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**Changes and Effects of the Syrian Civil War on the Syrian-
American Diaspora: The Case of New Jersey**

By

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Dedication Page

To the children caught in this bitter war, those whose names and faces are engraved in my memory, and those whose stories will never be told.

To my own children, Lea and Adam, you are the light in my life.

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Changes and Effects of the Syrian Civil War on the Syrian-American Diaspora: The Case of New Jersey

Racha El Bissar

ABSTRACT

The Syrian conflict, which originated as a rebellion against the regime and descended into civil war has had grave repercussions and has affected people in a wide geographical area. It has also had its impact on the Syrian Diaspora across the world to varying degrees. This thesis studies the effects of the war on the intra-group dynamics and the relations with the host society of the Syrian-American community of New Jersey. The research examines the ethnic organizations of this community and unearths, by studying the work of the associations, the changes that have taken place in intra-group dynamics and in the relations of the group with the New Jersian society. The diaspora in New Jersey has been politicized, experienced renewed group consciousness and displayed high levels of tension. Conversely, its relations with the New Jersian society have been improved by the crisis. This thesis offers insights into what the Syrian-American communities may be experiencing across other states and factors to be explored in other countries with a large Syrian diaspora. The research falls into fields of study of diaspora politicization and identity activation following a stimulus such as a war in the homeland.

Keywords: Syrian-American, Identity, Activation, Civil, War, Group, Consciousness, Diasporas, Syria

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Chapter One

Introduction

In our globalized, interconnected world, what happens at one end of the globe can have repercussions going beyond its immediate environment. The aftermath of the Syrian civil war offers the most recent and striking example of such connections. What started as a peaceful uprising against a brutal and repressive regime quickly descended into a full-blown war that has affected not only the countries surrounding Syria, but a much wider geographic area.

In already weak neighboring countries like Lebanon, the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees in a disorderly manner completely overwhelmed the government and threatened to tip the country into chaos. Beyond the immediate surrounding, the pressure inflicted upon the European Union (EU) as a massive influx of Syrian (and other) refugees came knocking on its doors compounded the strains of the already challenging economic and financial situations, putting the EU in a delicate position. Countries further removed from Syria are now bombing Syrian territory and have been dragged into the war while fighting terrorist groups. Finally, Syrian diasporas in countries around the world were deeply affected by the crisis.

Diasporas in times of war in the homeland have come under scrutiny in the past by academics and scholars in the field of Diaspora studies. In an increasingly globalized world, the effect that a well-connected and affluent diaspora could have on a civil war back home should not be underestimated. Indeed, studies which have focused on this aspect have found a renewed interest in homeland politics on the part of diasporas and a clear “diaspora effect” on the conflict which is oftentimes exacerbated and prolonged as a result of money and pressure from without (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Horst, 2008; Koslowski, 2005; Shain & Barth, 2003).

Diasporas in the US are of particular interest because of the country’s position as the only superpower in the world and because diasporas there are often the most affluent

and the best placed to bring actual change to a conflict in the homeland by exerting pressure on their powerful adopted country to interfere or to alter its foreign policy. This process, however, can transform dynamics within the diaspora, and can bring about a change in the way these individuals perceive their own identities, and interact with each other and with their society at large.

In the existing theoretical field on identity and identity formation, identities are no longer conceived as rigid classifications. To the contrary, they are fluid, changing and responsive to stimuli and outward influences. As such, identities are multi-layered and evolving. Some theories on identity focus more on the self and how conceptions of the self shape identity. One such theory is called the Identity Theory and relies on the roles that each of us plays and negotiate in our lives and our expectations as to what that role implies. Another way to approach identity is presented in the Social Identity Theory, which stipulates that a “social identity is a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social group or groups” (Sets & Burke, 2000, p.225). This theory was initially developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979 and later refined and published by Turner in 1986.

Within the social identity theory, how several in-groups or layers of identity with which one person identifies interact and rise or fall in salience has been studied. The activation of a particular group identity has been tied to the goals and situations of the context in which a person finds himself or herself. Accordingly, the activation of a particular layer of identity is susceptible to be influenced by stimuli related to changes in situations (Oakes,1987).

The Syrian-American diaspora, like all other groups, displays several layers of identity that have shifted and changed in their salience and impact on how this group views itself. During the history of their presence in the United States, like other groups of Arab-Americans, they have seen a revival of the Arab, and for some the Muslim, components of their identities with the advent of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Salaita, 2005). The Syrian component of their identity, however, has been awakened by the stimulus of the war in the homeland that started in 2011.

1.1 Research Question

To look into this phenomenon, this thesis will examine ways in which the Syrian diaspora in the US has reacted to the civil war, by addressing the following research question: Has the Syrian civil war transformed relations among the Syrian-American diaspora and relations with the American society? The conclusion reached in this thesis is that a civil war back in the homeland does affect the diaspora, affecting its dynamics, its politicization level, activating its sense of identity and group consciousness, and possibly radicalizing it, especially in the event of high brutality and human rights abuses. This is the argument that this thesis has been able to prove, by showcasing an increase in collective action, political lobbying, charitable action, and a shift of focus of the Syrian American associations from work inside US territory to work in Syria and its surroundings. This research adds to already existing literature on diaspora mobilization, ethnic identity activation in US- based diasporas in response to a stimulus and factors affecting politicization of diasporas from conflict-ridden regions of the world. The term “diaspora” has taken on many definitions in the literature. What started as a specific description of the forced dispersal of the Jews, the Greeks and the Armenians (also known as victim diaspora) has gradually grown more inclusive. Today, the word “diaspora” can mean different things to different people. For some, it is simply the dispersion of an ethnic group across several nation-states while retaining connections to the homeland (Armstrong, 1976; Brubaker, 2005). For others, more criteria have to be met before one can speak of a proper diaspora, for example a connection among the ethnic groups in different countries, a lack of assimilation in the various host lands, or a conscious acknowledgment of shared identity (Tölölyan 1996; Tsuda, 2012). In this thesis, the term will be used in its broadest sense, for an ethnic group that is dispersed across several nations and maintains some form of attachment, real or imagined, physical or otherwise, to the homeland.

1.2 Methodology

To attempt to answer the research question, this thesis will mainly rely on the study of Syrian-American associations, their websites, publications and charities. The work of associations covers most of the activities of the diaspora relating to the civil war back home, as nearly all of the activism and relief efforts of the Syrian American diaspora will go through associations. The choice of studying the changes undergone by the Syrian American community through a study of the ethnic organizations of this community was the result of an examination of the already existing literature on identity activation of ethnic minorities. The study of existing literature yielded ten variables that affect the sense of shared identity among ethnic minorities (Breton, 1964; Fugita & O'Brien, 1985; Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Sears, Fu, Henry & Bui, 2003; Wald, 2008; Yip, Sellers & Seaton, 2006). The first is the length of the presence of the group in the adopted country, which facilitates integration and therefore lessens group-consciousness as time passes. The second is the resemblance or homogeneity between the culture of origin and the culture of the adopted country. The more homogenous they are, the quicker and smoother the assimilation into the adopted country, lessening ethnic identity retention. The third variable, the circumstances of migration, implies higher group-consciousness in cases where the diaspora has migrated due to persecution and therefore has a shared common cause that will keep the shared identity active. The fourth variable, the parental ethnic socialization, highlights the role of the parents in nurturing the attachment to the identity of origin through their insistence on such issues as learning the language and marrying within the group. The fifth variable, the feeling of closeness is showcased by residential clustering which, where present, enhances the retention of an active ethnic identity. The feeling of linked fate, the sixth variable, is the feeling that one's fate can only improve as that of the community improves, which will lead to politicization of the diaspora or minority. The seventh variable, the presence of stereotyping, whether it is in the form of positive or negative discrimination, only highlights the boundaries and differences between the diaspora or minority and the adoptive society, which will enhance identity retention. Studies have also shown that the eighth variable, the socio-economic status, has a negative relationship with the retention of group consciousness whereby the amelioration of the group's socio-economic status and occupational status brings about a

decrease in group-consciousness as better assimilation is reached. The ninth variable, the role of the receiving government, is important as governments can play an instrumental role in singling out the community, thus prodding it to retain high group consciousness. Finally, the tenth variable, the presence and extent of a network of ethnic organizations showcases retention of high levels of shared identity and group consciousness amongst the diaspora or ethnic minority.

Of the ten variables previously detailed that will affect the activation of the identity of diasporas and showcase the presence of this shared identity and group consciousness, the literature review points to organizations being the indicator that is the most likely to manifest itself over a short span of time, contrary to other indicators which could take longer to register a change. As the war in Syria has been going on for only six years, the observation of the work of organizations is the most pertinent at this stage.

The scope of the research was limited to Syrian-Americans and migrants residing in the state of New Jersey, in the United States, prior to the onset of the war in 2011. It did not include refugees, who have, by nature of their experience, different concerns and a different sense of identity than migrants.

The selection of the case study was made with several key considerations in mind. First of all, the United States is the only superpower remaining in the world today. As such, its diaspora is uniquely-placed to exert pressure and to hope to change the course of the war in Syria. It is therefore likely to put in serious efforts to do so, with the potential to morph in the process and become more political, more group-conscious, and possibly more radical. Moreover, the United States being a democracy in tune with the mood on the streets, it is more responsive to the demands of its people (including, in this case, the diaspora) than, for example, Gulf countries where Syrian diasporas may be sizable but ineffective, and unlikely to try any kind of activism in countries where civil society is sometimes violently repressed.

The selection of New Jersey among all other states was made because it offers a representative sample population of the Syrian diaspora in the US. First of all, New Jersey is one of the states with the highest concentration of Syrian-Americans. It is

second only to Rhode Island, which has the highest concentration of Syrian-Americans of any state (De La Cruz & Brittingham, 2003). However, despite their high concentration, the Syrian-American community of Rhode Island is very small, comprised only of approximately 3,500 people as of 2011 according to the Arab American Institute, whereas the Syrian-American diaspora in New Jersey is almost four times more numerous (Arab American Institute Foundation, 2011; De La Cruz & Brittingham, 2003). Moreover, in New Jersey the community is diverse in its religious background, political orientation and time of arrival to the United States (some are first-generation, some are second-generation, some are third-generation Americans), which offers a more generalizable picture for the Syrian-American diaspora as a whole, as opposed to other states with a bigger but more monolithic Syrian-American community (Adely, 2011; AP, 2013).

To study the changes undergone by the civil society landscape of the Syrian American community in New Jersey, a method of triangulation was adopted in an effort to cover the issue from all its aspects and thus be able to acquire as full a picture as possible, and in an effort to ensure the validity of the information obtained. Therefore, to gather the data from Syrian-American associations, the websites and publications of the organizations were used to keep track of events, demonstrations, charity efforts and other ways in which the community is coming together. All of the Syrian-American associations currently active in the state of New Jersey have been encompassed in the study, including those that pre-date the uprisings, and those that have been established after 2011, organizations that are pro-regime and against the regime, as well as those which do not overtly declare any allegiance. The studied associations include religious establishments, charities, lobbying groups, medical professional groups, and associations working with refugees both in the US and in Syria and its neighboring countries. Aside from religious establishments and churches, there are eleven Syrian American associations operating in the state of New Jersey today. Some of them were established in the State with their headquarters present there, while others are chapters of national associations. Of those, three were present before the uprisings of 2011, namely the Syrian American Council (SAC), the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS Society) and the Syrian American Women's Association. After 2011, eight more organizations

were founded in the state or opened chapters in New Jersey. Those are the Syrian American Will Association (SAWA), the Syrian American Forum (SAF), the Refugee Outreach International (ROI), SWASIA, SAMS Foundation, the Syrian American Wish Association, Syrian Americans for Democracy and the Syrian American League.

To add to the insights provided by the study of their websites, press releases and publications, five phone and email interviews were successfully conducted, with the representatives of two anti-regime advocacy groups, one healthcare and charity group, one purely charitable association, and one organization dealing with refugees. The last three associations profess to be neutral as to the ongoing conflict. Finally, to complete the triangulation method and encompass the aspects that have eluded the research in its focus on associations, such as polarization in the community or a change in its relationship with the society it lives in, secondary sources such as journal studies, articles from local and national newspapers, police reports, and lawsuits were relied upon. This also allowed for a cross-check of previously gathered information to ensure the validity of the data presented.

This research did encounter difficulties that it strove to overcome. First of all, the fact that this is a recent and evolving topic meant that peer-reviewed journal articles were not always available. Moreover, the classification of Syrian-Americans as “White” in government censuses diluted this community into a larger group and made the gathering of updated facts and figures about it more difficult. However, the war in Syria generated a renewed interest in the Syrian-American diaspora which brought about a wealth of studies and reports handling this issue. The existence of institutions such as the Arab-American Institute also provided a way to overcome the inclusion of the Syrian-Americans in the “White” category with the detailed information they regularly publish about the Arab-American community. Other hurdles that were present include the inability to conduct field research, which sometimes gave rise to worries among the representatives of associations that were approached for interviews. The following of the Institutional Review Board’s procedure and the presentation of university credentials helped smooth over most of the concerns. The triangulation method was instrumental in filling in any gaps that were present in the research. Finally, a longitudinal study would

be needed to assess how deep the changes run and whether they will outlast the stimulus of the war. A longitudinal study would also be useful in assessing what changes will be registered on the longer run by the other nine variables that showcase a shared identity.

To answer the posed research question, the thesis begins with a review of the literature, followed by an overview of the Syrian American community in the US, with a special focus on New Jersey. It will then explore the importance of focusing on ethnic organizations as indicators of identity activation and changes in intra-group dynamics, moving on to the evolution of the Syrian American organizations in New Jersey before and after 2011. The following section explores the changes observable upon the Syrian American diaspora in the State as a whole. The display of the findings will be followed by an analysis examining the linkages between the organizations and the general community and how the changes in the organizations is related to the general Syrian American population in New Jersey.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Diasporas and their role in wartime efforts in their homeland have been increasingly studied. The interest has grown for the type and extent of the impact that diasporas could have on the war and the different mechanisms they could put to use to influence the course and outcome of the struggle. Much less work has been dedicated to the effect that the war could have on the several diasporas scattered around the world. A major crisis in the ancestral homeland, efforts to interfere in the war, to alleviate the suffering of countrymen and kin, feelings of guilt at being safe and able to go on with life as usual while family and friends back home have their lives shattered and suffer brutalities and human rights abuses: all of this can impact diasporas even in far removed host lands where they have integrated and become part of the social fabric, sometimes relegating the homeland and its problems to the back of their minds.

2.1 Theoretical Field: Diaspora Behavior Towards Homeland Politics

Some theoretical work has been done on the influence that diasporas have on starting a rebellion or civil war back home (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), on conflict transformation (Koslowski, 2005) and on the subsequent peace building phase (Bigombe, Collier & Sambanis, 2000; Horst, 2008). Beyond the impact that diaspora intervention has on the home country, however, some very interesting theories have also been put forth on two aspects that deal with the feature and specificities of the diaspora groups themselves. These two aspects are, first, the potential for diaspora radicalization, and second, characteristics of the diaspora groups that will encourage or hamper mobilization, whether on a regular basis or in times of events such as wars or rebellions in the home country.

A study undertaken by Maria Koinova tackles the influence of a civil war back home on the diaspora, putting forth the theory that diasporas radicalize or become more moderate in accordance with the conflict spiral of the war in the homeland. As such, Koinova presents evidence that a diaspora will back the more radical warring parties, and become more radicalized itself, at the time when the conflict takes on two features: the first being that it involves more brutal and flagrant human rights abuses, and the second is that the moderates are losing legitimacy, or are viewed as incapable of winning the war. According to the study, after phases of acute violence have passed, if the goals of the diasporas have not been achieved, diasporas can remain moderate under certain conditions related to international actors and their levels of interference and interest in the cause that diasporas are endorsing (Koinova, 2009).

In an in-depth study, Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen tackles the forms taken by transnational political practices undertaken by a diaspora in its involvement in homeland politics, from narrow practices that are institutionalized and involve more people and movement, and core practices that are regular, patterned and part of everyday life for diaspora members, to more broad and expanded (occasional) actions that take place in response to certain events in the homeland. In her detailed analysis of such practices and the institutional environment that encourages or discourages them, the author turns her attention to characteristics of the diaspora groups themselves as well as their sending (home) and receiving countries, evoking traits that may promote or hamper involvement in home country politics. Basing herself on the case study of Turkish and Kurdish associations and their work, Ostergaard-Nielsen highlights motivations behind diaspora activity, such as political developments in the homeland or environmental disasters. Interestingly, she also delves into home country government involvement in diaspora mobilization, and the reasons behind home state encouragement of such activities (economic reasons, political lobbying or image-shining motivations). Mirroring the home state's efforts to engage and benefit from diaspora mobilization, the author also investigates home political parties and home non-state actors and their interest in diaspora engagement, which is very relevant for the Syrian case. Moreover, Ostergaard-Nielsen probes into the reasons why diaspora organizations use different strategies based on their particular attributes (depending on economic capabilities, social resources,

ability to rely on sister organizations or to access international political institutions such as the UN and others). She also addresses the characteristics of the receiving country which may or may not leave the space for diaspora organizations to mobilize, sometimes pushing them towards confrontational politics such as demonstrations, civil disobedience or even violence (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Such theoretical work is very valuable in helping cross-evaluate the mobilization of other diasporas such as the Syrian one, against the criteria, characteristics and theories set by previous research.

An important addition to the theoretical field of diaspora studies is the work of Kenneth Wald who differs in the angle taken to study diasporas. Instead of looking at the legal and political climate in the host and home countries that could encourage or discourage mobilization, or looking at the potential of diaspora organizations to reach the right elites or institutions, Wald looks at the availability and readiness of diaspora members and groups to promote and push for agendas pertaining to the homeland. Wald advances the hypothesis that a diaspora's "politicized ethnic identity", or tendency to place homeland interest at the heart of its concerns and political behavior, depends on two groups of characteristics. The first group contains individual traits of members and follows a constructivist approach to identity, stipulating that involvement in organizations, intra-group social ties, cultural pride and other behaviors promote the construction of an ethnonational politicized identity. The other group of characteristics pertains to group properties and includes three sub-traits, namely the nature of migration (voluntary versus refugee), the time of arrival to the receiving state (how senior is this ethnic group in the host country) and the similarity of the diaspora's culture to that of the receiving state. Focusing on group characteristics, the author proceeds to measure the politicized ethnic identity of three US-based diasporas: the Christian Arabs, The Muslim Arabs and the American Jews. According to his set of characteristics, Christian Arabs (Syrians and Lebanese) should be the least ethnically politicized due to their seniority, cultural similarity to the receiving US society, and voluntary migration to the US. The Jews should exhibit mitigated behavior, as they are initially refugees, very different from the host society, but very senior and an old component of the American society. Finally, Muslim Arabs should exhibit the highest levels of politicized ethnic identity, as they are the most recent of the three groups, refugees and very alien to the receiving culture.

Checking the hypotheses against empirical data, however, and factoring in individual traits gave different results, with Christian Arabs confirming the expectations of the author but Jews and Muslims exhibiting very similar levels of ethnic politicization to each other. The author draws the conclusions that the status of both groups as outsiders and refugees, combined with the Jews' traumatic group experience which offsets their seniority, help explain the empirical evidence. The author concludes with the disclaimer that many other factors enter into the determination of a group's politicization and readiness for action on behalf of the homeland, and that more evidence can be unearthed with more case studies (Wald, 2008).

The theories put forth in this relatively recent field of study are very enlightening and can help improve our understanding of diaspora behavior towards homeland politics and provide a framework for further research.

2.2 Civil War in the Homeland and its Impact on the Diaspora

Some valuable work has been conducted on the specific event of a war in the homeland and its effect on the diaspora. In an interesting paper, Helen Underhill has recently studied the mobilization of the Egyptian diaspora in the UK vis-à-vis events in Egypt and has explored how the experience has shaped and changed diaspora activists' perspectives on democracy and democratization (Underhill, 2016).

