

“Difficult to Engage Politically, but Harder to not Engage at all”

Syrian political activism in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Syrian political activists try to create and perceive their political space in the Netherlands. It aims to contribute to the understanding of Syrian political activism in the Netherlands in relation to diaspora politics and political opportunities. It will focus particularly on the limitations faced by the Syrian diaspora in the context of wrongly perceived opportunities.

Due to the conflict in Syria since 2011, there has been a vast influx of Syrian refugees into Europe and the Netherlands, resulting in the formation of a new diaspora. This Syrian diaspora is relatively new to the field of political research. This paper will, therefore, look at the political life of the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands. It will continue to highlight the wrongly perceived political opportunities by the Syrian diaspora and analyse their political activism in the context of limited opportunities. It will look at the expectations and personal motivations, frustrations and strategies of Syrian political activists in the Netherlands. Consequently, this paper will argue that the Syrian political activism is very limited in the Netherlands and, in its current efforts, ineffective to actively influence the conflict in Syria. This paper discusses a rather weak diaspora in its efforts and ambitions to become politically active and taken seriously by the media and Dutch society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The idea for this thesis was inspired by the current refugee crisis and the remarkable influx of especially Syrian refugees to Europe. The conflict in Syria forced over 4 million Syrians to flee their homeland and find refuge in neighbouring countries or Europe. Additionally, over 7 million Syrians are displaced within Syria due to the conflict (UNHCR 2015). There has been a lot of media coverage about the vast number of Syrian refugees coming to Europe. The Syrian diaspora has expanded quickly within the last two years and is therefore relatively new. Rimmer (2010: 163) states that “the international community tends to only concern themselves with the civil and political life of an asylum-seeker when assessing refugee status, and has no regard for their civil and political life after such status has been acquired”. This paper has the intention to focus on the Syrian diaspora and their political life in the Netherlands.

This research relates to the emerging issue of the role of diaspora groups, concerning their impact on peacebuilding in their homeland. Bercovitch defines diasporas “as a transnational community created as a result of the movement of people, organised on the basis of shared ideas and collective identities and with loyalty and affinity with both their host and their homeland” (Bercovitch 2007:18). The debate around diaspora politics is guided by the question of their positive or negative impact on peace processes in their homelands. Additionally, this research uses the narratives of political opportunity and looks at limited opportunities and how the Syrian diaspora deals with a new set of opportunities.

The relevance of this research can be found in the current political situation in Syria and the vast influx of Syrian refugees coming to Europe and the Netherlands. Since 2011 the civil war in Syria has seen over 250.000 casualties. More than half of the Syrian population has been displaced (Gerlach 2016: 6). Potentially more than 398,000 Syrians have arrived in the Netherlands (Ministry of Security and Justice 2016). Up to this stage, the political environment in Syria has been dictated by the Assad family. Hafez al-Assad has been the designer of modern Syria. After decades of coups and counter-coups, he used the network he had built as Commander of the Syrian air force and Minister of Defence to increase his power in 1970. He created a system of divide and rule to maintain his position. Additionally, he personalised his power to such an extent that he became the one holding the state together. When his son Bashar Assad took over the power in 2000, after his father’s death, he removed his father’s peers and imposed his own urban elite on society and undermined the integrity of crucial institutions (Quilliam 2015). The revolution in 2011 gave people in Syria a new opportunity to become political active. The Syrian diaspora is diverse in its ethnicities and mainly created by the conflict in Syria since 2011. This new Syrian diaspora offers a new opportunity for field research that has not been explored intensively, especially in regard to their political activism in the

Netherlands. This research will contribute to the question regarding how diasporas perceive their opportunities and deal with a new set of opportunities. Most contemporary research has focused on successful diasporas, which were able to influence the conflict and politics in their home country – such as the Tamil and Armenian diaspora. This research will look at a diaspora that has no influence on the conflict in its homeland and how members deal with this. This research looks at a different angle of diaspora politics and political opportunity.

Following this, the guiding question for this research has been:

How do Syrian political activists try to create and perceive their political space in the Netherlands?

In order to be answer this research question, it is important to look at political opportunity and how political active Syrians perceive their political opportunity in the Netherlands. It is central to consider whether these perceived opportunities are actually there or rather if they do not in fact exist. Another aspect to look at, is a possible change in perceptions of opportunity. Has the perception of political opportunity changed over the time of their political activism, or has the perception stayed the same? Further, if political opportunity has changed, how do the Syrian political activists deal with that change? How have they adapted their political activism to this new set of political opportunities?

This thesis will rely on the analytical framework of political opportunity, particularly focusing on limited and perceived opportunity, and use this framework as a theoretical lens to analyse the Syrian political activism in the Netherlands. Another aspect of the analytical framework will be diaspora politics, with a focus on the question of whether diasporas are helpful or counterproductive in attempts to achieve peace in their homeland.

Looking at my research process, I first hoped to explore and gain access to the Syrian refugees in Germany. Most Syrian refugees live in and around Berlin. Gaining access to them was rather difficult as due to the vast influx of refugees into Germany, asylum procedures take a very long time and refugee shelters reaching their capacities. The refugee shelters which I contacted were not keen on helping or allowing me to enter their premises due to their work overload. Therefore, I relocated my research to the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, and especially in Utrecht, it was easier to gain access to Syrians as many of them were already somehow engaged with Dutch people and more visible than in Germany. In March of this year, I attended a remembrance event for the fifth anniversary of the Syrian conflict in Utrecht. At this event, I was able to get access to Syrians who were politically active and very willing to talk to me. Having had the impression at the beginning that many Syrians were politically active and willing to talk, I continued to try gaining access and to explore organisational political activity among the political active Syrians in the Netherlands. However, during the research, I realised that there were

actually not many Syrian organisations that were politically active. The main organisation I discovered was the Het Syrische Comité. The Het Syrische Comité appears to be the main Syrian political organisation in the Netherlands. However, gaining access to them was rather difficult. Although I have managed to speak with some of the board members during organised events, I was not able to gain enough access to focus my research on Syrian political organisations. Continuing my research, I explored that there was little organised political diaspora activity in the Netherlands. This puzzled me as I expected a greater political activism, especially considering the new influx of Syrians into the Netherlands. Therefore, I decided to refocus my research and look at this limited Syrian political activism in the Netherlands.

The structure of this thesis will be as follows: first, it will set out the design of this research; this will be followed by chapter 2, which will discuss the analytical framework used in this research. The analytical framework will focus on diaspora politics and political opportunity. Chapter 3 looks at the Syrian context. More specifically, the political organisation before and after 2011 in Syria, and the refugee flow to Europe. Chapter 4 discusses Syrian political activism in the Netherlands and my main findings. Chapter 5 will look at the personal experience of four participants, allowing for a personal insight into their motivations, expectations, frustrations and strategies. Finally, the sixth chapter draws up the main conclusions of the research.

Research Design

The following section will discuss the design of my research in the Netherlands. The research I conducted is qualitative in nature, and looks for narratives, experiences and analyses of Syrian political activists now living in the Netherlands. The participants used for my sample have been politically active at some stage within the last five years. The people who left Syria after 2011 have all been politically active in Syria and the Netherlands. Whereby the Syrians who left Syria before 2011 have been only political active in the Netherlands. The sample represents different degrees of political activism. The lightest degree of activism describes going to demonstration, whilst the strongest degree includes starting their own organisation. The Syrians interviewed were active as individuals or as part of an organisation. Due to the limited Syrian activism, it was not possible to focus only on activists who were exclusively active within an organisation. Only five of the twelve participants were active within an organisation. The sample primarily includes activists who are in favour of the Syrian opposition. Only one participant was in favour of Assad and therefore political active for the Syrian government. It was very difficult to find Syrians willing to talk openly about supporting Assad and therefore my sample mainly represents the Syrian opposition activists. In general, it was difficult to find Syrians who were politically engaged and willing to talk to me about their political activism. Additionally, I also interviewed Dutch people who engage with

Syrian political activists or organisations, to gain a better insight into Syrian political activism. Moreover, I participated in various events organised by the Syrians in the Netherlands. I attended memorial events remembering the fifth anniversary of the Syrian conflict, as well as various demonstrations - for example, the demonstration against the bombings of Aleppo in early May 2016. Furthermore, I participated in social events organised to demonstrate cooperation between the Dutch and the Syrians.

Mapping the Syrian political activism in the Netherlands, I followed the guidelines given by Charles Ragin, as noted in Demmers (2012: 13). I first tried to explore the main parties engaging in the Syrian political activism, and to determine what distinguished them, as well as what their interests were. Here I focused on Syrian political organisations. During the mapping, I realised that there weren't many active politically engaged organisations. Accordingly, I focused the first version of my topic guide on political activism in Syria and the Netherlands, and the intentions behind it, on both an individual and organisational level. This topic guide was informed by my early impression about vast Syrian political activism in the Netherlands. Later, however, I changed the topic guide after finding actually very limited Syrian political activism and the lack of sufficient access to Syrian political organisations. I continued to develop a more extensive topic guide that included perceptions of opportunity, limited opportunities and the form of activism people engaged in. This topic guide was directed by my analytical frames of diaspora politics and political opportunity, which I used to analyse the Syrian political activism in the Netherlands.

As a researcher, aiming to show an objective perspective of the Syrian political activist, I interviewed people who were associated with an organised group or acted as an individual. I also aimed to interview people with the different political perspective, so that I would be able to look at varying political engagement on both sides of the conflict. As already pointed out, this turned out to be rather difficult after many of my interviewees pointed out that openly supporting the Assad regime could influence asylum procedures negatively. In general, it was difficult to find people who were interested in political aspects and were politically engaged. This circumstance was rather puzzling for me as I had expected the opposite at the beginning of my research.

This thesis is based on three months of research in the Netherlands, and the information was gathered through twelve individual interviews with Syrian political activists. This information, although limited in quantity, is representative of Syrian political activism in the Netherlands. The people interviewed have an intimate knowledge of the organisational processes of the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands on a political and/or social scale. In addition to this information, as previously described, I had contact with a wide range of people during my research in the Netherlands,

which through events and informal conversations contributed to my understanding of the level of organisation and political work among Syrians in the Netherlands.

I collected my data by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. All of the interviews were recorded. For my interview guide, I prepared a list of topics based on my (sensitised) key concepts in the form of questions grouped under my main puzzle and sub-questions for my participants, as outlined above. As this technique is flexible (Boyce and Neale 2006) and open to probing and elaboration (Boeije 2013), I was able to adjust my topic list and ask more questions during the interview. As an outcome of this, I was able to gather sufficient data with detailed descriptions (Curtis and Curtis 2011) from a total of twelve interviews. My interviews lasted between one and three hours. Finally, one of the interviews had to be conducted in Arabic with the help of an Arabic translator. It helped facilitate better communication and understanding between me and the participant as his English was less confident. Also, in this way, the participant was more relaxed and more open to telling his story, which in turn, yielded better data.

Participating in demonstrations helped me to gain access to activists. From their responses, I gathered twelve, who were either former or current activists who are now based in the Netherlands. In the process, I eliminated participants who were outside of the Netherlands, in terms of manageability and feasibility, as it proved to be difficult as time passed. Moreover, I believed it would be more valuable to interview participants in person rather than via skype or telephone. I also eliminated people who exclusively worked on social aspects and who were not therefore interested in the political activism. In my research, I came across many Syrians who were active in organising social events and were keen to develop a bridge with their activism between Dutch people and Syrians. As already mentioned, it was much harder to find people who were also interested in political aspects and were politically engaged. I had a few key contacts who were able to connect me with possible participants and information. To recap, in the end, I was able to collect data from twelve participants.

The main ethical consideration in this research has been the privacy of the participants. Therefore, the twelve participants presented in this research are anonymous and the interviews, discussed in chapter 5, I used pseudonyms. Furthermore, any other information that could be used to identify them in this research was removed (Boeije 2012).

Having introduced my topic and research design, the second chapter will discuss the analytical framework of diaspora politics and political opportunity.

Chapter 2: Analytical Framework

This chapter will discuss the analytical frame relied upon in this research. It will look at the academic debate around the discussion of diaspora politics and political opportunity. It will focus on the debate surrounding whether diasporas help to achieve peace for their homeland or whether they are in fact counterproductive to this aim. Political opportunity is one of the key concepts by which to analyse social mobilisation. It refers to the political environment social movements need to deal with. Political opportunity is an attempt to comprehensively conceptualise the political environment (Goodwin and Jasper 1999: 28).

