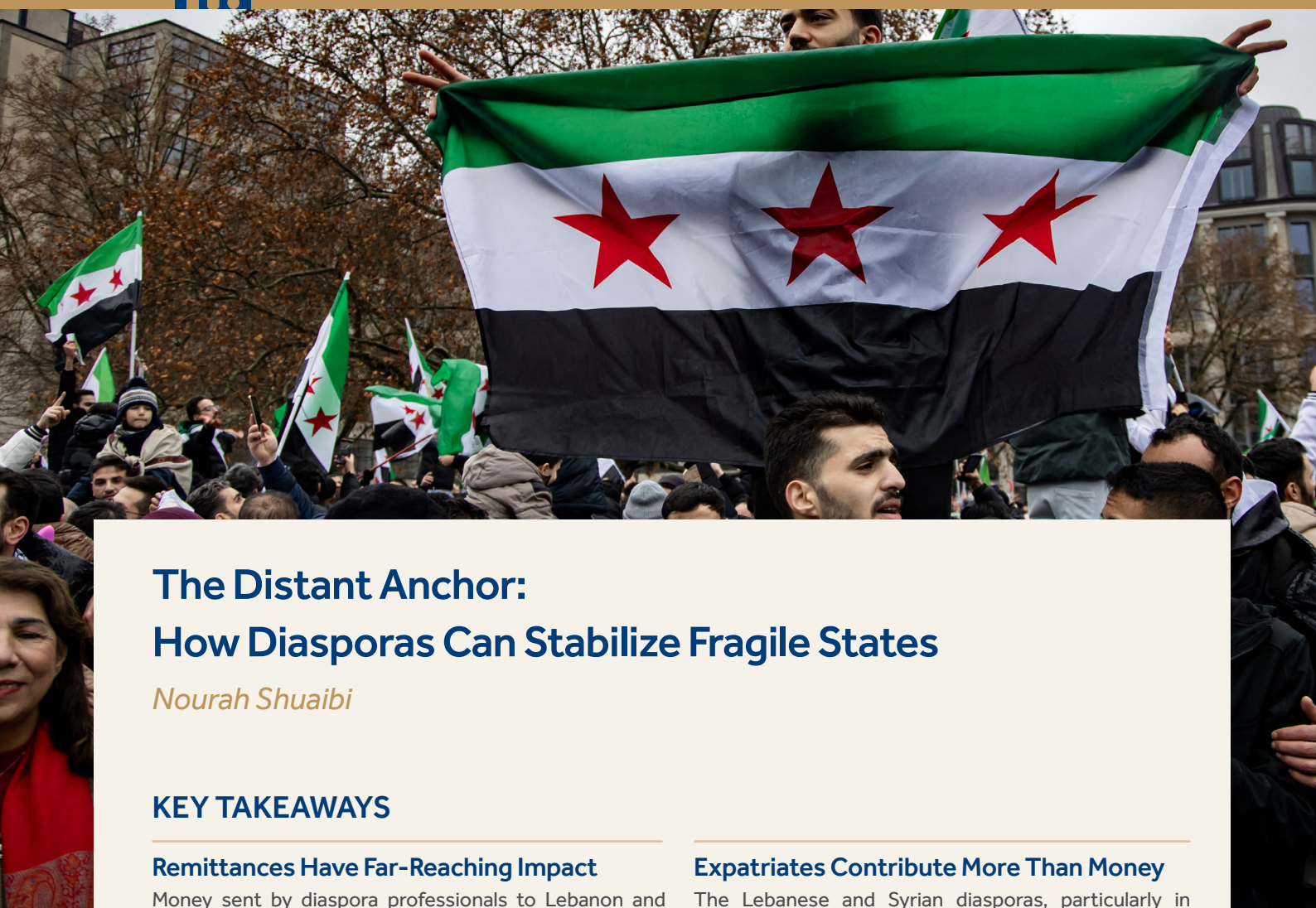




The Distant Anchor: How Diasporas Can Stabilize Fragile States

Nourah Shuaibi

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Remittances Have Far-Reaching Impact

Money sent by diaspora professionals to Lebanon and Syria are helping stabilize their economies, reduce poverty, and limit the appeal of extremist networks by offering alternatives to conflict-driven survival economies.

