



THE NEW ARAB DIASPORA SERIES

MEDIATIZED ARAB DIASPORAS:

*Understanding the Role of
Transnational Media in Diasporic
Political Action Formation*



Arab
Reform
Initiative



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Foreword

by *Sarah Anne Rennick*

Over the past decade, Europe has been experiencing an important wave of migration emanating from the Arab region, reaching its peak in 2015. These migratory flows and subsequent processes of diasporization of MENA populations in European spaces have often been the result of deteriorating conditions in home countries, including intractable conflict, repression and renewed authoritarianism, and economic and even State collapse. Yet, alongside this expansion and diversification of MENA diaspora communities in Europe has been a mixture of increasing popular and political hostility in host sites to migrants and asylum seekers along with the opening of new opportunities for diaspora organization and mobilization. Sites in Europe – cities, virtual forums, transnational networks – have emerged as spaces in which new political identities and modes of political activism are forming among Arab diaspora communities. A crucial dimension in these processes of diasporization, identity formation and re-formation, and political mobilization has been the diversification of media and the expanded offer of information and communications technology.

Since 2020, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) has been investigating the transformations in [MENA diaspora communities](#) and modes of political participation and social mobilization emanating from post-2011 dynamics. As part of this work, ARI hosted a webinar series in 2020-2021, *New Arab Diasporas*, that featured both research and activist perspectives on the current and potential role of MENA diasporas as political actors who monitor and interact with developments in their home countries. This series sought to explore their efforts and how they can be leveraged to contribute to peacebuilding, reconstruction and reconciliation, and to transitional justice processes back home. As part of this series, ARI and the University of Copenhagen co-hosted the webinar [Arab Diasporas in Europe: Spaces of Political Subjectivity Formation and Activist Engagement](#) on 21 January 2021. The webinar explored how media use in a transnational social sphere informs political action and identity formation, drawing on empirical cases of Syrian, Tunisian, Bahraini, and Egyptian diaspora communities in Europe and the research conducted under the project *Mediatized Diaspora: Contentious Politics among Arab Media Users in Europe*.¹ The webinar also explored specific new activist initiatives and the emerging spaces of political engagement, looking in particular at how members of Arab diasporas in Norway are creating a transdiasporic space of political engagement, how those exiled in Berlin are widening their solidarities and ideas of what activism can mean in practice, and how Lebanese diaspora activists are using a decentralized space to move from humanitarian aid to political engagement.

This collection of papers, which represents the research findings of the *Mediatized Diaspora* project, focuses on media practices of various Arab diasporas in Europe, and more precisely the relationship between media and shifting political dynamics in home countries since 2011. From a political and intercultural communication perspective, the papers discuss the transnational interactions of the Arab diaspora in Europe. This includes how diasporic media, as a transnational political actor, acts as a political critic and opponent in post-revolutionary Egypt; the differing roles media plays in activism and identity formation among diasporic Bahraini communities in London and Denmark; the multi-dimensional and multi-local media practices and how these inform the sense of belonging and degrees of political activism among Syrian communities; and the socio-political and transnational effects of the media on the Tunisian diaspora.

In publishing this collection, the Arab Reform Initiative and the University of Copenhagen are contributing new knowledge on Arab diaspora political activism in Europe since 2011, and the ways in which new media inform relationships to homeland and host country and are reconfiguring diaspora mobilization and future engagement.

¹ The project is placed at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at University of Copenhagen and is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark with funding ID 8018-00038B.

Introduction

Arab Mediatized Diaspora: Eleven Years after the Arab Spring

by *Ehab Galal*

About 11 years ago, everyone was talking about the so-called Arab Spring, the public protests that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and ignited a wave of uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, and to a lesser extent in other countries in the region. Since then, the stories of spring and new political winds in the Middle East have changed. After a brief stint of power, the Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi was removed and Egypt returned to military rule, led by General al-Sisi. In Bahrain, the regime quickly crushed the uprising in the country. Libya, Yemen, and Syria remain in chaos following a descent into civil war. And in the countries that experienced a second wave of mass uprising in 2019 – Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria – where certain gains seemed to have been made in favour of the protesters' demands, the political situation remains unstable, and repression is on the rise. Indeed, this instability is a daily concern and challenge in the Middle East where the people are largely silenced by censorship, imprisonment, and surveillance – which a digital media reality has only further spread.

However, for the part of the countries' populations living in the diaspora, i.e. in exile in other countries and parts of the world, not least Europe, daily reality and awareness of political developments is quite different. While regime-critical media have faced new political constraints (Hassan 2015; Lynch 2013), new and varied politically mobilized media outlets and platforms have appeared, some of which publish and broadcast from the diaspora. As such, many closely follow the political development in their countries of origin, and some are also actively trying to do something about the situation by influencing both the political and the media agenda, both in the Middle East and in European host countries where they now live (Brinkerhoff 2009; Galal 2021). These developments in the media sector thus affect Arab diasporic communities differently: they propose new restraints and opportunities in transnational political mobilization.

Given this, there is an acute need to understand the role of transnational media in political action formation among Arab diasporic communities in Europe. Three recent developments make this need urgent and relevant: first, the increased political turmoil, civil war, new authoritarianism, and severe constraints on media following the 2011 uprisings in Arab countries (Hinnebusch, 2018); second, the appearance of a new public concern about mass migration to Europe, post-Arab Spring, as well as securitization and reproach of Arab diasporic political formation in Europe; and third, the easy access to a continuously increasing variety of transnational and digital media outlets “from below.”

Given this context, the studies presented here, which are part of a larger research project, seek to explore two questions: how have Arab diasporic communities in Europe used Arab media in transnational political action formation since 2011? And how does the use of different media platforms stimulate or confine particular diasporic action, and what does this mean for our understanding of mediatized diaspora?

Understanding Contentious Politics in Transnational Space

To address these questions, the papers presented here and the larger project from which they stem propose a new model of mediatized diasporas that takes the multi-directional and situational character of political action formation into account (Levitt and Schiller 2004), by exploring the connections between forms of contentious political action and media use in a transnational social space. Within the framework of the interdisciplinary project Mediatized Diaspora: Contentious

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Politics among Arab Media Users in Europe (MEDIASP), the research group studies the political mobilization of Arab diasporic communities in Europe, post-Arab Spring, and the role the media plays in transforming them into mediatized diasporas. The project conducts a comparative study between the use and users of Syrian, Tunisian, Bahraini, and Egyptian regime-critical and politically mobilized media. The four Arab countries have been selected because they represent different patterns of immigration that are formed by colonial connections and current conflicts. These have resulted in diverse and changing engagement in, and organizational strength of, transnational political action. They also represent unresolved but varied political developments, after the Arab Spring: from a sustained civil war in Syria, to a fragile political democracy in Tunisia; from successive regime changes in Egypt, to regime maintenance in Bahrain (Sadiki 2014). These developments have a direct impact on the conditions for regime-critical and politically mobilized media. Organized as four sub-projects, these examine what are potentially wide variations in mediatized political action among Arab communities in Europe.

