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## Report: DEMAC Workshop in Berlin, 25. November 2017

### What's next for the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis?

*The diaspora's work in a changing landscape,*

The Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination (DEMAC) initiative has started in 2015 and is now entering its second phase. The initiative aims to enhance humanitarian relief efforts for the affected population by enhancing coordination and communication between diaspora aid organizations and other humanitarian actors. For the purpose of exchanging views and assessments of the most pressing developments and trends in Syria and the neighboring countries, a workshop was organized on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2017 which brought together a small group of diaspora humanitarians. The workshop aimed to inspire thinking about programming and (joint) actions in an ever-changing humanitarian landscape in Syria and to inform DEMAC's upcoming activities (see graphic).



#### Context – what are the trends on the ground?

This session focused on the most pressing trends in Syria and neighboring countries, effecting diaspora humanitarian response. In order to get a comprehensive understanding, all participants were invited to share experiences and assessments from each organization's experience:

- 1) **Conflict lines:** Participants discussed the current conflict lines and a scenario in which Syria could become separated into different zones of influence, whereby the U.S. forces dominate the oil-rich North and Northeast and the Russian sphere of influence is consolidating in the gas-rich West of the country. To avoid this division becoming solidified, it needs a stronger voice from civil society across conflict lines calling for a united Syria, some participants argued.
- 2) **Reconstruction:** A transition from humanitarian aid to reconstruction is underway in many parts of Syria. This has multiple consequences for humanitarian actors, reaching from decreased funding to consolidating power structures. How to adapt to this changing environment will be key questions for diaspora organizations.
- 3) **INGO dynamics:** One participant also raised the issue of international organizations increasingly considering working in government held areas. Participants were concerned about this leading to a reduced space for Syrian NGOs to work on the ground in Syria. This trend is accompanied by INGOs increasingly withdrawing from cross border operations.



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- 4) Turkey: Many Syrian organizations struggle to sustain operations in Turkey due to stringent rules and regulations. With more and more organizations moving to Europe for registration, the diaspora work from Europe is getting more important, some argued.
- 5) Cross-border: Participants raised the fear that UN resolution 2332, which authorizes organizations to use border crossings to deliver aid into Syria, might not be extended in January. This would have severe implications for humanitarian access and relief efforts (see also article from NY Times on this issue here: <http://nyti.ms/2AHnW5b> ).

### Local coordination and network structures

In the light of these emerging challenges and trends, close coordination among all Syrian actors is crucial. Mohammed Alhammedi presented the Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) in Gaziantep and the function it provides to its members. The SNA acts as an umbrella organization for many Syrian NGOs and seeks to enhance coordination between its members as well as represent them in different UN coordination bodies. Please find all details about SNA's work in the enclosed presentation slides.

After the presentation, participants discussed the idea of strengthening advocacy efforts by connecting diaspora and local voices. Potential topics for such a coordination are:

- Increased coordination along 3Ws (Who? What? Where?).
- Solutions in Europe – protection of refugees, resettlement and integration
- Thinking about how Syrian organizations can develop from implementers to a 'real' civil society
- Advocacy for Resolution 2332

Such a discussion could take place between the We Exist alliance, diaspora umbrella organizations in European countries and the SNA and could potentially be facilitated by the International Council for Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) or DEMAC.

To increase coordination with other actors on the ground, please find [here](#) a map of organizations present inside Syria, prepared by Citizens for Syria.

### Durable Solutions Platform's research on return and de-escalation zones

In addition to the trends outlined by the participants at the start of the workshop, this session looked at the recent returns of refugees and displaced Syrians and the implications of the so-called "de-escalation zones". In 2016 around 686,000 displaced people went back to their homes and another 22,200 refugees returned to Syria between January and August 2017. Research conducted by the Durable Solutions Platform, a joint initiative of DRC, IRC and NRC, showed that return took place to areas that are not safe and where livelihoods are not secured. Many people were returning not because they felt it was safe to go back, but because of the difficult living situation in their host country. In addition, the notion of "de-



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escalation zones” created a false picture of safety, increasing further pressure on people to return, the research concluded.

The subsequent discussion focused on common advocacy efforts on this issue and the role diaspora organizations can play in raising awareness in host countries. Many organizations asked for the research to be shared for this purpose. Some umbrella organizations raised the concern of them being asked to facilitate discussions with refugees on this topic of return soon.

### **Ways forward: Strategic exchange and brainstorming**

Returning to the trends outlined during the first session, this last session focused on organizational needs and the kind of training and capacity building support required.

In order to react to the decreasing funding for humanitarian aid, participants felt the need for better and more innovative proposal writing and reporting skills that could open options for donor diversification and save important resources. At the same time, diaspora organizations saw the need for their organizational structures to be better able to adapt to alterations in funding streams and contextual changes.

Improving communication skills was another key concern of the organizations present. Participants said they would like to improve their messages on social media as well as on official broadcasts (television and radio interviews) with regard to content, language and images. Similarly, participants regarded a training on general advocacy tools and skills as beneficial.

As many organizations struggle to attract and keep volunteers, participants emphasized the importance of learning more about volunteering from an organizational perspective. Also linked to the topic of staff management was the wish to improve the organizations’ duty of care policies. Diaspora representatives felt they had limited capacity to carry out sufficient duty of care for their staff in the field.

Lastly, the group discussed the idea of pooling expertise (technical as well as sector specific) within the diaspora. Some participants offered others in the session the opportunity to join their organizations for mentoring and shadowing with no costs involved. The idea of collecting capacity building offers and needs within the diaspora could be taken up by DEMAC.