In the same vein of examining the effects of diaspora mobilization on the diaspora members, a work by Ivana Djuric following the evolution of the Croatian-American press yields interesting conclusions. It looks into the effect of democratization, ethnic tensions and conflict in Croatia on the Croatian-Americans' self-perception and awareness of their separate identity (Djuric, 2003). Similarly to Djuric, Martin Sokefeld also adopts the view that diasporas are formed through social mobilization rather than being some kind of essentialist concept (Sokefeld, 2006).

Even though the work of Sean Carter, "The Geopolitics of Diaspora" deals more with geographic concepts such as the territoriality of a nation and of a diaspora, his

description of how events “there” (in the homeland) affected those “here” (in the United States) is more interesting from an analytical perspective than less articulated concepts of identity formation in Djuric’s work (Carter, 2005). Where Djuric limits her research to analyzing the articles of the diaspora press, which yield significant information, Carter goes beyond that (though he too relies on articles from the same publication) to showcase how acts of “banal nationalism” (Carter, 2005, p.54) like fundraising barbecues and bake sales in response to events in the homeland have moved Croatian-Americans who did not speak Croatian, who were perhaps third or fourth generation immigrants, who may never even have set foot in Croatia, let alone been involved in its internal politics, to become more implicated, more aware of their “Croatianess” and more drawn to overt political action.

Carter has moved beyond this argument to raise important questions about the impact that such an evolution could potentially have on the host country. Even though he does not take this view himself, the author raises the issue of whether diasporas lobbying for American foreign policy to take certain directions in accordance with their agendas on homeland issues may not end up undermining American national interests. Carter highlights how such considerations have skewed Croatian-Americans’ electoral choices for example. This view is supported by authors such as Samuel Huntington who deplores the influence and pressures of ethnic and diasporic communities in the US for the adoption of agendas that benefit foreigners sometimes at the expense of Americans and American national interest (Huntington, 1997).

In addition, Carter has addressed the problem of increased tensions between different diasporas which may have been getting along well before war between their home countries erupted, citing tensions between the Croatian and Serbian communities in the US. As the war in the Balkan radicalized the Croatian diaspora, it became more uniform in its political orientation, becoming increasingly nationalistic and patriotic. Where it used to display diverse political orientations, the diaspora’s wartime efforts saw it being gradually oriented towards the right end of the political spectrum. Voices of dissent were quelled, as always in times of war, even among diasporas in faraway lands.

All these works showcase the differences in definitions of diasporas and how their respective authors choose to limit the broadness of the term. For most of these authors, diasporas are not only people sharing common ancestry and spread across several countries. Diasporas are conscious of their linkages, their identity is built around the ties to the homeland and this aspect is augmented in times of war and duress in the ancestral homeland with which they keep ties and in whose politics they are vividly interested and increasingly involved. In these cases, war in the homeland has therefore played an active role in the formation of the diaspora.

2.3 The Syrian Diaspora in the Aftermath of the War

Concerning the recent Syrian war and the Syrian diaspora, some work has been done on the mobilization during the civil war. Emma Lundgren Jorum has studied the response of the Syrian regime to mobilization against it outside Syrian borders. Jorum challenges the notion that transnational mobilization can overcome state repression. Taking the case of the Syrian diaspora in Sweden, she studies and interviews diaspora members to showcase how the Syrian regime's illegal intelligence and pressures on them and their families have delayed and sometimes hampered mobilization, creating wariness among people of Syrian descent from each other even outside Syrian borders and direct control of the regime (Jorum, 2015).

In addition to direct interviews with members of the Syrian Diaspora in Sweden, Jorum relies on the findings of an Amnesty International publication shedding the light on the harassment of Syrians abroad by the "Mukhabarat" or the Syrian Intelligence Services (Amnesty International, 2011). This report is further corroborated by an article published by the Wall Street Journal documenting the attempts made by the Syrian regime to intimidate dissidents among the diaspora, notably in the United States (Solomon & Malas, 2011).

Another work conducted in Germany studies the response of the Syrian diaspora to the civil war. The report provides an overview of the actions of the diaspora in the political, social and financial spheres. It stresses the fact that the diaspora in Germany

has been using its energy on peace promotion and peace-building activities and that it has acted in unison, overcoming religious and ethnic differences in the course of helping their home country, and therefore being changed in the process (Ragab, 2013).

In the same vein, a paper by Eva Svoboda and Sara Pantuliano documents the efforts made by Syrian diasporas across the world (among other Syrian groups) to provide relief for Syrians caught up in the war. Studying the inability of traditional humanitarian INGOs and the UN to offer an adequate response to the crisis in the war-torn country, the paper goes in-depth in analyzing the efforts and the linkages between informal and more formal diaspora associations and other Syrian groups on the one hand, and the traditional humanitarian system on the other. It also stresses the need for humanitarian agencies to engage such groups in a partnership to be able to enhance the humanitarian response to such crises (Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015).

While the above works touch briefly on the changes undergone by the Syrian diasporas in the various countries cited, Mehrunisa Qayyum's paper, "Syrian Diaspora: Cultivating a New Public Space Consciousness" investigates more explicitly how the uprisings back home have emboldened Syrian-Americans and inspired them to become more outspoken and active in their opposition to the regime. These findings, which correlate with the research Emma Jorum conducted on the diaspora in Sweden and the mechanisms of intimidation employed by the regime to keep the diaspora under control, come at the very beginning of the crisis, as Qayyum writes in August 2011. They shed the light on an early influence of the war back home on the diaspora in the United States. Qayyum sees in this transformation a chance for a budding of Syrian civil society in the aftermath of the uprisings and the possibility for Syrian-American organizations to help with the transition to a democratic and open society in the homeland (Qayyum, 2011).

A study on the networks between civil society in Syria, NGOs across Europe and organizations of the UK-based Syrian diaspora was also conducted by Tahir Zaman as a way to investigate how the Syrian diaspora is transforming the conflict in its homeland and how any positive effect it might have on the conflict can be enhanced. In the report, Zaman goes briefly over the ways that dynamics inside the small UK-based diaspora were affected by its wartime efforts, exploring for example how the uprisings in Syria

have partially emboldened the diaspora in the UK to be more outspoken about opposition to or criticism of the regime. The report also looks into dividing lines among the diaspora as a reflection of those found in Syria in the wake of the war, with suspicion and accusations exchanged even among British-Syrians opposed to the regime (the study does not cover pro-regime diaspora) (Zaman, 2014).

Finally, worth mentioning here also are articles published in newspapers which showcase the increase in tensions and enmities within the Syrian diaspora in the US as a result of the war. In one article published in *The Guardian*, the author writes about boycotts among members of the Syrian-American community in New Jersey, business partners parting ways, and Syrian American associations losing members as they take sides in the conflict (Malo, 2013). In another article, Los Angeles was the theater of clashes between protesters against or in favor of the Assad regime, most of whom are part of the same community of Syrian Americans who have been living and cultivating ties together for generations (Slosson, 2011). Articles on Syrian-Americans taking a hiatus from their everyday American lives to travel back to Syria to help their home country as best they can also help us gain insights into certain aspects of the transformation that the war in Syria has had on Syrian-American lives (Johnson, 2013)

Work on the Syrian diaspora during the war in Syria is still not very extensive and the area needs to be studied more with regards to how the war has affected relationships among the diaspora members of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as risks of potential diaspora radicalization and the adoption of confrontational political means such as terrorism and violence to promote their cause. As a result, the interest of this thesis is to show how a protracted and violent conflict in the ancestral homeland can affect a diaspora, influence its conception of its own identity and politicize it, even in faraway host lands such as the United States.

Chapter Three

Profile of the Syrian-American Community

The Syrian-American community is well established and has been a part of the social fabric of the United States for many generations. The term Syrian was initially used to designate any person originating from modern Syria, Lebanon and Palestine/Israel, as the first immigrants to arrive from that region did so at a time when the present nation-states of the Levant were under Ottoman rule and part of the Ottoman Empire.

Figure 1: Map of the geographic area labeled as "Syria", including Syria's biggest cities (Hitti, 1924)

The drivers behind early Syrian migration to the United States were various in their nature. Scholars like Philip Hitti, who studied the early Syrian American communities, highlight economic drivers for migration. To most early immigrants, however, the main reasons behind their migration from Syria were of political and

religious nature. A lack of political and religious freedom under the Ottoman Empire, a bid to escape drafting into the Ottoman army, a rather closed horizon for Christians under Ottoman rule were all migration drivers supplanting economic reasons in the minds of the migrants themselves. This is also evidenced by the overrepresentation of Christians among the migrants from an area with an overwhelmingly Muslim population (Hitti, 1924).

According to the US census bureau's 2015 American Community Survey there are around 170,000 Americans reporting Syrian ancestry in the US, with approximately 11,000 of them in the state of New Jersey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Whereas the community in New Jersey is the fourth in terms of size from across the US, the State ranked second in terms of concentration of the diaspora, meaning that Syrian Americans represent 0.15% of the population of the state (De La Cruz and Brittingham, 2003). The fact that they represent such a proportion of the population of this State makes for a higher visibility and, combined with an old presence in the Northeast, makes for an interesting case study.

To be able to address diasporic activities and changes in relations among the diaspora and with their American surrounding society, it is necessary to first get an overview of the Syrian-American community in the US as a whole, and in New Jersey in particular.

3.1 Constructing the Syrian-American Identity

When they first arrived to the United States, the first Syrians were Christian and escaping persecution by the Ottoman ruler. For decades thereafter, migration to the US from Syria and its surroundings would remain predominantly Christian. Despite the common denominator of Christianity, the Syrian immigrants were confronted with a culture clash where religion was concerned, as they did not belong to the predominant Anglo-Protestant rite (Samhan, 1987). Moreover, even within the Catholic American church that was primarily Western and Latin, their Eastern rites and differences were viewed with suspicion. It was only when they allowed themselves to be assimilated into

American Catholicism that the Syrian immigrants were given access to opportunities of integration and social mobility. According to Philip Kayal, it is by doing so and by dissolving the boundaries of religious communities (the Eastern churches of the Melkites, Maronites, etc.) that they forged a common “Syrian identity” (Kayal, 1973). At the beginning, the identity of the so-called “Syrians” revolved more around “sect, village of origin, or family”, and the term “Syrian” was only acknowledged by them as a means to facilitate classification by the host American society (Samhan, 1987, p.12).

The main issue of contention for the Syrian migrants, however, was that of race. As they did not fit the dichotomous black/white perspective of the US, their “ambiguity” would cause some unrest, especially in Southern states where society was built on a racial basis. The community was directly confronted with this issue in the denial of citizenship faced by Syrians early on in the twentieth century. Prior to this date, not much thought was granted to Syrians’ ethnicity as they were given citizenship easily. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that concerns around non-white immigration to the United States began to emerge, and with it surfaced the issue of the “whiteness” of Syrians. The question of the race was crucial in constructing the Syrian-American identity, as evidenced by the case of George Dow, whose lawsuit to gain a citizenship that was twice denied to him would rally the Syrian community in the United States at an unprecedented level (Gualtieri, 2001; Samhan, 1987). The community was instrumental in helping Dow win the case, setting a legal precedent and establishing unequivocally and legally the “whiteness” of the Syrian diaspora. It is only now that the US government is reconsidering this classification, with a proposal that will be brought to Congress in 2018 for the creation of a new ethnic category, namely a MENA category for the upcoming population census (Bahrapour, 2016).

3.2 Socioeconomic Characteristics

The wave of immigrants who came before the Second World War was comprised of unskilled workers, among which around 25% settled in the Northeast, including New Jersey. They started out as peddlers and unskilled laborers in factories and on farms.

Later immigration, however, was different in nature. In addition to the continuing inflow of unskilled and uneducated migration, the newcomers included “skilled technicians and professionals” (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976, p.394) and students who came to the United States to study. After the 1960s, immigration became more “Arab” and less “Syrian”, especially as, during that lapse of time, states such as Lebanon separated from Syria and became their own sovereign entity. Immigration also became more Muslim and less Christian. The new immigrants did not necessarily settle in Syrian or Arab neighborhoods, choosing instead to assimilate and blend in perfectly in the American landscape (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976; Ludescher, 2006; Samhan, 1987).

In the Northeast, Syrians opened shops and worked in sales. Most of the early Syrian community was involved in trade (DiNapoli, 2002). This included Syrians in New Jersey who worked in and owned most of the silk factories in the State. They had brought this trade with them from their home country and became known for it. Paterson, New Jersey, where the community had opened and operated a number of factories, acquired the reputation of being the Silk City of the US (Womack, 2016; Stiffler, 2010). Syrian-Americans gained upward social mobility as a result, and more women became involved in textile factories and kimono production, slowly changing the face of the community.

Today, Syrian-Americans have come a long way since the early days of peddling and unskilled labor. Syrian households displayed a higher median household income than that of the American society at large in 2010, according to the US census bureau’s American Community Survey. Home ownership among Syrian-Americans is also higher than the national average. Both figures indicate that the Syrian-American community is generally on the middle to upper echelons of the social ladder and that it is a successful and productive component of the American society (Assi & Beaulieu, 2013). They also became more involved in other areas and specialized professions that diverged from trade, such as medicine, law, education, and other fields. Of the employed civilians among recent Syrian immigrants, the great majority works in skilled jobs, with 49% in the fields of management, business, science and arts, and 27% working in sales and offices (Zong, 2015, p.5).

Recent migration from Syria has included more educated, more professional newcomers. The newcomers are now more likely to hold a bachelor's degree, a graduate degree or a professional degree than both the native population and other immigrants. They present lower employment figures, however, than the native population and other foreign-born groups. According to the Migration Policy Institute's fact sheet on Syrian immigrants, this is due to very low rates of labor force participation by women, with the men's participation rates higher than natives' rates but lower than other immigrants (Zong, 2015).

3.3. Relations with the American Society: Stereotypes, Cultural Pride and Assimilation

Early Syrian-Americans did not enjoy a particularly glowing reputation. In fact, they were often associated with negative traits, such as being uncivilized, backwards, lazy, and other unpleasant attributes. The Syrians' Christianity and Whiteness were always doubted, with the locals associating them instead with Muslims and Asians (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976; Ludescher, 2006; Pulcini, 1993). The Syrians themselves fought that negative stereotyping as best they could, through the literature in which they published works that strove to improve American knowledge of the Syrian culture and attributes (Pulcini, 1993), through lawsuits to prove the whiteness of the Syrian ethnicity (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976; Samhan, 1987; Gualtieri, 2001), as well as by enrolling in the Army and fighting for their adoptive country as a means to showcase their patriotism (Hitti, 1924).

Early Syrian-Americans, feeling no threat to their group in the U.S., nor to their homeland from the U.S., had no problem melting into the American tableau (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976). Moreover, according to Philip Hitti, one of the main authorities on the Syrian-American community, the early immigrants were characterized by a lack of national pride, as there was no proper nation to speak of and they were too deeply divided amongst themselves. This was another one of the factors which facilitated assimilation (Hitti, 1924). As a result, by the end of WWII, the Syrian-Americans had

assimilated themselves to the point of the disappearance of the community (Ludescher, 2006). The assimilation process was facilitated by their Christian faith, which they even adapted to American churches (Kayal, 1973) and by a lack of clearly identifiable ethnic features which set them apart from the dominant whites (Ludescher, 2006). Most of them even Anglicized their names, so as to better blend with the décor (Hitti, 1924).

This was, however, a major point of contention within the community. While many Syrian-Americans were actively striving for assimilation and rejecting their culture and tradition (Pulcini, 1993), other voices resonated that called for caution. One such voice was that of Gibran Khalil Gibran, who exhorted the sons and daughters of Syria to keep the homeland in their hearts. Other prominent names among the community, such as the Moukarzel brothers, religious leaders like reverend Mansur or renowned writers such as Philip Hitti and Amin Rihany also called for caution in preserving Syrian identity and encouraged the community to unite and organize (Kanbar, 2013).

As proven by a look at the publications, whether academic, literary or journalistic, of Arab Americans or about Arab Americans, the early Syrian Christian migrants were rather eager to Americanize, adopting an almost apologetic approach to their differences from mainstream culture, whereas there existed a current of self-pride and an effort to preserve the homeland culture and distinctiveness. As Arab migration became less Syrian and more predominantly Arab, however, more clashes began to emerge, brought about by Arab-Israeli wars and other events in the Middle-East. The literature becomes more generally about Arabs, and less about Syrians at this point. We can glean information about the Syrian attitude towards such developments, however, by such actions as that of early organizations of Syrians and Lebanese, which broke with their tradition of remaining apolitical and more culturally and socially oriented, and took a stand against the erosion of Arab civil rights in the Nixon era (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976; Pulcini, 1993). Nevertheless, the Syrian-American community, in its Christian component at least, did not join the Arab wave of political activism on behalf of the Palestinian cause, remaining alienated from it by its predominantly Muslim facet. Throughout their presence in the country, they have remained, to the extent that they

were politically active, generally America-oriented, rather than attuned to events in the Middle-East (Wald, 2008).

3.4 The War in Syria

The war in Syria did not start as a war at all. It started as the latest episode in the saga of the Arab Spring, a series of protest movements that contaminated Arab country after Arab country in the year 2011. What started as the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor quickly escalated into a national security threat for several authoritarian Arab regimes.

The regimes, which had been in place in the Arab Spring countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and finally Syria for decades, had spent those decades effectively repressing and brutalizing their respective populations and failing to initialize any significant development in the nations under their rule. However, Arab authoritarian regimes were adept at adapting. They mastered the art of liberalizing just enough whenever a storm began to gather, allowing their populations to vent only to go back on the steps taken. They dodged popular anger and the threat of open revolt by various means such as co-opting the opposition, fear-mongering and rallying around the flag by presenting real or imaginary threats to their populations, in addition to repression and brutality. Protected by the above-described measures, friendly with the world's only superpower, the U.S., such regimes acquired a reputation for being immovable. The Middle-East witnessed the third wave of democratization without batting an eyelash, to the extent that International Relations experts and political pundits puzzled and theorized over the Middle-East's apparent immunity to democratization.

What was different about the protests of 2011? Was the timing just right, were there international conditions favorable to regime change or was the Arab Spring just a part of the West's master plan to redraw the Middle East map, as some conspiracy theorists claim? The reasons behind the impact of the popular uprisings are beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that the world watched in great surprise as one strongman after the other fell to the cries of "The people demand the fall of the regime"

which filled the squares of Arab countries. For a moment in time, it seemed things were about to improve for those countries, and democracy might finally be making its belated arrival in the Arab World (Brynen, Moore, Salloukh, & Zahar, 2012).

In Syria, it all started with some scribbles on the wall by schoolboys. When the children were arrested, protests erupted in the city of Daraa, which were met by live fire from the government forces. This led to more widespread protesting throughout the country, with a swelling in the numbers of protestors as government repression intensified (BBC News, 2016a). Despite President Bashar Al Assad offering to make concessions such as changing the government and lifting the state of emergency that the country had been under for decades (CNN, 2016; BBC News, 2016b) there was no lull in the escalation as the regime sent the tanks rolling in to regain control, and as the opposition started taking up arms and organizing to defend itself against regime brutality.

Despite US, EU and Arab sanctions against the regime, and despite UN efforts to mediate what was starting to look more and more like a civil war, the country saw an increase in fighting and destruction and a growing number of casualties. The opposition formed the National coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in an effort to present a unified front against the regime. The Gulf countries, and other countries such as the US, Britain, Turkey and France recognized it as the only entity representing the Syrian people (BBC News, 2016b). All efforts at a UN brokered peace failed. The conflict was further complicated by the unexpected rise of the terrorist group ISIS which first appeared in Iraq and went on to claim large swathes of Iraqi and Syrian lands amid outrageous reports of sexual slavery and mass executions. The opposition in Syria became increasingly fragmented and took on a more openly Islamist character as time went by and the war dragged on.

