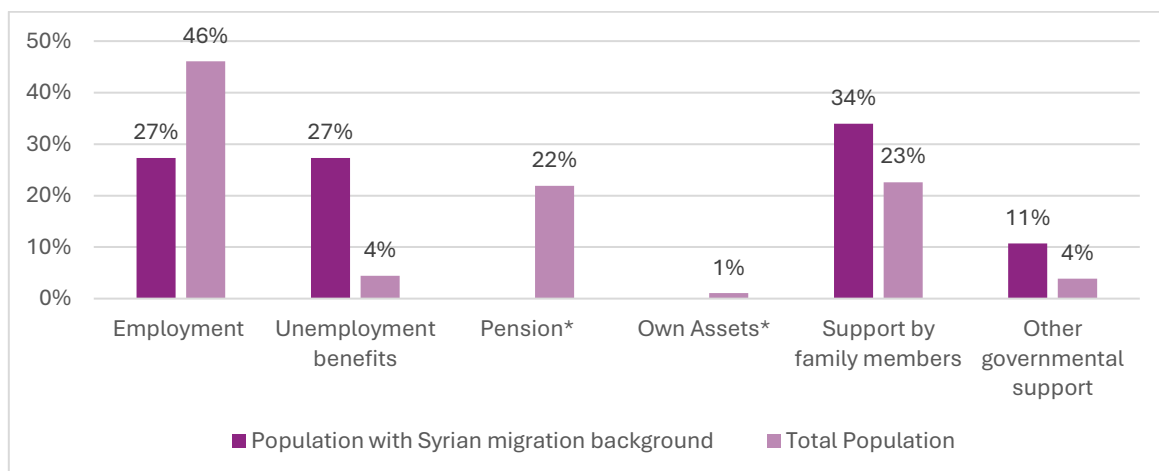
Figure 5: Labour force categorization, 2024



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a

As the proportion of gainfully employed persons among the population with a Syrian migration background remains lower, their income source profile naturally differed from that of the total population. As shows Figure 6, 27 per cent indicated wage from employment as the main source of income, compared to 46 per cent of the total population. Another 27 per cent sourced their main income from unemployment, a figure that was only at 4 per cent for the total population residing in Germany in 2024. In addition, support by family represented a crucial source of income, accounting for 34 per cent among the population with a Syrian migration background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

Figure 6: Income categories, 2024



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a, * Note: Number for persons with a Syrian background not specified

Syrian households on average were comprised of more household members; however, the number of gainfully employed persons earning a wage to support the household was lower. This situation resulted in an average net income per Syrian household member that was significantly less than that of the average household of the total German population in 2024 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

Table 3: Household characteristics and income situation, 2024

	Population with Syrian migration Background	Total Population
Average number of household members	2.8	2.2
Average number of gainfully employed persons per household	0.89	1.04
Average net income per household (€)	2.644,00	3.592,00
Average net income per household member (€)	1.154,00	1.921,00

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a

Since a large proportion of the Syrian population only migrated to Germany a few years ago, comparisons between the overall German population and the Syrian population should be treated with caution. The socioeconomic differences between the population groups could diminish over time once Syrians have settled and established themselves in Germany. A study by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) has shown, for example, that the employment rate of Syrians seeking refuge in Germany increases with the length of their stay, although there is a significant gender gap. While the employment rate of Syrian men converges with that of other migrant groups and approach the average for the male population in Germany, the employment rate of Syrian women remains significantly below that of the female population as a whole in Germany. The study also concludes that many Syrian refugees initially work in low-skilled jobs, but over time a growing proportion move into skilled and higher-skilled occupations. It is noteworthy that 62% of employed Syrians work in systemically important sectors such as health, logistics, and social services, a significantly higher proportion than among the German working population (Brücker et al., 2024).

4.1.2. Policy context

In response to the sharp increase people seeking asylum in Europe, reaching its height in 2015, Germany adopted a comparatively liberal approach to admission, with Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly endorsing a *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) for those seeking protection in Germany. In the beginning, Syrian refugees in Germany underwent a simplified asylum procedure due to the severity of the conflict in their home country. This process replaced individual hearings with a written questionnaire and typically granted protection under the Geneva Convention, resulting in faster decisions and a three-year residence permit with family reunification rights. In addition, the Dublin procedure for Syrian refugees was temporarily suspended in 2015, allowing Syrians to apply for asylum in Germany regardless of the country through which they had entered the European Union. The Dublin Regulation stipulates that the member state in which an asylum-seeker first enters European territory is responsible for the asylum procedure. Yet, by the end of 2015, German policies were already becoming more restrictive, with the introduction of rigid controls at the Austrian and Czech borders and a series of amendments to the legal framework

regulating reception and asylum application processes, deportations, and access to integration measures with regard to language, labour and education (Ragab, 2020).

Over the past year, German migration policy has become significantly more restrictive. In December 2024, BAMF issued a temporary suspension of asylum applications from Syrian nationals due to the “dynamic, confusing, and difficult-to-assess situation in Syria” (BAMF, 2024), resulting in a legal limbo for those in the asylum process, without clarity about their residence status. On June 27, 2025, the Bundestag decided that refugees with subsidiary protection status will not be allowed to bring family members to Germany for the next two years, which affects around 329,000 Syrians with subsidiary protection in Germany. In its four points plan the BMI (2025) puts focus on the following aspects:

- Criminals and dangerous individuals should be repatriated as quickly as possible.
- Well-integrated Syrians who work in Germany and have learned German should be allowed to stay.
- The federal government supports voluntary return to Syria and has expanded its program to this end.
- Protection status must be reviewed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees once the situation in Syria has stabilized and the persons concerned do not have a right of residence for other reasons such as work or education and do not return to Syria voluntarily. This review is required by law.

Aspect	Previous Policy (Pre-2025)	Current Policy (2025)
Asylum Approval	2014 & 2015 simplified asylum procedure (written questionnaires). Since beginning of 2016 regular procedures.	Still regular procedure in place.
Country Safety Assessment	Syria was considered unsafe due to widespread violence and instability.	The situation in Syria is considered as dynamic, volatile, and hard to assess. Fact-finding mission to Syria is being considered once the security situation improves.
Application Processing	Applications were processed continuously, with high approval rates.	Since December 2024 temporary suspension of asylum applications from Syrian nationals.
Voluntary Return	Limited incentives for voluntary return offered at regional states level.	Support for voluntary return under REAG/GARP. Financial support offered: €200 travel assistance and State support + €1.000 for individuals and for families max €4.000.
Country Reports	Regularly published to guide asylum decisions.	Final assessment of the situation is currently not possible due to high volatility. No update has been published since end 2024.

Deportations	No deportations to Syria due to safety concerns.	Still no forced returns, but the tone is shifting toward potential future removals of “criminals and Islamist extremists”.
Impact on Existing Residents	Residency and protection status was generally secure once granted.	Residency remains valid, yet there is a push towards reviewing protection status.

Within the Ministry of Interior (BMI), the Directorate Migration, Refugees, Return Policy is responsible for the migration and refugee policy of the Federal Government, including residence and asylum regulations, return related policies as well as issues regarding European harmonization. The department supervises the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which is responsible for the management of asylum procedure and the promotion of migrant integration (BMI, 2017). Since 2013, the structural support program of the BAMF (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) has been helping migrant organizations to expand their umbrella structures and professionalize their work. In the past, the umbrella association of German-Syrian Aid Organizations (Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine, VDSH e.V.) has received funding from the program to professionalize its work and stabilize its structures. Besides this federal initiative, there are several programmes at the state and local levels that aim to foster migrants’ self-organization often through project-based funding (Ragab, 2020).

In Germany, the topic of Migration and Development is high on the political agenda, with the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and its implementing agency GIZ being the lead organizations in this field. The MEG (Shaping Development-Oriented Migration) program by GIZ supports partner countries in leveraging the benefits of regular migration and engaging diaspora communities for sustainable development. Next to promoting fair and ethical regular migration, protecting migrant rights (especially for women) and fostering global partnerships aligned with the Global Compact for Migration, strengthening diaspora engagement is one of the key focus areas. The program operates in 14 countries and is commissioned by Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (GIZ, 2024).

With regard to the Syrian mission, the BMZ’s commitment focuses on the following priorities:

- **Improving access to education:** Expanding educational opportunities, repairing schools, providing psychosocial care for traumatized children.
- **Generating income for the suffering population:** Creating short-term jobs for people who have lost their livelihoods, property, and work as a result of the war.
- **Strengthening civil society:** Promoting projects by non-governmental organizations for reconciliation and understanding, strengthening the work of women’s rights organizations.
- **Improving health care:** Improving access to medical care and psychosocial support for the local population, refugees, and internally displaced persons (defined as: ‘Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or (IDPs) obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and persons who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

Supporting the Syrian diaspora is a strategic priority for German Development cooperation, recognizing its vital role in contributing to Syria's reconstruction, particularly through the expertise of skilled Syrians living abroad. Over the years past years, the German government has initiated a range of programs and initiatives to support Syrian diaspora engagement with a focus on capacity development, either through training or project-oriented funding, as well as through the strengthening of networks among diaspora groups in addition to fostering networks with development and humanitarian actors (Ragab, 2020). In response to the political transformations in Syria, BMZ/GIZ launched the [Plattform Neuanfang Syrien](#) which aims to connect interested private individuals and representatives from civil society, local authorities, academia and business and provide information about Germany's development policy engagement for and in Syria. As another example, [Deutsch-syrische Klinikpartnerschaften](#) (BMZ/GIZ) aims at funding partnerships between German non-profit healthcare institutions or non-governmental organizations and Syrian partner institutions in the healthcare sector. In order to implement needs-oriented hospital partnerships in Syria, a focus is placed on the expertise and network of the Syrian medical diaspora working in Germany.

3.2. Mapping the Syrian civil society landscape in Germany

Syrian civil society in Germany is characterized not only by diversity and heterogeneity, but also by dynamic development processes influenced by contextual factors in both Syria and Germany.

Pre 2011 revolution: Historically, the relationship between Syrian diaspora communities and their country of origin can be described as highly dynamic, complex, and conflictual. A number of studies show how the Syrian authorities exercised control beyond its territorial jurisdiction by actively suppressing opposition individuals, groups, and movements in the diaspora. Political repression from afar has been documented in Sweden (Jörum, 2015), the United Kingdom (Moss, 2016), the United States (Moss, 2016; Qayyum, 2011), and Germany (Ragab, 2020). Ragab's (2020) study, which examines the emergence and development of Syrian civil society in Germany, shows that the collective consciousness of Syrians in Germany before 2011 was often characterized by feelings of fear and mistrust. Until 2011, the engagement of Syrian diaspora communities was largely limited to social and cultural sphere.

2011 revolution as transformative event: The revolutionary movement in 2011 can be seen as a transformative event. When people in Syria took to the streets to demand political and social change, many Syrians in Germany felt compelled to support the struggle for change from abroad. The movement in Syria thus also led to a strengthening of political and civil society awareness within the diaspora communities and fostered the emergence of numerous civil society initiatives that showed solidarity with the political movement in Syria. In the early stages of the conflict, the desire for justice, democracy, and freedom united many Syrian organizations in Germany, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity (Hunger et al., 2017; Ragab, 2020). At the same time, a strong political polarization emerged between those who supported the opposition and those who advocated for the preservation of the Assad regime (Ragab, 2020).

2015/2016 forced displacement: The arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees in 2015/2016 further diversified and transnationalized Syrian civil society in Germany. Many new arrivals, often young activists politicized by the revolution, continued their engagement in exile, founding new

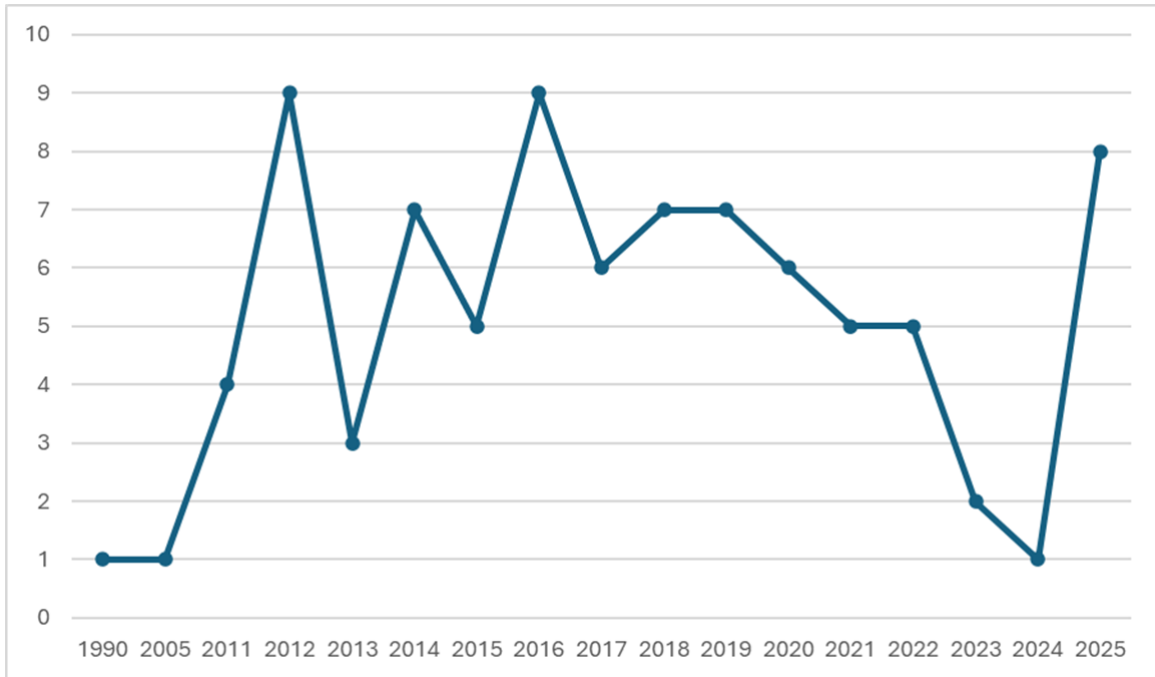
initiatives and bringing skills, experiences, and networks from their activism in Syria or neighbouring states. In addition, organizations were established to support those newly arrived in Germany or to foster the preservation of Syrian culture in the country of residence (Ragab, 2020).

Fall of Assad regime: Similarly to 2011, the fall of the Assad regime can be considered another transformative event that sparked a renewed interest and desire to actively support the rebuilding of Syria (Popp & Friedrich, 2025). As will be shown, several new initiatives have been established often with the aim to bundle the expertise and skills of the Syrian diaspora in Germany to facilitate knowledge transfers for the reconstruction and rebuilding of the country. At the same time, the sectarian violence, particularly targeting Alawite communities in Latakia, Tartus, Hama, and Homs as well as the massacres committed in the Sweida region in Summer 2025 also to certain degree led to a reproduction of conflict dynamics within the diaspora communities.

Over the years, a vibrant Syrian civil society has established itself in Germany, one that is politically, culturally, and socially engaged. Its goal is not only to contribute to social and political change in Syria, but also to address the urgent needs of the Syrian population in their country of origin, in neighbouring countries, and in Germany. A study on civil society engagement of Afghan and Syrian communities in Germany by the Expert Council on Migration identified 198 Syrian associations that are listed in the commercial register as of April 2025 (Kopp & Friedrichs, 2025). Yet, it can be assumed that not all associations registered in Germany are still active. With the help of supplementary web research, 87 organizations with an active online presence have been identified the mapping exercise, which form the basis of the following analysis. It should be noted, though, that diaspora engagement does not always take place in the visible (online) sphere, and this approach therefore risks overlooking more informal forms of engagement.

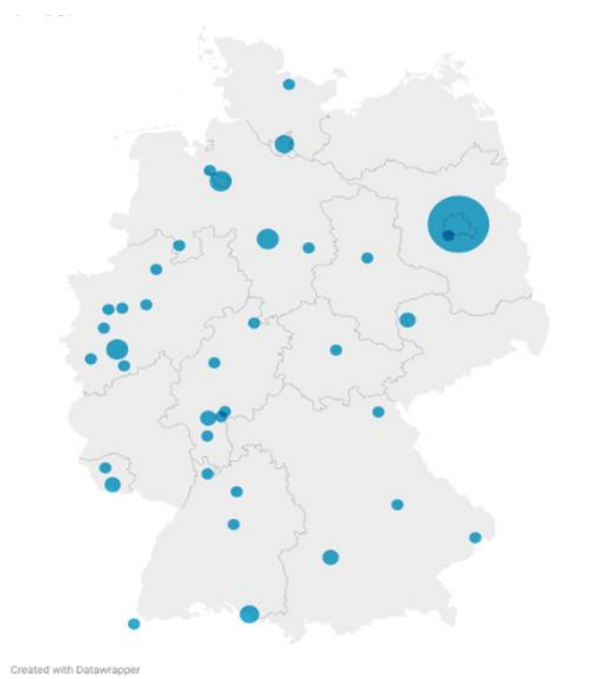
Syrian civil society in Germany has grown considerably over the past decade, reflected in the large number of associations and initiatives established across the country. Looking at the founding years of these organizations, certain periods stand out in particular for the high number of Syrian diaspora organizations founded, especially 2011/2012, 2015/2016, and again in 2025. As described above, the events in Syria and the social and political dynamics of displacement had a significant impact on the development of Syrian civil society in Germany.

Figure 7: Yearly registration of Syrian diaspora organisations in Germany



With regard to the geographical distribution of the mapped organizations (Figure 8), Syrian diaspora associations are represented in almost every federal state. It also shows that the density of associations is higher in western Germany than in the east of the country, which also partly being a result of the larger Syrian communities in the West of Germany. Berlin can certainly be regarded as a hub of Syrian civil society, with 35 of the associations mapped being based in the capital.

Figure 8: Geographical distribution of Syrian organizations in Germany



In terms of organizational structures and capacities, the landscape of Syrian diaspora is characterized by great diversity. Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany display a wide **variation in membership size**, ranging from only a handful of members to more than a hundred. Larger membership bases are typically found in professional and youth networks, while many smaller initiatives rely heavily on the commitment of a few core members. At the same time, numerous organizations are able to mobilize volunteers for larger events or campaigns, showing a degree of flexibility in participation.

Some organizations have indicated that they employ staff on a temporary basis through project-based funding (see also Popp & Friedrichs, 2025). More professionalized NGOs, particularly those with a strong transnational focus, operate with permanent teams of paid staff and less reliance on volunteers. These organizations, such as Women Now or SAMS, were often established in another country before being registered in Germany and maintain activities across several countries (Tuzi & Omran, 2025).

