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Arabism and its Repercussions: Forms of Solidarity among Syrians in Latin America

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Abstract

This paper examines the stance taken by the Syrian diaspora in Latin America vis-à-vis the war in Syria and how it envisions its aftermaths. It builds on an ethnographic field research and analysis carried out between 2011 and 2014 in Argentina and Brazil, and expands its scope by including a questionnaire prepared by ARI on the diaspora's future role in the reconstruction Syria in a post-conflict scenario. The questionnaire has been sent to Syrian immigrants and descendants from Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. The first section examines the patterns of Syrian emigration to Latin America and its diasporization process under the influence of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Ba'ath. The second section shows how those historical elements have impacted the diaspora's attitude towards the conflict in Syria. The last section analyzes the answers to the questionnaire and identifies the main topics of shared interest.

Introduction

The political and academic interest in diasporas has continued unabated since the 1990s. The importance of diaspora communities has been largely recognized as their transnational activities affect the political, economic, and social dynamics of their country of origin. Additionally, research demonstrates that the role of diasporas in homeland conflicts is particularly complex and depends on the historical reasons for their emigration and their perception of nationalism (Shain, 2002; Lyons, 2004; Smith and Stares, 2007). Scholars have also focused on periods of post-conflict, and more specifically the diaspora's potential engagement in the reconstruction of their home country (Nielsen and Riddle, 2009).

This article examines the role of the Syrian diaspora in Latin America in the ongoing conflict in Syria and their plans for future reconstruction. It builds on the ethnographic field research and analysis carried out by Baeza and Pinto between 2011 and 2014 in Argentina and Brazil (Baeza and Pinto, 2016), and expands its scope by including a questionnaire prepared by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) on the diaspora's future role in the reconstruction Syria in a post-conflict scenario. The questionnaire was sent to nineteen Syrian immigrants and descendants from Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. The interviewees include businessmen, lawyers, senior executives, politicians, judges, doctors, and representatives of diaspora organizations.

The first section examines the patterns of Syrian emigration to Latin America and the influence of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Ba'ath Party. The second section demonstrates how historical elements have impacted the diaspora's attitude towards the conflict in Syria. The last section analyzes the answers to the questionnaire and identifies the main topics of shared interest.

1. Characteristics of the Syrian diaspora in Latin America

Latin America hosts a large population of Syrian immigrants and their descendants. While Syrian communities can be found in every country in the region, the majority is present in Argentina and Brazil. While reliable numbers are difficult to obtain, Syrian immigrants and their descendants represent an estimated one million persons in the subcontinent,¹ which is considered a conservative figure.

1.1. Patterns of migration and the making of Syrian-Lebanese diaspora

This Syrian presence in Latin America is the result of several waves of immigration which peaked between 1870 and the 1930, and has continued until today.

Economic hardships in the Levant, the fear of conscription under the Ottomans, and the lure of prosperity in the new world were the deciding factors for this early emigration. However, emigration continued through chain migration or marriage, for economic opportunities, and, to a much lesser extent, for political reasons. Patterns of immigration and trajectories of integration have been quite similar across the continent, with a large portion of the emigrants and their descendants progressively

¹ For an analysis of the structural fluidity of the demographics of the Arabic-speaking immigrants and their descendants in Brazil, see Karam 2007: 10-13; Pinto 2010: 15.

joining the middle and upper classes of their host societies. Though some Muslims and Jews were part of these early waves of Levantine immigration, Maronite and Orthodox Christians constituted the majority. Despite this, the rate of some groups varied according to their regional and sectarian origins. For instance, there is a higher presence of the Souida Druze in Venezuela and of 'Alawis in Argentina.

As the diaspora grew, hometown clubs, mutual aid societies, charity groups, sports clubs, and religious institutions became the pillars of these communities (Balloffet, 2016). Throughout the early waves of immigration, most diaspora organizations were religious based groups. As Christians represented the majority of the Syrian populations, their institutions were the first to be established. In Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, for example, the Saint Nicholas Orthodox Society was founded as early as 1897. The minority groups made up of Sunnis, 'Alawi, and Druze established their own organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. In Argentina, the Druze Charitable Association was founded in 1927, while the first 'Alawi institution, the 'Alawi Islamic Union, was created in 1929.