Many countries are now involved in the war in Syria. A coalition has formed to fight the Islamic state (ISIS), including countries such as France, the UK, the US and Arab countries (Weaver & Borger, 2015). Russia and Iran are officially engaged in the war on the side of the regime, propping it up and allowing it to make important and strategic gains even as they wage unapologetically destructive bombing and starving

campaigns against rebel held areas and cities (Rubin & Saad, 2016; Cauchi, 2016). Non-Syrian sectarian militias have long been part of the fight both on the side of the regime and against it (El-Ghobashy & Abi Habib, 2016).

The war has resulted in the gravest refugee crisis of our time (United Nations, 2016). Europe has seen its shores assailed by hundreds of thousands of refugees, fleeing the destruction of their country on foot, by boat or by any means available to them. Countries surrounding Syria have been overwhelmed by the numbers of Syrians crossing into their territories. Refugees have been confined to camps or, in some cases, they have melted into cities, creating their own set of problems as governments struggle to cope (Witte, 2015).

The United States has only pledged to take in a limited number of refugees, both in comparison with the overall number of refugees and in comparison with the US population. Despite their limited number and the thorough vetting process they go through before being allowed into the US, the pledge of president Obama has been met with resistance and the point blank refusal of some state governors to admit any refugees at all (Fantz & Brumfield, 2015). The Syrian-American community has been affected by the devastation visited upon its homeland and any family remaining in Syria. It has also been moved by the refugee crisis with some Syrian-Americans seeking to privately sponsor refugees and to welcome them in their own homes (Malo, 2015).

Have the dynamics among the Syrian-American community in New Jersey been influenced by the war? Has the way members of the community identify with this Syrian component of their identity been affected by the dramatic events back in the ancestral homeland? In order to study such changes, we must first look into the literature and existing theoretical field dealing with ethnic identities and how they manifest themselves. To be able to measure and gauge a change in the dynamics of the Syrian-American community and in the way it positions itself vis-à-vis society as a whole, it is necessary to be able to isolate the manifestations of such a change.

Chapter Four

Operationalizing and Measuring Intra-Group Change: Why the Interest in Organizations?

The Syrian community has morphed and changed over time in the way members of the group view and interact with each other, and in such considerations as ethnic and national pride and identification with the homeland. Later generations have not necessarily behaved as their elders have. Newcomers did not have the same concerns, prospects and interests as the early migrants. Amid this evolution of group-consciousness, the war has come to bring its deep imprint on the process.

Before delving into potential changes that have taken place within the Syrian-American community in New Jersey as a result of the war, it is important to study the theoretical field as to what factors showcase the presence of a shared identity, to guide the research and better enable the highlight of any changes that may have occurred as a result of the war in the homeland. How does a particular diaspora envision itself vis-à-vis the homeland? What are the characteristics whose presence indicates an activated identity of a diaspora that is self-aware of its intra-group ties and specificities and that cultivates them to form a close-knit community? What is the place occupied by cultural or ethnic organizations in the manifestation of identity?

4.1 Presence of a Shared Identity: Existing Theories

Not all diasporas acknowledge their commonalities. Like any group of people, diasporas are never monolithic, and sometimes the differences run too deep among members, or the attachment to the homeland is too shallow to allow for the formation of a common identity. An overview of the literature on ethnic and sub-group identity helps to establish characteristics and features that determine the presence of a shared identity

and strong group consciousness. Once these features have been recognized, it will become clear what we should be looking for to identify change, and why it is important to look at ethnic or cultural organizations as indicators of an activated identity in the case of the Syrian-American community of New Jersey.

A study conducted on ethnic identity in the field of psychology focuses on different stages of identity developments among ethnic minorities and more specifically the African-American minority. Independently of the psychological terminology and details, the study assesses the influence of the age of the individual on the stage in which he or she may find themselves when it comes to ethnic identity development. As such, the older the individual, the more likely he or she is to have successfully explored what his or her ethnic identity means and have committed to that personal meaning (Yip, Sellers & Seaton, 2006). Therefore, the median age of a diaspora is likely to be indicative of the level of development of its ethnic identity. More than the median age, however, the history of the presence of the diaspora in the host land is very indicative as to the presence of an activated identity. Authors such as Kenneth Wald have pinned it as one of the determinants (Wald, 2008) whereas authors such as Raymond Breton have studied the evolution of the sense of identity of migrants as time and generations pass by and their presence in the country grows more entrenched (Breton, 1964).

Moreover, the influence that parents' "racial socialization" holds in forming the child's ethnic identification, specifically among adolescents is another indicator of identity retention in diaspora groups (Yip, Sellers & Seaton, 2006, p.1513). The role played by parents in their insistence on the importance of their children maintaining an attachment to the homeland's culture via learning the language or the importance placed upon marrying someone from within the community is also explored in a very detailed analysis undertaken by authors Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka. In this study, Junn and Masuoka have delved into group racial consciousness among the Asian-American minority as compared to the deeply racially conscious African-American minority. The authors have examined the levels of consciousness exhibited by the two ethnicities in a study in which two control groups, one from each of the minorities, have been asked a set of questions. The authors then submitted the same questionnaire to a group of

African Americans and a group of Asian Americans who had been subjected to a stimulus to boost their identification with their ethnic groups. The questionnaires laid bare several characteristics that showcase the presence of a strong ethnic identification, such as the desirability of learning one's history and language, marrying within the group, feeling of closeness to members of one's group, feeling of linked fate or the feeling that one's fate cannot improve unless the group's fate improves. In addition, it asked respondents whether their ethnicity mattered to their political choices and whether they preferred to be identified as a hyphenated group or simply as Americans. African-Americans in both the control and the "treatment" group did not differ significantly in their deep consciousness of their racial identity. Asian Americans, by contrast, showed some significantly higher identification with the group once subjected to the stimulus. The authors analyzed the results by demonstrating how an already strong sense of identity is not likely to be moved very much by stimulus, whereas a looser identification can be strengthened by one. To our Syrian-American case, should the group exhibit a more lackluster identification with the homeland prior to 2011, it is more likely that a major stimulus like a war back home would move it into higher levels of group consciousness. In addition to the characteristics subjected to the study, the authors have also mentioned an array of other factors studied by other authors, such as levels of residential and social integration, which when high are conducive to a less pronounced group consciousness, as well as a lack of stereotyping and a higher income level, which both produce the same results. Even positive stereotyping is likely to foster a continuation of identification with the group as it delineates its distinctiveness. Importantly, Junn and Masuoka also explored the role of the state in enforcing an ethnic identity, such as through a separate non-white classification which could lead to political and economic disenfranchisement, or through immigration laws that could lead to higher professionalization of the community, for example by only allowing highly professional individuals a legal status in the US (Junn & Masuoka, 2008).

Ethnic organizations, their presence and the participation of members of the community in them have generated much interest in the study of the retention of diaspora identity. Kenneth Wald, in studying what factors amount to an increase of identification of a diaspora with its homeland, put forth three group characteristics which

are the circumstances of migration, how old is the group's presence in the host country, and how similar the home culture is to the host culture. In addition to group characteristics, however, he put forth individual characteristics such as the readiness of individuals within the diaspora to participate in cultural organizations, their exhibition of cultural pride, and the presence of intra-group ties as showcasing high identity retention (Wald, 2008). In addressing the role of ethnic organizations in the integration of the diaspora members in the receiving society or lack thereof, and retention of ethnic identity, Raymond Breton places paramount importance on what he dubs "institutional completeness" of the community. The more the community is complete, that is with a fully developed network of cultural, religious, educational institutions, the more likely that diaspora members will interact less with society as a whole, and will thus be able to retain their homeland identity. The presence of organizations that will provide for the individual social interactions, solidarity, spirituality and other basic needs is a major component of the "completeness" mentioned by the author (Breton, 1964). Among other factors indicating a less than perfect integration of diasporas into the receiving society, a study in the dangers of "ethnic balkanization" mentions the presence of ethnic organizations as indicators of high identity retention and a lack of assimilation (Sears, Fu, Henry & Bui, 2003). Interestingly, the retention of identity among diasporas does not necessarily have to lead to problematic lack of assimilation or the absence of political participation in the general society, according to a study conducted by Fugita and O'Brien. In what is admittedly an exceptional case, the authors study the concomitant assimilation of Japanese-Americans and their unusually high participation in ethnic organizations. The authors highlight the participation of the members of this diaspora to political life in the United States in parallel to their participation in their narrower community. There are two schools of thought concerning participation in ethnic organizations and political participation of a community. One stipulates that the former prevents the latter or significantly decreases it whereas another line of thought puts forth the idea that participation in ethnic organizations simply promotes another way to political participation for a diaspora. Each diaspora may approach this issue differently depending on its own experience in the receiving country. Generally speaking, however, the presence of ethnic organizations is seen in this study as elsewhere as indicative of the

presence of an activated ethnic identity for the diaspora community (Fugita & O'Brien, 1985).

The literature thus produces a number of characteristics that, if present, indicate a strong identity retention and salience of the homeland ties in a diaspora's sense of self. These characteristics include the history of the presence of the diaspora in the receiving country, the similarity to host country's culture, the circumstances of migration, the parents' insistence on the preservation of culture and traditions in their children's way of life (marrying within the community, speaking the language), feeling of closeness to the group measured by geographic clustering, feeling of linked fate which will lead to politicization, stereotyping encountered by the community, income level, the role of the state in maintaining the community's distinctiveness, and finally the presence and extent of the development of ethnic organizations. Prior to 2011, The Syrian-American diaspora scored low on many of the above indicators. Enjoying a long and prosperous presence in the United-States, its high levels of assimilation have made for low identity-retention.

4.2 Syrian-American Identity Prior to 2011: The Importance of the “Organizations” Variable

The characteristics that showcase the presence of an activated identity are many. Some are easier to quantify or measure than others. Prior to the uprisings of 2011, Syrian-Americans did not display high rates of identity retention according to the above characteristics. This erosion of their identification with their “Syrianness” happened relatively rapidly. The early generations of Syrian-Americans did not view themselves as Americans at all. In fact, prior to the Second World War, they always had one foot out the door, always planning and dreaming of returning home (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976). They aggregated in geographical areas such as Little Syria in Brooklyn or Paterson in New Jersey. Their enclaves, by the nature of an enclave, allowed them to retain their Syrian culture, cultivating kinship ties and nourishing old homegrown hatreds. This geographic proximity is indicative of a sense of closeness and the presence of strong

intra-community ties (Pulcini, 1993; Hitti, 1924). Things changed with time, however, as the new immigrants and the second-generations did not adopt the same views as their parents. Second generation Syrian-Americans lost the language of their homeland as assimilation eroded the central place Arabic once held within the community (Hitti, 1924; Cristillo & Minnite, 2002). A report by the US Census Bureau shows that by the year 2000, 45.8% of Americans with Syrian ancestry spoke only English at home and that only 20% spoke English “less than ‘very well’”, most likely recent arrivals (Brittingham & De La Cruz, 2005, p.8). Skilled and higher social status jobs encouraged new immigrants and later generations of Syrian-Americans to move out of the neighborhoods that were typically Syrian (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976; Hitti, 1924). According to Hitti, a general lack of national pride has made a substantial portion of the group eager to rid itself of its distinctiveness (Hitti, 1924). Therefore, on the characteristics of socio-economic standing, feeling of closeness and parents’ ethnic sensitization of their children, the Syrian-American community moved from one strongly identifying with its culture of origin, to one more distanced from it within the lapse of one generation. In fact, from the 1920s to the 1950s, as new immigration was strongly restricted and no new arrivals came to offset the phenomenon, the Syrian-American community saw a strong assimilation and a rapid move away from their culture and distinctiveness as they prospered and merged into the great American melting pot (Samhan, 1987).

Concerning stereotyping, while negative imaging of the Syrian was widely dispersed, the derogatory perceptions were not overtly hostile, as previously discussed, and did not prevent the Syrians as a group from social advancement or assimilation. The lack of visibility of this small minority, their involvement in peddling which did not present a threat to the natives, the fact that they originated from the “holy land”, tempered the wariness of the general population and rendered any discrimination they may have encountered inoffensive (Samhan, 1987). Moreover, since they have been classified as whites and granted all the privileges that go with such a classification, they did not suffer from disenfranchisement by the state such as other groups have (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976; Ludescher, 2006; Pulcini, 1993). On these two characteristics the Syrian-Americans also should not be expected to strongly identify with their group. The

relative ease with which they assimilated, combined with the lack of a background of common suffering such as that of the Jewish-Americans or the African-Americans also lead to the same result.

The evolution of the early Syrian-American community is somehow well documented through the works of such scholars as Philip Hitti (1924) or more recently Philip Kayal (1973), Helen Samhan (1987) and others. The following period, starting from the 1960s, suffers from a lack of available resources. Arab-Americans, which were almost exclusively Syrian-Americans at first, became a more diverse group as time elapsed and different groups of Arabs from different countries started to arrive as a result of the easing of immigration restrictions. Moreover, as countries gained independence, Syrians were split among Lebanese-Americans, Syrian-Americans and Palestinian-Americans. As such Syrian-Americans became a less interesting group by themselves, as Arabs gained more prominence and started diverging in their characteristics as a group from the early immigrants. Most of the works available for the time period after the Second World War focus on the Arab-Americans in general, and even this group is understudied (Fadda-Conrey, 2006).

From studies that were conducted on the Arab population, however, we can glean information about the Syrian-American diaspora at that time. One study on the state of the Arab-American community at the turn of the century, written in the summer of 2001, just before the game-changing events of 9-11, places the Syrian-American community as separate from the Lebanese and Palestinian ancestries and as constituting one fifth of the Arab-American population. Moreover, it gives valuable information on the profile of Syrian-Americans at this time by offering the percentages of US-born members of the diaspora (second generation or further generations). US-born Syrian Americans constituted 78.8% of all Syrian-Americans in 1980, whereas the number dropped to 67% in 1990. The importance of these figures for our study of group-consciousness and identity retention resides in that first generation immigrants usually display a higher attachment to the homeland than second-generation or further generations (Breton, 1964). In the decade of the 1980s, it appears from the data that significant new waves of migrants came to the US from Syria. These fresh immigrants can be expected to offset

the decline in group consciousness that was observed among Syrian-Americans until that point (Kulczycki & Lobo, 2001, p.464). However, the same study mentions that Lebanese and Syrian-Americans have had a similar assimilation path as southern and eastern European diasporas, thus enabling us to form a picture closer to the conclusion that emerged from observation of the characteristics of the group across time: the picture of a group less and less “ethnic” and mostly successfully assimilated (p.471).

Studying the traits exhibited by the Syrian-American community before the uprisings of 2011, therefore, paints the picture of a community that isn’t cultivating its ties, and that doesn’t particularly present high levels of group consciousness. The early Syrian-Americans had been more active in trying to do so, but with time and the strive to integrate, the community slowly assimilated itself out of existence (Ludescher, 2006). In New Jersey, the picture isn’t much different from the US as a whole. The community did maintain cordial relations before 2011 (Malo, 2013). In the state of New Jersey, restaurants and grocery stores selling Syrian food and products were avidly frequented by the Syrian-American residents. The true formation of a group-consciousness and the feeling of community were still missing from the diaspora in New Jersey, however. In the words of one Syrian-American who grew up in that State, while the Syrians knew each other, there was no community in the proper sense of the term. According to Hamid Imam’s interview with Germany’s international broadcaster Deutsch Welle, the community only started to form, organize and become active after March 2011. It was only then that a real sense of group-consciousness emerged (Arthur, 2015). Syrian-Americans cited in a Guardian article expressed the same view that the uprisings back home galvanized the formation of a true community for the Syrian-Americans of New Jersey (Malo, 2013).

This leads to the importance of ethnic-based organizations in the organizing and emergence of a real group-consciousness. Since the Syrian-Americans of New Jersey have proven to be only loosely and vaguely attached to their homeland prior to 2011, a major stimulus such as a war in the homeland is expected to activate their dormant identity, as per the work of authors Junn and Masuoka (2008). However, measuring this change cannot be done through factors that have not yet had the chance to be altered, if

they are to be altered at all, since the start of the Syrian civil war. In the short time-lapse of 6 years since the uprisings of 2011, the Syrian-American community in general, and that of New Jersey in particular, has not changed in its socio-economic status, for example. Its circumstances of migration, while they are certainly different in the case of refugees, have been controlled for in this thesis by eliminating the refugee population from the sample studied. Moreover, residential aggregation hasn't changed during those 6 years. The residential aggregation which was displayed by the early diaspora as a result of a need to be close to other Syrians has given way, over time, to the Syrian-Americans moving out of Syrian neighborhoods as their socio-economic status and the nature of their work have changed and improved. This was not altered by the war. The community's history and presence in New Jersey remains the same, its status as "white" and therefore the role played by the state in potential marginalization or distinctiveness of the diaspora has not yet changed (though it is up for grabs, as mentioned earlier with the possible creation of a MENA category in upcoming US censuses and with the recent executive orders of President Trump (BBC NEWS, 2017)).

Therefore, the remaining factors brought forth by the theoretical field on identity activation, namely the feeling of linked fate and the presence of ethnic-based organizations are the most likely to be indicative of a change within the Syrian-American community of New Jersey. The feeling of linked fate, or the feeling that one's fate can only improve if that of one's community improves (Junn & Masuoka, 2008), is measured by activism on behalf of the group, which also goes through organizations. As such, the importance of the study of ethnic associations, be they religious, charitable, professional, or political, resides in the fact that it is the only measure capable of indicating change across such a relatively short period of time. Having established the validity of examining Syrian-American associations in New Jersey to gauge change in identity activation and group consciousness, the next section studies their evolution and the phases that have been distinct in their history.

Chapter Five

The Evolution of Syrian-American Organizations in New Jersey

As demonstrated by the study of the literature, the focus on NGOs is warranted to examine changes undergone by the Syrian-American community at this point in time. The research so far has been based on desk reviews and the study of the scholarly works of early Syrian-American academics who delved into the specificities of their community. The following sections rely on the study of Syrian-American organizations in New Jersey, through the collection of data from their websites, publications and social media pages, as well as through interviews conducted for this thesis with representatives of these NGOs. The information gathered was then cross-checked using existing sources such as local newspapers and interviews previously given by Syrian-American activists to radio stations and other outlets. There are eleven Syrian-American NGOs currently operating in New Jersey. These include three that were founded before 2011, which are the Syrian American Council, the Syrian-American Medical Society (SAMS Society), and the Syrian-American Women's Association. Eight new NGOs were established after 2011. Of those, three are dedicated to political activism, the Syrian American Forum (SAF), the Syrian American Will Association (SAWA), and Syrian Americans for Democracy. Four others are charities, including SWASIA, the SAMS Foundation, the Syrian American Wish Association and the Syrian American League. Finally, one NGO was established to specifically address refugee relief, and that is the Refugee Outreach International. Interviews were conducted with representatives of five of those NGOs, including some that already existed before 2011 and some more recent ones, and including associations from several areas of focus. Interviews were conducted over the phone and while interviewees were reluctant at times, the presentation of university credentials and IRB approval forms helped smooth the process and overcome some of the apprehension. All of the organizations were asked for interviews but some refused to

give them. Pro-regime associations in all categories refused to participate even after several attempts. This obstacle was overcome by detailed analysis of their websites and their publications and press releases, as well as by tapping into available interviews that they had previously given to local newspapers.

According to activists interviewed previously and interviewed for this research, the Syrian-American diaspora has seen a rebirth of the community in the aftermath of the uprisings of 2011 and in the lifting of the heavy hand of the regime from atop the civil society both in the homeland and in the US (Arthur, 2015; Malo, 2013; Qayyum, 2011). This has been translated by a spike in the number of Syrian-American organizations in the state of New Jersey and in the transformation of already existing associations.

Prior to the uprisings of 2011, the Syrian-American community's levels of group consciousness had been waning with the passing of time and with successful assimilation. Despite the best efforts of some high profile members of the community, mostly intellectuals, the diaspora gradually lost its attachment to its particular culture. This is reflected in the decline of Syrian-American civil society organizations with time, as predicted by the work of Raymond Breton who links the presence of ethnic organizations with a lack of assimilation. According to Breton and others' works, it is therefore predictable that the number of Syrian American associations would decrease as assimilation of the community deepened (Breton, 1964).

