



Arab
Reform
Initiative

THE NEW ARAB DIASPORA SERIES

ORGANIZING IN EXILE:
*DYNAMICS OF MOBILIZATION
AND ENGAGEMENT OF NEW ARAB
DIASPORAS*

Edited by
Sarah Anne Rennick

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sarah Anne Rennick is Deputy Director at the Arab Reform Initiative.

Oula Kadhum is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Birmingham. Her research explores diaspora politics and transnationalism between Europe and the Middle East.

Houda Mzioudet is a freelance journalist, commentator, and researcher on Libyan and Tunisian affairs. She is also studying political science at University of Toronto.

Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

© 2021 Arab Reform Initiative. All Rights Reserved.



This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

JULY 2021

Table of contents

1 ***Introduction: What Is New about Post-2011 MENA
Diasporas?***

Sarah Anne Rennick

7 ***The UK Iraqi Diaspora and their Mobilization towards
Iraq:***

Oula Kadhum

15 ***Straddling Liminality and Active Engagement:
Understanding Mobilization Patterns of the Libyan Diaspora***

Houda Mzioudet

23 ***The Long Shadow of War: Mobilization Dynamics of the
Yemeni Diaspora since 2011***

Maysaa Jusha Al Deen

Introduction:

What Is New about Post-2011 MENA Diasporas?

Sarah Anne Rennick

The phenomenon of mobilization among the diasporas emanating from the MENA region is in many ways not new. Historic diasporas communities, such as the [Armenian](#), [Palestinian](#), [Kurdish](#), and [Lebanese](#), have existed for multiple decades, and their contributions to their homelands has been both documented in the literature and promoted by policymakers and development organizations alike. This includes both the economic impact of MENA diasporas and the critical importance of financial remittances to supporting development and growth back home,¹ but also various forms of political mobilization that have been undertaken by diasporic communities for the purpose of contributing to nation/state-building² and recognition processes³ or, under certain conditions, contesting homeland regimes.⁴ In this vein, much of the literature has focused on more traditional forms of diaspora political mobilization,⁵ including lobbying and advocacy work designed to shape international public opinion and pressure foreign governments. The idea that Arab diaspora communities can be viewed not only as an economic actor but also, potentially, a political one is not in itself new. Yet, much of this literature on Arab diasporas has been focused on unidirectional flow of remittance – from those in diaspora back to the homeland. Likewise, the view of diaspora communities as either a resource to be harnessed or a threat to be contained has been largely informed by the political and geopolitical realities of host and home states.⁶

Our observations of diaspora political mobilization dynamics and the role that Arab diasporas can play in shaping homeland politics have been enlarged since 2011. Over the last decade, the many political, social, and economic upheavals that have transpired in the region – spanning national uprisings challenging the existing order, deepened authoritarianism and the closure of civic space, economic collapse and the undermining of collective morale, and the onset of violent intractable conflict – have produced multiple waves of migration of those seeking safe harbour abroad.⁷ While the image of Syrian migrants partaking in dangerous journeys to reach European shores dominates the popular narrative, the reality of this exodus from the Arab region over the last decade is much more complex.⁸ Indeed, what has evolved in the post-2011 period are Arab diaspora communities that have different and more diverse socio-political profiles from earlier epochs, with different degrees of attachment, identification to, and engagement with their homeland – both among new arrivals but also, importantly, those who have long since been in diaspora or who are second or third generation abroad. These Arab diaspora communities have also seen increased dispersal in terms of

the geographic locations of resettlement, including both the enlargement and heterogenization of existing host sites but also the emergence of new destinations.

Alongside these transformations in the profiles and locations of these Arab diasporas has been the emergence of new forms of political remittances, involving the transfer of political ideas, norms, and practices in multi-directional flows that challenge the state-bounded concept of transnational politics.⁹ These new political remittances and forms of diaspora community organization and mobilization are in many cases actively seeking to make substantive changes to homeland politics and to respond to the cascading crises at home. Yet in other cases, they are instead efforts on the parts of diaspora members to navigate the liminal and uncertain status of being caught somewhere along the spectrum of “here” and/or “there.”

1 See for example Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, ed, *Diasporas and Development: Exploring the Potential*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008; Mariem Mezghenni Malouche, Sonia Plaza, and Fanny Salsac, “Mobilizing the Middle East and North Africa Diaspora for Economic Integration and Entrepreneurship”, World Bank, 2016.

2 See for example Eva Pfösti, “Diasporas as Political Actors: The Case of the Amazigh Diaspora”, In Peter Seeberg and Zaid Eyadat (eds) *Migration, Security, and Citizenship in the Middle East*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Jennifer Skulte-Ouiass and Paul Tabar, “Strong in their Weakness or Weak in their Strength: The Case of Lebanese Diaspora Engagement with Lebanon”, *Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora* 33(2), 2015; Stephen Syrett and Janroj Yilmaz Keles, “Diasporas, Agency, and Enterprise in Settlement and Homeland Contexts: Politicised Entrepreneurship in the Kurdish Diaspora”, *Political Geography* 73, 2019; Maria Koinova, *Diaspora Mobilization for Palestinian Statehood*, In M. Koinova *Diaspora Entrepreneurs and Contested States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021;

3 See for example Ofra Bengio and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, “Mobilised Diasporas: Kurdish and Berber Movements in Comparative Perspective”, *Kurdish Studies* 1(1), 2013; Maria Koinova, “Diaspora Coalition-Building for Genocide Recognition: Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29(11), 2019.

4 For more on conditions under which diasporas subject to transnational repression mobilize against authoritarian regimes, see Dana M. Moss, “Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of The Arab Spring”, *Social Problems* 63(4), 2016; Dara Conduit, “Authoritarian Power in Space, Time and Exile”, *Political Geography* 82, 2020.

5 Benedict Anderson, “Long Distance Nationalism”, In *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, London: Verso, 1998

6 Bahar Basar and Amira Halperin, “Diasporas from the Middle East: Displacement, Transnational Identities and Homeland Politics”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 46 No. 2, 2019; Elise Féron and Bruno Lefort, “Diasporas and Conflicts: Understanding the Nexus”, *Diaspora Studies* 12(1), 2019.

7 Philippe Fargues, “Mass Migration and Uprisings in Arab Countries: An Analytical Framework”, *International Policy Development* 7, 2017.

8 See also Claire Beaugrand and Vincent Geisser, “Social Mobilization and Political Participation in the Diaspora during the Arab Spring”, *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* Vol. 14 No. 3, 2016.

9 Melissa Finn and Bessma Momani, “Established and Emergent Political Subjectivities in Circular Human Geographies: Transnational Arab Activists”, *Citizenship Studies* 21(1), 2017; Félix Krawatzek and Léa Müller-Funk, “Two Centuries of Flow between ‘Here’ and ‘There’: Political Remittances and their Transformative Potential”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46(6), 2020.

This collection of studies, written by Oula Kadhum, Houda Mzioudet, and Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, seeks to investigate more closely these transformations within Arab diasporas in the post-2011, and to shed light onto what is actually “new” about them. Through three in-depth case studies looking at Iraqi, Libyan, and Yemeni communities in different locations abroad, the studies presented here assess the transformations within these diasporas in terms of profiles of members and locations of exile and how conflict dynamics at home inform not only patterns of migration but also relationships within diaspora communities themselves. The studies also expose new forms and directional flows of political remittances that are taking place, and the various factors that mediate the act of remitting politically. This includes assessing how political identity is formed/transformed through the experience of exile and observation of conflict dynamics from quite different external vantage points, as well as the impact of multiple and overlaying political opportunity structures. Finally, the studies shed light on the impact of these political remittances and offer an assessment of the opportunities and constraints that these new Iraqi, Libyan, and Yemeni diasporas face in their own efforts to contribute to rebuilding, reconstructing, and re-imagining their homelands.

DIVERSIFICATION IN DIASPORA PROFILES AND GEOGRAPHIES

The studies in this collection explore different waves of migration and diaspora formation emanating from Iraq, Libya, and Yemen over the past tumultuous decade, considering in particular how the evolution of conflict at home impacted who leaves when. At the same time, the studies also explore how conflict but also revolutionary and pro-change dynamics in the homeland have impacted those who were already in diaspora prior to 2011. One trend that can be observed across the studies is the increased diversification in terms of the political leanings and profiles of those in diaspora, as well as the diversification in terms of geographic distribution and destination. All three countries under investigation here were endowed with important and historical diasporas prior to 2011, and in all three cases large diaspora communities could be found in certain key locations. These include the UK and US, where important diaspora populations have long been located, as well as destinations easily accessible and welcoming within the MENA region, including Tunisia, Egypt, and Gulf countries. While for all three countries diaspora groups held heterogeneous political leanings and by no means constituted a “unified” political force, the onset of new conflict and social mobilization dynamics at home has translated to increasing diversification within the political profiles of those in diaspora. In Libya, for example, the political profile of the diaspora from the 1970s onward was largely composed of dissidents to the Gaddafi regime,¹⁰ and although

internally diverse in terms of socioeconomic background and position in the political spectrum, opposition to the Gaddafi regime remained a point in common. Likewise, the Iraqi diaspora during the period prior to 2003 was in large part composed of those excluded by or opposing the Saddam regime and was subsequently marked by political leanings in line with the ethno-sectarian divides as per the post-2003 political order.¹¹ With regards to the Yemeni diaspora, though its political profile showed diversity as a result of multiple waves of internal conflict the country had experienced prior to 2011, the efforts by political elites to impose their political ideologies on diaspora members created a certain reproduction of existing positions.¹²

In the three studies presented here, the authors demonstrate how the new waves of diaspora set off by the events over the past decade, as well as observation of these dynamics from those already in diaspora, have been accompanied by a multiplication of political leanings. Houda Mzioudet, for example, demonstrates how the uprising of 2011 and initial transition process in Libya led to a rapid departure of Gaddafi loyalists, followed in 2014 by an increasing departure of pro-revolutionary activists either too disappointed with the onset of war or indeed forced into exile because of counter-revolutionary political repression at home. In this way, it was not one but rather a series of departures from Libya, resulting from conflict dynamics at home, that led to increased diversity in terms of political affiliations and ideological leanings of those in diaspora. Likewise, Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen demonstrates how Yemeni diaspora communities have become both more politicized and more politically diverse as a result of dynamics since 2011 and in particular the intensification of conflict since 2015. As she explains, the mass displacement of Yemenis to cities such as Cairo has been characterized by the influx of political elites, journalists, and intellectuals, representing in part pro-revolution forces that carry a political vision for change born out of the post-2011 context. At the same time, the Yemeni diaspora today also reflects the political fragmentation of the Yemeni political arena, moving beyond the North vs. South divides of the pre-2011 period to include diaspora members with strong political leanings towards Islah as well as other regional affiliations such as Hadramout. And in her study detailing the transformations within the UK-based Iraqi diaspora over the past several decades, Oula Kadhum reveals how recent dynamics have led to the manifestation of new political positions, including new anti-sectarian political leanings and affiliations with youth civil movements demanding a restructuring of the political order, as well as a unified political position against ISIS following the 2014 take-over of Mosul. As she explains, these dynamics break with the traditional ethno-sectarian political divides that had marked diaspora profiles in the post-2003 period.

¹⁰ Alice Alunni, “Long-Distance Nationalism and Belonging in the Libyan Diaspora (1969-2011)”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46 No.2, 2019.

¹¹ Oula Kadhum, “Ethno-Sectarianism in Iraq, Diaspora Positionality, and Political Transnationalism”, *Global Networks* Vol 19. No.2, 2019.

¹² Mohammed Sharqawi, “Dire et faire communauté en diaspora. Le cas de l’immigration yéménite en Angleterre (1950-2015)”, *Unpublished Dissertation, Paris: Ecoles de hautes études en sciences sociales*, 2020.

Alongside this increased diversification in political leanings has been new geographical distribution of diasporic communities and groups. All three studies reveal that places where diasporas already existed – London, Cairo, Tunis, among others – continued to be important destinations for new arrivals in the post-2011. Indeed, the facility of re-installation in such places, due to the existence of a local community already installed or the historic ties binding sites, served as major factors attracting further diaspora resettlement. For example, the ease and familiarity of cities such as Tunis for Libyans and Cairo for Yemenis, where visa regulations are lax and where long-standing patterns of circularity had forged pre-existing links between host and home locations, served to attract new arrivals in heretofore unseen numbers. Yet the studies also show new locations where Iraqis, Libyans, and Yemenis are settling in either permanent or semi-permanent fashions and forming diaspora communities. Turkey, for example, has become a new destination for Yemenis and in particular students seeking study abroad opportunities as well as businessmen. Likewise, the studies on the Iraqi and Libyan diasporas both allude to new trends of diffusion across Europe in the last decade,¹³ breaking with previous patterns of family chain migration but nonetheless leading to diaspora formation (and not simply irregular migration) thanks to transnational connections through activist networks and virtual spaces.

As the studies reveal, and in line with findings elsewhere,¹⁴ conflict dynamics at home follow those in diaspora and become reflected in social divisions and lack of trust between members of a diaspora community, broken down along conflict lines (be they regional, ethno-sectarian, or other). The studies presented here on the Iraqi and Yemeni cases, for example, both depict how the outbreak of new conflicts since 2011 has led to deteriorating levels of trust and social interaction within diaspora communities long-since settled in the UK. In both cases, this breakdown in trust and everyday social mixing reflects the lines of tension in the homeland. In this way, Sunni and Shia Iraqi communities in the UK find themselves not only living apart but even largely unaware of one another's existence. Likewise Northern Yemenis and Southern Yemenis, who previously interacted at social gatherings, are increasingly separated, and as a result the informal mixing of different political positions has been curtailed. As the authors depict, these relational breakdowns have a negative impact on the capacity for diaspora mobilization, especially within the realm of political action. The studies also demonstrate how the reproduction of conflict lines in diaspora also determines in some cases the place of settlement, creating homogeneous pockets of ideologically aligned diaspora groups. Yet at the same time, the studies also indicate that the large-scale mixing happening in major cities seeing huge influx of permanent and semi-permanent migrants, such as Tunis and Cairo, are creating new possibilities for social interactions heretofore unseen. These sites can thus potentially serve as locations for

more coordinated diaspora mobilization in the future.

POLITICAL REMITTANCES AND MEDIATING FACTORS

The collection of studies presented here demonstrate a variety of different ways that Iraqis, Libyans, and Yemenis in diaspora are remitting politically and culturally, in addition to economically. This includes more traditional forms of diaspora activism in situations of conflict, including efforts to channel humanitarian aid to communities in the homeland and lobbying foreign governments, but also a variety of new forms of activism and political engagement. As the authors reveal, the new diaspora activism since 2011 includes various efforts to document, archive, and pursue justice for human rights violations through translocal engagement, linking host and home sites for the transfer of material and immaterial resources, as well as cultural engagement activities including heritage protection and cultural exchange and revival. Thus, for example, Houda Mzioudet outlines how online transnational communities of members of the Libyan diaspora have allowed for an Amazigh cultural revival movement, while Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen discusses the organization of cultural gathering places such as Yemeni bookshops to transmit homeland culture in host sites. Likewise, Oula Kadhum points to new forms of cross-sectarian mobilization since 2014 for the purpose of protecting Iraqi cultural heritage.

What the studies also indicate, however, is the complicated set of factors that mediate when and where diaspora members mobilize and the types of mobilization that they choose to undertake. Indeed, as is clear from the research presented here, activist trajectories pre- and post-2011 are not linear: while some who have never been mobilized for issues related to their homeland have come to do so in observing recent events in their country of origin, others who were actively involved in protest movements or other forms of engagement have now halted their activism. Indeed, and especially in the cases of Libya and Yemen, many of those who have left since 2011 represent pro-revolution activists who were forced into exile as a result of conflict dynamics; yet for some, this activist trajectory has not continued in host countries. On the flip side of this coin, among those who have left their countries over the last decade are migrants who, though they were never politically active before, have now mobilized from their position in exile. The factors that mediate diaspora mobilization are quite varied, and include current and future relationships to the homeland, migration generation, the multi-contextual political opportunity structure, and positionality – all of which intersect in complicated ways.