In the age of globalisation, the political meaning of diaspora groups in contemporary conflicts has increased. Diaspora groups have conventionally engaged in conflicts in their country of origin using various methods, including lobbying governments in their host countries, networking with international agencies, fundraising, trafficking arms, and providing skills and technologies (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006: 1).

The questions guiding the discussion about diaspora politics can be divided into three sections: 1) processes of mobilisation; 2) strategies and participation; and 3) the impact on democratic processes in the host country and the country of origin. These questions look at the macro, meso and micro level of diaspora politics (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 765). As Smith points out, it is important to ask about when and why some diasporas become political engaged (Smith 1999: 504). Hereby, it is therefore important to look at the role of the receiving and sending countries of the diaspora (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 766). Furthermore, there are questions regarding how diaspora politics and their political practices are expressed and received in the sending and receiving countries. These are the central components of organisational patterns of diasporas political engagement (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 769). Finally, the field explores the question of the effects of diaspora politics.

Diaspora groups connect the processes of globalisation to conflicts over identity and territory. Due to globalisation, cross-border migration has increased following decreased communication and travel costs. This has made it easier for migrants to build diaspora networks between their homeland and other places of residence. People that have been forced to leave their country due to war have a specific set of traumatic memories and build conflict-produced diasporas. These diasporas normally sustain and sometimes intensify their strong sense of attachment to the homeland. The term homeland is frequently understood as a territorial term representing the area from which the group had to leave, and has a high symbolic meaning.

These diasporas often play an important role in regard to the conflicts in their homeland. Diaspora remittances can often be key resources to a conflict. Additionally, these diasporas have an important role in framing the conflict. Diasporas that have been created through conflict and which are continued by memories of the trauma tend to be less willing to compromise (Lyons 2004: 1). This dynamic tends to make conflicts in the homeland more protracted, especially with the existence of diaspora groups with a strong symbolic attachment to a territory and uncompromising views on how the conflict should be understood and contested. Engaging with a powerful conflict-generated diaspora can help third parties, like non-governmental organisations, to reduce homeland conflicts and break down the categorical perception of the conflict. In cases like this, there are specific conflict resolution interventions that could help to deal with the homeland conflict. Third parties can, by engaging with diaspora groups and by promoting dialogues between the different conflict groups, reduce the conflict (Lyons 2004: 1).

Two roles can be identified in the study of diasporas and conflict. Diasporas are mainly seen as nationalists or fundamentalists who preserve the conflict via economic and financial support without putting their own life at risk. Therefore, diasporas tend to be seen as part of the problem rather than the solution (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006: 1). They are generally regarded as obstacles to conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Cochrane 2009: 682). As mentioned above, diaspora groups created by conflict and sustained by traumatic memories tend to compromise less and can reinforce the protracted nature of conflicts. In cases, like the Tamil, Armenian, Irish, or segments of the Ethiopian diasporas, the hard-line terms of negotiations strengthen confrontational leaders and organisations and destabilise others seeking compromise (Lyons 2007: 530). In the case of Northern Ireland, the Irish diaspora worsened the issue for the domestic coalitions, also introducing additional problems to overcome in the effective search for a social change (Maney 2000: 153).

In contrast, diasporas have also been recognised on grounds of their commitment to non-violent conflict resolutions. This can stimulate and reinforce local processes of democratisation and post-conflict reconstruction in their countries of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006: 1). This has been reflected in current recommendations and policy papers supporting a stronger role of diasporas, especially in development, but also democratisation (Van Hear, Lindley, Pieke and Vertovec 2004: 22). The focus in the literature lies on the question of whether if diasporas are helping or rather counterproductive in solving the conflict. As Smith and Stares describe it, are they “peace-making” or “peace-wrecking”? Smith points out that it is very difficult to find a diaspora that is a peace-wrecker, as all seem to want peace. It is rather the question of peace under which circumstances (Smith and Stares 2007: 10)? As Shain states, the involvement of diasporas in conflict can influence

the prospects for conflict perpetuation or conflict resolution (2002: 116). As an example, Armenian and Jews have been identified as powerful diasporas. They continue to play an important part in the politics and life of their homeland (Shain 2002: 121). At times both diasporas have undertaken political initiatives that have conflicted with the wishes of their homeland governments. The Armenian diaspora used their resources to mobilise against president Ter-Petrosian and his peace efforts with Turkey and Azerbaijan, resulting in his resignation as president. In Israel, the diaspora largely financed the religious nationalist campaign against Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (Shain 2002: 126). Moreover, in the case of Sri-Lanka, the Tamil diaspora has the potential to be a strategic player in the process of peace-building in Sri-Lanka. The case of Northern Ireland shows the positive and negative potential of a diaspora, with the Irish-American diaspora helping to facilitate the peace process (Cochrane 2009: 699). However, the Irish Northern Aid Committee supported the aims and methods of republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland (Cochrane 2009: 689).

The literature here focuses on either the positive or negative impact diasporas can have on the conflict in their homeland. This assumes that diasporas are actually having an impact on the outcome of a conflict at all. What happens when diasporas are not able to influence and do not have any impact on the conflict in their homeland? How does it influence diaspora politics and what does it mean for the members of the diaspora?

Looking at political opportunities, McAdam, in his original attempt to define his political process model, highlights the need to see social movements as contentious political process (McAdam 1982: 36). He continues to bring together the different conceptual debates on social movements. He proceeds to outline three necessary analytical elements from his original model: 1) broaden political opportunity structures; 2) extant mobilising structures; and 3) framing or other interpretive processes (McAdam 2010: 36).

Political opportunity processes are central to understanding the character and course of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000: 612). The social movements literature tries to investigate how political opportunity structures constrain and facilitate the collective action frame (Benford and Snow 2000: 628).

The concept of political opportunities lies at the core of the political process approach to social movements (Giugni 2009: 361). Tarrow defines it as *“consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements”* (Tarrow 1996: 54). More precisely, opportunities can be seen as possible options for collective action. McAdam describes four dimensions of political opportunity: 1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized

political system; 2) the stability or instability of the broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a policy; 3) the presence or absence of elite allies and; 3) the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam 1996). Tilly has been one of the first to conceptualise opportunities in a more comprehensive model (Tilly 1978: 55). Since then the concept and usage of political opportunities have developed into two main directions. American scholars have been concentrating on 'windows of opportunities' that can help to encourage actors to join social movements. The focus here is on explaining the emergence or development of a social movement over time. European scholars have been largely looking at the most stable aspects of political opportunities. The focus is primarily on trying to account for cross-national differences of forms, levels, and outcomes of social movements and protest activities (Giugni 2009: 362).

The focus on political opportunities has been criticised by its opponents. They argue that it refers to different variables and has been used to serve different functions, based on different definitions (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 275). Godwin and Jasper have given the most fundamental criticism on the concept of political opportunities. They argue that the concept of political opportunity structures has a structural bias. They voice serious doubts on how useful this concept is in order to understand social movements. They refer to the political opportunity thesis "*as an invariant causal hypothesis, just plain wrong*" (Goodwin and Jasper 2004: 14). Tilly has countered this by stressing the problems associated with phenomenological fundamentalism (Tilly and Tarrow 2006).

Scholars have tried to improve and add to the traditional view of political opportunities. *Discursive opportunities* refer to opportunity for mobilisation having two sides. The institutional side looks at the access activists have to the institutionalised political system. The discursive side relates to the public visibility, as well as the political legitimacy of actors, claims and identities. As Giugni puts it, "*what matters is not only the extent to which social movements face an open or closed institutional setting, but also the extent to which their claims and identities relate to prevailing discourses in the public domain*" (Giugni 2009: 364). The concept of *specific opportunities* refers to the opportunities which are specific to a certain movement or issue fields (Giugni 2009: 364). Koopmans et al. believe that in regards to immigration, "*institutional and discursive opportunities facilitate the mobilisation of some collective actors with certain types of collective identity and specific types of demands while constraining the mobilisation of other actors and the expression of other identities and demands*" (Koopmans 2005: 6). Another concept is perceived opportunities. This concept acknowledges that opportunities must be perceived in order to be used (Giugni 2009: 365). Gamson et al. points out that opportunities are subject to interpretation and frequently are subjects of controversy. They are often included in framing processes (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 276). Even a very specific and objective definition of political opportunity structure can only explain a part of social movement opportunity.

As Gamson et al. point out, “[a]n opportunity not recognised is no opportunity at all” (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 283). In her study, Banaszak points out that previous scholars have assumed that movement groups are able to see all opportunities. She continues by saying that, “*this assumption need not be unrealistic if one believes that misperceptions have only random effects on success, and therefore can be safely ignored*” (Banaszak 1996: 222). Her study shows that the effect of perceptions is decisive and not random. Individual social ties affect beliefs and values, which systematically differ for activists at certain times. She claims that “*given that perceptions and values derive from an individual’s ties to broader society, other political groups (whether allies or not), and the more intimate bonds with fellow activists, it seems unlikely that movements will ever perceive all available opportunities or resources*” (Banaszak 1996: 222). Van der Borgh and Terwindts’ concept of political space refers to the opportunities and threats organisations or individuals experience in a political space. This is additional to the way they are using these opportunities. This concept is similar to the notion of political opportunity structures, linking the characteristics of the political context to possibilities and restrictions actors face. They argue that while the notion of political opportunity structure focuses on the characteristics, political space focuses on organisations while taking into account the political context (van der Borgh and Terwindt: 36). Political space will be different for each organisation, as well as the experience and restriction processes. As a result, the pressures and restrictions faced by organisations have to be understood in the particular political context. Political space is not static, and can be better understood as the product of the relations and interactions between organisations and, for example, state actors (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2014: 39). In this thesis, the term political space will be used to define the interaction of Syrian political activists and organisations as claim makers in regard to institutions and civil societies in the Netherlands and Syria.

To conclude, as Gamson and Meyer note, the framing of political opportunity is a central component of social mobilisation. It is believed that an opportunity has an impact on social change and that people have the agency to write their own history (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 285). Furthermore, if political activists look at their political space with an emphasis on opportunity rather than limitation, they will come forward with actions that change their opportunities and make “*their opportunity frame a self-fulfilling prophecy*” (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 287).

As discussed, political opportunity is an important and crucial component of understanding social movements. Therefore, it is also important to look at how political movements and individual activist deal with limited opportunities. How does it change their activism or does it have no effect at all? Limited opportunities are an important aspect of analysing social movements. The change and perception of opportunities have also to be considered. What happens to social movements when

the formerly perceived opportunities turn out to be different or even wrongly perceived? How do political activists deal with this change of opportunities?

These questions should be also asked in evaluating political opportunities and social mobilisation. The Syrian diaspora is conflict-generated and has, therefore, a specific set of traumatic memories. As Lyons describes, these diasporas often play an important role in the conflict in their homes (Lyons 2004: 1). As asked previously, what happens when diasporas have no impact on the conflict? How does this affect their activism as a group but also on an individual level? This thesis, will be explore these aspects of social mobilisation and use diaspora politics and political opportunity to make sense of the political mobilisation of the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands. The next chapter looks at the Syrian context. It will assess the political organisation before and after 2011 in Syria, and examine the details of the Syrian refugee flow to the Netherlands following the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

Chapter 3: The Syrian Context

The following section outlines how the situations and opportunities for Syrians have changed since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. It will be looking at the situation in Syria and how the situation for Syrians has changed coming to the Netherlands. How Syrians were organised before and after 2011, their opportunities to organise in Syria, as well as the number of Syrians that have made their way to the Netherlands are questions which will guide this section.

To date, more than 50,000 Syrians have lost their lives in the Syrian armed conflict since 2011. The conflict began with anti-government protests before escalating into a full-scale civil war. At the moment, there are more than 11 million Syrians who have been forced from their homes (BBC 2016).

On February 16th 2011, four days after Hosni Mubarak stepped back from his presidential office in Egypt, teenagers in Deraa painted the slogan *Al-shaab yurid isqat al-nizam*¹ on the wall of their school. This rather harmless act can be seen as the beginning of the Syrian civil war. In March 2011, after the teenagers had been arrested by the Assad regime, pro-democracy protests erupted in Deraa (Gerlach 2015: 21).

Looking at Syria's population, it is characterised by strong religious and ethnic diversity. Dividing the population by language or religion, 82,5 percent are Arabic-speaking and 68,7 percent are Sunni Muslims (Van Dam 2011: 2). The Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims form a majority of 57,4 per cent of the whole Syrian population. The other religious groups in Syria consist of 11,5 percent Alawis, 3,0 percent Druzes, 1,5 percent Isma'ilis and 14,1 percent of Christians. The ethnic minorities consist of 8,5 percent Kurds, 40 per cent Armenians and 3,0 per cent Turcomans and Circassians. The Kurds and Turcomans and Circassians are almost exclusively Sunni Muslims, whereas the Armenians are Christians. The Arabic-speaking religious minorities are the Alawis, Druzes, Isma'ilis and Greek Orthodox Christians (Van Dam 2011: 2).