5.1 Syrian-American Organizations in New Jersey: The Picture Prior to 2011.

The protests of 2011 in the homeland were a watershed event for all Syrians, including the Syrian diaspora in New Jersey. The period before that date, however, is not monolithic and can be divided into two distinct phases: before the 1960s and after the 1960s with its change in the face of migration from the Middle East.

5.1.1 The Early Years (Pre-1960s)

The organizations of the early community were mostly religious, charitable or culture-oriented. The early members of the diaspora were not bent on getting politically active or involved (Hitti, 1924). Where pride in a common culture is concerned, the early Syrian-American generations were divided into two currents: one assimilationist, and one that promoted integration in the American society, but conserving and preserving the culture. This second component, made up predominantly of intellectuals and prominent individuals among the community, extolled Syrian pride and the uniqueness of the Syrian heritage and potential, such as in an article published by the Syrian-American magazine “The Syrian World” in 1927. In the article, author Reverend Bishara sings the virtues of the Syrian stock and the value it will add to the new country in which the immigrants have settled, namely the United States (as cited in Pulcini, 1993).

The existence of such publications, which are considered to be part of the Syrian-American network of organizations, is in and by itself part of the effort to preserve the unique identity and the link to the homeland, by keeping the diaspora informed about what is happening back home and what its own members are undertaking. Publications such as “The Syrian World” and other magazines and newspapers, founded and published mostly in the Northeast of the United States by the early Syrian-Americans both in Arabic and English, provide us with insight into what the diaspora was like back in the day, what their interests were, what problems they encountered and what views they held. They display the achievements of members of the diaspora and offer a very valuable window to look in on a community that was not very well-studied and whose history is not well-documented. The very nature of the readerships of the respective publications, divided according to sect and affiliations pertaining to the homeland, reflects the lingering presence of homeland divisions and the importance that the homeland retained for these early immigrants. In the words of scholar Michael Suleiman “There was communal solidarity, but the community was a collective of several communities.” (Suleiman, 2004). Despite the differences among the various sects and sub-identities displayed and cherished by the early Syrian-Americans, they did cultivate

ties amongst the community at large. By the mid-fifties, however, few of the publications were still surviving, and those that remained morphed from being exclusively Arabic, to publishing in a mixture of Arabic and English, to eventually become English-only publications as their readers lost their mother tongue (Cristillo & Minnite, 2002, p.134).

Syrian-American publications are only one type of associations founded by the community. Syrian-American organizations have been recorded as early as 1896. In times of distress in the homeland, such as the devastating famine during World War I, the diaspora's efforts were turned towards alleviating that suffering. However, as soon as the crisis was over, the Syrian-American organizations would turn their concentration back to their adopted country. The organizations of the Northeast specialized in many types of work, some were aimed at lifting members of the community out of poverty, some were focused on education, while others had the goal of helping new arrivals from the homeland to find a job and integrate easily into the American society (Cadinot, 2013; Kayyali, 2006, p.78).

The Syrian-American community was not political (Hitti, 1924). As such, its organizations worked in fields unrelated to politics. Some instances, however, spurred the community to get into politics, such as with the problem of naturalization. Even so, their center of interest was always the United States. As is evidenced by the failed efforts of Gibran Khalil Gibran to motivate his fellow Syrian-Americans into making concerted efforts for the liberation of Syria from Ottoman rule, the community was interested in making a new life for itself in its adopted country, the US, and his efforts at politicizing the Syrians fell on deaf ears (Gibran National Committee, 2014). Other important figures such as Salloum Mokarzel called in 1928 on the diaspora to unite its organizations and clubs into one federation, in continuation of his long work for the goal of instilling more unity into the community. Mokarzel extolled the Syrian-Americans to be ready to give time, energy and money and to organize and unite in an effort to become more efficient at improving the standards of living of the diaspora as well as to be better able to preserve the heritage of the homeland while contributing and being full members of their adopted society. He was joined in his call in 1929 by prominent Syrian-American

Reverend W.A. Mansur who insisted in his writings that the goal of establishing such a federation was not political or religious, but that it was rather an effort to better contribute to the adopted country, and to embrace the American spirit while enabling the Syrian-American community to make the best out of its Phoenician stock and Phoenician entrepreneurship. Many clubs and organizations from all across the United States responded to Mokarzel and Mansur's calls and showed enthusiasm for the idea (Kanbar, 2013). The Federation, however, never came to fruition in the Northeast from which Mokarzel had issued the call. Instead, it was in the South that it came to be realized in 1931 by the efforts of a young and eager leadership. The Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs still exists today and is still operational in promoting the Syrian-Lebanese heritage and in enhancing the lives of its community members. In keeping with the spirit of the call that was made in 1928, it is avowedly apolitical, non-religious and non-sectarian (The Southern Federation, 2017). Similarly, in 1936 a Midwest Federation of American-Syrian/Lebanese Clubs was founded, and it is still operational today, with the same goals of promoting the heritage and fostering good relations between the community and the larger American society (The Midwest Federation, n.d.). In the Northeast, where the main concentration of Syrian-Americans was to be found, no such federation was established.

In New Jersey, the earliest organizations to be founded by Syrian Americans were the various churches. The Melkites, who came originally from Aleppo, founded in 1932 their church, the Saint Ann Melkite Church in New Jersey. The church was very active in maintaining and promoting the culture and heritage of the community and was the center of communal life with religious education, club meetings and social events happening on its grounds. The church is still operational today and active within the community (Saint Ann Melkite Catholic Church, 2017). Similarly, the Syrian Orthodox community which is made up of Syrian immigrants, among other immigrants from the Middle East was central to the members of its church getting to know of the existence of each other as they first came to the United States. The community began to establish organizations as early as the 1900s. It gradually grew and established many churches and parishes throughout the northeast and other regions of the US. The first in New Jersey was established in 1927 in Paramus. The Syrian Orthodox also established the

Archdiocese for the Eastern United States in Paramus New Jersey in 1995, where it still stands today (Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, 2016). The churches were thus among the earliest associations and were certainly central in anchoring the Syrian immigrants in their adopted homeland as well as in organizing their lives and starting embryonic communities. Moreover, they are among the few organizations to stand the test of time and to remain active and operational to this day. Churches were dynamic in the promotion of the Syrian heritage and in the celebration of the culture as seen later with the Mahrajans organized by associations and clubs linked to the various churches.

The organizations of the early Syrian Americans took a special interest in promoting the culture of their homeland and favored this aspect of collective action over any political collective action. This is evidenced by the “Mahrajans” or festivals celebrating the Syrian culture and advertising for it. These Mahrajans used to happen on a regular basis and in all areas of the US where the Syrian-Americans were present in big enough numbers. They were sponsored by churches and organizations and were occasions for this little known community to display its culture and better acquaint the American public with it. It was also an opportunity for members of the community to meet each other and for matches to be made as it was still considered better for Syrians to marry other Syrians. The New Jersey Mahrajan in Trenton would, for example, attract people from the whole area, who would then come and enjoy the music, the food, the drinking and meet and greet other Syrians. There were also occasions for fundraising, where the sponsoring church or organization would raise funds for social solidarity and for the benefit of the poorer members of the community. The funds were also used to send money back to the homeland, with Syrian-Americans being the group that sent the biggest amounts of money back home per capita among all migrant groups at the time. This showcases a strong attachment and identification with the homeland at this stage (Rashid, 2002; Rasmussen, 1998). Mahrajans eventually declined, with the last large ones being held in the mid-seventies (Rasmussen, 1998, p.146). These festivities that used to gather the community, allow for matchmaking and strengthen intra-group ties as well as display a beloved culture, eventually proved to be too big an affair for them to go on into the seventies. Their disappearance is illustrative of looser ties within the group as time and generations passed on.

Despite the early associations being US-centered for the most part, major events in the homeland stirred the Syrian-Lebanese community into action through these associations. One such occurrence was the Great Famine which hit the homeland in 1915. A Syrian Relief Committee was formed in the Northeast to raise funds to alleviate the effects of the famine on the countrymen and women left behind. On this occasion, squabbles erupted between the “Lebanese” separatists and the “Syrian” nationalists. The former, dedicated to the establishment of an independent country in Mount Lebanon and feeling allegiance to this potential entity, strove to direct all of the funds gathered in the United States, and particularly in the Northeast where the activists were located, towards this territory through an organization called the “Society of Lebanese Renaissance”. Others such as Gibran Khalil Gibran, who were advocates for the establishment of a Greater Syria (though the name was not in use back then and was coined later, in the 1920s) which preserved the integrity of the territoriality of Syria as it was known at the time, did not agree with these exclusionary tactics in the distribution of aid. Through the efforts of Gibran and of other illustrious names such as Amin Rihani and Mikha’il Nu’aymah, the two associations ended up merging to face the crisis, thus establishing the Syrian Mount Lebanon Relief Committee which raised money to send back to the affected populations all over “Syria” and “Lebanon” (Beshara, 2011). The fundraising efforts of the community were not enough but their petitions and voices reached all the way to the top of the American administration, and President Woodrow Wilson declared two days as fundraising days for the devastated populations of Syria (Farshee, 2010, p.98). In spite of all the efforts at relief, the diaspora could not alleviate all the suffering occasioned by the famine.

On another occasion, again in response to turmoil in Syria, the community would rally to provide relief to the homeland once more. In 1925 a revolt erupted in Syria against the French holders of the mandate. This revolt, which was to last until 1927, triggered a descent into violence across the territory. In October of 1925, for example, the French organized a massive bombardment of the city of Damascus, causing some 1,500 inhabitants, rebels, neutrals, foreign diplomats and charity workers to lose their lives and wreaking havoc on the infrastructure of the city and on its economy (Miller 1977). Other towns such as Rashayya and Hasbaya also sustained significant damage

and generated waves of refugees (Bailony, 2013). Similarly to what happened during the Great Famine, the impact of the revolt provoked a mushrooming of relief committees and fundraisers aiming at helping the compatriots back in the homeland. These committees were very specialized, targeting particular villages and areas according to sectarian considerations, and were promoted and advertised for by Syrian American newspapers according to the sectarian affiliations and political agendas of the said newspapers. As the crisis this time was of a much more political nature, and as politics in this region of the world are always laced with religion and sectarianism, the stakes of this crisis were very high, impacting the future of Syria/Lebanon. Accordingly, during the revolt and even after it had been crushed and the violence had abated, the revolt of 1925 generated unprecedented levels of politicization on behalf of the homeland for the Syrian American community all over the country, and it resulted in acute intra-community tensions. Positions vis-a-vis the revolt were taken among some in the Syrian American community with sectarian considerations in mind. The language and lexicon used by Syrian American publications of the time reflected their position from the revolt. In terms familiar to what we heard in the aftermath of the Syrian uprisings of 2011, some dubbed the revolt of 1925 a nationalist uprising while others decried it as religious in its nature, ignoring the support for the revolt among Christians in the community. The latter feared that, if it succeeded, it would undermine the Maronites' French support in the establishment of an independent Lebanon (Bailony, 2013). The two blocs engaged in a struggle to bring members of the diaspora to their camp, publishing furiously in Arabic, but also in English, in an effort to reach a broader audience. Tensions rose among the community as accusations of theft of aid were thrown at each other by each of the opposing camps as well as allegations of arming rebels and other fighting groups. The accusation of arming fighters is, again, an interesting reflection of the doubts arising today as to any financial donation emanating from Syrian-American organizations "(...) from New Jersey to California (...)" and going to Syria (Adely, 2014). Moreover, the sagacity of sending money to the homeland when the community in the United States could use this money was questioned by those who were perhaps starting already to stray from their "Syrianness" and to become so essentially American as to resent what was perceived as a misallocation of otherwise needed money (Bailony, 2013).

Most interestingly, as a result of the 1925 revolt, an official Syrian political party was established in the United States, with branches all over the country (a branch was requested in Newark, New Jersey (Bawardi, 2014, p.124)). What originated as a relief campaign transformed into a political party with an avowedly political goal, that of attaining Syrian nationhood. The party aimed to make an impact in the adopted country, and to gain backing for their cause and protection from the French by an increasingly important and prestigious world player, the United States of America. This was the “(...) first general body (...) in the history of Syrian immigration, established by a resolution of the First General Syrian Convention (...)” (Bawardi, 2014, p.124). The party, called the New Syria Party, collected donations from all of its chapters and sent them regularly to affected populations in the homeland. It was less successful, however, at uniting the community and at forming a group strong enough to lobby in Washington. Squabbles within the party, efforts by members of the diaspora to undermine the work it was doing, lack of experience, corrupt or self-serving management and even the very small size of the community were major obstacles in the face of the attainment of its goals. The Americans were less than interested in the fate of Syria, and the homeland ended up being under French mandate until after the Second World War. The party ended up losing its place within the community, haunted by financial problems and dragged down by the failure of the revolt and of the leadership in Syria and among diasporas in other countries (Bawardi, 2014). In spite of its failure, however, the Syrian revolt of 1925 gave the Syrian Americans an incentive, a common cause that galvanized them into political activism in their adopted country on behalf of their ancestral homeland. The efforts continued even after the revolt had been crushed by the French.

These two instances (the Great Famine of 1915 and the revolt of 1925) showcase that the otherwise assimilated and US-centered community in the Greater New York area, which includes New Jersey, could be moved to action on behalf of the homeland in cases where the homeland itself, and the events unfolding there, stir their feelings of “Syrianess” and provide the stimulus needed to activate their ethnic identities. This is reflected in the work of the associations of the community. With time and the decline of the bond with Syria, and with the changes that occurred to what was previously Syria

and became several countries after the end of the mandates in the region, the face of the community slowly changed, and so did its organizations.

5.1.2 The Effect of a Changing Arab Migration on Syrian-American Organizations

After the 1960s, as the Arab migration transformed, the Syrian-American community was left on the margins of a new movement that was political in its nature, oriented towards the Middle-Eastern region of origin and Muslim in its overwhelming majority. The Palestinian cause took a hold of the Arab-American community but was not enticing enough for those among the better-established, better assimilated, overwhelmingly Christian Syrian-American diaspora (and Lebanese-American diaspora as well) who did not view this fight as theirs (Wald, 2008). In the early years, the Syrian community was involved in the cause of British Palestine's only insofar as it was considered part of Syria and part of the territory that Syrian nationalists like Shakib Arslan were aiming to gain independence for. The prince visited the United States at the invitation of the New Syria Party in 1927 and tried to entice the Syrian American communities there to participate in the fight for Syria, which included Palestine, also known as South Syria. With time and with reality on the ground imposing itself, the Syrian-American community that was involved in the fight against the French mandate transferred their memberships from the New Syria Party to the Arab National League with its much more Pan-Arab cause. Those within the community who weren't active on behalf of the Syrian nationalist cause remained aloof from this fight. In any case, the cause acquired a much more Arab and Palestinian facet, as the Palestinian issue overtook other fights in its urgency (Bawardi, 2014).

Much later, around 1973 some Syrian-Lebanese associations did participate in protests and a campaign for the civil rights of Arab-Americans who were being pressured and surveilled by the government for their views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The involvement in a political advocacy campaign by those otherwise avowedly apolitical associations was, however, only momentary, and much more in response to the erosion of the rights of the Arab-American community in the US than in response to

events in the Middle East (Jaqueline & Ismael, 1976). In interviews conducted for this research, several key facts emerged as to the characteristics of the community and its associations in the time period between the 1960s and 2010. Syrians all over the United States did occasionally get involved in the Palestinian cause and still advocated for it up until the 2011 revolts in the homeland, but these were mainly more recent immigrants to the US, people who had been more attuned to the Middle East during the peak of the Israeli Palestinian crisis, not descendants of the early immigrants who had by then completed their assimilation and remained estranged from the movement (Wald, 2008). Moreover, in New Jersey, interviews revealed that while Syrian-American activists were involved in Palestine-related campaigns, demonstrations and other types of political activism, they were also involved in the causes of other Arab-American communities, for example during the Iraqi war, or more recently during the protests and other types of activism and campaigns that echoed the uprisings happening in the Arab Spring countries before Syria. Some of the interviewees were active in the efforts of the Yemeni community and the Egyptian community. To this date, some are still involved with the other Arab activists, for example in their commemorations of their uprisings and revolts. After the protests erupted in Syria, however, activists reported a focus and a specialization on the part they should play in the Syrian issue, even as they maintained cordial relations with other Arab causes and activists. It is worthy of note, however, in our study of the Syrian-Americans of New Jersey and their organizations, that the interviewees took part in independent activism on behalf of the causes of other Arab communities, rather than engaging in these activities through the organizations that promoted these causes. This perhaps highlights a lack of will to leave a trail or indications of political activism that could be linked to them.

Syrian-Americans after the 1960s started participating in Arab-American organizations, professional associations, student unions and such other organizations. They were but one component of the Arab-American community, however, and as with their predecessors, these organizations still faced inwards towards the United States. During this time period renowned Arab-American organizations were founded, following the footsteps of ancestors such as the Arab National League. These associations focused on issues such as Arab-American political participation (The Arab

American Institute would be an example of an organization with such a focus) or on Anti-Arab discrimination (the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee has such a goal) with chapters in New Jersey and with Syrian-American members and board members in those chapters, as evidenced by the analysis of the websites and Facebook pages of these associations. Professional Arab organizations such as the National Arab American Medical Association also opened chapters in New Jersey (National Arab American Medical Association, 2016). At prestigious universities in the state, such as Princeton or Rutgers, no Syrian club can be found. The only student associations that can be linked to Syria are Arab-American associations and they must have encompassed the Syrian-American students as well (Princeton, 2017; Rutgers, 2017).

Specifically Syrian-American associations still existed, however. Professional associations, were established, and served to maintain good relations among Syrian-Americans practicing the same profession and to nurture a connection with the homeland. Founded in 1998, the Syrian American Medical Society is perhaps one of the most famous examples of such an association, and it provided its members with a variety of services related to the medical profession and field. It also helped establish a network amongst them and a link to Syria, the ancestral homeland. It was not, in any fashion, political, however, and it is still in operation today, though it has been changed by the events in Syria and it has established a foundation to help cater to the needs of the affected populations after the war started (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation, n.d.). Similarly, some associations were established with the blessing of the Syrian government through its embassy and were operational during that time period, for example the Syrian American Women's Association which was founded in 1993 and opened a chapter in New Jersey in 1994 (Syrian American Women's Association, 2016). Religious organizations, such as churches of Eastern denominations, which were founded by the early Syrians, still survive until today and cultivate around themselves a flourishing flock of believers who feel at home in these religious establishments and participate willingly to communal life through the lens of these churches. They have preserved their heritage and their link to their ancestral homeland. Islamic religious establishments, however, have not been particularly Syrian in nature. The Islamic center of Passaic County, for example, in whose management and activities Syrian-Americans

take part, encompasses all nationalities and ancestries. This is perhaps due to the fact that Muslim sects do not display the particular Eastern/Western divide which allowed the Syrian-American Christians to come to regard their faith as somehow associated with their country of origin and their ethnicity (Islamic Center of Passaic County, 2016).

