

# Diaspora Mobilisation and the Arab Uprisings: Opportunities and Limits of the “Back Home Effect”

by Silvia Colombo and Giulia Gozzini

Arab emigration has been growing rapidly in recent years. Approximately 26 million citizens from Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries lived abroad in mid-2020.<sup>1</sup>

Equivalent to 10 per cent of the international migrant stock, this figure accounts for about 6 per cent of the total population of the region, a proportion that is twice as high as the world average.<sup>2</sup> Just over half – or 53 per cent – of these migrants remain in the MENA, mostly in the Arabian Peninsula, whereas Europe and North America stand out as the primary destination for the remaining percentage of MENA

diasporas.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the literature considers diasporas as examples of transnational communities, meaning that they belong to two or more societies at the same time and display multiple forms of identification.<sup>4</sup> In the age of globalisation, identity maintenance has been helped by cheap air travels (Covid-permitting) and phone calls, the Internet and satellite television.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), *International Migrant Stock 2019*, 2019, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Fargues, “International Migration and the Nation State in Arab Countries”, in *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (January 2013), p. 5-35 at p. 13, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/27601>.

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, *Migration to, from and in the Middle East and North Africa. Data Snapshot*, August 2016, [https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/2018-07/Migration-in-the-Middle-East-and-North-Africa\\_Data%20Sheet\\_August2016.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/2018-07/Migration-in-the-Middle-East-and-North-Africa_Data%20Sheet_August2016.pdf). Particularly, migrants from the Arab Mashreq seem to prefer Arab destinations, while the majority of people coming from the Arab Maghreb is concentrated in the western European and North American countries.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian (eds), *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East. Contextualising Community*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Dana M. Moss, “The Ties that Bind: Internet Communication Technologies, Networked

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These factors have also facilitated the emergence of diasporas as important players at the domestic political level in origin countries (the so-called “back home effect”), through return migration, external voting, political mobilisation and remittances.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, systematic analysis of diaspora interactions with domestic politics in the MENA is lacking, apart from the cases of the Palestinian and Kurdish diasporas.

From a historical perspective, in the early phases of the post-independence era, Arab states took little or no interest in their expatriate communities. They showed distrust towards them, doubting their loyalty and depicting them as the epicentre of plots and political opposition. It was only with the adoption of IMF-inspired neoliberal economic policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that Arab states started to look differently at their diasporas, considering them as potential assets for national development through remittances and political support.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, Arab regimes began to exploit the “migration card” to bolster their power base and extract concessions from hosting western states. At the same time, mounting threats to domestic regime security led to growing oversight and repression of Arab diasporas, which remained rather

Authoritarianism, and ‘Voice’ in the Syrian Diaspora”, in *Globalizations*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2018), p. 265-282.

<sup>6</sup> Louise Cainkar, “Global Arab World Migrations and Diasporas”, in *Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 2013), p. 126-165, [https://epublications.marquette.edu/socs\\_fac/70](https://epublications.marquette.edu/socs_fac/70).

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Fargues, “International Migration and the Nation State in Arab Countries”, cit., p. 18.

silent politically until 2011, again with the notable exception of the Palestinian and Kurdish diasporas in Europe.

With the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, diasporas – some of which consist overwhelmingly of exiled or auto-exiled individuals – were confronted with new forms of contentious politics in their origin countries and with changing spaces of activism. This encouraged diaspora communities to re-engage with political life through different strategies to the point that some have spoken about a “Diaspora Spring”.<sup>8</sup>

Two considerations can be made in this respect.

Firstly, the Arab uprisings provided first and second generations living abroad a chance to assert their sense of belonging to their home countries or claim their own identity amidst host societies. As a result, expatriate communities started to mobilise and became rapidly involved in home-state politics. Nonetheless, political mobilisation among MENA diasporas has been affected by what Chaudhary and Moss call “triadic political opportunity structures”, that is the multiple and embedded political conditions of the home country, the host country and the ability of diaspora communities to deal with both through transnational interactions and geopolitical relations.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Sheema Khan, “The Arab Diaspora Finds Its Voice”, in *The Globe and Mail*, 11 June 2012, <https://tgam.ca/2nUept>.