Membership structures also reflect the diversity of the Syrian community in Germany, with many organizations aiming to bring together people from different backgrounds. However, research shows that participation is shaped by class dynamics. Tuzi and Omran (2025) find that leadership positions are predominantly occupied by middle- and upper-class Syrians with greater educational and professional capital, while Syrians from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face barriers that limit their influence within diaspora organizations.

The **financial capacity** of Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany is generally precarious, with most relying heavily on volunteer labour, donations, and small-scale project funding (e.g., municipalities). This is especially true for organizations whose activities are primarily Germany-focused. Some transnationally engaged organizations have been more successful in securing public funding from a mix of governmental and private foundation sources.

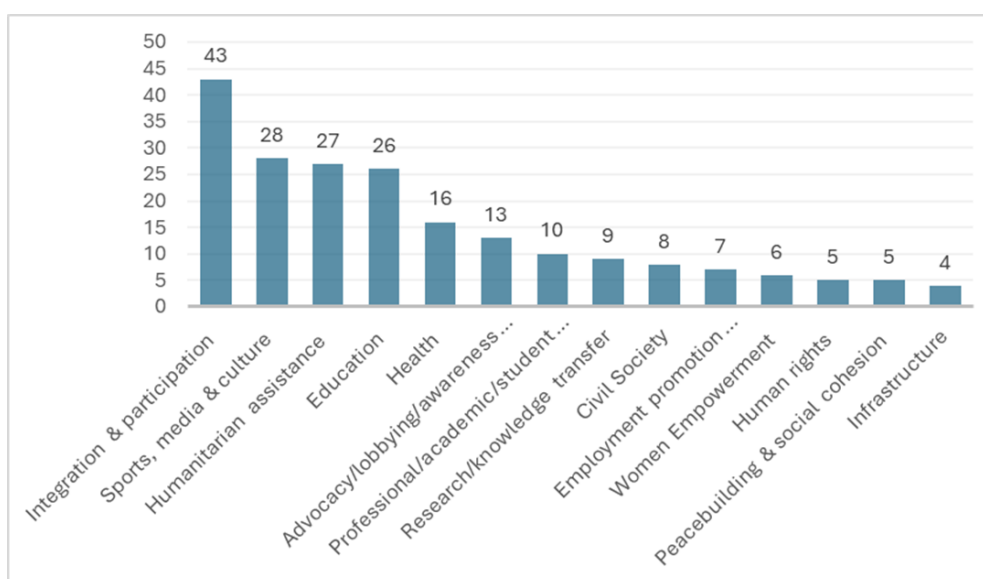
Nevertheless, all organizations face funding insecurity, which becomes more and more intensified due to cuts to development assistance (notably by Trump administration but also from the German government) and reductions in social and cultural funding within Germany. Shifts inside Syria, alongside shrinking budgets for development and humanitarian aid, have also led international donors to establish their own presence in the country, reducing support for diaspora organizations that previously acted as intermediaries, as one respondent highlights:

"Even our donor, because of the lack of fund, they now want to work in Syria directly. But we think that it's our time to lead on the work on Syria and you need to support our work in Syria. But most of them are just rushing to open their offices to take their registration, to spend their money on their stuff and leave us outside the scene because now they can implement directly in Syria, which is very, really frustrating (IN13).

3.3. Activities and practices

Syrian diaspora organisations in Germany are highly diverse, engaging in fields ranging from integration, education, health, humanitarian aid, media, culture, and employment support to advocacy, women’s empowerment, human rights, peacebuilding, reconstruction and urban development. Mapping Syrian associations also shows that most organizations are active in multiple fields of activity, with around 85 per cent of organizations working in several areas of engagement and thus covering a broad range of topics.

Figure 9: Fields of engagement of Syrian civil society organizations in Germany



As Figure 9 shows, integration and participation is the most common area of engagement, with nearly half of all organizations active in this field. Sports, media, and culture also play a central role, often focusing on preserving Syrian identity, fostering cultural exchange in Germany, or supporting artistic and media initiatives in both Syria and the diaspora. Around one third of organizations are engaged in humanitarian assistance, collecting donations or sending relief supplies. Education is another major area, with projects ranging from support for newcomers in Germany to promoting access to education in Syria and neighbouring countries. Health-related activities include strengthening the medical sector and training health workers. Thirteen organizations focus on advocacy, lobbying, and awareness-raising, while ten professional or academic networks aim to connect Syrian expertise abroad. Roughly 10% of organizations promote Syrian civil society, often through capacity building and networking. Employment promotion (7) includes both initiatives that seek to support the integrations of Syrians in the German labour market, as well as activities that offer individual capacity development, micro-credit and livelihood programs to people in Syria. Women empowerment and gender equality is the focus of 6 organizations. In addition, five organizations are involved in promoting human rights by implementing activities aimed at documenting human rights violations related to the Syrian conflict, protecting the rights of victims, or promoting justice through the use of national and international legal instruments. Another, 5 organizations focus on promoting peacebuilding and social cohesion by creating space of dialogue and exchange either within the diaspora

communities or inside Syria. Finally, 4 organizations focus on infrastructure and urban design to support reconstruction, recovery and development in Syria.

Due to the dynamic development processes of Syrian civil society in Germany, it seems only partially possible to categorize the organizations clearly. Many organizations that were founded in 2011/2012 to influence political processes in Syria or to provide humanitarian aid in Syria and neighbouring countries have, over time, also implemented activities aimed at promoting the involvement and participation of Syrian refugees in Germany. With increasing refugee migration, ongoing displacement, and the establishment of Syrian communities in Germany, more and more Syrian integration and cultural organizations have been founded in recent years. These organizations aim to strengthen the community and sense of belonging among Syrians, as well as to provide support and assistance with the arrival and integration processes in Germany (Ragab, 2020). With the Fall of the Assad regime, there is now a renewed interest and motivation to contribute to the country's rebuilding. Hence, changes in the political opportunity structures also transform the strategies, spaces and trajectories of diaspora mobilization in Germany.

3.4. Challenges and opportunities

Opportunities

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 constituted a critical juncture for Syrian civil society actors, both inside and outside the country. Among diaspora organisations in Germany, this political shift was widely perceived as opening new possibilities for participation, localisation, and the transfer of skills and knowledge accumulated abroad.

“Then, at this stage in December 2024, after Assad's fall, it was also a new phase for many. For many Syrians here in Germany, and also around the world, it was the start or the beginning, when people said, now the rebuilding of the country has begun” (IN18).

Respondents described this moment as a revival of the revolutionary energy of 2011, signalling a renewed willingness to invest in reconstruction processes and to operate more directly on the ground.

“Before the change of power, we never thought we would be working in Syria [...] And then suddenly Al Assad was overthrown and suddenly everyone was fired up, just like on the first day of the revolution” (IN6).

Given the Syrian diaspora civil society in Germany's diverse skills, extensive experience, and strong commitment to addressing a wide range of needs and challenges, they have an active role to play in Syria's reconstruction and broader transitional processes. Their accumulated expertise and networks position them as key actors not only in rebuilding infrastructure and institutions, but also in fostering social cohesion, promoting justice, and shaping inclusive governance.

Hence, when it comes to the current post-Assad context, respondents highlighted a wide range of needs, due to the mass-scale destruction of infrastructure and displacement, the collapse of the health system, and the breakdown of the educational sector, alongside deep social fragmentation after 14 years of war.

"When I look at the education sector, I think that's the top priority, then I look at healthcare, which is also my top priority. I think all areas are top priority at the moment" (IN6).

The regional dichotomies (rural vs. urban, Sunni vs Alawite etc.) that existed in the pre-2011 context are perceived to be reinforced by the conflict dynamics and have produced vastly different realities across the country. Hence, needs manifest differently depending on geography, community, and political control:

"I think depends. If you ask this question, you will have so many different answers, right? So depends where do you live? If you are Kurdish, if you live in the in the north, it's different if you are Druse living at the Israeli border. If you are living in Homs, it's really very different based on the place you live. But I think the priority for Syrians, I would say all of them is meeting basic needs" (IN3).

Supporting reconstruction of infrastructure

Physical infrastructure such as housing is seen as one of the most important priorities given the last scale destruction and displacement caused by the war. Yet, respondents stress that rebuilding must not be reduced to technical fixes. Instead, reconstruction should incorporate social and cultural dimensions and ensure participation of affected communities to prevent exclusion or renewed displacement. Participatory urban design is highlighted as a means to embed human rights, gender perspectives, and the concerns of marginalized groups in future urban policies:

"So, we will also try to include, for example, the gender perspective with that because and how to do really urban policies in, in a participatory way how that does not exclude the very marginalized groups within one society. People with specific needs, especially now after the conflict needs to be really addressed with all the policies that will happen now" (IN16).

In addition, preserving Syria's cultural heritage is seen as important to restore collective identity, foster social cohesion, and counter the cultural erasure caused by war. Safeguarding the heritage ensures that Syria's diverse history and knowledge are passed on to future generations as a foundation for lasting peace and reconciliation.

"But this commitment to doing the renovation work properly and using the knowledge in the background to embed it in the historical development of the city is not perceived in detail; instead, they just want to make money" (IN19).

Strengthening the health system

After years of war in which public infrastructure such as school and hospitals became a frequent target critically strained the health care system, with many medical facilities still being either partially operational or completely non-functional, limiting access to essential treatment.

"So, after 14 years of war, the country is completely destroyed. 80 per cent of the people are poor. I know about medicine; I used to visit my parents every two years. I know how bad the medical care is there. No one has any money, there is a lack of materials and a lack of specialists—in other words, there is a lack of everything." (IN7).

The maintenance and development of the health sector in Syria have been a central priority of Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany since the escalation and militarization of the conflict. Syrian diaspora organisations support the country's health sector by funding hospitals and strengthening medical personnel through training, financing, and professional development. They also facilitate knowledge transfer via digital communication tools, enabling doctors in Syria to consult with colleagues abroad for diagnoses and surgical support.

While Syrian (diaspora) NGOs previously could be considered important health care providers, directly establishing and operating health care facilities and mobile clinics, recent political transformations have redefined their role. With the Ministry of Health now reasserting ownership of the sector, NGOs increasingly position themselves in a consultative capacity, by **supporting planning processes, offering expertise**, and aligning their efforts under the ministry's strategic guidance. As one interviewee explained:

“Previously, it was UN/NGO/local authority leadership model, more or less. Now you have a government, you have a Ministry of Health and everybody's trying to strengthen it. So now the whole planning and strengthening of the health system is finally getting back to a Syrian ownership model. And I believe that NGOs are trying to re-define the role as under the strategic guidance of the ministry and in consultation with the ministry (IN16).”

In addition, diaspora doctors have also engaged in **return missions** to Syria. These missions often involve groups of medical professionals travelling to different regions to conduct surgeries, deliver specialist care, and provide urgently needed equipment. As one interviewee states,

“We were traveling throughout Syria with 80 doctors [...] We performed a great number of operations and interventions, which were very well received, and we were also able to purchase three dialysis machines and two ventilators through donations (IN7).”

Strengthening capacities and spaces for knowledge transfer is seen as another long-term goal to ensure the quality and sustainability of the healthcare system. For example, health organizations interviewed plan to establish health academies inside Syria, enabling Syrian doctors from the diaspora to provide training for local healthcare workers. Complementary seminars in Germany are also being organised to foster knowledge exchange and collaboration among doctors and healthcare professionals based there.

In addition to physical health, respondents highlighted the need for a more **comprehensive integration of mental health services** within the broader health care system. Years of war, destruction and displacement have deeply affected the psychological well-being of Syrian people leading to trauma, PTSD, and other mental health conditions. Without addressing emotional and social needs, there is a risk that cycles of violence will repeat themselves, which is likely to hamper technical reconstruction efforts:

“Because you know, it's like I could build a building and then some kind of traumatized person can come and put a bomb in a car and then the whole building is destroyed. We need to have the infrastructure in place, but at the same time we need to work on the emotional part because otherwise we're still in the cycle of violence and everything that we built is going to be destroyed” (IN14).”

Among others, measures could include the training and capacity development of mental health professionals, the creation of mobile mental health units, awareness-raising campaigns to address stigma, and the adoption of transgenerational, community-based, and trauma-informed approaches within health programming (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Supporting the educational system

After years of conflict, many diaspora actors perceived an increasing risk for an entire generation of children to be deprived of their basic right to education. Therefore, many organizations saw the need to promote the education of children, through the establishment and financing of schools and educational centres both in Syria and in the neighbouring countries.

“Education is definitely the most important thing here, as well as programs for children to protect them and prevent child labour in some way” (IN2).

Beside traditional subjects, such as languages and natural sciences, some organizations put emphasis on strengthening the awareness for political education on human rights, women's rights and principles of democracy and freedom.

“Political education is very important for the young people, and this is what exactly we did. We designed a political educational programme. We collect like a couple of courses, we put them together in one syllabus and we say this is how you study it, and this is how it's helped you to understand the economic situation, social situation, political situation, and diplomacy” (IN17).

Addressing sectarianization of conflict

While respondents acknowledge the more material needs in the reconstruction process, they often perceive that the societal aspects tend to be neglected. The war not only had a devastating impact on the physical infrastructure but also eroded trust and the overall social fabric of the Syrian society. Although elements of sectarianism were present since the onset of the Syrian conflict, current patterns of sectarian violence are seen to further reinforce societal fragmentations, deepening mistrust and undermining prospects for coexistence.

“The current approach will not lead to closing these gaps between the different groups in Syria and to coexistence, that is not the case. On the contrary, it is a power that likes to demonstrate this, so in my opinion, the approach is not much different, only the sides have changed” (IN4).

“The situation has gotten even worse for the Kurds; they are now also in danger. When they watch the media, they see Syrian groups saying that they will come for you once they are done with Sweida. And unfortunately, this is a very difficult situation” (IN10).

Among some respondents there is the perception that there is a lack of willingness and leadership within the transitional government to actively counter the divisions and acts of violence to foster inclusive and peaceful co-existence:

“On the one hand, one could argue that this [fragmentation] is normal due to 15 and 16 years of oppression and so on and so forth. On the other hand, there is no leadership in Syria that is saying, ‘Stop this now, let's work together.’ Instead, politics is promoting this division, just as before in my view: you belong to us, you don't belong to us” (IN1).

Another challenge is seen in the deep-rooted violence and trauma embedded in the Syrian society. Many young people have never experienced anything other than war and violence, which not only heightens vulnerability to radicalisation but also poses a major psychological barrier to collective healing processes, as one respondent notes:

“The drivers and pushers of radicalization, if you look at them, most of them are emotional. It’s the lack of sense of belonging, the lost identity, the feeling rejection by the community, feeling that they need to prove themselves. [...] So an integrated, comprehensive trauma-informed approach in dealing with all of this is very important” (IN14).

Hence, there is a need for a holistic, trauma-informed approach to successfully implement social healing and cohesion programs. Some initiatives work on the development of programmes to foster national identity that includes understanding trauma and indoctrination, and the use of art and storytelling as healing methods.

Challenging the reproduction of conflict dynamics

The sectarianization of the Syrian conflict, in which the political ‘other’ is increasingly constructed and mobilised along ethnic and religious lines, is seen as being also reproduced within Syrian diaspora communities in Germany. Incidences of verbal and physical assaults which have recently occurred during demonstrations in Dusseldorf and Berlin, sparked the fear of transnational diffusion of sectarianism. In addition, processes of division, polarisation and fragmentation within Syrian diaspora communities are to a certain extent mirroring the cultural, economic, social and political divisions present in the Syrian context, as one respondent puts it:

“At the moment, there is also a kind of polarization: are you for Al-Sharaa, for this government, or are you against it? Especially after the events in Sweida, the polarization is very stark, sometimes reminding me of that phase of are you for Assad or against Assad?” (IN12).

Some diaspora initiatives actively seek to counter internal divisions by fostering processes of peacebuilding, dialogue, community cohesion, and reconciliation among Syrian civil society actors and the broader Syrian community in Germany. Through diverse formats such as workshops, dialogue sessions, and storytelling approaches, these initiatives create spaces for constructive conflict transformation and mutual understanding within the diaspora. The efforts to address social, political, ethnic, and religious fragmentation thus represent significant contributions toward laying the foundations for sustainable peace in Syria in the future.

Civil society, youth and women empowerment

In addition, diaspora initiatives have been established that aim to strengthen Syrian civil society both in the context of the German society and within Syria itself. On the one hand, these initiatives implement activities to enhance networking and build the capacities of civil society actors in Syria. On the other hand, they promote the civic and political participation of newly arrived Syrians, supporting them in articulating their concerns and contributing to political decision-making processes. Some organisations also place a particular focus on youth and women’s empowerment, recognising their central role in shaping the future of Syrian society. These efforts include leadership training, awareness-raising on gender equality, and the creation of safe

spaces for participation, thereby seeking to foster more inclusive and representative forms of civic engagement.

Developing the capacities of individuals, strengthening civic and political structures, and creating spaces for participation are seen as essential foundation for long-term democratic transformation and inclusive governance in Syria.

"Working with people is much more important than working with governments because governments come and go. [...] So I think working with people, engaging with political structures, working with civic structures and political structures, and then then working on the capacities of the human being, it's much more important work than tackling one government" (IN8).

Arts, Media and Culture

Among those who have found refuge in Germany are many Syrian artists, writers, musicians, performers, theatre directors, and filmmakers. Berlin in particular has increasingly developed into a centre of Arab intellectual and cultural life in Europe over the past ten years. Berlin's cosmopolitan vibrancy and diverse political and cultural scene in particular are considered a magnet for many artists in exile (Bank, 2018). This has led to a well-documented increase in Arabic-language events throughout Berlin, ranging from theatre, poetry evenings, culture and politics, conferences, parties, raves, and film festivals. In recent years, Syrian artists have thus made an important contribution to Berlin's art scene (Unicomb, 2021).

Within the cultural and artistic sector, there is a recognised need to create spaces of exchange and dialogue that bridge inside and outside perspectives. Such initiatives not only reconnect Syrian artists with their cultural roots but also strengthen exchange with artists inside Syria. Facilitating the presence of exiled artists in Syria, while simultaneously supporting Syrian artists' participation in exhibitions and events abroad, is seen as essential for revitalising the artistic sphere and fostering a more transnational, dynamic, interconnected cultural field.

Given the current pressing needs of survival, supporting art and culture is often dealt with as an afterthought. However, one respondent also stresses the important role art can play in the transitional process and reconciliation:

"Art can bridge really and can create infrastructure, can challenge systems, can open topics in a way that otherwise would be impossible to be opened up" (IN3).