In addition to melting within the American society as had happened with its older waves of immigrants, and compounding the effects of the Arabization of the diaspora, the consolidation of the Syrian state and the ascension of Baathist regime to power proved to be conducive to cementing the community's move away from Middle Eastern affairs. The regime, according to its opponents in the United States had played an instrumental part in instilling distrust and suspicion even among the diaspora community. "The walls have ears", said one activist, who is part today of one of the biggest Syrian American organizations operational in New Jersey, and openly boasts of maintaining an extensive network with other Syrian-American activists in the State. "There was no point in discussing Syrian politics" in the words of another activist and president of the New Jersey chapter of a political advocacy group today. When asked about Syrian American associations in New Jersey prior to 2011, interviewees cited a cultural club here and there, and even those did not survive for very long. Moreover, one major organization, the Syrian American Council, which was founded in 2005 and which today, describes its mission as "(...) to empower the Syrian-American community to organize and advocate for a free, democratic, and pluralistic Syria through American support." (Syrian American Council, 2017) was cited by activists but described as a grassroots organization whose work did not really kick off until the uprisings started in Syria in 2011. This organization did strive to remain neutral and was not cooperating with the regime according to activists. The Syrian Embassy in the United States was somewhat active with the organizations of the diaspora. It had a relationship with some organizations which were directly involved with it from their inception such as the Syrian American Women's Association, which still operates today, and which was founded by the wife of an ambassador of Syria. It opened four chapters, one of which was in New Jersey and is active today in helping the affected populations in the homeland. By nature of its founding figure, it was always oriented towards Syria rather than the United States, and remains so today. Other activities also took place for the

Syrian-American community of New Jersey and were organized by the embassy in the US. One member of a big organization spoke of festivities held in New Jersey for the commemoration of the independence of Syria, mentioning also the “Majles A’aza” held for the late president Hafez Al Assad. A “Majles A’aza” is an Arab tradition whereby the friends and acquaintances of the deceased present condolences to the family. These events took place under the patronage of the Syrian Embassy.

The presence of the Syrian state and its heavy hand even in faraway diaspora communities is disputed, however. The Embassy itself decries such allegations as pure inventions. Whether it was a fact that the Syrian American diaspora was under surveillance prior to 2011, or whether it was only the zealous imagination of those who are bent on bedeviling the regime, the result remains the same as to the effect this had on Syrian American organizations. It was effective in dissuading the diaspora from getting too political when it came to Syrian affairs. Before the 2011 uprisings, while some were active in domestic (US) politics, rarely anyone had any comment on Syrian affairs, or tried some form of activism to pressure the Syrian government. This was due to fear of reprisal or of consequences to be reckoned with if the person was reported (Qayyum, 2011). According to some of the interviewees, this was not common across other Arab-American communities. Even prior to the events of 2011, there was a conviction among the diaspora that the Syrian government made use of its embassies worldwide to spy on its citizens abroad. There was a widespread belief among the Syrian diaspora in the US and in other countries, that the homeland government was using undercover agents and ordinary Syrians to keep tabs on their expatriates.

This fear was not entirely unfounded and some facts do seem to lend credibility to it. Some Syrian expatriates, upon visiting Syria were presented with files containing information about their activities and lives in their adoptive countries. Some were threatened and some were asked to spy on their fellow expatriates (Amnesty International, 2011; Jorum, 2015; Qayyum, 2012; Solomon & Malas, 2011). As such, most people of Syrian ancestry tended to avoid other Syrians, which affected the ability to form a shared identity and a conscious community. There was a fear among members of the community that a stranger could be working for the Mukhabarat even in the

United States. This feeling was reported by members of Syrian American associations and activists in New Jersey, in interviews undertaken for this research as well as in articles published previously in newspapers and on websites of news channels (Malo, 2013; Tobia, 2012a, 2012b). While they are straightforward enough, today, about the nature of their activities and their goal of regime change in Syria, those among the community in New Jersey who are against the regime spoke of the period preceding the uprisings in the homeland as one where the community in the Northeastern state was fragmented and its members were deeply suspicious of one another. Naturally, this had a consequence on the establishment of Syrian American associations. According to interviewees, there were opponents to the regime here and there before 2011, but not in an organized fashion. The Syrian American community was so cautious that it failed to organize or to create networks or associations geared towards issues in Syria. These fears were further corroborated when, at the beginning of the uprisings, those who attended demonstrations and participated in the mobilization were recognized and received warning messages in which threats were issued against their families which remain in Syria (Tobia, 2012a; Tobia 2012b). This phenomenon intensified as the protests went on.

As we have seen, although since their coming to the United States and until 2011 the Syrian-Americans of New Jersey and the Northeast have remained generally centered on the US in their work in associations, and overall apolitical in the nature of their efforts, some key events back home have mobilized and moved them to political action. However, once the crisis had subsided, the community would resume its life and revert to its non-political, non-activist nature. Given the precedents set by the crises of 1915, 1925 and later (but to a lesser extent) the Palestinian/Israeli issue in which the Syrian-American community has been but peripherally interested, one can expect the humanitarian disaster caused by the Syrian civil war to have similar, but more amplified results. The era post-2011 has witnessed a significant increase in the rate and magnitude of the work of Syrian-American NGOs in New Jersey as will be demonstrated.

5.2 The Organizations and Political Activism of Syrian-Americans of New Jersey Post-2011

Just as Syria was erupting in protests, the diaspora was moved by what it was witnessing in the homeland to help in any way it could. According to the websites of many of the Syrian American organizations in New Jersey, the main drive to establish the associations or to participate in existing ones was the effect of the events in Syria (American Relief Coalition for Syria, 2016; Syrian American Council, 2014, p.3; SWASIA, 2016). Some within the community in New Jersey were spurred to action by the example of the rebels and what they saw as their courage under fire. Others rushed to defend a regime they saw as secular, successful in maintaining the stability of a country containing several sects and factions, and headed by an educated and young president (Adely, 2012). Whatever their political views, the Syrian-American community was empathetic and deeply moved by what was happening in Syria.

The result was a burgeoning civil society in the “mahjar”, in the adopted country, the likes of which was only seen by the community during the early immigration phases when the members of the diaspora were still soundly connected to Syria. The efforts of the organizations fell into several much-needed categories: political advocacy, charity, medical and healthcare services and refugee resettlement aid. In exploring the work of associations in New Jersey after 2011, five interviews were conducted with activists working in political advocacy groups (two interviews), medical assistance and charity (one interview), refugee resettlement organizations (one interview) and charitable associations (one interview). The perspectives of the interviewees were used to enrich and cross-check the information provided by several sources as to the dynamics of the civil society scene among the Syrian American community in the state of New Jersey after the uprisings of 2011.

The work of Syrian American organizations in New Jersey after 2011 can be observed and documented through their websites, and through the interviews that were conducted with their members and presidents. Even as the associations, new or old, religious or secular, political or charitable worked tirelessly for causes their members believed in and strove to promote, the NGO scenery in the community started to change

and evolve noticeably within the six years of the life of the war in Syria. The efforts of the diaspora were multi-faceted. Some associations worked at political advocacy, some focused on relief and charity, while others were mainly concerned with refugees coming into New Jersey.

5.2.1 Political Advocacy Groups

Political advocacy organizations can be found on both sides of the conflict. Some associations work to improve and polish the image of the regime, promoting it as the only rampart against the devastation of religious and ethnic minorities in Syria, stressing on the secular nature of the Baathist regime and on the youth and modernity of the embattled President Assad who is fighting for the preservation of his country. Other associations are pouring all their efforts on swaying the public opinion in the state of New Jersey and all across the country towards the rebels, highlighting the presence of a moderate opposition in the face of claims that all opponents to the regime are actually terrorists and doing their utmost to distance opposition to the regime from extremist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which have hijacked the revolution and twisted its goals. “We have been working very hard to [avoid being] in any way or shape connected to this terrorist organization” stated one of the interviewees. Both pro-regime and anti-regime advocacy groups have been very energetic in trying to bring American officials, elected representatives, and policymakers to tilt American foreign policy in Syria to their view point. They have been frequently travelling to, or collaborating with, mother organizations such as the Syrian American Council (SAC) or other associations based in Washington D.C. in an effort to push the Obama administration to adopt their views or to further their agendas on Syria. Some organizations have banded together with other similar associations from across the country in umbrella coalitions with the aim to be more efficient at lobbying for their cause. Examples of such coalitions include the Hands Off Syria Coalition (HOSC) and the Coalition for a Democratic Syria (CDS).

During the past six years or since their inception New Jersian associations have resorted to a panoply of means to press their points and advocate for their respective camps. Pro-Regime organizations have been active at trying to change what they perceive to be unjust portrayals of the regime and its head, President Assad, in the US media and in US government circles. As such, the members and presidents of New Jersey associations or their chapters have been responding to newspaper articles, editorials and opinion pieces published in the American media with their version of the truth, countering claims and debunking what they perceived as falsehoods in an effort to educate the American average person on what has really been happening in Syria, according to them. The communications director of the Syrian American Forum's New Jersey chapter, for example, has been prolific in this field. He has published biting replies and written letters to the editors of such prestigious newspapers as the New York Times (Moussa, 2015) and the Washington Post (Moussa, 2013). His organization and particularly its New Jersey chapter have been very active, throwing dinner parties, receiving and offering thanks to a Congresswoman who traveled to Syria on a "fact-finding mission" in which she was taken in charge by the Syrian government, petitioning the US government, and raising funds for the homeland and to fund their political activities. The New Jersey chapter of this organization has also received high-ranking Syrian government officials such as the Chairman of the Syrian Parliament and Syria's UN Envoy for whom they have organized an event that was attended by members of other organizations such as the Syrian American Will Association in 2015 (Syrian American Forum, 2017; Syrian American Will Association, 2016). The Pro-regime side has generally been adamant about keeping what they dub "foreign aggression" at bay, by which it is meant that they are trying to keep the United States away from military intervention in Syria, considering it to be an uninvited military interference in a sovereign country (Syrian American Forum, 2017; Syrian American Will Association, 2016). The organization called the Syrian American Will Association, which was founded by a New Jersian doctor, Dr. Suhail Saba (Adely, 2016), has spared no effort and adopted various approaches in its political activism. In addition to sending out various letters to ambassadors, congressmen and women, senators, and other influential leaders, it has addressed letters to the Syrian American community, started petitions to

the White House to lift travel restrictions on Syria's UN Ambassador, met with several UN representatives and US elected officials, appeared on TV shows and even held an exhibition in the UN seat in New York to promote the Syrian culture. In addition to all these measures, the organization has sent representatives to Syria in a "fact-finding" mission in which they met with government officials and army generals and from which they came back reporting the imminent victory of the pro-government camp, but also the great need and catastrophic situation of the populations in Syria, even in pro-government areas which are generally considered to be better off than rebel-held areas (Samaan & Barnard, 2015). Following this mission a charity was set up to send help and aid back to the homeland. Most interestingly, this organization also issues a regular publication called "The truth about Syria" which it sends to the offices of important leaders and lawmakers in an effort to sway them to their viewpoint. This particular organization has also hired a professional with years of experience to help with lobbying efforts in Washington D.C. (Syrian American Will Association, 2016). Both the Syrian American Forum and the Syrian American Will Association are part of an umbrella coalition called "Hands Off Syria Coalition" or HOSC, under which organizations of Syrian diaspora, peace activists and a plethora of other organizations agreed to cooperate to prevent a US/NATO intervention in Syria in an effort to topple the regime (Hands Off Syria Coalition, 2016).

Anti-Regime advocacy groups haven't been idle either. Their efforts have been manifold as well. The biggest and oldest advocacy group across the US, the Syrian American Council (SAC), has a chapter in New Jersey. The SAC's mission, which is to "empower the Syrian American community to organize and advocate for a free democratic and pluralistic Syria through American support" means that the organization advocates on behalf of the revolution, but also that it is engaged in public relations campaigns to enhance the image of the Syrian American community in the US. The group displays a similar array of methods as those used by pro-regime groups, such as writing and publishing op-eds in such newspapers as the Washington Post, the New York Times, The Huffington Post and Politico. Being a more prominent group than the pro-regime advocacy groups cited above, and enjoying a longer broader experience (the SAC has been operational since 2005) it is naturally more prolific and better connected

than the SAF or SAWA. It has succeeded in getting its activists to appear on such reputable TV channels as BBC News and CNN News in addition to others, and to be interviewed for articles in well-regarded publications such as the Wall Street Journal and the LA Times among others. Moreover, the organization has planned fundraisers, anniversary commemorations, held wakes and memorials for victims of the violence of the regime in the homeland, hosted panels, held press conferences, and sent out letters and petitions. It has also invited high ranking personalities from the Syrian opposition, such as George Sabra or Ghassan Hitto, in a mirror image of what the pro-regime groups have been doing. The organization took them on nationwide tours which have included New Jersey, and in which they have promoted their cause and held lectures and sessions with University students in various states. The organization enjoys an extensive and well-maintained network of relations with American officials and departments such as the National Security Council and Homeland Security, which have lent their ears to lobbyists and activists from the SAC on several occasions. Members of the association frequently meet with congressmen and women and communicate with them to press their points. The SAC also publishes scorecards for senators and congressmen according to their stances on Syria-related issues, and regularly post updates to these scorecards (Syrian American Council, 2017a). Moreover, the SAC has organized and participated in several campaigns such as efforts to get a bill voted on in the house (Syrian American Council; n.d.), or the National Advocacy Day for Syria on April 25, 2013 (Wilkie, 2013). This was a campaign called for by the Coalition for a Democratic Syria, an umbrella comprising several anti-regime advocacy groups including the SAC, and which consisted in gathering as many activists and sympathizers to travel to Washington and meet with their representatives to push the agenda of the Syrian revolution. Similarly, the SAC has also participated with other organizations in protests and demonstrations across the country, notably in front of the Russian Embassy in Washington. Several members of the New Jersey chapters were involved in such activities according to interviews. The organization has also sent activists to Syria's liberated areas in "fact finding" missions, again in a mirror image of what is being done on the other side of the divide, but, perhaps more importantly, the SAC has sent American youngsters and high school students to refugee areas in countries neighboring Syria as part of their Youth

Program, to volunteer with the refugees and earn community service hours in their institutions in counterpart. Because it is a better established organization which relies heavily on its national committees and their heads for national campaigns and efforts, and because it has not been founded by New Jersians such as in the case of the SAF for example, the New Jersey chapter has played its part but has not been central in the activities of the organization. The Houston chapter, for example, seems to be much more active and energetic according to the yearly reports of the SAC (Syrian American Council, 2014, 2015). The SAC and other organizations under the umbrella of the CDS have campaigned for a US intervention in the conflict, and have been working to coordinate between the efforts of local groups and individuals who may or may not be Syrian Americans, but who share similar values as those of the SAC. Contrary to pro-regime advocacy groups, these groups welcome the American hand in the efforts to transition Syria from under the Assad regime, and activists have deplored the lack of American efforts in this direction.

Political activity reached a peak and was especially acute in 2013, at the time when the famous “red line” drawn by President Obama, namely the use of chemical weapons against civilian populations, was allegedly crossed by the regime of President Assad in Syria. As such allegations surfaced, expectations of an American direct involvement on the side of the rebels, or at least punitive airstrikes against the regime were high. Among the New Jersian Syrian-Americans, the opinions were split in two camps, those who were against such airstrikes, and those who were pushing for them (Strunsky, 2013). Campaigning took place with fervor and passion on both sides of the divide (Adely, 2013, Shapiro, 2013). Organizations that were devoted to political advocacy, such as the Syrian American Council on the one hand and the Syrian American Forum and the Syrian American Will Association on the other threw all their weights behind the campaigns of their respective sides. Even religious organizations in the state participated in the effort to bring their preferred outcome to fruition (Shapiro, 2013; Strunsky 2013). Demonstrations, calls to representatives, petitions: no effort was spared to achieve the goal. The stakes were high and the attention of the world was, once again, focused on Syria, which seemed like an opportunity for activists to enroll the support of senators and congressmen who were usually uninterested in Syria-related

issues (Wilkie, 2013). Expectations and apprehensions ran high among the diaspora members as protestors in the United States took to the streets in demonstrations and counter demonstrations. The eventual resolution to the crisis came in the form of a diplomatic solution following negotiations between the US and Russia, after which an agreement emerged whereby the Syrian government would hand over their chemical weapons for destruction, avoiding the consequences of US airstrikes on various locations in an effort to locate the arsenal (BBC News, 2014). This solution was met with the approval of most of New Jersey's Syrian American community, with some remaining disappointed in the absence of military strikes which they estimated would be pivotal in the fight against the regime (Maag & Adely, 2013).

Similarly to what happened in 2013, in every phase in which the conflict in Syria has seen intensification in the violence and brutality inflicted upon civilians, organizations in New Jersey and elsewhere have increased their efforts correspondingly. This was due to two main reasons. First of all, as the conflict claims more victims at a faster tempo, the urgency of the situation naturally increases. An additional and practical reason would be what one activist cited as “(...) strike while the iron was hot” and making the most of the public and lawmakers' attention while it is drawn to Syria by such events that bring it to the spotlight once more (Wilkie, 2013). An example of this would be the fierce Russian bombing campaign on the rebel held East-Aleppo at the end of 2016, which has been matched by an escalation in the urgency and intensity of the Syrian American organizations' work, especially those that are anti-regime. This is especially applicable in the case of political advocacy organizations such as the SAC (Syrian American Council, 2016; Wishart, 2016) but also in the work of charitable organizations that have risen to the challenge of meeting increasingly dire needs in the homeland.

5.2.2 Charitable Organizations

Charitable associations of Syrian Americans in New Jersey have been providing a colossal effort throughout the crisis. Some charities are, by their own definition,

neutral. In such a massive scale humanitarian disaster brought about by political violence, however, most associations take a side in the war and a look at their work and websites is enough to unearth the barely hidden affiliations. This does not necessarily take away from their humanitarian efforts. Partisan organizations, religious institutions and even political advocacy associations have been working tirelessly at alleviating the suffering of their fellow countrymen and women in Syria. Organizations on both sides of the political divide have organized fundraisers, drives, collected donations and advertised for the cause of those suffering due to the violence in the homeland. In New Jersey, several charitable associations have been founded by New Jersians or have opened chapters in the state. The SAMS society, which was previously mentioned, was before the war a professional association that provided networking opportunities and services to Syrian American healthcare professionals (Syrian American Medical Society, n.d.). In the aftermath of the 2011 protests, it created the SAMS Foundation which focuses all its efforts on offering medical relief for the embattled populations in the homeland. The foundation has sent doctors and activists with medical aid and other types of aid to Syria and to the surrounding countries with their refugee populations. It has established, funded and helped run several field hospitals on the ground in some of the worst-hit cities such as Aleppo, field hospitals that have sometimes become the only way for the wounded in the battles and airstrikes to obtain medical attention. Its members were sent to Syria and the surrounding countries to provide training for doctors and other healthcare professionals working on the ground. The Foundation has raised funds in its many campaigns for the children of Syria, for the families of its fallen doctors and for other causes. Despite its proclamation of neutrality, however, the organization comes off as avowedly anti-regime. It has time and again highlighted the brutality of regime attacks on the towns and territories it was trying to regain. It has advocated in the US against the regime (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation, n.d.). This was not always the case, as the SAMS Society included, before the eruption of the uprisings, many doctors who are today fierce advocates of the regime. In fact, the doctor who was the president of its New Jersey chapter in 2011 has left the organization, along with some board members and regular members, following a clash that occurred soon after the uprisings. In one striking example of the effects of the war in Syria on the

New Jersey Syrian American community, the professional organization which was, since its inception, apolitical, was forced into introspection and was compelled to take a side following the harrowing news coming from the homeland. It was then that leading pro-regime board members resigned from their posts and left the organization (Malo, 2013; Syrian American Medical Society, 2012). Dr Naser Ani, the vice president of the Board and one of the members who left the organization, went on to found, with other like-minded members of the community, the Syrian American Forum, one of the most active pro-regime groups in the state (Syrian American Forum, 2012) and is currently the Chairman of the Syrian American League, which is a charitable organization tackling the needs of the affected populations in Syria, and of the needy Syrian-Americans in the United States (Syrian American League, 2016).

The Syrian American League is an example of a charitable association that is not explicitly endorsing any political views on the crisis in Syria. The fact that it was founded by the Syrian American Forum, however, as well as the political ideals of its members and the choice of the wording of the website information made available to the public, constitute strong indications as to where the organization stands on the issue. The same goes for other charitable organizations such as the Syrian American Wish Association, which has been established as the charitable arm of the SAWA political advocacy group, and which is explicitly political, though they are still efficient in offering help to affected populations in Syria. Similarly, there are biased groups and charities on the other side, such as SWASIA and SAMS. While they are more or less open about their political ideals, all of these associations are linked together by one goal, which is to help their kin and compatriots in Syria.