The two other forms of diaspora groups, hometown clubs and national institutions, first developed in 1910. Emigrants from Homs were the most numerous among Syrians in Latin America and established Homs societies between the 1910 and the 1930, such as the Homs Youth Charity Society in Santiago de Chile, the Homs Club in São Paulo in 1920, Brazil, and the Homs Youth Association in Buenos Aires in 1925. The first emigrants to establish their own religious institutions also created national institutions abroad. Christians and emigrants from Homs were the first to establish Syrian or Syrian-Lebanese organizations. For example, the Syrian-Argentine School in Buenos Aires was created by Maronite missionaries in 1902. Similarly, the Syrian-Lebanese Society founded in 1925 in Tucuman by Syrian Christian immigrants. Coincidentally, the Syrian Orphanage in São Paulo was founded in 1923 by a group of young men, all from the city of Homs.

These various types of sectarian, local, and national organizations are typical of the late Ottoman era and the French mandate period in Syria and Lebanon. Syrian emigrants remained loyal to their religion, Arab identity, as well as their country and family connections. The diaspora in the Americas largely expressed national loyalty through the creation of Syrian-Lebanese institutions. This Syrian-Lebanese identity was fostered by the historical presence of the pan-Syrian identity in the Americas, which was bolstered by the large waves of emigration from both Syria and Lebanon as well as the sectarian composition of the diaspora.

1.2. Growing influence of national political parties

The idea of a Syrian-Lebanese identity were advocated in South America by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP, in Arabic *Al-Hizb Al-Suri Al-Qawmi Al-'Ijtima'i*). Antun Sa'adeh, a Lebanese born into a Greek Orthodox family, founded the SSNP in 1932 and lived in Brazil and Argentina for almost two decades. While residing abroad he founded several nationalist parties within the Syrian community² (Schumann, 2004; Lesser, 1999). Sa'adeh finally returned to Lebanon in 1947, but was executed two years later following conflicts between his political party and the newly formed Lebanese Republic.

² With the help of fellow intellectuals, he formed the Syrian Patriotic Association, an underground political movement that quickly disintegrated. He formed then a new political organization called the Free Syrians Party, but this second attempt only lasted a few years.

However, this was not the end of the SSNP. Despite tensions within Lebanon, the SSNP developed a strong institutional influence in the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora in both Argentina and Brazil and organized several political and cultural programmes. Like the emerging Arab nationalism movement,³ the secular pan-Syrianism of the SSNP found a following among the Greek Orthodox community. The party also proved to be popular among the Druze, 'Alawis, and other Christians as the SSNP provided a response to the religious diversity in Syria (Salibi, 1988). The party is still thriving today in Argentina and Brazil due to the [Syrian Cultural Association, founded by Sa'adeh himself, which continues to play a crucial role in the diffusion of his ideas.](#)

Similarly, the Ba'th party acquired influence and control over ethnic and nationalist organizations a few decades later, through the creation of the Federation of American-Arab Entities (FEARAB). Consequently, the first Pan-American Arab Congress was held in October 1973 in the Homs Club of Buenos Aires, where a pioneer Arab Argentine Federation was created in 1972. The meeting was attended by hundreds of delegates from Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Uruguay Venezuela, and a number of Arab diplomatic representatives in the region. Their goal was to establish national federations of Arab entities in every Latin American country. FEARAB was officially established in Brazil in November 1974 and the second conference was held in São Paulo in November 1975 (Hajjar 1985).

According to Claude Hajjar (1985), FEARAB actually dates to the First Congress of Arab Emigrants in 1965 in Damascus. However, most scholars emphasize the decisive influence of the Syrian Ba'th party on the establishment of this organization (Klich, 1998). The diaspora viewed FEARAB as an institution capable of defending and promoting the Arab culture in their host societies. However, the Syrian regime intended to use FEARAB to lobby Latin American states to adopt more favorable position towards Syrian interests and to boost bilateral trade relations. Additionally, the Syrian government viewed the diaspora as a source of capital and human resources (Logroño-Narbona, 2013).

Syrians have always enjoyed higher rates of participation in FEARAB. The organization was intended to represent all Arab immigrants and their descendants in Latin America; however, Syrians have regularly made the majority of the executive board. Furthermore, SSNP militants often obtain a high profile in the organization, as the SSNP and the Ba'th party share the common goal of mobilizing the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora. Indeed, with the gradual monopoly of the pan-Arab nationalist discourse in Syria by the Ba'th party, the SSNP militants became enthusiastic supporters and active members of the Ba'thist initiatives in Latin America as a way for their diaspora organizations to gain political importance (Baeza and Pinto, 2016).

