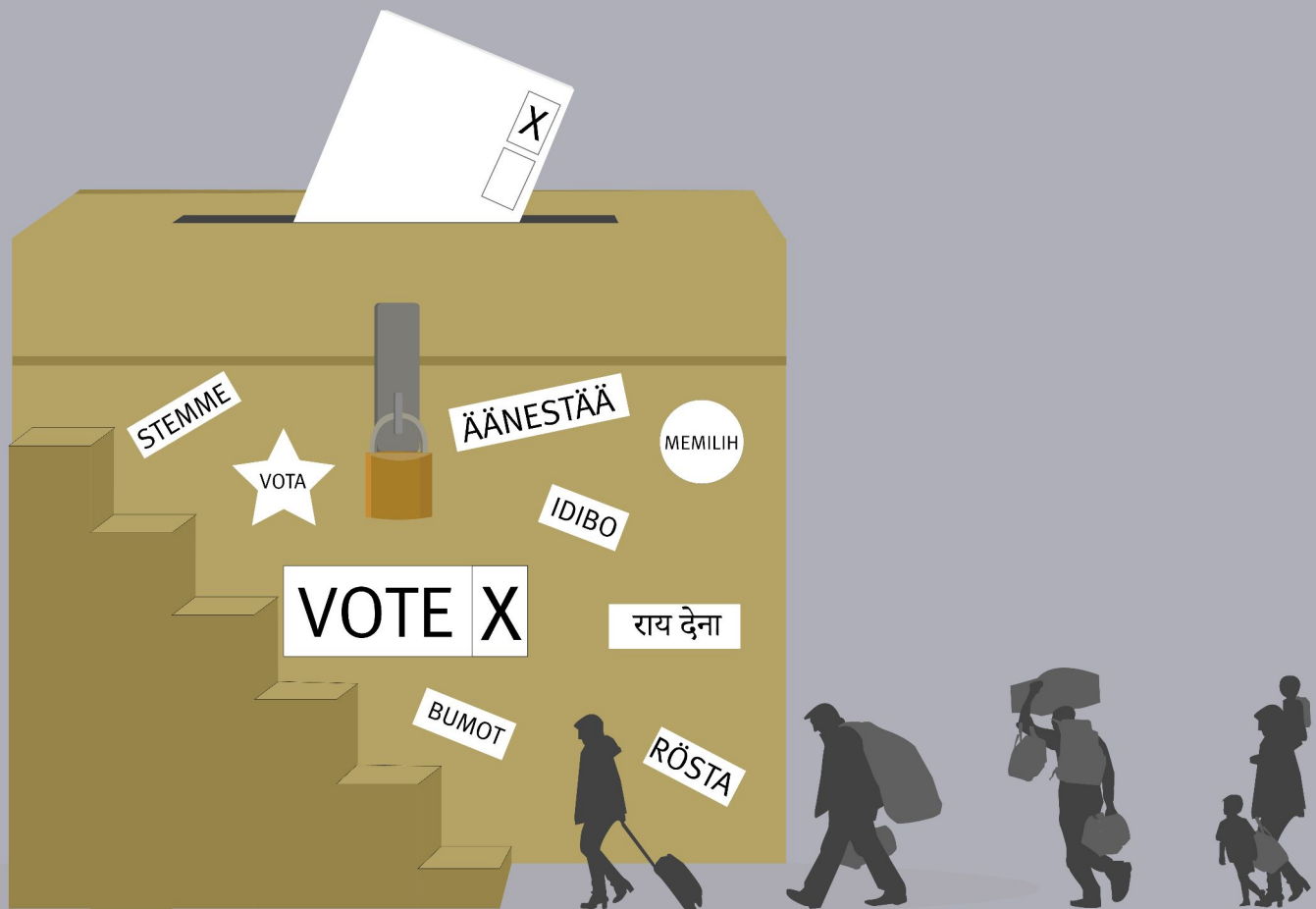


# Political Participation of Refugees

The Case of Afghan and Syrian Refugees in Germany





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Nora Jasmin Ragab  
Lina Antara (series editor)