Gulf Engagement Can Galvanize Diaspora Participation

Gulf-led development in Syria signals a shift toward regional stabilization. This could encourage reengagement by members of the diaspora as a factor in preventing conflict, aligning their efforts with emerging Arab-led security frameworks.

Expatriates Contribute More Than Money

The Lebanese and Syrian diasporas, particularly in Europe, have evolved from senders of remittances into active transnational contributors to governance, institution-building, and peace advocacy. Their roles go far beyond sending money, to support resilience, services, and long-term peace.

Good Policy Multiplies Diaspora Impact

To maximize diaspora impact, host and home governments should institutionalize engagement, support inclusive platforms, lower remittance costs, and enable circular migration. Diasporas can also serve as “security multipliers,” rebuilding trust and preventing relapse into conflict.

KEYWORDS

Lebanon

Syria

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Remittances

Fragile States

Post-Conflict Reconstruction

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Cover Image: Syrian expatriates celebrate the fall of the Assad regime in Oranienplatz in Berlin, Germany, on December 8, 2024. (Photo by Emmanuele Contini / NurPhoto / NurPhoto via AFP.

Introduction

Dramatic shifts in the geopolitical landscape have placed Syria and Lebanon at a crossroads. As regional and international actors recalibrate their engagement in the Levant, the dynamics of peacebuilding and state recovery are shifting rapidly. Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are emerging as key players in war-torn Syria's reconstruction, moving from proxy politics toward modes of influence driven by development. Simultaneously, European states are reassessing their migration and security policies, recognizing that unresolved fragility in the Middle East poses long-term strategic risks, ranging from forced displacement to transnational extremism.¹

Amid these transitions, two crucial forces remain underutilized: the Lebanese and Syrian diasporas. These communities are uniquely positioned to act as stabilizers and security multipliers, directly addressing core conflict drivers such as state weakness, economic collapse, and civic fragmentation. The failures of post-war Iraq, where externally imposed, top-down governance undermined legitimacy, deepened sectarian divides, and fueled long-term instability, underscore the risks of externally dictated reconstruction in Lebanon and Syria. Diaspora engagement offers a locally anchored alternative, rooted in community trust, transnational networks, and long-term commitment.

“They are instrumental not only in providing remittances, but also in driving the dialogue on national recovery and supporting grassroots organizations that aim to fill governance gaps in the absence of strong state institutions.”

This issue brief argues that the Lebanese and Syrian diasporas, particularly those based in Europe, can be leveraged as critical agents of long-term security, reconstruction, and peacebuilding. This approach prioritizes local ownership while

harnessing financial resources, institutional expertise, and civic capacity for post-conflict recovery. Remittances, skill transfer, peace advocacy, and civil society support from diaspora communities are already helping to rebuild institutions, strengthen resilience, and create sustainable pathways to stability. Diasporas, in this context, are not merely contributors. They are strategic assets for addressing the root causes of conflict through non-military means.

The Diaspora's Rise as a Political and Economic Actor

The Lebanese and Syrian diasporas are among the largest and most well-established expatriate communities in the world, with deep roots in various regions, particularly Europe and North America. The Lebanese diaspora, which predates the country's modern independence, expanded significantly during the civil war (1975–1990) and again following the 2005 political crisis and the 2019 economic collapse. Today, those who live abroad outnumber the population residing in Lebanon.