Syrian American charities and individuals have been faced with obstacles in their efforts to raise funds and send relief to Syria. The banking sector has been particularly wary of any financial transactions that are headed for Syria, for two reasons. The first is that sanctions are imposed against high-ranking individuals within the Assad Regime. The second is that the American fight against terrorism has left the banks exposed to investigations and lawsuits in case any transaction could be linked to terrorist organizations operating in Syria. Consequently, deep and additional investigations were

conducted for any such transactions. The additional time and cost required to regulate and investigate accounts and transfers linked to Syria have sometimes provided a further reason for the banks to decline doing business with certain clients. Money transferring companies followed the same procedure of extra care when it came to funds sent to the troubled country. Moreover, according to activists, even personal money transfers to the homeland were and remain difficult, with many questions asked and with the transactions being sometimes cancelled without any specific reason being given. Reports of difficult transactions, additional investigation and even the unexplained closing down of bank accounts of Syrian Americans in the state of New Jersey were investigated in an article by the local newspaper, The Record (Adely, 2014), and were corroborated by some of the interviewees, as well as by an article recently published by Reuters (Torbat, 2017). Other interviewees spoke of “friends of friends” who have had such problems, but it was never someone they personally knew or a story they could personally verify.

Just as with political advocacy groups, Syrian American charities have also banded together under the umbrella of the ARCS or American Relief Coalition for Syria. Under this coalition, New Jersey Syrian American charitable association SWASIA can be found, as well as organizations that have chapters in the state like SAMS. This coalition aims to coordinate efforts at relief for those in Syria as well as for refugees in neighboring countries. Its goal is to maximize efficiency to be best able to undertake this task. It is strictly non-political, and is also active in providing help for the Syrian refugees that reach the United States. These coalitions, whether political or charitable, highlight the intensive networking going on among the Syrian American community, which was traditionally fragmented and tried to stay away from activism. In the face of the magnitude of the crisis, the members of the community have not only banded together within the state of New Jersey, but they have also established connections with Syrian Americans in other states. The community has transitioned from one with barely existing, skin-deep, non-militant networks to one with extensive networks and cooperation initiatives that link activists and volunteers from across the country who are brought together by a cause.

5.2.3 Refugee Relief Associations

In addition to political advocacy and charitable work, Syrian refugees arriving to the US have constituted a separate category. By nature of their goal, charitable associations have been involved in helping the refugees arriving to New Jersey. However, only one Syrian American association based in New Jersey has specialized in working with refugees that have been resettled in the State, in addition to also tending to those in the countries surrounding Syria, as well as those in Europe. It is the “Refugee Outreach International” organization, which was founded by second generation Syrian-American Rana Shanawani, who has a long experience with heading NGOs even back in Syria. Its aim is to help Syrian refugees in New Jersey integrate and start their new lives on a better footing. Their work in New Jersey, which has received a meager number of 194 refugees since the start of the crisis and as of August 2016, has been multifaceted (Goldman, 2016; Jackson, 2016). The association and its founder have worked at easing the refugees’ transition by matching them with sponsors in New Jersey, which can be individuals or institutions. These sponsors have not only been involved in helping provide for the families’ material needs, but they have also formed bonds of friendship with them, providing for them an embryo of a support system to give them the best shot at getting back on their feet in their new lives, and making them feel welcomed and embraced by their neighbors (Kadosh, 2015; Refugee Outreach International, personal communication, October 5, 2016). The organization has also coordinated with independent volunteers, people who are seeking to help, as well as Syrian-American and other religious institutions, including mosques, churches and synagogues which have been instrumental to the effort to settle refugees in this state (Horowitz, 2015). The role of religious institutions in this regard should be highlighted, as it has been a recurrent theme in several articles and in interviews conducted with activists. Other than helping refugees with material support, setting up fundraisers and clothing drives for them, the organization and other institutions have helped orchestrate English tutoring for the newcomers, as language is often the greatest obstacle to refugee integration (Fertig, 2016; ROI, 2016). The organization is working with a local university to research how to tailor programs to the special cases of the refugees so as to optimize learning. In this they have also received the help of sympathetic members of the Arab New Jersey

community, not just the Syrian Americans, and of New Jerseyans from all backgrounds. The association displays a proud figure of 50% non-Arab volunteers of all ages, as young as 8 and as old as 70. Moreover, members of the organization have been engaging in a PR campaign to improve the understanding of the general public as to the situation of the refugees, their conditions back home and in the camps of overwhelmed countries of first asylum (Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey). Other organizations that are non-Syrian American but that specialize in refugee aid have lobbied the government on behalf of the refugee issue, in an effort to increase the proclaimed goal of accepting 10,000 refugees from Syria (Foley, 2015). These reputable organizations, such as the Church World Service (CWS) or the International Rescue Committee (IRC) were not joined in their lobbying efforts by the Refugee Outreach International organization, which is staying away from all politicization and retains a decidedly apolitical character. Charitable organizations, which have been concerned with alleviating the suffering in Syria, and for Syrians situated in camps around the homeland, have also been helping in the effort to support and integrate refugees. While this may not be their main goal like the Refugee Outreach International, they have been mindful of those of their compatriots who have been resettled in New Jersey. Non-charitable organizations, such as the SAC, have been participating in the effort to help the families of Syrians that have recently arrived in the US too. The SAC has established a hotline in 2015 for the Syrian refugees arriving in the country (Syrian American Council, 2015). Interestingly, the hotline is also for Syrian-Americans in general and is intended to help improve intra-community communications in one anecdotal illustration of how the war in Syria has affected intra-community dynamics. The Syrian American Forum and the Syrian American Will association, which are both pro-regime, have also spoken out on behalf of Syrian refugees, castigating a former presidential candidate for characterizing them in offensive terms, with SAWA sending him a letter (Syrian American Will Association, 2015) and the SAF condemning his statement and calling on their members to express their displeasure via the website of the candidate (Syrian American Forum, 2015). Interviews conducted for “The Record”, a local newspaper in New Jersey, have showcased that Syrian-Americans from across the political spectrum have generally been united in defending Syrian refugees and in fighting the perception that those refugees pose a threat (Adely, 2015).

They fear that the image of the Syrian-American may be affected by this crisis, and that the general society would come to regard with apprehension a group that has been successfully integrated and has contributed to the country.

The activities of the various Syrian American organizations in New Jersey are numerous and the associations are dynamic. The nature of their work, the tempo, the magnitude and the geographic location of its beneficiaries reveal changes in the civil society landscape for the Syrian American community in the State. This evolution is a mere reflection of the changes undergone by the community itself.

Chapter Six

Changes in the Community

The number of Syrian American associations has no doubt increased since 2011, and their work has become much more diverse and intense. The impact of these changes has not been felt by activists or members of the associations only, but also by the general community, on whom several changes can be observed. The relations between the Syrian-American diaspora and the New Jersian general society have also been affected by the war as is further detailed below.

6.1 Breaking the Wall of Fear and Emergence of Tensions.

In intra-group relations, two mutually reinforcing phenomena took place, linking the associations to the general Syrian-American public. On the one hand, the growing willingness amongst the Syrian Americans of New Jersey to participate in what was happening in the homeland led to the need to organize and systematize the efforts so as to be most efficient. This naturally led to more and more organizations being established. On the other hand, the birth of a network within the community, brought about by the organizations and their activities was one of the factors that encouraged otherwise apolitical or silent Syrian-Americans to come out of their shell and participate, seeking protection in numbers and inspired by what they saw as the courage of those fighting in Syria (on both sides of the conflict) and willing to die for their country. The fact that the associations provided an institutional framework for action and took it upon themselves to organize events and campaigns and to deal with the details of political activism and charitable events made it easier for the average Syrian American to participate without having to allocate many hours of their day or much effort or money to the cause. Participating became as easy as signing a petition, sending an email or making a phone

call. More dedicated supporters of the causes took to the streets in New Jersey and across the US, especially in Washington, but they did not have to take any initiative as the events were already orchestrated by associations and networks of associations. The sheer exponential growth in the number of organizations made it easier to be involved and provided a path to political or charitable activity. Moreover, the fact that these events and campaigns were coordinated by associations rather than private or social media initiatives that would only gather a few people, gave ordinary Syrian Americans throughout New Jersey a layer of protection. Where political involvement and opinions about domestic politics in Syria was perceived by the community to be borderline dangerous, even in the US, the somewhat large crowds that gathered at the call of associations provided safety in numbers. Those who may have shied away from initiating any political advocacy movement now could follow the lead set by the members of Syrian American organizations. Safety in numbers is one way to overcome the alleged surveillance of the regime, which, if it was discreet and somehow undocumented before 2011, intensified in the wake of the revolts shaking Syria.

The few Syrian-American activists who were outspoken in their opposition to the regime in Syria, or at least, in their demand for reforms before 2011 are reportedly familiar with the side effects that come out of such actions. Phone calls and harassment were a regular occurrence according to previous interviews given by some of them (Tobia, 2012b). Even non-active members of the Syrian American community of New Jersey felt the presence of the Syrian government whenever the community gathered (Dougherty, Cratty, Crawford & Sterling, 2011). After March 2011, which marks the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, Syrian-Americans from New Jersey were inspired to do something to help the cause of their embattled compatriots, whether they sided with the regime or the rebels. The sight of the Syrians standing up to get rid of a hated regime, or, conversely, the sight of the national army rising to defend a secular and modernizing regime, spurred the community across both sides of the divide into action (Adely, 2011; Syrian American Council, 2014). According to anti-regime Syrian-Americans, the Syrian regime responded by intensifying its surveillance on them, by harassing them, and even by bringing physical harm upon their families back in Syria. In interviews conducted for this research as well as in previous interviews, activists

report receiving messages advising them to stay away from demonstrations organized against the regime, and to rally around the regime in order to save Syria (Tobia, 2012b). Others report receiving threats to which some did comply by stopping their activities. More worrisome, however, are the testimonies of US-based activists reporting that their families remaining in Syria have been visited by government agents, and sometimes even seriously harmed or killed (Dougherty et al., 2011; PBS Newshour, 2012; Solomon & Malas, 2011; Tobia, 2012b). While the gravest of these allegations were made by the activists, the Syrian embassy in D.C. brushed them off as lies and defamation. The US State Department did confirm, however, coming across reports of surveillance with a credible backing, enough for the State Department to confine the ambassador to a 25-mile radius around Washington and to investigate reports of the activists' families being harmed in Syria. Moreover, the FBI launched an investigation into these allegations as well, and met at regular intervals with certain militants to warn them to exercise caution (Dougherty et al., 2011; Solomon & Malas, 2011).

In June 2012, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted a Syrian American, Mohamad Soueid, following charges that he was operating a network of spies for the Syrian government, a network charged with keeping tabs, audio and video recordings and lists of the activities of demonstrators and activists who gathered to protest in Washington D.C. (The United States Department of Justice, 2012) The defendant was charged with operating under the orders of the Syrian government and of recruiting people to collect information for him. While the defendant is based in Virginia and the surveillance happened in Washington D.C., many New Jersey activists travel with New Jersey based associations to the capital to participate in demonstrations, sit-ins and other forms of protest. As such, the discovery of such a network of spies touches on them directly (PBS Newshour, 2011, Tobia, 2012a). This indictment by U.S. federal courts provides one of the rare available pieces of hard evidence of such activities occurring.

The existence of surveillance is further corroborated by an employee in the Syrian Embassy in Washington who turned double-agent and helped the rebels back in Syria. Mr. Bassam Barabandi was a diplomat at the embassy when the protests began. After demonstrations erupted in front of the embassy, Mr. Barabandi was sent to gather

some of the protestors and usher them in to meet with the ambassador. This was when a clash erupted between the ambassador and one of the activists, who had, at this point, been emboldened enough by the breaking of the wall of fear in Syria to freely give his full name, in an illustration of how the members of the community have changed. Following the incident, the family of the activist back in Syria was interrogated and harassed, ending up in the alleged killing of his brother. Following this incident, Mr. Barabandi, who was promoted to the rank of counselor helped to discreetly issue new passports and renew the papers of prominent regime opponents who had been denied such papers in order to keep them within reach of the regime. Moreover, he leaked the names of activists in the United States who were being surveilled by the embassy, helping them avoid the consequences or warn their families of impending actions.(Entous, 2014). Mr. Barabandi's insider information provides backing to the allegations that the Syrian Embassy in Washington was providing information about the Syrian-American dissidents to the Syrian government. Facts and well-sourced evidence of the existence of regime surveillance of dissidents in the United States post-2011 is very rare. However, even where available, the evidence concerns the Washington D.C. area and only affects New Jersians in as far as they go to Washington D.C. to demonstrate. Surveillance in New Jersey could not be substantiated, with activists being the only source that has mentioned intimidation tactics, and even then, it could not be linked to the regime in any direct way.

Mr. Barabandi's spy story highlights the presence of surveillance of activists in the United States and showcases the fact that there are consequences to be reckoned with for opposing the regime, even from so far away. However, as with the activist who confronted the ambassador, it also underscores how the Syrian-American community was encouraged by the examples of the Syrians in the homeland and by their defiance of the regime to break the wall of fear that existed even among the diaspora. The fact that the community was able to overcome the ghost of surveillance after 2011 does not mean that this was not a hurdle in its path to organizing. It was only partly successful, however, as more and more people joined the movement of activism for Syria in the US. This is evidenced by the intensification of the efforts of the organizations in New Jersey and elsewhere, and by the creation of nationwide networks with well-known names and

faces. And while some anti-regime interviewees spoke of their families back in Syria and of not being able to return to the homeland, or for that matter, to some countries such as Lebanon for fear of being extradited back to the regime which knows them so well by now, they did not display stress or fear and were more than willing to participate in this research as well as in interviews with newspapers and radio stations. The internet is teeming with such interviews and debates and the Syrian American community in New Jersey now has a long list of activists who are recognized for the role they are playing in keeping the community in touch with the homeland and active in the efforts to overthrow the regime. Mehrunisa Qayyum, in her policy brief to the Middle East Institute that contains interviews of young Syrian-Americans right after the start of the uprisings in Syria, has highlighted this change in attitude, bringing to the fore of the discussion the fact that these young people were willing to be identified and to give their full details, contrary to previous years and previous studies conducted. One of the interviewees in Qayyum's study is a Syrian-American from New Jersey who is presently the Mayor of one of the boroughs in the State and a very pivotal figure among the community. He has been very open about his positions and his activism, despite his local fame (Qayyum, 2011). Moreover, membership numbers of Syrian American organizations in New Jersey as well as the numbers of protestors in demonstrations or participants in drives or fundraisers show a willingness to participate that has grown with the war. Interviewees report an increase in the number of members for political activism groups and for charitable foundations that were in place before 2011, as presidents of associations have recounted in previous interviews with The Guardian newspaper (Malo, 2013). New chapters were inaugurated across the country as the numbers of those willing to participate in one way or the other in what was going on in Syria grew.

Surveillance and intimidation attempts were very intensive at the beginning of the conflict, when it was still, in the early stages, a peaceful uprising. With time, it seems that the Syrian government, getting more and more engulfed by the quagmire of the war, lost the interest or the ability to monitor the US-based diaspora. Barely in control in Syria itself, it could not have had the luxury of keeping up with the Syrian-American community's efforts and activities. Activists interviewed for this research report receiving threats at the very beginning of their activism, right after March 2011. As the

conflict prolonged, they all report that the harassment almost disappeared and the threats stopped coming. In the issue of surveillance, in any case, it is more perceptions, than actual facts, that appear to matter, as the very rumor or suspicion of being watched had kept the Syrian American community of New Jersey fragmented and passive before 2011, whereas court rulings indicting Syrian spies working on US soil have not been able to keep them away from political advocacy after 2011.

Pro-regime organizations and their members need not, of course, worry about the regime. Some of their members have expressed, if not a fear, a certain caution around anti-regime sympathizers, though not in New Jersey (Tobia, 2012b). While they may not be in direct jeopardy from fellow New Jersian Syrian Americans, the pro-regime camp has been on the receiving end of several boycott campaigns in the State. In an exemplification of how the activism of associations has trickled down into the larger community, boycotts were called for by anti-regime activists against businesses that were either pro-regime or even those that were reluctant to come out in the open with their political views. It was the view of the anti-regime activists that in such hard times of human rights abuses and catastrophic destruction in the homeland, the very fact that one was not willing to take a clear side was a moral faux-pas (Adely, 2011; Malo, 2013). The boycotters went as far as to lock up the business of one pro-Assadist and to use extra strong glue to envelop the lock, according to the business owner (Adely, 2011). According to the interviews conducted for this thesis, these boycotts were sometimes successful, but were undermined by the need of the diaspora members to acquire a number of Syria-related items and foods that are not always readily available in the US and that were only imported by some specific stores.

The campaigns against pro-regime interests were not restricted to businesses, however. They extended to campaigns to undermine certain events organized by pro-Assad associations and to prevent them from taking place. In one instance reported by an activist, a festivity planned to mark the independence of Syria, which was to include Ambassador to the UN Bashar al Jaafari was cancelled due to activists calling the restaurant and advising it not to hold the event. In other instances the campaigns were not so successful. One important incident occurred when New Jersey born organization

the Syrian American Forum tried to invite Syrian Mufti Hassoun for a tour to the U.S. This resulted in a massive campaign by New Jersey activists as well as by Washington activists and associations around the country which encouraged people to make their displeasure known, especially as the Mufti was recorded issuing direct threats to the United States on a previous occasion. Thousands of people participated in the campaign, calling the State Department, members of congress, the venue that was supposed to host his lecture. This was one of the most successful campaigns which resulted in the tour being cancelled and in the Mufti never making it to the United States (AFP/NOW Lebanon, 2012). The success of these boycotts and campaigns showcase participation of the general Syrian-American community, not just activists and members of associations, in these efforts. These occurrences also give rise to tensions among the community members. The tensions were evident when a pro-regime protest was met with an anti-regime protest on the streets of Patterson New Jersey in April 2011, resulting in clashes and an eruption of violence which required police intervention. “There’s a fragile peace among the Syrian Diaspora in New Jersey”, according to an article in the Daily Herald published in 2013. Syrian-Americans in the State feel cautious about undertaking public activities, conscious that it might lead to clashes (AP, 2013).

Refugees have occasioned another source of tensions within the community. The organizations of the community have displayed a united front in the defense of the refugees, as seen above. Fear of stereotyping has also prompted an apparent homogeneity in the statements of ordinary Syrian Americans in New Jersey where the question of refugees is concerned. However, some activists interviewed for this research have been adamant that the pro-regime Syrian Americans have been actively promoting hatred and fear of Syrian refugees. “They have been contributing to demonizing refugees,” one of the interviewees alleged. “They should be ashamed of themselves”. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. While most of the Syrian-American community in Pennsylvania, for example, which is fiercely pro-Assad, has been outspoken in its rejection of refugees (AP, 2015a), the community in New Jersey contains milder and more varied opinions, in a reflection of its composition. While they express a professed solidarity with refugees, some members of the community who are pro-regime may feel resentment towards the refugees who are overwhelmingly anti-

Assad. If that is the case, however, the pro-regime associations have been successful in glossing over it and in presenting a more compassionate façade to the world. Moreover, refugee organizations that are, by their own accounts “apolitical” and in which politics are “never brought up” have included pro-regime and anti-regime activists working side by side for this bridging cause. It may be the case that the pro-regime section of the community harbors no such feelings, and that anti-regime activists are overly zealous in their approach to the defense of their compatriots. Or perhaps some within the pro-regime camp do harbor resentment. The accusations, in and by themselves, however, stem from existing tensions and feeling within the community that the other side has somehow betrayed the homeland.

The tensions that have arisen amongst the community are a direct result of the war and of the whipping up of patriotic feelings that it has brought about, intensified by the work of Syrian American associations. Such tensions have not been kept strictly among the community, as relations with the general society in the state have also been affected by the Syrian civil war.

