Techne-Impact: Local Knowledge of ME Diaspora as a Resource for Policy Making (GRAD-P1052)

The Techne Initiative

Final Product

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Executive Summary

The Techne Initiative project aims at understanding the role of the Middle Eastern community in German foreign policy, presenting how political knowledge can be decentralised as a way to generate knowledge hubs within the diaspora community. The project aspires to assess the policy ecosystem in Germany, adding depth to the realm of foreign policy while understanding the way Germany can provide a more meaningful intergovernmental interaction between itself and Syria. Some of the areas analysed include the meaning of the diaspora, the legitimisation of their knowledge, how diaspora knowledge can be added to the process of German policy making, and the importance of their alignment with Germany's political interests. Consequently, the final goal is to contribute to the work of IMPACT today, connecting our findings to the overarching goals of the initiative in further including diaspora voices in the policy ecosystem.

Background

The diasporic community in Germany is growing every day, with the Middle Eastern diaspora estimated to be around 1.5 million in 2020.[1] Undeniably, they became substantial groups of actors in the German political realm. But despite their presence and increasing legacy in the European political sphere, their knowledge remains largely untapped regarding the political dynamics shaping their respective origin countries; the voices of diaspora experts continue to be tangential in the EU foreign policy.

Academic research has long emphasised the positive implications of including diasporic voices in the policymaking process due to their first-hand knowledge and experience, such as Kathleen Newland and Dina Ionescu in their discussion on engaging diaspora in development projects. Nonetheless, little has been done to further include them in this discussion.[2] This indicates a pressing need to reorient past path dependencies in foreign policymaking and to take a new inclusive and participatory approach. Therefore, new avenues of inclusion for their diverse possible contributions still need to be made available in the current approach to foreign policy decision making, which would, in turn, only strengthen and legitimise such efforts. With that being

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[1] "Ausländer in Deutschland Bis 2019: Herkunftsland," Statista, last modified March 29, 2021, https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1221/umfrage/anzahl-der-auslaender-in-deutschland-nach-herkunftsland/.

[2] Bahar Baser, "The Awakening of a Latent Diaspora: The Political Mobilisation of First and Second Generation Turkish Migrants in Sweden," *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 4 (2014): xx, doi:10.1080/17449057.2014.894175.

said, the *Techne Initiative* aims to provide evidence for reframing the German approach to Middle Eastern foreign policy by centralising Middle Eastern actors as an integral part of the process of policymaking. To do so, the project focuses on the Syrian diaspora as the case study.

Consequently, the desired outcome of the project is to add depth to the German foreign policy plane and to contribute to meaningful intergovernmental interactions. The scope of the project is between Germany and Syria, but the proposed strategy for engagement and knowledge sharing can be expanded to the broader European level.

Techne Project Vision

The Techne initiative aims to redefine the role of the Middle Eastern diaspora community in the European policy-making plan as a resource of expertise. Utilising the firsthand experience of these community members provides valuable insight on relevant questions facing foreign policy planners. In order to accomplish this goal, the project is carried out in two phases: firstly, identifying sources of expertise among the Middle Eastern diaspora communities and developing a methodology for converting this knowledge into policy insight. Secondly, incorporating diaspora expert advisors into pilot policy projects in conjunction with Germany's foreign policy planners. This first phase is the focus of the current project, particularly in working toward the development of a methodology. In order to do so, our team has conducted an in-depth literature review and review of existing case studies, as well as going directly to the source to interview diaspora community members and policy planners related to German and European foreign policy.

Literature Review

The role and importance of diasporic expertise in the policymaking process have been highlighted by many studies. In Engaging Diasporas in Development: Contours and Outcomes of International Policymaking, a part of the African Histories and Modernities book series, the author has emphasised the role and positive impact diaspora communities have on both sending and host countries' development.[3] The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has reaffirmed this finding by recognizing the diaspora as human capital, financial and entrepreneurial capital, social

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[3] J. Mangala, Africa and its Global Diaspora. African Histories and Modernities, (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017), pg. 3-37 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-50053-9_1

capital, effective capital, and local capital for the countries of immigration and emigration[4]. Building on this rationale, many European[5], African[6] and Middle Eastern countries have strived to utilise the diaspora community in defining policies for their own nation and policies pertaining to the affairs of countries of the diaspora communities.