<sup>9</sup> Ali R. Chaudhary and Dana M. Moss, “Triadic Political Opportunity Structures: Re-Conceptualising Immigrant Transnational

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A negative reception context as well as assimilationist strategies and securitising narratives can inhibit voices and foster conflicts in the countries of origin as well.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the 2011 uprisings and its aftermath, transnational diaspora activism assumed direct and indirect modes of engagement through digital, civic and associational as well as epistemic fields.<sup>11</sup> Direct forms of diaspora mobilisation comprised financial support to political parties or NGOs, returning from exile to take part in the protests, national dialogue processes, political negotiations or to run for elections (the case of the leader of Ennahda, Rashid Ghannouchi, is paramount in this respect).

Nevertheless, despite some concessions (for example extending the right to vote to expatriates in the 2011 Tunisian Constituent Assembly election<sup>12</sup>),

Politics”, in *IMI Working Papers*, No. 129 (May 2016), <https://www.migrationinstitute.org/publications/triadic-political-opportunity-structures-re-conceptualising-immigrant-transnational-politics>.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Beaugrand and Vincent Geisser, “The Role of Diasporas, Migrants, and Exiles in the Arab Revolutions and Political Transitions”, in Elif Aksaz and Jean-François Pérouse (eds.), *“Guests and Aliens”: Re-Configuring New Mobilities in the Eastern Mediterranean After 2011 - With a Special Focus on Syrian Refugees*, Istanbul, Institut français d’études anatoliennes, 2016, p. 21-24, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifeagd.1850>.

<sup>11</sup> Tamirace Fakhoury, “The Arab Uprisings and the Politics of Contention Beyond Borders: The Case of Egyptian Communities in the United States”, in *Mashriq & Mahjar*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2018), p. 71-100, <https://doi.org/10.24847/55i2018.164>.

<sup>12</sup> Thibaut Jaulin, “Geographies of External Voting: The Tunisian Elections Abroad since the 2011 Uprising”, in *Comparative Migration Studies*, Vol. 4, Article 14 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-016-0034-y>.

including diasporas in the electoral process remained controversial as it has sometimes been regarded as a move to co-opt them and provide undue legitimation to incumbent regimes.<sup>13</sup>

As part of their political mobilisation patterns, diasporas have also made use of ideational resources to engage in debates and voice proposals related to human rights and socio-political reforms in their host countries.<sup>14</sup> They did so by harnessing, above all, the enormous potential of online activism. Social media enabled them to access a broader audience, drawing the world’s attention to their home countries, exposing major violations of human rights, promptly disseminating information and staying connected with compatriots.

During the 2019 Lebanese protests, countless solidarity marches and initiatives took place across the globe

[org/10.1186/s40878-016-0034-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-016-0034-y).

<sup>13</sup> Chafic Sarsar et al., “The Political Participation of the Diaspora of the Middle East and North Africa before and after the Arab Uprisings”, in *Global Campus Human Rights Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2019), p. 52-75, <https://doi.org/20.500.11825/995>. See, for instance, the Assad-tailored voting conditions in the 2021 Syrian Presidential elections. Lacking a politically neutral and safe space, current laws restricted the right to vote to some categories of internally displaced Syrians, refugees and members of the diaspora, thus compromising the overall credibility of the process. See Vladimir Pran et al., “Not (Just) Another Rigged Syrian Election: Implications for Settling the War”, in *PolicyWatch*, No. 3491 (26 May 2021), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/16765>.

<sup>14</sup> A fully-fledged typology in this regard has been developed by Dana M. Moss in her recent book, *The Arab Spring Abroad. Diaspora Activism Against Authoritarian Regimes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

thanks to the active role of the sizable number of Lebanese expatriates. An interactive map was even created to monitor solidarity events worldwide.<sup>15</sup> Online initiatives, like the website “The Lebanese Revolution”, were launched to document the revolution and spread awareness. Diasporic communities were also active in giving rise to several fundraising platforms, such as Xpatria in Switzerland or Impact Lebanon in the UK.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, MENA diaspora mobilisation has come to represent something of a thermometer for the success of the uprisings and ensuing political transition processes. In this regard, a number of limits have been revealed about how MENA diasporas can concretely impact domestic dynamics back home. For instance, despite some improvements, forms of transnational repression are still active. Authoritarian regimes took measures to keep their diasporas under control – be it via physical or virtual, i.e., cyber, tools – by targeting dissident voices abroad both directly (through embassies and regime informers) and indirectly (punishing their friends and family members at home). As a result, it was generally after the weakening of authoritarianism in their home countries that diasporas have engaged in political mobilisation.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Tarek Ali Ahmad, “By the People, for the People, Lebanese Diaspora Launches Platform Documenting Lebanon’s Revolution”, in *Arab News*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1578171>.