Besides the differences of ethnicity and religion, there are also differences between the rural and urban population in Syria. The diversity of the Syrian population can also be found in the Syrian opposition. In the process of the conflict, the Syrian opposition has been divided between different political ideologies such as; left, liberal, national, Islamist or secular. International politics also play an important role, as some people would like to see a solution for Syria with the engagement of an international intervention and others reject such an intervention. These differences within the opposition hinder the agreement for a collective resistance strategy and help deepen social boundaries (Zein 2103: 17)

¹ Translation into English, 'The people want to bring down the regime'

Political Organisation before 2011

The fall of Assad requires a strong opposition. However, a strong opposition does not necessarily mean that it can successfully deliver its agenda of change (Ulutas 2011: 88).

The Opposition movements' existence and scope of activity are constrained by the Syrian state. While opposition in different forms has always existed in Syria and among the Syrian diaspora, their political activities have been limited. The Syrian regime is able to turn violent if it perceives that an existential threat is coming from the opposition. When Bashar came to power in 2004, many Syrians and foreign observers expected and hoped for a change within the regime (Ulurtas 2011: 88).

In order to understand the situation and political opportunities in Syria under Bashar Assad, it is crucial to look at the way the Syrian regime has dealt with opposition in the past. In the early 1980s, Hafez al-Assad²³ put down the Muslim Brotherhood uprising with a brutal and successful counterinsurgency campaign. This campaign relied mainly on three strategies in order to generate and employ the military force; 1) cautiously select and deploy the most trusted military units, 2) increase pro-regime militias, and 3) use those forces to clear insurgents out of major urban areas. In the years 2011 and 2012, Bashar Assad used the same strategy to deal with the uprising of the opposition, which ended eventually in the civil war (Holliday 2013: 9).

Bashar Assad's regime, following his father's death in June 2000, was assured by loyalists in the security forces, military, ruling Baath Party and dominant Alawite sect. They removed the last remaining obstacles; such as amending the constitution to allow a 34-year-old to become head of state. Later he was promoted to field marshal, commander of the armed forces and secretary-general of the Baath Party. After having been confirmed as president by 97 percent of the vote, he promised wide-ranging reforms, including modernising the economy, fighting corruption and launching the so-called 'our own democratic experience' (BBC 2015). What followed was the so-called Damascus spring, in which Bashar released hundreds of political prisoners and allowed for the first independent newspapers to publish. Additionally, a group of intellectuals pressing for democratic reforms were permitted to hold public political meetings and publish statements. However, this lasted only a short time. By early 2001, the meetings were closed down or refused licences and several leading opposition figures were arrested, as well as reinstalling limits on the freedom of the press. For the remaining time, the emergency rule remained in effect. The security agencies continued to keep people without arrest warrants and held them detained for long periods, while Islamists and Kurdish activists were regularly sentenced to long prison terms. The economic liberalisation mainly benefitted the elite as well as its allies, rather than creating opportunities for all.

² Father of Bashar Assad

³ Syrian president from 1971 to 2000

The situation above has been described by the vast majority of my interviewees, and as outlined later some of them have been detained for expressing their opinion about the regime several times. Reflecting on the situation under Hafez al-Assad and Bashar Assad, it can be noticed that there was a minimum or even non-opportunity for political engagement. Although Bashar Assad seemed to move forward a more open society with the opportunity to speak up, he rapidly changed his direction back to a suppressive regime with no real political opportunities.

Political Organisation in Syria after 2011

Inspired by the Arab spring many Syrians were waiting for an opportunity for change in Syria. When the conflict broke out in 2011, opposition and military groups became active. The Syrian revolution gave new opportunities for people to get engaged in political activism. The Syrian opposition is diverse, and in addition new military groups formed themselves guided by a diverse set of ideologies.

Syrian National Council

The Syrian National Council was founded at the 23rd of August 2011 in Istanbul. The SNC consists of Syrians living in exile, independents and different members of opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, liberals and the political left. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is quite influential in the SNC as they are supported by Gulf states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as Turkey. More than half of the members are supposed to consist of Islamists.

The Syrian National Council supports arming the opposition and an international military intervention.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan), has been one of the driving forces of the Syrian opposition for years. The movement was founded in the mid-1940s and was able to take part legally in the political system until the 1963 coup, after which it was banned. Since 1963, the Ikhwan has been a fundamental component of the opposition since the establishment of the Ba'ath regime. In the late 1970s, it clashed with the regime forces. Nevertheless, regardless of major clashes with the Syrian regime since 1963, the Ikhwan has managed to survive. When in 1980 the membership to the Ikhwan became an offence, it forced the Ikhwan leadership to leave Syria and seek refuge in Europe and other Arab countries (Ulutas 2011: 94).

The fact that the Syrian Brotherhoods has been in exile since the 1980s was a major obstacle for the movement's organisational capabilities in the country. This makes it difficult to estimate the real potential of the movement (Ulutas 2011: 95).

Military Groups

The Free Syrian Army was founded in summer 2011. At the beginning, the Free Syrian Army consisted mainly out of small units of deserted soldiers. Over time civilians and some foreign fighters started joining them. Starting off with the goal of protecting peaceful demonstrations, they moved towards becoming a partisan unit. The Free Syrian Army has members from all ethnic backgrounds. In addition to the Free Syrian Army there are also radical Islamic groups such as; al-Nursa-Front, Kataeb Ahrar al Sham, Liwaa al Tawhid and many more. These groups have a relatively good network and are well equipped. As long as there are no alternatives to them Syrians are willing to work together with such radicalised groups, even though they might disagree with their ideology. However, many Syrians are afraid of a radicalised Islamic identification of the conflict. Even though there have been several attempts to unify the military units of the Syrian opposition, they continue to be organised on a decentralised level. The confessionalisation of the conflict is supported by the regime as well as by international actors like Iran and the Hizbollah (Zein 2013: 22).

Refugee Flow

Having looked at the situation for political opportunities in Syria before and after the Syrian revolution in 2011, this part will look at the Syrian refugee flow to the Netherlands.

Many Syrians who have left Syria due to the conflict have made their way to Europe. The number of Syrians arriving in Europe seeking international protection continues to increase. However, it remains low compared to Syria's neighbouring countries, with slightly more than 10% of those who have fled the conflict seeking safety in Europe. Between April 2011 and April 2016, a total of 1.037.760 Syrians have applied for Asylum in Europe. In 2014, 21 percent of asylum seekers in Europe have been from Syria. In the year 2015, a total of 43.093 people have applied for asylum in the Netherlands. The largest portion, consisting of 43 percent and 18.677 individuals, has been from Syria. Looking at the period from May 2015 till April 2016, 2.538 Syrians have applied for refuge in the Netherlands. This is a total of 45 percent of all applicants (Ministry of Security and Justice 2016: 4).

Table 1

Total asylum applications in The Netherlands (first applications, repeated applications, family reunification applications)

Source: METIS

Top 10 Last twelve months **total** asylum applications in the Netherlands

Total 2014	Total 2015	Country of citizenship	2015												2016					Last 12 months	Perc
			Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Total				
11,595	27,710	Syrian Arab Republic	647	1,161	1,880	2,271	3,837	5,259	6,439	3,076	1,545	25,915	1,143	746	341	308	2,538	27,806	45%		
4,100	8,434	Eritrea	405	1,115	1,289	1,056	1,397	922	1,210	417	376	8,187	261	159	141	135	696	8,478	14%		
3,045	4,942	Stateless	119	269	303	452	615	855	1,019	587	359	4,578	186	173	61	55	475	4,934	8%		
1,570	3,450	Iraq	58	48	78	108	199	431	1,092	720	456	3,190	273	180	95	68	616	3,748	6%		
977	2,945	Afghanistan	81	83	74	97	159	184	473	910	643	2,704	404	191	75	84	754	3,377	5%		
746	2,074	Iran (Islamic Republic of)	36	42	45	58	81	113	425	735	388	1,923	231	146	85	81	543	2,430	4%		
89	1,016	Albania	13	26	40	71	79	173	285	145	149	981	234	250	224	141	849	1,817	3%		
60	689	Kosovo / UNSCR 1244	20	64	162	112	107	53	58	29	51	656	58	78	77	42	255	891	1%		
271	764	Ukraine	49	52	77	50	64	42	108	107	107	656	57	96	62	17	232	839	1%		
1,527	866	Somalia	54	51	54	71	65	74	75	82	68	594	68	45	45	25	183	723	1%		
5,911	5,990	Others	410	457	500	443	477	488	691	632	551	4,649	520	519	578	517	2,134	6,373	10%		
29,891	58,880	Total	1,892	3,368	4,302	4,789	7,080	8,594	11,875	7,440	4,893	54,033	3,435	2,583	1,784	1,473	9,275	61,416	100%		

* To conceal the lowest figures, all values between 0 and 4 are replaced by asterisk.

Table 2

First asylum applications in the EU , Norway and Switzerland from February 2015 - January 2016

	2015												2016	Total
	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan		
Syrian Arab Republic	9,155	10,460	11,625	13,415	21,150	32,120	50,095	64,370	62,740	55,370	35,485	32,655	398,640	
Afghanistan	4,330	4,470	5,660	9,250	13,385	18,930	20,240	21,790	29,850	38,760	21,465	12,315	200,445	
Iraq	2,505	3,180	3,605	4,655	6,380	8,175	12,170	26,370	26,510	19,165	11,705	10,415	134,835	
Albania	2,365	3,710	5,525	5,695	6,720	9,065	9,500	8,470	6,355	4,390	2,885	1,825	66,505	
Kosovo / UNSCR 1244	22,580	12,620	5,380	2,735	2,305	2,005	1,385	1,685	1,155	790	905	650	54,195	
Pakistan	1,705	1,930	2,245	2,705	3,975	6,675	9,405	5,370	4,030	4,225	3,070	3,265	48,600	
Eritrea	1,125	1,335	1,925	4,965	6,600	6,655	6,420	5,350	5,415	2,570	1,825	1,390	45,575	
Nigeria	1,520	1,465	1,550	2,250	2,665	3,740	3,710	4,145	3,480	2,850	2,005	1,970	31,350	
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	700	785	1,020	1,005	1,200	1,415	1,735	2,590	5,160	6,790	3,995	3,065	29,460	
Unknown	1,015	930	680	875	1,315	1,730	2,285	1,815	2,675	3,090	4,095	3,415	23,920	
Others	20,990	23,015	21,710	23,825	29,245	30,835	30,475	32,730	32,965	30,300	22,760	16,330	315,180	
Total	67,990	63,900	60,925	71,375	94,940	121,345	147,420	174,685	180,335	168,300	110,195	87,295	1,348,705	

Source: EUROSTAT, situation by May 3rd

In January of 2016, Germany received the highest number of first asylum applications in the EU, followed by Italy and Austria. Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq are the most important countries of origin in the influx of first asylum applications in the EU (Ministry of Security and Justice 2016: 12).

As seen in *Table 1* and *Table 2* the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands and Europe has expanded drastically since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. Potentially more than 398.000 new Syrians have arrived in the Netherlands. This relatively new diaspora could be very significant, when politically organised, in influencing the conflict back in Syria.

The application process for asylum in the Netherlands can be very time-consuming. Non-Dutch nationals who seek asylum must report to the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). After identification and registration, asylum seekers are transferred to a reception centre, which is usually near the application centre that will process the asylum application. Generally, asylum seekers are given at least 6 days to recover from their journey. The asylum procedure does not begin until after this period. In a special interview, the asylum seeker can explain what they experienced in their country of origin and why they had to leave. After these interviews and some formalities, the IND decide if an asylum seeker is entitled to be granted asylum or not. If the IND establishes that an asylum seeker needs protection, they will be given an asylum residence permit. This procedure can take up to several months, during which time applicants have to stay in a shelter assigned by the government (Ministry of Security and Justice 2016).

As my research will show, many Syrians who arrived in the Netherlands entered with high expectations. Coming into a democratic western country seemed to open all sorts of political opportunities to become active and to influence the conflict back home in Syria. The idea of finally being open to voice their political opinions and to organise themselves freely created big expectations for many.