In a work by Alexandra C. Budabin[7] that assesses the engagement of the US-based NGO Save Darfur Coalition with the Darfuri diaspora, it was outlined that the diaspora serves as important sources of legitimacy and first-hand knowledge to support the "information politics" of the host country NGOs. Additionally, it emphasised that diaspora gain access to policy-making around development and conflict resolution which impacts their country of origin. The study also underscored that the strength of alliance across the diaspora, NGOs, and other host country actors are influenced by the status of the diaspora and the home and host country contexts. While examining the Turkish political mobilisation in Sweden, in his work Bahar Baser suggests that inter-diaspora rivalries and group competition helps policymakers to gain a better understanding of the interest that diasporans show in the promotion of homeland politics.

Gerasimos Tsourapas[8] goes a step further in his work and identifies the technicalities involved in the engagement process; Specifically, the research specifies how each state develops multi-tier diaspora engagement policies aimed at three separate stages of citizens' mobility: first, policies of exit regulate aspects related to emigration from the country of origin, second, overseas policies target citizens beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, and finally, return policies set processes of readmission into the country of origin. Similarly, the Diaspora Engagement Model

[4] IOM, Engaging Diasporas as Development Partners for Home and Destination Countries: Challenges for Policymakers, (IOM, 2006) pg. 36-43 https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs26.pdf

[5] Bahar Baser, The Awakening of a Latent Diaspora: The Political Mobilization of First and Second Generation Turkish Migrants in Sweden, (Ethnopolitics: Formerly Global Review of Ethnopolitics, 2014) pg. 355-376 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449057.2014.894175; Sarah Garding, Weak by Design? Diaspora engagement and institutional change in Croatia and Serbia, Vol. 39(3), (International Political Science Review, 2018), pg. 353-368 https://sci-hub.hkvisa.net/10.1177/0192512118755202

[6] Alexandra C. Budabin, Diasporas as development partners for peace? The alliance between the Darfuri diaspora and the Save Darfur Coalition, (Third World Quarterly, 2014), pg. 163-180, https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F01436597.2014.868996

[7] Ibid.

[8] Gerasimos Tsourapas, Theorizing state-diaspora relations in the Middle East: Authoritarian emigration states in comparative perspective, (Mediterranean Politics, 2020), pg. 135-159, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2018.1511299?scroll=top&needAccess=true

for Development[9], a project by GIZ, discusses diaspora engagement as a strategy for development based on good practices that have been successful in engaging the diaspora for the development of their countries of origin. At the same time, the study holds that many governments do not have a comprehensive toolkit that they can adopt to engage the Diaspora in their respective national development plans in an orderly and effective manner; the key challenge identified is the absence of a reliable roadmap or a good practice blueprint for a Diaspora engagement model.

However, even though there has been literature which has particularly focused on the assimilation of the Syrian diaspora community into the European landscape – further supported by project reports from organisations like GIZ – there exists a dearth of research which specifically focuses on the role and necessity of incorporating the Syrian diasporic expertise in the German foreign policy landscape. Though the importance of the diaspora community in the policy process has been recognized time and again, there has not been any effective state mechanism that puts the aforementioned realization into practice. This vacuum has prompted the need for the present research process which will highlight the avenues for Syrian diaspora engagement, underscore foreseeable challenges in diaspora assimilation, and develop a probable roadmap for securing diaspora participation in the German foreign policy landscape.

Case Studies

There have been a number of civil society groups, diaspora networks, NGOs and development agencies working in the sphere of diaspora engagement. It has been observed that the diaspora plays an important role on multiple levels, they provide economic support to the people from their country of origin by leveraging better economic opportunities provided by the host countries, and they also contribute to the process of migration and settlement to newer arrivals through their experience. These institutions have been spread across different European countries[10] and while supporting the diaspora they have also leveraged the strengths of these communities. In summary, their work can be categorised into the following areas.