The Ba'th party increased their interest in the diaspora when Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000. During the first decade of his presidency Assad sought to integrate the Syrian diaspora into Syrian affairs not only as a source of economic investment but also as political capital in the international arena. Additionally, the Ministry of Expatriates (*Wazarat al-Mughtaribun*) was created in 2002 to foster

³ George Antonius argued in his famous *Arab Awakening* in 1938 that Syrian Christians played a crucial role in the early development of Arab nationalism. Although this thesis has been superseded by more recent research (See C. Ernest Dawn, "The Origins of Arab Nationalism," in Rashid Khalidi, et al., eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, 1991), other authors have noted that the Orthodox seemed to have a greater affinity for Arab nationalism (Hopwood, 1969; Hourani, 1947; Haddad, 1970).

closer relations with Syrian communities abroad. Shortly after, a Conference of Expatriates was organized in 2004, for the first time since 1965, [accompanied by two meetings of the Syrian Expatriate Youth Forum, in 2009 and 2010](#). In his opening speech at the Conference of Expatriates, Assad urged the Syrian diaspora to become “ambassadors” of Syrian values, which he defined as “peace, freedom and pluralism” (Logroño-Narbona, 2013).

Furthermore, Joseph Sweid, the secretary of the SSNP, was designated as minister of expatriates in 2008. It is clear that the SSNP has a significant political weight among the diaspora and a strategic importance acquired through the Syrian government’s efforts to mobilize the Syrian communities abroad to further the Ba’thist agenda. As minister, Sweid continued to politically integrate the Syrian diaspora as representatives of an idealized social, cultural, and political order in Syria. During the opening of the first Syrian Expatriate Youth Forum, he defined the young expatriates as the pillars and future of the Syrian nation, inviting them to learn Arabic and to strengthen connections between their countries and Syria. He concluded by urging them to show the world the “real Syria” to confront the image painted by the international media (Logroño-Narbona, 2013).

Furthermore, in 2008 and 2009 he undertook a series of visits to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela where he met representatives of the Syrian and Syrian-Lebanese communities (Logroño-Narbona, 2013). Sweid’s efforts to integrate the Syrian expatriates and their descendants in Latin America made the community more receptive to Bashar al-Assad’s visit to the region in 2010. The cultural politicization of the diaspora also reinforced the relationship between the SSNP and the Ba’th party in Syria.

2. Mapping solidarities since the uprisings in 2011

The ongoing war in Syria has triggered an unprecedented political mobilization of the diaspora around specific Syrian issues, thereby strengthening the process of the Syrianization of the diaspora, initiated by Bashar al-Assad. However, the political rifts of the war have also divided the diaspora by reinforcing transnational sectarian solidarities.

2.1. Support to the main government organizations

The networks and organizations that the immigrants built more than a century ago still exist today. Hometown clubs, charity groups, sports clubs, bi-national chambers of commerce, and religious institutions have maintained a significant role in the diaspora. In São Paulo alone, there are a dozen well-funded institutions, including the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital, the Homs Club, the Cardiology Hospital-Syrian Sanatorium HCor, the Syrian Orphanage, the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, the Charitable Association of Syrian-Lebanese Women-Crèche Adelia Curi, and the Syrian Sports Club. Even though only a very small portion of Syrian descendants actively participate on a regular basis, these institutions are central to framing the way in which Middle Eastern issues are articulated and constructed in Latin America.

With the transformation of the uprising into an armed conflict, the majority of the Arab and Syrian-Lebanese traditional institutions became more vocal in expressing their support for the Syrian regime,

usually referring to it as “progressive”, “secular” and “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people”. The long-standing organizational ties with the SSPN, the Ba’ath party as well as the transnational sectarian solidarities largely explain this stance. Both support and opposition for the Syrian regime among the diaspora mirror and exaggerate the sectarian divides inside Syria. Latin Americans of Shia Lebanese origins, Christian Syrian or ‘Alawi Syrian descent, who constitute the majority of the diaspora, fiercely defend Bashar al-Assad’s government, while Sunni Muslims, a small minority, support the revolution. The image of Sunnis influenced by Saudi money as well as the Shia resistance against Israel and imperialism have become prominent among non-Sunnis. Christians and ‘Alawis have begun to publicly reproduce discourses about Sunni Muslim fanaticism and the need to contain militant Islam. Furthermore, from 2012, Christian and ‘Alawi institutions developed into arenas of the Syrian-Lebanese Community’s collective support for the Assad regime.