Chapter 4: Politically active Syrians in the Netherlands

This chapter will look at politically active Syrians in the Netherlands, and their organisation and experiences over the period of their activism. It will be looking at their expectations starting their political activism, having to deal with the reality in the Netherlands and how they dealt with their new set of opportunities.

The participants for my research had to be Syrians now residing in the Netherlands. It was required for them to be politically involved. This political involvement varied from participant to participant. Some of them were really actively engaged and others were rather passively engaged, for example attending demonstrations and events. During my research, I came across Syrians who had been very active back in Syria and then decided when arriving in the Netherlands to give up on that activism. As outlined in more detail in chapter 4, I have also come across Syrians who decided to become active at the beginning in 2011, but then decided to give up their activism as they did not feel they could achieve anything. I tried to gather participants from many different backgrounds together. The vast amount of participants belonged to the Sunnis. Additionally, I was able to interview Kurds, Alawiten, Christians and Armenian Christians. Regarding their political background, they were predominantly in favour of the Syrian opposition or the revolution. However, I was able to get one participant who openly supports Assad. All of my participants who lived in Syria around 2011 had been politically active back in Syria.

High expectations

As mentioned before, all of my participants who lived in Syria around 2011 had been politically active back in Syria. Many of them attended demonstrations and started sharing their experiences on Facebook. Regarding this activism two of my participants point out;

When the Syrian Revolution started, I was in Damascus studying my Master, looking at the Arab spring and we were waiting for something to happen in Syria (Interview 6-4-16).

You can say 70% of University students were interested in politics and what was going on in the government but it was really a taboo. You can't speak openly, for me I couldn't stand and watch I had to do something (Interview 8-5-16)

They had brought this political interest with them to the Netherlands and hoped to continue their political activism here. Yet, as some of my participants have voiced, it is a very different situation in the Netherlands than in Syria. Arriving in a new country and having to start from the very beginning to build a network can be hard. Nevertheless, the Syrians interviewed revealed a certain amount of excitement coming to the Netherlands and becoming politically active there. They felt that finally living in a democratic western country would offer them political opportunities they have been

missing back in Syria. Arriving in the Netherlands they felt they had all sorts of opportunities to influence the conflict back in Syria; to voice their opinion and get heard by the public. For them, the Netherlands offered a new set of political opportunities to become active. These opportunities need to be acknowledged and by their challengers in order to become valid (Giugni 2009: 364). Shortly after arriving many of them felt that the Dutch people did not know much about the conflict in Syria. So one of the opportunities they received was to tell the Dutch society 'the truth about Syria'. This was a reoccurring topic during the interviews. All of my participants felt that the western societies did not know what was really happening in Syria. They felt the news coverage was false and leading people into the wrong direction. Therefore, one of their main aims was to share their stories and to inform others about the situation in Syria. Their main concerns surrounded the knowledge people in the Netherlands had about the conflict in Syria and the present attention on Isis in the media.

Especially the people arriving in the Netherlands within the first two years of the conflict in Syria and the Syrians who had been living in the Netherlands longer voiced that they felt Dutch people had a very limited knowledge about the situation in Syria. This lack of knowledge included the conflict, but also concerned the social situation back in Syria. They felt that people in the Netherlands thought about Syria as a backwards underdeveloped country. They felt that they needed to challenge these impressions. It was important for them to show that Syria was more than a war torn country; it had provided them with a good university education, was diverse in its culture and not backwards as they felt it was being portrayed. This concern was not political but rather of a social nature. This perception might have turned on them as Syrian refugees living in the Netherlands.

The other problem they felt confronted with was the intense media attention on Isis. As one of the interviewees pointed out;

The focus of the media is first in their interest and they are concentrating on what they want; Isis. Isis is still a threat but it is not what the Syrian revolution is about (Interview 8-5-16).

There is a big frustration about the media coverage surrounding Isis. They felt by concentrating on Isis the media would send across an incorrect picture about the revolution in Syria. The media coverage of Isis would take away from the real problem, which is Bashar Assad and his attacks on Syria. For them, Assad should stand in the focus of attention and his military attacks on the Syrian population. For them, this was a way more crucial component of the conflict than Isis and their main issue of concern. Their ultimate goal was to shift the media coverage from Isis to Bashar Assad and the issues of the revolution, which they felt was a better representation of the situation in Syria. The urge to change the media coverage and to shift the focus of it is not only shared among the

revolution supporters and the Assad opposition, but also by Assad supporters. The participant who supports Assad was very active in giving interviews to the media, especially when the conflict started in 2011. She appeared in various newspapers and television sequences talking about her activism. As well as the Syrians active for the revolution, she also criticised the media coverage on the conflict in Syria. She also felt that the media was not reporting about the real situation in Syria. She felt the need to educate and show the people the real side of the conflict. Yet, she perceives the situation in Syria differently than my other participants. Her main concern revolves around the issue that the media would only report on what they felt was relevant. During her activism, she expressed that she often felt misunderstood, and that when she would give interviews things would be taken out of context and put her in a wrong light. One of the things she tried and still tries to put forward is that Assad enjoys the support of the majority of people in Syria, and that the revolution troops are the ones to commit crimes. As she states, she has been contacting newspapers and television programs with footage which proves her points, but they are refusing to report any of her findings in public. What this shows is that potentially both sides share a desire to tell Dutch people and the media about what they perceive as the 'real situation in Syria'. Both want to convince Dutch people and the media about their side and therefore their version of the 'truth about Syria'. Seeing this as one of their main goals to achieve with their political activism, they also discussed the means they are using to achieve this goal.

Means

In general, demonstrations were stated as the main tool to communicate and to educate Dutch society about the conflict back in Syria (interview 25-5-16). During my three months' field research, I participated in two main demonstrations organised by Syrians in the Netherlands. The first demonstration on the 20th March, 2016 was to commemorate the beginning of the revolution in Syria on March 15, 2011. Organised by the Het Syrische Comité and supported by PAX, the goal was to draw the attention to the people imprisoned in Syria by Isis and the Assad regime (Het Syrische Comité 2016). Around 300 people attended the demonstration with the majority being Syrian. Yet there were also many Dutch people present at the demonstration. The second demonstration, on the 30th April 2016, was against the bombing of Aleppo. The demonstration took place in Amsterdam and in 53 other cities around the globe, and was triggered by the estimated 200 civilians who have been killed by Russian-backed government bombardment in the opposition-held half of Aleppo since April 19th. The victims included hospital personnel, rescue workers and children. The worldwide protest against the targeting of civilians by government attacks, aimed to generate a widespread response that would persuade global powers to pressure Bashar al-Assad's government and its Russian allies to stop bombarding civilian areas in rebel-held Aleppo (Mahmoud 2016). As with the other demonstration, around 300 people participated in the demonstration at Amsterdam Dam 25

Square. Even though the majority of the demonstrators were Syrians, many Dutch people also participated to show their support. Among others, Harry van Bommel, a politician for the Dutch Socialist Party, was one of the speakers at the demonstration. As one Dutch participant noted; 'the Syrians are not standing alone. There are people in the Netherlands who feel touched by their fate' (NPO 2016). In both demonstrations, the disapproval with the Assad regime was present in posters, speeches and their paroles. As pointed out in the interviews, participants use these demonstrations to get in contact with Dutch people and the media to tell them their truth about the situation in Syria.

In addition to the demonstrations, one participant, who had lived in the Netherlands for seventeen years, used his role as a filmmaker to raise awareness of the situation. He started off by creating documentaries about the situation in Syria, and later started to produce political movies with an emphasis on human rights to spread his ideas (Interview 5-6-16). This interview showed really clearly his approach on how to spread awareness. In the other interviews, participants discussed spreading the truth about Syria, but it was not really clear how they would do that. However, this case was different. Even though he voiced that he was not directly political in his movies; he had a message and was able to reach people through them. Ultimately, this shows how Syrians arriving in the Netherlands due to the conflict in Syria have had previous political interest and how they brought it with them to the Netherlands. In their expectations, the Netherlands as a western democratic country would offer immense political opportunity to continue their political activism. They perceived an opportunity to change the public perception of the conflict in Syria and Syria itself. They believed they could change the media focus on Isis to the issues regarding Bashar Assad and show people a different picture of Syria than a backwards society. The problem with the media coverage and public opinion is recognised by both sides, even though they believe in a different 'truth for Syria'. Through demonstrations they hope to get the public attention and media coverage to show people their side of the story.

Individual Activism and Organisations

In general, Syrian activism in the Netherlands seems to happen rather on an individual basis. In the long run, participants would attend demonstrations mainly organised by Het Syrische Comité but not engage further in the organisation. Some stated that they felt organisations were not reaching out to them or encouraging them to be politically active. Especially the Syrians who have arrived in the Netherlands within the last eighteen months have certainly heard about Het Syrische Comité when attending their demonstrations, but did not feel an urge to join them. Most of them wanted to keep working as an individual, but did not rule out completely the option of becoming more active within an organisation in the future. In general, there was a certain sentiment noticeable among the

interviewees to start their own projects rather than joining a political organisation. One participant, in particular, felt really strongly about establishing his own organisation. He believed his network was big enough and he felt he would be able to organise something bigger than the already established organisations. He was also fairly confident about the impact the Syrian diaspora could have on the conflict in Syria. He believed that their influence will grow drastically within the next few years, so that peace in Syria could be achieved very soon (Interview 25-03-2016). This potential interest Syrian refugees appear to have in starting their own organisations needs to be further investigated and is an incentive for further research.

Looking at the three Syrian organisations Het Syrische Comité, Syrian Youth Forum and Comité Syrian Nederland, it is interesting to note that none of these organisations are exclusively political. All of them have a very strong humanitarian aspect within their organisation. Even though they have been founded on the basis of a political organization, all of them engage in social and humanitarian events. They try to combine their political interest with other objectives. All three offer support to Syrian refugees arriving in the Netherlands. This support varies from material needs to practical support. Het Syrische Comité and Comité Syrian Nederland are also active offering humanitarian support to Syrians back in Syria, as well as Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon. However, the difference is that the Comité Syrian Nederland supports the Syrian government and therefore focuses on the government parts of Syria, whilst Het Syrische Comité focuses on refugees in Lebanon and Turkey and supports the Syrian opposition. Both organisations try to supply food, clothes and medical assistance for Syrians in need. Additionally, Het Syrische Comité and the Syrian Youth Forum also engage in social events. An example for a social event I attended is a poetry reading organised by Het Syrische Comité with the Syrian-Palestinian poet Ghayath Almadhoun in Leiden in April 2016. Even though this was primarily a social event, his poems were about the war and the revolution in Syria. This event is a good example of how the organisations try to bring their political objectives together with other objectives. Additionally, all three organisations engage in and organise demonstrations, discussion groups and information meetings about the situation in Syria. All three organisations claim to welcome anyone who is interested in joining them, not taking into account that person's ethnicity.

Ultimately, we see how Syrians have a tendency to work politically on an individual basis. Moreover, there is a certain sentiment amongst them to organise their own projects and to establish their own organizations, which should be researched further. In regard to the organizations, they characteristically try to combine their political objectives with social and humanitarian objectives.

Lack of Trust

Early in my research, I noticed that the political Syrian activism in the Netherlands is very limited. This was confirmed over the course of my research. One of my participants, who I met on a demonstration in Amsterdam, stated that he would attend demonstrations but would not become politically active within an organisation. He did not believe in any form of opposition in Syria. He did not trust them and therefore wanted nothing to do with such an organisation. He voiced that he was against the war but did not want to participate in any organisation and would rather use his own ways to be active. He used music as his main tool, as he stated that it served 'to give hope to the people' (Interview 1-6-16). I came across this disappointment in the Syrian opposition many times during my research.

People were stating how they couldn't trust anyone in the opposition and that everyone was out for their own benefit. This feeling had not always been in their thoughts. Participants stated their excitement in the beginning of the revolution and their commitment to the peaceful revolution in Syria. Over the course of the conflict, this excitement shifted to a feeling of distrust, disagreement and disappointment in the Syrian opposition. Even among the participants there was a certain level of disagreement. As one participant pointed out about other politically active Syrians in the Netherlands, they would do it for their own personal benefit, to get a name for themselves, rather than truly supporting the revolution (Interview 30-03-2016).

Sometimes different people would start a political discussion but we are not practised in this kind of talk. Syrians, in general, don't trust each other. There are a lot of fragmentation, and people don't trust anyone so they create their own groups. Most people are withdrawn from the activism and think they can't do anything but they also don't trust anyone (Interview 25-5-16).