The Syrian diaspora grew exponentially after civil war erupted in 2011. As of 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that around 6.6 million Syrian refugees live abroad, underscoring the extensive displacement arising from the Syrian conflict.² In addition to those registered, millions more live under temporary or undocumented status across the Middle East and Europe. According to the UNHCR, as of 2021, European countries hosted over one million Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees, with Germany and Sweden alone accounting for 70% of this population.³ In Germany, the Syrian community has grown significantly, with estimates indicating that around 1.3 million individuals of Syrian descent resided in the country in 2023.⁴ Sweden has also seen a substantial increase in its Syrian population, with over 27,000 Syrians granted citizenship in 2021 alone.⁵

These diasporas have evolved from mainly economic contributors into active transnational agents in political, social, and institutional processes in their home countries. They are instrumental not only in providing remittances, but also in driving the dialogue on national recovery and supporting grassroots organizations that aim to fill governance gaps in the absence of strong state institutions.

Diaspora Contributions to Stability and Recovery

Lebanon has long been one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. In 2023, it received an estimated \$6.7 billion in remittances, which represented around 30% of the country's GDP.⁶ These inflows are not just vital for maintaining livelihoods; they function as a critical stabilizing mechanism, reducing economic grievances that could otherwise fuel unrest. By cushioning households from poverty and unemployment, remittances lower the likelihood of social upheaval and serve as a buffer against conflict triggers. Remittances support critical household needs such as food, housing, education, and healthcare, directly boosting local consumption. The resilience of these remittance flows, despite economic and political turmoil, underscores their importance in Lebanon's economic recovery, political stability, and peace.

Remittances have played an equally crucial role in Syria, providing an essential lifeline amid the civil war and the government's limited capacity to deliver services. Despite the conflict and economic sanctions, remittances to Syria are estimated at around \$1 billion annually, largely from the Syrian diaspora in Europe.⁷ These funds not only sustain basic needs and small businesses but also play a conflict-mitigating role by reducing the population's dependency on war economies, illicit networks, or extremist groups. In the absence of effective state welfare, diaspora remittances directly contribute to human security and community resilience. These funds are also non-

conditional, meaning they do not come with the political or institutional strings often attached to foreign aid, instead allowing families to use the funds as they see fit.

Across both contexts, diaspora remittances should be viewed not merely as economic lifelines, but as preventative security tools that address the root causes of instability—poverty, exclusion, and institutional neglect. By empowering households and enabling localized service delivery, diaspora communities indirectly fortify social cohesion and undercut the appeal of extremist narratives or violent mobilization.

The Lebanese diaspora is estimated to comprise 15 million individuals worldwide, significantly outnumbering the approximately 5.7 million citizens residing within Lebanon itself.⁸ During Lebanon's financial collapse post-2019, the remittances they sent became even more critical, supporting basic household needs amidst widespread unemployment and inflation. Figure 1 gives a snapshot of remittance inflows to the country at five-year intervals.

Figure 1: Annual Remittance Inflows to Lebanon⁹

Year	Personal Remittances (USD, Billion)
2003	4.7
2008	7.2
2013	7.6
2018	7.0
2023	6.7

Since 2011, Syria's civil war has caused drastic displacement, and its diaspora has grown substantially, particularly in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and other parts of Europe. As of 2024, the UNHCR estimated that over six million Syrians were living as refugees outside their country.¹⁰

The personal remittances received in Syria signify a sizeable desire from the diaspora to support stability and community cohesion. The \$1 billion annual remittance estimate presented above

signals a potential source of non-restricted capital to be routed to domestic needs, enabling rebuilding according to local demand and fostering sustainable progress—in other words, rebuilding Syria by the choice of, and under the supervision of, the Syrian population.

Beyond Remittances: Diasporas as Drivers of Resilience and Peace

Beyond financial remittances, the Syrian and Lebanese diasporas have transformed into pivotal actors in post-conflict stabilization, contributing professional expertise, humanitarian relief, and peacebuilding initiatives. These efforts address both immediate needs and deeper structural drivers of conflict, filling governance vacuums and reinforcing long-term resilience.

“Beyond financial remittances, the Syrian and Lebanese diasporas have transformed into pivotal actors in post-conflict stabilization, contributing professional expertise, humanitarian relief, and peacebuilding initiatives.”