Demonstrations of support for Assad were held in São Paulo as early as 2011, usually at the Avenida Paulista, where both the Homs Club and the Syrian consulate are located. In March 2012, the Argentine branch of the SSNP organized a [demonstration for the regime at the Obelisk of Buenos Aires with hundreds of participants](#). Chants and slogans⁴ clearly indicated that participants maintained a close connection with the pro-regime movement in Syria. Since then, [several other demonstrations in favour of the regime took place in several Latin America countries](#), but [the most significant were held in August and September 2013 in the wake of American military action against Syria following the chemical attacks in 21 August 2013](#). In Buenos Aires, the demonstration was convened by several organizations, including labour unions, left-wing parties as well as Islamic and Arab organizations. In Brazil, a similar alliance of Syrian-Lebanese institutions and left-wing political organizations staged periodical pro-regime demonstrations in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro since 2012.

One novelty of these political mobilizations is the intense use of social media. The plethora of groups in cyberspace strengthened the enthusiasm of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Latin America with slogans and images meant to mobilize them around a certain political position. Dozens of new Facebook groups in Spanish were created after 2011, such as “*Soldados de Bashar en Sudamérica*” [[Soldiers of Bashar in South America](#)], “*En Siria No Hay Una Revolución, Hay Una Invasión*” [[In Syria there is no revolution, there is an invasion](#)], or “*Libaneses, Sirios y Argentinos con Bashar El Assad*” [[Lebanese, Syrians and Argentines with Bashar el Assad](#)]. Almost all those groups support the Assad regime. [The rare anti-Assad groups from Latin America on Facebook](#) are either not managed by Syrian descendants or are mainly composed of non-Arab Latin Americans.

The battles of Damascus and Aleppo, coupled with Hezbollah’s military support of the Syrian regime in early 2013, radicalized these discourses on social media. Insults along sectarian lines become widespread on social media. Individuals who disagreed with the political line of a page have been systematically excluded as agitators. Intimidation and personal threats were also employed in 2015 against the curator of the Arab Film Festival organized by Institute of Arab Culture (ICArab) in São Paulo because he chose to show *Silvered Water*, which some Arab organizations judged too critical of the

⁴ “Allah, Suria, Bashar wa bas” [God, Syria, and Bashar only]; “Wahid, wahid, wahid, al-sha’b al-suri wahid” [One, one, one, the Syrian people is only one]; “Shabbiha lil abad, li’uyunak ya Assad [Shabbiha forever, for the sake of your eyes oh Assad]; “Bil ruh bil dam nefdik ya Bashar” [With our soul and blood, we will sacrifice for you, oh Bashar]). NB: Shabihha are groups of armed militia in support of the Ba’th Party and led by the Assad family.

Assad regime. Consequently, several sponsors, including the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, withdrew their support for the festival. This movement of political silencing created a public image of unanimous support for Assad throughout the Syrian-Lebanese communities in Latin America despite the worsening tensions caused by disagreements among diaspora members.

More notably, the Syrian civil war created a new Middle Eastern media in Spanish. The Assad regime and its allies have been keen to produce their own version of news regarding Syria. For example, HispanTV, a Spanish language news channel operated by IRIB, Iran's state-owned media corporation, began broadcasting in December 2011.⁵ Similarly, the Spanish version of the official [Syrian news agency \(SANA\)](#) created a Facebook page in May 2013. The latest of the pro-resistance camp in the Latin America media is the Spanish version of the [TV channel Al Mayadeen](#), which has been on air since March 2015.

2.2. Refugees: specific programmes and alternative voices

The Syrian diaspora has also been influenced by the current influx of Syrian refugees. Alongside the old diaspora, a new generation of Syrians has arrived in Latin America as refugees since the beginning of the war. Countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay have adopted special programmes for Syrians fleeing the conflict. While the European Union and some Arab countries have been criticized for failing to extend a hand to Syrian refugees, Latin American countries have made a large effort to welcome them.