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[9] GIZ, Diaspora Engagement Model for Development, (Hague: African Diaspora Policy Centre, 2021), pg. 5-18, https://www.idiaspora.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl181/files/resources/document/diaspora_engagement_model_final_291121.pdf
[10]Diaspora support programmes in development cooperation, VIDC
https://www.vidc.org/fileadmin/pdfs/diaspora_support_neuweb2.pdf

Capacity building

Organisations and civil societies have been working on capacity development of the existing diaspora in the host countries. This development happens through workshops, conferences and skill building sessions and are intended towards social and economic development of the diaspora. Capacity development in this context ranges from building vocational skills for better employment prospects to building skills of advocacy for higher civic and policy participation. One such example is the 'Professional development course on Advocacy for Afghan Diaspora' organised by Danish Refugee Council[11]. Similar programs have been undertaken across different European countries targeted at specific diaspora groups.

Funding & Financial Support

Through the funds obtained by development corporations from host countries, diaspora organisations and networks have been helping entrepreneurs invest in their country of origin and create employment and better opportunities. The funds have also been used for supporting different projects aimed at engagement and capacity development. This can be seen in the 'Programme Migration and Diaspora' in Germany, this program led to the funding of over 700 startups. [12]

Networking & Advocacy

A key role that these organisations play is that of connecting various groups and organisations that are working in the sphere. These organisations, which might have different paths, are still dedicated to the betterment of the diaspora and hence working together at times could be of immense value. These networks also facilitate dialogue, knowledge and resource sharing and help strengthen the voices leading to effective advocacy. Organisations like FORIM, an umbrella organisation that connects around 1000 diaspora organisations and groups in France, play a role in creating awareness of the capabilities and experiences of DOs and making them visible to policymakers and donors.

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[11]https://drc.ngo/our-work/what-we-do/civil-society-engagement-cse/diaspora/events-and-workshops/adee-professional-development-course-on-advocacy-for-afghan-diaspora/
[12] www.giz.de/en/worldwide/64184.html

Methodology

The team envisaged the project as comprising three distinct phases.

PHASE 1 focused upon research, stressing heavily on academic research and also upon the identification of existing players working on influencing policies vis-a-vis the diaspora community. This was accompanied by the creation of a database of experts to reach out to. The academic research has been covered in the 'Literature Review' section. For the database, the experts, based on a detailed deliberation among team members, were grouped into four distinct categories: a) Policymakers, b) Policy Planners, c) Project/Case Study Leads & d) Diaspora Experts. 'Policymakers' are the members of the government machinery. The policymakers we reached out to comprise members of the Bundestag and Berlin parliament. 'Policy Planners' are the people working in think tanks and NGOs and have expertise on relevant topics like refugee policy, migration, diaspora etc., especially those concerning, but not restricted to, refugee/migrant/diaspora of Syrian origin. 'Project/Case Study Leads' work on specific projects on diaspora issues. And finally, 'Diaspora Experts' are people with full or partial ancestry from Syria (or the Middle East in general) who live and work in Germany.

PHASE 2 involved stakeholder outreach, drafting interview questions and conducting online interviews. For this, separate sets of emails were framed and sent to each category of 'expert'. For example, the emails sent to Policymakers differed from the ones sent to Diaspora Experts. Our team had 20% success rates in securing interviews, with 5 out of 25 experts actually giving the interview. These experts were from a diverse set of organisations, like Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berghof Foundation, Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine (VDSH), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung e.V. (KAS - a foundation affiliated with Christian Democratic Union), and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ). One more interview is scheduled after the due deadline of this project course. Just like emails, different sets of questionnaires were prepared for each of the four types of experts. However, during the interview, the questionnaires weren't followed to the letter and the interviewers (the team members) improvised upon their questions based on responses from the concerned resource persons.