In this way, the project provides new and grounded empirical knowledge on the complex ways that media are involved in highly powerful conflicts and diasporic politics today (Simon 2006). This is supported by a methodology that examines the situated and complementary use of multiple media platforms through case studies, comparisons, and interdisciplinary approaches, and through theoretical innovation thanks to the conceptual triangulation of diaspora, multimodality, and political action formation.

Assessing Diasporic Media Use

The theoretical and analytical approach of the project is steered by an interest in connections between means of communication and an individual's construction of self (Krotz 2008), and how these connections facilitate political action formation. We, therefore, employ the perspective of mediatization as a continuing inter-relational process between the change of media, on one hand, and social and cultural transformation, on the other (Lundby 2014; Mortensen 2016). Through the concept of diaspora (Cohen 2008), we explore how media use connects to distinct diasporic configurations and organizational structures. Acknowledging its organizational (ways of doing) and emotional (ways of being) potential (Levitt and Schiller 2004), we expose diasporic communities through their multi-directional and situated media practices, political action, and

place-making (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010; Georgiou 2006; Moores 2012).

Considering media as an inseparable part of everyday life (Hepp, 2010), we do not privilege any specific media outlet. We investigate the practices of using multiple complementary media platforms instead and employ the concept of multimodality to explore each platform's repertoire of meaning-making (Elleström 2010; Kress 2009). The analytical link between multimodal media practices and political action formation is explored through the distinction between connective (random, little, or loose organization) and collective (well-organized) action formation (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) bearing in mind that political action works over distance in a diasporic context.

The studies presented here are based on interviews with users of Arab media in different European countries: Denmark, Sweden, Germany, the UK, and France. Besides having a diasporic connection to either Syria, Tunisia, Bahrain, or Egypt, the respondents are politically engaged, but not necessarily politically organized, and are selected with as much variation as possible in relation to gender, age, and length of residence. Through this research, the articles in this collection provide insights about media, Arab diaspora, religion, as well as political consciousness and activism. The articles are all focused on developments since the Arab Spring, and discuss how diaspora groups in different places in Europe, including Turkey, relate to the situation in the Middle East and especially in the country of origin (Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain). The studies thus provide a complex set of data which strengthens case-specific insights, context-sensitive comparisons, and counteracts bias due to gatekeeping. As such, the studies presented shed light on the processes of political action formation by bringing forth the complexity in the offer and use of transnational oppositional media among Arab diasporas in the post-2011 period.

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Egyptian Diasporic Media: Potentials and Limitations for Political Mobilization

by *Ehab Galal*

Since the Arab Spring, Istanbul has outmatched London as the centre for hosting Arab political opposition groups and regime-critical media. This geographical placement outside the Arab region enables the establishment of media that criticize Arab regimes, and, together with the London and Doha based media, has resulted in the appearance of new and varied politically mobilized media outlets and platforms. In Istanbul, this includes several Egyptian YouTubers, social media, news sites, and TV stations; the Muslim Brotherhood channel Al-Watan TV; Al-Sharq TV that is administered by the well-known Egyptian liberal politician Ayman Noor; and Mekameleen TV that employs both liberals and younger activists who were associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and many of whom are in opposition to the traditional leaders of the Brotherhood or have their fraction group. The London and Doha based media, for their part, are not Egyptian but devote much time on and space to the political situation in Egypt while simultaneously employing many presenters and journalists with Egyptian backgrounds. These include Al-Jazeera in Doha and Al-Hiwar TV, Al-Araby TV, and Al-Araby Al-Jadid newspaper in London. In addition, independent media like YouTubers have increasingly been able to attract a huge audience. This includes well-known and established TV presenters who appear in their own TV programme while simultaneously running their own YouTube channel (such as Mohammed Nasser at Mekameleen TV, Moataz Matar at Al-Sharq TV, Nour Al-Din Abd-Alhafiz at Watan TV, and Youssef Hussein at Al-Araby TV) and those such as Ayat Oraby and Abdullah Elshrif, who appear with their programme only on YouTube, employing the platform to criticize and oppose the current Egyptian regime although with rather different means and goals.

Despite their different ideological outlooks, all these media outlets share a critical approach to the autocratic Egyptian regime and aim at mobilizing political opposition among Egyptians inside as well as outside Egypt. As such, they aspire

to serve as potential revolutionary spaces. Do they succeed? The intention of this paper is not to give a final answer to this question, but to examine potentials and obstacles by looking into the entanglement of national, diasporic, and media aspects that together confine and inspire mobilization. The paper draws on findings from the research project Mediatized Diaspora: Contentious Politics among Arab Media Users in Europe, including interviews with journalists, presenters, and producers of the Egyptian media in Istanbul, with political activists who have moved to Turkey since the military took power in July 2013, and with ordinary members of the Egyptian diaspora in Europe.¹

The Egyptian Media Landscape: Between Liberalization and State Control

In the 1990s and the 2000s, new communication technology and permission to privatize media in Egypt, including satellite television and the internet (Abdel-Fadil 2012; Khamis & Fowler 2020; Shehata 2018), saw the media landscape become more diverse. This in turn commenced the formation of transnational Egyptian publics that challenged traditional political values and the authoritative Egyptian state while escaping the direct control of the regime. This relatively liberal media landscape was further nurtured in Egypt with the Egyptian uprising in 2011 that brought about an increase in social media and new satellite channels (Galal 2021; El-

1 I define members of the Egyptian diaspora as people who identify themselves as Egyptian or partly Egyptian with an Egyptian heritage.

Nawawy and Khamis 2016).

With the removal of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, both activist and mainstream media were facing a new reality, where limits on media freedom were no longer as fixed or guarded. The apparent lack of a univocal power gave Egyptian citizens new possibilities as opinion-makers. Hence, in the realm of the 2011 uprising, Egyptians put forward different opinions, gradually creating a more diverse and critical public than before. Indeed, one could argue that the Egyptian media had close to a golden era from 2011-2013. For the first time since Egyptian independence in 1952, Egyptians could watch and read opinions by representatives from all sections of society. While media were dominated by liberal and secular political viewpoints, Islamists – such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi political activists – were also invited into different talk shows and debates to offer their views (Galal 2017). Nonetheless, the Islamists never got as much time to talk as the liberals did, nor could they compete with the liberals in terms of the number of media platforms.