The trust issue seems to be very present in the Syrian community. The participants point out that they are still in favour of the revolution but cannot trust any of the opposition groups. This leads to a certain amount of distrust amongst each other, as well as disagreement. As pointed out, Syrians would go to demonstration in favour of the revolution or to stop the attacks on Aleppo as these are the main issues most Syrians agree on, but that does not mean that they do agree on the ways on how to achieve peace or which political direction Syria should take (Interview 25-5-16).

This issue seems to be closely connected to the apparent lack of political understanding. As specified by participants; there is a gap of knowledge about politics (Interview 8-5-16). Politics as a topic of discussion has not happened in Syria for decades. This might have resulted in Syrians having issues in expressing their political stands and getting engaged in politics. While people might be interested and keen to become politically active, they simply do not know how. This concern has been voiced many times in interviews, and reveals how the reality has differed from the expectations Syrians have

coming to the Netherlands. Believing that political activism and engagement would be easy and that the Netherlands would offer plenty of opportunities and tools to be active proved to be more difficult in reality. Although the Dutch state offers some of these political opportunities, it can be difficult for some Syrians to perceive these opportunities, especially with a lack of political knowledge.

Possible Threats

Another finding indicates that many Syrians still feel threatened by the situation back in Syria. One participant in particular voiced that he is afraid of his face being shown in the media when he attends demonstrations in favour of the revolution, as he fears repercussions for his family in Syria (Interview 25-3-16). This concern has been voiced by other participants as well, and at demonstrations many Syrians did not want to be filmed or photographed out of fear of the consequences for their activism back in Syria. This fear frequently prevents Syrians from participating within an organisation or being openly political active, and is therefore limiting Syrian political activism in the Netherlands. The feelings of insecurity Syrians experience actively limit their political opportunity and stop them from recognizing and seizing an opportunity. Even though it is not clear to what extent these feelings of threats are justified, they have an impact on Syrian political activism in the Netherlands and can be seen as a limitation for Syrian political activism.

Frustrations

One of the main findings is the experience of high levels of frustration by Syrian activists⁴ regarding their political activism, which resulted for some of them in quitting their activism. There are several factors which lead to these feelings of frustrations.

One main factor is connected to media coverage and international involvement. Looking at the expectations and opportunities perceived by Syrians coming to the Netherlands it is noticeable that these expectations were very high, and to a certain extent not achievable. Many Syrian activists perceived an opportunity to educate Dutch people about the situation in Syria and to influence the way in which they think about Syria, which turned out to be not as achievable as they had initially assumed. Having these high expectations and wrong ideas about their political opportunities was central to the resulting feelings of frustration. It seemed that many participants were not aware of the bigger political picture regarding the conflict in Syria. This slowly changed and there is a gradual awareness among Syrian activists that the possibilities to actually make a change are very limited. The high expectations about their political opportunities in the Netherlands are also reflected in the desire to get the Dutch government and European governments to intervene in Syria. They felt there

⁴ Further outlined in Chapter 4

was a real opportunity for them to achieve these goals. The gradual awareness of the limited opportunities led to frustrations. It has also resulted in a more accurate perception of the political opportunities available for Syrian political activists and a better understanding of the political context of the conflict in Syria. Participants have voiced that the Syrian diaspora will not have a real influence on the conflict as long as international actors such as the United States, Iran, Saudi-Arabia and Russia are involved. Many feel that the solution or the end of the conflict is dependent on these international actors, and that the Syrian diaspora has no real impact on it. This realisation of the ir potential real impact as Syrian activists in the Netherlands took time for many participants. Starting very enthusiastically with high goals resulted slowly in frustration and being confronted with another set of political opportunities than they expected.

During the interviews, certain factors were pointed out which led to the gradual awareness of the different set of opportunities. One factor was the current lack of resources, which made it difficult to organise themselves and to become political active. This lack of resources was very present and it was seen as one of the main reasons for the limited opportunities. As voiced frequently, ideas on how to become active had to be adjusted to the budget and could therefore not be followed through, which also led to increased frustrations. Another factor that added to the limited opportunities and frustration is the lack of trust, as explained earlier, among the Syrians and the Syrian opposition. Not being able to associate with a certain wing of the Syrian opposition and the subtle distrust amongst each other makes it difficult to work together and to establish a common goal. Ultimately, all these limitations provide a more limited set of opportunities for the Syrian diaspora to actively influence the conflict in Syria. This new and rather limited set of opportunities leads to frustrations among the Syrian political activists.

New Set of Opportunities

It is important to look at the different ways participants decided to deal with this new set of opportunities. Even though the majority has experienced this frustration, three of the participants are still very confident that they can have a real impact on the situation in Syria and are still optimistic that they will be able to educate the Dutch about the real situation in Syria. The other nine participants have felt this frustration and searched for ways to deal with it.

Some participants decided to limit their political activism to participating in demonstrations. They shifted their focus from political activism to humanitarian efforts. The need for humanitarian efforts in Syria are enormous because of the ongoing conflict. This is one reason why a huge amount of the Syrian activism in the Netherlands evolves around humanitarian support for Syrians. The vast majority of the Syrians interviewed had additionally been engaged in humanitarian work in the Netherlands or back in Syria. As participants pointed out, they are hoping to use humanitarian aid as

a way to be also politically active. Due to a perceived lack of interest from the media in the Syrian conflict regarding Bashar Assad, they are hoping to gain attention through their humanitarian work and shift the focus to the victims and military attacks of Bashar Assad. By showing that there is a need to support people in Syria, as well as Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon, because of the ongoing conflict and Bashar Assad refusal to resign, they hope that the attention will stay on Syria. As one participant pointed out; people don't care for the complex political situation and they are more interested in personal stories. As mentioned earlier, the political organisations, in addition to their political activism, are engaging in humanitarian efforts which offer a different side of activism than the political to Syrians in the Netherlands. There is an interest among Syrians in the Netherlands to offer help to people affected by the civil war in Syria. For some of them, it can be a tool to overcome the frustration experienced by their political activism. Although the humanitarian effort is also limited due to the lack of resources, it is easier to see an outcome. The humanitarian effort evolves mostly around collecting clothes and money and shipping it to Turkey and Lebanon, as sending goods to Syria to support the opposition is increasingly difficult.

In addition, organising social events and gatherings is seen by Syrians as another type of action to deal with the lack of political opportunities. The events are often being used to keep raising awareness for the situation in Syria and to inform people about what is currently happening. The humanitarian efforts and engaging in social events is a way to get in contact with Dutch people. Dutch people play an important role in the Syrian activism. During the three months of research, it has been visible that there are a good number of Dutch people participating in Syria-related events.

Light a Candle for Peace in Syria in Utrecht was the first event I attended during my research. This event was organised by Syrians living in Utrecht, in cooperation with Dutch volunteers. The event was used to raise awareness by Syrians in Utrecht about the situation in Syria. They used music, speeches and a small play to show how they perceive the conflict and the situation in Syria under Bashar Assad. Even though the majority of participants had been from Syria, there were also many Dutch people taking part (Field Notes 18-03-16). Especially in Utrecht I came across a strong connection between the Syrians and Dutch people. The Facebook page New Neighbours/ Utrecht has over 1.100 members, and Welkom in Utrecht over 7.700 members. Both of these groups have been very active in organising events with Syrians. New Neighbours/ Utrecht offer a platform for Syrians and Dutch citizens to get in contact with each other and to offer support. They help to facilitate language partners or to donate furniture, electronics and clothes to Syrians in need. Moreover, they are very much engaged on a social level and focus on sharing information with each other. The organised events vary from cooking with each other to organising a political lecture led by Syrians about the situation back home. Many Syrians from around Utrecht have voiced that they felt very welcome and supported by the people in Utrecht. One of my participants stated that Utrecht is very

well organised in dealing with Syrian refugees and that the Dutch people in Utrecht are very engaged. He felt they offered Syrians an opportunity to become active within Utrecht, and many Syrians have taken this opportunity willingly. He considers that this form of activism might lead to greater political activism among Syrians (Interview 8-5-16). This Dutch support seems very important especially when Syrians have only recently arrived in the Netherlands. They can supply Syrians with information needed to get organised. This support can offer a better opportunity for Syrians to become active.

This chapter showed the journey Syrians undertook and how this journey has changed their way of activism. Many Syrians started with high expectations about their political opportunities in the Netherlands. These expectations varied from influencing the conflict in Syria directly, influencing Dutch politicians to intervene, and to educate the Dutch society and media about the real situation. These expectations can be seen as very ambitious and to a certain degree unrealistic. Being confronted with the fear of Syrians being politically active and a certain lack of political understanding, in addition to the feeling of not having a real impact in influencing the situation in Syria, Syrians started feeling highly frustrated. Trying to deal with that frustration, some decided to take a step back from their political activism to concentrate on humanitarian efforts or social organisation. However, others are still aiming for these goals and are still positive about achieving them. The next chapter, however, will look into the personal experience of four politically active Syrians in the Netherlands and how they experience and perceive their political activism.

Chapter 5: Personal Experience

This chapter will be looking at three of my interviews in more detail. It will show the personal experience and feelings of each of the participants regarding their political activism in the Netherlands. The interviews will give an overview of their political activism and the journey they have undertaken up to this stage. This chapter will show the personal motivations, strategies, expectations and frustration of Syrian political activists in the Netherlands in the context of limited opportunities.

This chapter will not mention their ethnic backgrounds⁵, as this is not relevant to the chapter as it will focus on their personal experiences and feelings. Each of these participants has been engaged within a political organisation in the Netherlands. All three try or tried to mobilise against the Assad regime, and are therefore in favour of the Syrian opposition. I chose these three participants as all three of them were engaged in an organisation and were active politically on a very intense level. I will discuss each case separately. The names of the participants have been changed.

All three interviews lasted between an hour or ninety minutes. Two of the interviews took place in a restaurant, while the first took place at the participant's house. In all three interviews, the atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable. I had the impression that all participants were at ease with the interview as I did not see any indication of nervousness or anxiety. All participants seemed to be happy and very willingly to talk to me. Most interviews were conducted in English, except in the case of the last one during which I used an Arabic translator. Before starting the interviews, I first talked about non-research related things. All the interviews were recorded and after they took place I made field notes about my impression of the interviews.

Interview with Harm

The Organisation

Harm has been in the Netherlands since 2000 and had become politically active in 2011. Immediately three days after the outbreak of the revolution in Syria in 2011 he started to attend demonstrations and to meet up with other Syrians in the Netherlands to start an organisation which would support the revolution in Syria. The idea was to try mobilising people in the Netherlands and to provide support for the activists back in Syria. They wanted to create contact with the Dutch media to inform others about the situation in Syria and to keep the general public updated. The aim was to create a link between the Syrian community back in Syria and the Syrian community in the Netherlands. It

⁵ Except Rose as she has mentioned her background during the interview, the other participants did not talk about it.

aimed at showing people in Syria that the Syrians in the Netherlands were part of their opposition movement.

Providing some sort of support to the people internally and making the link between the Dutch community, society, media, politics and the Syrian activists and the situation in Syria.

Before the conflict erupted in 2011 in Syria, Harm never thought of becoming politically active himself. Following the news about the situation in Tunisia and Egypt, he felt inspired. But before the Syrian revolution in 2011, he never cared about the political situation in Syria, even though he comes from a very political family and some of his brothers had been in prison for their political engagement back in Syria.

We were expecting some activities in Syria as well. Once that happened we thought it is our moment our time let's get in involved in that. Everybody wanted to be [part of the movement] because we thought that things would go smoothly, we had energy and we were optimistic.

After this, he decided to become active and started to organise with other Syrians in the Netherlands. Together they established Het Syrische Comité⁶. The Syrians he engaged with had all been living in the Netherlands for a while. Many of them were already politically active; some of them in political parties in Syria whilst others were even involved in political parties in the Netherlands. As many of them were Kurdish they were already active in different Kurdish parties and Syrian opposition parties, as well as Syrian communist parties or organisations. Very few of them had strong religious or nationalistic backgrounds. A very small minority, underrepresented in the beginning of the organisation, were in favour of, or even members of, the Muslim Brotherhood.

But the majority, especially the younger generation of Syrians, were not politically oriented and not politically coloured; which supported the organisation's aim. Harm guessed that about 14.000 Syrians had been living in the Netherlands at that stage and about 5.000 of them were 1st generation immigrants. Many of them were pro-Assad, especially in the East of the Netherlands, but they did not become active at this stage. They became active later, as he states:

A couple of months they were in denial, they said nothing had happened in Syria. So there was no reason for them to become active. But later on, some of them became active...I know I am aware of it, some of them showing up in the media, some of them were helping the Dutch media to go to interview Syrian officials, facilitated that for them. I know, some of them were gathering humanitarian support for the government. Some of them were debating in discussions and even organising some demonstrations. I even attended a couple of them to have a look around.