6.2 Relations with the New Jersian Society

The major headlines for the American sentiments over the conflict in Syria have been generally constant throughout the six year duration of the war, only slightly changing, but not decisively so, at times of heightened crisis such as during the 2013 alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. The first constant is an aversion to US involvement in yet another Middle-Eastern quagmire (Edwards-Levy, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2012). The second is an approval for US airstrikes against ISIS (Pew Research Center, 2014) and the third is a refusal to admit refugees into the United States (Alter, 2015). As for the intricacies of the issue, according to activists in New Jersey the Americans have very superficial knowledge of all the details of the conflict, and most are not too closely interested. This is supported by poll results. In a poll conducted by Pew Research center in 2013, only 15% of those surveyed reported following up on the news coming from Syria, even as the United States was debating whether to launch

airstrikes there (Pew Research Center, 2013). It is enough to hear a serious presidential candidate ask, “What is Aleppo?” at the peak of the fighting in the city to understand the American distance from the war in Syria (Rappeport, 2016).

6.2.1 The Centrality of ISIS in the American Mindset

New Jersian interest in this war has mainly centered on ISIS, according to interviewees. As one activist reported in his interview, the New Jersian opinion towards the rebels was rather favorable at the onset of the conflict, with the view that these were people fighting to get rid of a brutal and repressive regime. Nationwide opinion polls do reflect American disapproval of the Syrian regime, though there is no specific poll for New Jersey to make the decisive case for it in the state. American opinion was shown to be unfavorable towards Syrian president Bashar al Assad as of late 2013 (Gallup, 2013) but this does not translate into a favorable opinion of the rebels. The interviewee’s claim that the tide turned against the rebels when ISIS emerged and became one of the main players in Syria is not borne out by the polls either. Public approval rates of the Syrian “moderate” rebels have been consistently low. Disapproval of the Syrian Regime does not translate into support for the rebels, with 60% of Americans expressing the view that they may not be better than the Syrian government (Stokes, 2013). The striking expansions of ISIS and its reliance on sensationalism to spread its fame have given fruit, however, and have made it one of the main fixtures of the conflict in Syria. Now, one only has to follow up on the news concerning Syria and how it is reported in the West to understand the centrality of ISIS to western interests and considerations. Interviewees relayed feeling this American focus on ISIS over the course of their activism. “You can’t mention Syria without ISIS being the first word on the lips [of your interlocutor],” said one of the activists. In a poll conducted for the Brookings Institution, Americans polled showed a very unfavorable attitude towards both the regime and ISIS. Despite that, a majority expressed the view that the United States should not be fighting the regime, it should instead allow the regime to fight ISIS, as the rebels were seen as too weak to stand up to either ISIS or the Assad government. This comes even as 70% of those polled agreed that the war will not be resolved as long as the regime is in place, and that

it was as bad as ISIS. This somewhat confusing image would be better understood if one factors in the strong American rejection of U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict, aside from fighting ISIS. While the American public remains persuaded that the Assad government is a brutal regime, they have no appetite for war and, indeed, see little interest in removing the regime from power (Telhami, 2015).

To anti-regime organizations, the Islamization of the rebellion has proven to be a considerable hurdle. In their efforts to promote the cause of the rebels, the associations have had to address the risk of being linked to terrorist groups in the perceptions of the public. Allegations of being linked to terrorists have even followed prominent American politicians who advocate for arming the moderate rebels, such as Senator John McCain (Gladstone, 2014). The endeavors and work of the organizations have been complicated by the need to distance themselves from such links, as goodwill has definitely been driven down by the possibility that the rebels could all be Islamist terrorists, and that none of them were really moderates.

Public opinion has also impacted the American response to the crisis in Syria. Just as Syrian American advocacy groups have been trying to push the American Administration towards taking decisive steps in Syria such as the establishment of no-fly zones, or airstrikes against the regime at the time of the chemical weapons crisis, the lack of public support for American involvement in the crisis has stayed the hands of president Obama, who is not a hawk or a very interventionist president to start with. As such, the polls indicating that the American public was very much opposed to arming the moderate rebels must have played a part in the lack of American support to them in this area (Pew Research Center, 2013). The work of the advocacy groups has been made that much harder with the turning of the conflict into a civil war, and with the association in the minds of portions of the American society of the rebels with the Islamists and with such groups as ISIS. While the image of the regime remains negative in opinion polls, the image of the rebels is hardly better.

While the lack of American interest in the conflict in Syria has posed a challenge to both pro-regime and anti-regime groups, the perception of the rebels as being weak and hardly better than Assad, added to the danger presented by ISIS, has helped along

the agenda of the pro-regime advocacy organizations and hindered the anti-regime ones. On their websites and in their mission statements, the pro-Assad associations have driven the knife in the wound of the anti-Assad camp by highlighting the rhetoric that Assad is fighting terrorists who are trying to destroy his country. The usage of certain terminologies like “foreigners” and “terrorists” to describe those fighting the regime, and “secular” or “protecting minorities” to describe the regime is instrumental in pushing forth such a narrative. It is also done for the benefit of the New Jersian public, to generate more sympathy towards the regime.

6.2.2 Syrian Refugees

Syrian refugees were another point of contention among the New Jersey society, and an issue that was hotly debated. While the Syrian-American community has, at least on the surface, offered a unified front in support of their brethren fleeing the war and lucky enough to have been accepted as refugees in the United States, the rest of the New Jersian society has not been so homogeneous. Some do support the welcoming of refugees into the United States, citing the American culture of welcoming those in need and the Christian values behind such hospitality. Moreover, the number of refugees that has been put forth by the Obama administration is very limited and will not add much strain on the US economy. The country is wealthy enough to take in those that are in need of refuge and to take care of its own: that was the argument often advanced by those New Jersians who welcome refugees. This comes to counter the demand by those against refugees that the US should care for its own veterans first. With a problem of veteran homelessness and destitution, the New Jersians who don't want refugees to be let in cite the need to care for Americans as the main reason why they are against refugee to admissions (Danzis, 2015; O'Brien, 2015).

The fear that refugees would constitute a serious security threat and act as a Trojan horse for ISIS infiltrators was close behind in reasons prompting New Jersians to oppose the admission of Syrian refugees, despite claims by the pro-refugee camp that the vetting process was more than thorough (Danzis, 2015; O'Brien, 2015). This fear is

shared widely across the United States and is prompting governors to convey their constituents' wishes and refuse to allow refugees into their states, even if they do not have the real power to stop them from being admitted there. The governor of New Jersey has made it clear that the state would no longer participate in this program, prompting the federal government to collaborate with local NGOs to do the work (Krieg, 2015; Livio & Salant, 2016).

The fear that the refugees might constitute a terror threat is, according to an analysis conducted by the CATO institute in 2016, unfounded, with refugees committing exactly zero fatal attacks on US soil since the 1980 Refugee Act which put in place the strict and thorough screening process still followed today (Levenson, 2017; Nowrasteh, 2016). Conversely, diasporas from war-torn countries do sometimes present a risk of radicalization. The literature on the matter has provided several key elements that can help identify whether a diaspora is bound to be radicalized or to turn violent. Diasporas turn to terrorism and violence in an effort to get their cause back on the international agenda. Such was the case of the Armenian diaspora, for example, which used terrorism coupled with diplomatic efforts to advance its cause (Shain & Barth, 2003). Moreover, the diasporas most likely to fund or to participate in terrorist activities are conflict-generated diasporas, rather than diasporas constituted mainly of economic migrants. The Palestinian diaspora, the Armenian diaspora, the Sri-Lankan diaspora and the Kurdish diaspora provide examples and case studies that back such a theory (Faist, 2000; Lyons, 2009). Finally, it seems that diasporas are most likely to turn radical or to back radical elements at certain phases of the homeland crisis. One such occurrence would be at times of highest abuses against homeland populations and kin populations. Another delicate timing is when the moderate currents are seen as unlikely to win or illegitimate. A final critical phase is after the conflict has subsided, during the peace process, in the case where the goals of the insurgents in the home country have not been fulfilled (Koinova, 2009).

In light of these findings by previous research, does the Syrian-American diaspora in New Jersey constitute a risk of radicalization? It doesn't seem like the risk is high. The diaspora is not conflict-generated. It is rather constituted of economic

immigrants, some of whom have been present for a long time in the state, and some who are more recent arrivals. Moreover, the Syrian cause is very much on the international agenda and is still at the heart of the foreign policy concerns of the United States. The Syrian war has passed through phases of acute human rights violations committed by both sides of the conflict. During those times, there is no evidence that the Syrian-American New Jersians have radicalized or supported radical groups in Syria. To the contrary, the organizations have been adamant in criticizing and condemning extremist activities, including calling on the United States to conduct airstrikes against ISIS (Wishart, 2015). Today, the conflict has reached a less violent stage. However, the moderate actors have not only lost legitimacy, there are those who would argue that they have disappeared altogether. Additionally, the goals of the rebels have not been reached, far from it. The regime, having recently dominated the war on the ground, by all accounts, and enjoying the backing of committed and determined allies who are ensuring its survival in diplomatic negotiations, seems poised to stay in power. Could these two factors pose a risk of radicalization for the community?

History does not back this claim up. Syrian terrorism on U.S. soil has been nonexistent. According to a study conducted by the Cato Institute, there have been no records that a Syrian-American has ever been a part of a terrorist operation in the United States (Nowrasteh, 2017). In New Jersey, post-2011, however, there have been several arrests made of individuals who were part of a cell related to ISIS, and who were radicalized in the context of the war in Syria. They were preparing attacks on US soil and some of them did attack law enforcement officers. Some were arrested when they tried to go to ISIS territory in Syria. Two of those arrested are Jordanian-Americans, one is Ghanaian-American, and one is a non-Arab-American convert. None were Syrian-Americans, however (AP, 2015b; Mueller, 2015).

6.2.3 Syrian-Americans Returning to Syria

Some Syrian-American New Jersians have gone back to Syria, nonetheless. Most of those who have done so have gone back as part of humanitarian and relief efforts.

They have travelled within the cadre of missions by Syrian-American associations. There is no record of Syrian-Americans from New Jersey joining the fight against the government in Syria. Syrian-Americans from other states, however, have traveled to the homeland and fought the regime, including a student who joined the rebels for a while, with the only condition that he would not associate with Islamist fighters, and vowed to come back after obtaining his degree in the US (Johnson, 2013). Another Syrian-American from Texas has been reported to have joined ISIS and been killed in the fight (Engel, Plessner, Connor & Schuppe, 2016). The numbers and figures of the Syrian Americans who have been enticed and committed enough to take the step and go to Syria are extremely small, with research finding only one Syrian-American allegedly fighting and dying with ISIS. Remarkably, nonetheless, one New Jersey Syrian-American has gone back to support the regime, in one of the few well-documented such occurrences. The man, a first-generation Syrian American, went back to allegedly help the regime but not fight (Hills, 2013). He ended up rising in importance to the point that he is organizing militias in the Old City in Damascus, and is constantly accompanied by bodyguards. He has played a central role in helping with the establishment and control of neighborhood militias in the Old City (Barnard, 2013). Do those who choose to go back to the homeland in times of war, determined to play a part in the battle pose a risk to their adopted society upon their return? Not according to a study published by the Brookings Institution. While high ranking security officers such as the director of the FBI have warned of the high threat posed by such returnees, according to the Brookings Institution, the threat is exaggerated. Most of them will not return to the United States, and those that do return come back disillusioned with their ideologies. Even those who go back to the US with a determination to carry out terrorist attacks in their adopted societies would constitute a marginal threat, as they would be closely observed (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). While such may be the case, and as the potential threat should not be dismissed based on one study alone, these returnees, where they exist, certainly need to be thoroughly monitored and followed up by the proper authorities.

6.2.4 Perceptions of Already Established Syrian-Americans in New Jersey

Facts backed up by studies and research (Byman & Shapiro, 2014; Levenson, 2017, Nowrasteh, 2016, 2017) show that the risk of radicalization among the Syrian-American community in New Jersey and among the incoming Syrian refugees resettled there is practically nonexistent. Facts are not always what drive people, however, especially in difficult and changing times such as those the world is going through today. Has the fear that the Syrian refugees may be radicalized been projected on the Syrian American community already well integrated in the New Jersey social fabric, despite research indicating that it is not likely to radicalize? There is no clear indication that perceptions of this community have changed. No polls or incidents reviewed for this research have been reported that show a negative influence of the war in Syria or the refugee issue on how the Syrian Americans were perceived by the general society in the State. However, this previously mostly invisible minority is now very much in the spotlight. While no problems have been reported, extra scrutiny of this community has manifested itself in New Jersey through high police presence even at demonstrations that have not gathered a high number of people (Danzis, 2015). Moreover, the banking and money transferring difficulties reportedly encountered by members of the community in New Jersey prove that the community is indeed under the microscope (Adely, 2014). Activists interviewed report that, growing up in New Jersey, nobody knew where Syria was, with their classmates and fellow Americans sometimes confusing it with Siberia. Now, awareness penetration is close to 100%, according to one activist and CEO of an organization. Everybody, at least on the two coasts has heard of Syria. While they may not be following up the news closely, New Jersians are generally aware of the situation in the country.

Syria has been viewed unfavorably by 80% of Americans as of 2016 (Gallup, 2016). The combination of the war, the exodus of the refugees, the brutality of the regime, the emergence of ISIS and the general collapse of the country has rendered Americans understandably wary of a country they already did not view very favorably. Even though no radicalization of the community has been tangibly felt, and even in the absence of any incidents or threats either by refugees or by the Syrian-American community, the percentage of Americans who view Syria negatively has crossed the 70% threshold as the uprisings erupted, and continued to rise steadily throughout the

war, a change that should have been felt by the Syrian American community in New Jersey. Interviewees, however, have remarkably not backed this up in their interviews. This may be due to the fact that they admittedly remain out of contact with people who are prejudiced against Muslims and Arabs in general, and who may view negatively anyone who is “brownish” in the words of an interviewee, whether they may actually be Arab or Muslim, or not. The change reported by more than one interviewee, has been the exact opposite of what the polls indicate, with the crisis bringing out all the altruistic people, both Syrian-Americans and non-Syrian Americans. This cannot be construed as representative, as it only highlights the experience of some individuals and not all. The outpouring of help was also reported notably by charities and those organizations working with refugees, and has been “extreme” in the words of one activist. And this sympathy was evident even before President Trump took over and prompted a wave of support towards refugees and Muslims with his virulent rhetoric and later with his travel ban on citizens of seven Muslim majority countries (Telhami, 2017). This is also evidenced by the numbers of non-Arab, non-Muslim volunteers reported by the Refugee Outreach International association. The response of New Jersians to the refugee arrivals has brought about the breaking of traditional barriers between groups such as the Jewish Americans and the Syrian-Americans, with the Jewish community playing a very important part in facilitating the transition and in adopting newly arrived families.

“Syria is a trendy cause”, in the words of one of the interviewees, and it has brought about both the worst and the best in society, as is always the case with crises of this magnitude. The changes undergone by the Syrian American organizations in New Jersey are clear and marked. Whether this translates to the general Syrian American population in their relationships with each other and with their fellow New Jersians needs to be more closely examined and analyzed.

Chapter Seven

Analysis

The data collection for this research has not always been easy, especially since the topic is relatively recent and the subject of the study is evolving every day. Moreover, as it is very specific and limited in scope to the state of New Jersey and to a generally understudied community within that state, data was not always readily available, nor was it always up to date. However, the triangulation method used to uncover and cross-check information was helpful in covering the topic from several perspectives and from all angles. The categorization of Syrian-Americans as “Whites” in the US censuses has made it difficult to gather separate data about this specific community. Moreover, even in censuses where Arab-Americans are studied as an ethnicity, Syrian-Americans are seldom singled out for observation. Nevertheless, the studies conducted by members of the diaspora themselves and by other scholars do offer valuable insights as to historical background and the resurgence of interest in this community brought about by the war in Syria has made available more detailed material about this community.

The interviews conducted for this research served to complement and reinforce the information uncovered by the desk review, and provided a more personal insight into a topic that is sensitive and subjective, namely that of identity and how it is constructed. Initially the goal was to approach all of the eleven Syrian-American associations that are operational in New Jersey. Unfortunately not all were open to discuss sensitive topics with the researcher. The sample of interviewees includes organizations working in all of the fields but does not cover pro-regime organizations which were very reluctant to participate, even after university credentials were presented and assurances of anonymity were given. As previously mentioned, however, this was overcome by studying previously granted interviews and websites and other publications emanating from these associations.

The study of the evolution of Syrian American associations in the state of New Jersey yields three distinct phases: the first one starts with the arrival of the first immigrants and lasts until the 1960s. The second covers the period extending from the 1960s until right before the uprisings of 2011. Finally, the protests of 2011 in Syria marked an important event for the community and the start of a new phase.

During the first phase, the community was overwhelmingly Christian and the trend in the US was geared towards complete assimilation into American culture and society. As such, differences from the main culture were smoothed over and upward socio-economic mobility helped the diaspora achieve successful assimilation. Since the Syrian Americans at the time were still connected to the homeland and felt an attachment to it, they cultivated and maintained those ties through ethnic associations, but remained aloof from politics, especially from “Syrian” politics. During this phase, however, major crises back in the homeland provided stimuli to activate the ethnic identification of the community and triggered its political activism on behalf of the Homeland. The revolt of 1925 in Syria against the French presents some similarities with the uprisings of 2011 and gave rise to intense politicization by the standards of the usually apolitical community. Several associations were created, tensions ran high among those with differing views and political parties were even founded. For some time after the revolt, even after it had been quashed, political interest in the fate of the Homeland remained acute in the community. It wended down gradually as the crisis waned and the uprising wasn’t successful. The stability that reigned under the French thereafter provided little incentive for the Syrian Americans of the Northeast of the US to involve themselves actively in Syria.

The 1960s, with the lift of the ban on immigration, ushered in a wave of Arab migration, and additional migration from Syria. This migration, as we have seen, changed the face of the community by importing a large Muslim element, and additional nationalities among the Arabs. It also comprised of immigrants who were intensely touched by the problems in Palestine and were sometimes running away from them. The Syrian Americans, who were Christians and already assimilated, distanced themselves from the Arab struggle. Some elements among the community did get involved in Arab

associations related to the Palestinian cause, but mostly the community remained centered on the US, getting engulfed in US-centered struggles for civil rights and other such issues, with the occasional involvement in Middle-Eastern affairs. The Syrian-Americans of New Jersey did still engage in Arab-American student unions and professional associations, and also had, during this time period, their own Syrian-American apolitical and mostly professional associations. The Baathist regime took a hold of power during this time period and established its grip on Syria. A lack of data exists as to how the Syrian-American community reacted to this and more research is needed in this area. The effect of the stifling of political life in the homeland and of the danger of talking Syrian politics seems to have been transmitted to the diasporas, including that in New Jersey, with reports of the government using its embassies and gathering reports from “regular” Syrian expatriates to spy and keep tabs on its expatriates around the world and in the US. Whether these reports were true or exaggerated, the result for the diaspora remains the same. Compounded with a loss of connection for older arrivals, and fear of the Syrian government’s surveillance for the newer arrivals, the Syrian American diaspora in New Jersey reportedly grew fragmented and its members were cautious around one another. Politicization was very rare and where diaspora members expressed political views regarding Syria, it was not through organizations, but rather in isolation.

The uprisings of 2011 were a watershed event for the civil society landscape of Syrian-Americans in New Jersey. Things started to evolve in the aftermath of the 2011. Several phenomena took place with regards to the associations in New Jersey. First, the existing associations had to take a stand vis-à-vis what was happening in the homeland. As seen in the research findings, while some associations did try to remain apolitical, it wasn’t long before a positioning was forced upon them. One example is the local New Jersey chapter of reputed medical association SAMS (Syrian American Medical Society), which saw growing tensions among its board members as a result of events in Syria. Members of the board clashed over where the organization stood from the protestors and the government, resulting finally in the departure of the chapter’s president and other members and in a restructuring of the whole chapter. Similarly, according to activist interviews and articles published around that time, other Syrian

American associations, and even Arab-American associations took a stand vis-à-vis what was happening in Syria, and aligned, if not explicitly, then at least implicitly, with one side of the conflict or the other (Malo, 2013).