In Syria, diaspora professionals—particularly those integrated into Europe’s healthcare, education, and tech sectors—are actively engaged in virtual training, institutional support, and civil society development. Germany, for example, hosts over 6,000 Syrian physicians, the largest group of foreign-born doctors in the country.¹¹ Many provide remote consultations in Syria, train healthcare workers in conflict zones, and coordinate medical supply chains. Organizations such as the Syrian Economic Forum and Adopt a Revolution are central to this effort, facilitating policy engagement, local leadership development, and knowledge transfer.

The Lebanese diaspora plays a similarly transformative role. Programs such as Lebanese Diaspora Energy (LDE) and Lebanese International Finance Executives (LIFE) have connected professionals abroad with local entrepreneurs, academic institutions, and government entities. Diaspora-led tech hubs like Berytech and AltCity benefit from mentorship and partnerships that fuel innovation and job creation. LIFE alone raised \$3.1 million in 2023 to support educational access and job placements, through institutions like the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Lebanese American University (LAU).¹² These efforts strengthen human capital and reduce economic marginalization, a well-documented conflict trigger.

By investing in social infrastructure, particularly health, education, and entrepreneurship, diaspora professionals provide alternatives to militarized or exploitative economies. These contributions promote state resilience and mitigate the conditions that give rise to extremist recruitment or renewed violence.

Beyond skills and service provision, both diasporas are contributing significantly to peacebuilding. The Syrian diaspora has led efforts in transitional justice, most notably through the Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), which documents war crimes and prepares evidence for future legal processes. This contributes to building post-conflict accountability frameworks critical to long-term peace enforcement. The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) operates in high-risk areas, maintaining healthcare delivery and training staff despite the dangerous conditions. The 2021 bombing of Al-Atareb Hospital in Aleppo province exemplifies the high-risk environment in which diaspora-linked institutions operate—as well as their role in safeguarding basic services and accountability mechanisms.¹³

Regional Reengagement and Diaspora Mobilization

In terms of social cohesion, the Council of the Syrian Charter has created one of the few inclusive platforms for dialogue among Syria's fragmented communities. Established in 2019, it includes diaspora representatives and has produced the "Code of Conduct for Syrian Coexistence," a document emphasizing mutual respect and national unity.¹⁴

Lebanese diaspora communities have also mobilized rapidly in response to overlapping crises. Following the 2020 Beirut port explosion and during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations like the Lebanese Red Cross channeled millions into emergency aid.¹⁵ These responses compensated for government paralysis and helped prevent societal collapse. At the same time, diaspora-supported educational initiatives—like LAU's Outreach and Leadership Academy—have promoted youth engagement and cross-sectarian understanding, supporting social trust in a deeply polarized context.

“This evolution signals a broader shift from geopolitical contestation to economic engagement and state-building, anchored in the belief that sustainable influence in the region must be rooted in locally led reconstruction and institutional recovery.”

Diaspora-led international advocacy further amplifies these efforts, as networks continue to lobby for reforms, humanitarian access, and the protection of civil liberties. In both Syria and Lebanon, such transnational activism addresses governance gaps and contributes to conflict prevention and sustainable peace.

As Syria begins its path to recovery following the fall of the Assad regime, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have emerged as increasingly influential actors in its post-conflict trajectory, marking a notable reorientation in the regional approach to reconstruction. Rather than operating solely through political or military channels, these Gulf states are now leveraging economic tools and development strategies to assert their presence and shape outcomes. This evolution signals a broader shift from geopolitical contestation to economic engagement and state-building, anchored in the belief that sustainable influence in the region must be rooted in locally led reconstruction and institutional recovery.

Recent developments, particularly following the Gulf–U.S. Summit held in Riyadh on May 14, reinforce this transition. Notably, positive feedback regarding U.S. President Donald Trump's lifting of sanctions has enhanced Syria's eligibility for multilateral funding and development aid. Against this backdrop, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have taken concrete steps to reinforce their regional leadership roles. These included clearing Syria's outstanding \$15.5 million debt to the World Bank's International Development Association,¹⁶ and Qatar's agreement to supply natural gas through Jordan to mitigate Syria's chronic energy shortages.¹⁷ These initiatives not only address Syria's immediate infrastructural needs but also symbolically assert that the country's path forward will be shaped by Arab-led security frameworks to promote regional stability.