Nonetheless, the numbers remain very modest,⁶ and there are important differences between each country's asylum policies. Brazil has become, by far, the main destination for Syrian refugees in the region. In 2013, Brazil launched a humanitarian visa for any Syrian or Palestinian national that has been affected by the Syrian conflict. This policy provides an alternative safe route for individuals with nowhere else to go. By September 2015, over 3,340 Syrians had applied for refugee status in Brazil. Some had family connections, but the majority had no previous contacts in the region. The programme, which was scheduled to expire on 30 September 2015 has, in fact, been renewed. In October 2016, the government declared that the country was willing to welcome at least an additional 3,000 Syrians from refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon.

In Argentina, a "Syria Programme" was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship in October 2014 for Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria. Similar to the visa scheme in Brazil, the programme grants humanitarian visas but it is more restrictive and requires proof of "a bond of kinship" with an Argentine citizen. According to official data, Argentina has currently received only 807 Syrians.

⁵ Facebook pages in favor of Bashar al-Assad almost only share articles from these sources and Shia media. Among the Shi'i sources in Spanish, the main ones are: the Spanish version of Hezbollah-owned *Al-Manar*, the first to be launched in early 2010; *AhlulBayt News Agency* (ABNA) whose Facebook page in Spanish was opened in July 2010; *AnnurTV*, "the first Arab and Islamic channel from Argentina", on the air since December 2010; and *TabkirTV*, "the first Islamic TV program of Argentina", launched in 2012.

⁶ Chile's government announced that it would take 120 families as part of a resettlement program with the UNHCR. 60 will arrive in October 2017, and the other half will arrive next year. Uruguay resettled in October 2014 five Syrian families who had been living in refugee camps in Jordan in 2014. Like in Chile, the program was executed in cooperation with the UNHCR. Totalling 42 people, those families are mostly composed of children. The arrival of another seven families - 72 people - has been postponed or an indefinite period of time by the Uruguayan Government. At the beginning of September 2015, Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro said that his country would accept 20,000 refugees from Syria, but the project did not materialize.

The restrictive framework of the Syria program can be largely attributed to diaspora organizations as many wanted to have a say in the selection of the refugees. Adalberto Ass'aad, the president of Arab Argentine Islamic Association, stated: "We should try to make sure that the person who arrives [in Argentina] is compatible with those who already live here. You cannot put someone ideologically in favour of Assad with another one who is an opponent. Here in Argentina, those who historically settled are the Alawite, who are on the side of Assad; but [the majority of refugees] are Sunnis, who think very differently, as well as Catholics. We need to know [who is coming to Argentina] so we can all live together in peace (...)". Despite the position of the diaspora, the current government announced its plan to extend the programme in to increase the number of Syrian refugees in Argentina to 3000.

However, the arrival of refugees in Brazil has been received differently. In fact, refugees have empowered the diaspora. In São Paulo, the Coordination Committee of the Syrian Revolution, a small group of Syrian-Lebanese descendants and Trotskyist activists demonstrated in solidarity with the Syrian uprising and have expand their activities with the influx of refugees in Brazil. Additionally, Amer Masarani, a Syrian immigrant from Homs who arrived in São Paulo in 1996, is one of the founders of the committee and in 2012 who arrived in São Paulo in 1996, is one of the founders of the committee arrived in São Paulo in 1996, is one of the founders of the committee and in 2012, he created a support network for Syrian refugees.⁷

3. Syrian-Latin Americans and the reconstruction of Syria

The questionnaire prepared by ARI was sent to nineteen Syrian immigrants and descendants from Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. The interviewees include businessmen, lawyers, senior executives, politicians, judges, doctors, and representatives of diaspora organizations. Refugees were not part of the sample. However, less than half of them answered the questionnaire, which clearly demonstrates the deep distrust and suspicion surrounding Syrian issues. Discussing Syrian politics, even in a harmless way, has become taboo. The ideological divide has led the diaspora to only trust their longstanding networks. One representative of the Syrian Sports Club reported that he could not answer the questionnaire because the "bylaws of the organization do not allow it". However, the integration of the refugees in Latin America and the humanitarian dimension of the war in Syria were the two most important issues mentioned on the questionnaires.