Next to arts and culture, a strong **independent media** is also seen as crucial to contribute to a more informed society and to holding those in power accountable. Operating from outside Syria allows diaspora media initiatives to report on critical but often ignored topics or sensitive political stories, without immediate direct government interference on the ground. This can play an important role in the long-term processes of societal recovery and democratic transformation in Syria:

"Sometimes I asked myself, why do I bother founding an environmental magazine in a country where like there's a massacre happening every now and then. But I feel like whoever plants the seed doesn't sit under its shadow. So, I feel like if we want the next generation to have a better life than what we have to work for the long-term impact" (IN13).

Justice and accountability

Since the early stages of the conflict, Syrian civil society actors inside the country and across the diaspora have been central in documenting human rights violations, collecting evidence, and advocating for justice and accountability. Their work has underpinned landmark cases based on universal jurisdiction in Europe, such as those pursued by the ECCHR in cooperation with Syrian lawyers, activists, and victims, leading to prosecutions of former regime officials in Germany. Alongside legal initiatives, projects focussing on digital documentation and survivor-led advocacy contributed to preserving evidence, raising awareness, and mobilising international pressure for accountability (Ragab, 2022). Other organizations are dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of (religious or ethnic) minorities, while also stressing that their work now extends beyond single-group concerns towards building an inclusive rights-based political order:

"We have fought for the rights of the Kurds for years, but now it's about Syria as a whole [...] We are not working for the rights of a single group in Syria, but for a new system. Yes, the new system should guarantee the rights of all people, not just the rights of a single group, and that is the difference now" (IN4).

At the same time, respondents highlighted challenges regarding the future role of accountability actors in a transitional context. Many of these actors have pursued cases not only against representatives of the former regime but also against members of armed groups now integrated into transitional governance structures.

"Now look at all the people who were involved in the rights violation issues or those who initiated legal cases against the previous regime or soldiers or whatever. They are basically the same people who did legal cases against Jaysh al-Islam and Al Nusra and other people. So how is the new government going to accept that scene, the human rights law scene in exile" (IN5).

This raises critical questions about the extent to which such actors will be granted political space and protection, and whether their work will be perceived as legitimate or instead constrained by the dynamics of selective justice.

Supporting integration and participation

As mentioned earlier, supporting integration and participation of Syrians in Germany emerged as an important field of engagement over the last years. Activities range from assistance with administrative procedures and doctor's appointments to organizing information events on the asylum process, legal advice, and psychosocial support. Since language plays an important role in the integration process, some organizations also offer German language and orientation courses.

In addition, promoting community building also plays a central role. The goal of many organizations is to create a safe space for belonging and community for Syrians in Germany in order to counteract the painful experiences marked by exile, displacement, instability, and uncertainty. Through a variety of activities, identities are expressed, and the heritage, traditions, customs, and culture of the country of origin are preserved. Religious or cultural events, family gatherings, and meetings are regularly organized to promote and strengthen relationships between Syrians in Germany.

“We are working on bringing people closer together here in Germany as well. To communicate more, including the Syrians themselves, because you know, it's not easy, the Syrians are really divided [...] Many people turn to us because they have found trust in us due to our neutrality”
(IN11).

In order for Syrians in Germany to act as agents of social change, respondents stress that there must be opportunities to generate skills, knowledge, and expertise, which is particularly facilitated by qualification and opportunities for participation. Hence, participation in the receiving societies and transnational engagement in the country of origin are not necessarily substitutes but often complement each other.

Challenges

While Syrian diaspora actors in Germany possess unique strengths that position them as valuable contributors to Syria's reconstruction, they are confronted with several challenges both within the German context as well as inside Syria.

Security represents one of the most immediate challenges to diaspora engagement inside Syria. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the difficulties of long-term planning in an environment marked by unpredictable violence and recurrent atrocities. As one participant explained:

“You can't plan ahead activities because all of the sudden there's a new attack and there's a new massacre and there's a new bomb. So our exhibition, for example, we had to postpone, like pause it and postpone maybe like five times because every time there was a new thing happening” (IN3).

Respondents raised also concerned of **personal safety** of their staff, volunteers, and partners who may become a target of violence:

“Security, I mean, like, of course you always have the financial challenges, but like in Syria, on ground, it's like security. Like I feel not only our journalists, but also every, anyone, anyone, literally anyone could be targeted any minute from anyone” (IN9).

The risk was viewed as particularly high for women rights activists, media workers or human rights defenders, who were seen as especially vulnerable to intimidation and violence. As one respondent noted:

“Because we know it's the easiest thing is to target women and specifically if those women are activists or if they are working in the public sphere. So that's mean most of our team are targeted or are possible targets. So this is make us like really, really very slow doing anything specifically now for example, we couldn't publish anything about what happened because we know it's there would be like a reaction for our team” (IN13).

To mitigate these risks some organizations chose to keep a low profile, avoiding public events or visibility campaigns that could expose staff to retaliation. Others opted not to register officially inside Syria, but instead work through informal networks, unregistered initiatives, or transnational structures to shield members from repression.

Next to physical safety, insecurity and violence also have an effect on the **emotional and psychological wellbeing of Syrian diaspora communities**. Despite the physical distance, members of diasporas are emotionally involved and influenced by events happening in Syria due to social media and contact with the beloved ones back home, which makes fear, suffering and threats to life felt very present in the diaspora. Recurrent incidents of violence, therefore, can shift the priorities of communities, sometimes leading to disengagement from civic activities:

“When something happens, which is often the case, people don't find the time to focus on anything else. For example, there was bad news during the second workshop, and then some people cancel. This happens a lot at the moment: sometimes the mood is high and you feel hopeful, but after a few days, the mood becomes tense and priorities often change” (IN12).

Respondents highlighted the importance of creating spaces and practices of self and collective care (e.g. wellbeing check-ins, retreats, rest & reflection spaces, mentoring and counselling) to navigate experiences of trauma and insecurity and to build resilience and nurture the collective strength.

Limited civic and political space and mistrust emerged as a central theme shaping the scope of diaspora engagement in post-Assad Syria. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the limited and uncertain nature of political space under the transitional authorities.

“You know, we need also to understand the infrastructure here, the possibilities, the new government and the direction in the country in general. Are we going this direction, or this direction? For example, if you are doing art, you don't know, like what is the limitation? Where are the possibilities?” (IN2).

For some, this uncertainty reinforced the need to actively contest political space and push for reforms rather than concede it to transitional authorities.

“We have to join them and try to challenge them and try to change it to our side, not to give it to them and not to repeat the situation how it's happened as well with the Syrian Army, with Assad regime” (IN17).

Others argued that diaspora actors should “occupy” civic spaces as soon as they became available, in order to prevent monopolisation by political elites.

“It's a good moment to go all of us there to try to do something with these people so they don't take over all of it. And this was very important. [...] For me, I was encouraging everyone that we should do something. We should do so we should find a space for ourselves, we should occupy it. Many people were hesitating and then some people who tried, really, they were also stopped. Like they were also like being pushed out. So no, they didn't want anyone.” (IN5).

Yet, as the quote indicates attempts to assert such roles were sometimes met with resistance and exclusion. In addition, some respondents described deep mistrust towards the transitional authorities, particularly in relation to civic and human rights and accountability. While infrastructure or health initiatives were perceived as more acceptable, rights-based civic action remained heavily constrained.

“But this authority has proven so far it's not inclusive, but still the West and the US are cooperating. So this is now the thing what we are living since March until today is actually the consequences of this legitimacy that was given to these people. And then they occupied the government, occupied the space and never accepted a loud civic voices. You need to look into the actions of the current government. They don't deal with all the civic structures that we have built the last 14 years” (IN8).

The **absence of clear regulations** regarding rights and duties further exacerbated these challenges. Respondents mention that due to the recent political transitions, there are no clear regulations for registering associations or for certain policy areas such as education and culture. This creates a lot of insecurities with regard to the possibilities and limits of civic spaces in Syria:

“We need to find out, for example, how to set up an association or what restrictions we might face in terms of political education. No matter what kind of involvement, it's not really clear because everything is new in Syria” (IN6).

These accounts reflect both an openness to seize opportunities as well as a profound mistrust towards transitional government structures. In response, some respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining a **diaspora position** (with no registration inside Syria) in order to preserve independence and ensure that critical engagement, particularly around rights and accountability, remains possible.

When it comes to organizational challenges, **financial precarity** remains a structural limitation, particularly for grassroots organizations reliant on volunteer labour and small-scale, project-based funding. The absence of stable, long-term funding support constrains organisational development and risks undermining structures built over the past decade.

“We are also financially weak. As long as we work on a voluntary basis, we cannot establish a proper structure without full-time staff. We now face the risk that the structure we have built up over the past few years will be destroyed because we survive on these micro-projects. And if the new government decides that what we are doing is unnecessary and we no longer receive funding, then I think it will be very difficult to continue doing what we are doing” (IN6).

As the quote also indicates, cuts in spending on culture and social affairs in Germany may risk the survival of diaspora organizations, given that many already operate under financial precarity. According to another respondent this trend has been already observed in the past years:

“Over time, interest in supporting associations or projects that work for other cultures or bring both cultures together has also declined somewhat” (IN2)

More transnationally engaged NGOs have been able to access a broader range of governmental and private funding streams, but overall reductions in development funding linked to international political dynamics have substantially narrowed the funding ecosystem. Human rights-oriented organisations have been disproportionately affected, as donor agendas increasingly privilege infrastructure and reconstruction over rights-based initiatives and social cohesion.

“Like, especially we do civil society work, we don't do humanitarian response and we don't do relief etcetera. So, like getting more funds was much more difficult for us” (IN8).

“In Syria, there is a lot of focus on the economy and reconstruction, and people think, okay, if we focus on that, then other things can follow [...] But given the current context without social cohesion, we won't get anywhere. That's exactly what I see as the challenge” (IN12).

Moreover, as one interviewee noted, engaging in pro-Palestinian advocacy is complicated by funding structures, political sensitivities, and the pervasive risk of being confronted with accusations of antisemitism. This creates a difficult environment for organizations that approach their work from an intersectional perspective:

“You have the challenges of also like being pro Palestine or against the war and the whole fund structure and you know the whole anti-Semitism accusation, all of this in Germany. So that's one thing that is challenging to work in such an environment because if you are like from an intersectional struggle point of view, you don't want to support one thing and ignore another (IN3).”

In an environment where motivations are high and plenty of new initiatives emerged the lack of funding not only limits the scope and sustainability of engagement but also risks creating **competition among diasporas actors** over scarce resources.

“Because somehow we, the Syrian civil society organizations, are many and somehow they're all competing for the same resources. And I think it's not sustainable for their work (IN16).

Legal and regulatory barriers such as sanctions and restrictive banking regulations impede the transfer of funds, complicate registration, and, in some cases, lead to blocked accounts. Among the participants that have operations inside Syria, a common concern is the lack of formal money transfer channels, which is impeding the work on the ground. The economic sanctions imposed by the EU and USA on Syria caused many banks to restrict the transactions and even shut down bank accounts in Syria:

“We have like we have unfunctional bank system in Syria. We don't, we don't have this option to transfer money directly to Syria. We're still using our Turkey office to channel the money to Syria” (IN13).

“Because the sanction, because we are not allowed to register an organization with the name of Syria, they will block our bank accounts” (IN17).

As the quotes showed, larger organizations with office in the neighbouring countries of Syria continue to channel money from there, while others decided to not expose their Syrian identity in the organization's name to avoid restrictions.

The lack of access to policymakers in Germany represents another challenge for some organizations. Despite their considerable expertise, local knowledge, and extensive transnational networks, some organizations reported that their engagement with German decision-making processes remains limited. Outreach efforts to political actors in Germany, whether through advocacy campaigns, written inputs, or direct meetings, were described as rarely leading to substantive dialogue or long-term partnerships.

“In most cases, the doors of politicians and politics were closed to us. We were faced with closed doors. I can say that 10% of my inquiries led to discussions with politicians, and I don't know how many emails I sent.” (IN4).

Especially now, since Germany plans to invest a lot of resources in the rebuilding of Syria, respondents also expressed concern that external actors, including the German government, conferred legitimacy on the transitional authorities in Syria without consultation with civil society inside the country and in the diaspora.

“When Annalena Baerbock landed in Syria with a military jet, we were still trying to understand what is happening in Syria. We did not give legitimacy for these authorities. The international world gave legitimacy for these authorities in the very first few days without even consulting, without even consulting the Syrian people” (IN8).

Respondents therefore stressed that reconstruction of the country should be Syrian-led with decision-making roles in justice, return & reintegration and reconstruction. A top-down approach faces the risk of breaking down due to lack of nuanced understanding of the Syrian context, whereas local and grassroots ownership in peacebuilding can render it more successful and durable.

Increasingly restrictive migration policies also affect the capacity of diaspora organisations to engage. Respondents pointed to recent restrictions on family reunification, which were described not only as bureaucratic obstacles but also as having serious social and psychological consequences. The inability to be reunited with family members was seen as a source of ongoing stress that negatively affects well-being and feelings of safety and stability:

“For example, last week they just cancelled the family unification programme in Berlin. It's like mental health for many refugees to be able to bring their family like parents here after years they are disconnected” (IN17).

The lack of safety and feelings of insecurity have also practical implications for civil society participation. As one respondent explained, the burden of restrictive migration policies reduces the time and energy that individuals can dedicate to collective activities:

“Currently, one issue is the pressure on our community, such as the new rules on family reunification. When a person is under a lot of pressure, they cannot do as much volunteer work” (IN6).

Finally, respondents also highlighted **gender-specific challenges**, such as the double burden resulting from the need to balance responsibilities across work, care, and community roles. Due to their status as migrants and their gender, migrant women are often exposed to multiple disadvantages and discrimination. In addition, traditional gender norms not only limit the space to act and participate but also shape how women perceive their roles and possibilities:

“I find that many women still don't believe in themselves, so they still have inhibitions about stepping forward and think they're not good enough, scientifically or politically.” (IN1).

3.5. Aspirations and motivations for potential (temporary) return

Studies in Germany on Syrian refugees' intentions to return or remain have so far been conducted under the conditions that prevailed in Syria until recently, which were marked by war, civil war, and persecution, and therefore cannot be directly applied to the new situation following the fall of the Assad regime.

A survey examining the factors influencing Syrian refugees' decisions to return to their country of origin found that in 2015, over 90 percent of Syrian refugees surveyed in Germany expressed interest in returning, but only under certain conditions. The most important of these included an end to the war and reconciliation between different religious and ethnic groups, as well as regime change through the removal of Assad and the introduction of a democratic system with free elections. Further, their motivations diverged depending on personal experiences of violence and levels of education. Those who experienced direct threats to their safety (e.g., shelling, arrests, barrel bombs) were significantly more likely to consider returning if stability is restored, while refugees with higher education levels were more likely to link their return to the adoption of a democratic system (Kaya & Orchard, 2020).

A study by Al Husein and Wagner (2020) examining the determinants of intended return migration among Syrian refugees in Germany and Turkey found that Syrian refugees in Germany showed relatively low short-term return aspirations, with only 13 per cent intending to return within two years and fewer than 40 per cent willing to return even if Syria became as safe as before the war. Long-term aspirations were more hopeful, with about half of respondents expressing a desire to return someday, but factors like a permanent protection status, and severed ties with Syria (e.g. no remaining assets or family) significantly reduced their likelihood of return. Further, women and people with higher education had a lower willingness to return. Finally, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany found that 94 per cent of refugees born in Syria who arrived between 2013 and 2019 stated that they wanted to remain permanently in Germany (Brücker et al, 2024).

Research on refugee return aspirations and decisions consistently shows that these are complex, dynamic, and highly context-dependent, rather than straightforward intentions that easily translate into actual return. While return aspirations tend to be higher at an early stage of migration, over time, integration in residence countries, the length of exile, and the establishment of family and social ties abroad may reduce the likelihood of return. Studies also highlight that even when aspirations to return are strong, the feasibility of return is constrained by conflict dynamics, political repression, lack of livelihoods, or fear of persecution (Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2023). Further, the heterogeneity of the Syrian population in Germany, in terms of experiences of violence, socio-economic resources, education, gender, and family situation, both shapes and reflects their intentions to return and their prospects of return and reintegration (Kaya & Orchard, 2020; y Al Husein& Wagner, 2020).

Among the interviewed Syrian diaspora members in Germany, aspirations for return were widespread, though most emphasize the possibility of **temporary rather than permanent return**. Many respondents have already travelled back to Syria in recent months, with two

interviewees residing in the country at the time of the study. These returns were often motivated by the desire to reconnect with family, to experience the newly gained freedoms on the ground, and to explore opportunities for engagement. For some, the experience of return was deeply emotional. As one respondent described:

“At the moment I entered Damascus, I felt as if I were homeless for the last 12 years. I felt I were sleeping on the streets and living on the streets, which is not the case. I wasn't, I had a nicer home in Berlin. I have a good stuff, I work, I have a good life, I have like family around. I have a partner now, everything. But literally only the moment I entered the city and I entered my home, I had this feeling like as if I were on the streets” (IN5).

Such testimonies highlight the sense of belonging and homecoming that temporary returns can evoke, even for those who have built stable lives in Germany.

Some returns were also linked to **practical forms of engagement inside Syria**. Respondents reported activities, such as organizing workshops on urban design and reconstruction in Damascus, contributing to the health system through medical expertise, or establishing cultural initiatives such as arts collectives in Sweida. Others participated in meetings with representatives of the transitional government or carried out needs assessments to identify priorities for future engagement.

At the same time, most respondents acknowledged the **limitations of a (permanent) return**. For many it took considerable time, energy and resources to establish a stable life in Germany and going back to Syria after years of exile would mean another break in their biographies. As one interviewee explained:

“I don't think a complete return would be possible anyway, because a return would mean starting over again at the age of over 40. Starting from scratch. I've built a life, I've had a career for so many years, I have so many friends here, and I don't want to give that up again” (IN4).

Family and professional obligations in Germany are also seen as obstacle for return. For respondents with children, aspiration for return were balanced by better and safer opportunities present in Germany, when compared to the challenging conditions in Syria:

“You live here in Germany for a long time, you already have a job here, you have your own family, children, you're married and so on, and then that's how it is, you don't think about yourself only but also of your children and so on and so forth. So it's not an easy decision to be here or there” (IN7).

Systemic barriers inside Syria relate to the **lack of country's basic infrastructure** and services. The limited prospects of ensuring a decent livelihood in Syria, due the challenging economic conditions, along with limited access to homes, infrastructure, basic services, education and health provision limit the aspiration for permanent return. Respondents frequently cited the lack of reliable electricity, water, internet as key deterrents. As one interviewee put it:

“I need to access the basic needs [...] It's about accessing Internet, speed Internet, accessing electricity and accessing water” (IN17).