The relationship to the homeland – existing, perceived, anticipated, or desired – informs to an important degree if and how those in diaspora mobilize. In her study of Libyans in Tunisia, for example, Houda Mzioudet demonstrates how circular mobility and the desire to resettle in Libya once the situation improves acts as a break on mobilization: out of

¹³ See also REACH, *Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers, and Return*, 2017. Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_iraq_grc_report_iraqi_migration_to_europe_in_2016_june_2017%20%281%29.pdf

¹⁴ Elise Féron, "Transporting and Re-inventing Conflicts: Conflict-Generated Diasporas and Conflict Autonomisation", *Cooperation and Conflict* 52(3), 2017.

fear of creating future problems for themselves upon return (depending on outcomes of the conflict), some Libyan exiles in Tunisia prefer to fly under the radar and thus avoid any form of mobilization that could be considered overtly political. Yet the anticipation or project of return does not act as a uniform barrier to mobilization. In covering the evolution of the Iraqi diaspora in the UK, for example, Oula Kadhum's study reveals how the potential for more favourable political and social structures at home in fact favoured diaspora mobilization, and in particular in the aftermath of 2003 when a return under improved conditions seemed possible. A secondary factor mediating the relationship with the homeland, though, is generation in diaspora: all three studies reveal interesting insights with regards to second and third generation Iraqis, Libyans, and Yemenis in various diaspora locations, and how the observation of dynamics since 2011 has transformed their degree of engagement with the homeland. In line with research elsewhere,¹⁵ all three studies reveal that moments of potential transformation produce a positive impact on diaspora mobilization of descendants of migrants. Thus, for example, descendants of Libyans who were born in North American and Europe experienced new feelings of citizenship and belonging to the Libyan nation in the wake of 2011 and the liberation of the country from the confines of the Gaddafi regime. Likewise, second generation Iraqis in the UK were spurred to mobilize or, in the very least, lend moral support to the idea of saving the Iraqi state in the aftermath of ISIS' takeover of Mosul in 2014 and the failure of the government to defend the territory. Conversely, the studies also demonstrate how disappointment with failed revolutions or systemic changes can push second and third generation diaspora members into less mobilization and identification with the homeland. In the case of Yemenis in the UK, for example, the inability to return to visit the country as a result of the conflict, along with the feeling of hopelessness about the situation, served to decrease the sense of attachment and hence interest in mobilization of those in the second generation.

Alongside the relationship with the homeland, however, the studies quite clearly demonstrate that diaspora political mobilization and the type of political remittances that occur are largely patterned on the "triadic political opportunity structure."¹⁶ the multiple and embedded political contexts of home sites, host sites, and the transnational interactions and geopolitical relations between the two. As the studies show here, this triadic political opportunity structure includes the civic space afforded to diaspora communities and the ability to organize politically or not in host sites; access to elites and the discursive environment vis-à-vis the homeland within host sites; the threat and ability to enact repression (both national and transnational); and the relationship between host and home states. In the study on the Yemeni diaspora since 2011, Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, for example, demonstrates how the degree of space given to diaspora activism alongside access to political elites in the UK vs. Egypt explains the very different forms of remitting that take place. For those in the UK, activism is not only permitted but even structured by homeland political actors that are granted the space to organize their diaspora communities and have access to British political institutions. For those in Egypt, however, the closed civic space alongside increasing restrictions on migration rights

have favoured cultural mobilization in lieu of political. Likewise, in her study on Libyan diaspora mobilization, Houda Mzioudet demonstrates how the decrease in the threat of transnational repression after the fall of the Gaddafi regime allowed for increased mobilization on the part of diaspora activists, but how new threats of repression emerging in host sites (and in particular Tunisia) served to re-erect barriers. As related to this change in threat of repression, her study also reveals how the position of Tunisia vis-à-vis Libya, based on historically strong ties and an effort to remain neutral throughout the conflict, has resulted in restricted political mobilization - with the exception of activities channelled through formal, UN-led peacebuilding processes that utilize Tunis as the operational base.

Yet what the studies also show is that the triadic political opportunity structure does not affect all members in the diaspora in the same way. On the contrary, Oula Kadhum demonstrates how positionality vis-à-vis conflict dynamics serves to create favourable opportunities for some and unfavourable opportunities for others, thereby empowering certain diaspora groups or communities to remit politically while disempowering others from doing so. As her research shows, this positionality affects transnational ties and access points but also feelings of belonging and the ability to project future relations with the homeland and/or host site. In this way, for example, diaspora members who hail from Iraq's Sunni population have been excluded from participating in the reconstruction of Iraq as their position within current dynamics in the homeland has led to marginalization. The studies in this collection thus contribute to a broader understanding of the multifaceted factors that affect diaspora political mobilization and the types of non-economic remittances that occur, ranging from the multiple political structural factors that act as opportunities or constraints to action to the subjective manner in which identity, community, and the relationship to home and host sites evolve and transform as political dynamics shift.

IMPACT AND THE ROLE IN PEACEBUILDING

Conflict-generated diasporas are of course not always potential actors in peacebuilding processes; on the contrary, diasporas can mobilize in ways that contribute to reinforcing dynamics of conflict at home¹⁷ or act as spoilers¹⁸ during peace processes.

15 Leo Müller-Funk, "Fluid Identities, Diaspora Youth Activists and the (Post-)Arab Spring: How Narratives of Belonging Can Change Over Time", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46(6), 2020.

16 Ali R. Chaudhary and Dana M. Moss, "Triadic Political Opportunity Structures: Re-Conceptualising Immigrant Transnational Politics", Working Paper 129, International Migration Institute, Oxford Department of International Development, 2016.

17 Fiona B. Adamson, "Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization and the Transnationalization of Civil War", In Jeffrey T. Checkel (ed) *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

18 Yossi Shain and Ravinatha P. Arjasinha, "Spoilers or Catalysts? The Role of Diasporas in Peace Processes", In Edward Newman and Oliver Richmond (eds) *Challenges to Peacebuilding: Managing Spoilers during Conflict Resolution*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2006.

For the purposes of the research conducted here, however, the authors have specifically explored how the diaspora communities they are investigating are currently mobilizing for the purposes of peacebuilding, reconciliation, or reconstruction in the homeland – and what possibilities exist for further leveraging diaspora mobilization in these efforts. Across many of the interviews, the authors find that a “do no harm” principle informs at least in part the willingness of diaspora members to engage in mobilization towards the homeland. Thus, for example, Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen explains how fear of exacerbating the conflict acts as an impediment to mobilization among those in the Yemeni diaspora in the UK. Likewise, as Oula Kadhum explains, decreased confidence in the Iraqi political elite, and especially after the failure of the government to defend the territory in 2014, has turned mobilization efforts away from the political realm and towards support of civil society and the charitable sector instead. Indeed, a recurring theme throughout the three studies in this collection is diasporic efforts to channel humanitarian relief and fill information gaps as a means of addressing the conflict without interacting directly in the political sphere.

Yet mobilization and the act of political remitting for the purpose of rebuilding the nation or state are occurring within the diasporas under investigation here, and different forms of impact can already be observed. One theme that emerges is the re-conceptualization of the nation and bases of belonging that is emerging through the process of diaspora political remitting. In her study on the Libyan diaspora, for example, Houda Mzioudet depicts how the construction of online communities linking diaspora members across a variety of host sites has allowed for the extension of the imagined Libyan community and an enlargement of what “being Libyan” means. As she shows, these multi-directional flows of remittance have not only allowed for transnational Libyan Amazigh revival to emerge but have also contributed to increased commitment on the part of previously atomized listeners to building a more equal and freer Libya in the future. Likewise, Oula Kadhum reveals how new organizations have been formed in the UK, interacting with both British and Iraqi audiences, in order to support the 2019 civil and youth movements in Iraq and put forth a new nationalist vision of an anti-sectarian Iraq that echoes that being proffered by protesters back home. And Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen discusses the emergence of currents within the Yemeni diaspora in support of a new vision for the state and a rethinking of Yemeni identity, and the types of cultural mobilization occurring in support of these ideas. In this way, diasporic interactions both across diaspora communities and in interaction with those still in the homeland are contributing to a rethinking of what it means to be “Libyan” or “Iraqi” or “Yemeni” and what should be the foundations of the nation-state in the future.

In addition, the studies here all depict not only how diaspora mobilization is contributing to both Track I and Track II peacebuilding processes but also how diaspora actors are seeking to achieve justice for crimes committed during the conflict. The studies on the Libyan and Yemeni diasporas, for example, demonstrate how diaspora actors are incorporated

in formal peacebuilding through their participation in dialogue and consultative processes. Perhaps even more importantly, the studies also depict how diasporic organizations are contributing to the pursuit of justice, despite the absence of formal transitional justice processes for the moment. In the case of Libya, for example, diasporic organizations such as Lawyers for Justice in Libya are not only undertaking human rights activities but are also putting forth justice-based discourses in the transnational public sphere in order to shape the way we think about justice-related issues in the Libyan case. Likewise, the study on the Iraqi diaspora reveals the critical role being played by activists in the UK to raise awareness in a largely silent foreign public sphere regarding state-led crimes being committed against pro-change protesters at home. In this way, they are contributing to a broader understanding of violations and demands for justice in the Iraq case beyond the high-profile crimes and international criminal cases as related to ISIS. These actions in the pursuit of justice from vantage points of diaspora represent some of the most innovative ways that these new Arab diasporas are contributing to truth and reconciliation in the post-2011 period.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The three studies in this collection reveal the enormous obstacles facing the prospects of increased diaspora mobilization for the purpose of reconstruction and political renewal at home. The process of political polarization and increased mistrust among those in diaspora, the closures of civic space and the decreased operational capacity of existing organizations, and the waxing and waning of feelings of belonging as a result of evolving conflict dynamics are all common features inhibiting more pronounced political mobilization. Nonetheless, the studies here also demonstrate that certain opportunities for leveraging the many resources of the Iraqi, Libyan, and Yemeni diasporas do exist. Mobilization along less overtly political issues, such as community-level reconstruction via translocal activist lines and cultural heritage protection, could offer a means for increased diasporic engagement that both overcomes divisions and also contributes meaningfully to rebuilding home sites. Such actions, moreover, can also be pillars in local-level reconciliation efforts¹⁹ while also working around some of the potential obstacles as imposed by the triadic political opportunity structure. Likewise, the field of transitional justice and truth-seeking actions are areas in which diasporic groups have much to contribute and can indeed make important gains given their different access points,

19 See for example Ataa Alsalloum and Andre Brown, “Towards a Heritage-Led Sustainable Post-Conflict Reconciliation: A Policy-Led Perspective”, *Sustainability* 11(6), 2019.

20 See also Noha Aboueldahab, “Innovation in Transitional Justice: Experiences from the Arab Region”, *Brookings Doha Center*, 2020. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/innovation-in-transitional-justice-experiences-from-the-arab-region/>. For examples outside the MENA region, see for example Camilla Orjuela, “Mobilising Diasporas for Justice. Opportunity Structures and the Presenting of a Violent Past”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(8), 2018.

capacity to link to home sites, and different judicial mechanisms at their disposal.²⁰ The recent success of Syrian diaspora activists in pursuing transitional justice through European mechanisms provides an instructive example regarding the type of ecosystem that can be established for such efforts to come to fruition.²¹

Indeed, as the studies here conclude, for amplification in mobilization to occur, the operational capacities of diaspora groups need to be increased. While certain groups are currently finding ways to work around closures to civic space or the decrease in funding opportunities, leveraging diasporas for peacebuilding and reconstruction requires more operational coordination and more organizational skills. The authors of the studies in this collection offer a variety of ways in which this can be achieved, including partnering with other organizations and creating umbrella structures. Yet beyond organized and deliberate mobilization for the purpose of peacebuilding and political impact in the homeland, what the studies show is that political remittances are occurring in a variety of forms and directions. And while some are indeed directed towards the homeland, others are instead directed across diasporic spaces and within host sites. The transformations within Arab diaspora communities since 2011 have contributed to exchanges of new political ideas, practices, and norms; given that the process of diasporization of MENA populations is only likely to continue in the coming years, understanding how these various political remittances are affecting not only diasporic communities

21 See also Espen Stokke and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, "Syrian Diaspora Mobilization: Vertical Coordination, Patronage Relations, and the Challenges of Fragmentation in the Pursuit of Transitional Justice", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42(11), 2019.

7 *The UK Iraqi Diaspora and Their Mobilization towards Iraq:*

HOMELAND POLITICS, INTERNAL DYNAMICS, AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF DIASPORIC TRANS-NATIONALISM

Oula Kadhum

In 2003, for the first time in decades, Iraqis in the diaspora were able to return to their former homeland and help in the rebuilding of their country. Many returned in 2003 with ambitious plans and ideas to help in the country's development, some through political parties and others through civil society. Due to political developments in Iraq however, and the subsequent ethno-sectarian political system installed under the US-led intervention, diaspora mobilization has been affected and shaped by homeland politics and dynamics, privileging some while thwarting others. Indeed, the post-2003 political system contributed to the fragmentation of diasporic mobilization along ethnic and sectarian lines due to homeland political dynamics. This, in turn, has shaped the issues and the type of transnational and translocal mobilization carried out by different groups.

Focusing predominantly on the UK context and to a lesser extent the Swedish one,¹ this study explores both top-down and bottom-up approaches to Iraqi diaspora transnational mobilization, and assesses the opportunities and constraints for coordination in diasporic trans-nationalism. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with community gatekeepers, organizational representatives, and professionals working in specific sectors, as well as numerous informal interviews, and supplemented by interviews conducted from 2013 to 2018 in both London and Stockholm, this study assesses the different waves of migration and socio-economic profiles of Iraqi migrants, how pivotal moments in Iraq's recent history have affected diasporic trans-nationalism, and underlines the hindrances to mobilization.

The study finds that where the first waves of UK migration saw the arrival of political and religious elites, medical professionals, and artists, latter waves saw the arrival of less skilled and educated workers, as well as refugees. This provides the background both to Iraqi diasporic mobilization and links to the post-2003 political system and to the fragmentation that would ensue. While some diasporic elites went on to serve in the Iraqi government, other diaspora individuals worked through civil society, providing development, training, knowledge transfer, and social welfare. The study also finds that the instability in Iraq, homeland dynamics affecting the positionality of groups

vis-à-vis the country, and lack of funds are major obstacles to broader mobilization. To this point, while there is no denying the will of the diaspora to help in the rebuilding of Iraq, distrust in the diaspora among ethnic and sectarian groups presents a particular challenge to collaboration and cooperation. Building trust and reconciliation, helping to create a platform between diaspora groups, the wider public, and Iraqi organizations, and focusing efforts on cultural, heritage, health and developmental issues - and avoiding party politics - could help overcome these obstacles to allow the diaspora to play a greater role in supporting the Iraqi state and society.

BACKGROUND:

The diverse and fragmented Iraqi diaspora in the UK

Iraq has witnessed the exodus of millions of Iraqis due to the 2003 US-led occupation, the subsequent sectarian conflicts, and ongoing political and economic turmoil. Indeed, there are currently Iraqis in countries as far afield as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Canada, as well as closer to home in Jordan, Turkey and Syria.²

Yet the diasporization of Iraqis began at a much earlier date, in the mid 20th century, when Iraqi Jews, Christians, and Monarchists migrated to European countries to escape persecution and the political uncertainty facing their respective communities. As a former British mandate, Iraq maintained colonial links with the United Kingdom, opening a gateway for many religious minorities

¹ Both European contexts have the highest population of Iraqis and both have been active in mobilizing towards Iraq pre- and post-2003, making them pertinent case studies.