In July 2013, with the removal of Mohamed Morsi in a military coup and the new Egyptian regime's stark anti-Islamist stance, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic media were closed, and Brotherhood activists were imprisoned. More unforeseen, though, was the gradual restrictions on all media and critical voices that also afflicted the liberal activists that had led the 2011 uprisings. Both Muslim Brotherhood supporters and liberal activists soon had to choose among complete silence, continuous fighting – whilst paying the almost inevitable price of going to prison or getting killed – or escaping and fighting from outside Egypt.

Diasporic Escape to Turkey and Regime-Critical Media

In this context of non-existent space for political opposition in Egypt, Istanbul has become a centre for Egyptian activists who express opposition to the military regime by producing and appearing in regime-critical media. Well aware of the impact of Al-Jazeera TV and Al-Jazeera Al-Masa'iyah on Arab publics, several Egyptian satellite channels were established in Istanbul with the ambition to broadcast critical news on Egypt. The three channels currently dominating the Istanbul scene, Al-Watan TV, Al-Sharq TV and Mekameleen TV, form together with two London based channels, Al-Araby TV and Al-Hiwar TV, an Egyptian oppositional or even revolutionary space. They are characterized by being Arab owned media that broadcast to Arab audiences in the Arabic language and

mainly concerned with Arab affairs. A qualified guess is that most funding comes from Arab Gulf money and Egyptians abroad, although the issue of ownership is blurred: neither the employees nor the audiences know who the owners of the channel are.

Activists from 2011 play a central role in these channels as producers, presenters, and other staff. To this point, two of the most prominent programme hosts at the Istanbul channels, Mohammed Nasser and Moataz Matar, both left Egypt after 2013 in light of their activism and stance against the military coup.² Another example is the producer of the programme Bitawqit Misr at the London based Al-Araby TV who was a political activist during the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and had to move to London to avoid political persecution. Just as importantly, while the Istanbul TV channels show different types of programmes (including documentaries, films, TV series, lifestyle and cooking programmes, songs, TV news, and live talk shows with the possibility of calling in), all (except the cooking show) adopt a critical perspective on the Egyptian regime. Both Mohammed Nasser and Moataz Matar, for example, who host their talk shows, attack the Egyptian military regime and strongly criticize President El-Sisi and his government. In their programmes, they address burning political topics while their performance is explicitly confrontational, exaggerative, and sarcastic. This mix of an urgent topic and a satirical performance makes the programmes both informal and entertaining compared to dull political discussions. Since the presenter gives his account of heart-breaking stories using his voice and movements as though he is playing a theatrical role, this kind of talk show very much depends on the presenter's charisma and popularity rather than the specific content of the programme.

As a form of political opposition, such programming seems on the surface to have some success. Presenters like Nasser and Matar have been exposed to severe attacks by the Egyptian media, lawsuits have been filed against them, and both have been sentenced in absentia, while their family members have been arrested to put pressure on them. In this sense, the Istanbul channels' regime-critical programmes have, as a minimum, success in mobilizing the Egyptian regime's anger. To what extent, though, do they also succeed in mobilizing an Egyptian opposition to the regime?

² Mohammed Nasser worked as an author, scriptwriter, and television host, but disappeared from the Egyptian media after openly having criticized the military coup. In April 2014, he reappeared at Al-Sharq TV in Istanbul together with Moataz Matar. Matar had appeared as host at several TV channels but was in 2013 presenter at the Muslim Brotherhood channel Misr25. This combined with having been very active during the revolution made him leave Egypt.

Egyptian Audience Responses in Diaspora

Looking into the Egyptian diaspora's use of and view on regime-critical media, their success appears less obvious. Across different age categories, gender, and backgrounds of the interviewees, it is possible to identify different ways of using, identifying with, and interpreting the regime-critical media broadcast from outside Egypt. Broadly, there is one group that primarily watches the channels for non-political reasons and another whose political engagement shapes their use of and view on the channels. Yet, within each of these two overall groups, it is possible to identify three varieties of positions. These do not necessarily constitute distinct groups of audiences, but rather ideal-typical positions which people may move between in practice.

Starting with the non-political engagement, the first position comprises the use of Egyptian regime-critical media as a way of helping audiences to survive the emotional distress from being in exile or diaspora while sharing this feeling with other Egyptians who are in the same situation. Though victims of political circumstances, the motivation to watch these media is not political activism. The second position of the non-political use of regime-critical media covers the spontaneous media user. For this group, regime-critical media is a sort of media among other media outlets without any specific purpose for watching it. If anything, it is mainly a question of curiosity about these channels' coverage of a topic that the Egyptian media in Egypt is preoccupied with. A third non-political reason to watch these media is, quite simply, that they are entertaining. Interviewees who identify with this position find that the hyperbolic style of these media is fascinating to watch and is speaking to all Egyptians and not only to the elite. Exaggeration is the only way to make Egyptians understand the disastrous situation in Egypt and as such, the programmes do not jeopardize journalistic ethics. Rather this is the only way to fight the Egyptian regime-loyal media.

Another set of positions is more explicitly politically motivated while at the same time being more critical towards the general style and approach of the regime-critical media. The first of these includes those who follow the media and accept their distinctive style although they do not believe it is an optimal kind of journalism. They excuse the presenters for not following journalistic ethics and standards by either referring to the Egyptian regime's much worse treatment of the opposition or to the responsibility of the presenter to be talking on behalf of all tyrannized Egyptians who are either imprisoned or forced to live in exile. The second more explicit

political position covers those who explicitly use regime-critical media to gain information and knowledge about Egyptian daily life and the political and economic situation in Egypt while sharing the experience of living in exile as part of the Egyptian diaspora. They expect the regime-critical media to provide knowledge that the Egyptian media does not address, and they are generally interested in how Egyptian news is covered in Egypt, regionally and internationally. The use of regime-critical media becomes one element in a multifaceted media use that includes different media genres, different languages, and different opinions. Being critical and suspicious towards all media institutions and established political parties, they embrace a varied media use to be able to draw their own conclusions. Simultaneously, their trust is relatively higher towards western media than Egyptian and Arab media, although they criticize the western governments' double standard on defending human rights vis-à-vis the Egyptian regime. The third explicitly political position rejects the usefulness of regime-critical media like those in Istanbul. Interviewees that adopt this position generally loathe the approach and quality of these media. And while they recognize the relevance of the chosen topics, they renounce the language of talk shows like Nasser's and Matar's. They believe that opposition media with the noble goal of freeing the nation from tyranny should strive for higher standards, and be accessible to the entire family. Furthermore, they should deal with the challenges that Egyptians in the diaspora face and not only respond to the Egyptian media's coverage and political bias inside Egypt. They should meet journalistic ethics and standards and not chase cheap affect by playing one group of Egyptians against another. According to this position, the regime-critical media share with Egyptian media in Egypt the same low level of journalistic ethics and language which appeal to the same kind of audiences. For them, the regime-critical media do not have any political mobilization potential.