Next to basic infrastructure, functioning educational and health systems as well as employment opportunities were seen as precondition for a long-term and sustainable return:

“If I believe that the country is safe and that everything is stable, and that my family and my children are secure in terms of education, healthcare, and employment, then I might consider giving it a try” (IN18).

Insecurity and conflict dynamics constitute another major barrier. Concerns about personal safety, kidnappings, or general exposure to violence discourage some respondents from even travelling to the country, let alone returning for a period:

“The most important thing for me right now, it's security, if I need to go back. But for example, to be honest, until today I didn't visit Syria after December 24th. My question was how secure or how safe is it to be able to travel Syria or will anyone kidnap me just only because I come from Germany (IN17).

Barriers are also **gendered and minority-specific**, illustrating how return aspirations are shaped by different social positions. Next to a lack of physical safety due to potential persecution, restrictions on the ability to act, participate, and be recognized may limit both the aspirations and options for return among particularly women, minorities and other groups in risk of marginalization.

“But even a visit to Syria is out of the question for me, for several reasons, for security reasons. As I said, Turkey is present in Syria and is well informed about Kurdish activities in Germany, and so it is a risk for me to go to Syria (IN4).

“Let's say if I'm going alone back at night, especially as a woman, let's say I didn't face a lot of problems, but I am insecure now about me being a woman there or a female working. I have to go to the justice ministerium, I have to go to the municipality and so on. And I am a woman there. They don't accept me very easily.” (IN16).

The lack of a permanent legal status constitutes another barrier especially for Syrians without German citizenship. Many fear that even a short stay in Syria could lead to the revocation of their protection status. Although the German government initially considered permitting so-called “exploratory trips” that would serve to prepare for voluntary return, this provision was ultimately dropped, leaving no legal framework for such visits without risking residence rights.

“So I got the refugee status. And since then I'm renewing it like every three years like all other Syrians. So this is the background, this is the personal background where I kind of, I felt like I was stuck into this refugee situation. So I can't go back” (IN3).

Finally, a sense of belonging presents a significant precondition for establishing links with the place of origin and for return aspirations. Yet, a connecting and sense of belonging to a homeland should not be viewed as static but may change overtime due to specific events. While the fall of the Assad regime initially led to a renewed sense of belonging and hopes for a potential return, recent atrocities in Tartus and Sweida, and the wider sectarianization of society, have fostered a **sense of dis-belonging** among some respondents questioning if this is the change and country they fought for and want to return:

“We also like I talked with my partner about, I don't know, long distance or something or I go there like for a few months and then come back and then go and then come back. But at the moment after Sweda, I don't see any perspective like how do I go there? Like how do I live there?” (IN9).

“It was a huge disappointment for me, but it was not only about the disappointment it was also about where I am going to go now? Like this huge questions inside you, like is this a country I dream of? This country welcomes me even? Also the Palestinian layer of me, like we don't know what is the Palestinians future in this? Now, after all of the things happening in Syria and all of these questions personally, being Palestinian, being queer, being civic, being vocal” (IN8).

Overall, while aspirations for return remain widespread among Syrian respondents in Germany, the findings highlight the extent to which such aspirations are mediated by structural and individual constraints. The absence of infrastructure, livelihoods, and basic services, alongside insecurity and conflict dynamics, reflects the systemic barriers that limit the ability to return. At the same time, family obligations, legal insecurities, gendered and minority-specific risks, and shifting senses of belonging illustrate how return is negotiated through social positions and lived experiences.

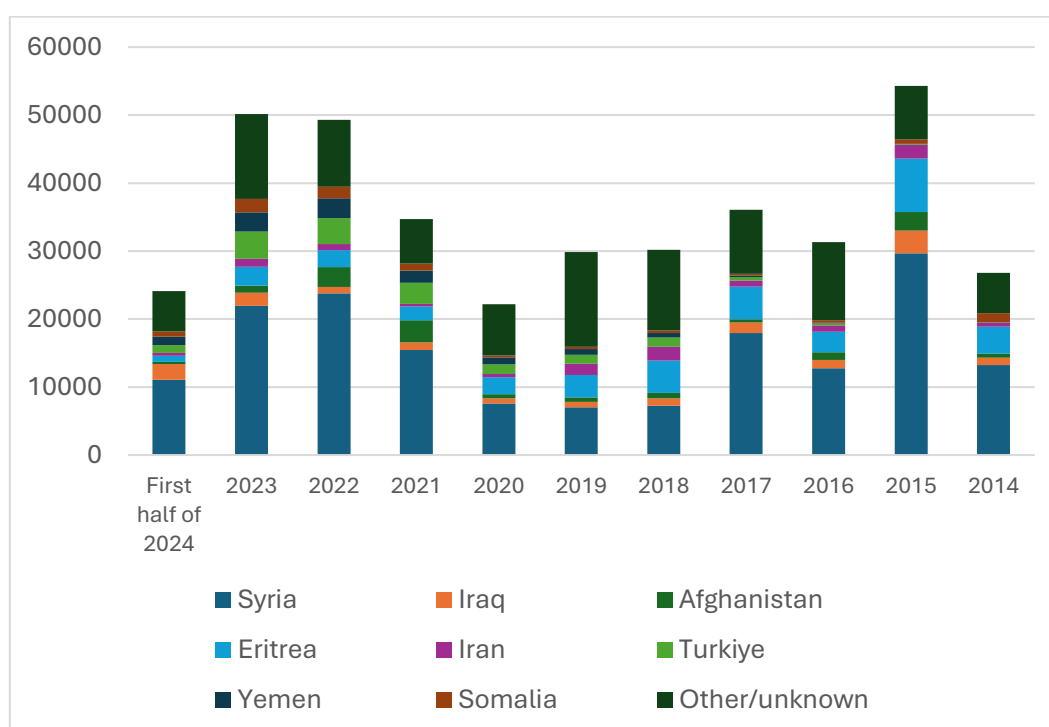
4. Syrian Diaspora mobilization in the Netherlands

4.1. Migration and policy context

Syrian migration to the Netherlands has evolved significantly over the past few decades. Prior to 2011, the Syrian community in the Netherlands was relatively small, consisting mainly of individuals who arrived for educational, professional, or family reunification purposes. However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 marked a turning point. Between 2014 and 2016, the Netherlands experienced a substantial influx of Syrian refugees, with nearly 28,000 arriving in 2016 alone (SCP, 2018). This significant increase placed considerable pressure on Dutch asylum systems, reception centres, and integration services. As of the end of 2023, there were more than 165,000 Syrians registered in the Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, 2025).

Asylum requests from Syrians remained at a high level in the years after, in comparison to requests from other nationalities (see Figure 7 below). The number of asylum requests from Syrians decreased significantly in the first half of 2025, most likely due to the fall of the Assad regime (CBS, 2025a). People with Syrian nationality still applied for asylum most frequently (21 per cent of the total), which amounts to more than 900 asylum applications. This is 68 per cent less than in the same period last year, when more than 2,900 Syrians applied for asylum (ibid).

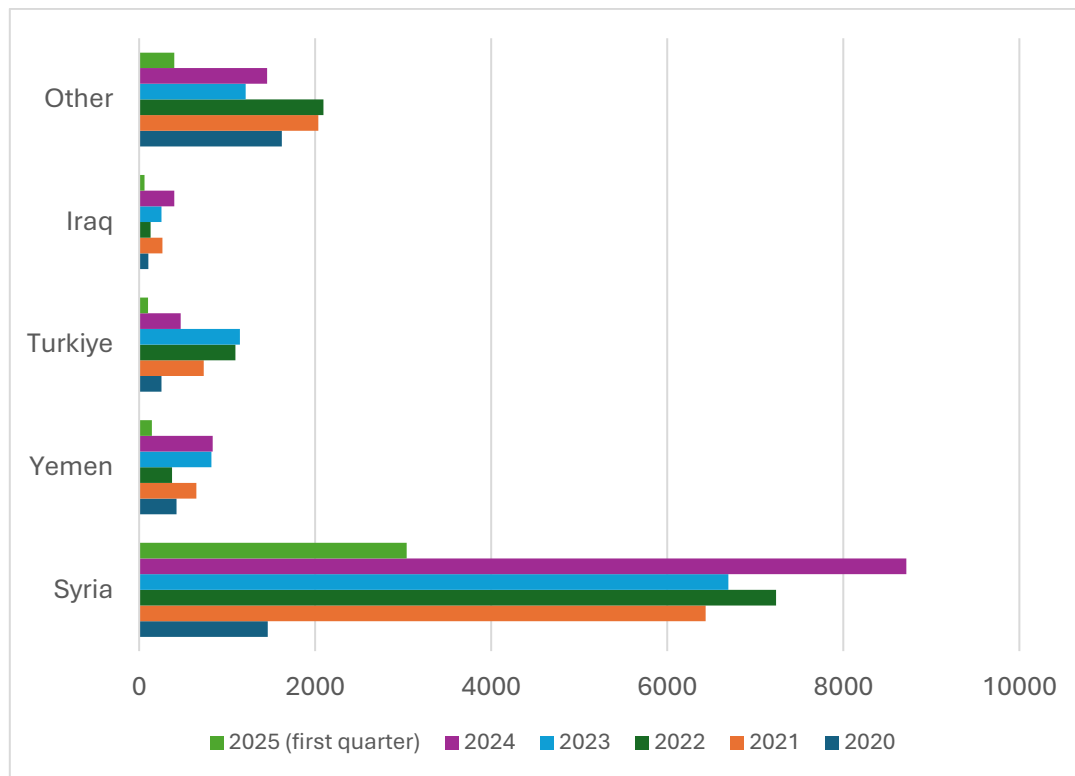
Figure 10: Asylum Requests per nationality in the Netherlands (2014 – 2024)



Source: Asylum and Integration Report, Central Bureau for Statistics, 2025b

Syrians also remain one of the most represented nationalities involved in Family Reunification cases and requests in the Netherlands:

Figure 11: Family Reunification Cases in the Netherlands (2020- first quarter of 2025)



Source: Central Bureau for Statistics, 2025b

Following their arrival, many Syrians transitioned from asylum centres to independent housing. Unlike some other migrant groups, Syrians did not tend to cluster in major urban areas, instead dispersing more evenly across the country. Integration into Dutch society has been a gradual process. While many Syrians have expressed a growing sense of belonging in the Netherlands, challenges remain—particularly in the areas of employment and language acquisition. Studies show that only a minority of Syrians had secured paid employment 30 months after receiving residency, though participation in language and civic integration programs has been widespread.

Around 86 per cent of Dutch Syrians now have a Dutch passport and around 92 per cent of those interviewed for the 2022 WODC research indicated that they “for sure” wanted to stay in the Netherlands and 69 per cent indicated that they definitely would not want to go back to Syria ([WODC, 2023](#)). These figures have since changed, which will be outlined later on in the report.

Demographic information about the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands

In general, Dutch Syrian individuals in the Netherlands tend to be younger, largely male, and have attained a higher education:

Figure 12: Age of general population in the Netherlands vs. Syrian Dutch individuals

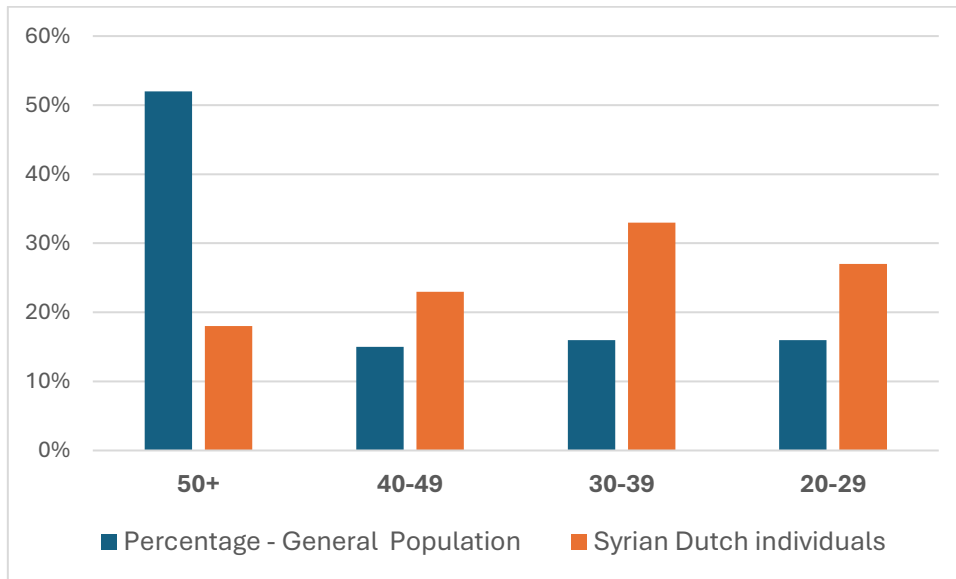


Figure 13: Gender identity composition of Dutch Syrian individuals

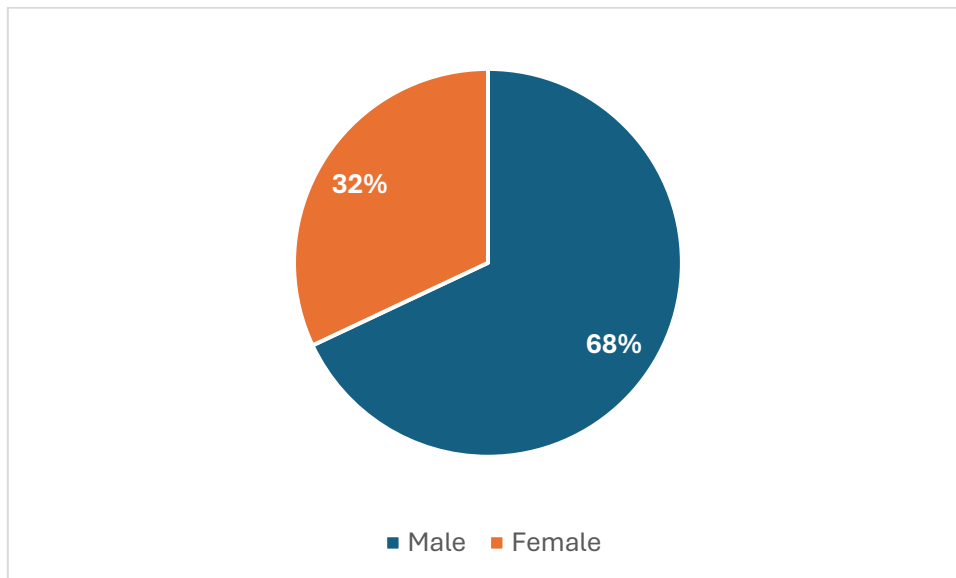
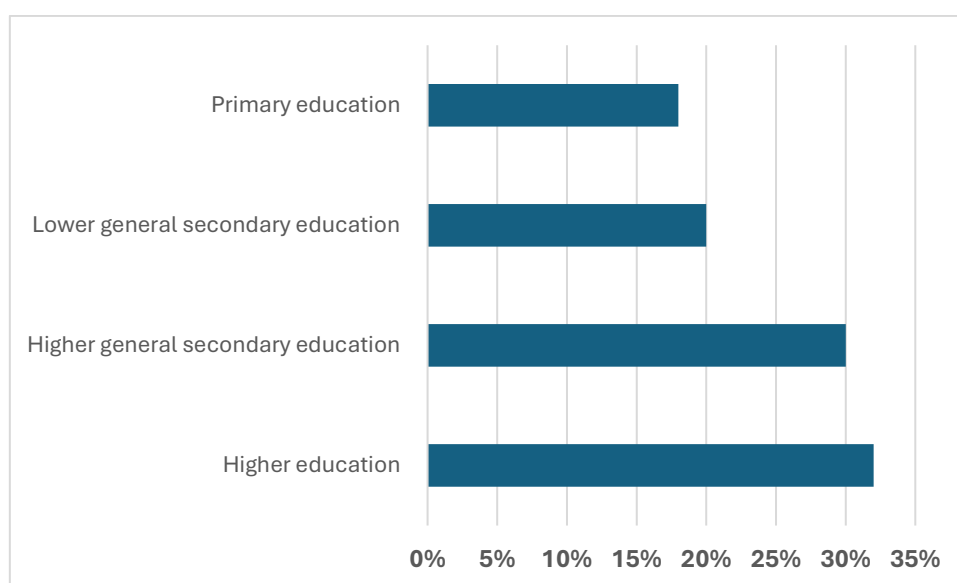


Figure 14: Highest attained educational level:



Source Figure 9-11: WODC, 2023

The Syrian community in the Netherlands number around 120,000 people as of 2024 (CBS, 2024). It is a relatively young population, with many arriving during the 2014–2016 refugee wave. Recent arrivals still include a high proportion of young men aged 15–19, though family reunification has also played a major role in shaping the community (CBS, 2025b). The demographic profile of Syrian migrants is notably young, with many families arriving through reunification processes (Lubbers and de Valk, 2020). This has led to a growing second generation of Dutch-born Syrian children. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) and other organizations continue to monitor the integration of Syrians, focusing on education, health, and social participation. These efforts aim to support long-term inclusion and well-being within Dutch society.

Most Syrians transition out of asylum reception centres within a year of receiving residency. They are geographically dispersed across the Netherlands, with no major ethnic enclaves, though cities like Amsterdam, Arnhem, and Utrecht have visible communities. Housing shortages and affordability remain challenges, especially for larger families (SCP, 2018). Syrian children are well-integrated into the Dutch school system, and many young adults pursue vocational or higher education. However, Dutch language proficiency varies—while younger Syrians adapt quickly, older adults often struggle, which can hinder employment and social participation (ibid).

Employment remains a key challenge. Even 30 months after receiving residency, only a minority of Syrians have paid jobs, often in low-skilled sectors. Barriers include language, lack of Dutch work experience, and difficulties in recognizing foreign qualifications (CBS, 2024). Syrians generally express positive attitudes toward Dutch society, valuing safety, education, and freedom. Many are active in volunteering and community initiatives, especially youth. However, feelings of isolation and cultural disconnection persist, particularly among older generations and women (ibid).

Key Recent Policy Changes in the Netherlands

Before 2015, the Netherlands operated under a structured asylum system shaped by:

- [The Aliens Act 2000](#), which streamlined asylum procedures into a single status system.
- [The EU Qualification Directive and Dublin Regulation](#), which influenced national asylum decisions and responsibility-sharing among EU states.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Netherlands began receiving increasing numbers of Syrian asylum-seekers. Key features of the policy during this period included high recognition rates, as Syrians were generally granted asylum due to the clear risk of persecution and violence in Syria (The Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) recognized the conflict as grounds for protection under Article 3 of the ECHR and Article 15c of the EU Qualification Directive).