² Joseph Sassoon, *The Iraqi Refugees the New Crisis in the Middle East*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

and Monarchists, who were allies of the British, to migrate and settle in the UK. The first wave of Iraqi migrants were Iraqi royal elites, Iraqi Christians who served with the British Royal Air Force, and Iraqi Jewish politicians, educators, merchants, journalists, and government officials.³

The second migration wave to the UK came as a result of the 1963 Baathist coup, which overthrew the government of Abd al-Kareem Qassim. This time the profile of migrants was somewhat different, with mostly middle-class professional doctors, lawyers, artists, and intellectuals.⁴ Many were able to leave the country with student scholarships from the Baath government to study medicine, dentistry, architecture, and engineering abroad and would eventually stay on to practice their chosen professions as a part of the diaspora. This profile of migrants continued to arrive after the Baathist leadership coup in 1968, from which a young Saddam Hussein emerged as the new leader. Amongst this wave were also middle-class Kurds and Christian Assyrians, who felt increasingly pushed out by the regime's intolerance of Iraq's other ethnic identities, political opposition movements, and general climate of repression.⁵

Following the flow of political Leftist and Kurdish leaders and more affluent Iraqis into London, the 1980s saw a new wave of Iraqi migrants enter the UK. The Iraq-Iran war, which began in 1979 and ended in 1988, brought in largely Shia families who were Islamic Da'wa party activists, sympathisers, or those accused of "*taba'iya Irania*" (Iranian ancestry) and who would later be deported by the regime as tensions with Iran increased.⁶ This wave of Iraqis was mixed, from merchants who had lost their wealth, to professionals left without an occupation, to semi-skilled and unskilled workers with poor education and qualifications.⁷

The next flow of migrants arrived in 1990 and 1991 during the First Gulf War and following the Shia and Kurdish uprisings.⁸ Those who had the material wealth were able to seek asylum through legal channels, while others arrived with few resources and were dependent on the UK's social welfare system to support their families. Many were persecuted Shia families and others were economic migrants looking for a better life. Others still had migrated previously to neighbouring Middle Eastern countries or to one of the Soviet Union's satellite states, which were now no longer stable or welcoming of refugees.

After the 2003 occupation of Iraq and the subsequent conflicts, civil war, and more recently the threat from Islamic State, more and more Iraqis have found themselves in the diaspora. Many have followed a pattern of chain migration and joined extended family in host countries where family reunification has been possible. Meanwhile others have pursued more perilous and illegal journeys into Europe.

As a result of the continued instability in Iraq, it is unlikely that migration will abate any time soon and the diasporization of Iraqis will subsequently continue for years to come. While there are no exact figures for the number of Iraqis in the UK, by some estimates this ranges between 350,000 and 450,000 according

to the Iraqi Embassy in London, 200,000 according to the International Organization for Migration.⁹

Due to the vintages of migration waves and backgrounds of Iraqis who migrated to the UK, the composition of the Iraqi community in the UK is very mixed. The majority are Iraqi Arab Shia and Sunni Kurds, while many other minorities such as Iraqi Sunnis, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Mandeans, Iraqi Turkmen, Faili Kurds, and Iraqi Jews also form part of the Iraqi diasporic landscape.

The socio-economic backgrounds of those who came earlier were wealthier, better skilled, and educated and consequently found integration into the UK far easier than some of those who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s. Many who came later, even those with qualifications, have found it hard to find employment opportunities, while the traumas of displacement, exile, and war have left many with mental health problems that make them reliant on social welfare.¹⁰

While Iraqis are not exclusively concentrated geographically in any one area, the majority live in London, with concentrations in the borough of Brent, Ealing, and Kingston. With the exception of secular Iraqis, those of a liberal or left-leaning background, and second-generation Iraqis who have met other Iraqis through their university experiences, most ethnic and sectarian communities within the Iraqi diaspora do not readily mix with other Iraqi diasporic worlds outside their geographical or ethno-sectarian communities.

THE IRAQI DIASPORA, DEVELOPMENT AND THE REBUILDING OF IRAQ

Diasporic aid and development directed towards Iraq have been shaped by a number of factors including the historical period and the access that has been permitted for the diaspora, homeland

3 See Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Political Migration and Downward Socio-Economic Mobility: The Iraqi Community in London," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 18(4), 1992; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*, London: Saqi Books, 2004; Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, (2001) *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*. Rev. ed. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001; Tamar Morad, Robert Shasha, and Dennis Shasha (eds.), *Iraq's Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

4 Al-Rasheed 1992.

5 Al-Rasheed 1992.

6 Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*. 3rd ed. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

7 Al-Rasheed 1992, p.539.

8 Tripp 2007.

9 IOM, *Iraq Mapping Exercise*, 2007.

10 Great Britain & Department for Communities and Local Government, *The Iraqi Muslim Community in England: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*, 2009.

political/sectarian dynamics, social profiles of diaspora, levels of violence, as well as links and relationships to power brokers in Iraq. With each phase, diasporic contributions have either shifted to cater for specific events and needs or been shaped by the constraints and opportunities afforded to certain individuals depending on their positionality vis-à-vis the corridors of power in Baghdad.

The Pre-2003 Opposition Years

Various groups and individuals from within the diverse Iraqi diaspora have been mobilized transnationally towards the homeland since the 1980s. As more and more political elites and exiles found their way to London following persecution and clampdowns due to underground or prohibited political activity, London soon emerged, along with Damascus and Tehran, as a nucleus for opposition activity for Iraqi political elites. These included Islamic religious families such as the Al Hakim and the Al Khoei families, and later the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Islamic Da'wa party, as well as the two Kurdish parties the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. There were also many other liberal groups including Arab nationalists, socialists, and communists.¹¹

As tensions between Iraq and the international community heightened following Saddam Hussein's attempted occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqi opposition in London saw an opportunity to influence policy makers in London and Washington and push for regime change in Iraq. It is within this context that the Iraqi National Congress (INC) under the leadership of Ahmed Chalabi emerged to represent the full spectrum of Iraqi oppositional groups. Another group led by Ayad Allawi - the Iraqi National Accord (INA) - also worked with the US and UK governments during this time to similarly push for regime change. It is hard to underestimate the influence of figures such as Ahmed Chalabi and Ayad Allawi on policy makers in the US and UK. Working tirelessly to shape policy towards Iraq was their mission and to a large extent they were successful in pushing through the agenda for regime change, which was eventually written into US law under the Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998.

Though the INC had some initial success in gathering the diverse interests of the opposition groups who were united in their goal for regime change, many groups, including SCIRI and the Kurdish parties, would eventually splinter off. Additionally, the diverse groups had very different ideas about how regime change would look, including the role of the US military, the nature of their deployment, and the role of native Iraqi opposition groups, which further contributed to the disunity of the INC. As the drums of war started to beat ahead of the 2003 Iraq war, opposition groups were fomenting their own relationships with the US-led coalition in anticipation of forming part of the government once intervention had taken place. The fragmentation of the opposition and their unaligned interests during this time were precursors for events that would take place in the aftermath of regime change in 2003. It is also important to note that the political parties in opposition in no way represented the diverse Iraqi diaspora in London. Many

were in fact against the intervention and marched in the historic anti-war demonstration of February 2003.

Beyond elite political mobilization in opposition, many groups within the Iraqi diaspora worked to provide humanitarian relief during the crippling sanctions regime, which lasted from 1991 to 2003. Organizations including World Wide Welfare and other now-defunct organizations used channels through Iraqi Kurdistan, which at the time was protected under the no-fly zone UN agreement in 1991. This gave the Kurds a certain level of autonomy and protection from Baghdad and provided a backdoor for entering Iraq. Donations and funds raised in the diaspora paid for medicine and medical tools, school equipment, clothes, and many other items, all of which were smuggled into Iraq through the Kurdish borders.¹²

The Remaking of Iraq Post-2003

Once intervention and the occupation of Iraq took place in 2003, many millions of exiled Iraqis were able to return to their homeland physically for the first time in decades and contribute directly. Many were motivated to help in the rebuilding of Iraq and returned in the early years of occupation to assess the ways in which they could contribute to the politics of the country or civil society.

Diasporic Elite Mobilization

In the early years of occupation and leading up to Iraq's first elections in 2005, the majority of Iraqi transnational mobilization was defined by elite diasporic political parties who had by then firmly positioned themselves in the corridors of power. The Da'wa party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the INC, the INA, the Iraqi Communist party, and many other individuals from the diaspora were now tapping into their transnational social networks in London to recruit loyal members to their cause and to fill political positions in ministries, governorates, and other administrative positions. London thus became a recruiting ground for many of the political and bureaucratic positions which were now governing the Iraqi state. Indeed, five of Iraq's prime ministers were formerly residing in the diaspora, including Ibrahim Al Jaafari, Ayad Allawi, Nouri Al Maliki, Haider Al Abadi, and Mohammed Tawfik Allawi. Of these, four resided in the UK.

This trend in diasporic transnational recruitment continues unabated to this day. Nonetheless, in more recent years this has steadily declined, as many of the former exiles have served their time in Iraq and returned to their diasporic lives whilst continuing an existence of circular migration between London and Iraq.

Since 2003, however, and certainly in the last 5 years, political mobilizations in support of political parties in the diaspora has

¹¹ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2007.

¹² Oula Kadhum, *Diasporic Interventions: State-Building in Iraq following the 2003 Iraq War*. Coventry: Warwick University, 2017.

waned due to the general disappointment and disaffection of the Iraqi diaspora with diasporic elites they supported in 2003 who have contributed rather than dealt with corruption, not addressed Iraq's poor public services, and reinforced sectarian politics that have plagued the country. Party representation and attendance at political events have declined significantly and mobilization has been oriented more towards non-state actors, civil society, and the charitable sector.¹³

Diaspora Grassroots Mobilization

Diasporic involvement in the homeland since 2003 has also worked on the grassroots level to support a new civil society in Iraq as distinct from the state-sanctioned and monitored civil society. Many Iraqis living in the diaspora have been involved in areas related to mental health, women's rights, education, health services, welfare and provision for Iraqi widows and orphans, democracy building, election training, the preservation of Iraqi heritage, and many more translocal initiatives serving local community needs. Examples include a roaming medical doctor to support Iraqis living in remote areas, mental health professionals supporting the professionalization and development of Iraq's mental health services and training of mental health staff,¹⁴ the provision of university books and textbooks for Baghdad University in partnership with US universities, sanitation initiatives to provide public toilets,¹⁵ and the resurrection of Iraqi cultural heritage,¹⁶ including arts and crafts and reed boats that serve the southern marshes, amongst many others.

Some initiatives were successful in delivering much needed resources or public services to disenfranchised groups or communities. Others, meanwhile, were met with hostility and violence due to instability and dominant cultures of corruption and sectarianism, both of which prevented those unconnected to political parties from carrying out their work. This trend has marked the post-2003 order, where sectarian politics and the corruption that sustains them have infiltrated all aspects of Iraqi society and life.

Other diasporic mobilization has been oriented towards lobbying the EU, the UK parliament, and other organizations such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch to address the violence, land grabs, and religious discrimination faced by Iraqi minorities such as the Yazidis, the Mandeans, Iraqi Christians, and Turkmen. Meanwhile the issue of women's rights and the personal status law and violence against women has also been raised repeatedly in the diaspora by the Iraqi Women's League and the Iraqi Democratic Movement.

Diaspora and Ethno-Sectarian Divisions

On the grassroots level, diasporic mobilization is also fragmented and shaped by power dynamics. For instance, due to the strengthening of Shia identity and power since 2003, there has been an increase in Iraqi Shia organizations in the diaspora

raising funds for Iraqi orphans, widows, and the impoverished in Iraq.¹⁷ Meanwhile in the case of the Iraqi Kurdish diasporic organizations, their need has been diminished due to the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan is relatively autonomous and safe to visit. Furthermore, the presence of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government representation in the UK has meant that there is less need for a diasporic organization to exist, with the KRG London office acting as the bridge between the diaspora and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Other organizations have come and gone or are inactive in the diaspora due to lack of funds and resources. Older organizations such as the Iraqi Association and the Iraqi Welfare Organization have succeeded in institutionalizing and professionalizing and have hence been able to continue serving their respective Iraqi communities.

More recent organizations have also emerged, including the Iraqi Democratic Movement in 2011 and Collective Action for Iraq in 2019, who are activist organizations raising awareness and acting in solidarity with Iraq's civil and youth movements. Working with British and Iraqi audiences, these organizations support anti-sectarian platforms that champion an Iraqi nationalist agenda that does not discriminate against ethnicity, sect, or religion.

Post-ISIS Diaspora Mobilization

The takeover of Mosul by IS in 2014 and the failure of the Iraqi forces to protect Iraqi soil marked a turning point for many in the Iraqi diaspora. While disaffection with Iraqi politics and the diaspora politicians they had previously supported was steadily waning over the years, the events of 2014 marked a total loss of trust in the government and its ability to protect the nation, Iraqi sovereignty, and its territorial integrity.

It was Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani's 2014 fatwa that, for many in the diaspora, saved Iraq. Indeed, this was an oft-repeated phrase heard during several interviews with Iraqi gatekeepers and diasporans of all generations. Sistani called on Iraqi citizens to join the security forces and fight against IS. This religious call to arms saw the birth of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a group of paramilitary forces of mainly Shia, but also Christian and Sunni, groups join in the fight. With the help of the PMF, the Iraqi security forces were able to defeat IS by 2017 and reclaim Mosul and Iraq's territorial integrity.

During the battle for Mosul from 2014 to 2017 diaspora mobilization saw three important trends emerge. The first was a move towards religio-political mobilization where mobilizing

¹³ Oula Kadhum, "Unpacking the Role of Religion in Political Trans-nationalism: The Case of the Iraqi Shi'a Diaspora Post 2003", *International Affairs*, 2020.

¹⁴ Author interview with Mental Health Professional in London, October 2019.

¹⁵ Kadhum 2017.

¹⁶ See work by Nahrein Network <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/nahrein/> and Safina Projects <https://www.safinaprojects.org/>

¹⁷ Kadhum 2020.

towards Iraqi politicians was replaced by a mobilization motivated by non-state actors including Sistani and the PMF.¹⁸ During rallies and protests against IS incursions seen in London, the PMF and Sistani were often hailed as heroes who were the saviours of Iraq. Furthermore, during the holy month of Muharram, where the killing of the Prophet's grandson Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD is commemorated by Shia Muslims, placards and posters during Ashura processions were linking the killing of Imam Hussain with the killing of Shias at the hands of IS. The transnational mobilization served to demarcate Shia Islam as different to Sunni Islam and to remind the public that Shia Muslims were the main victims of IS.

The rise in martyrs fighting against IS and the resultant rise in orphaned children led to an increase in charitable fundraising for Iraqi orphans in the period 2014 to 2017. Organizations such as Al Ayn and Noor Trust, among many others, were overwhelmed by the donations coming from the diaspora, who wanted to help and alleviate the conditions for those families whose fathers fought to protect their country. Millions of GBP were raised and remitted back to Iraq from the UK predominantly, though not exclusively from Iraqi Shia diasporic charities.

While most of the transnational mobilization witnessed in the diaspora is conducted by diasporic ethnic or religious groups, with few cross-ethnic or sectarian alliances formed, one exception to this trend was witnessed during the fight against IS. Indeed, Iraqis of all ethnic, social, and political backgrounds joined the protests against terrorism and appealing for the protection of Iraqi heritage, which was being destroyed by IS in Mosul and Ninevah province. Various protests were held in Trafalgar Square and in front of the Iraqi embassy in London attended by Iraqi diaspora artists, writers, musicians, various political party representatives, and students.