⁶ Even though many of them had been from Kurdish ethnicity, the group was still mixed and had members from many different backgrounds.

However, he believes that between two hundred and three hundred Syrians became active or participated in the events organised by Het Syrische Comité in support of the Syrian opposition. Beforehand there were no active Syrian political organisations. They started off by organising social and political events such as discussions or galleries. They also spoke in universities and to Dutch politicians about the situation in Syria. When the situation in Syria kept escalating they moved towards a humanitarian aid approach. As Harm states, this was their tool to keep the attention on Syria. This gradual shift happened sometime between 2013 and 2014, according to Harm, as the focus shifted towards humanitarian aid⁷⁷ because the situation in the Syria was going so terribly that they all felt they needed to do something. Consequently, political engagement didn't seem to be that useful anymore,⁸⁸ especially with the limited resources available. Many Syrians residing in the Netherlands had invested a lot at this stage and had lost family in Syria. This had cost them a lot of energy and emotional strength. When the situation in Syria continued to escalate their engagement moved towards humanitarian aid. Harm saw this as a tool to still keep the attention on Syria. The Syrian community in the Netherlands just felt they needed to do something, to help the people back in Syria as the humanitarian situation kept escalating.

We had limited resources, so we had to make choices. Whatever you want to do, you have to do it in a careful way. So we thought that humanitarian work is more important. So it was a means for us to draw attention and to be also politically active. And also it had to...I have to mention this...with the public opinion in Europe. At a certain moment, people were not interested anymore in the political situation in Syria. Everybody was telling us at a certain moment 'ahh Syria very complicated'...So we realised that nobody was interested, even the media, not interested in the political situation but more into the humanitarian situation. So being active on a humanitarian level was a way to draw attention to the situation politically.

Changing

As mentioned previously, Harm pointed out that they used their political engagement to also inform others about the political situation and their activism. He made very clear that this was not their choice but the situation was so urgent that they needed to do something. Humanitarian aid became the priority. Het Syrische Comité started organising events such as concerts or flea markets, with the goal to collect as much money as possible to keep their humanitarian engagement in Syria going. They would try to support local or individual initiatives in Syria by collecting second-hand clothes from Dutch schools and shipping them in containers to Syria, but mainly to refugee camps in Turkey.

⁷ Mainly shipping clothes and medical goods to refugee camps in Turkey

⁸ He already started to feel at this stage, that their political engagement was not really successful and thought it would be better using their resources to focus on humanitarian aid.

However, some of the collected money was invested in buying medical equipment. He points out that they tried to connect this engagement as much as possible with social, cultural and political activities. However, trying to get additional funding from the Dutch government turned out to be rather complicated.

They want to support and give money, but of course, they have to give it to parties they know...keeping some Dutch organisations working⁹.

In terms of working together with other Syrian communities, they mainly focused on the Netherlands as there was always the issue of funding. But as he mentioned there had been interaction with other Syrians all around Europe. One of the projects Harm pointed out was the painting of a caravan in the Syrian colours and to drive it around Europe to draw attention to the situation in Syria. The caravan drove via Germany and Italy to Paris. They would stop in cities and with the help of the local Syrian community organise demonstrations. However, he also states that the connection and engagement between the different Syrian communities around Europe are based on a minimum. They tend to work together through the exchange of information rather than organising events together. There have been demonstrations as a community, for example outside the Syrian embassy in Brussels but that costs resources and organisation¹⁰. Therefore, as a compromise, it would be a lot easier to organise something in the Netherlands instead. Working and spreading information via Facebook about events has become one of the main tools of organisation and communication of the Syrian community.

Giving up Political Activism

At some stage, Harm decided to stop being politically active and decided to not nominate himself for internal organisation elections.

Also at a certain moment, there was this feeling of disappointment, to be honest. It was a disappointment in the situation, national community and what they are doing and how the political movement in Syria evolved. So I was demotivated at a certain moment and yes maybe it's strange to say but it I some sort of actually started losing faith in the entire...well in how things evolved. So basically what I realised in that moment...ok we did a lot and people are dying and the situation is just horrible. Everybody knows that everybody sees that and the public here in Europe is not interested anymore.

⁹ He felt that their organisation was not as established as other Dutch organisation, and therefore exposed to intense competition as well as having felt that other organisations might have been more valued by the Dutch authorities.

¹⁰ He expressed that it is easier to mobilise resources for humanitarian aid than for political events.

He felt that it did not matter what picture you would show people, the situation in Syria would not change, as he felt people had stopped caring.

European governments will not interfere they do what they want and they will not do more than that. So there is no point in trying.

He felt they were reaching their limits and with that came a huge disappointment of the international community. This became really clear to him when;

Actually, the turning point for me was when the chemical attacks [2013] happened and I thought this moment was the climax of the situation in Syria and now the world will bring an end to the situation in Syrian...and then just a couple of days later there was this political agreement between Russian and America to dismantle all the chemical weapons in Syria...so basically what they were saying was 'okay you are allowed to kill your entire population but not with chemical weapons'

The frustration kept growing as Harm felt they were put in a position in which they had to defend themselves. He felt that when you were against Assad and in favour of the opposition, you had to prove you were not in favour of Isis. So instead of continuing their work showing people what happens in Syria, they felt forced to prove that they were not part of Isis. As he points out, having a beard does not mean that you are an extremist. When he is reflecting on the situation now, he realised that there was no progress in speaking to the Dutch media and politicians. In the beginning, they tried to help to create political pressure but this failed. As a group, they did not want to give the impression that they were in favour of a military intervention. However, some people in the organisation were in favour of that. As an organisation, they tried to avoid issues such as the Free Syrian Army, because of their military activity. There were discussions from some members about financially supporting the Free Syrian Army. However, they made it clear that they were against such support. Some members disagreed and therefore left the organisation.

Harm especially points out the frustration he felt when politicians were not listening to them. They predicted at an early stage that people in Syria will start using weapons, religion will play a bigger role and that foreign fighters will come to fight. He states that these things were predicted by them and told to politicians without any effect.

Connection to Syria

Looking at their connections to Syria he points out that the important thing was that people in Syria knew that people in the Netherlands were active. They also needed some sort of connection to Syria to be taken more seriously by the Dutch public. They tried to reflect Syrian voices here in the Netherlands. But Harm also notes that it was important to realise that their organisation was not

reflecting Syria as a whole, as they did not represent Syria's diversity, as well as the fact that many members had been in the Netherlands for a really long time. Some of their members became members of the Syrian Nation Council and post-revolution organisations back in Syria.

When the new influx of new Syrians began he personally did not see that this would have changed their political activism. Having put their focus on the political and humanitarian side of the conflict, they once again had to change their focus to deal with the needs of the incoming Syrian refugees. Providing support and information to incoming refugees was crucial, and they also tried to connect them to their organisation. He is not sure if that has worked, some Syrians have joined the organisation but the numbers seem small in comparison to how many of them came to the Netherlands. He rather believes that Syrians who are politically active do it on an individual level rather than organised in a group.

When he reflects on what needs to change so people become more politically active he is looking at the situation in Syria. He believes things need to change in Syria on a political level. If the opposition is moving towards finding a solution and reconciliation, people would be able to contribute to the idea of a new Syria. They would be able to contribute to the stability of Syria. As a starting point, it would be important to remind people here that they would have the opportunity to contribute to the stability and progress in Syria. All in all, the situation for him is very disappointing. The situation has become stagnated and people need to feel that there is progress and that they could be part of it. People need to feel that they have been listened to. People feel disappointed and helpless against the international influences and powers. He concludes that maybe a charismatic opposition leader might help to improve the situation, but as long as international politics play their games with Syria the normal everyday Syrian has no way of influencing that.

Interview with Amy and Rose

I came across Amy and Rose as they both recently (around 6 months ago) started their own organisation in the East of the Netherlands. Both had been very helpful and willing to meet me for an interview. At the time of my interview, Amy had been in the Netherlands for about 5 years, shortly before the conflict started in Syria in 2011. Rose had been in the Netherlands for about two years at this stage. At the beginning of our conversation, Rose mentioned quickly her political engagement in Syria. In Syria, she worked together with non-violent activists to support the Syrian revolution. After she needed to leave Syria and went to Egypt, hoping she could return after a few months. As this was not the case she moved further to Turkey, and was later prevented from going back to Egypt by the Egyptian government. She stayed in Turkey for about four to five months before she continued her journey to the Netherlands. Looking at her activism in Syria she describes herself as a non-violent

activist. Together with her brother she participated in political protests and worked together with other organizations. When her brother and friends had been arrested the situation became too dangerous she needed to leave Syria and moved to Egypt. As Amy came before the Syrian revolution, she had not been politically active. Being in the Netherlands at that time she felt an urge to become active but due to her private situation, she was initially not able to.

In Egypt, Rose did learn about non-violent resistance and even went to Bulgaria in 2013, to have political training with the Otpor¹¹ movement from Serbia.

The Organisation

The movement in Syria tried to make people interested in elections and tried to push local initiatives, giving citizens a feeling of responsibility. When Rose came to the Netherlands she had already been politically active in Syria and the revolution and did not want to stop with her engagement. Rose and Amy started thinking about how to get Syrians in Europe and especially in the Netherlands actively engaged. After some careful thought, they decided to start their own organisation with the aim to keep the connection between the Syrian diaspora and Syria as well as to create possible political pressure on the Syrian and Dutch governments to intervene. The idea was it to make a change in Syria through their political engagement in the Netherlands. Arriving in the Netherlands it became clear pretty quickly for the both of them that it would be very difficult to make the whole world aware of the situation in Syria. As Amy points out when she arrived in 2011, many Dutch people did not know anything about Syria.

A: Now all they think about is Daesh¹² and the Syrian regime fighting Deash.

Starting an organisation was for them the *'official way'* of getting in contact with more Syrians and the Dutch society. Integration plays a central role for the two of them. The aim is helping the Syrian community to integrate better into the Dutch society and creating contact between the two through social events and interaction. Another point, which is very important for the two, is to keep the contact between the Syrian community in the Netherlands and Syria.

However, their main focus lies in the exchange between the Dutch and Syrian community. Up to this stage, there are a few Dutch members who are actively engaged in the organisation. They help Syrian refugees to settle down after arriving in the Netherlands. For both of them, it is important that the Syrians here in the Netherlands do not forget about their roots and stay in contact with their Syrian heritage. Rose points out that she believes that Syrians have to be reminded about the positivity of the revolution. Even though it seems that the situation got worse after 2011, they need to be

¹¹ Serbian political movement against Milosevic, starting 1998 (BBC 2000).

¹² Deash is referring to Isis

reminded about the goal of the revolution, which is to achieve democracy and a better life in Syria. It needs to be clear that the revolution is important and was not a mistake. As the organisation is still pretty young and they are just at the beginning, they are only starting to get properly organised. They shared some ideas with me about future possible projects. Both would like to connect social events with a political content. One way of doing this was to create an exhibition with art about the revolution and the war in Syria. This would be a way for them to get people talking and to create a connection between the Dutch society and the conflict back in Syria. The big hope of the two is that through events like this, as well as demonstrations, they can remind Syrians about the revolution goals and hope to keep them politically active and engaged in the revolution. Yet, the big goal is to be able to influence European governments to become active in regard to the problems in Syria. Both of them realise that this is a very ambitious goal and there is still a lot that needs to be considered.

So far they haven't established a relationship with organisations back in Syria, but they are in contact with their friends in Syria who are politically active. Their friend network reaches all over Europe and there are planning to expand to France very soon. They have been in contact with Syrians who are living in France and are interested in starting an organisation as well. They hope to establish branches of their organisation all over Europe to become a strong political diaspora.

In regards to other organisations in the Netherlands, they are hoping to develop a relationship with them (mainly Het Syrische Comité) as they are all Syrian and working for the same goal.

How to Engage

Both believe that there is a general interest of Syrians living in the Netherlands to become politically active and engaged.

R: This is actually a very difficult point for the Syrian community. The Syrian people don't like to speak about political things and when the Syrian revolution began it was a kind of...it is not because they don't want to work as an activist but now it is more complicated as the situation became more complicated. For this, it is our goal how we can make it easier for them to think about these [political] ideas and how to do something. They don't believe in how much the people can do...especially after six years.

A: There are many people who are still active and would want to do things but that depends on the situation.