Limitations for Success

The key role of political activists in regime-critical media is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength as far as they guarantee the authenticity of the political opposition, putting forth those who have willingly risked losing their livelihood and family for the sake of political change. On the other hand, the dependence on people who left Egypt for political reasons also means that the channels primarily employ those without any professional media training, lacking educated journalists and technical staff. Whereas channels such as Mekameleen TV and al-Sharq TV, with a relatively stable financial situation, started to offer their employees courses and training, other channels suffer under the shortage of sufficient funding,

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which further increases problems as employees face irregular and reduced salaries from time to time. In combination with not having correspondents on the ground in Egypt, the channels heavily rely on “citizen journalists” and stories circulated on social media. Moreover, the shortage of funding and professional competence is not improved by the fear of potential sources (institutions, experts, people on the street) to talk to or cooperate with the regime-critical media in Istanbul. Likewise, some companies fear advertising on those channels. And in fact, the examples of threats against family members in Egypt illustrate that the reasons for their fears are genuine.

Indeed, the Egyptian regime is doing its best to limit the influence of regime-critical media from outside Egypt. Thus, countries that host such media – like the UK, France, USA, Turkey, and Qatar – have all been exposed to political pressure by the Egyptian state. As an example, Egypt demanded the closure of all Egyptian opposition media in Turkey to resume diplomatic relations with Ankara. In response, in March 2021,

the Turkish state asked Mekameleen TV, al-Sharq TV and Watan TV to moderate their criticism. Likewise, on 10 April 2021, Nasser and Matar both announced that they – of their own volition – had decided to end the transmission of their talk shows at Mekameleen TV and al-Sharq TV, respectively, arguing that they wanted to avoid any further pressure on Turkey while nonetheless not intending to stop criticizing the Egyptian military regime. To this point, on 17 April 2021, Matar relaunched the same programme with the same name on his own YouTube channel. Shortly after, he and Nasser were both forced by the Turkish state to close their YouTube channels. In December 2021, Matar started his new YouTube channel when he succeeded in moving to London. In his new programme, he does not limit his critique of the Egyptian regime but he also criticizes other Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the Arab United Emirates. In this sense, the Egyptian regime’s attempts to restrict critical voices by regime-critical media outside Egypt has had some success, while the impact of these media on the political mobilization of the Egyptian diasporas is less evident.

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What Can I Do?

The Role of (Media) Activism among Bahrainis in London and Denmark

by *Thomas Fibiger*

In February 2011 Bahrain became part of the “Arab Spring.” Inspired by Tunisia and Egypt, protesters occupied a central site in the capital, Manama, namely the Pearl Monument and roundabout, known as al-Lulua. Calling for reform (but not fall) of the long-lasting Al Khalifa regime, this camp was allowed to last for one month before being destroyed and protesters dispersed. In addition, the monument itself was destructed, even if originally a symbol of the State and Gulf Arab partnership (Khalaf 2015; Fibiger 2017). Indeed, it was these neighbouring countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, that provided military support to quash the uprising (Matthiesen 2013). In the following months and years, the regime has tightened its authoritative grip on the country and population, much like in other countries post-Arab Spring. Among the results, many political activists have fled the country or have been exiled.

This, however, was not the first time Bahrain experienced political unrest and Bahrainis have left the country in exile. Due to political turmoil in Bahrain, many Bahrainis have been granted asylum in Europe since the 1980s. London, in particular, is a hub for this diasporic community, not least its political activities. In 1983, the Bahrain Freedom Movement – or *Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain al-Islamiyya* – was founded in London, and ever since this movement and others have worked to put pressure on the regime in Bahrain from outside, and to encourage European authorities to put pressure on Bahrain. Today, with a new influx since the uprising in 2011, this community in London, primarily Shia Bahrainis, number around 500 people. Likewise, a small group of Bahrainis came to Denmark in the 1980s, where 5060- people of Bahraini descent still live, primarily those coming of age in Denmark.

In taking a comparative analysis of the two Bahraini diasporic communities in London and Denmark, respectively,¹ I focus on the role of activism and aim to broaden the idea of what activism is - not only political, but also social, humanistic, and religious - but also explore the role of media within this (non)activism.² In London, the core group of political activists are very active on media, not only following the situation in Bahrain closely but also contributing to the flow of information by disseminating and writing news themselves, through WhatsApp and Twitter, YouTube channels and (to a lesser extent) Arab or European media institutions like newspapers and TV-channels. Many of these stories are also based on on-the-ground, offline, street activities in London and Europe. In Denmark, on the other hand, many of the Bahrainis I have talked to may follow the situation in Bahrain, but try not to: they do not feel they can do much to change the situation there, and it only makes them sad to keep following.³ Indeed, this aspect of non-participation, non-

1 My fieldwork for this project includes a total of 31 interviews (all adults, 25 men, 6 women) with Bahrainis in exile, or descendants of exiles. All were carried out in 2018-2019, with 24 of these interviews conducted in London and 7 in Denmark. The difficulty of finding people to talk to in Denmark made it clear that most there prefer to keep a low profile and do not want to speak up about the political situation.

2 This paper is part of a bigger book project by the Mediatized Diaspora research project out of the University of Copenhagen.

3 This may well be the case for a large part of the community in London too, but here I have mostly been in touch with the core group of activists and was often directed towards them when asking people to talk about these issues.

media use, and non-activism is an important characteristic of the Bahraini diaspora in Denmark. My comparative analysis of the two communities thus shows how media plays a very important role in both places, but in rather different ways, contributing to a critical and nuanced discussion of the concept “Mediatized Diaspora.”