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## Abbreviations

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BAGFA	Federal Association of Volunteer Agencies (Germany)
BAMF	Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Germany)
BMI	Federal Ministry of the Interior (Germany)
CDU	Christian Democratic Union of Germany
CSU	Christian Social Union
FDP	Free Democratic Party
IEC	Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan
NRW	North Rhine-Westphalia
OCV	Out-of-country voting
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany

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# 1. Introduction



This case study focuses on Afghan and Syrian asylum seekers and refugees, who are among the largest groups of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany. It explores the opportunities and challenges regarding their civic and political participation in Germany, and the ways in which they can participate in peace and democracy-building in their countries of origin. It was written as part of a larger research project on the political participation of refugees (Bekaj and Antara 2018). The primary data collected for this case study concerns formal and non-formal means of political participation by refugees and asylum seekers in Germany and their countries of origin.

The case study is based on extensive desk research, including a review of journal articles, news reports, legal documents, research papers and other secondary sources. In addition, qualitative data was collected using one-to-one interviews with 18 individuals: nine Afghan respondents (eight men and one woman) and nine Syrian respondents, of whom six were males and three females (see Table 1). Twelve of the respondents arrived in the past five years, whereas the rest migrated in the 1990s, either alone or with their families. In addition, two civil society organizations working on issues relevant to refugees and asylum seekers, as well as a director of an integration council, were interviewed. The research took place in June, July and August 2017 in Berlin, Bonn, Cologne and Hamburg.

Table 1. Case study respondents' profiles and locations

Research site	Afghan			Syrian			Key informants
	Male	Female	TOTAL	Male	Female	TOTAL	
Berlin	4	1	5	4	3	7	2
Bonn	2	0	2	1	0	1	0
Cologne	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
Hamburg	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>9</b>			<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>

Given the limited time for conducting the field research as well as the difficulties in getting access to the target groups, the selection of participants was based on their active political involvement in Germany, their country of origin or both. Potential participants were identified through various channels, including desk research on Syrian and Afghan refugee-

led organizations and the review of media articles on the political participation of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany, as well as through snowball sampling. In addition, information events and demonstrations organized by refugee-led organizations and diaspora associations were used to establish further contacts.

As the qualitative approach does not allow for generalization, the findings should not be considered as representative of the Syrian or Afghan refugee population as a whole. Furthermore, in the context of the research being carried out in large cities, it is important to keep in mind that opportunities for political participation might be different when refugees are allocated to rural areas on arrival (see e.g. Mehl 2017). Nonetheless, through an in-depth analysis, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the complexity of refugees' experiences, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in their participation in political life through formal and non-formal means.



## 2. Host-country context: Germany



Germany has become one of Europe's major recipient countries of refugees and asylum seekers, receiving approximately 750,000 asylum applications in 2016. In terms of countries of origin, Syria ranks first with a 36.9 per cent share of first-time asylum applications in 2016, followed by Afghanistan (17.6 per cent) and Iraq (13.3 per cent) (BAMF 2017b). The geographic distribution of asylum seekers among the Federal States (Bundesländer) is regulated by the 'Königstein Key', which is based on tax revenues and population numbers, and determines in which Federal State a prospective asylum seeker must apply for asylum on arrival in Germany. In 2017, North-Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) received the highest proportion of asylum seekers (21.1 per cent), followed by Bavaria (15.5 per cent) and Baden-Württemberg (13 per cent) (BAMF 2017a).