The other impact was that the existing associations turned their attention from the adopted country to the country of origin. Some associations established in the US were already focusing on alleviating poverty in Syria prior to 2011, like the Syrian American Women's Charitable Association which was created in 1994 and had a chapter in New Jersey. Before 2011, the goal of this organization was to help disadvantaged Syrians in Syria through linkages with other NGOs based there. Most Syrian American associations, however, were focused on improving the lives of the diaspora members living in the US. This was the work done by such associations as SAMS Society and religious organizations such as Saint Ann's Melkite Church or St Mark's Syrian Orthodox Church. Islamic religious centers, though not exclusively Syrian or even Arab, also turned their attention to the plight of the Syrians. Whereas the interest previously was to take care of those present in the adopted country, the troubles of the homeland warranted a change of direction for all of the Syrian American associations of New Jersey, at least in part. This indicates a reestablishment and strengthening of the bond between the diaspora in New Jersey and the homeland. Religious organizations continued, of course, to care for their congregations, in addition to undertaking charitable work for affected populations in Syria. Religious organizations have been the least changed by the war in Syria, as they fall clearly within one sect and religion, and as the conflict has taken on a mostly sectarian turn. They remained unified and did not experience internal struggles. They did modify their activities, however, to engage in charity directed at Syria.

The last change that events in Syria had on the New Jersey diaspora organizations was that new associations began to crop up. After decades of a dearth of Syrian American associations in the State, the period extending from late 2011 until today saw a mushrooming of associations that were directed, in one way or another, towards Syria. Over the course of six years, eight new associations were founded in New Jersey, in addition to the already existing ones, with three of them specifically dedicated

to political advocacy: The Syrian American Forum, the Syrian American Will Association, and Syrian Americans for Democracy. The Syrian American Council's New Jersey chapter took off after 2011 as well. The five remaining new associations, SWASIA, the Syrian American League, Refugee Outreach International, Syrian American Wish Association and SAMS Foundation were established as offshoots of other organizations or as independent associations for charitable purpose, with specialization in health services or refugee relief for two of them. Given that before 2011 there were only three ethnic Syrian organizations in the state of New Jersey aside from religious establishments (the SAC, SAMS Society and the Syrian American Women's Association), we have witnessed an increase of 267% in Syrian American associations in the state. This dramatic increase could only have been brought about by the war, as one very dramatic stimulus that could activate identity, as per the work of Junn and Masuoka who tested the effect of stimuli much weaker and less tragic than a civil war in the homeland, upon identity activation in minorities with mild to weak group consciousness.

A noticeable trait of some of the new associations is that they generate the impression of being more ad hoc, more temporary and much less organized than the organizations that have been operational much longer. The latter have an established and clear structure, a much more extensive network and a number of employees and experienced activists. Some of the new organizations have much less professional websites, a much less detailed archive or record of activities, which is natural considering the fact that they have been operational for a much shorter period of time. Moreover, contact with pre-existing associations was much easier to undertake, as they had appointed spokespeople and communications personnel designated to provide liaison with the public. However, these associations have generally not been very active in New Jersey, with their most active chapters being the Washington D.C. ones. Communication with pro-regime associations was much more difficult than with anti-regime associations, whose activists and prominent figures were much more disposed and open to talk to me about the topic. The latter also did not hesitate to disclose their names and link their activism with their full identity in an illustration of the breaking of the wall of fear. The ad hoc feeling conveyed by some of the recently established organizations and the lack of structure that is sometimes apparent in their organizational

chart could be indicators that these organizations may be more temporary than their predecessors, which have already been present on the civil society scene for a long time and seem poised to continue in their activities even after the war in Syria will abate.

The most striking observation that has emanated from the research is the over representation of the first generation of Syrian Americans among the activists, board members and founders of old and new organizations in the State. A look at the board members of the Syrian American Will Association, for example, which includes a short biography for each, quickly reveals that most of them are members of the first generation (Syrian American Will Association, 2017). This is not to say that only first-generation Syrian Americans are involved. While some activists, in their interviews have reported that it was only the first generation of Syrian American that was involved in activism and charity on behalf of Syria, this is not borne out by a more thorough research into the associations and their members' backgrounds. In fact, some of the most prominent presidents, members and founders of associations are second-generation or further down the family tree. For example the SAC's Policy and Advocacy officer Schlomo Bolts, traces his ancestry back to the Jews of Aleppo (Syrian American Council, 2017b). The founder of the Refugee International Outreach organization and seasoned activist Rana Shanawani is a second-generation Syrian American, as is the current president of SAMS' Tri-State Chapter, New Jersian Lara Zakaria. Moreover, associations dealing with refugees have reported how children of Syrian-Americans have been part of the effort to adopt families and to tutor newly arrived students of their age, showcasing how the war in Syria has even affected young Syrian-Americans. The students sent by the SAC to the countries neighboring Syria offer another example of how second or further generation Syrian-American youth is participating in the efforts. Finally, almost every association, church and advocacy group has a youth chapter or group, again underlining the presence of children of Syrian-Americans among the activists. Other activists have confirmed the involvement of second and further generations, underscoring how the war in Syria has brought them back into contact with their Syrianness, with some even exhibiting pride in these ties. One interviewee observed that, as the war dragged on and became increasingly more brutal and destructive, second and further generations of

Syrian-Americans became gradually more compelled to take an interest in it and to play a part in alleviating the suffering in Syria.

The involvement of Syrian-Americans of generations other than the first generation strengthens the link between the war in Syria and the revival of Syrian identity among the diaspora in New Jersey. Other indications are available in the findings that the dynamics and group consciousness among the community have changed. Associations have flourished and increased in numbers. Those who were interested in Syrian affairs before the war and active in these fields have become more so, according to interviews, and have deepened, strengthened and politicized their involvement. Moreover, some of those who were not active before 2011 have been moved to activism, at least in charitable organizations. Some associations such as SAMS have reported a 357% increase in membership across all chapters, according to an interview given by their director Zaher Sahloul to The Guardian (Malo, 2013). For political activism organizations, however, interviews resulted in conflicting reports. Some did not report important increases in their membership numbers. In the words of one president of such an association, people from the community are still reluctant to be involved in politics. In the past, before 2011, the interviewee, who enjoys an extensive network of Syrian Americans from the State, reported that the community did not get involved in politics because, in their words, “there was no point” to such activities or discussions. The community was more united by their professional associations and networks than by anything political. After 2011, the high tensions among the diaspora made everyone uncomfortable around others of different political views, and the overwhelming sentiment was that members of the community were still reluctant in enrolling in political associations. Other interviewees stated the exact opposite, citing growing numbers of members in political advocacy groups and the establishment of new chapters due to the high interest in states where no chapters were previously available. The reports of studies such as that of Qayyum, articles in local and national newspapers and interviews with other activists do not confirm reports of reluctance, at least not in recent years. People, by most accounts, have been very determined to participate and to make their voices heard.

Membership in associations is not the only way to participate and showcase interest. The numbers of people volunteering or playing a role in campaigns, rallies and demonstrations is another way one can gauge the participation of the Syrian American community in the State. Refugee associations have reported an overwhelming wave of volunteers and people reaching out to be put in contact with refugee families or to be of any help. Of those, 50% have been Syrian and Arab-Americans according to interviews conducted for this thesis. Non-refugee Syrian-American organizations which also work with refugee families in the state have reported similar important participation. Work with refugees has also built an important bridge between the two conflicting sides within the diaspora. It has, by the accounts of those involved in such work, been undertaken by both pro and anti-regime activists, sometimes working within the same organizations. Political campaigns have made an impact in the community. While the numbers of participants from New Jersey are not available, activists interviewed report thousands participating with organizations whether by calling their senators, by traveling to Washington D.C. to participate in Syria Advocacy days or by marching in demonstrations. The participation in some of the campaigns must have been important enough to make an impact, with some high profile successes like getting a bill to be voted on in the house (Syrian American Council, n.d.) or getting a visit to the United States by a Syrian official cancelled.

Financial transfers and donations are other indicative figures for the participation of those among the community who do not have the time or the energy to become full-fledged activists. In addition to financial support and remittances sent by the Syrian-American community of New Jersey to their families and friends stuck in the war-torn homeland (Tucker, 2012), money has been flowing into charitable associations based in the State. Donations have poured in and reached significant amounts, with SWASIA, for example, raising alone as much as three million dollars as of 2014, in the space of two years since its establishment, for relief efforts in Syria (Janoski, 2014). SAMS Foundation, in one of its campaigns alone raised over a million and a half dollars donated from 27 thousand people, for its Aleppo fund (B. Termanini, personal communication, November 29, 2016). The amount of money flowing into charities is significant, and while more is always needed, people have been enthusiastic and

sympathetic enough to the cause to donate. This money is not, of course, only collected from New Jersians, but in a charity such as SWASIA, which is purely New Jersian, and operational only in this State, it clearly reflects the participation of the society perhaps more than national organizations such as SAMS. The Syrian American community and the New Jersey community as a whole have been obliging in donating for Syria.

In every population, or community, there are those who are prone to activism, and those who are not. The percentage of activists, even those who occasionally engage in activism is typically low compared to the overall population. Despite this fact, the president of the Syrian American Council, the largest and oldest Syrian-American advocacy group estimates that a noteworthy number of 10,000 Syrian-Americans are involved in actively helping the rebellion with their work in the United States (Bahrapour, 2012). This number pertains only to one side of the conflict, and should be added to an unknown number of Syrian Americans who are pro-regime and who are also working on promoting their cause. Moreover, the number of associations that have been established after the war warrants the link between the war in Syria and the identity activation of the Syrian American community in New Jersey. Associations provide the institutional framework for the mobilization of the community. Their very existence and survival is proof that there is a need for them and that people are participating in larger numbers. As most of these associations specifically declare the need for Syrian ancestry as a prerequisite for membership, the very presence of new members in newly established organizations reflects a growth in activism and identity activation among the community. The increased membership numbers in already existing associations are also indicative that the dynamics within the community have been affected, and so is the politicization of the new and old associations. The amount of money raised through charitable associations is perhaps one of the most significant indicators that people of Syrian ancestry in New Jersey are sympathetic to the plight of their compatriots and moved by it to help. The fact that, while the majority of those who are concerned and who do participate belong to the first generation of Syrian Americans, second and further generations are also involved in founding and in running Syrian American associations is indicative of an activated identity for those who are moved by the war to come out in the open with their affiliations, to proclaim their Syrianness loud and clear,

offering it as motivation for their activities. Unfortunately, without research on the field, it is impossible to determine who among the donors, the demonstrators, and the activists is second-generation or more, and as such, it is hard to evaluate their presence among the participants. They are a minority among the boards of directors and the founders of associations, but it may not be reflective of their minority within the rank and file. More field research is needed for an in-depth assessment of the second and further generations to be able to measure the clear overall effect of the war on them.

Politicization of the diaspora is the final finding that should be highlighted in this thesis. As a community that used to be fragmented and fiercely apolitical, the change brought about by the war is noticeable. The activists who used to operate on the margins are now front and center among the community. They know everybody and everybody knows them. They have succeeded in the aftermath of the war in creating around themselves extensive networks that bring Syrian Americans in New Jersey and beyond in close contact with one another. In this context of conflict and brutality in the homeland, however, it is not only political activists who have engaged in politics, it is virtually every member of the community. As per the interviews, events in Syria have naturally overtaken every gathering of the community and have forced everyone's affiliations to be brought out in the open. It has been very difficult to remain neutral, as evidenced by the lack of neutrality amongst the organizations. Even the organizations that proclaim to be apolitical require only a little digging under the surface to reveal the political orientations of the founders and board. The overwhelming majority of the associations have been of one political color. Even those businesses that have tried to make their customers leave politics at their front door have paid the price for their lack of willingness to take a side, by experiencing boycott campaigns.

Politicization of the Syrian American community in the Northeast of the United States has happened before, twice, as per the history of the community. Both times, however, the politicization levels did not remain acute for very long. Both episodes were, in the end, only pikes of politicization in an otherwise apolitical community. The war in Syria is a very dramatic event and has been felt as such by the members of the diaspora in New Jersey. Whether its impact is going to be long-lasting remains to be

seen. A longitudinal study would be needed to determine this, especially in the aftermath of the war. Two key issues could provide an indication for the possible future, however. The first is that, today, the times have changed from the 1910s and 1920s when the two previous pikes in politicization took place. Back then, the trend was towards Americanization and total assimilation of minorities. If a minority wanted to live and thrive in the United States, it had to be as American as possible. Celebrating multiculturalism, singing the virtues of the input of different cultures and backgrounds and how that input was beneficial for the society was unthinkable. America was predominantly Protestant and White. After the civil rights movement of the 1960s, perceptions and ideas in the United States changed. Differences came to be celebrated as enriching, and multiculturalism slowly emerged as the trend for the future. In this new context, however, the Syrian-American community did not encounter reasons or stimuli for politicization. Their identity was not activated, as per the work of Junn and Masuoka (2008), by any external stimulus either in the United States or coming from Syria. Perhaps after the stimulus provided by the war in Syria, and in the new context of celebrating multiculturalism which was reinforced, against all odds, by the presidency of Mr. Trump and by his successive executive orders, the Syrian-American community in New Jersey would retain high identity activation levels and ethnic pride for the coming years.

Moreover, the community could be further engaged in politicization and in maintaining high levels of political activities vis-à-vis the homeland by the fact that the goal of the rebellion in Syria has not been achieved. Indeed, as per the work and research of Maria Koinova, the lack of fulfillment of the goal in the homeland (whether secession or a change of regime or the re-appropriation of land that was stolen, there are diverse scenarios) gives the diaspora an incentive to keep up the fight, even in the event that the rebels in the homeland are prepared for concessions (2009). Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka consider the presence of a common cause, such as that of the African-Americans, to be a strong propeller of group identification, strong enough to remove the need for a stimulus to activate identity. If this holds true for the Syrian Americans of New Jersey, the activated group consciousness and identity will outlive the stimulus of the war. As per the work of these researchers, the Syrian American community in New

Jersey is likely to continue to exhibit high levels of identity activation, group consciousness and politicization, even once the stimulus of the war in the homeland has subsided at least until the fulfilment of the cause, whether this cause is the removal of the regime or, to the contrary, its stabilization. Whether this will be the case remains to be determined in the future.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

New Jersey's Syrian American diaspora has been buzzing with activity since the start of the civil war in Syria six years ago. The civil society landscape has experienced a renewal and a spirited rebirth. While the NGO scene has been completely transformed, has the Syrian civil war transformed relations among the Syrian-American diaspora and relations with the American society? Recruitment figures, donations assembled, participation in campaigns and activities by all generations of Syrian Americans (first, second, and further generations), involvement of the Syrian American youth who had, by all accounts, been previously detached from the homeland are all direct linkages that showcase the involvement of the diaspora to a high degree, through the work and the institutional framework provided by the organizations. Moreover, the very growth of the numbers of associations of Syrian Americans in the state is indicative that there was an appetite and indeed a need for such organizations in the aftermath of the war.

The detailed research on the work of the organizations, the follow up on events as reported by local newspapers, and the information yielded by the various interviews all highlight the fact that the Syrian American community in New Jersey has undergone transformations as a result of the civil war. It has become less fragmented, with evolved and extensive networks being created between organizations, but also, through their work in the organizations, between individuals of Syrian ancestry, whether they are activists or non-activists. It has been politicized to a high degree, with political views being aired freely. Inspired by the courage of those under fire in Syria on both sides of the conflict, the Syrian Americans of New Jersey broke the taboo of getting political. Moreover, the community experienced and is still experiencing high levels of tension among its members, which have not, so far, translated into violent incidents. No accounts of radicalization among the community have been recounted either and there is no evidence to showcase that the community is at risk of radicalization.

In its relationship with the New Jersian society in general, the Syrian American diaspora has also been affected. From an invisible minority, the community went on to become a highly visible minority living under scrutiny. No hostility or incidents have been recorded, on the contrary, activists report an opening up of the community and a newfound friendliness with sectors of the New Jersian society that weren't necessarily natural allies. On the issue of refugees, while the data, polls and other hard evidence provide a picture of a society that wouldn't be welcoming to the refugees arriving in the State, those involved in refugee resettlement have conveyed sympathy and help coming from the New Jersians of all creeds and colors. Those who participated in this research insist that the relationship of their community with the adopted society has been improved by the crisis, albeit while still reporting that they avoid interacting with the segments that reject their ancestry.

The Syrian American community in New Jersey has thus been changed both internally, and in its relationship with its adopted society, by the war happening in faraway Syria. The findings of the research offer a case study backing the work of authors Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka in that they display the effects of a very strong stimulus, a war in the homeland, on the ethnic identification of a previously only loosely connected minority. How far will the stimulus hold remains to be seen, and needs to be studied more in depth through a longitudinal research. If the community proves to have acquired a cause strong enough to deepen its identity activation beyond the need of a stimulus, it could then be construed as a case study for Junn and Masuoka's other theory, that deeply conscious groups do not need, and indeed are not affected by a stimulus. Moreover, the research provides a case study for Wald's work on politicized ethnic identity. In his work, Wald uses a two-pronged approach to study the intricacies of the display of such a politicized identity by minorities. The first branch of Wald's analysis takes a constructivist approach with the view that individuals' participation in ethnic based associations and the cultivation of intra-group ties constitute building blocks to construct the politicized ethnic identity. In this, the diaspora's increasing networking, organizing and coming together has indeed proven to be instrumental to the activation of a group consciousness and politicized identity, bringing backing to Wald's work. Additionally, the findings add a new category to Kenneth Wald's motivators of

politicized ethnic identity. While citing the presence of a common trauma that prompts departure from the homeland as one of the main group characteristics that, if present, can motivate a politicized ethnic identity, the author overlooks the effect of a trauma or a common cause that may have taken place after the group has been successfully established for a significant time in the adopted country. As such, this research can offer an additional insight into one of the categories explored by Mr. Wald, namely the nature of the migration, by which he means the case where the migration was a result of trauma or upheaval. This research provides an addendum to that category by exploring the effects of trauma or a common cause occurring after the date of migration.

The research has suffered from obstacles that have led to some shortcomings. Updated and detailed information was not always easy to find for such an understudied minority. Moreover, the inability to do field research with a physical presence of the researcher in the state of New Jersey has led some of the interviewees to be a little less open about participating than they might have been if the interview could have been conducted face to face. The following of a clear procedure approved by the IRB has facilitated the interaction, with the research gaining in legitimacy as the credentials of the university were presented. Despite this, presence on the ground could have smoothed over any worries the participants had, and it could have provided deeper insights into the subtle differences between first-generation Syrian Americans and other generations of Syrian Americans. Finally, as previously mentioned a longitudinal study is needed to ascertain that the findings of this research will stand the test of time and the waning of the stimulus of the war in Syria.

The research provides insights into how the community has been changed internally and in its outwards relations with its adopted society. While the study has uncovered linkages to other states across the US and what might be happening in these states, the findings of this thesis do not necessarily hold for Syrian American communities across the country. One very different community with a very different experience of the war has been the more monolithic and homogeneous community that lives in the state of Pennsylvania, for example. As such, while the findings of this research allow us to make out linkages and assumptions about what is underway in other

states, further research is needed to assert the effects of the war on other Syrian American communities in the US, and to thus be able to generalize the findings to the diaspora in whole country.

Moreover, the ascendancy of Mr. Trump to the US presidency has been a game changer, especially since he has singled out Syrian refugees with an indeterminate ban and has had some strong positions on the war in Syria that have not been in line with those of his predecessors. As seen in the research, the way the government interacts with a minority, the way laws apply to this group contributes in giving it a special status and plays a part in redefining the way this ethnic minority views itself vis-à-vis society in general (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). As such, the way President Trump is going to change the legal and social framework within which the diaspora will find itself under his presidency may have a profound impact on its relations with the general society and its intra-group dynamics. A future study of how these changes will come into play for the community in the future depending on how things play out under President Trump would be needed to study that evolution.

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