What Can I Do? Mapping Different Patterns of Activism and Media Use

The Bahraini Shia community in London is gathered in the religious centre Dar al-Hikma (House of Wisdom). This is first and foremost a place for religious congregation, sermons, and discussions, much like the community centres known in Bahrain and the wider Shia world as *hussayniyya*. But it is also a place for political mobilization. However, interviewees note an increasing passiveness and demobilization among Bahrainis as well as other groups and communities. People are not as active as they used to be, neither religiously nor politically. As one of the first exiled Bahrainis in London explains:

“Dar al-Hikma, they come because they consider it a social place, rather than an activist... It is a religious charity, so we have a speech, about any of our religious matters. But many of them don’t want to listen, they just want to stand outside and talk and chat and so on. So not many people are real givers. Not only Bahrainis, every community is the same.”

This man may well be right that this is a general development over the past few years, or even longer. There is an increasing sense of demobilization among Bahrainis in exile (and within Bahrain, Fibiger 2018), not least owing to increased repression and transnational, digital surveillance. However, a young generation of new activists, with new forms of activism, has emerged in the years after 2011 and continues the struggle and activities of putting pressure on regimes in both Europe and the Arab region for changes in Bahrain.

For example, in 2018, activist Ali Mushaima held a hunger strike just outside Bahrain’s London embassy, for 63 days, to highlight the plight of his father imprisoned in Bahrain. His father is a well-known political Islamist, Hassan Mushaima, who has for many years been an opposition leader in Bahrain. The story was told by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, among others, and it did have some effect. His conditions in prison were improved, via the intervention of British

diplomacy, but in the long run, the initiative did not change much. Even more spectacular, and further pointing to the fine line between Bahrain’s embassy and British jurisdiction outside, was an event in July 2019, on the night just before the planned execution of two prisoners in Bahrain, when activist Musa Abdul Ali jumped from scaffolding onto the roof of the embassy and fanned a banner calling for the halt of the executions. Police and media were called to the scene and documented how Mr Musa was threatening to jump from the rooftop but was dragged by embassy guards down into the building. At this point police forcefully (and illegally) entered the embassy to get him out, urged by his Bahraini co-activists outside who feared for his life, arguing that this could be “a second Khashoggi,” with reference to the Saudi journalist killed at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul in 2018.⁴

Comparing this to Bahrainis in Denmark, one of my interviewees in Denmark, a mother in her 30s, explains how she does not follow the situation in Bahrain anymore:

“I don’t want to listen [to news about Bahrain] because it will not mean that much to me since I live in Denmark, my life is in Denmark, and I have a good life in Denmark. I also have my kids to take care of, and I will make a good future for them. Moreover, if I listen to this news then I would feel a sort of obligation to do something. And as passive as I am just now, I cannot do anything. In this case, it would only be bad for me to listen to this and think, okay I am listening, but I don’t do anything. Then I would rather take part in fundraising or do something else, give clothes or toys for children, wherever this may be around the world.”

To this woman, as to most of my interlocutors, it is still important to do good and to make an impact, but there are several ways of doing that, and these activities may be directed not only towards Bahrain as a country of origin but to other countries in need, such as Syria, Sudan, or Yemen, and towards communities in Denmark as well as abroad. Denmark is very much the home in this case, as much as Bahrain is. I, therefore, follow Roza Tsagarousianou’s call for “a theoretical shift from the centrality of an originary home and a static and rigid ethnocentrism to more multicentric, network-like conceptualizations of diasporas” (2019: 86). This also entails a non-media centric approach, where offline, street and non-mediatized forms of activism is included in the analysis, as well as non-political activism as in the interview quoted above. Media is of crucial importance to the diaspora – but sometimes people may restrict their own media use, and certainly there are other ways of being a diasporic activist. This, I suggest, nuances the theoretical trope of “mediatization” (Hjarvard 2008; Hepp et al. 2015),

⁴ Channel 4 News, London, 7 August 2018, last visited at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcRhAHVCHOU> 17 December 2020.

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taken to suggest that media increasingly frames reality, and therefore also nuances the concept of mediatized diaspora.

So, on the one hand, diasporas may be a hub for political activism, spurred also by new media technologies (Baser and Halperin 2019, see also Adamson 2002; Sökefeld 2006), but, on the other hand, the same media technology may be used for digital surveillance and what a recent report by Freedom House has termed “transnational repression” (Schenkkan et al. 2020, see also Moss 2018). While this demonstrates the crucial importance of media, my interlocutors are very aware of this double-edged sword and many have significantly reduced their use of media, in particular in relation to the political situation in Bahrain.

Expanding the Notion of Activism beyond the Political

With regards to the degree of engagement of the Bahraini diaspora in activism, it is certainly true for important parts of the diaspora and notably the London-based activists. They continue their activism in exile, and they continue to do what they can to put pressure on the regime in Bahrain including through putting pressure on governments in Europe. They use a wide range of media for this activism,

including social media, NGO-based webpages, newsletters (e.g. Voice of Bahrain), and more traditional press such as newspaper articles in UK dailies, and TV appearances. However, it is important to note that online and offline activism go together, and that much of the media news is based on street activism, demonstrations, and public events. This suggests that a study of the role of media in diasporic activism should not only be media centred (Leurs and Smets 2018; Candidatu et al. 2019:38) but should take the relation of media and non-media activities into account.

Further, because of the transnational repression described above, many Bahrainis, in Bahrain and in the diaspora, prefer not to engage with political activism, in particular forms that are traceable through media, social or traditional. This apparent demobilization now 10 years after the 2011 uprising (Rennick 2018; Yonus 2020), due to digital surveillance and a general mood that activism does not help, needs further studies in discussions of diaspora, activism, and media. This, however, does not mean that people are not active, but it means that this scholarly field needs to expand what is defined as activism and see this in a broader perspective, including forms of activism that are not directly political and not directly targeted at the country of origin, let alone born by media. I conclude therefore with this interview quote:

“If I can make a difference for Bahrain, then I would, but if I cannot, then I must do something else. I live in Denmark. This is where I can make a difference... [...] So yes, I believe in the cause of Bahrain, but the point of departure for my activities is that I live in Denmark. And when I die I will be held accountable.”