Within Europe, Germany is the major destination country for Afghan migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, giving host to 253,485 Afghan nationals as of December 2016. Given that only 16,020 Afghan nationals hold a permanent or unlimited residence permit, the vast majority are only entitled to reside in Germany on a temporary basis. Of these, 40,880 persons were granted residency based on humanitarian or political grounds, around half (122,500) have permission to reside in Germany following a request for asylum and 10,540 were authorized to remain in Germany following a temporary suspension of their deportation. In addition, around 44,635 Afghan nationals reside in Germany without residence permits (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017a). This group includes individuals who have been registered in Germany but have not yet filed an application for asylum or who have not yet been granted a preliminary residence permit on the grounds of seeking asylum. Geographically, the majority of Afghan nationals reside in North Rhine-Westphalia (40,980) followed by Bavaria (38,520), Hesse (36,520) and Baden-Württemberg (24,255). In terms of demographic profile, immigration to Germany tends to be dominated by young men: the average age is 24 years and men represent 67 per cent of the Afghan population (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017a). Since the mid-1980s, Afghanistan has consistently been in the top 10 countries of origin of asylum seekers in Germany. In the past decade, the number of first-time asylum applications has increased substantially from 531 in 2006 to 31,382 in 2015. With regard to ethnicity, Tajiks were 43.7 per cent of first-time asylum applicants in 2016, followed by Hazaras (25.5 per cent) and Pashtuns (14.0 per cent). Muslims made up 91.4 per cent of Afghan first-time asylum applicants in 2016 (BAMF 2017b).

Germany has also become Europe's major destination country for Syrian immigrants, hosting 637,845 individuals with Syrian citizenship in 2016 compared to 30,133 in 2010. As of 2016, the vast majority of Syrian citizens had a limited residence permit. More than half (54 per cent) received temporary protection on humanitarian grounds, whereas 84,375 were

granted a residence permit based on their admission into the asylum procedure. In terms of geographical distribution, 174,020 Syrian nationals were residing in NRW, followed by Baden-Württemberg (68,085), Lower Saxony (68,005) and Bavaria (62,450). Syrian migrants to Germany tend to be young males: their average age was 24 years and 3 months and men accounted for 64 per cent of Syrian nationals in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017b). With the so-called refugee crisis, there was a sharp increase in Syrian asylum applicants from 1,490 in 2010 to 266,250 in 2016. As in the previous year, in 2016 Syria ranked first among the countries of origin of asylum seekers in Germany. Arabs account for 65.3 per cent of Syrian asylum applicants in 2016, followed by Kurds (29 per cent). With regard to religious affiliation, the vast majority of first-time asylum applicants (91.5 per cent) were Muslims, followed by Christians (3.9 per cent) and Yezidis (2.2 per cent) (BAMF 2017b). Compared to other major countries of origin, in 2015 Syrian first-time asylum applicants had high levels of schooling and made up a low percentage of those without formal education. Almost a quarter had recently worked in technical, medical, engineering, teaching or administrative professions (Rich 2016).

### Overview of Germany's refugee and asylum policy

In response to the sharp increase in asylum seekers in Europe, which reached its peak in 2015, Germany initially operated a so-called open-door policy, and Chancellor Angela Merkel advocated a welcoming culture for those seeking protection in Germany. In the summer of 2015 the German Government stated that it would allow all Syrians to apply for asylum regardless of the country through which they had entered the European Union. However, by the second half of 2015, German policies were already becoming more restrictive, with the introduction of rigid controls at the Austrian and Czech borders and a series of amendments to the legal framework regulating reception and asylum application processes, deportations, and access to integration measures with regard to language, labor and education. In addition, there was increasing resistance to immigration, as right wing movements and parties such as the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident and Alternative for Germany gained support (Geddes and Scholten 2016).