<sup>16</sup> Carmen Geha, “From Revolt to Community-Driven Resistance: Beirut’s Year of Hell”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|30 (July 2021), p. 15-16, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13774>.

<sup>17</sup> Dana M. Moss, “Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of The

In the case of Egypt, it was difficult for diaspora groups to reconnect to national and local dynamics during the 2011 revolution and the subsequent political transition that ended with the military coup in 2013. This was mostly due to the high level of domestic polarisation in Egypt and the fear of transnational repression that reached new heights particularly under the al-Sisi regime.<sup>18</sup>

These limits notwithstanding, we have witnessed a transformation in the spatiality of political engagement and activism in the context of the Arab uprisings thanks to the role of Arab diasporas forging new spaces of distance mobilisation that are fluid and, sometimes, cross internal-external boundaries. As a result, “fully delimiting the theatrical stage of Arab uprisings requires looking beyond ‘bounded communities’ and state-confined concepts of the political”.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, after 2011, Arab diasporas often began to mirror conflict patterns at home through “conflict transmission” dynamics. According to Moss, conflict transmission refers to “the ways in which divisive home-country politics are reproduced

Arab Spring”, in *Social Problems*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (November 2016), p. 480-498, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw019>.

<sup>18</sup> Dana M. Moss, “Diasporas and the MENA Region Prospects and Struggles for Influence”, in *Med Dialogue Series*, No. 38 (October 2021), p. 5, <https://www.kas.de/en/single-title/-/content/diasporas-and-the-mena-region-prospects-and-struggles-for-influence>.

<sup>19</sup> Tamirace Fakhoury, “The Arab Uprisings and Their External Dimensions: Bringing Migration In”, in *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, Vol. 4 (2015), p. 37-43 at p. 41, <https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/?p=588>.



in diaspora communities through members' biographical and identity-based ties".<sup>20</sup> Old and new conflicts in the region allow new forms of entanglement between global and regional/local dynamics through diasporas, as demonstrated by the role of the Syrian diaspora in Europe and other parts of the Middle East during the decade-long conflict.

In conclusion, Arab diaspora mobilisation is an ongoing phenomenon and while it is subject to ebbs and flows, it remains a very important dynamic to be reckoned and acted upon. The 2011 uprisings have catalysed Arab diaspora mobilisation even further and have contributed to transnational exchanges of new political ideas, practices and norms.

Understanding how these recent developments are affecting not only diaspora communities themselves but also home and host countries is critical for the European Union's policies towards the region, whether the objective is fostering sustainable development or addressing the lack of civic and political rights in many countries in the region, down to the management and resolution of conflicts.

What emerges is that diasporas are not passive actors. Rather, they have sharpened their transnational role by leveraging their multiple identities and pursuing different tasks in the context of fluid internal-external dynamics and a changing landscape in the MENA.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Dana M. Moss, *The Arab Spring Abroad*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that while many

Thus, the choice of some international institutions to focus only on their economic contribution<sup>22</sup> obscures substantial features of the *political* role and identity of diasporas.

These more politically active Arab diasporas in the post-2011 era often include former politicians, activist lawyers, academics, civil society professionals and journalists who should be systematically engaged by European institutions to better inform policymaking and address the complex challenges facing the region. More attention should be directed at effectively involving and learning from the experience and expertise of these communities. To start with, EU policymakers should work to establish safe spaces for these people to protect them from the transnational tentacles of repressive state security agencies that target their citizens abroad.

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articles deal with how diaspora activists applauded and contributed to the protests, less attention was devoted to the activities of pro-regime expatriate actors. Moss discusses some examples of counter-mobilisation of pro-regime groups within the Syrian and Libyan diasporas in the United States. See, Dana M. Moss, "Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of the Arab Spring", cit. Pro-Assad mobilisations among Syrian expatriate communities are also reported in Argentina and Brazil in Paulo Pinto and Cecilia Baeza, "The Syrian Uprising and Mobilization of the Syrian Diaspora in South America", in *Middle East Report*, No. 284/285 (Winter 2017), p. 26-29, <https://merip.org/?p=47856>.

<sup>22</sup> Mariem Mezghenni Malouche, Sonia Plaza and Fanny Salsac, *Mobilizing the Middle East and North Africa Diaspora for Economic Integration and Entrepreneurship*, Washington, World Bank, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/26307>.

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