Reflecting on the issue of what would need to change so more Syrians would politically active. Both expressed their hope that by organising a meaningful event that will have the possibility to influence something, people might realise that engagement can achieve something. They believe it is up to the political organisations to show that change is possible and to convince people to get engaged.

R: This group or this event, for example, achieved something they will feel that they can do more and start to trust themselves to achieve more.

Looking at the real impact that Syrians might have on the situation in Syria both of them have a different opinion.

R: Can I give my own opinion? As an organisation, it is another one...actually for me I don't believe that we can make a big change. We have to stay in contact with our issue and our revolution because there is a future. If we feel now that we are tired we will lose our future...our future and our hope...but we know that our situation is not about the Syrian people...it is about Russia, it is about Iran and America and Europe, it is about a lot of deals between these countries and when they kind of have an agreement or deal they will solve the problem in Syria but till that we will have to continue working. There will be two or three generations of Syrians living here, they will forget their language, home and they will forget about Syria then who will go back?

A: I have another opinion because I really think that we can make a big change. I think if the Syrians are really working together to achieve something, and with a plan in their mind and communicating with the Dutch people then I think we can influence the Dutch government.

Both of them agree that they need to keep working and hoping to influence the government to politically intervene in Syria but not militarily.

The idea of coming together as Syrians without paying attention to the ethical background became more and more complicated after the revolution. Even though it had not been like this before, Syrians are having more problems in coming together as a whole.

R: I am from a minority in Syria...I don't believe in religion...but the Syrian people now have a very big problem with this kind of differences. It was not like this at the beginning of the revolution but after some time...but we have the civil war...and if we think about these differences we will not do anything because it is very complicated.

R: But if we forget that and try to do something serious maybe the people see someone doing something good and then they can forget about the idea [religious differences]. But it is not easy.

Answering my question whether they see that as a problem at the moment:

A: At the moment yes but Syrians used to live together without thinking about religion.

This problem of division became more and more present after the first year of the civil war passed by. Both assure me that their organisation is open to everyone and that they have members from all ethnicities. However, there are differences within the Syrian community on how to achieve peace. As Rose points out people often believe she is in favour of Assad as she is an Alawite. Yet, they see the political engagement of Syrians to grow as more Syrians arrive. Until now their organisation is not that big, but they have established a network all around the Netherlands. For them a lack of resources plays also an important role:

R: When I was working in Egypt it was really easy to move and it is not expensive...it is easy to make people come together but like here it is very difficult to invite the people in the Hague to an event in Amersfoort but in Kairo it is easy.

A real problem for them on an organisational level is that the Syrian community is spread all around the Netherlands and they are lacking resources to come together. This lack of resources forces them to create many things themselves. Additionally they point out that Syrians are inexperienced in working political organisations and NGOs.

R: We as Syrians have no experience with this kind of work...the people don't know how to work together.

A: It is forbidden to speak about anything political in Syria so we are afraid..but now Syrian people are learning. In our organisation, we are thinking about providing a training on how to think politically.

They believe in working with a grassroots level approach they will be able to influence the situation in Syria step by step. As they point out it is difficult to work politically but also very difficult to leave this work behind. They also experienced that it is easier to get people engaged on a humanitarian approach. As many people prefer to help but not to think about Syria in the political context.

R: The people prefer to think about this kind of work...humanitarian events

A: There are many groups in the Netherlands, which work for refugees or something similar. They prefer that work.

They also believe that humanitarian engagement and social events can be used to as a tool to get people to think about a politics. Syrians are well able to organise themselves on a humanitarian level but not so much on a political one.

R: If you ask them to help they will do that but if you ask them ' why do think this family is in that situation?' they will start thinking more about that.

Interview with Ali

Ali arrived in the Netherlands in March 2014 and had been reunited with his wife and daughter in July 2014. Ali has been politically active since 2000. In this time he had to do his military service in Syria. During this period, he became very aware of the unjust treatment of Syrians in the military. As he describes it he was very aware of the fact that all military officials were Alawites, who treated the other members with disrespect. When he started speaking up against this treatment he was put in jail for the first time. His jail sentences lasted from October 2000 until October 2001. This should not have been his only time in jail. He was arrested two more times for speaking up and served another 20 months in prison from July 2002 and the last time for three years being released in 2007. The prison he served his times was not a public prison but a prison, especially for military and political prisoners. After this period he stayed active and when the revolution started in 2011, he concentrated on helping other Syrians on a humanitarian level. He helped to supply food to areas in need, helping people who have lost their homes to find a place to stay and trying to hide political activists who were running away from Assad's troops. Having to leave Syria and his family after being hit by a car bomb due to his severe injuries, he arrived in the Netherlands in March 2014.

Engagement

When Ali arrived in the Netherlands in March 2014 and received his medical treatment, he had to readjust the way of how he would be politically active with having lost one arm, having trouble walking and losing the majority of his eyesight. Shortly after arriving in the Netherlands, he started getting frustrated about the media coverage about Syria. In his opinion, the Dutch media was only reporting on issues on Isis and put Isis in the centre of attention. He felt that the Dutch media was missing the main point by only reporting on Isis and forgetting about the revolution against Assad. Trying to air his frustration he started creating art to show people his side of the story. Being impacted by his disabilities, especially by his bad eyesight, he decided to create posters and drawings to get people's attention. He wanted to show people that the conflict was not about religion. Trying to prove his point he refers to himself and his wife as they are from different religions and does not matter for them.

1 Poster



2 Poster



The posters he is creating are used at demonstrations and other events. He says it is a good way to express his opinion and emotions. His criticism against the media is also very much portrayed in the first picture. He is directly criticising the media coverage about the Aylan¹³ case, pointing out that every day children are dying in Syria but the media is only picking certain stories to cover.

When I first went on the streets in the Netherlands in October 2014 without any drawings or poster, I realised that no one cared and no one paid attention. So I created something so that the people would look at me. I was not an artist but I became one just to do something creative so I could reach people.

Starting off as an individual creating the posters together with his wife, he then decided to group up with other Syrians to work together on different art projects. Yet, he also decided to join the Het Syrische Comitè¹⁴ as an active member.

¹³ The 3-year-old Syrian boy, who fled with his family via Turkey and drowned at the Turkish coast at the end of August 2015 (Frankfurter Allgemeine 2015)

¹⁴ Het Syrische Comitè was founded in March 2011

When I was in Syria I lost my hand and one eye and after that, I just needed to get out for medical attention. When I arrived I was shocked that people here did not know Bashar Assad. When the top terrorist is Bashar Assad.

I recently noticed that the Dutch media is covering the issues on Syria a bit fairer as they used to. If the real situation in Syria will be portrayed in the news the conflict will not go on for another five years. I am not planning on staying here forever, I want to go back.

During the interview, his frustration with the media coverage came more and more present. He questioned himself how it is possible that the media seem to care more about the terror attacks in Paris and the people who died there than the Syrians who die every day. Especially when all of them are human beings. He feels that the media coverage is hypocritical.

His work in the Het Syrische Comite is voluntary as for all members. With his work within the organisation, he is hoping to help them fulfil their two main goals. Firstly, they try to send medical equipment and clothes to people in need in Syria. Secondly, to reflect the reality of the revolution in Syria and to inform people about what is happening. The Het Syrische Comite has also Dutch members, who are actively engaged.

As he points out there are also some difficulties within the political active Syrian community.

Some of the people who are active for the Syrian revolution are following their personal benefit and want all eyes on them. They are not 100 percent revolutionaries.

There is also a certain degree of disagreement within the Syrian community. As he points out, he did not feel confident attending a light a candle for peace event as he felt the organiser were mainly interested in creating a big event rather than bringing across the right message. He decided he would not participate as he felt lighting a candle for peace when Assad is still in power would not be right. He would support events about the revolution but not events that serve to promote individuals.

I am not begging the people to support or sent money but the problem is not solved yet. So I want any possible way to get involved in Syria...if that means by politics, army, by supporting the revolution just to take Assad out of the regime. I am asking to solve this problem.

My hope for Syria is to become democratic and to vote a new president democratically. I feel motivated by how human the European people are.

No country is supporting the revolution in Syria one-hundred percent. This makes their situation as political activists more complicated. Even though the Dutch government is offering the opportunities for demonstration etc. they still do not intervene and support the revolution in Syria. In the

beginning of the revolution, you had people from all religious backgrounds worked together. But after five years when no one intervened in the conflict, you find Syrians now standing closer along religious lines than they used to. Most of the Syrians are against the regime but many of them cannot speak out in public as they are afraid that their families back in Syria will be attacked by the regime.

After the interview

After I had my interview with Ali at the end of March, I met him on many other occasions afterwards. He invited me to a poetry event in Leiden, shortly after our interview, which gave me a better idea of how they were using art to inform people about their reflexion of the situation in Syria. Even though mainly Syrians attended, many of them having lived in the Netherlands for a long time, there were also Dutch people who were interested especially in the poetry readings. The poems were written and presented by the Syrian poet Ghayath Almadhoun. His work consisted out of poems about the revolution and the conflict in Syria and the audience had the opportunity to ask questions.

Additionally, I met him on various demonstrations organised by the Het Syrische Comite. At the demonstration, he played one of the main roles and was leading the attending people through the demonstration. Out of all my interviews, he was the one I have seen being politically active and in action many times. During all these brief meetings and throughout the interview he was very passionate and enthusiastic about his political activism. Reflecting back on it, it seems this political activism was a big part of his identity here in the Netherlands.

Key Findings

These interviews gave a personal overview of the personal motivations, expectations, strategies and frustrations in a context of very limited opportunities. There are some key findings regarding these interviews, which are a very personal experience but represent the experience of Syrian political activists in the Netherlands.

Motivations

These interviews illustrate the personal motivations of Syrians to become politically active. Harm himself never had an interest in political activism before 2011. Yet, after the revolution in 2011, he felt he needed to do something and became active. He wanted to support the revolution and show his support and therefore founded with other Syrians the Het Syrische Comité as a political organisation. His key motivation was to create contact with the Dutch media and to inform them about the situation in Syria and to keep the general public updated.

finally the Netherlands. For her, it seems there is no other option than to be political active. Although it might be hard for her it is still better than to not be engaged at all. Amy had not been active in Syria

but felt a strong commitment towards the Syrian revolution. Back in 2011, her personal situation did not allow her to become active but she always had an urge to support the revolution and finally took the initiative to become politically active.

Ali's story is different than the previous ones. Having to serve in the military and speaking up about the injustice in the military he had served several years in prison in Syria. Having to leave his wife and baby in Syria due to his severe injuries, he came to the Netherlands and continued his political activism. Political activism seems to be a major and important part of his life. During the whole interview, he was full of passion talking about his political activism.

The motivations for their political activism are diverse and connected to their background and personal experiences.

Expectations

Very interesting and striking to look at, are the very high expectations they have from their political activism in the Netherlands. Even though there is seemingly a lack of Syrian political activism in the Netherlands, they seem to hold great expectations of what they can achieve as activists¹⁵.

One of the main expectations that came across in the interviews was to educate and to inform the Dutch people and media about the real situation in Syria. They expressed their concern that the main focus in the media would lay on Isis and not on the conflict itself. They felt people would not take Assad as a threat as seriously as Isis. They wanted a shift of the media's concentration from Isis to the revolution and the fight against Assad. Another goal was to get the Netherlands or even Europe to intervene in the conflict in Syria. Yet, the demands varied from sanctions (Amy and Rose) to military interventions (Ali). They felt they would be able through their activism to pressure the Dutch and European governments to step and intervene into the conflict in Syria. The perceived opportunities by the participants to be able to actively influence the conflict and to get international actors to step in seem very high, especially in regard to the limited Syrian activism in the Netherlands. In this case, opportunities which have not been there have been wrongly perceived by Syrian political activists. Instead, they have to deal with a very limited set of opportunities. The concept of perceived opportunity is arguing that opportunities have to be perceived by a group in order to be real opportunities. The public needs to be aware of opportunities for successful protest activities (Kurzman 1996: 153). In the case presented here, a mismatch occurs. The correlation between subjective perceptions and structural conditions is not holding true for this case. As Kurzman points

¹⁵ Harm and Rose had these expectations at the beginning of their activism but not anymore

out, two possible mismatches can occur 1) when people fail to perceive opportunities, or 2) they perceive opportunities where none exists (Kurzman 1996: 154). In this case, opportunities have been perceived where none exists.

Frustrations

Starting with very high and even unrealistic expectations about the political opportunities in the Netherlands to influence the conflict in Syria the limitation become clear quite quickly.