3.1. Refugees integration

When responding to the question of refugees the interviewees had various responses but they all focused on integration of refugees. The responses from the diaspora members emphasized the need to welcome more refugees, to increase support for refugee families especially with children as well as psychological support, to maintain the refugees' cultural and familial ties with Syria, to consolidate a

⁷ See Facebook page of Nidal alomal (in Arabic) available at <https://www.facebook.com/nidalalomal/> Victorios Bayan Shams, "News in Arabic from a Labour perspective", Al Jazeera Media Institute (in Arabic) available at: <http://institute.aljazeera.net/ar/ajr/article/2017/08/170823132230275.html>

civil society network between the governments of Latin American countries receiving refugees as well as to actively contribute to the integration of Syrians who found refuge in Chile.

The question of the refugees' social integration is of considerable concern for Syrian of Latin America. The refugee crisis in Europe has influenced the perception of refugees in Latin America as some members of the diaspora consider them a huge responsibility for host countries as well as for diaspora organizations. However, ethnic solidarity has played a crucial role in their willingness to actively contribute to supporting refugees. While diaspora organizations have advocated for welcoming more refugees, all of them have emphasized their preference for integrating small numbers of refugees and, when possible, individuals with the same religious affiliations as the established community. The Brazilian experience has shown that political, social, and religious fractures between the old Syrian diaspora and the new waves of refugees could negatively affect solidarity towards the refugees, who only received scarce support from Syrian-Lebanese institutions.

3.2. Alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Syria

When responding to finding a solution for the humanitarian crisis in Syrian the interviewees emphasized the need for humanitarian support, urban reconstruction, and making children a priority. Additionally, all of them insisted on their willingness to contribute to the alleviation of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. In fact, several diaspora organizations have been active in this field since 2011. In Brazil, a special Immigration Committee, coordinated by the Syrian consulate-general in São Paulo and composed of numerous diaspora organizations, was established to further humanitarian activities. The committee also collects funds to [support efforts in Syria and provided hospitals in Syria with medication and equipment in 2016](#).⁸

Similarly, [the Syrian community in Chile](#) raised enough money in 2015 to purchase six fully equipped ambulances for Syrian hospitals. As in Brazil, this project was managed by both the Syrian embassy in Santiago and the United Syrian Club. Juan Carlos Sarquis, the president of the United Syrian Club, stated: “we understand that considering the magnitude of the humanitarian disaster in Syria, this is only a small action in favour of those who suffer, but the level of response of our community was a tremendous success”. In both cases, the material was received by members of the Assad government, and attracted significant attention in the weekly radio programme “Syrian Expatriates” conducted by Maysa Younis and broadcast via the Damascus channel Saut Ash-Sha’ab (*The Voice of the People*).

Those two examples demonstrate the Syrian regime’s strategy to capitalize on the diaspora’s attachment to Syria to monopolize their contributions. However, interviews also show that, even if the diaspora does trust the Syrian government, Latin American Syrians are not opposed to working with other actors. While international institutions, such as the UNHCR and UNICEF, were not frequently mentioned, civil society organizations, the private sector, and local authorities in Syria are considered reliable partners by many diaspora organizations. Similarly, local projects, largely in Homs, are

⁸Sputnik News, “Descendentes árabes no Brasil entregam ajuda humanitária a Assad”, 27 September 2016, available at: <https://br.sputniknews.com/brasil/201609276422800-siria-guerra-estrangeiros-ajuda-humanitaria-brasileiros-mercenarios/>

generally preferred over national ones. However, the diaspora has chosen to avoid investment opportunities in Syria due to the prevalence of corruption and the lack of transparent intermediaries.

Conclusion

Bashar al-Assad's government found vocal support among the members of the Syrian-Lebanese communities in Latin America. This is the result of a long history of the diaspora's mobilization around nationalist ideologies that promoted the image of a strong Syria with a leading role in the Middle East. The SSNP's control of the ethnic organizations and the Ba'th party was instrumental for framing these nationalist ideals. Paradoxically, while it helped to delineate more clear boundaries of a Syrian identity for the diaspora, this political mobilization undermined the possibility of a broadly shared Syrian national identity due to the radicalization of sectarian identities. Devising the diaspora's future involvement in the reconstruction of Syria that will benefit all Syrians and allow refugees to return will require far more than good intentions. In the current context, the regime may reap all the benefits of the transnational solidarity of this wealthy diaspora.

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ABOUT ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading 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. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

1. We **produce** original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
2. We **empower** individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
3. We **mobilize** stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

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