The Netherlands participates in the UNHCR-led resettlement program, selecting refugees from countries neighbouring Syria (e.g., Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey) for relocation to the Netherlands (ibid). From 2014, the Netherlands began using part of its annual resettlement quota specifically for Syrian refugees. This was part of the broader Policy Framework 2012–2015, which emphasized humanitarian admission and resettlement as legal pathways for vulnerable groups ([European Migration Network, 2016](#)). The selection criteria for resettlement included the potential for integration, such as language skills, education level, and family composition.

In 2025, the Netherlands introduced significant changes to its asylum policy for Syrians, marking a shift away from the more protective stance of previous years. Syrian asylum applications are no longer automatically approved; instead, each case is now assessed individually ([Ministry of Asylum and Migration, 2025](#)). Applicants must demonstrate a specific and personal risk of persecution or harm if returned to Syria, rather than relying on the general insecurity that previously justified protection. This change follows the Dutch government's reclassification of Syria's safety status—now considered to have the lowest level of indiscriminate violence. While this means general conflict is no longer sufficient grounds for asylum, individuals from vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQIA+ people, may still qualify if they can prove targeted threats.

After a six-month freeze on Syrian asylum applications—from December 2024 to June 2025—the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) resumed processing cases on 14 June 2025 ([IND, 2025](#)). During the freeze, approximately 17,000 applications were put on hold and are now being reviewed under the new, stricter criteria. In parallel, the Dutch government is encouraging voluntary return to Syria by offering financial support: €815 in cash upon arrival and up to €2,000 in in-kind reintegration assistance. Initially, the government also suspended the publication of country security reports used to assess asylum claims. However, a court ruling forced the release of the latest report, which still describes Syria's situation as “fragile” and “unstable,” highlighting the ongoing complexity of return and reintegration ([Dutch News, 2025](#)).

Overview of Asylum Policies in the Netherlands regarding Syrians, pre- vs. post-2025

Aspect	Previous Policy (Pre-2025)	Current Policy (2025)
Asylum Approval	Most Syrians were granted asylum automatically due to the ongoing civil war and general insecurity.	Each case is now assessed individually. Applicants must prove a personal risk of persecution.
Country Safety Assessment	Syria was considered unsafe due to widespread violence and instability.	Syria is now classified as having low levels of indiscriminate violence, making general insecurity insufficient for asylum.
Application Processing	Applications were processed continuously, with high approval rates.	Applications were frozen for 6 months (Dec 2024–Jun 2025); now resumed under stricter criteria.
Voluntary Return	Limited incentives for voluntary return.	Financial support offered: €815 cash + up to €2,000 in reintegration aid.
Country Reports	Regularly published to guide asylum decisions.	Temporarily suspended; resumed after court intervention. Latest report still calls Syria “fragile.”
Deportations	No deportations to Syria due to safety concerns.	Still no forced returns, but the tone is shifting toward potential future removals.
Impact on Existing Residents	Residency was generally secure once granted.	Residency remains valid, but future renewals or family reunification may face more scrutiny.

Dutch government legislative priorities – rebuilding Syria and a potential TRQN programme

The Dutch government, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BuZa), has a history of engaging with diaspora organizations, though past efforts have yielded mixed results ([Kamerbrief van Minister David van Weel, 2025a](#)). Currently, under the caretaker government Schoof, diaspora engagement is not listed as a strategic priority. However, recent parliamentary interest suggests a potential shift in attention toward this area, in particular the ‘Kamerbrief’ that was drafted by the Parliament requesting information on diaspora communities in the Netherlands and their relationships with their countries of origin ([Rijksoverheid, 2025](#)). The Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands presents a unique case: it consists largely of refugees who arrived relatively recently, and many individuals possess skills and experiences that could contribute meaningfully to Syria’s reconstruction. While the current caretaker government Schoof is not actively pursuing diaspora engagement, it prioritizes return and has participated in Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) programmes in the past, as seen in IOM’s Connecting Diaspora for Development project, which was funded by the Dutch Foreign Ministry.

Syria’s reconstruction remains a complex and politically sensitive issue. Within Dutch development aid, healthcare continues to be a priority sector, reflecting both humanitarian needs and long-term development goals. The caretaker government has emphasized return as a policy priority, aligning with broader European concerns about migration and stability ([Kamerbrief van Minister David van Weel, 2025b](#)). In this context, social cohesion and conflict resolution are seen

as essential components of any sustainable reconstruction strategy. Regional hosting of Syrian refugees also remains a major focus, with ongoing support for neighbouring countries that bear the brunt of displacement.

There is growing interest within Dutch policy circles in exploring different ways to support voluntary return and the rebuilding of Syria, and thus also the feasibility of a Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) programme tailored to the Syrian diaspora ([Kamerbrief van Minister David van Weel, 2025b](#)). While no formal initiative has been launched, the importance of interministerial collaboration—particularly with the Ministry of Asylum and Migration—remains important in addressing legal and logistical considerations. A comprehensive feasibility study and diaspora mapping would be essential to define the programme’s scope, objectives, and operational requirements. At the European level, there appears to be momentum around coordinated approaches to diaspora engagement, with countries like Germany reportedly exploring similar models. Questions remain around clarity around eligibility criteria, funding mechanisms, and coordination structures will be key to determining the viability of such a programme for many Member States and so the conversation is expected to continue to evolve over the coming months and potentially even years.

5.2 Mapping the Syrian civil society landscape in The Netherlands

Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands form a modest but dynamic part of the broader European Syrian civil society landscape. Their emergence is closely tied to the post-2011 migration wave, which brought a diverse group of Syrians to the country. While the number of formal organizations is relatively small—partly due to the limited size of the Syrian population in the Netherlands and partly due to legal and financial constraints—these groups are characterized by a strong sense of civic engagement and transnational solidarity. Many began informally, often around kitchen tables, and have gradually professionalized their operations.

Seventeen such groups have been identified and contacted in the scope of this research, each contributing in diverse ways—from cultural preservation and community support to advocacy and transnational solidarity (for more information on their activities, see the below section on ‘Activities’). The limited number of formal organizations is partly due to the smaller proportion of Syrians in the Netherlands compared to neighbouring countries (i.e. Germany), and partly due to, as indicated by the organizations consulted for this research, legal and financial barriers. EU sanctions related to Syria have made it difficult to establish official organizations, particularly when it comes to opening bank accounts or navigating lengthy registration procedures.

Despite constraints, Syrian civil society thrives informally. Many initiatives operate through WhatsApp groups and personal networks, allowing for agile and responsive community engagement. These connections tend to be regionally focused, with limited coordination at the national level. However, there is a shared desire among the organizations interviewed to strengthen national ties. One example is a medical diaspora initiative that is exploring the creation of a national network, with ambitions to expand across Europe. This effort reflects a broader vision among Syrian civil society actors: to build transnational structures that can contribute meaningfully to the future reconstruction of Syria.

There are a number of overlapping values and approaches to be noted amongst Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands. These include a commitment to human rights, inclusive dialogue, and community-based rebuilding efforts. The organizational landscape is marked by diversity in structure and focus. According to a comparative study by the Danish Refugee Council, Syrian diaspora organizations across Europe—including those in the Netherlands—are increasingly seeking cooperation through umbrella networks and professional associations (Ragab and Katbeh, 2017). These networks often revolve around specific sectors, such as medicine or education, and aim to coordinate efforts across borders to contribute to Syria’s recovery.

Six diaspora organizations were interviewed for this research and their activities were focused on the following areas:

- Humanitarian Assistance
- Health
- Integration and participation
- Women empowerment
- Engineering and infrastructure
- Justice and human rights

5.3 Activities and practices

Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands are dynamic, multifaceted actors. They serve as bridges between communities, countries, and causes—supporting integration locally while contributing to Syria’s recovery globally. Their activities reflect a deep commitment to justice, dignity, and sustainable development, and their transnational networks are increasingly vital in shaping both policy and practice.

Focus Areas and Missions

The missions of Syrian diaspora organizations are diverse but often converge around a few key themes:

- **Rebuilding Syria:** A strong focus exists on contributing to Syria’s recovery, whether through humanitarian aid, professional expertise, or advocacy for inclusive and just reconstruction.
- **Integration and belonging:** Organizations also prioritize helping Syrians feel at home in the Netherlands, supporting their integration while preserving cultural identity.
- **Justice and accountability:** Some groups focus on transitional justice, human rights, and documenting war crimes.
- **Gender equity:** Several organizations emphasize the inclusion and empowerment of women, both in the diaspora and in Syria
- **Empowerment and self-reliance:** Several organizations aim to empower Syrians—both in the diaspora and in Syria—through education, training, and access to resources.

Activities – An Overview

Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands **actively support newcomers and long-term residents** through a range of empowerment initiatives. These include providing guidance on navigating Dutch institutions, offering translation and interpretation services, and organizing workshops on civic integration. Many groups also facilitate peer-to-peer support networks, helping individuals build resilience and confidence in their new environment.

A strong focus is placed on education, both formal and informal. Organizations offer Dutch language courses, tutoring for school-aged children, and vocational training for adults. Some initiatives also provide mentorship programs for students and young professionals, aiming to bridge gaps in access to higher education and employment opportunities.

Preserving and celebrating Syrian culture is central to many diaspora initiatives. Organizations host cultural events such as music performances, art exhibitions, and storytelling evenings to foster a sense of belonging and pride. These activities also serve as a bridge between Syrian and Dutch communities, promoting mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. Some organizations also offer **spiritual support**, while also fostering integration and interfaith dialogue in the Netherlands.

Diaspora organizations often engage in **advocacy work, raising awareness about the challenges faced by Syrians in the Netherlands and abroad.** They participate in policy dialogues, collaborate with human rights organizations, and contribute to research on migration and integration. Some groups also work to amplify Syrian voices in media and politics, ensuring representation in decision making processes. **Advocacy and justice** are also central themes. Numerous organizations work on transitional justice and gender equity, using documentation, training, and policy engagement to shape a more inclusive and accountable future for Syria.

Many organizations maintain strong ties with Syria and neighboring countries, **coordinating humanitarian aid and development projects.** These efforts include fundraising for medical supplies, supporting education in refugee camps, and facilitating psychosocial support for displaced populations. The transnational nature of these activities reflects a commitment to solidarity beyond borders. **Humanitarian aid** remains a cornerstone of diaspora engagement. Multiple organizations interviewed for this research are actively involved in delivering essential services—food, water, and medical support—to vulnerable populations in Syria. These efforts are often grassroots and rely heavily on personal networks and volunteerism.

Figure 15: Map of activities Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands work on

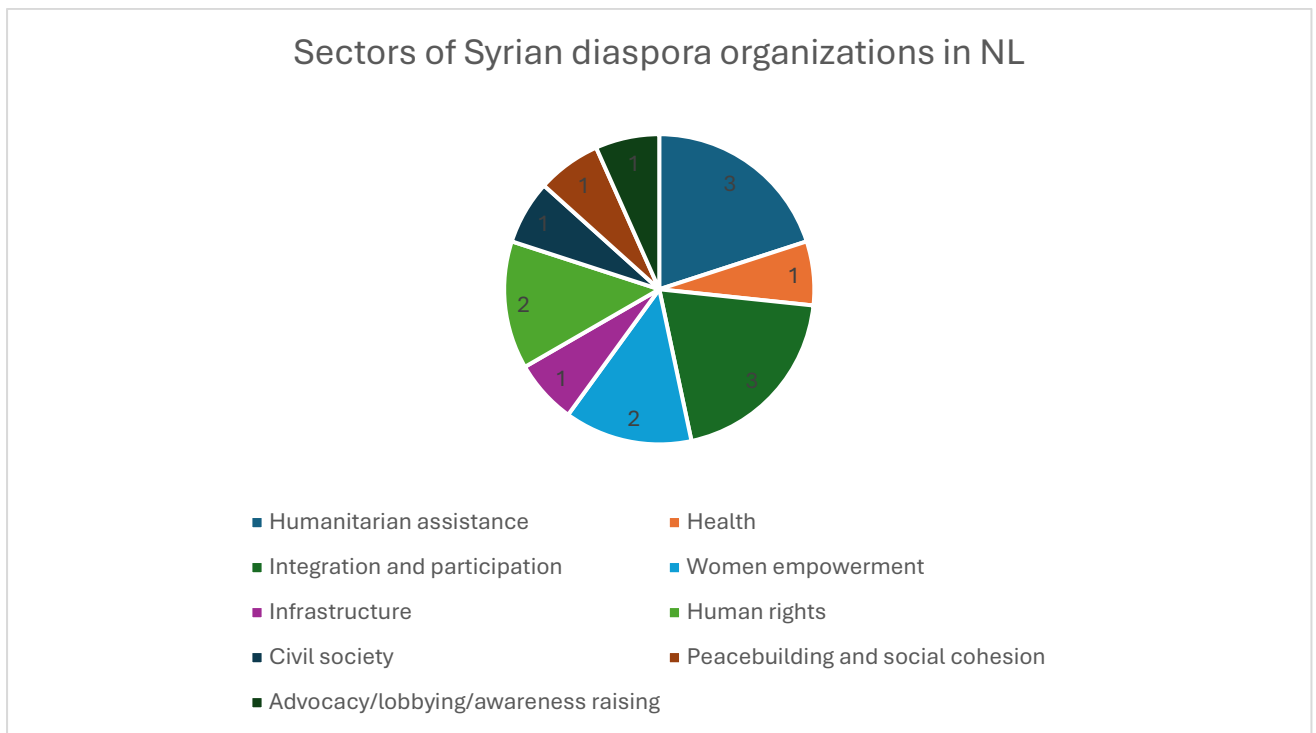
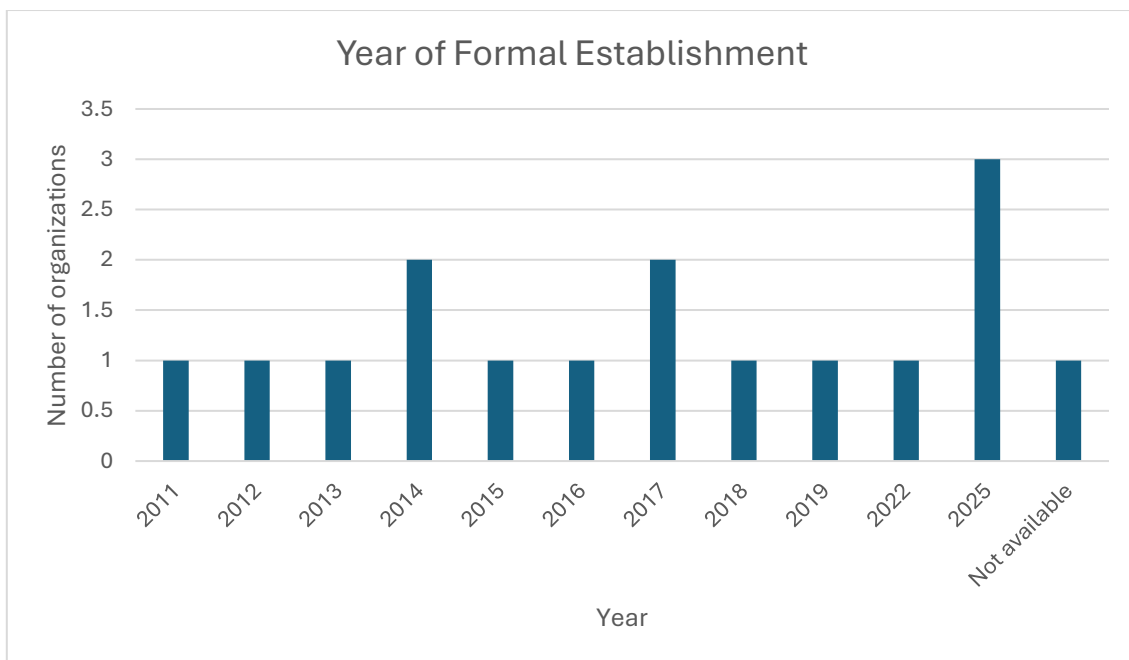


Figure 16: Year of Formal Establishment



The establishment of Syrian diaspora organizations (formally) in the Netherlands aligned with the timeline where more and more Syrian refugees arrived in the Netherlands. Once Syrians were more settled in the Netherlands, there would be time to start setting up organizations and therefore the number of organizations slowly started increasing over time. To be noted: with the fall of the Assad regime, a number of organizations were established with the sole purpose to rebuilding Syria (see spike in registrations in 2025).

5.4 Challenges and opportunities

5.4.1. Opportunities

“Addressing the past is key to a successful future... the process has to be owned by the Syrian people.” (IN25)

The Syrian diaspora organizations interviewed share a strong belief that rebuilding Syria is not only possible but must be led by Syrians themselves—both inside the country and abroad. They view the diaspora as a vital resource, offering professional expertise, international networks, and a deep commitment to justice and development.

One major opportunity lies in **professional knowledge transfer**. Some groups are preparing to contribute to urban planning and sustainable infrastructure projects, envisioning missions to Syria to collaborate with local professionals and offer design expertise for rebuilding cities and villages. Others are organizing donations of medical equipment and training for healthcare workers, with the long-term goal of facilitating medical missions. In parallel, international actors are promoting area-based return approaches, focusing on urban centres where most returnees are expected. These hubs are being developed to ensure dignified service delivery and safety, with support from multilateral agencies and local NGOs.

Engineering and infrastructure expertise is being mobilized by diaspora organizations in the Netherlands, including developing plans for sustainable urban reconstruction and mentorship programs. IOM could support these initiatives by connecting diaspora engineers with local authorities, offering technical exchange platforms, and funding pilot projects that demonstrate scalable models for rebuilding. That focus can involve the following activities:

- Urban development: Offering expertise in sustainable reconstruction of cities and villages.
- Mentorship and employment: Supporting Syrian engineers in the Netherlands and linking them to rebuilding efforts.
- Knowledge transfer: Planning visits to Syria to assess needs and share technical know-how.

“We want to be the face of Syrian engineers... a bridge between Syrian engineers and Dutch employers...[we are preparing for] a group of engineers in the Netherlands who want to dedicate time to rebuilding Syria...[and hope to] visit Syria when it’s safe to assess what is needed and how we can help.” (IN22)

Healthcare-focused groups are addressing urgent medical needs by planning to send, and actually sending, equipment, training professionals, and organizing field missions. This can be further built upon in the coming years in the following ways:

- Medical aid: Sending equipment and medicines to Syrian hospitals.
- Training: training of Syrian medical students and professionals by Syrians from abroad.
- Support for women: Emphasizing the role of female professionals in healthcare and adopting gender-sensitive practices while providing trainings.