The first two phases finally culminated in PHASE 3, where learnings from interviews were consolidated (captured in the 'Key Findings' section) and analysed. Since all the interviews were

online, we asked for consent from each interviewee for recording the sessions; in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. The interviews were transcribed using Sonix software and key points were noted (also captured in the 'Key Findings' section).

Key Findings

The first step of the project aspired to understand the current ecosystem of actors present on the German political scale and engage with diasporic knowledge. These include policymakers, policy planners, project leaders, and diaspora experts. Identifying such hubs of knowledge exchange and mechanisms for community outreach enabled us to assess the policy ecosystem for the utilisation of this knowledge on the German political scale. Consequently, we identified critical thematics in the interviews conducted, discussed below.

Diverse Meaning of the Diaspora Community

The starting point of the interview was to understand the interviewee's interpretation of who is a member of the diaspora community, and whether it is a time-bound status and/or framed around the narrative of integration. According to Lina Fustok, who identifies herself as part of the Syrian, Arabic, Sunni, and German-Russian diaspora groups, a member of the diaspora community is whoever identifies themselves as such: "*I would say everybody who identifies himself as part of the diaspora for me is part of the diaspora.*" In a similar way, Fustok argues that being born in Syria does not imply a Syrian diaspora identity, as some - such as Kurds - might not share a similar national identity with other Syrians. Fustok highlighted the diversity within the diaspora community and the importance of acknowledging the multi-faceted nature of the community.

Similarly, another participant, Nora Ragab, who has a Palestinian-German lineage, described the diaspora *as a homogenous group having a strong sense of connection to their country of origin and thus forming a collective identity*. She also stressed that we should also consider the identities that emerge from this; groups, political organisations etc.

Their Knowledge of Policy-Making Processes

After identifying the diaspora community and main actors, it is also important to note institutional barriers which many members of the diaspora community face regarding their incorporation into the policy process. According to David Labude from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, some policy

planners look to those with "academic experience." This usually comes in the form of a formal university degree or certification as well as publication history. Labude acknowledges the legitimacy of community members speaking on behalf of their community. However, this expertise is incorporated to a lesser extent, usually in the form of soliciting recommendations during workshops, which filter diaspora members' voices through the hosting organisation.

A challenge to integrating diaspora experts into the policy process is their familiarity with the channels available to them. According to Fustok, members of the Syrian diaspora community do not necessarily understand the way in which politics work, therefore also do not understand the possibilities of them influencing the process, such as through lobbying. This sentiment was echoed by both Nora Rathje and Nora Ragab, who have seen similar knowledge and skills gap in the existing diaspora on an individual and organisational level. Labude emphasised skills workshops which offer political education on topics such as the policy process and its application by community members at a local level within their communities.

Legitimising Information

An additional point of interest for the project was to understand whether there are presumptions in terms of the validity and legitimacy of the claims made by diaspora experts. All interview participants expressed their concern when identifying legitimate sources of information and channelling them to policymakers. Rathje acknowledged misinformation as a significant obstacle: "*Syria is full of conspiracy theories and disinformation, which is absolutely normal, especially for conflict countries.*"

As a way to overcome such a challenge of the legitimacy of information, Rathje points out that in her work, she 'triangulates' information by speaking with different people of different backgrounds. In her opinion, the outcome is a better understanding of the broader architecture of the political realm of the Middle East, and ultimately better support for the longevity of projects while simultaneously strengthening the independent Syrian voices that are on the ground. Getting a variety of actors' inputs into recommendations of foreign policies then becomes a must when making sure that narratives are not oversimplified or over-representing a single channel of perception. Along the same lines, Nora Ragab pointed out that at times the interests of the diaspora members do not align with or necessarily benefit the people still living in the origin country. This

could be attributed to the fact that the diaspora might not have the correct view of the situation on the ground due to the changing situations.

Michaela Balluff from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung offered a counterpoint to this sentiment. She suggested that *"working with the diaspora, we can talk about more topics more openly that wouldn't be possible to discuss on the ground in Syria because of the security situation."* She offers that status as a diaspora community member imbues more freedom than the same citizen would have on the ground in their home country. In this sense, views from diaspora community members may be more transparent than that of those on the ground. She also emphasised diaspora community members' often ongoing connection to the communities in their origin country, which further tightens the connection between the two groups. Balluff suggests that the optimal working conditions include hearing from diaspora community members as well as people on the ground.