In light of Germany's experience with forced displacement following two world wars, and especially after 1945, the fundamental right of asylum is not only regulated by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but has also been enshrined in the 1949 Basic Law (Grundgesetz, GG). More specifically, the right to asylum is governed by article 16a of the Basic Law and sections 3 and 4 of the Asylum Act (Asylgesetz, AsylG). In order to receive protection based on an entitlement to asylum (GG article 4), a person has to prove that he or she is being persecuted by the state in their country of origin. Refugee status, however, can be granted due to either state or non-state persecution. Germany also offers subsidiary protection based on the articles of the European Convention on Human Rights on subsidiary protection, which have been transposed into national legislation in section 4 of the Asylum Act. Through this, a person is entitled to protection if he or she is at risk of serious harm resulting from an international or internal armed conflict in their country of origin. Moreover, paragraph 60 (5 and 7) of the Residence Act regulates the national deportation ban, which states that a person seeking protection should not be returned if concrete danger to life, health or liberty exists in the country of origin (BAMF 2016b). Within the Ministry of Interior (Bundesministerium des Innern, BMI), the Directorate General for Migration, Refugees and Return Policy is responsible for federal migration and refugee policy, including residence and asylum regulations, return-related policies and issues of European harmonization. The department supervises the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF), which manages the asylum procedure and the promotion of migrant integration (BAMF 2017a).



In 2016, the success rate of Syrian asylum seekers was 97.9 per cent and the majority were granted either refugee status (56.4 per cent) or subsidiary protection (41.2 per cent). In contrast, the success rate of Afghan asylum seekers was significantly lower (55.4 per cent) and applicants were mainly protected based on the ban on deportations (27 per cent). Only 20.2 per cent were granted refugee status and 7.8 per cent received subsidiary protection (BAMF 2017b). Different residency regulations apply, depending on the category of protection. People entitled to asylum or to refugee status receive a residence permit for three years and are entitled to apply for permanent residency after that if married to a German citizen (Paragraph 28(2) Aufenthaltsgesetz). Alternatively, they are entitled to apply after five years, subject to certain requirements such as adequate knowledge of the German language, a commitment to the liberal democratic order of the Federal Republic and the ability to earn a living independently. In contrast, persons granted subsidiary protection, or protection based on a national ban on deportation, receive a one-year residence permit, with the possibility of extension, and can apply for permanent residency under the same conditions as above after five years (BAMF 2016b).

## Requirements for refugees' political participation and naturalization

### Access to citizenship

Although Germany ranks among the top 10 European countries when it comes to access to citizenship and political participation for migrants (MIPEX 2015), its citizenship regime has been widely criticized. Citizenship was historically granted on the basis of descent, building on an ethno-cultural understanding of the nation state. The ever-recurring discussion on Germany's guiding culture (*deutsche Leitkultur*) based on Christian-occidental values, coined among others by the Christian Democratic Union in the 1990s, highlights Germany's difficult path from assimilation to multiculturalism (Ward, Silberman and Till 2012). Nonetheless, incremental changes based on continuing reform mean that Germany is moving away from this ethno-cultural understanding of national belonging towards extending citizenship rights to its immigrants. The Citizenship Act adopted in 1999 reduced the residence requirement from 15 years to eight. In addition, an applicant must hold a permanent residence permit, be in a position to independently ensure her or his livelihood without receiving social or unemployment assistance, and be sufficiently proficient in the German language. Other requirements include the successful completion of naturalization tests, a commitment to the Basic Law and no convictions for criminal offences. Further amendments in 2007 reduced the required time of lawful residence for naturalization to six years if the applicant proves a high level of knowledge of the German language (Hailbronner 2012). It is important to highlight that Germany does not allow dual citizenship for first-generation, non-EU migrants, so third-country nationals must give up their old citizenship during the naturalization process (Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz 2014, articles 8, 13, 16, 38). Nonetheless, the reforms include elements of *jus soli* (right of the soil) for immigrant children, provided at least one parent holds a permanent residence permit and has been residing in Germany for eight years. When Germany did not allow dual (or multiple) citizenship, individuals had to decide between the age of 18 and 21 which nationality they wanted to hold (Faist 2013). The so-called choice obligation law was abolished in 2014, enabling those born and raised in Germany to hold dual citizenship (BGBl. I S. 1714).