The Diaspora and Iraq's 2019 Protest Movement

In early October 2019, Iraq's civil and protest movement, which had been gathering pace from at least 2015, took a serious turn as thousands of youthful protesters from across Iraq called for the overhaul of the Iraqi government, an end to the ethno-sectarian system and the corruption it has spawned, improved services, and better economic prospects for all Iraqis. The October protests – as they are popularly referred to – have continued in different cycles despite government crackdowns, kidnappings, torture, and various attempts by foreign and domestic actors to thwart them.

In the diaspora, many solidarity protests were witnessed in the UK, the US, and across Europe in support of protesters and their demands. In the UK, the Iraqi Association and the Iraqi Democratic Movement organised several solidarity protests in front of the Iraqi embassy and in Trafalgar Square to raise awareness of the protests occurring in Iraq and to condemn the government's actions and lack of protection both for protesters

and their legitimate concerns. New youth groups have also since emerged, including the Collective Action for Iraq (CAFI), which has organised various vigils in London in solidarity with protesters, but also whose purpose is to raise awareness of what is happening inside the country amidst the dearth of news from Iraq reported in Western media outlets.

As a result of the killing of General Qassim Soleimani and Abdul Mahdi Al Muhandis in January 2020 in drone strikes executed by the United States, the protests were side-lined by domestic politics and the Iraqi government's preoccupations with how to respond to the US attack on Iraqi soil. This event led to a lull in diasporic activities in relation to the protests as tensions between Tehran and Washington, and their implications for Iraq, were closely watched.

In the Shia diasporic community in Brent, several mourning events and commemorations were also held for General Qassim Soleimani and Abdul Mahdi Al Muhandis, who are now seen as Shia martyrs by certain segments of the Iraqi Shia diaspora. One event held at the Islamic College was reportedly well attended, with over 300 participants from across the first and second generations participating in paying their respects to the fallen martyrs. The killing of the Shia leaders in Iraq will further strengthen sectarian identifications in the diaspora as they further feed the Shia victimization narratives so prevalent in Shia history and mythology. Consequently, Shia Islam and its politicization continues to be transported transnationally from Iraq to the Shia diaspora.

CURRENT DYNAMIC IN THE DIASPORA AND OBSTRUCTIONS TO MOBILIZATIONS

The issues facing the Iraqi diaspora are complex and varied. Four areas in particular are hindering the diaspora's ability to contribute towards Iraq: lack of unity, diaspora positionality, instability and violence, and lack of funds and professionalization.

Lack of unity

The Iraqi diaspora is fragmented along multiple lines and categories including ethnicity, religious conviction, sect, class, ideology, and geographical location in the UK. It is therefore mistaken to talk of the Iraqi diaspora as one homogeneous group; rather it is a collection of diverse groups each living their own traditions, memories, imaginations of community, and

18 Oula Kadhum, "Where Politics and Temporality Meet: Change in Shi'a Political Trans-nationalism over Time, Identity and the Iraqi State", Conference paper, University of Chicago, 04 May 2019.

individual transnational connections to Iraq. There is very little overlap between these groups and often very little knowledge about the events, activities, and lived experiences of others. Put simply, there is no unity or sense of a collective Iraqi identity in the diaspora.

This has been exacerbated by homeland politics, which reverberates in the diaspora, affecting how people feel and creating mistrust between diaspora groups. As a result, very little coordination or collaboration has existed between diasporic groups, save for the aforementioned protests against Islamic State and for the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage.

Positionality

Since 2003, some groups, namely the Arab Shias and the Kurds, have been empowered due to their political positions in Iraq. As mentioned previously, many have been recruited transnationally to serve in ministerial and government positions since 2003 forming a diasporic elite political network in Iraq that is connected to London. On the level of civil society, too, the powerful position of both groups has facilitated charitable and development work where a culture of sectarianism, corruption, and nepotism can mean the difference between being able to execute a project or not.

The relative stability of Iraqi Kurdistan has further meant that many from the diaspora are able to visit family and friends regularly and continue a diasporic existence of circular migration. Meanwhile for many within the Shia community, the ability to travel to their heavily protected holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Samarra and take part in Shia rituals and commemorations has strengthened their faith and Shia identity, bringing them closer to Iraq and their religion.

On the other hand, for Iraqi minorities, be they ethnic, sectarian, or sexual, transnational connections have been hindered due to insecurity, kidnappings, and attacks due to land disputes, as well as Islamic violent extremism, which have led many to no longer see Iraq as a place of return. Ethnic and sectarian minorities such as the Yezidis, the Turkmen, Faili Kurds, Mandean, and Christians in the diaspora have therefore worked from the diaspora either to lobby on their kin group's behalf to Western audiences and governments or to support their ethnic compatriots through fundraising, helping with asylum claims, and raising awareness. Finally, for Iraqi Sunnis in the diaspora, the legacy of Saddam's reign, and the marginalization of the Iraqi Sunni community in Iraq post-intervention, has left many excluded from participating in the rebuilding of Iraq. A sectarian role reversal has occurred, where the once secure and powerful Sunnis in the diaspora have been dethroned by the formerly insecure and powerless Shias.

Instability and violence

The civil war and violence of 2006-2008, the threat from Islamic State from 2014, the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, and more recently the instability and crackdowns perpetrated against the

Iraqi civil protest movement, have inevitably affected the ability of the Iraqi diaspora to mobilize, return, or help in the development of Iraq. So though transnational connections have been shaped by the positionality of diaspora groups vis-à-vis positions of power in Iraq,¹⁹ it is also important to stress that transnational connections and mobilization have been hindered for all groups by the levels of conflict and violence in Iraq. This has inevitably impacted some areas more than others (Iraqi Kurdistan being less affected) and obstructed the transfer of remittances during times of conflict. It has also affected the gendered dimensions of trans-nationalism where women, who have been the targets of gender-based violence, have been adversely affected and thus discouraged from participating.²⁰

Lack of funds and professionalization

There are variances in the organizational and financial positions of Iraqi diaspora organizations in the UK. Some receive large philanthropic funds from Iraqi and British-Iraqi religious clerics and figures and wealthy businessmen, or UK government or organizational funding, for their survival. Some meanwhile depend on donations from their respective ethnic or sectarian diasporic communities in the UK or small contributions from members for operational costs and rely on volunteers for the continuation of their work. This reality explains why some communities are more active and have more organizations in their midst and why organizations from other communities have come and gone or continue to struggle financially, limiting their events and activities.

In the last ten years in the UK, government austerity has dealt a blow to the charitable and non-profit sector, where financial cuts have made it even harder for diaspora organizations to survive. Consequently, a lack of funds makes it difficult to employ staff, strategize, have a physical office and presence, and therefore professionalize and institutionalize the organizations' work both domestically and transnationally.

CONCLUSION:

Opportunities for the Iraqi diaspora

In assessing the Iraqi diaspora's contributions to politics and development before and since 2003, what is clear is that while

¹⁹ Oula Kadhum, "Ethno-Sectarianism in Iraq, Diaspora Positionality and Political Trans-nationalism", *Global Networks*, 2018.

²⁰ Oula Kadhum, "Assessing Co-Development Projects for Civil Society Building in Iraq: The Case of the Iraqi Diaspora and Swedish Institutions Following the 2003 Intervention in Iraq", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 46(2), 2019.

some projects were successful, others were obstructed by conflict, corruption, and a culture of sectarianism and nepotism. What is also clear is that the ethno-sectarian system institutionalized under occupation has shaped the trans-nationalism of the Iraqi diaspora, creating opportunities for those connected to the corridors of power, while hindering the efforts of those marginalized by the exclusive system.

The myriad projects and initiatives attempted bear witness to the desire and will of many Iraqis in the diaspora who in 2003 wanted to return and help in the rebuilding of their country of origin. Yet, homeland dynamics have inevitably affected the diaspora and their trans-nationalism, shaping not only who can mobilize and how but also creating disunity and distrust amongst the various Iraqi diasporic groups. Cooperation has been impeded as some communities have mobilized an ethnic or sectarian identity rather than a national Iraqi identity. For example, the territorial threat from the Islamic State and the killing of Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis and Qassim Soleimani have heightened identity politics in the diaspora for some within the Shia community. Likewise for the Kurds, Baghdad's stance towards Kurdish independence, the Kirkuk issue, and oil shares have also served to distance Iraqi Kurds from their Iraqi compatriots further.

For Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities, their preoccupations with regaining land, freedom to practice their religions in peace, and to receive security from the state and feel safe amidst existential threats are battles that will continue to be fought so long as there are enough members inside the country for the diaspora to support. For many, including the Iraqi Mandeans and Iraqi Jews, the diaspora is where the majority now reside, and the future of the homeland population remains dubious at best.

For others, meanwhile, the Iraqi civil protest movement represents a bid for Iraqi national unity that gives hope of ascending ethnic or sectarian loyalties and is supported by many secular Iraqis in the diaspora. For now, at least, these contrasting stances remain prevalent and supplant any unified national vision, which has distanced diaspora groups rather than brought them closer.

As their relationship with the homeland widely differs, the concept of development has a different meaning for each Iraqi diasporic group. This reality orients the focus towards a plethora of agendas, making it even more difficult for the disparate Iraqi diaspora groups to work together. Ultimately Iraqi diasporic mobilization for development for the large part comprises a multitude of ethnic, sectarian, and religious claims, stances, and projects rather than a unified collaborative effort to develop the country. Moreover, as a result of the disunity, conflict, and instability, there is a lack of institutionalization and professionalization of diasporic organizations across the Iraqi diaspora. Nonetheless, this study offers several recommendations in order to support the Iraqi diaspora and its trans-nationalism towards Iraq.

First, work in the diaspora might focus on building trust between the different communities by bringing groups together and in

dialogue with one another under the auspices of an independent and impartial international organization with experience in working with diasporas. The chosen organization could facilitate a forum for Iraqi diasporic gatekeepers in the spirit of truth and reconciliation commissions (see the interesting example of the Liberian truth and reconciliation commission that the Liberian diasporas formed a part of),²¹ bearing in mind the particular political sensitivities and dynamics of Iraq's different religious and ethnic communities. Giving the different diaspora communities a chance to speak their truths and realities may create more empathy and understanding as a first step towards future cooperation and collaboration. Secondly, such a dialogue may open the ground for agreed priorities for mobilization towards Iraq that cut across ethnic and sectarian interests.

In order to bring the diaspora together and build a more united community for Iraqi diasporic organizations, the creation of an umbrella organization or simply a digital platform, as in the case of Sweden's Iraqi diasporic organizations, is instructive. In 1995, the Federation of Iraqi Associations in Sweden was created, an umbrella organization that united the growing number of Iraqi diasporic organizations being created as a result of increased migration to Sweden. In doing so, the umbrella organization helped to publicize the work of the Iraqi diaspora in Swedish society, professionalize the group, and facilitate partnerships with Swedish organizations. The umbrella organization also coordinates public messaging with regards to Iraqi politics and the Iraqi diaspora in Swedish society and, more importantly, it has helped the diaspora groups to work more effectively together and support each other's work. As mentioned previously, there is very little communication between groups and knowledge of one another's activities in the UK Iraqi diaspora. Currently there is no platform, organization, or network that exists that can unite or build social capital between the disparate groups. Creating such a structure would allow diasporic groups to be connected, in dialogue, and co-ordinate work with both Western audiences, Iraqi organizations inside Iraq, as well as the wider Iraqi diaspora in other countries. Participation and membership would be voluntary and based on democratic values.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that one of the biggest impediments to sustaining the work of diasporic organizations is funding, which then prevents the professionalizing and institutionalization needed for continuity and development. Capacity-building in the form of fundraising, bid-writing, and social media would go a long way in training the Iraqi diaspora to sustainably manage finances, retain staff, and mobilize effectively. One idea might be to organize a workshop with selected and successful individuals from the Iraqi diaspora already engaged and working in Iraq. This would be useful for gathering data on best practice in relation to working transnationally between Europe and Iraq. A second workshop would then be useful to bring together Iraqi professionals working transnationally and other Iraqi

21 Laura A. Young and Rosalyn Park, "Engaging Diasporas in Truth Commissions: Lessons from the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project", *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 3(3), 2009.

diaspora organizations seeking to do the same but lacking the professional know-how, compliance knowledge, and risk assessments needed for working in turbulent environments. For some diasporic groups interested in mobilizing towards Iraq, it may simply be worthwhile to partner with bigger organizations rather than creating new organizations from scratch. This would also help diaspora groups to gain experience, professionalize, and build networks and capacity should they wish in the future to create their own organizations.

Finally, due to political sensitivities, areas of collaboration should avoid political issues and focus on national projects that address more unifying themes such as Iraqi culture and heritage, civil society, education, health, the environment, etc. where skills and expertise guide the projects and not politics or ideology. Due to the instability the country currently faces, projects and mobilization should focus on small-scale local initiatives that can make a difference on the community level through existing translocal networks. One way to circumvent conflict in times of instability and violence is through digital collaborations.

Video-calls, WhatsApp, and social media channels are routinely used by the Iraqi diaspora. Skilled professionals such as doctors, dentists, engineers, teachers, academics, mental health professionals, and many others can therefore set up online video conferences and training sessions in times of intense conflict.

Instability in Iraq and homeland political dynamics have affected the unity and trans-nationalism of the Iraqi diaspora. In recognizing the inevitable divisions this creates, not to mention the uneven playing field for diasporic trans-nationalism, it is unrealistic to expect cross-ethnic or -religious transnational mobilization with regards to Iraqi high politics. However, as the case of mobilizations against IS terrorism and calls for the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage show, opportunities for diaspora collaborations and cooperation are possible on issues that affect all Iraqis. There is no reason to believe therefore that the diaspora could not also collaborate on issues pertaining to civil society, social welfare, the environment and health, and other important areas where assistance is needed in Iraq and where political dimensions can be avoided.

Straddling Liminality and Active Engagement:

Understanding Mobilization Patterns of the Libyan Diaspora

Houda Mzioudet

The NATO campaign to unseat long-time Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 was met largely with support by Libyans living in exile. Many had not set foot in their country in decades – some not even since 1969, the year Gaddafi carried out his coup d'état against King Idris I – and in diaspora they formed a close-knit community of intellectuals, doctors, professors, artists, politicians, and other civil society activists who acted as an opposition force to the regime.

With the tragic unfolding of what started as the Libyan uprising in 2011, which morphed into a protracted civil and proxy war, the Libyan diaspora has enlarged to include new categories of activists and political actors seeking refuge abroad but also new socio-economic groups who are fleeing the deteriorating economic and security conditions. Yet despite this diversification in the profiles of those in diaspora, the conflict has never undermined the efforts of Libyans in exile to rebuild a semblance of a community that can mobilize for promoting peace and reconciliation. Building on the rich networks that were made with Western and Arab policymakers during the long years of exile, the Libyan diaspora, which has never been a monolithic entity, has been able to contribute to changes that have occurred in the country since the fall of the Gaddafi regime.