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Mediated Complexities of Belonging and Political (De)Mobilization: Syrian Dissidents in Europe

by *Zenia Yonus*

While the conflict in Syria that began in 2011 has resulted in millions of Syrians fleeing to neighbouring countries or to Europe, the war has not only brought about death and destruction of people, places, and crucial infrastructure (including schools and hospitals). Alongside these, the conflict has also fostered a huge pile of online material as a sort of cyber archive in a clash of narratives. Indeed, the role of media has been crucial in the coverage. But how do Syrians engage in mediated material from afar, and how do the Syrians themselves evaluate the possibilities and constraints given by media technologies? This paper argues that there is a direct connection between migration policy practices in the new country of residence and the extent of political activism towards transition in Syria. It is in other words not only tied to the home state but also the country they now reside in. By examining the media practices among Syrians in Denmark, Sweden, and Germany,¹ it becomes visible how the everyday life struggles of ambiguous belonging effect the levels of political participation. In this way, for those Syrian dissidents in Europe, media both enables and disables political activism.²

This paper shows how Syrians relate to, and evaluate, mediated content, and how it connotes within political activism. The media orientations are dyadic and represent both news about the conflict in Syria, as well as debates in

the country of residence – migration policies in particular. The study shows how media practices among diasporic Syrians are multi-dimensional, and puts forward the complexities of identity processes between here and there, between political activism and demobilization, and between gratitude for being safe and never feeling secure. The argument is that these multi-local processes involve multiple interdependent factors, diverse encounters, as well as a variety of struggles in belonging.

Developments in the Syrian Mediascape

The Syrian mediascape is marked by practices of control, misinformation, and the necessity for personal news verification that derives from the competing dynamics of a controlled official media sphere, on the one hand, and the far more open social mediascape, on the other. A small elite in Syria monitors the media through the Ministry of Information, and more informally, the intelligence branch for political affairs. The fierce restrictions on media only allows public and private media that favour the political leadership, by which I mean the politically relevant elites who hold the power over the state's strategic communication in order to spread their views, mobilize support, and legitimize the actions of public institutions through both traditional and new media. The technology of new media has challenged the state monopoly but did not erode it. Syria is listed as number 174 out of 180 countries in the ranking of 2020 Press Freedom Index in terms of press freedom.

1 The paper is based on 37 semi-structured interviews I have conducted in Denmark, Sweden and Germany along with digital ethnography on social network sites to follow the discourses of online content and discussions.

2 I use the term "Syrians" to refer to people who lived most of their life within the borders of the Syrian nation-state. This includes people who are not Syrian citizens.

Nonetheless, changes in the media landscape from 2011 are few in terms of legislation and licenses to operate, but new media have created a more open media environment (Issa, 2016). Social network sites (SNS) were initially used to mobilize and facilitate the coordination of demonstrations in the early stages of the uprising. When the conflict became more violent in 2013, social media played a crucial role in documenting events from within the closed media environment of Syria. This need for documentation led to many new media initiatives across genres such as Halab al-Youm, Enab Baladi, Syria TV, Syria Untold, The Syria Campaign, and the radio stations Souriali and Radio Fresh. Social media and the Internet thus proved essential to the international coverage of Syria, together with the cooperation with diasporic Syrians, NGOs, and established media institutions. One of the main issues in the coverage of the conflict is the high degree of misinformation. As a result, the media war over narratives has increased Syrians' dependence on personal contacts in order to verify news, which has resulted in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) notably WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Syrian diaspora activism is thus informed by this complex mediascape and the different ways that information is both arrived at and struggled over.

Oppositional Diasporic Political Actions

When Syrians started arriving to Europe in late 2011, they developed and organized unions, Facebook groups, fellowships, and humanitarian initiatives, with the aim of transforming the everyday life hardships among Syrians – both in Syria and neighbouring countries as well as, to a large extent, in their new country of residence. A diasporic community is defined as a border-crossing population tied to “a collective memory of their original homeland” (Cohen, 2001, 4). Political actions from within the Syrian diaspora focusing exclusively on Syria have mainly been documenting the war through media initiatives, advocacy, knowledge-sharing, participation in demonstrations, cooperation with NGOs, as well as direct humanitarian aid through organizations of informal networks.

The orientations of political actions are twofold and represent both the Syrian cause and the debates of migration policies in particular. The activities have been motivated by a wish to influence public opinion through advocacy, for instance, and video activism, media engagement, and attending discussions about Syria or migration. Syrians participate in different activities simultaneously, thus making participation multi-dimensional. The political activities have been human rights-based (including also feminism) and morally motivated to raise awareness about injustice. Syrians have created spaces for national and transnational exchanges via media, even though they are spread out all over Europe, but loosely

connected by the relations to the Syrian nation-state. The political actions are both directed at Syrian and host country politics, as well as online and offline alignments that are deterritorialized: they not only cross between states, but also from the imagined and mediated homeland, linked through a collectively constructed identity as “Syrians”.

In this sense, the activities are diasporic and not transnational as Tabar argues (Tabar, 2020), in that they work for changes in Syria and are based on strong ties to the same nation-state. However, the relationship to the former “home” is ambivalent and loaded with emotions connected to both the cruelty of the regime as well as good memories and nostalgia. The “home” is still crucial despite the physical detachment from the perceived homeland. Nonetheless, the past years have witnessed a decline in political actions, on the one hand, and changes in the nature of the actions themselves, on the other, demonstrating how media can transform diasporic activism both in form and content.

The Changing Nature of Activism

One of the most important forms of Syrian diaspora activism is the documenting and prosecuting of former state officials in different countries across Europe – in Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Norway, such as the al-Khatib trial in Koblenz against two officers accused of overseeing the torture of more than 4000 people. Anwar Raslan was sentenced to life in prison on 13 January 2022. Because there has been debate that the court case is rather “elitist” and not accessible for all, some activists in Berlin worked to communicate the trial more widely. These activities aim at transitional justice, hoping that the conviction and the vast media material can shed light on the structural violence in Syria and even help in other authoritarian contexts. Another prevailing type of oppositional activity has been through the production of films such as Oscar-nominated *The Cave* and *For Sama*. This is both a cultural expression of documenting personal stories that were told, thanks to financial aid, through footage filmed in Syria.

However, despite the big step with the court case in Koblenz, political demobilization among Syrians is occurring. While this does not equal depoliticization, I have witnessed a sort of collective hopelessness and negative evaluations of the importance of political actions since the conflict has not changed the living situation for Syrians for the better. Lack of freedom, starvation, the fact that Al-Assad is still in power, alongside the struggles among Syrians in the diaspora with learning a new language, finding a job, and being subjected as unidimensional “refugees”, all act as factors in demobilization.

A male activist based in Denmark expresses his decline in

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political participation due to exile stress:

Real activities do not exist anymore [...] and I am not like that at all – totally the opposite. When I arrived, I did not sit, I always had activities, but now only work and at home. The lack of settling and other issues let you enter a situation of worries [...] stress, I mean.

Another male concurs: “They used to give refugees their rights in all perspectives – now there is so much stress and pressure.”