In total, 56,319 Afghan nationals were naturalized in the period 2000–2015. However, there has been a declining trend in the naturalization of Afghans during this period, with the highest number of Afghans naturalized in 2001 (5,111), as compared to one of the lowest levels in 2015 (2,572). With regard to Syrian nationals, 21,754 individuals were naturalized in the period 2000–15. In contrast to the Afghan case, there has been a modest increase in

the number of Syrians being naturalized in Germany since 2004, and 2015 represented a peak of 2,027 Syrians being naturalized (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017b).

#### Access to voting rights and political parties

The right to vote in German national and local elections is not granted to non-European resident non-citizens. As a result, a large section of the immigrant population, including Syrian and Afghan refugees, is left disenfranchised. According to the law on political parties (Parteiengesetz, para. 2 (3)), non-German nationals are allowed to register a party if the majority of its members or the members of the board are German citizens. Otherwise, they are only permitted to organize in the form of political associations, and hence are prevented from participating in elections. While all the parties represented in the German Parliament (Bundestag) allow membership by non-German citizens, membership by non-European migrants of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) is limited to guest status (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2016; CDU 2016; Die Linke 2016; SPD 2017). The Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union, CSU) allows membership by third country nationals only if the person has lived in Germany for at least three years (CSU 2017). Although the proportion of members of parliament of immigrant-origin has been continuously rising, only 37 members of the national parliament (5.9 per cent of all national MPs) had a migrant background in 2013 (Mediendienst Integration 2013). This figure increased after the 2017 elections, when 57 members with an immigrant background were elected to the national parliament, which accounts for 8 per cent of all national MPs (Mediendienst Integration 2017). A 2011 study by the Max Planck Institute, in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, on council membership in large German cities of persons with a migrant background found an increasing number of council members with a migrant background on German city councils. Yet, given that in the period between September 2006 and March 2011 only 4 per cent of the 4,670 council members were of migrant origin, they still do not reflect the diversity of the German urban population. On average, migrants account for about a quarter of the population in the big cities. Even less well represented are refugees and asylum seekers. Only 8.6 per cent of the surveyed persons indicated that forced displacement was their reason for migration (Schönwälder, Sinanoglu and Volkert 2011).

#### Participation in consultative bodies and civil society organizations

Given the lack of opportunities for traditional forms of democratic participation, foreign advisory, migration and integration councils (Ausländer-, Migrations-, Integrationsbeiräte) have been established in various German cities and municipalities since the mid-1970s to ensure political representation of migrants at the local level. Regulation of the formation of these consultative bodies is governed by the different constitutions of the German federal states. Berlin, Bremen, NRW and Hesse require municipalities with a certain proportion of non-German citizens to establish migrant advisory councils, whereas the constitutions of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Lower Saxony and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania do not have any specific regulations (Gesemann and Roth 2014). In addition, some Federal States have enacted “Integration” or “Participations Laws”, which enshrine a number of binding regulations for representation of migrants (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen 2017). Unsurprisingly, states such as North-Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse, which have a long tradition and strong regulatory framework, tend to have larger numbers of migrant consultative bodies, compared to states like Bavaria in which promotional measures are lacking (Dietz, Eißel and Naumann 2013). Moreover, a study by Gesemann, Roth and Aumüller (2012) on local integration policies revealed that 64.2 per cent of municipalities have an institutionalized form of migrant representation, with major cities being particularly active in promoting such bodies. The composition, appointment of members and main