This study explores the formation of Libyan exile communities since 2011, the different relationships they harbor vis-à-vis the homeland, and some of the different roles they have assumed in building the imagined community and in participating in the rebuilding of the country. Through exploration of the nature of the diaspora and its geographical distribution, and with particular focus on those in Tunisia vs. those in the UK and US, the study assesses the diasporic character of Libyans in exile. The research finds that issues related to peacebuilding, reconciliation, and the empowerment of women and minority groups act as nodal points for diasporic Libyans who, despite their different ideological, cultural, and tribal affiliations, can find common ground when discussing the future of post-Gaddafi Libya.¹ Yet, in exploring the work of Libyan diaspora organizations and contextualizing the different waves and destinations of exodus, the research also observes quite different patterns of diaspora mobilization. More precisely, the research finds that the relationships between those in diaspora and the Libyan homeland differ according to relationship, as do the political opportunity structures, which have an implication on the type of mobilization that occurs. In this way, Libyans in diaspora in Tunisia – who maintain patterns

of circular mobility and often harbour hopes of return, and who perceive more threats if engaged in political mobilization – tend to either remain under the radar or to engage through the activities and frameworks of international organizations located in Tunis. On the contrary, those in Western capitals have been able to cultivate relationships with foreign policymakers and international organizations for advocacy and lobbying purposes in favour of transitional processes. In all cases, though, direct political participation of Libyans in diaspora in homeland politics has faced a number of institutional, legal, and perceptual barriers, which nonetheless show signs of being able to be overcome through shared belonging to the Libyan imagined community.

Based on structured and semi-structured interviews with four members of the Libyan diaspora, an online questionnaire distributed through a popular Libyan podcast series, a conversation with the Libyan podcast series' creator and my attendance of two Zoom conferences of a Libyan diasporic organization, and drawing on existing statistical data as well as a qualitative review of social media content of Libyan exile groups, carried out between September 2019-January 2021, the study provides an assessment of how members of the Libyan diaspora relate to the homeland and to each others, and how these relationships contribute to different patterns of mobilization. The study concludes with a few recommendations to Libyan and international policymakers regarding how best to support the Libyan diaspora in the implementation of their efforts designed to promote reconciliation, peacebuilding, institutional reform, and transitional justice for Libya.

¹ My use of the term "tribal" should be taken in its traditional sense of the pre-Libyan state, denoting the "tribal loyalties, kinship and brotherhood bonds and affiliation with the pre-colonial Ottoman provinces," which have not totally vanished even during the Gaddafi dictatorship. See Anna Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile, and the Emergence of a New Nation-State*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History, 2010:6.

EARLY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LIBYAN DIASPORA:

Nation-State Building and the Development of Libyan Nationalism

Even before the emergence of the modern Libyan state, the community of those living in exile has played a vital role in the formation and consolidation of the nation-state and Libyan nationalism. According to Anna Baldinetti,² the first nucleus of Libyan national identity was formed thanks to Libyan exiles' activities following Italian colonization in 1911. They played a role in merging different ethnic, tribal, and other kinship identities and links into an association of political parties that helped in the formation of the Libyan nation that is known today. As the country gained independence from Italy on 24 December 1951, and under the profound social, political, and economic changes that occurred between 1951-1969, the year Muammar Gaddafi carried out his coup against King Idris I, the process of exile and mobilization of those in diaspora³ continued to grow. Indeed, the dramatic political change under Gaddafi led to the exile of political, social, and cultural elites to neighbouring Egypt, as well as Western countries, in particular the UK and the US, which house some of the largest Libyan diaspora populations. This latter continued contributing to the growth of the notion of the nation-state and Libyan nationalism.⁴

Yet while the Libyan diaspora in the years preceding 2011 was contributing to concept of Libya, it faced significant constraints to mobilization that prevented its ability to make a significant impact on homeland politics. Seeberg, for example, discusses the marginalization of the Libyan diaspora under the rule of Gaddafi as a consequence of Libya's international isolation between the late 1980s and early 2000s (and after 2011) due to the deteriorating security situation, which made it hard for the community to have an impact in the homeland.⁵ This would change, however, with the 2011 uprising and the ouster of Gaddafi from power. The violent repression of the regime saw the fleeing of many thousands of Libyans, mainly Gaddafi loyalists initially, to neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt;⁶ conversely, the Libyan revolution also saw the return of some of those who had gone into exile since 1969. Dynamics would shift again in 2014, when a new wave of migration occurred of those fleeing the civil war. These different waves of migration thus saw a diversification in the nature of the Libyan diaspora but also new opportunities to engage vis-à-vis the homeland.

Indeed, the downfall of the Gaddafi regime saw the emergence of new roles for the Libyan diaspora in contributing to political developments at home and to the growth of the Libyan nation-state. The engagement of Libyans abroad, having been liberated from transnational repression⁷ suffered under the Gaddafi regime, became more prominent with active mobilization to challenge oppression. In particular, the Libyan exile community

who mobilized in support of the 2011 uprising from their positions in diaspora helped define the post-Gaddafi Libyan transition, seeking to play an active role in the transition process. Nonetheless, the vectors chosen for mobilization and political engagement with the homeland, as well as the opportunities and constraints that exist for each type of mobilization, are largely patterned on the location in diaspora but also the position vis-à-vis Libya. Comparing migration and mobilization dynamics between Libyans in exile in Tunisia versus those in Europe/North America demonstrates a different set of parameters that inform mobilization dynamics.

“ROOTED UPROOTEDNESS:” Dynamics of the Libyan Diaspora in Tunisia

“Due to personal threats that targeted my family, I had to flee the country during the revolution, [I] came back after the liberation [of Tripoli in October 2011], then I left the country [again] in 2014 due to the war. Before the Libyan revolution, we lived in different countries, at one time, my father had to take on a different identity because of the Gaddafi regime's hounding of our family.”⁸

In taking a generational view of Libyan political migration, exile, and diaspora to Tunisia, what becomes apparent are dynamics of what I dub a “rooted uprootedness” that renders Tunisia an easy and appealing destination for migration but – importantly – that also allows it to act as a staging ground for eventual return. As a result, Tunisia in the wake of 2011 has seen two important waves of migration of Libyans fleeing unfavourable political dynamics and insecurity at home, but who are settling in an impermanent manner. The result has been both propitious for a breakdown in ideological divides but has also acted to favour certain forms of mobilization towards Libya and hinder others.

On the one hand, the size and long history of Libyan presence in Tunisia has produced a dynamic and tightly knit community that is able to absorb new members and provide a semblance of

² Baldinetti, 2010.

³ Building on the definition Bauböck and Faist (2010), the Libyan diaspora can be understood as a “dispersed, extraterritorial, and imagined community that shares a basic political identity attached to the ‘homeland’ and that carries out some form of mobilization or material/immateral engagement for the specific purpose of supporting or challenging domestic politics or the State of origin.” Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, eds., *Diaspora and Trans-nationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

⁴ Alice Alunni, “Long-Distance Nationalism and Belonging in the Libyan Diaspora (1969–2011)”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.46 No.2, 2019.

⁵ Peter Seeberg, “Trans-nationalism and Exceptional Transition Processes: The Role of the Libyan Diaspora from Qadhafi's Jamahiriyya to Post-Revolutionary Civil War and State Collapse”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.47 No.5, 2018.

⁶ Megan Bradley, Ibrahim Fraihat, and Houda Mzioudet, *Libya's Displacement Crisis: Uprooted by Revolution and Civil War*, Georgetown University Press, 2016.

⁷ Dana Moss, “Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of the Arab Spring”, *Social Problems* Vol.63 No.4, 2016.

⁸ Author interview 12 August 2020.

familiarity. The diaspora in Tunisia is one of the oldest communities of Libyans outside their home country and represents a range of ideologies, from the more socially conservative to the more liberal. Libyans can be found living in urban centres, gathering in close communities in Tunis or scattered in smaller urban centres as in the seaside resort of Hammamet and the different towns in the northeast governorate of Nabeul. With the onset of major political transformations in Libya in 2011 and again in 2014, a thriving post-2011 Libyan community was established, including the Tunis neighbourhoods of Laouina and Ennasr, which have become the new “Little Tripoli” where a series of Libyan restaurants opened to cater to the demands of an increasing Libyan clientele. As of 2013, there were five Libyan schools in Tunis, Hammamet, Sousse, Mahdia, and Sfax, all of which fell under the jurisdiction of the Libyan government at the time, and which serve the Libyan exiled communities – often the children of those who have relocated since 2011 - in these Tunisian cities.⁹

On the other hand, though, the Libyan diaspora in Tunisia is marked by a circular movement of going back and forth to the same point of departure. Examples of this diaspora circularity are abundant. One interviewee for example, who has been living in Tunis since 2014, spoke about her family’s saga of a continuous cycle of exile since the 1970s: her parents had fled to Europe then the Middle East then to Morocco due to her father’s dissident activities against Gaddafi; the family came back to Libya before the revolution but had to briefly leave again during 2011, to finally go on a quasi-permanent exile in 2014, between Europe, the Gulf, and Tunisia. Central to her narrative of recurrent movement to disparate locations is Tunisia, which remains the preferred destination given its proximity to Libya and the possibility it offers to return should the situation in Libya improve. Indeed, the yearning for an improvement in the security situation and for a permanent return haunts many Libyans. Tunisia thus remains the preferred choice of many Libyans for relocation, precisely because it offers the best chance at diaspora circularity.¹⁰ These dynamics of rooted uprootedness have contributed to new waves of migration of Libyans to Tunisia in the wake of 2011, despite important ideological differences between new arrivals. In this way, migration to Tunisia is not based on ideological affiliation, meaning that the exile community is in fact quite heterogeneous. At the same time, though, the proximity and close relations between Tunisia and Libya, along with the existence of circular mobility, also act as parameters to the types of mobilization that those in diaspora engage in.

The fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 saw the arrival of many Gaddafi loyalists into major Tunisian cities, whose lives were marked by mistrust and precarity, as well as a creeping fear of insecurity and threat of retribution. The Gaddafi loyalists live a life in limbo in Tunisia where they are not considered refugees by the Tunisia authorities, given their reluctance to apply for refugee status with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). They opt instead to live under the radar, often overstaying their three-month legal stay in Tunisia. The Tunisian authorities, for their part, turn a blind eye on their “illegal” status, creating a situation of precarity in which many depend on

the remittances that their relatives in Libya send – representing a reversed flow of financial resources from homeland to host country.

For Gaddafi loyalists living in Tunisia, their mistrust of the new political class in Libya also adds to the feeling of isolation and neglect.¹¹ Just as Gaddafi used “proxy punishment”¹² to intimidate Libyan dissidents in the UK diaspora in the 1980s, fueling a lack of trust towards other diasporic Libyans, loyalists in exile since 2011 fear retribution given their alleged participation in human rights abuses against Libyan civilians during the uprising. This fear was compounded when Tunisia handed over Gaddafi’s former prime minister, Baghdadi Mahmoudi, in late 2012 to Libyan authorities – a move that drew outcry in Tunisia among human rights groups and with Libyan exiles from the Gaddafi regime who feared facing a similar fate.¹³

In 2014, however, the fracturing of the Libyan political space, marked by parliamentary elections that saw the establishment of two rival governments pitting eastern and western Libya against each other and the military ventures of renegade General Khalifa Haftar, produced a new wave of departure for Tunisia of international organizations and embassies - as well as Libyans who worked with them. The flow of Libyans into Tunisia increased in summer 2014 when the Tripoli airport was attacked in clashes between the rival militias Libya Dawn and the Zintan Brigades. This second wave of migration represented those disenchanted with the outcome of the revolution and its evolution into a protracted civil war. This latter category includes those who once supported the Libyan revolution but found themselves in the same situation of insecurity and fearing for their lives as a result of the spiral of violence stemming from different armed groups. Those who sought refuge in Tunisia, for instance, included media personalities, civil society activists, and artists and journalists who found safe haven in the capital city Tunis, where an already established Libyan community had built a bustling social and economic life that can rival its counterpart in Egypt.

Thus, while the two waves of migration since 2011 represent important ideological divisions between pro- and anti-Gaddafi factions, the lines between them were being blurred as a result of the appeal of resettlement in Tunisia and the intermixing that accompanied it. In this way, for the first time since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, the ideological divisions of Libyans in Tunisia were dissipating. Nonetheless, the proximity of Libya to Tunisia, which allows for this rooted uprootedness of the diaspora, also has an important impact on the nature of mobilization towards the homeland. For example, the strong presence of international organizations (IOs) along with UN missions for Libya in Tunis has

9 Thomas Rosenthal, “L’école en exil : Étude de l’école libyenne de Sfax en Tunisie” MA Thesis, UP1 UFR11 - Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne - UFR Science Politique, 2015, available at <https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-01293211>

10 Author interview, 12 August 2020.

11 Bradley et al., 2016.

12 Moss, 2016.

13 Bradley et al., 2016.

an important impact on how mobilization is occurring. For some, relocation to Tunisia allowed for new forms of engagement and activism through IOs. One interviewee, for example, recounts how she has been working on capacity building for civil society organizations “to support entrepreneurs on the ground, especially women” through her job as a project manager in the international organization where she is employed. Likewise, some civil society activists based in Tunisia succeed in organizing international events and conferences to shed light on the Libyan conflict and take part in the peacebuilding process in the future Libya thanks to the presence of the UN. For example, one prominent event was supported by the UN mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and represented a cornerstone for the subsequent Libyan national dialogue that took place in Tunis in September 2015. The “Libyan Conference for the Development of Libyan Dialogue” brought Libyan policymakers in politics and economics, along with diplomats, academics, and civil society representatives for “the disarmament in Libya and the creation of a green zone to protect the Government of National Accord.” The conference was organized by a Tunis-based media and civil society organization, Salemtom Organization for Comprehensive Development, headed by Libyan media activist, Rabie Shrair.

Nonetheless, overtly political mobilization is by and large avoided. For those living under the radar and largely in precarity, keeping a low profile is a necessary survival strategy. Likewise, for those seeking to return to Libya once conditions improve, political engagement has been avoided. Libyans in Tunisia have exercised more social, economic, and humanitarian mobilization, in particular coming to the rescue of internally displaced Libyans who were victims of renewed clashes between eastern Libya forces loyal to Marshall Haftar and radical Islamist groups (in particular from IS) in 2014. Nonetheless, other forms of political contestation or political pressure from diaspora are less likely given the relationship maintained with their host and home country.

This avoidance of political mobilization, however, is also the result of the Tunisian position vis-à-vis the conflict and its resolution in Libya. Tunisia took a stern stance towards the Libyan community who practiced politics in Tunisia, deporting some who engaged in any political activity on Tunisian soil. Indeed, Tunisia has always retained its rather neutral stance towards conflict by maintaining strong historical ties with the Libyan people and standing at arms’ length of all Libyan rivals. As a result, Libyans staying in Tunisia were at last partially dissuaded from tempting to destabilize Tunisian-Libyan relations or putting pressure on the Tunisian government to take a stand with either party. This has been especially true since the outbreak of the civil war in 2014. In 2016, Tunisia was active in its support of Libyan national dialogue and its resultant Government of National Accord with Fayeze Sarraj as its president. To this point, Khemaïes Jehinaoui, the then Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs, stressed the importance of a government that brings all Libyans together to agree on and to ensure the stability of Libya and that of Tunisia. Tunisia continued to maintain a hands-off position towards the raging conflict during the 2019 LAAF/LNA’s military operation in Tripoli where Marshall Haftar failed to take over the capital city.

And while the LNA/LAAF’s imminent threat to Tunisia’s neutrality was minimized after the failure of Haftar’s operation, political mobilization of Libyans in Tunisia remained largely unchanged since 2011. While an important change did occur with the breakthrough Libyan Political Dialogue Forum¹⁴ and Tunisia’s hosting of the event on 09 November 2020 (which marked the moment for Tunisia to make a comeback to the Libyan scene as a proactive actor), Libyan diaspora political mobilization from Tunisia has nonetheless remained within the framework of official processes.