Another important factor in the demobilization is paradoxically the mediation of the war: both that people withdraw from the news flow to protect themselves from watching the graphic material but also due to fear of the surveillance of the Syrian state apparatus. For instance, Syrians abroad avoid political issues or discuss sensitive topics in coded language when interacting with people in Syria. Digital surveillance, or “digitally-enabled authoritarianism” (Moss, 2018), in combination with other forms of social control, demonstrate how the social fabric of fear, mistrust, and authoritarian rule migrate along with the people who have grown up with it. This is not surprising in itself, except for the fact that fear lifted in the very beginning and now might be even stronger than before 2011 because of the resilience of the leadership with its violent and harsh methods to quell political dissidence. As political activities from the diaspora have declined over the past years, several interlocutors also mention the entry of radical Islamic groups as a turning point.

Yet, demobilization is also related to the hardships of migration, and how one defines being politically active or engaged. For instance, there are professional journalists among the interlocutors, and, although they have oppositional stances and work on highly political subjects about Syria, they do not consider themselves as politically active. It is a job in their opinion, and the goal is to remain neutral and objective, although they describe emotional difficulties when listening to events or experiences of hardship. Though this is not a comparison between the three countries I have conducted interviews in, it is very apparent how the diaspora in and around Berlin is still vivid despite the generational gaps among “old” and “new” opposition members, both in age and political ideologies.

the situation in Syria and the networked authoritarianism into consideration. Their voices are silenced, and some questions raised by the people in this study relate to how Danish migration policies indirectly helped the Syrian leadership to stay in power by enabling dissident activities. A young male journalist based in Denmark stated: “we are used to a government who shoots us, who kills us, and we can deal with it – but this [Danish] government’s mental war is really hard to deal with”.

This statement leads me to the conclusion that, especially in Denmark, but generally in all three countries examined, exile stress is prevailing and takes up much energy and focus. This is one aspect in the demobilization and the decreasing level of political activism towards change in Syria. During the interviews, it became clear how the Syrians’ experiences and encounters with the new states have shaped their everyday life, and therefore media practices and political activism. The political actions are trying both to push for transition in Syria and against harsh migration policies in their country of residence, which is a shift towards activities that are more based on being a newcomer in a new context, providing help and information to others in the same position. Many people still work tirelessly for their cause while others have decreased their engagement to protect their mental health. For many, mediated spaces becomes the place of belonging, and hopefully a sense of belonging can be strengthened offline as well by acknowledging the hybridity of human identity and with a dose of extended empathy.

Media and Exile Stress

Media-scholar Myria Georgiou underpins that diasporic groups use the media in complex ways, which forms the sense of cultural and political belonging (Georgiou, 2013: 88). The need for humans to belong to a group, a country or a virtual society, is crucial, but, for Syrians in Europe, they are subjected to what is most often referred to as “pressure” from lack of time, lack of skills, lack of money, and even lack of agency. The hardships are even more apparent when taking

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Diasporic Political Communication: The Case of the Tunisian Diaspora in Europe

by *Mostafa Shehata*

Although a small country, Tunisia has a high immigration rate, especially to the West, and a high percentage of its population living abroad. Out of 11.5 million, 1.2 million live outside the country, most of whom (84.5%) are in Europe and especially in France (Tunisia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). Indeed, the tendency to immigrate from Tunisia has increased since 2011, in light of the economic hardships that resulted from political instability in the wake of the revolution (Wolf, 2014). While the diaspora has been an important source of national income for Tunisia (Mensard 2004:134), it has also had an important oppositional role during both Bourguiba and Ben Ali's reigns (Graziano 2012; Dazey and Zederman 2017).

Recently, however, the political arena in Tunisia has witnessed two important shifts that have likely shaped the diaspora's political communication. On the one hand, the expansion of freedom of speech and organization (Masri 2017) has diminished the risks associated with political engagement. On the other hand, the expansion of media platforms (el-Issawi 2012:6) has allowed for more representativity of Tunisians' political orientations (Bucklet et al. 2012). However, these gains are likely to vanish after the 2021 coup, which overthrew the parliament and the government.

In this context, different means of political communication have emerged that help people to interact in diaspora such as media, networks, and organizations.¹ In categorizing the

aspects of political communication practised by the Tunisian diaspora in Europe,² it is possible to better understand the chances available for the diaspora to engage in politics and have a transnational effect in the country of origin. At the same time, however, it is also possible to see that engagement in political activities is also dependent on personal factors beyond the availability of means.

Varying Forms of Political Communication

Political communication as a field addresses the role of any form of communication in the political process (McNair 201:4). In diaspora, political communication could include any political interaction, either verbal- or action-based, practised by members of the diaspora, either political actors or citizens. In this context, five main Tunisian diasporic political activities can be identified in which communication has had a key role, ranging from quite direct forms of political engagement to passive political consumption through an informal exchange (See Figure 1).

1 It is argued in several studies that digital media specifically keep people in diaspora connectively linked (e.g. Kang 2009; Tsagarousianou and Retis 2019:4) and structured organizations keep them collectively related (e.g. Cohen 2008:6; Grossman 2019:1274).

2 The research presented here is based on 45 qualitative semi-structured interviews collected with Tunisians Living in three European countries (11 interviews Denmark, 10 in Sweden, and 24 France) through the snowball sampling method. Participants were selected based on their interest in politics and level of education. The sample included people from different age groups and political orientations.

First, and perhaps quite traditionally, is the involvement in Tunisian political parties. A 56-year-old male residing in Denmark, for example, stated “in 2011, I travelled to Tunisia and established a political party... I also established an organization concerned with protecting kids from physical and sexual violence. And I’m still in touch with the party and the organization through social media.” Others,

meanwhile, have been key members in political parties such as the Islamist Ennahdha and the centre-left Congress for the Republic. As a young woman (aged 26) living in France stated, “I joined the Congress for the Republic in 2012... I also ran in the parliamentary election with a list, but we lost due to the lack of transparency. Then I came to France and started to support the progressive movement.”