statutes of the migrant advisory committees vary according to the different regulations in the constitutions. In some cases, representatives are elected by the non-German population, whereas in others, members are selected by the municipal Council. Often, integration councils tend to have an advisory function, and therefore can only advocate for the interests of the immigrant populations but do not make binding decisions. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that next to the lack of decision-making power, the scarce financial resources of many integration councils limit their capacity to exert influence at the communal level (Hunger and Candan 2009). The low turnout for many council elections, which is on average around 10 per cent, poses another challenge to the legitimacy of migrant representative bodies (Vicente 2011). For example, the Integration Council of Cologne pursues its objectives to promote equality of opportunity for migrants to participate in urban society and to highlight the migrant perspective on issues of concern at the city level. The council is made up with two-thirds of directly elected migrant representatives and one-third council members nominated by the parties represented in the city council. Every person who has permanent residence in Germany and has been registered in Cologne for at least three months can stand for election and is eligible to vote for a migrant representative. Given the temporary nature of the legal status of the displaced population in Germany, people in the asylum process or with refugee status are not allowed to run for or participate in the elections to the integration council. Efforts have been made by the council to reach out to the displaced population in Cologne and to create contacts with refugee organizations to safeguard their interests and ensure that their needs are being addressed by the municipality (Director of Cologne Integration Council, Cologne, 2017).

In the same vein, migrant and refugee organizations can serve as bridge-builders between the migrant population and local communities, and provide alternative avenues for political participation (Leinberger 2006). These organizations are actively supported through financial aid and capacity-building provided by the BAMF (BAMF 2016a). Besides this federal initiative, there are several programmes at the state and local levels that aim to foster migrants' self-organization (Gesemann and Roth 2014; Gesemann et al. 2012). As an example at the regional level, the Ministry for Labour, Integration and Social Issues in the state of NRW provides capacity development and financial resources specifically tailored to the needs of migrant organizations (MAIS NRW 2017). Although targeted support for migrant organizations can address structural barriers to conventional funding, the relationship between the state and migrant organizations has also been critically discussed. For instance, Weiss (2013) points out that state-led funding schemes tend to favour bigger umbrella organizations and preference is also given to similar projects led by organizations already established in the host society. Next to state-led initiatives, there are several civil society organizations as well as political foundations that promote civic and political participation by asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. For instance, Politische Partizipation mit und von Geflüchteten (Political participation with and for refugees), an initiative by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in NRW, seeks to develop concepts for political education in dialogue with the displaced population and other local initiatives on refugee assistance. The workshops in this initiative found that in addition to dialogue, the training of volunteers and the empowerment of refugees should be central tasks of political education. Often, participants had already acquired broad knowledge not just of the political context of their countries of origin, but also of European societies. Hence, involving the target group in the design of political education services based on dialogue ensures that relevant needs can be addressed. At the same time, target group-specific challenges related to language limitations and experiences of displacement make work in this area more complex compared to conventional educational work. In particular, there is a need for qualified personnel trained to deal in a sensitive way with people who have experienced conflict and displacement. Additional resources will therefore be needed to empower the newcomers to become an equal

part of society. According to the Director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation: ‘If we think long-term, politically participating people are always better for a democracy than a mass that is dissatisfied’ (Director of Heinrich Böll Foundation, phone interview, 2017).

In another example, the pilot project *Teilhabe durch Engagement: Das Engagement von und mit Flüchtlingen stärken* (Participation through engagement: Strengthen the engagement of and for refugees), implemented by the *Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freiwilligenagenturen (BAGFA)*, aims to foster, encourage and support civic participation by refugees and asylum seekers in 10 cities across Germany. At the same time, the project aims to ease those newly arrived in Germany into voluntary engagement with the host society. It also supports civil society organizations, associations and initiatives in the host society to open themselves up to refugee engagement. The interim conclusions of the project show that there is a high degree of willingness to become engaged in the host community among the target group, and that many participants had already acquired experience of voluntary work in their country of origin context. One of the success factors for reaching out to the target group is to create spaces for encounters, in which both the newly arrived and local volunteers can share their experiences. One of the main challenges was perceived to be the prejudice of some German civil society organizations, which tended to consider refugees as victims that are vulnerable, traumatized and problematic, rather than as active individuals with useful resources and skills that can contribute to the host society (Project manager, BAGFA, phone interview, 2017).