With that, many participants pointed out that the expertise of diaspora actors cannot be taken in a vacuum, but through cross-references with other credible sources of information, concrete political theories and other experts available in the field. Labude emphasised, however, that members of diaspora communities do have an inherent legitimacy on some issues simply by being a member of the community. This important element is often overshadowed by other concerns of legitimacy as detailed above.

Alignment of Domestic and German Interests

An argument raised by Fustok was that foreign policy is never about Syrian interest in Germany: *"Foreign policy is defending the interests of the domestic state… German foreign policy is defending German interests outside of Germany. It's not, for example, the interests of Syrians in Syria* [...] *So the diaspora, it is always nice to have them. But till now, they will never be part of any solution if it's against the interests of Germany."* Labude maintains that organisations such as the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung serve as a link between Germany and Syria and that relevancy for either Germany or Syria is what drives foreign policy goals.

Rathje also expressed the concern for the conflicting interests of external Western nations and Syrian actors, and how that jeopardises the possibility of further including Syrian diaspora actors in policy making.

Critiques and Challenges

The team faced multiple challenges during the course of this project, which we categorised into technical and fundamental challenges.

Technical Challenges:

First, time was always in short supply. We had less than two months' time at our disposal, which is inadequate, by any standard, to address a politically sensitive and dynamic region like Syria. Second, our attempt at inter-team collaboration didn't materialise. We tried exploring the possibility of conducting joint interviews with the team working on 'Non-Profit as an Economic Sector'. But resource and time constraints inhibited such collaboration. Third, putting people into categories of 'Policymakers', 'Policy Planners', Last, defining a 'Diaspora Expert' was a daunting challenge. The chief concern was the cut-off date/year to be used for the purpose of definition. There were multiple contenders - like 2011 when the Syrian conflict began amidst the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East, or 2015 when the Syrian conflict intensified to the point that created a refugee crisis not just in Germany but throughout Europe.

Fundamental Challenges:

First, our credibility as a group of student researchers was an ever-present challenge. Most of us have little to no experience dealing with the Middle Eastern community and issues. Arguably, this explains the lack of response from many resource persons to our emails. Second, there were concerns about the legitimacy of the resource persons we approached and the reliability of the information they provided. We simply approached these people in good faith, assuming that information always has vested interest embedded into them and there exists no clear way to corroborate the information that we get. However, there were cases, like Mesut Yegen from SWP, where he acknowledged from the interview's onset that his inputs might not be very helpful to us. Such honesty is highly appreciated. Last, the COVID-19 pandemic and greater acceptability of digital tools led us to conduct all the interviews online via Zoom. Although it was logistically more convenient, we believe that the insights one gets from an in-person interview can't be replicated in an online setting. Luckily for us, concerns over data privacy weren't an issue with any of the interviewees as all of them readily agreed to let us record the sessions, provided we keep their identities ambiguous and only use them internally for the team's reference.

Conclusion/ strategy for engagement and knowledge sharing

Members of the diaspora are in a unique position, having a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the on-ground situation through direct experience and having access to opportunities in the host countries that could potentially influence policies. This position however is not without its challenges; as observed during our research and interviews, the legitimacy of opinions of the diaspora and their potential to influence the policies are two of the biggest hurdles.

In order to tackle the first hurdle, we need to have diversity in the voices being captured and should have a mechanism to corroborate their opinions with the latest on-ground development. This diversity would not only help in including voices that are not usually heard, since the discourse is at times monopolised by people and groups with more social and political capital, but also help address the common misconception that all civil societies and groups working in the sphere have a 'common voice' and a common agenda.

The second hurdle could be addressed by building capacity in the diaspora to take part in advocacy and political discourse. Such workshops and events would also enable the organic creation of influential networks and synergies that would enable more effective advocacy.