THE LIBYAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA:

Shaping the Transnational Imagined Community

In contrast to the exile community in Tunisia, Libyan populations in Europe and North America are endowed with different relationships vis-à-vis the homeland, as well as different opportunities and constraints to mobilization, including rich networks with host country policymakers as well as different abilities to invest the public sphere. As a result, the types of mobilization that are occurring are often far more political in nature but are also being carried out by diaspora members that maintain different relationships with Libya, based more on a sense of moral obligation to contribute to the nation’s healing more than hopes of return, and largely based on the actions of second-generation Libyans. As a result, Libyan diasporic populations across North America and Europe have been marked by more proactive engagement with post-Gaddafi Libyan reconstruction, peacebuilding, and mobilization at the political, economic, cultural, and social levels.

When the Libyan uprising against the regime of Gaddafi began in February 2011, a group of young Libyan activists in European and North American cities, many of whom who had never lived under his autocratic regime, gathered and were able to connect online to establish transnational civil society organizations aiming towards the regeneration of the country. Due to decades long transnational repression of their voices, lives, and beings, Libyan exiles in farther locations had lost grounded touch with their homeland. The daunting idea of transitioning from “subjecthood to citizenship,” a process that involves transcending “the shackles of authoritarianism and embrace civic participation as a means of social change”¹⁵ for the first generation of Libyan exiles was realized by the successor generation, those who were usually born outside of Libya and knew it through the lived

¹⁴ UNSMIL, “Libyan Political Dialogue Forum Kicks Off in the Tunisian Capital and Discusses a Draft Political Roadmap” November 2020, available at <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/libyan-political-dialogue-forum-kicks-tunisian-capital-and-discusses-draft-political-roadmap>

¹⁵ Moss, 2016:495.

memories and accounts of their exiled parents. In this way, the coming out of members of the Libyan diaspora when the uprising against Gaddafi started represented a break with the past lack or absence of mobilization and a reckoning with the reality of the changing dynamics of the Libyan diaspora.¹⁶

What emerged were different forms of transnational activism, connecting Libyans in diaspora with those still inside the country, and working toward the empowerment of marginalized groups. These include the Libya Youth Forum and Civil Initiative Libya among the most prominent transnational NGOs,¹⁷ as well as the establishment of other organizations including the Libyan Women Platform for Peace, the Tamazight Women's Movement, and Together We Build It, all of which have been playing active roles in empowering women, youth, and the Amazigh minority population. In addition, a new type of transnational Libyan community, characterized by the use of online spaces and new technologies, emerged through the new generation of Libyans living abroad.¹⁸

The use of digital media has in fact been a major factor in the process of virtually gathering Libyans in diaspora and creating shared sense of community. Indeed, the single most prominent means of mass communication that spurred the Libyan diaspora during the 2011 uprising was Libya Al Ahrar TV, a Qatar-based TV channel whose journalists represented a generation of mainly young Libyans. These journalists, who lived in exile before the 2011 events, saw in this media outlet a window to the new, post-Gaddafi Libya. Broadcasting from Doha, the satellite channel echoed an anti-Gaddafi and pro-revolution rhetoric that reverberated abroad. This channel broadcast, for the first time in modern Libyan history, a program in the Tamazight language, a long-repressed language of a significant portion of the population living in the western part of the country.¹⁹ Its star presenter, Sana Mansouri, is a Libyan Amazigh from the coastal town of Zuwara, near the Tunisian border, and herself a diaspora Libyan. This, combined with rising pop singer Dania Ben Sassi and her "revolutionary" songs, galvanized not only Libyan Amazighs inside Libya but diffused across borders to the wider Amazigh diaspora in Europe, contributing to a pan-Amazigh cultural revival movement.²⁰

Diasporic Libyan online mobilization can also be perfectly epitomized in the active participation of young Libyans in the UK, Germany, Ireland, and North America who interact with new technologies to affect significant change in the social and political sphere in Libya as well as across the diaspora by building the transnational imagined community and by undertaking a process of frame alignment. Aware of the power of new media such as blogs, podcasts, and social media channels such as YouTube and Facebook, they have played a pivotal role in shaping the feeling of belonging to the Libyan nation, and in contributing to a shared understanding of the stakes of the Libyan conflict and the critical issues for peacebuilding to occur. In so doing, these new platforms have also been revealing the faces of a reinvigorated post-Gaddafi Libyan political and social sphere.

One prominent example of a participatory online mobilization platform is the Da Miri podcast by Libyan American Tariq Elmeri.²¹ The platform has become the main go-to online community for the Libyan diaspora in Europe and North America, inviting Libyan artists, students, journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, and writers. In particular, the podcast has shone a spotlight on Hisham Matar, an award-winning novel writer and a son of a Libyan dissident assassinated by Gaddafi in the 1970s, whose depiction of loss, exile, and memory have given the platform an international outlook and garnered an important following not only among members of the Libyan diaspora but also researchers and journalists working on Libya. Elmeri, himself the son of a Libyan exiled in the USA (with previous experience of living in Morocco), wanted the platform to bring together different Libyan voices for positive change in their lives as well as to reconnect Libyans from all walks of life together – all to be achieved through story telling.²² Likewise, the podcast Libya Matters,²³ the flagship online platform for the human rights network Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL), has featured since its launch in 2019 human rights practitioners and activists, civil society activists, as well as artists, lawyers, and academics. The podcast aims to produce casual conversations with experts and practitioners around issues of truth, justice, and human rights in Libya. In so doing, the podcast contributes to shaping the way both Libyan and non-Libyan listeners think about justice and rights-related issues in the Libyan context.

Podcasts have in fact proven to be one of the most valuable means of communication with otherwise hard to reach Libyans in the diaspora, given the unavailability of some on social media. Perhaps more importantly, though, podcasts have built a new level of trust among different diasporic Libyan communities, and in particular those in Europe. As Alunni elaborates on the issue of trust among Libyans abroad, mistrust and suspiciousness added to the sense of isolation but also the building of smaller communities along narrow ideological lines. As a result, there was a failure to "create an all-Libyan diasporic public space."²⁴ Podcasts have thus been able to counter these dynamics. In addition, the creation of an online community of diaspora Libyans has also served to spur others to continue in their activism, even if just by contributing to the building of the imagined community and participating in the virtual transnational space. Indeed, looking at a sample of profiles of Libyan diaspora listeners of

16 Moss, 2016; Alunni, 2019. See also Martin Russell and Ramadan Sanoussi Belhaj, "A Study on Libyans Living Abroad: Profiling of Libyans Living Abroad to Develop a Roadmap for Strategic and Institutional Engagement", International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2020.

17 Libya Youth Forum Facebook page, 2012.

18 Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020.

19 In the Jabal Nafusa region, in Zuwara, and Ghadames in the Fezzan region in particular.

20 Fatima El Issawi, "Transitional Libyan Media: Free at Last", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013; Karlos Zurutuza, "The Amazigh of Libya Revive Their Previously Banned Language", Middle East Eye, 09 January 2018.

21 <https://www.tariqelmeri.com/podcast>

22 Author interview, January 2021.

23 <https://www.buzzsprout.com/450046>

24 Alunni, 2019: 254-255.

the Da Miri podcast reveals an important continuity in activism. Among the six listeners who responded to the online questionnaire distributed through the podcast platform, all but one were civil society activists in Libya and all had left their country since 2011. And all but one continued their activism abroad, undertaking a variety of different online and offline activities to contribute to peacebuilding, consolidation of individual and civil liberties, and women's empowerment in Libya. These members of the Libyan diaspora, who are connected in the virtual online community, all express their desire to play a pivotal role in empowering the social categories in Libyan society that have often been marginalized, in particular women, and supporting the democratic process in Libya.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR DIRECT POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE DIASPORA

Beyond online activity and the shaping of opinion and the sense of nationhood, the Libyan diaspora is also engaging in direct forms of political activity that seek to have an immediate impact on the transition process and the post-Gaddafi order. At the broadest level, a historic moment for direct involvement of the Libyan diaspora in homeland politics was opened in 2012 with active efforts to include voting for Libyan citizens abroad in the legislative elections.²⁵ The first democratic elections in modern Libyan history (since its independence from Italy in 1951), Libyans of the diaspora were active in the mobilization of their communities in North Africa and the Middle East, Europe, North America and as far as Asia (in particular in Malaysia and China where there is a sizeable Libyan student population). The elections saw 60,000 register to participate, with women voting for the first time in Libyan history, casting their votes for the choice of 200 members of the General National Congress.²⁶ Yet, despite this “moment of enthusiasm” marked by a “moment of connectivity and community”²⁷ of the potential role of the diasporic community to contribute to the future of Libya after Gaddafi, limited institutional capacity resulted in low voter turnout of exiles, with only 8,021 actually casting ballots. The heavy legacy of the Gaddafi era and its institutional, informational, and implementation gaps acted as hurdles to the effective engagement of diaspora Libyans in the elections.²⁸

Nonetheless, there remains a potential to tap the diaspora for the purpose of rebuilding the new Libya.²⁹ In the wake of those elections, additional efforts have been made to mobilize the voting capacity of the Libyan diaspora. The High National Electoral Commission (HNEC), partnered with UNSMIL and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), engaged REBOOT, an NGO made up of strategists, organizers, and designers working on the development of solutions for the inclusion of underserved communities around the world in effecting

structural and social change for the designing of a platform for election inclusiveness in Libya. Out of this partnership was born the world's first mobile-based voter registration system used in December 2013 to support Libya's Constitutional Assembly Elections in 2014. With 11 integrated mobile and web applications, the system “facilitated secure voter registration for more than 1.1 million citizens, representing both those in Libya and diaspora in 13 countries.”³⁰ Moreover, the HNEC has been organizing several workshops, conferences, and events on voter registration and elections aimed at Libyans abroad since 2013. This is in addition to the Commission keeping a database of news and press releases of the different electoral campaigns, voter registration, and election-related partnerships with international organizations.³¹ The establishment of a voting platform, Vote Abroad, for diasporic Libyans was also created to boost Libyans abroad to participate in elections, while using their right to vote as enshrined in the Draft Libyan Constitution, which contains Article 149 on the “Rights of Libyans Abroad” stipulating that the “State shall undertake measures to ensure their participation in the electoral process.”³²

At the same time, however, the engagement of Libyans in diaspora in homeland politics has been curtailed by legal restrictions but also a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of those who have stayed in Libya. Though the National Transitional Council (2011), the General National Congress (GNC), and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (2016) were mainly composed of technocratic Libyan exiles, they had little-to-no experience with politics, given their estrangement to the Libyan political scene during the Gaddafi years, but were also alienated from the general population. Indeed, the term “double *shafra*,” which has become a pejorative catchphrase for any Libyan who is dual citizen or is a second or 1.5 generation of the Libyan diaspora, demonstrates the lack of legitimacy that Libyans abroad may hold in the eyes of those still in the homeland.³³ Adding to these constraints, one of the most prominent critical political junctures was the 2013 Political Isolation Law, which significantly shaped the potential role of the Libyan diaspora to participate directly in post-Gaddafi politics. The law banned the Gaddafi-era high officials from holding office for a period of time, a process compared to Iraq's de-Baathification, that has resulted in an increase in the

²⁵ Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020.

²⁶ UNDP Libya, “Supporting Inclusivity in Libya's National Congress Election: Out of Country Voting,” July 2012, available at <https://www.ly.undp.org/content/libya/en/home/stories/out-of-country-voting.html>

²⁷ Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.

²⁸ Laurie A. Brand, “Arab Uprisings and the Changing Frontiers of Transnational Citizenship: Voting from Abroad in Political Transitions.” *Political Geography*, Vol.41, 2014.

²⁹ Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.

³⁰ Reboot, “Case Study: Supporting Democratic Transition Through Fair Elections”, 2014, available at <https://reboot.org/case-studies/ict-for-voter-registration-libya/>

³¹ HNEC website, www.hnec.ly.

³² International Commission of Jurists, “The Draft Libyan Constitution: Procedural Deficiencies, Substantive Flaws”, 2015:31-32, available at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/57ee86814.pdf>

³³ See Alunni, 2019 for a detailed description of these generations.

number of losers of the Libyan transition.³⁴ The law has had a negative impact on diaspora Libyans as it has weakened their ability to influence the political developments in Libya³⁵ and adversely affected the well-functioning of Libyan institutions. It thus exacerbated the already volatile security situation in Libya.³⁶ This has also added to the skepticism about the ability of Libyans abroad to play an effective role in the rebuilding of the country and its institutions.³⁷

Nonetheless, mobilization of diaspora Libyans for the purpose of contributing to the transitional process and reconstruction has found different channels for action, ranging from traditional lobbying of the political sector in host countries to the channeling of development aid to the pursuit of transitional justice. One prominent group, the Libyan American Alliance (LAA), which is based in Washington DC and caters to the Libyan American community as well as Libyan Canadians, has long engaged in lobbying and outreach to US policymakers. Describing itself as a non-partisan group dedicated to “advocating rule of law, civil state, democracy and an end to the conflict in Libya,” LAA recently lobbied for a lawsuit against General Khalifa Haftar, accusing him of having committed atrocities during his military campaigns notably in 2019.³⁸ In November 2020, LAA also celebrated a symbolic victory for its lobbying work with US policymakers with the passage of the Libyan Stabilization Act by the US Congress that “requires the US administration to clarify its strategy, report on foreign interventions, and impose sanctions on those who violate the arms embargo or seek to undermine the stability and security of Libya.”³⁹ Yet beyond lobbying actions, LAA has also engaged in work with women in Libya and civil society more generally during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included coordinating with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on Libyans and support Covid-19 medical infrastructure in Libya.⁴⁰

Another major player on the scene is the transnational network Lawyers For Justice in Libya (LFJL), which seeks to hold accountable anyone involved in human rights violations in Libya. Working in collaboration with international organizations and some Western governments and their agencies, LFJL is prime case of a post-2011 mobilization network of human rights practitioners that has arisen not only in the Libyan case but indeed in numerous other post-2011 MENA diasporas. The organization’s activities include suing perpetrators of crimes committed on civilians and providing assistance to victims of forced displacement, in addition to advocacy efforts toward international organizations including the UN and the International Criminal Court. For example, in June 2020, LFJL supported the UN fact-finding mission bring to light the Tarhuna mass graves, which indicted General Khalifa Haftar’s LNA forces for having perpetrated crimes against civilians and forced disappearances early in 2020. The organization also publishes a Universal Political Review with fact-sheets on the state of human rights in Libya.

Most recently, the role of the Libyan diaspora in contributing to the political transition in Libya has been observed in the Libyan

Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) and the breakthrough achieved in February 2021. The LPDF, composed of 75 members representing the broadest possible cross-section of Libyan society along with a larger digital dialogue, was an attempt to escape the impasse of the UN peacebuilding process by establishing a fully Libyan-owned effort at mediation to define a potential resolution. The LPDF, which notably included members of the Libyan diaspora, was able to successfully designate a new prime minister and presidency council in the run-up to the elections scheduled for December 2021. The presence of diaspora Libyans in the LPDF and its adjacent groups has demonstrated the capacity of those outside the country to directly participate in transition processes under a banner of shared Libyan national identity – and the capacity to overcome the divisions between those inside and outside Libya when provided with forums for meaningful dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This study is not meant to be an exhaustive catalogue of Libyan diasporic communities across the world; rather, it aims to shed light on the various dynamics that inform diasporic engagement. The Libyan diaspora remains poorly covered and researched, given the complexity of the topic and the enmeshed narratives of Libyans in exile, ranging from political and economic elites long-since settled in Western capitals to more recently irregular migrants fleeing to southern Europe following the deteriorating economic and security situation in Libya. Nonetheless, leveraging the capacity of the Libyan diaspora to act as a political actor for the country’s transition, reconstruction, and reconciliation requires a more substantive strategy to map out this population that balances quantitative and qualitative methods with the scarcity of updated and reliable data on the demographics of Libyans abroad. Social media has played a major role in shedding the light on the rich experience of engagement and mobilization of Libyans abroad for the betterment of their communities. These new spaces have also promoted an image of a Libya that cuts with the usual news of a conflict-ridden country where the quest for the rule of law and the upholding of human rights are absent from the historical narrative. Indeed, the diasporic Libyan media sphere can continue to promote democracy and peacebuilding while also encouraging additional representation of Libyan marginalized groups in order to enlarge the sense of belonging to the nation.