One of the most significant implications of this renewed regional engagement is its potential to galvanize diaspora participation. For Lebanese and Syrian communities abroad, many of whom have been historically cautious about investing in their unstable homelands, the active involvement of credible, resource-rich regional powers serves as a powerful signal of emerging stability and

long-term commitment. In such a context, diaspora communities are more likely to re-engage, bringing with them capital, professional expertise, and entrepreneurial initiatives that can complement state-building efforts and commitment to long-term peace.

Moreover, the cultural, professional, and economic linkages many diaspora members maintain with the Gulf further ease this re-engagement. Following decades of labor migration and professional integration into the Gulf states, large segments of the Syrian and Lebanese diasporas are already embedded in regional networks. For them, collaboration with Qatar- or Saudi-led initiatives feels not only feasible, but like a natural extension of their regional identity. This alignment of interests and identities between the diaspora, Gulf leadership, and national recovery offers a promising foundation for more inclusive and sustainable reconstruction processes across the Levant.

Deploying the Diaspora

To maximize the potential of the Lebanese and Syrian diasporas in post-conflict reconstruction, European governments, international organizations, and local authorities should adopt several key strategies.

First, governments should institutionalize diaspora engagement. This includes creating formal mechanisms such as diaspora desks within relevant ministries—such as those of foreign affairs, development, and education—and involving diaspora representatives in national reconstruction councils or UN-led stabilization working groups. This would ensure that diaspora voices are integrated into formal processes.

Second, enhancing financial tools and access could significantly increase diaspora contributions. This could be done by reducing remittance transfer fees through the promotion of digital financial services, making it more affordable for

diaspora communities to send money home. Additionally, supporting the creation of diaspora-pooled investment funds could help finance infrastructure projects and support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Lebanon and Syria.

Third, recognizing diaspora contributions to peacebuilding efforts is essential—not only for reconciliation but also for conflict prevention. Supporting inclusive, non-partisan diaspora platforms would help reduce the security risks associated with political fragmentation and ideological polarization. By prioritizing neutral, rights-based engagement, these platforms could prevent the re-importation of homeland conflicts into diaspora communities and promote unity in reconstruction efforts.

Lastly, facilitating return and circular migration through flexible migration policies could encourage professionals in the diaspora to return for short-term projects without the pressure of committing to long-term residency. This approach allows for sustained contributions without necessitating permanent relocation.

While diaspora engagement offers clear benefits, it also carries the risk of political fragmentation, as communities abroad often reflect the political, sectarian, or ideological divides of their homelands. These divisions could resurface in the diaspora, undermining coordinated advocacy, collaborative development, and post-conflict unity. The most effective way to counter this is by establishing politically neutral platforms that place national recovery above factional agendas, foster dialogue, and operate with transparent governance. By intentionally reducing factionalism and building consensus, such spaces could preempt transnational spillovers of conflict, limit the influence of divisive actors, and provide constructive channels of dissent, ultimately strengthening long-term peace and stability.



Conclusion

The Lebanese and Syrian diasporas are pivotal to building durable peace and security in their home countries. By channeling financial resources, transferring institutional knowledge, and fostering inclusive dialogue, these communities actively address the root causes of instability: economic disenfranchisement, institutional breakdown, and social fragmentation. Their contributions bolster human security, help rebuild resilient state structures, and create alternatives to violence by strengthening civil society and reducing reliance on conflict economies.

With the right engagement strategies, diasporas can help stabilize fragile post-conflict environments and prevent the resurgence of violence, avoiding the pitfalls seen in Iraq's reconstruction. This policy brief has outlined concrete pathways for maximizing the impact of these diasporas through inclusive, risk-sensitive, and sustained support for peacebuilding. Policymakers should make this a priority, turning diaspora capacity into a cornerstone of regional stability.

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