The reasons experienced for limited opportunities for the four interviewees are diverse. As they have pointed out there are very limited resources available to the Syrian diaspora as for example in contrast to the Tamil Tigers, with substantial financial and technical resources at its disposal (Ember, Ember and Skoggard 2005: 499). The lack of resources available forces them to pursue their interests on a very low key. As stated by Harm did this limit their ambitions to pursue their interests and organise events outside the Netherlands. Rose and Amy pointed out that they also have to deal with very limited resources. This starts with having to create posters and decoration articles for events themselves¹⁶ as well as finding locations for events, which are easily accessible from all over the Netherlands as travelling in the Netherlands is very expensive for many Syrians¹⁷.

Another factor pointed out by them is the greater picture of the conflict in Syria and the international involvement. Realising the important role of these international actors, especially Russia, in regard to the conflict in Syria has been very frustrating. Especially for Harm, who lost hope that countries like the United States would intervene in the conflict. All of them felt helpless to a certain degree being able to influence international actors to change their position. The importance and frustration can be also seen in Ali's posters; in which he criticises the role of Russia supplying Bashar Assad with weapons¹⁸. Another factor being described in the interviews is the apparent lack of Syrians working together. As Rose points out it is difficult for Syrians to come and to work together. However, all four point out that ethnicity plays no role for them and they would hope for the Syrians to come together as a community.

Strategies

These interviews show different strategies, which have been picked by the individual activist.

One of the main strategies is the connection of political and humanitarian objectives. Starting off as a political organisation, the Het Syrische Comite moved towards a more humanitarian aid approach sometime between 2013 and 2014 as Harm points out. This shift can be seen as a result of the

¹⁶ The sense I got during the interview is that both feel creating their own posters etc. might make an amateur impression on others.

¹⁷ Additionally, Syrians live all across the Netherlands.

¹⁸ Can be seen on poster 2.

limited resources available and having to decide which way to pursue and the increasing need for humanitarian support for Syrian refugees in Turkey but also in the Netherlands. The starting goal of educating the Dutch media and people about Syria and the revolution shifted in priorities and humanitarian aid started to become more important. This new focus is a reaction to the limited political opportunities. As Harm points out in the interview, there was no progress in speaking to the media and the Dutch public, the goal of educating the public couldn't be achieved. In the beginning, this had been a key motivation for Harm and during the term of his activism, he started to realise that there are actually very limited opportunities to do so in the Netherlands. Being aware of these limited opportunities led to high levels of frustration. As he states the situation became very disappointing for him and people started feeling helpless. Consequently, this meant for him to stop his activism as he did not have the feeling to be able to achieve anything.

Rose and Amy outlined a different strategy. They started a youth organisation in order to keep people political engaged. They try to combine social and political objectives with each other. One of their main goals, as highlighted in the interview, was to create a 'meaningful event' which would motivate people and let them believe in the validity of the Syrian political activism. They believe in a grassroots level approach to get people engaged and to successfully support the Syrian revolution. Both of them are at the beginning with their organisation but very committed. Rose and Amy both believe in a peaceful resistance and Rose even tried to educate herself about political movements and used an opportunity for a workshop in 2013 to learn about the peaceful resistance against Milošević. They aim to educate Syrians about political activism and the possible ways to become more active. It seems that their strategy, for now, is to mainly focus their activism on educating people about political activism and to get people involved. In the interview, I had the impression that their focus is not concentrated on educating the media but rather to engage with Syrians and to get them involved.

Ali also found his own strategy to use his opportunities to become political active. He had to adapt his activism coming to the Netherlands due to his injuries. Starting to create political posters and drawings and using them at a demonstration to present them to the public is his strategy to stay active. The posters included in this thesis are only a sample. Many of them reflect his personal experience as a political activist in the Netherlands and Syria. Even though he also is very frustrated about the current situation, he shows no signs of giving up his activism anytime soon.

These three interviews gave an intimate inside into these people's histories and experience. All of these differ from each other and show a different way and approach to their political activism in an environment of limited opportunity. They reflect different types of Syrian activists in the Netherlands and their interviews help to understand their personal incentives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In conclusion, of what has been presented in this paper, it can be seen how the Syrian diaspora tries to create and perceives their political space in the Netherlands. This paper started by looking at the analytical framework of this thesis. This thesis focused on diaspora politics with attention to the positive and negative influences of diasporas on the peace processes in their homeland as well as political opportunity especially in regard to perceived and limited opportunity. Followed by the Syrian context before and after 2011 and the vast influx of Syrian refugees into the Netherlands. Starting the analysis of Syrian political activism in the Netherlands, this paper looked at the perceived opportunities by Syrian and the changing set of political opportunity towards a very limited set of opportunity. This chapter continued to look at the effects of dealing with this set of very limited opportunities and the very high expectations of political opportunities in the Netherlands. Chapter 4 looked at individual histories of Syrian political activists and gave, therefore, a very personal insight into their motivations, strategies, expectations and frustrations in a context of very limited political opportunity.

This paper presented the very high expectations of Syrians coming to the Netherlands. They believed the Netherlands as a western democratic country would offer them an unlimited amount of political opportunity to the point where they could influence the media coverage of the Syrian conflict and get the Dutch government and potentially further European countries to intervene in Syria. These ideas were widely shared among the participants. They felt that the media focuses too much on the covering of Isis rather than on the issue of the revolution and Bashar Assad. In this case, the perceived opportunities were not actually there and were wrongly perceived by Syrian political activists. When this was realised by Syrian political activists they were suddenly confronted with a completely different set of political opportunity. This set was in contrast to the expected opportunities in the Netherlands very limited. As this research has shown, people reacted with very high levels of frustration to this set of limited opportunity. Some Syrian political activists took their consequences out of this frustration and stopped their political activism completely. Others stopped their activism as well but yet decided to put their main focus on their humanitarian efforts. Perceiving opportunities were there are none can have a vast impact on political activism. This case illustrates the frustration and demotivation political activists have to deal with when confronted by wrongly perceived opportunities as well as very limited opportunities. However, it shows also how easily opportunities can be wrongly perceived by a diaspora. The literature rather focuses on opportunities that are existent but were not perceived by social movements. Looking at it from the opposite angle shows the importance and influence perception can have on social movements. The

way in which a social movement deals with limited opportunities can tell a lot about how they perceive their political space. In the Syrian case, there is a clear shift from believing in a vast amount of political opportunity to having to deal with very limited political opportunities. This shows that opportunities are not stagnated and can change over time as well as potential political space.

The concept of diaspora politics tends to focus on the possible positive or negative impacts diasporas can have on peace negotiations in their homeland but does not really look into what happens to a diaspora that has potentially no impact at all. The Syrian political diaspora in the Netherlands at this stage is very limited in its impact to influence the conflict in Syria and can be used as a case study to analyse the impact these limitations can have on a diaspora. As outlined already these limitations result in high levels of frustrations and disappointment. In order to keep people engaged in the political activism, political organisations have to find a way to keep activists engaged and to overcome their frustrations.

All interviewees have been engaged in humanitarian efforts, which is very representative for the Syrian diaspora in the Netherlands. Some of them continued to only focus on these efforts when confronted with the limited political opportunity. As pointed out, some saw their humanitarian efforts as a way to keep people engaged and to make the public aware of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Additionally, all three organisations I have discussed, combine their political objectives with social and humanitarian objectives. On the one hand there is a certain demand for social support especially regarding the vast influx of Syrian refugees coming into the Netherlands, however, it is a way to get people engaged in the organisation and to get them engaged in the political activism as well.

Part of the set of limited political opportunity is the limited Syrian political activism in the Netherlands. The limited Syrian political activism has diverse reasons, which have been previously outlined as follows; limited trust among the Syrians, limited trust in the Syrian opposition, lack of political knowledge and the fear of consequences for family back in Syria when getting politically active in the Netherlands. These factors all play directly into the lack of Syrian political activism in the Netherlands and the high frustrations Syrian political activists feel about their activism. Especially, the limited trust in the Syrian opposition was mentioned as one of the possible main reason for the lack of Syrian political activism in the Netherlands. People felt that if the situation in Syria would change and the opposition would have a strong clear leadership more people would be inclined to get politically active. Additionally, the lack of political knowledge was mentioned various times. It was stated that potentially Syrians might be interested in becoming politically active but simply did not know how. This can be directly related to the lack of political opportunity in Syria before 2011 and very limited political opportunity after 2011. Another issue discussed, is the fear of Syrians to be

identified as political activists against Assad as they fear consequences for their families back home in Syria. This fear has a great impact on the Syrian political activists in the Netherlands. Some activists told me they would not want that pictures of them would be in newspapers and some were even afraid to attend as demonstrations as they feared Assad supporters would report them. Even though this fear has not stopped the people interviewed from becoming politically active, it has certainly influenced Syrians in the decision to not become politically active. A certain level of distrust is also reflected among the Syrian political activists. It was voiced that people feel some activists are only political active to make a name for themselves and are not really committed to the real cause. However, interviewees have pointed out that ethnicity plays no important role for them and their activism and that Syrians of all ethnicities used to be living peacefully next to each other. Yet, they also have pointed out that it is not easy and more problematic for Syrians now to come together and work with each other.

This distrust among the Syrian diaspora might be one explanation for the rather individualistic approach to become political active. The majority of Syrians are not actively engaged in an organisation. They work on an individual level and are not eager to join an organisation at the current stage. Only a minority of the participants is actively engaged in an organisation. The vast amount of political activism on an individual level seems somehow logical, considering the ethnic diversity of the Syrian population and diaspora. Yet, taking into account that all participants have voiced that for them ethnicity is not important and they communicate and associate with all ethnicities, it seems rather striking. There is a certain degree of denial about accepting that this is a problem among the Syrian diaspora. People were quite reluctant to talk about the internal issues of coming together as Syrians. There is an acknowledgement about this issue and people have pointed out that back in Syria there used to be no issues among the different ethnicities. Yet, they have also explained that people did not discuss religion and politics among each other. The Syrian revolution in 2011, offered a new set of political opportunity to discuss topics like politics and religion. The new opportunity to openly voice their opinion about their political stance has also additionally led to disagreement amongst the Syrians. Some Syrians want the revolution to be peaceful, others want a strong Syrian opposition army and in turn, others want a military intervention or sanctions put on Syria by the international community.

The presented findings are the key findings of this paper. They explain how Syrians try to create and perceive their political space in the Netherlands. This paper looked at the impact of wrongly perceived political opportunity and therefore adds an important element to the academic debate about opportunities. As already outlined, do these wrongly perceived opportunities play an important role in the way Syrians try and perceive their political space in the Netherlands. This

perception changes for many of them over the time and shifts towards a set of very limited political opportunity. This paper outlined how Syrians try to adapt to this new set of limited political opportunity and the way they try to create their political space. Importantly, this paper looks at a diaspora which has no impact at the current stage of the conflict in their homeland and adds therefore to the academic debate of diaspora conflicts. We see the way limited political opportunity limits the way in which the Syrian diaspora can influence their homeland conflict.

As for recommendations for further research, there is a strong incentive to further research the role of individual activism within the Syrian diaspora. Especially, in regard to starting their own organisation. The interviews convey a certain degree of individualism especially in regard to political activism. This has the potential to be further investigated and to look at the reasoning behind this individualism and why it seems that Syrian political activists do not want to engage in political organisation and rather want to start their own organisation. Additionally, the Syrian diaspora is still very young and their set of opportunity is not fixed. Yet, there is a lack of Syrian political activism at the moment which is open to a possible change in the future. Especially, when the Syrian oppositions are able to show a strong leadership, Syrian political activism might increase over time. It is still up to see if the Syrian diaspora will be able to allocate resources over time as they become more established. Therefore, there is still research needed to look at their role in the possible future about their influences regarding the conflict in Syria.

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Appendix 1

Interview Table

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Active in an Organisation</i>
	25-03-16	Utrecht	Male	Sunni	No
	30-03-16	Leiden	Male	Sunni	Yes
	(Ali)				
	06-04-16	Utrecht	Male	Sunni	No
	08-05-16	Utrecht	Male	Sunni	No
	15-05-16	Utrecht	Female	Armenian Christian	No
	01-06-16	Leiden	Female	Christian	Yes
	01-06-13	Amsterdam	Male	Sunni	No
	05-06-16	Rotterdam	Male	Kurdish	No
	15-06-16	Utrecht	Male	Kurdish	Yes
	(Harm)				
	16-06-16	Utrecht	Female	Sunni	Yes
	(Amy)				
	16-06-16	Utrecht	Female	Alawite	Yes
	(Rose)				