³⁴ Roman David and Houda Mzioudet, “Personnel Change or Personal Change? Rethinking Libya’s Political Isolation Law”, *Brookings Doha Center – Stanford Paper Series*, No.4., 2014.

³⁵ Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.

³⁶ Seeberg, 2019.

³⁷ Russel and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.

³⁸ Bassma Barakat, “Tunisia: Conference to Seek Disarmament Strategy in Libya”, *Al Araby Al Jadeed*, 07 September 2015.

³⁹ House Bill HR 4644.

⁴⁰ LAA Zoom meeting, 25 July 2020.

Beyond these more symbolic efforts at nation-building and the promotion of an inclusive Libyan-ness, other concrete actions can be taken in order to ensure the inclusion of diaspora Libyans in the country's post-Gaddafi future. Most importantly, the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2021 provide a ripe opportunity for the diaspora to play a role in election monitoring, logistical support, and the provision of information to voters – and in this way to continue participating the in country's political transition.

The Long Shadow of War:

Mobilization Dynamics of the Yemeni Diaspora

since 2011

Maysaa Jusha Al-Deen

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising and ensuing descent into protracted conflict, a new wave of Yemeni migration has transpired, marked by different socio-political profiles than previous waves of migration and the transformation in places of destination. As a result, existing Yemeni diaspora communities in countries such as the UK and the US have seen important changes in the economic and political make-up of their members, while new diaspora communities have emerged in countries heretofore largely off the radar of Yemeni migration. Importantly, these transformations in Yemeni migration are also a reflection of conflict dynamics, which pattern the destination of migrants but also the relationships within diaspora communities and their mobilization dynamics towards Yemen. This latest wave of conflict-motivated migration is characterized by the large number of intellectual and political elites; however, this has not necessarily translated into sustained political engagement or mobilization for the sake of peacebuilding and/or reconstruction. Looking at Yemeni diaspora communities in three countries of destination – the UK, Egypt, and Turkey – reveals how the space of freedom for organization that each country provides, as well as conflict dynamics back home, impact the nature and positionality of the particular community in question and shape the forms of and possibilities for diaspora mobilization.

Based on more than twenty interviews and a review of the activities of more than twelve Yemeni diaspora organizations working in UK, Egypt and Turkey, this paper assesses the political, cultural, and social roles that the Yemeni diaspora is trying to play both towards the diaspora itself and towards Yemen, and how these are impacted by the long shadow of the conflict in Yemen. While the UK diaspora does engage in political mobilization, this is marked by trends of polarization and the external intervention of parties to the conflict that seek to garner support for their cause through their diasporic communities. Meanwhile, for the Yemeni diasporas in Turkey and Egypt, the constrained civic space and fear of exacerbating internal frictions that mirror those back home has meant that mobilization is geared towards the provision of social services and culture activities rather than political remittances towards Yemen. Thus, while diaspora political organization in support of conflict resolution could in theory be possible, the characteristics of these diaspora

communities, along with the political opportunity structures of host societies, have translated to a decreased overall capacity for political mobilization for the purpose of peacebuilding.

YEMEN:

A History of Immigration and Emigration

This history of Yemen is marked by three great waves of migration. The first, following the collapse of the [Ma'rib dam](#) during the 5th century and provoking the decline of ancient Yemeni civilization, saw migration to different areas in the Arabian Peninsula, Levant, and North Africa. The second wave, which took place after the emergence of Islam during the 8th century, led to [migration](#) to Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Spain (Andalusia) in part due to the fact that Yemenis participated heavily in the Muslim armies that conquered those areas. The third great wave, that of modern migration, saw the [mass movement](#) of Yemenis to Gulf countries, starting in the mid-20th century and reaching its peak in the 1970s and the 1980s. Stemming from economic imperatives and the lure of far better paying jobs next door, this wave of mass movement differed from previous ones in that it was not a permanent resettlement but rather a displacement of workers who were expected to return. This modern migration was also marked by the emergence of economic remittances, which became a pillar of the Yemeni economy. It is estimated that more than 10 million Yemenis have settled in almost 40 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, providing US\$ 3.4 billion annually as [remittances](#) inside Yemen.

Much of modern migration of Yemenis was also the result of various instances of civil conflict in the last 60 or so years; however, this did not translate to a massive political elite diaspora. The 1962 Republican revolution in the North of Yemen sent only the royal family to exile. Meanwhile, the independence of the South of Yemen in 1967, leading to the establishment of a Communist regime in 1968, resulted in the immigration of business owners (along with westerners and other foreigners) from Aden city, along with tens of sultans and tribal sheikhs and their families. Importantly, though, most of this elite were not politically

active and did not try to oppose the sitting regimes, regardless of place of settlement. As Yemen was divided according to Cold War camps, the semi-capitalist Northern Yemen became host to opposition figures of the Communist South and vice-versa. Likewise, after reunification in 1990, a certain space for political opposition opened within Yemen, marked by the multiplication of political parties. And following the civil war of 1994, prominent figures of the Socialist Party left Yemen to the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UK. Yet, even then, as a space of freedom was left, the political opposition was possible through the political parties and media.

The onset of a new cycle of contention in 2011, followed by conflict in 2015, and the ensuing demographics of the diaspora and forms of transnational politics that have resulted, are thus quite new in the long history of Yemeni diaspora. While throughout the 20th century most Yemenis immigrated for economic reasons, the aftermath of the 2011 uprising saw a new political factor resulting from the current war. This has changed the nature of the Yemeni diaspora, by creating not only new economic migrants but also a political diaspora that has actively sent political remittances towards the homeland. Indeed, the phenomenon of political elites and activists in diaspora actively participating in political mobilization is quite new in the Yemeni context. Yet this phenomenon is not uniform in nature: the destination of Yemeni migrants is both influenced by political ideology and affinity, but also has an important mediating factor in their forms of diaspora mobilization and organization. Exploring Yemeni diaspora groups in the UK, Egypt, and Turkey reveals demographic cluster formation in diaspora, but also how different political opportunity structures in host countries effect transnational mobilization.

YEMENIS IN THE UK: The Ebb and Flow of Mobilization

While the Yemeni diaspora population in the UK was estimated to be between 70,000-80,000 people as per the 2001 census, and represents one of the oldest Muslim diasporas in the country, those who actively mobilize today, whether working for diaspora integration or trying to influence the British government policy towards Yemen, are members of the first generation. As visiting Yemen has become near-impossible as result of the current conflict, ties with Yemen are becoming weak or totally lost. The feeling among many in the second generation as expressed in interviews and informal discussions is that they are British more than Yemeni. This is combined with a shared view that Yemen, in this war, is becoming a helpless country. These factors have minimized interest in Yemen by those in the diaspora. Just as importantly, though, the war has divided the Yemeni diaspora in

the UK in an unprecedented way and has created a widespread feeling of disappointment. While Yemeni diaspora political activism in the UK still exists, this is without a large degree of enthusiasm, especially among those from the North of Yemen.

The history of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK dates back to 1860 in South Shield, comprised of [seamen](#) who immigrated from the British colony in Aden city. Following World War Two, with Britain in need of workers, hundreds of Yemenis immigrated to work in British factories and settled in the industrial areas such as Sheffield, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. When the industrial economy retreated by the end of the 1970s, after the economic rise of Southeast Asian countries, Yemeni immigration decreased and some even returned to Yemen or indeed immigrated again to the Gulf States. Until the 1980s, few Yemenis immigrants were accompanied by their families; this trend began to change, however, in the 1970s as South Asians who had worked with the British colonial enterprise in Africa and Asia settled in the UK with their families by the end of the 1970s, which encouraged Yemenis to do the same.¹ This trend towards family immigration also resulted from the low salaries and high costs of living in the UK.²

This shift in the nature of immigration from single men as non-permanent workers to families seeking more permanent resettlement led to significant changes within the Yemeni diaspora's concerns and priorities. The first Yemeni organization, the Allawia Society, was founded in the late 1930s by Sheikh Abdullah Ali Al Hakimi as a religious foundation designed to provide social services to the Yemeni community as well as spaces for gathering and meetings. The Allawia Society's importance declined with the rise of political struggle in Yemen, and in particular with both the republican revolution in 1962 in the North of Yemen that overthrew the Imamate and the start of the guerrilla war against the British colony in the South. During this time, Yemenis in the UK diaspora were quite active politically, and got involved with Arab Nationalist and leftist movements within the Arab Workers Union, established in 1961. Primarily active in Birmingham, the Union's main activities included fundraising for development projects in the homeland, organizing political campaigns in the UK, convening meeting for the Yemeni community, and holding literacy classes for members of the diaspora, among others.³

Yet by the end of the 1970s, with the increasing trend of family immigration, this political activism decreased as members of the diaspora became more concerned with keeping their identity and customs. This demographic shift also coincided with an important political shift occurring throughout the Arab world. The decline of political liberation and independence movements, along with the rise of the political Islamic movements, saw a shift towards identity issues. As one interviewee explained,

¹ Author interview, 10 October 2020.

² Author interview, 22 October 2020.

³ Fred Halliday, "Yemeni Workers' Organizations in Britain," *Race and Class*, Vol.33 No.4, 1992.

people became more concerned with their personal issues and distanced themselves from politics.⁴

As a result of these demographic and political changes, the Yemeni representative bodies in the UK also underwent changes. In 1986, the first Yemeni Community Association was established in Sheffield, and subsequently in many British cities that hosted the Yemeni diaspora such as Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester.⁵ Yet unlike earlier organizations, these associations were not concerned with politics in the homeland, focusing instead on providing social services for integration in the UK, such as legal advising, English language instruction for older immigrants, Arabic language instruction for children, and the building of mosques. Members of these associations were elected by the Yemeni diaspora and were funded by the British government, with only very small funds from the Yemeni government.

Over the past few years, and especially in 2010, this shift in focus from Yemen toward the UK was the result of both changing attachments within the diaspora but also funding constraints presented in the UK. On one hand, the importance of these associations had decreased as new generations were less attached to the home country. Yet at the same time, attracting funding to maintain these organizations required a shift away from emphasis on Yemen. As explained by one interviewee, the decision to change the name of their association in Sheffield to “Aspiring Community Together” was undertaken as connecting their name to Yemen became a barrier to receiving greater amounts of money. Yet, he goes on to explain that “we should not confine our activities to the homeland, and we have to be more active and involved in British politics and economy, this specific thing can develop the community and integrate more with the British society.”⁶

Southern Yemen Political Mobilization

The Yemeni civil war of 1994 between the Socialist party in the South and the government in Sana’a created a rift among the Yemeni diaspora in UK, and revived political activism in the diaspora. This was at least partially the result of new trends in migration provoked by the war: Yemeni migration for those from the South largely favoured the UK as a base for their opposition in exile due to the colonial history in the South of Yemen and the Southern diaspora that already existed in the UK,⁷ which rendered it an attainable destination for the most Southerners. In the aftermath, the seeds of Southern diaspora political mobilization that had been planted would become effective in subsequent years.

In 1997, the first Yemeni political opposition from exile since the 1960s was established. The National Front of the Southern Opposition, otherwise known as MOWJ, which was led by

Abdulrahman al Jifri and funded by the Saudi government until 2000, succeeded in gathering constituents of the Southern diaspora to work for the establishment of an independent state, or at least to reform the path of Yemen’s unity. Among their goals was to gather Southerners, raise awareness for the Southern cause, and try to lobby and influence the British government. This initiative did not last, however, and was totally closed in 2002 due to the drying up of [Saudi funding](#). In 2003, another Southern opposition organization was established in the UK, the Southern Democratic Assembly, or TAJ as it is known. This organization was popular among Southerners in the UK as was founded at the same time as the new secessionist movement in the South of Yemen emerged.⁸ And six years later, in 2009, another Southern organization was established, the South Yemen National Board, headed by the first prime minister of the Yemeni unity cabinet, Haidar al Attas. This organization worked for the Southern cause, targeted the Socialists mainly, and called for reforming Yemeni unity rather than secession. Yet, this specific set of claims – focused on unity reform as opposed to secession – proved less popular than those of TAJ.

Post-2011: Increased Political Mobilization, Increased Polarization

In 2011, with the popular uprising, the Yemeni diaspora became active in an unprecedented way. Yemenis from the North launched demonstrations and pressure campaigns to support the uprising, which was facilitated by a receptive environment given the great interest and attention of the British government and media on the MENA region. Yet this diasporic mobilization in favour of the uprising was not representative of the whole; on the contrary, the movement resulted in another division among the Northerners in the UK, particularly in Birmingham, as some of them favoured the Saleh regime. According to interviews, this division is in part a reflection of different political party affinities, and namely the division between those supporting the ruling General Congress Party and those ideologically affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islah party.⁹ And while some Southerners were sympathetic with the uprising and participated in supporting major events, the majority had been too disenfranchised by unity with the North, dubious that radical reform for a fundamentally altered path of Yemeni unity could be possible.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in the early years after 2011, divisions were assuaged by hope for the future and a largely optimistic atmosphere.

⁴ Author interview, 10 October 2020.

⁵ Author interview, 22 October 2020.

⁶ Author interview, 22 October 2020.

⁷ Author interview, 22 October 2020.

⁸ Author interview, 16 October 2020.

⁹ Author Interview, 20 October 2020.

¹⁰ Author Interview, 23 October 2020.

The eruption of war in Yemen in 2015, however, created a new rift within the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, as well as a prevalent degree of political apathy. Profoundly aggrieved by the Houthis' invasion of their region, Southerners in the diaspora became increasingly divided from Northerners and were active in organizing demonstrations to support the Saudi-UAE led coalition until the retreat of the Houthi forces from the South in July 2015.¹¹ On the other hand, while Northerners were divided according to their stances on the Houthi-Saleh coalition, the dominant feeling was that of disappointment: most Northerners were against both the Saudi-UAE led coalition and the Houthis at the same time. The result was political lassitude among the Northerners, who as such refrained from taking any action that could serve even inadvertently to strengthen one side of the conflict.¹² Yet, this political apathy was also the result of declined interest on the part of British media and the British government in the Yemeni situation, unlike in 2011.

In 2017, the establishment of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) led to huge Southern diaspora mobilization, including demonstrations to signal support and the spreading of STC propaganda. Importantly, this diaspora mobilization was encouraged by the STC. As the first important organized structure trying to represent the South, the Council established an office in London in 2019 following the visit of STC's president, Aidaroos al Zubaidi, to the UK, at which time he made a specific call on the Yemeni diaspora base in Sheffield.¹³ However, this Southern mobilization has decreased over time as many Southerners started to oppose the STC, which they deemed not sufficiently firm in its opposition to the recognized government. In addition, a new division within the Southern diaspora in the UK emerged following the conflict in August 2019,¹⁴ as conflict dynamics within the South saw the emergence of pro- and anti-STC factions. Nonetheless, efforts on the part of the STC to influence diaspora mobilization continued. After the establishment of the STC office in London, another group, the [Friends of South Yemen](#) was formed with the aim to pressure [British policy](#) towards the South for the establishment of an independent Southern state in partial disagreement with the policies of STC. A similar group, the Labour Friends of Yemen, was established with a similar purpose, though this group also included Northerners and so did not take part in Southern divisions.