“We want to send Dutch doctors to Syria for specific surgeries...and expand free training programs for medical students” (IN21)

IOM can play a key role in facilitating cross-border logistics, securing funding, and formalizing partnerships with local health institutions to scale these efforts sustainably.

Education and empowerment are central to many initiatives, especially organizing trainings to contribute to the long-term sustainable development and recovery. Vocational training programs—especially for women and youth—are being developed to promote self-reliance and economic recovery. IOM can help by supporting curriculum development and linking training programs to employment pathways.

“We give free lessons and training... people have opened their own salons...[our future vision includes] expanding courses to include Excel, Word, and office skills...and reaching people who are hard to reach, especially in rural areas.”(IN24)

Justice, accountability and good governance are seen as foundational. Some organizations stress that transitional justice must be part of any rebuilding effort. Their work in documenting war crimes and supporting legal processes contributes to a future Syria where institutions are accountable and human rights are upheld. In the justice and governance sector, organizations are actively engaged in transitional justice efforts. They support legal investigations, monitor trials, and provide training to judicial actors. Their work also includes advocacy for gender-sensitive media and countering misinformation, which is essential for rebuilding trust and promoting accountability. Through this route, rebuilding efforts in Syria can be done in an inclusive and sustainable manner, centering trust-building in its approach. These efforts can be further strengthened through technical assistance, coordination with judicial actors, and support for secure data collection and victim protection protocols.

“The ultimate goal is a transition from the old culture to a new, better, safer one – transitional justice...This vision includes holding institutions and actors accountable according to the law and providing capacity-building trainings on improving justice systems.” (IN25)

Another key opportunity is **inclusive and gender-sensitive development**. Several diaspora actors emphasize the need to rebuild Syria with a gender lens, advocating for women's participation in media, justice, and governance. Proposals include the creation of safe hubs for female professionals and the implementation of national action plans aligned with international resolutions. There is also interest in exploring how municipalities in residence countries might support participatory governance models in Syria through knowledge exchange, capacity-building, and joint programming with local governments and civil society organizations. IOM can amplify these efforts by supporting cultural programming and safe return visits.

“In the region where we work, there are a lot of single mothers and children...free educational courses are a priority...” (IN24)

Community-based development is also central to diaspora-led efforts. Some organizations have built strong local networks in northern Syria and are already implementing vocational training, humanitarian aid, and water infrastructure projects. Their approach—grounded in listening to local needs and adapting programmes accordingly—demonstrates how diaspora

initiatives can be both responsive and sustainable. Additionally, Syria’s vibrant civil society is growing and striving to play an active role in the country’s reconstruction. These organizations are well-positioned to lead local rebuilding efforts, provided they are supported and not undermined by government interference. However, some experts stress the importance of reconciliation programmes before launching full-scale rebuilding efforts. Drawing on lessons from other post-conflict contexts, they suggest that healing divisions and fostering a sense of belonging are essential first steps.

Faith-based and cultural engagement offers another pathway. Certain diaspora groups see rebuilding as a spiritual and cultural mission, aiming to support religious minorities and preserve cultural identity. Their ties to communities in Syria provide a channel for moral and material support, especially for vulnerable groups. IOM can amplify these efforts by supporting cultural exchange programs, facilitating safe return visits, and promoting inclusive narratives in peacebuilding.

Across all interviews, common themes emerged: the need for safety and trust, the importance of Syrian ownership of the rebuilding process, and the challenges posed by sanctions, funding limitations, and bureaucratic barriers. Organizations expressed strong interest in collaborating with other international actors, including IOM, to overcome these obstacles. IOM is well-positioned to act as a convener and enabler—supporting the bridging of diaspora expertise with local needs, and ensuring that rebuilding efforts are inclusive, coordinated, and impactful.

5.4.2. Current Challenges for Syrian Diaspora Organizations

Funding and Financial Constraints

Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands face significant financial and structural constraints that hinder their sustainability and growth. Many struggle to secure stable funding, with several reporting difficulties in opening bank accounts due to EU sanctions linked to Syria—an issue that blocks access to formal funding channels and complicates financial administration. Others are exploring alternative routes such as subsidies and community fundraising, but find the registration and setup process for registering an official organization both costly and bureaucratically complex.

“Opening a bank account is the biggest obstacle [for Syrian organizations in the Netherlands]. Existing sanctions stop organizations and foundations from creating a bank account and so they can’t request ANBI status or receive payments or apply for many funds...it’s been especially hard the last five years...” (IN23)

“Raising funds in the Netherlands remains the biggest challenge...the sanctions have always been a big challenge for Syrian organizations. We have been trying to open a bank account for a few years now, and are currently in discussions with a Dutch bank, but this is our last hope, after this, if this doesn’t work, I don’t know what other options there will be...we mostly fund our activities through my personal finances and small donations we receive.” (IN24)

Additionally, shifts in donor priorities have impacted the sector: the reallocation of Dutch government funding from Syria-related initiatives to support for Ukraine has left many Syrian-led efforts under-resourced. This has particularly affected programming focused on gender and inclusion, which often relies on targeted donor support. These challenges underscore the need for more flexible and inclusive funding mechanisms to support diaspora-led civil society work.

Infrastructure and Access in Syria

Syrian diaspora organizations engaged in transnational work face considerable challenges related to infrastructure and access. Similar to experiences of Syrian diasporas in Germany, several groups highlight the severe lack of basic infrastructure in Syria, including electricity, water, medical equipment, and reliable transport routes, which significantly hampers their ability to deliver aid or implement development projects. In addition to these material constraints, logistical and security concerns—especially in areas under government control—pose serious risks to operations. These conditions make it difficult for diaspora actors to maintain consistent engagement on the ground, despite their strong commitment to supporting communities in Syria.

“We have an office in Syria that provides lessons and humanitarian support for those who need it...it’s very difficult for me to go there. A lot of airports are still closed, so I now travel through Iraq, which is expensive and there is a lot of security...for a while we collected clothing and items, we still do, to send to Syria, but sending trucks to Syria is extremely expensive...we hope the port will open soon.” (IN24)

Political and Bureaucratic Barriers in Syria and the Netherlands

Political and bureaucratic barriers further complicate the work of Syrian civil society actors. Religious and ethnic divisions, coupled with the absence of a functioning legal system, create an unstable environment for collaboration and implementation. Organizations also report difficulties in navigating relationships with the Syrian authorities, which remains under international sanctions and is viewed with scepticism by many in the diaspora. These factors contribute to a fragmented and cautious approach to engagement, where trust, legitimacy, and safety are ongoing concerns.

“A lot stills remains quite unclear in the Syrian context...there are not really clear communication lines between local and national government entities and the new governmental structure is also not really clear yet...remnants of the conflict remain [in certain areas] and so a lot will most likely remain unclear for a whole...” (IN23)

In the Netherlands, organizations experience complicated bureaucratic processes when attempting to officially register their organization. This often leads to organizations remaining informal and being excluded from funding opportunities, such as applying for subsidies. Additionally, a number of organizations also mentioned the political debate around migration, and the prevalent negative narratives that have existed surrounding asylum-seekers, in particular those with a Syrian nationality. It remains a sensitive topic in the Netherlands and as such, Syrian diaspora at times have felt isolated from the larger Dutch population, as well as stigmatized for their nationality and/or legal status. A number of interviewees also had the perception that due to a number of reasons, including the political sensitivity of the migration debate, a number of government funding streams for diaspora organizations have been cut in the past years, limiting

the funding sources for the organizations and causing competition between those who can apply, for the few funding sources that remain available. This in turn has also fed into a competitive environment for organizations and limits the potential for collaboration.

Gender-Specific Barriers

Some diaspora organizations have emphasized the importance of integrating gender-sensitive approaches into policies and programmes that aim to support migrant communities. One organization has called for the development of a national action plan to promote the inclusion of women, particularly in professional and technical fields. Another group has observed that women pursuing careers in engineering face more structural and societal barriers in the Netherlands than they did in their country of origin. These challenges may include limited access to professional networks, cultural expectations, and systemic biases within the labour market. The need for targeted support and inclusive strategies is seen as essential to ensuring that women can fully participate and thrive in their chosen professions.

“There are many widows, and orphans and injured children, and widows are in a very hard situation. Often, due to cultural expectations, men work and women are expected to stay home and are bound to being home...” (IN24)

“There remain limited opportunities for women and there is a big need for further advocacy and support...the dream would be to have a safe hub for female journalists and media personnel...the creation of a group that can support female journalists and human rights defenders and protect them...” (IN20)

Fragmentation and Limited Networks

Diaspora organizations have also raised concerns about the fragmentation within migrant communities, noting that the Syrian diaspora, while not as strictly as in Syria, often remain divided along lines of ethnicity, religion, or regional origin, even in the Netherlands. This segmentation can hinder collective action and reduce the effectiveness of community-based initiatives. While informal networks—such as WhatsApp groups among professionals, for example Syrian medical personnel living in the Netherlands and in other European countries — do exist and serve as valuable platforms for peer support and information exchange, formal collaboration between organizations remains limited. The lack of structured cooperation can impede efforts to build unified advocacy movements, share resources, and increase challenges to create an inclusive oversight of what diaspora organizations exist, what work they do, and whether they can complement each other’s work.

“Often the (ethnic, religious, etc.) divisions that exist within the community, are reflected in the diaspora abroad...there is a lot of rebuilding necessary in the Syrian context, as there was a big damage of trust between groups and the regime fostered distrust amongst the community and with the diaspora.” (SI6)

“Syrians remained Syrians...We like our culture, our norms and values, and what we did back in Syria, we often start doing here...we have become more direct though [after coming to the Netherlands].” (IN22)

5.4.3. Specific (Perceived) Challenges to Rebuild Syria

Infrastructure and Basic Services

Across the board, diaspora organizations agree that any meaningful reconstruction effort must begin with the restoration of essential infrastructure, including electricity, water, healthcare, and education. Health-focused groups are prioritizing the delivery of medical equipment and the training of local personnel to rebuild healthcare systems. Meanwhile, professionals in engineering are preparing to contribute to urban development and promote sustainable reconstruction practices. However, institutions working on governance and development have noted a persistent mismatch between the skills of returnees and the realities of the local infrastructure and labour market in Syria. This disconnect limits the impact of temporary return programmes and discourages long-term engagement, as many skilled individuals find few opportunities to apply their expertise effectively.

“In Syria, the hospitals have a lack of everything; medicines, equipment, technology...” (IN21)

“Infrastructure is a huge challenge...there is no electricity, sometimes only between 1-2 hours per day, there’s no water, no access to education [infrastructure]...it also depends on where you go...” (IN22)

Safety and Security

Safety remains a central concern for many diaspora members, particularly those from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds. Several organizations have reported that feelings of vulnerability persist, and fear of persecution continues to deter individuals from considering return. Human rights advocates have warned that returnees may still face arbitrary detention or worse, and that trust in local authorities remains extremely low. These security concerns not only affect individual decisions about return but also shape the broader willingness of diaspora communities to engage in reconstruction or reconciliation efforts.

“I think there are some safety concerns...there is an unsafe feeling, especially with the news from the last few days...there are tensions between different groups and people do not feel safe. Damascus is a safe place, so if I were to go back (temporarily), I would go there.” (IN22)

Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Rebuilding

A number of diaspora organizations have emphasized the importance of ensuring that rebuilding efforts are both inclusive and gender-sensitive. There is a strong call to empower women and to integrate the expertise of diaspora professionals into reconstruction processes. Some groups advocate for gender mainstreaming across key sectors such as the judiciary and media, aiming to promote equitable representation and access. Others are developing mentorship and knowledge-sharing initiatives to support women in technical and professional fields, recognizing the value of intergenerational and cross-border collaboration. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to rebuilding not just physical infrastructure, but also social systems that are fair and representative.

“There are limited opportunities for women and a big need for advocacy and further support...there needs to be a national action plan for Syria, 1325 action plan for Syria, and Syrian women need to be involved in the rebuilding...rebuilding efforts should be run from the ground up...Additionally, there should be a focus on incorporating women empower and inclusive practices in the judicial system, on all levels.” (IN20)

Diaspora Engagement

Diaspora communities are widely seen as essential contributors to Syria’s future reconstruction. Organizations working in human rights, healthcare, and engineering highlight the diaspora’s capacity, professional networks, and willingness to mobilize for future missions. Cultural and religious groups focus on maintaining ties with second-generation Syrians, ensuring that identity and heritage remain strong across generations. However, rebuilding trust remains a major challenge. Some institutions point to the legacy of division and misinformation fostered by the regime, which continues to affect diaspora cohesion. Practical barriers such as legal status, travel restrictions, and inadequate infrastructure further complicate return efforts. Many diaspora members remain hesitant to return, particularly if they lack social connections in the areas they would be sent to, underscoring the need for thoughtful and supportive reintegration strategies.

“The [perceived] unsafety of Syria remains...the economic situation in Syria is also very bad. The economy is bad, there is high inflation, prices are very high, it’s also very unstable...it makes it tricky for setting up initiatives and returning for a long time.” (IN22)

Government Distrust and Lack of Cooperation

Multiple organizations have expressed concern about the lack of institutional reform and the limited cooperation from government actors, which they see as critical barriers to effective reconstruction. Without clear legal frameworks and genuine government engagement, rebuilding efforts risk remaining fragmented and unsustainable. The relationship between local and national governance structures is described as unclear and underdeveloped, with no functioning social contract between citizens and the state. Local governments often feel sidelined or burdened by external interventions, which undermines their autonomy and capacity. Meanwhile, civil society organizations—despite being active and resilient—report a strained relationship with government institutions. Many fear co-optation and the erosion of their independence, which further complicates efforts to build trust and foster inclusive governance.

“There has been a big change in the narratives of organizations and their communications. More and more are merging with the government and adopting their communication and messaging, or changing their missions and activities to match government priorities to work for the government, as that is where the funding is...this has led to an uncertain and unbalanced situation, currently, whereby some Syrian organizations remained silent during some atrocities and that has left a mark [on the trust on these organizations and the government].” (IN25)

5.5 Aspirations and motivations for transnational engagement and potential (temporary) return

The IOM's recent 'Syrians Intention Survey', conducted between May and June 2025 in the Netherlands, provided insights into current aspirations of Syrians residing in the Netherlands for long-term return to Syria.

Short-Term Return Intentions

A small but significant group of Syrians in the Netherlands expressed intentions to return to Syria in the short term. This group is predominantly male (86%) and includes a higher proportion of older individuals (34%). Many belong to larger families (47% have four or more members) and are less likely to be part of split-family arrangements. The majority arrived before 2020 (83%) and are relatively well integrated into Dutch society—approximately 70 per cent hold Dutch citizenship, are employed, and provide financial support to extended family abroad.

Their motivations for return are primarily driven by pull factors in Syria, such as emotional attachment (64%), improved security (20%), and employment opportunities (19%). Notably, nearly one in five respondents (19%) cited challenges integrating into Dutch society. Many in this group have already taken concrete steps toward return, including saving money, preparing travel documents, and planning or conducting scoping visits. Most intend to return to their area of origin (73%), while others consider relocating to Damascus. Return is often planned in stages, with one family member going first (67%) or through split returns (43%).

Medium-to-Long-Term Return Intentions

The largest group surveyed consists of individuals considering return in the medium to long term. Their demographic profile is similar to the short-term returnees, though with slightly fewer males (78%) and older individuals (26%). Nearly half belong to large families and are less likely to be split. While still relatively rooted in the Netherlands, this group shows slightly lower levels of integration. Around 70 per cent arrived before 2020, and many are employed and support family abroad. Their hesitation to return is largely influenced by push factors in Syria, particularly the lack of safety (52%), as well as limited access to jobs, housing, and infrastructure. Additionally, 33 per cent of respondents cited the need to complete education as a reason for delaying return. The timing of their return is highly dependent on improvements in Syria, with 45 per cent indicating they would adjust their plans based on conditions in the country. Only 5 per cent reconsidering return within two years, while half are looking at a timeframe of two to five years or longer.

No Intention to Return

The second-largest group comprises individuals who do not intend to return to Syria. This group includes slightly more women (29%) and younger individuals (35%), with a higher prevalence of single persons (44%) and small families (24%). Many have split-family arrangements and are less integrated into Dutch society—63 per cent arrived after 2020, only 33% have citizenship, and over half (53%) are unemployed. Just 39 per cent provide financial support to family abroad.

While lack of safety in Syria remains the most cited reason for not returning (54%), pull factors in the Netherlands also play a significant role. About 23 percent of respondents mentioned better living conditions and opportunities in the Netherlands. This group appears particularly

vulnerable, with 21 per cent expressing fear of targeted violence in Syria, and others citing personal issues (9%) and distrust in the Syrian authorities (9%).

Residual Group

A smaller residual group of 63 respondents shows even greater vulnerability. This group includes a higher proportion of women (38%) and individuals aged 30–44 (59%). Like the non-returning group, they are more likely to be single (40%) or part of small families (24%), with 44 per cent living in split-family arrangements. Despite more than half having arrived before 2020 and holding citizenship, only 46 per cent are employed, indicating a significant lack of agency. Their indecision is shaped by a combination of push factors in Syria—such as insecurity (42%), lack of housing (32%), and limited job opportunities (27%)—and pull factors in the Netherlands, including better living conditions (23%). Additionally, 26 per cent reported that they or their family members need to complete education, further delaying return plans.

Existing and Potential Barriers to Return

In addition to exploring future intentions and related push and pull factors, the IOM survey investigated specific barriers that may hinder Syrians in the Netherlands from returning to Syria. These barriers span across housing, legal documentation, health, safety, and reintegration needs.

Housing emerged as a major concern among respondents: While 81 per cent previously owned a home in Syria, fewer than 30 per cent reported being able to live in those homes if they returned. The primary reason cited was home destruction (69%). Other contributing factors included changes in family composition—such as homes now being too small or belonging to other family members—and the sale of property (12%). Land ownership issues were less widespread but still significant. About 34 per cent of respondents previously owned land in Syria, yet only half could access or use it upon return. Barriers included damaged or absent infrastructure (20%), lack of documentation (13%), occupation of land (10%), and contamination (5%). Additionally, 20 per cent of respondents had sold their land.

Legal and administrative barriers also pose significant challenges: Approximately one in three respondents reported lacking identification documents issued by the Syrian authorities. A further 16 per cent cited missing other legal documents or unresolved legal issues that could impede their return. Nine per cent mentioned missing civil documentation such as birth or death certificates. Although less frequently reported, other issues included lack of recognition for marriages or divorces obtained abroad, child custody disputes, inheritance issues, legal problems with the former regime, and missing education certificates—each affecting around 1 per cent of respondents.