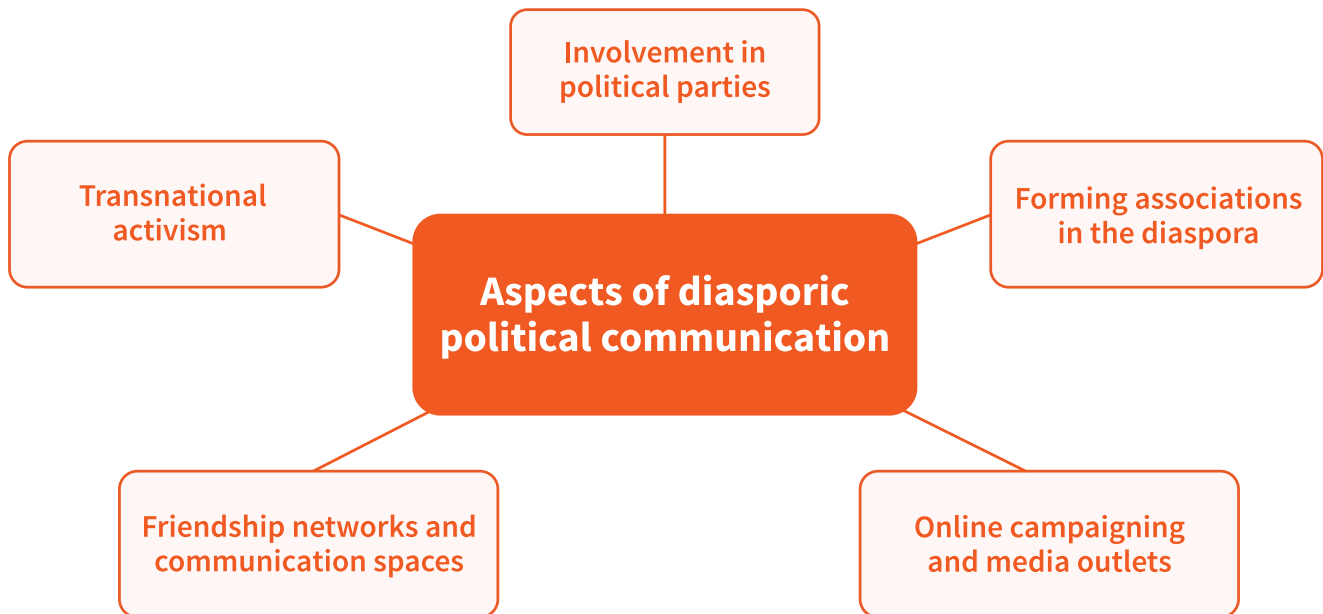


Figure 1: Aspects of diasporic political communication

Second, political communication among the Tunisian diaspora in Europe includes the formation of associations in host countries. Social associations are important factors for gatherings, efforts coordination, and identity-sharing. Some Tunisians in Sweden, for example, have established political and social associations before and after the revolution, aiming at affecting the political situation in the homeland. An Islamist participant (a male aged 62) residing in Sweden revealed “we established an organization...we were organizing demonstrations in Sweden. The organization had a specific role: fighting the dictator (Ben Ali). It still works until today, but its role has diminished.” Likewise, two other Islamist participants established an association after 2011 in south Sweden to empower the social relations between the Tunisian diasporas. They held two meetings, but they did not manage to continue due to the lack of resources. However, they have managed to keep a Facebook page that carries the name of the association and occasionally publishes social posts.

Third, Tunisian diasporic political engagement takes the form of online campaigning and the establishment of media outlets. Under Ben Ali, the Tunisian diaspora managed to establish news websites that had a key oppositional role, such as, Nawaat, Fil Rouge, Tunisnews and Réveil Tunisien (see Graziano 2012). As a media activist in Sweden (58-year-old male) stated “early 2000s, our website started as a mailing list by sending news to people residing in Tunisia. It was like a newsletter that Tunisian actors trusted, and they sent us what they wanted to publish.” Furthermore, online campaigning has also been an important activity in diaspora. Social media specifically have had an oppositional role. For example, the Facebook group *Tunisien I Sverige* (Tunisia in Sweden) has campaigned against the corruption of the government in the mining sector, a case that witnessed the dismissal of the Tunisian Energy and Mines minister in 2018 based on suspicion of corruption.

Fourth, friendship networks and communication spaces create possibilities for political exchange. In the diaspora, Tunisians had the chance to meet their peers, form friendship networks, and organize social events. For example, the Tunisians in France have been using social media to organize events that allow socializing and exchanging views about the affairs of their homeland.³ In addition, NGO events about Tunisia provide another chance for socializing and discussing the situation in the homeland. For example, Oxfam IBIS organization held an event in Copenhagen in 2019 about the Tunisian revolution, which allowed many Tunisians to meet and discuss political issues. Another space for political communication in the diaspora is the friendship networks, which play an important role in political discussions, knowledge sharing, attitude formation, and voting behaviour. In this context, a 20-year-old female student residing in France stated, “I live in a Tunisian dorm which is a very special one. I know a lot of people there, and some of them are my friends... I talk to my friends about the conditions of Tunisia, the political and economic situation.”

Fifth are various forms of transnational activism, by which I mean the engagement of the diaspora in multinational activities beyond their homeland affairs. In France, I met a Tunisian leftist who established organizations concerned with the immigrants’ affairs and participated in international events based on his interest in democracy, human rights, justice, and equality. As he described his activities, “I organized concerts for all immigrants here in France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Spain. I also visited Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Syria... Our institution is concerned with defending the rights of immigrants, and we organize symposiums against discrimination.” Another example is a Tunisian cleric (aged 65) living in Denmark who is involved in transnational political and religious activities. He mentioned one of his activities: “at the time of the Danish cartoon crisis [20052006-], TV channels came to us like CNN and BBC asking about our situation. I also travelled the world to clarify the problem and I was hosted by radio and TV channels.”

³ Indeed, representing the biggest number of Tunisians living abroad, France has been a country in which Tunisians have formed communities. In Paris, there are Tunisian restaurants, dorms, coffee shops, and mosques, in which I had the opportunity to meet many Tunisians.

Varying Levels of Engagement

These five categories of activities are the most dominant aspects of political communication practised by the Tunisian diaspora in Europe. However, it should be noted that the members of the diaspora vary in their level of engagement in political communication. Given this, I suggest dividing the diaspora, based on the degree of involvement in diasporic political communication, into three categories. This includes the political influencers, the most active members who can influence other members of the diaspora. Many of them are leading characters enabled by associations, networks, and/or media platforms. Second are the politically informed, who engage and retain an interest in political communication activities, but who do not likely take a leading role in political institutions or political activities. Finally, there are the political avoiders group, which includes many who used to be interested in politics but have stopped following developments as a result of the political failure and despair in Tunisia.

This mapping indicates that life in the diaspora allows Tunisians in Europe to engage in different forms of political activity, from direct and formal participation to indirect passive exchange, through networks, organizations, and media channels. This engagement, in turn, and the forms of political communication that are utilized can also influence, to different degrees, political decisions and government policies. Nonetheless, the level of engagement as practised by any one individual member of the diaspora is not only linked to the availability of communicative spaces, but also to the factors related to motivation and personal interest. In this sense, mapping diasporic political communication must take into account both the modalities of participation and the different individual elements mediating the degree of engagement.

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