Interesting, this increased polarization has also taken on a cross-diaspora dimension. The Yemeni diaspora is networking with other sympathetic diasporas and receiving support from various other forms of solidarity, including participation in Yemeni demonstrations or assistance in reaching the British media or decision makers. The best example is the relationship between

the pro-Houthis from one side and the Bahraini opposition and Shiite Iraqi diasporas from the other side. The Southerners find similar support from other diasporas such as the Kurdish, Sunni Iraqis, and Somalilanders who have participated in their demonstrations and events.

Charity and Cultural Work as Remaining Signs of Diaspora Unity

Despite political divisions, it is worth noting that all of those who were interviewed agreed that these multiple divisions do not exert influence on social relationships within the Yemeni diaspora. Indeed, all interviewees confirmed that the social relationships among Yemenis in the UK diaspora are not affected by political divisions, unlike other Arab communities. To this point, they still gather normally at events like marriages or funerals, although they agreed that the sense of unity and harmony was much better in the past. The banning of qat¹⁵ in the UK six years ago is in fact cited as one of the principal factors negatively affecting the diaspora. Qat sessions were regarded as prime opportunities for more regular social gatherings; importantly, though, they were also informal forums where different political opinions were freely exchanged. These venues thus allowed for members of the diaspora to remain connected despite political differences and to be more aware of one another's perspectives. Now, Yemeni gatherings are irregular and there is a notable absence of constant discussion, which has led to some misunderstandings and deepened disagreements.

Nonetheless, Yemeni diaspora organization in the cultural sector was and remains today an active field of collective action. For example, the [British-Yemeni Society](#) that was founded in 1993 by prominent Yemeni politicians, intellectuals, British academics, and ambassadors is a charity organization that receives its funding from the British government and Yemeni businessmen. It publishes an annual academic journal on Yemen and issued a book about Yemen, titled *Why Yemen Matters*, and remains active today. Likewise, while the interest in intellectual activities has decreased in recent years given the war, a few diaspora organizations working on cultural issues have continued to be established, such as [Tamadon](#), which was established in 2017 and aims to raise issues related to Arab culture targeting the Yemeni diaspora.

Similarly, despite the increased political fractures, one remaining field where the UK Yemen diaspora is still able to work together is in charity efforts. Sheffield's community, for example, regularly sends donations to Yemen, reaching up to 200,000 pounds.¹⁶ Donations are also collected regularly by different UK-based Yemeni diaspora organizations, and mainly by Mercy Relief and Saba Relief, or even from the community associations (Saba Relief, for example, collects donations mostly from other Muslim communities such as the South Asian community in the UK for an annual income of almost 2.2 million pounds). These donations are distributed all over Yemen regardless of the region. Adding

¹¹ Author Interview, 23 October 2020.

¹² Author Interview, 20 October 2020.

¹³ Author Interview, 23 October 2020.

¹⁴ Helen Lackner and Raiman Al-Hamdani, Raiman, "War and Pieces: Political Divides in Southern Yemen", European Council on Foreign Relations, January 2020, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/war_and_pieces_political_divides_in_southern_yemen/

¹⁵ Qat, also known as khat, is a plant that releases an amphetamine-like high when chewed.

¹⁶ Author interview, 22 October 2020.

to their donations, Yemenis in the UK continue to provide remittances for their extended families in their home country. Despite such efforts, though, the impact remains limited because of numerous access obstacles imposed by both the Saudi-UAE coalition as well as the Houthis, in addition to travel restrictions which prevent the monitoring of donation distribution.¹⁷

YEMENI DIASPORA MOBILIZATION IN EGYPT:

Limitations in Scope and Size

Egypt has long been a preferred destination of Yemenis seeking residence abroad (albeit with only rare cases of asylum), study opportunities, and in some cases business abroad, and this trend has only continued since the outbreak of the current conflict in Yemen. Since the 1930s, and thanks to the shared language and easy access, Egypt has been the preferred higher-education destination of upper-class Yemenis, a trend that only increased in the 1960s following the Egyptian military intervention in Northern Yemen. Indeed, the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt has always been sizeable and relatively integrated in Egyptian society. It is also diverse and includes students, businessmen, intellectuals, politicians, and millions of visitors for tourism, medical care, and other purposes. Indeed, by the 1980s, some significant businesses were owned by Yemenis in Egypt, including the Coca Cola Company and some food products factories.

In the wake of the 2015 war, Egypt has received a huge wave of Yemeni migrants. The population is now estimated to be 500,000-700,000 residents in addition to thousands of other visitors annually, though only 9,200 Yemenis in Egypt are registered as refugees with UNCHR.¹⁸ This represents a considerable increase, as the number of Yemeni residents in Egypt before the war did not exceed 70,000.¹⁹ At the beginning of the war, Egypt issued visa restrictions for the first time, marking a significant break with the past when Yemenis could visit without a visa and live in Egypt without a residency permit. A few months later, though, the government reversed course, easing the procedures for obtaining visas through the furnishing of a medical report proving the need to seek medical care in Egypt – a source of important revenues for the Egyptian healthcare sector. These medical reports can be easily obtained in Yemen, regardless of health condition, and as a result Egypt is once again the most accessible country for Yemenis, and in particular for those who live in Yemen (the visa process remains difficult for Yemenis who live outside the country). In addition to this, the residency procedures have become easier and more systematic, requiring renewal once every six months or even annually. As such, Egypt has become a constant hub for thousands of Yemenis who are fleeing the war or the Houthi suppression, and in particular politicians, intellectuals, and journalists.

Yet, despite the long history of the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt, mobilization and diaspora organizations have been relatively

insignificant. A major exception was the Yemeni Student Union in Egypt was politically active following the Egyptian revolution in 1952 and even played a major role in the Yemeni opposition against the Imamate regime in the North and the British colony in the South,²⁰ conducting activities such as the organization of demonstrations, raising awareness about the Yemeni cause in the Egyptian media, and meeting with Egyptian officials to support the Yemeni movement in the North and South. This notwithstanding, it was only in 2006 that an association of the Yemeni diaspora was first established, though its purpose was less directed towards the homeland than the provision of social services for members of the diaspora. With the onset of the war however, and the problems that have been posed to Yemenis living in Egypt, new forms of diaspora mobilization have emerged. When the war erupted on 26 March 2015, and flights to and from Yemen were suspended, thousands of Yemenis were [stranded in Egypt](#) yet without the funds necessary to live there. This crisis continued for two months, during which time neither the Yemeni embassy nor the Egyptian government was able to find a solution. In their place, Yemeni students in the Egypt diaspora collected donations from Yemeni businessmen and assisted in providing a monthly stipend to those stranded and in need.

From this spontaneous civic and community-oriented mobilization other forms of diaspora mobilization emerged. The organization Mubadara, established during the COVID-19 crisis for example, provides services to Yemeni refugees, including job training and psycho-social support. Likewise, the Yemeni publishing house Arowqa, established in Cairo in 2010, has increased its activities and publications and has become more focused on Yemen, benefiting from the increase in Yemeni intellectuals present in the diaspora in Egypt.²¹ Similarly, another Yemeni cultural institution was founded in Egypt in the wake of the war, Sabaa for Culture and Art, creating a bookshop specialized in Yemeni books in addition to sponsoring and supporting Yemeni artists and artisans who have settled in Egypt since 2015.²²

This limited number of Yemeni diaspora organizations, and their highly restricted scope, is demonstrative of the important restrictions to civic space in the Egyptian context. Mubadara, for example, operates without official permission as a result of high costs of registration, working instead under the cover of the Sudanese organization Ahlam or UNCHR.²³ Indeed, working under

¹⁷ Author interview, 25 October 2020.

¹⁸ Author interview, 28 October 2020.

¹⁹ Qabool Al-Absi, Qabool, "The Struggle Far from Home: Yemeni Refugees in Egypt", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 2020, available at <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/12286>

²⁰ Sadiq Muhammad Al-Safwani, "The Establishment of Yemeni Student Missions in Egypt in the 1930s", (Arabic), *Arabian Humanities*, Vol.12, 2019.

²¹ The publishing house owner believes that the intellectual atmosphere in Egypt has deteriorated since 2013, due to the feeling of fear and disappointment. This stands in contrast to the situation during 2011-2013 when the feelings of optimism and freedom were dominant. Author interview, 23 September 2020.

²² Author interview, 30 September 2020.

²³ Author interview, 23 September 2020.

the cover of other organizations is a well-utilized manoeuvring strategy for Yemeni associations given the difficulty of obtaining permission for their civic activities. Other organizations, such as Al Mashhad Al Yemeni and the organization Women's Voices of Peace Network have carved out space through obtaining permits from the Yemeni government to operate abroad, although these still face limitations in terms of operational capacity.

Perhaps just as importantly, and as in the UK, the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt faces divisions that are regional and political, which has hampered its ability to organize and mobilize, with the difference being that those in Egypt lack the margin of freedom that allows for these divisions to exist. As a case in point, the Yemeni Student Union has been mostly disabled and elections have stopped functioning since 2011²⁴ for fear of triggering internal disagreement as a result of different political or ideological stances with regards to the conflict.

THE NEW YEMENI DIASPORA IN TURKEY:

Ideological Cohesion, Limited Organization

While prior to 2015 only few Yemeni students received scholarships to study in Turkey, the country since the outbreak of war has become an important migration destination. In a very short period, Turkey has welcomed thousands of Yemenis fleeing the conflict and Houthi oppression. This has included Yemeni businessmen and ordinary people who previously lived in the Gulf countries but who ultimately preferred to settle in Turkey in light of recent restrictions on Yemeni investors and immigrants in the GCC. As a result, Turkey is now home to at least 30,000 Yemenis, including 4,500 university students.²⁵

This fast resettlement of Yemenis to Turkey has been accompanied by the emergence of new media channels and organizational structures. There are currently three Yemeni TV channels that broadcast from Istanbul, funded primarily by Qatar. The oldest, Belqess TV, owned by Nobel laureate Tawakkol Karman, was established in August 2014 with its primary broadcast center in Sana'a. However, pressure from the Houthis forced the channel to transfer most of the staff to Istanbul in February 2015, and by March of that year the office in the Yemeni capital was forcibly shut. The channel has been granted official permission to work from the Turkish government, given that it pays taxes, employs Turks, and – importantly – does not interfere in the politics of the Turkish government.²⁶

In addition, since 2015, two important Yemeni associations have been established, the Yemeni Diaspora Association that organizes meetings for Yemenis and provides social services for Yemeni residents and the Yemeni Student Union Association, which was consolidated from eight smaller and separate student unions following the eruption of the war and the rapid

increase in the size of the Yemeni student body and is active in organizing cultural and social events and providing services for Yemeni students. Financially, both of them rely on member dues and the donations of businessmen. Interestingly, there is no regional division within the Yemeni Student Union, except for an attempt from the students of Hadramout, who tried (and failed) to establish an independent union.²⁷ Yet, while there is no regional division present, there is a distinct hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Union, which is demonstrative of the ideological leanings of the majority of Yemenis in Turkey. The only real challenge facing the absolute Brotherhood hegemony is an independent movement not affiliated with any political party and representing mostly liberal secular students who present themselves as the new republicans. This movement, which is currently becoming popular in the North of Yemen and is considered part of the struggle against the Houthis, intersects with another popular discourse calling to revive the national identity and connect Yemen to its pre-Islamic roots. While this independent movement cannot win the student union elections due to its poor organizational abilities compared to the Brotherhood, it has succeeded in establishing some cultural clubs, such as Fikr and Al-Iklil, which have organized several cultural conferences focused on historical and identity issues.

Despite the low degree of formal organization, the Yemeni diaspora in Turkey is in general anti-Houthi and pro-government, which has created a solid common ground despite minor disagreements. Consequently, collective mobilization is possible, as seen in the large demonstration that was organized against the UAE, particularly when it stood with the STC forces against the government's army that was targeted by an Emirati air strike in August 2019.²⁸ Nonetheless, several important obstacles face the new Yemeni diaspora in Turkey. Firstly, the difficulties of learning the language has hindered integration in general and created gaps between parents and their children who are learning Turkish in school.²⁹ Secondly, the Yemeni embassy has been without an ambassador since 2017, as a result of the tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia/UAE, which has harmed the interests of the Yemeni diaspora in Turkey and increased the difficulty of obtaining visas and residency permits.³⁰ Such obstacles have a negative impact on the diaspora's mobilization capacity by diverting resources and energy to issues related to resettlement as opposed to political organizing towards Yemen.

²⁴ Author interview, 28 October 2020.

²⁵ Author interview, 30 October 2020.

²⁶ Author interview, 28 October 2020.

²⁷ Author interview, 31 October 2020.

²⁸ Muhammad Abdul Malik, "The Yemeni Community in Turkey Demonstrates to Denounce the Practices of the UAE in their Country", (Arabic), Al-Jazeera, available at: <https://bit.ly/3sDbwCH>

²⁹ Author interview, 30 October 2020.

³⁰ Author interview, 28 October 2020.

CONCLUSION

The distinctions between the Yemeni diasporas in the UK, Egypt, and Turkey are apparent and reflect the different circumstances in which they arose, yet they also demonstrate quite different patterns of mobilization and organization. In comparing these diasporas and the forms of collective action they undertake, it is possible to grasp how socio-political characteristics, afforded spaces within host societies, and conflict dynamics back home interact to shape mobilization opportunities and constraints. In the UK, where the diaspora is old and had become largely integrated into British society, with most benefiting from British citizenship, there is a diverse Yemeni community that reflects the long history of immigration to the UK and the multiple motivations for immigration. While the war has posed a real challenge for this diverse diaspora in threatening its tranquillity, the democratic atmosphere and the strong relationships between members have enabled the diaspora to weather the negative consequences of the war and the divisions it has provoked at the social level. Yet at the same time, the political divisions that exist thanks to this diversity, and space provided for political mobilization, have created new forms of polarization, especially given different mobilization capacities that favour the Southern secessionist cause through the STC's efforts towards instrumentalizing the UK diaspora.

This contradicts the case of the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt, also characterized by diversity yet marked by the absence of a democratic atmosphere which obstructs the possibility of managing internal disagreements but also the space for political organizing. As a result, diaspora associations and the student union have failed in organizing elections and other actions to avoid producing internal conflicts that mirror dynamics in Yemen. What is more, the political authoritarian system does not provide work opportunities, whether on the political, cultural,

or social level, though Yemenis have succeeded relatively well in implementing some form of workarounds to organize in Egypt. Nonetheless, diaspora organization is more limited to either cultural activities or the provision of services to those in Egypt. As for the situation in Turkey, the relatively new diaspora that has emerged as a direct result of the current conflict is heavily dominated by one political group. Thus, while the space for organization and mobilization is greater than in Egypt, there is a lack of any kind of diversity due to the pull-and-push surrounding Yemeni migration to Turkey.

Historically, the Yemeni diaspora has played a vital role in supporting the home country by raising funds to finance development projects or providing support to the national movements that struggled against the Imamah in the North or the British colony in the South. In the face of today's conflict, while different diasporas communities are trying to support Yemen through charity work, the unprecedented divisions along with constrained operational space have decreased their capacity to play a role in promoting peace or finding political solutions. Importantly, this has been the result not only of divisions within the diaspora communities themselves, which act as an obstacle to organization or coordination, but also the result of different policies of host countries. Nonetheless, as Egypt hosts a large part of the Yemeni political and intellectual elite, and as it remains the best place for diaspora Yemenis to meet with those still inside the country, it could be a suitable place for coordination between different Yemeni factions interested in working towards peace. Such a possibility, though, would be dependent on the Egyptian government's willingness to host such meetings. Thus, while opportunities do exist for the Yemeni diaspora to play a greater political role in the resolution of conflict, this is dependent both on overcoming internal divisions and also on granting a civic space that is free from external intervention.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



contact@arab-reform.net

Paris - Beirut - Tunis