Health-related barriers were also prominent: Over one-third of respondents (36%) indicated that they or a family member suffer from a disability or chronic condition requiring ongoing medical care. Conditions mentioned included heart disease, autism, and epilepsy, highlighting the need for accessible and specialized healthcare services in Syria.

Personal safety remains a critical concern: Half of the respondents (447 individuals) expressed personal fears about returning, primarily related to their own safety or that of their families. These fears were often linked to the presence of armed groups in areas of origin, associated with

abductions, torture, and killings. Specific vulnerabilities were also reported: 11 per cent identified as ethno-religious minorities, 7 per cent as political dissidents or activists, 3 per cent had received direct threats, 2 per cent identified as LGBTQ, 2 per cent had issues with the current government, 1 per cent feared sectarian violence, and 1 per cent identified as fugitives from the former regime. It is likely that the actual number of individuals at risk is higher, given the sensitivity of these disclosures.

When asked about the most needed interventions to support return, respondents emphasized the importance of housing (54%) and employment support (53%). Legal assistance for housing, land, and property (HLP) issues was also frequently mentioned (41%), along with psychosocial support (36%) and reintegration support for children (26%). The latter includes educational assistance, curriculum equivalence, and Arabic language courses to facilitate reintegration into the Syrian education system.

Capacity and interest in participation in a potential Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) programme – Syrian diaspora organizations

A majority of the representatives from diaspora organizations interviewed indicated that there was an interest to participate in any TRQN programmes that were set up and had already been back to Syria themselves either in personal capacity or to monitor work being done on the ground in the name of their organization. This interest was especially strong among individuals and organizations that already maintain ties with Syria or have professional expertise relevant to reconstruction. However, the interest is often conditional and shaped by personal, logistical, and political factors.

Figure 17: number of individuals interviewed open to engaging in temporary return

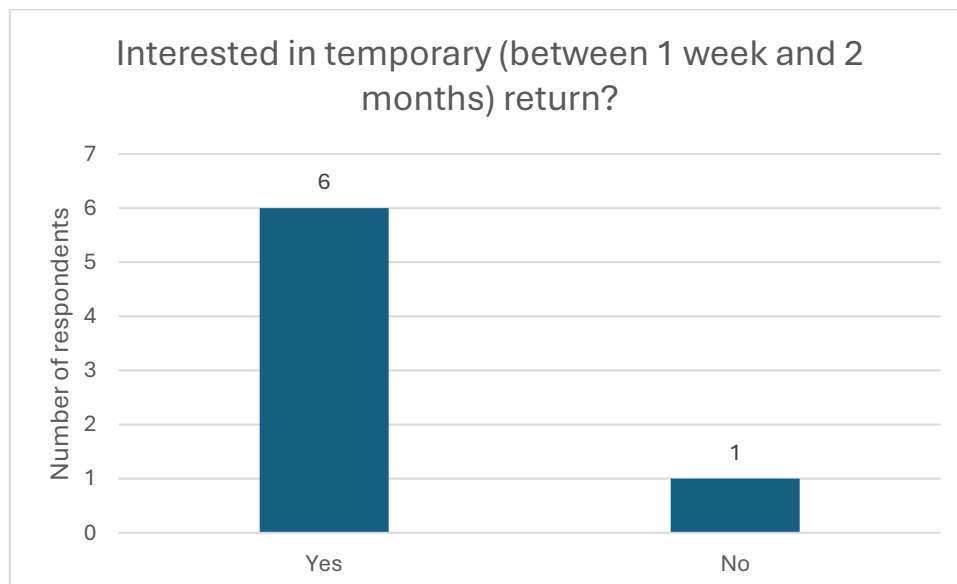
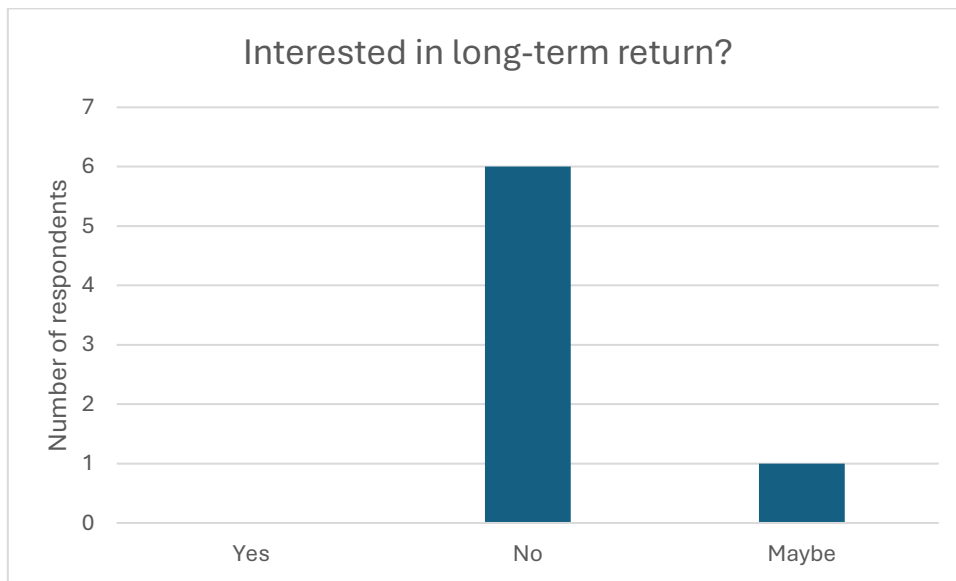


Figure 18: Individuals interested in long-term return



There were a small number of interviewees who indicated that they would not be willing nor interested in returning in a temporary capacity. This included representatives of minority religious communities, for fear of religious persecution and safety concerns.

There were a number of different reasons for this motivation to participate in a TRQN programme:

Several individuals expressed a clear willingness to return temporarily to Syria to contribute to humanitarian aid, training, or infrastructure development, as a way to share their knowledge collected over the years and provide direct help and support. A majority of the representatives spoken with are actively planning future missions to Syria this year still to support reconstruction and urban planning.

A number of diaspora organizations in the Netherlands already operate offices in Syria and have strong local networks, making temporary return more feasible and impactful. Additionally, earlier research and other stakeholder interviewees noted that many diaspora members feel a renewed sense of belonging and motivation to contribute to Syria's recovery, especially after years of activism and integration abroad.

Next to these motivations, there were a number of concerns that were noted that are currently, or will, create obstacles to participating in such a programme:

- Many respondents cited **poor infrastructure, lack of electricity and water, and ongoing safety risks** as major deterrents to return. Respondents cited unreliable electricity, limited access to clean water, and ongoing safety risks as major deterrents.
- There is also a widespread **lack of trust in local authorities**, which further discourages engagement. These conditions are particularly concerning for vulnerable groups, including minorities and women, for whom return is perceived as unsafe.
- **Travel to Syria is difficult and expensive**, with no direct flights and long overland routes.
- **Legal status in the Netherlands** (e.g. permanent residency or citizenship) affects the ability and willingness to return.

- Earlier research that stakeholders cited that returnees often face a **mismatch between their skills and the local job market or infrastructure** in Syria.
- Several organizations noted that **without financial and logistical support**, participation in TRQN would be difficult. They would need help with travel, accommodation, and coordination with local partners.

Elements discussed to consider for a TRQN programme design:

Short-term, mission-based engagement: Many respondents prefer short-term returns (e.g. 2–6 weeks) that can be integrated with their work in the Netherlands.

Focus on professional expertise: TRQN programmes could target professionals in medicine, engineering, education, and justice—fields where diaspora expertise is most needed.

Support for organizational legitimacy and networking: TRQN participation could help diaspora organizations build legitimacy and strengthen their networks, as noted by the Maastricht School of Governance.

Bottom-up initiatives as a priority: Noting the existing feelings of distrust and uncertainty amongst diaspora organizations, adopting a ‘people’ approach in the design of the programme would be beneficial. This could be done through co-creation with specific diaspora experts who have engaged in TRQN programmes before and diaspora academic specialists.

Area-based return strategy: Noted in a number of discussions, TRQN programmes could align with area-based return strategies, focusing on urban hubs like Aleppo and Damascus where infrastructure is being rebuilt. Aleppo remains one of the main areas that Syrians return to and where a number of initiatives are currently being targeted towards (interviews; Rijksoverheid, 2025).

Sector-specific focus and partnerships with private sector as well as public: for sustainable and impactful programming and noting the existing distrust amongst diaspora organizations towards Syrian authorities entities, partnerships with private sector entities or specific organizations (individuals, hospitals or local schools, for example) can be considered.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

6.3 Summary of the findings

The Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands represents a dynamic and engaged part of the broader European civil society landscape. Despite legal and financial obstacles—including EU sanctions and limited access to banking—Syrian organizations have managed to build informal networks and gradually professionalize. Their work spans a wide range of themes, including humanitarian aid, healthcare, women's empowerment, integration, justice, and reconstruction. Many operate through personal networks and WhatsApp groups, showing a strong willingness to contribute to Syria's rebuilding, provided safety and infrastructure conditions allow.

Similar patterns are observed in Germany, where the Syrian diaspora has grown significantly since 2011, now representing the third largest immigrant group. Civil society mobilization in Germany has evolved through key transformative moments: the 2011 revolution, the 2015–2016 refugee influx, and the fall of the Assad regime in 2024. These events have shaped a vibrant and diverse landscape of Syrian organizations, many of which are politically, socially, and culturally active. Organizations in Germany also face financial precarity, legal restrictions, and fragmentation, but have developed strong transnational networks and professionalized structures, particularly in sectors like healthcare, education, and justice.

The research shows growing interest among diaspora organizations in participating in a potential Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) programme. However, this interest is conditional, shaped by factors such as safety, trust in local authorities, and practical feasibility. Organizations emphasize the importance of bottom-up approaches, gender-inclusive strategies, and collaboration with local partners rather than government institutions. In the Netherlands, there is a preference for short, mission-based return options and support with logistics and funding. In Germany, similar aspirations for return exist, though most respondents emphasize temporary rather than permanent return. Emotional ties, professional engagement, and the desire to contribute to reconstruction motivate these aspirations. However, systemic barriers—such as lack of infrastructure, insecurity, and legal uncertainties—limit feasibility. Gendered and minority-specific risks, as well as shifting senses of belonging, further complicate return decisions.

The IOM DTM survey among Syrians in the Netherlands reveals a wide range of return intentions. A small group considers short-term return, often motivated by emotional ties and improved security in Syria. The largest group sees return as a medium- to long-term possibility, depending on developments in Syria. A significant portion has no intention to return, mainly due to safety concerns and better living conditions in the Netherlands. Key barriers include destroyed homes, missing documentation, health issues, and personal safety.

Syrian diaspora organizations in both the Netherlands and Germany face structural and political challenges that hinder their ability to contribute effectively to Syria's reconstruction. Financial constraints are among the most pressing issues, with many organizations struggling to open bank accounts due to EU sanctions. This limits access to formal funding channels and complicates administrative processes. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles in both host countries and Syria make it difficult for organizations to register officially, apply for subsidies, or coordinate cross-

border activities. Political sensitivities around migration and asylum also affect diaspora engagement. In both countries, diaspora organizations report feeling excluded from broader civil society networks, and divisions along ethnic, religious, or regional lines persist, mirroring the fragmentation seen in Syria. This limits the potential for unified advocacy and coordinated rebuilding efforts.

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for diaspora-led contributions to Syria's recovery. Many organizations maintain strong ties with communities in Syria and have already implemented humanitarian and development projects on the ground. Their grassroots approach—centered on listening to local needs and adapting programs accordingly—positions them well to lead sustainable and inclusive rebuilding efforts. Areas of particular promise include healthcare, education, engineering, and justice, where diaspora expertise can be mobilized through short-term missions, knowledge transfer, and mentorship. In Germany and the Netherlands, diaspora organizations have already conducted return missions, organized workshops on urban design, and supported the health sector through training and equipment donations. The fall of the Assad regime has sparked renewed energy and motivation to engage directly in Syria, though concerns about civic space, safety, and political legitimacy remain.

Moreover, diaspora organizations are increasingly advocating for gender-sensitive and inclusive rebuilding strategies. Their emphasis on empowering women, supporting vulnerable groups, and promoting transitional justice reflects a broader commitment to rebuilding not just infrastructure, but also social systems rooted in equity and accountability. With the right support—financial, logistical, and political—these organizations can play a transformative role in shaping Syria's future.

6.4 Recommendations

6.2.1. Recommendations on how to engage with and support the Syrian diaspora

Syrian diaspora organizations in Germany and in the Netherlands are deeply committed to their missions yet face tangible barriers that limit their growth and impact. Consultations with multiple groups revealed recurring needs and challenges across five key areas: financial and logistical support, capacity building, visibility and networking, legal advocacy, and potential collaboration with IOM.

- **Financial and Logistical Support**

Several organizations struggle with the financial and logistical demands of their work. Common challenges include the high costs of sending medical equipment and aid to Syria, difficulties in securing shipping routes, and restrictions on opening bank accounts due to sanctions. These financial constraints hinder their ability to receive formal donations, apply for legal status, and operate effectively.

- **Capacity Building and Organizational Development**

Newly established and grassroots organizations consistently emphasized the need for support in building internal capacity. This includes help with structuring operations, applying for subsidies, forming professional partnerships, and developing strategic plans. Additionally, seeing as the

majority of organizations are informal or have reported complicated processes to becoming formal organizations, there is a need to reflect on 1) how IOM could best support organizations in their journey to registering as official entities and/or 2) set up partnership with informal organizations, noting that an additional level of administrative reporting and support will most likely be needed. There is also a strong need for infrastructure, security, and sustainable funding to support safe spaces and long-term initiatives. Across the board, organizations expressed a desire for assistance with project planning, volunteer management, and fundraising.

- **Visibility and Networking**

Improving visibility and fostering connections are shared priorities. Many organizations wish to be more visible within German and Dutch societies and to connect with similar diaspora groups across Europe. There is also interest in strengthening ties with local institutions to expand integration and cultural exchange programmes. Enhanced networking opportunities are seen as essential for collaboration and mutual support.

- **Legal and Policy Advocacy**

Legal and policy advocacy is another area where support is needed. Organizations working on documentation and justice initiatives require access to policymakers and judicial institutions. Others call for advocacy around gender equity and the implementation of national action plans aligned with international frameworks. These efforts are crucial for ensuring that Syrian voices are represented in broader policy discussions.

- **Integrate mental health and psychosocial support into diaspora engagement efforts**

Many Syrians in the diaspora have experienced displacement, loss, and prolonged exposure to conflict-related trauma. These experiences shape their ability and willingness to engage in reconstruction and reconciliation processes. To build trust and foster meaningful participation, diaspora engagement strategies should include trauma-informed approaches and psychosocial support mechanisms. This not only acknowledges the emotional and psychological dimensions of diaspora involvement but also helps create safer, more empathetic spaces for dialogue and collaboration. By recognizing mental health as a foundational element of trust-building, governments and partners can strengthen diaspora resilience and ensure that engagement is both inclusive and sustainable.

Potential for Partnerships with IOM – what is needed?

Most organizations expressed openness, and in some cases enthusiasm, about potentially partnering with IOM in the future. They envision collaboration in several areas:

- **Strengthening financial capacity:** There is a strong interest in funding and resource mobilization to scale activities, especially those related to Syria. Organizations also advocate for long-term, flexible, and trust-based funding models that reduce administrative burdens and allow for more effective project implementation.
- **Capacity development and training:** IOM could support training initiatives for diaspora professionals, including workshops in medicine, engineering, media ethics, and organizational development. Additionally, many actors face emotional strain and burnout, particularly those in humanitarian and advocacy roles. Support for self- and collective care is seen as vital for sustaining engagement in Syria's rebuilding process.
- **Joint programming and project support:** Several groups are interested in co-developing programmes with IOM, including reconstruction missions and justice and protection initiatives. Locally, specifically in the Netherlands, there are opportunities for IOM to support integration and social cohesion efforts through cultural events, language programmes, and support for asylum-seekers.
- **Networking support:** Organizations value IOM's role in mapping diaspora actors and fostering collaboration. There is a desire for accessible platforms to connect with other diaspora organizations in the Netherlands, and also potentially broader, with organizations in other European countries. Additional support is needed for conflict transformation within diaspora communities and for creating networking opportunities with stakeholders both in residence countries and in Syria.
- **Advocacy and policy engagement:** Finally, organizations call on IOM to advocate for greater recognition of diaspora contributions in both residence countries and Syria. Raising awareness among policymakers about the role of diaspora organizations is seen as essential to strengthening their impact and legitimacy.

Recommendations for the Development of a Diaspora Engagement Strategy

Engaging diasporas for reconstruction and development is not a one-way process; governments must also recognise and respond to the needs and aspirations of diaspora communities. When governments place too much emphasis on obligations and the leverage of resources while neglecting rights, they risk undermining trust and sustainable diaspora involvement. Effective diaspora engagement strategies therefore require a comprehensive legal framework that not only regulates government action but is also designed with practical implementation in mind, ensuring the measures move beyond rhetoric and become operational realities (Ragab & Diker, 2021). While IOM (2021) offers concrete guidance on building trust, mobilizing resources and ensuring sustainability of diaspora engagement, these are following recommendations to be considered in the short-term:

- **Develop the diaspora engagement policy through a participatory, co-created process:** Past state–diaspora relations in the context of Syria were marked by repression and mistrust, which still shape origin-state diaspora dynamics. A joint design with diaspora actors, helps to ensure that legitimacy, ownership, and trust are built into it from the start. Formats such as structured consultation, working group committees and digital engagement platforms can facilitate the co-creation process.
- **Building trust based on an inclusive approach:** The Syrian diaspora civil society is highly diverse, politically active, and possesses expertise in areas such as health, education, justice, accountability, human rights, civil society, reconstruction, and culture. Many organizations have already engaged in knowledge transfer, advocacy, and professional networking. However, mistrust toward transitional authorities and risks of exclusion remain major obstacles. Respecting diversity within the diaspora (political views, generational differences, ethnic/religious backgrounds) by creating inclusive platforms and autonomous institutions is crucial to leverage the potential of the diaspora to tackle the various needs inside Syria.
- **Harness the diaspora potential for peacebuilding, justice and accountability and social cohesion:** Sectarianization, trauma, and mistrust pose a crucial challenge to Syria’s transition towards a just and peaceful society. Diaspora communities themselves have mirrored these fragmentations, but they also have demonstrated capacity to foster dialogue, cultural preservation, and rights-based advocacy. It is therefore crucial to consider diaspora-led initiatives in peacebuilding, transitional justice, and cultural heritage preservation as integral to reconstruction, and not as an afterthought.
- **Facilitate diaspora knowledge and skills transfer for reconstruction:** Syrian professionals and organizations in the diaspora (e.g., medical associations, urban planners, educators) have already engaged in capacity development, training, and knowledge-sharing. Many diaspora members express willingness to contribute through temporary return missions, but structural and security barriers hinder engagement. Instead of ad hoc exchanges, the transitional government should foster **sustained, institutionalized connections** that allow skills to flow both ways, and in a more coordinated way to ensure that aspirations of diaspora meet the needs on the ground in Syria.

6.2.2. Recommendations specific on enabling sustainable (temporary) return

Evaluations of IOM’s Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) and Connecting Diaspora for Development (CD4D) programmes have consistently shown that diaspora professionals can play a vital role in rebuilding priority sectors in their countries of origin. Participants in these programmes have demonstrated a high level of commitment and motivation, and their contributions have been warmly welcomed by host institutions and governments. Their expertise, particularly in training and capacity building, has been recognized as a valuable asset for institutional development. Experience from these programmes highlights the importance of tailoring diaspora engagement strategies to the specific context of each country. In the case of Syria, this means acknowledging the challenges of operating in a fragile state and designing interventions that reflect the availability of qualified diaspora professionals and the country’s

sectoral priorities. A focused approach, targeting a limited number of sectors and institutions, can help ensure deeper, more sustainable impact.

For specifically the Syrian context, flexible assignment models, including short-term in-person missions combined with virtual engagements, have proven effective in maintaining continuity and expanding reach. When supported by reliable internet infrastructure, online coaching and training can complement physical assignments, while exchange visits to the Netherlands for Syrian institutional staff can further strengthen bilateral cooperation. Digital tools, including social media, have also played a key role in outreach and network-building among diaspora communities and stakeholders. To maximize the effectiveness of a Syria-specific programme, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential. These should be grounded in a clear Theory of Change for each participating institution, enabling better assessment of outcomes and long-term impact. Finally, tailored preparation of diaspora participants, aligned with the needs of host institutions and local realities, adds significant value to their assignments and enhances the overall success of the programme.

Syrian diaspora organizations in the Netherlands and Germany have expressed strong interest in contributing to Syria's reconstruction through temporary return. However, enabling such engagement requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses legal, logistical, financial, and political barriers. The following recommendations are based on consultations with diaspora actors and reflect their priorities and concerns.

- **Advocacy and policy engagement for safe, dignified and rights-based return and reintegration:** The return of Syrian refugees is high on the political agenda both in the Netherlands and Germany. Advocacy and policy engagement with governments in the Netherlands and Germany should ensure that political decisions on return are informed by accurate assessments of conditions in Syria and the needs of returnees. Other advocacy priorities are the upholding non-refoulement principles and preventing the withdrawal of protection status for short-term visits.
- **Financial and technical support of temporary return:** Temporary return missions require practical support to be feasible. This includes covering travel costs, accommodation, and logistical coordination inside Syria. Matching diaspora professionals with Syrian institutions and organizations is essential to ensure that their expertise is effectively utilized. Without financial and technical backing, many diaspora actors will be unable to participate, despite their willingness.
- **Co-creation with diaspora organizations:** Any temporary return programme should be co-designed with diaspora organizations to ensure relevance, ownership, and sustainability. These groups possess deep contextual knowledge and maintain strong networks in Syria. Their involvement in programme design will help tailor interventions to local realities and build trust among participants.
- **Targeted support in specific geographic areas:** Area-based approaches, such as focusing on urban hubs like Aleppo and Damascus, can enhance the impact of temporary return initiatives. These regions are already receiving attention for reconstruction and are more likely to offer the infrastructure and safety needed for short-term missions. Targeted support should include coordination with local authorities and civil society actors.

- **Set up collaborations between diaspora organizations in different European countries for potential temporary:** Cross-border collaboration between Syrian diaspora organizations in different European countries can strengthen networks, share resources, and increase impact. Joint missions, knowledge exchange, and coordinated advocacy can help build a unified approach to reconstruction and return.
- **Short-term temporary return assignments are preferred:** Most diaspora actors prefer short-term assignments ranging from 2–6 weeks, with some open to stays of 1–3 months. These durations allow professionals to contribute meaningfully while maintaining their responsibilities in Europe. Flexibility in assignment length and timing is key to enabling broad participation.

References

- Adamson, F. B. (2008). Constructing the diaspora: Diaspora identity politics and transnational social movements. Annual Meeting of the ISA's 49 Annual Convention., San Francisco, CA.
- Ahmed, D. R., Kar, S. K., Heun, R., Hraib, M., & Deeb, C. A. (2025). Rebuilding Syria's mental health system after decades of war. *The Lancet*, 405(10489), 1575.
- Al-Ali, N., Black, R., & Koser, K. (2001). The limits to 'transnationalism': Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in Europe as emerging transnational communities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24(4), 578–600.
- Ali, A. (2019). On the Need to Shape the Arab Exile Body in Berlin. *dis:orient*. <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/need-shape-arab-exile-body-berlin>
- Al Husein, N., & Wagner, N. (2023). Determinants of Intended Return Migration among Refugees: A Comparison of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Turkey. *International Migration Review*, 57(4), 1771–1805.
- Ang, I. (2003). Together-in-difference: Beyond diaspora, into hybridity. *Asian Studies Review*, 27(2), 141–154.
- BAMF. (2024). Lage in Syrien: Temporärer Verfahrensaufschub für Asylanträge. BAMF - Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. <https://www.BAMF.de/SharedDocs/Meldungen/DE/2024/241220-syrien-verfahrensaufschub.html?nn=282388>
- Bank. (2018). Remaking a world: Recently displaced artists from Syria in Berlin. *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal*, 4, 171–182.
- Baser, B. (2014). The Awakening of a Latent Diaspora: The Political Mobilization of First and Second Generation Turkish Migrants in Sweden. *Ethnopolitics*, 13(4), 355–376.
- BMI. (2017). Aufgaben der Abteilung M. Bundesministerium Des Innern. http://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/Ministerium/Struktur-Abteilungen/Aufgaben-Abteilung-M/aufgaben-abteilung-m_node.html
- BMI. (2025). Sicherheit, Stabilisierung und Rückkehrperspektiven für syrische Flüchtlinge. Bundesministerium des Inneren. <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2025/04/syrien.html?nn=10001204>
- Brücker, Herbert, Maye Ehab, Andreas Hauptmann, Philipp Jaschke, Maria Theresa Koch & Yuliya Kosyakova (2024). Syrische Arbeitskräfte in Deutschland. (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung. Aktuelle Daten und Indikatoren), Nürnberg, 16 S.
- Burgess, K. (2014). Unpacking the Diaspora Channel in New Democracies: When Do Migrants Act Politically Back Home? *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 49(1), 13–43.
- Bush, K. (2008). Diaspora Engagement in Peacebuilding. Empirical and Theoretical Challenges. In M. C. Pugh, N. Cooper, & M. Turner (Eds), *Whose peace?: Critical perspectives on the political economy of peacebuilding* (pp. 191–205). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. (2024). *Integratie en Samenleven: 2024*. 22 November 2024. [Report on Integration and Society, 2024 | CBS](#)
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS). (2025a). *Halvering aantal asielzoekers in eerste kwartaal 2025*. 29 April 2025. [Halvering aantal asielverzoeken in eerste kwartaal 2025 | CBS](#)
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS). (2025b). *Cohortstudie asielzoekers en statushouders: Asielaanvraag en opvang 2025*. [Asielaanvraag en opvang - Asiel en integratie 2025 | CBS](#)
- Chaudhary, A. R., & Moss, D. M. (2016). Triadic political opportunity structures: Re-conceptualising immigrant transnational politics (No. Paper 129; IMI Working Papers). International Migration Institute (IMI), Oxford Department of International Development (QEH), University of Oxford.
- Cochrane, F., Baser, B., & Swain, A. (2009). Home Thoughts from Abroad: Diasporas and Peace-Building in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32(8), 681–704.
- Cohen, R. (2008). *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (2 edition). Routledge.
- Cohen, R., & Kennedy, P. M. (2013). *Global sociology* (Third Edition). NYU Press.
- Dutch News. (2025). 'Court forces Syria report release, warns of "fragile" situation'. 7 June 2025. [Court forces Syria report release, warns of "fragile" situation - DutchNews.nl](#)
- European Migration Network (EMN). (2016). *Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission in the Netherlands: Policy and Practices*. December 2016. [2016-Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission - Netherlands.pdf](#)
- Giugni, M., & Passy, F. (2004). Migrant mobilization between political institutions and citizenship regimes: A comparison of France and Switzerland. *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(1),
- GIZ. (2024). Shaping Development-Oriented Migration. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2023-en-Shaping-Development-Oriented-Migration.pdf>
- Glick Schiller, N. (2013). Transnational Migration Paradigm: Global Perspectives on Migration Research. In D. Halm & Z. Sezgin (Eds), *Migration and organized civil society: Rethinking national policy*. Routledge.
- Hammond, L., Awad, M., Ibrahim Dagane, A., Hansen, P., Horst, C., Menkhaus, K., & Obare, L. (2011). *Cash & Compassion: The Somali Diaspora's Role in Relief, Development & Peacebuilding* [Other]. <http://www.so.undp.org>
- Hess, M., & Korf, B. (2014). Tamil diaspora and the political spaces of second-generation activism in Switzerland. *Global Networks*, 14(4), 419–437.
- Horst, C. (2018). Making a difference in Mogadishu? Experiences of multi-sited embeddedness among diaspora youth. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(8), 1341–1356.
- Hunger, U., Kröger, J., & Stiller, M. (2017). Die syrische Diaspora-Community in Deutschland. Umfang, Formen und Gründe des freiwilligen Engagements (Zivilgesellschaft in Zahlen ZIVIZ).

- Immigratie en Naturalisatie Dienst (IND). (2025). 'IND resumes processing Syrian asylum applications'. 12 June 2025. [IND resumes processing Syrian asylum applications | IND](#)
- IOM (2021). Maximizing Diaspora Engagement: Building Trust, Mobilizing Resources and Ensuring Sustainability. Insights and Reflections Paper <https://publications.iom.int/books/virtual-exchanges-maximizing-diaspora-engagement-building-trust-mobilizing-resources-and>
- Jörum, E. L. (2015). Repression across borders: Homeland response to anti-regime mobilization among Syrians in Sweden. *Diaspora Studies*, 8(2), 104–119.
- Kadhun, O. (2014). Diaspora Mobilisation and Belonging in the UK: The Case of the Iraqi Diaspora in the Aftermath of the 2003 Intervention. In Dialogue Society (Ed.), Workshop Proceedings: Sense of Belonging in a Diverse Britain (pp. 105–128).
- Kaya, S., & Orchard, P. (2020). Prospects of Return: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Germany. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 18(1), 95–112.
- Khayati, K. (2012). Diaspora as an instance of global governance: The case of Kurds in Sweden (pp. 181–185). Uppsala Centre for Sustainable Development, Uppsala University. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A646047&dswid=282>
- Kleist, N. (2015). Diaspora organisations as development actors. *The New Europeans*, 5.
- Koinova, M. (2011). Diasporas and secessionist conflicts: The mobilization of the Armenian, Albanian and Chechen diasporas. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34(2), 333–356.
- Koinova, M. (2012). Four Types of Diaspora Mobilization: Albanian Diaspora Activism For Kosovo Independence in the US and the UK. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, n/a-n/a.
- Koinova, M. (2014). Why do conflict-generated diasporas pursue sovereignty-based claims through state-based or transnational channels? Armenian, Albanian and Palestinian diasporas in the UK compared. *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(4), 1043–1071.
- Koopmans, R. (2004). Migrant mobilisation and political opportunities: Variation among German cities and a comparison with the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30(3), 449–470.
- Lyons, T., & Mandaville, P. (2010). Think Locally, Act Globally: Toward a Transnational Comparative Politics. *International Political Sociology*, 4, 121–141.
- Lubbers, M., & de Valk, H. A. G. (2020). Demographic Profile of Syrians in the Netherlands. In E. D. Carlson, & N. E. Williams (Eds.), *Comparative Demography of the Syrian Diaspora: European and Middle Eastern Destinations* (pp. 261-280). (European Studies of Population; Vol. 20). Springer.
- Ministry of Asylum and Migration. (2025). 'Brief regering – Landenbeleid Syrië'. Letter submitted by the Minister of Asylum and Migration, D.M. van Weel. 10 June 2025. [Vreemdelingenbeleid | Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal](#)

- Moss, D. M. (2016). Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of The Arab Spring. *Social Problems*, 63(4), 480–498.
- Müller-Funk, L., & Fransen, S. (2023). 'I Will Return Strong': The Role of Life Aspirations in Refugees' Return Aspirations. *International Migration Review*, 57(4), 1739–1770.
- Østergaard-Nielsen, E. (2003). The Politics of Migrants' Transnational Political Practices. *International Migration Review*, 37(3), 760–786.
- Popp, K., & Friedrichs, N. (2025). Diaspora und mehr. Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement afghanischer und syrischer Communitys in Deutschland. (SVR-Studie 2025-2).
- Qayyum, M. (2011). Syrian Diaspora: Cultivating a New Public Space Consciousness (Policy Brief No. No. 35). Middle East Institute.
- Quinsaat, S. M. (2019). Diasporas as social movements? In R. Cohen & C. Fischer (Eds), *Routledge handbook of diaspora studies* (pp. 93–104). Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Ragab, N.J. & Diker, E. (2021). Diaspora Legislation and Engagement Policies in Lebanon, India, Ireland and Italy.
https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/57366/file/Diaspora%2520Policies_WEB.pdf
- Ragab, N. J. (2020). Diaspora mobilisation in a conflict setting: The emergence and trajectories of Syrian Diaspora Mobilisation in Germany. Boekenplan.
- Ragab, N. J., & Katbeh, A. (2017). Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe - Mapping their engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
[drc-diaspora-programme_study_syrian-diaspora-groups-in-europe_web.pdf](https://www.drc-diaspora-programme_study_syrian-diaspora-groups-in-europe_web.pdf)
- Rijksoverheid. (2025). *Verbonden en Veerkrachtig – De Dynamiek tussen gemeenschappen en hun land van herkomst*. Labyrinth and Verwey Jonker Instituut. 4 February 2025. [Verbonden en Veerkrachtig - De dynamiek tussen gemeenschappen en hun land van herkomst | Rapport | Rijksoverheid.nl](https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/verbonden-en-veerkrachtig-de-dynamiek-tussen-gemeenschappen-en-hun-land-van-herkomst-rapport)
- Sinatti, G., & Horst, C. (2015). Migrants as agents of development: Diaspora engagement discourse and practice in Europe. *Ethnicities*, 15(1), 134–152.
- Skrbis, Z. (2007). The mobilized Croatian diaspora: Its role in homeland politics and war. In H. Smith & P. B. Stares (Eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers?* (pp. 218–238). United Nations University Press.
- Smith, H. (2007). Diasporas in international conflict. In H. Smith & P. B. Stares (Eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers?* (pp. 3–16). United Nations University Press.
- Sökefeld, M. (2006). Mobilizing in transnational space: A social movement approach to the formation of diaspora. *Global Networks*, 6(3), 265–284.
- Statistisches Bundesamt. (2016). Statistische Daten zu Flüchtlingen—Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis).
<https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Querschnitt/Fluechtlinge/Fluechtlinge.html>

- Statistisches Bundesamt. (2018). Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit. Ausländische Bevölkerung- Ergebnisse des Ausländerzentralregisters 2017 (Fachserie 1 Reihe 2). Statistisches Bundesamt,.
- Statistisches Bundesamt. (2025a). Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund [Data set]. https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/_publikationen-innen-migrationshintergrund.html
- Statistisches Bundesamt. (2025b). Statistischer Bericht—Ausländische Bevölkerung 2024 [Data set]. <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/statistischer-bericht-auslaend-bevoelkerung-2010200247005.html?templateQueryString=alter+mehrfacher+in+schweden>
- Tuzi, I., & Omran, L. (2025). Bridging Struggles Across Borders. <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2025/03/27/bridging-struggles-across-borders/>
- Unicomb, M. (2022). Berlin: Inside Europe's capital of Arab culture. Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/berlin-germany-europe-capital-arab-culture>
- Warnecke, A. (2010). Diaspora and peace: A comparative assessment of Somali and Ethiopian communities in Europe. [University of Jyväskylä], Diaspeace Project. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/36876>
- Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum (WODC). (2023). *Navigeren in een nieuwe samenleving: De ontwikkeling van de positie en leefsituatie van Syrische Nederlanders*. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam and Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu. [Navigeren in een nieuwe samenleving: de ontwikkeling van de positie en leefsituatie van Syrische Nederlanders](#)

Appendix A – Resources for diaspora actors

Name	Objectives	Link
Plattform Neuanfang Syrien (BMZ)	Aims to connect interested private individuals and representatives from civil society, local authorities, academia and business and provide information about Germany's development policy engagement for and in Syria.	https://www.bmz.de/de/neuanfang-syrien
Deutsch-syrische Klinikpartnerschaften (BMZ/GIZ)	Aimed at funding partnerships between German non-profit healthcare institutions or non-governmental organizations and Syrian partner institutions in the healthcare sector. In order to implement needs-oriented hospital partnerships in Syria, a focus is placed on the expertise and network of the Syrian medical diaspora working in Germany.	https://klinikpartnerschaften.de/kp-in-syrien
EZ-Kleinprojektefonds (Stiftung Nord-Süd Brücken/Schmitz Stiftungen)	Supports projects in the Global South with an amount of up to 50,000 euros.	https://www.kleinprojektefonds.de/
Bengo (Engagement Global)	Advice centre for questions relating to development project work in countries of the Global South. The program supports NGOs in all phases of a project - in the run-up, during the application process, during project implementation and after completion of the project.	https://bengo.engagement-global.de/
Förderdatenbank des Bundes	Provides an overview of federal, state and European Union funding programs.	https://www.foerderdatenbank.de/
iDiaspora (IOM)	Provides a platform for diaspora actors to share their voices, to gain knowledge, and to engage with the global community committed to the importance of diaspora.	https://www.idiaspora.org/en
European Union Global Diaspora Facility - EUDIF (ICMPD)	Seeks to consolidate knowledge and action to address the fragmentation of diaspora engagement for development. The initiative assists diaspora organizations in Europe, countries of origin and the EU to engage and collaborate more effectively with each other on development issues	https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/
Diaspora Toolkit Series (DRC)	Intends to offer practical tools and guidance to diaspora actors in different areas: Diaspora Fundraising, Community Outreach, Networking and Alliances Building, Advocacy and Diaspora Feminist Organizing.	https://drc.ngo/resources/documents/toolkits-for-diaspora-organizations/