### 3. Refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the host country

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For respondents, being involved socially, politically and culturally in German society was seen as an important aspect of inclusion and belonging, particularly since for many, a sustainable return in the near future or a cessation of conflict in their country of origin seems unlikely. At the same time, respondents acknowledged and valued the freedom and space for political activism available in Germany as their host country:

You cannot feel that you are really integrated or that you are powerful unless you are involved in the local things happening here [...]. Being engaged here in Germany is very important because here are the tools, the freedoms to express yourself and freedom of belief in general. This is an opportunity. I believe that being socially and politically active is very important. That was one of the main reasons for the revolution in Syria, and why I joined it.

—Syrian female respondent 1, Berlin, 2017

Those respondents who have been disenfranchised raised the desire to gain formal rights, as the lack of political freedom was among the primary reasons for fleeing their countries of origin in the majority of cases, and one of the key demands of their political involvement in their country of origin.

#### Formal political participation

In recent years, there has been growing interest in studying migrants' political preferences and electoral practices as well the representation of people of migrant origin in parliament in the German context (Hunger and Candan 2009; Müssig and Worbs 2012; Sauer 2016; Schönwälder et al. 2011; Sinanoglu and Volkert 2011; Will 2012; Wittlif and Litta 2016; Wüst 2006, 2014, 2016). There seems to be a lack of literature, however, on political participation of refugees and asylum seekers, which can be explained in part by the very limited channels for formal electoral participation open to this group. Comparing migrants with German citizenship to non-German citizens, the former group tends to display a greater interest in political issues, indicating that a lack of voting rights tends to reduce willingness to engage in formal political processes in Germany (Müssig and Worbs 2012).

Looking at the party preferences of people with a migrant background, a study by the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (Wittlif and Litta 2016), based on a large survey in 2015, showed that the majority aligned themselves with two major German parties: the CDU and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD). The SPD was ranked first by 40.1 per cent, followed by the CDU on 27.6 per cent, the Greens (13.2 per cent) and the Left Party (11 per cent). If the origin of migrants is taken into account, however, party preferences varied across the migrant groups. The SPD was by far the most popular party (69.8 per cent) among migrants with a Turkish background, whereas high levels of approval were found for the grand coalition of the CDU and SPD among EU migrants who had been living in Germany since 2000 or those who were born in Germany. Newer EU migrants (post-2004), who were mostly from Eastern European countries, tended to favour the CDU, while migrants from countries categorized as the 'rest of the world' preferred the more left-leaning parties. Wüst (2004, 2006) explains this as part of a historical cultural cleavage in the German party system, based on a mono-cultural versus multicultural orientation. He argues that the CDU and CSU have traditionally applied a monocultural understanding of nation states guided by dominant German culture (Deutsche Leitkultur). As the workers' party, the SPD has traditionally focused on promoting the integration of foreign workers and naturalized 'guest workers', and advocated the protection of refugees and asylum seekers. Similarly, the Greens and the Left have had a stronger multicultural orientation, traditionally focused on asylum and human rights policies, in their party programmes. The Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP) can be seen as being in the middle, with a particularly open stance towards highly skilled immigration.

Studies of candidates and MPs in Germany with a migrant background found that parties that pursue a more open stance towards immigration, such as the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens, tend to have a higher proportion of candidates and MPs of migrant origin. For instance, a study by Wüst (2014) on migrant-origin candidates in the 2013 election to the Bundestag found that the Green Party had the highest number of persons with a migrant background (26 candidates), followed by the Left Party (24) and the SPD (23). In contrast, only 12 candidates of migrant-origin stood for the CDU, 10 for the FDP and just one for the CSU. Similarly, at the city level, 8 per cent of the council members of both the Left Party and the Green Party were of migrant origin between September 2006 and March 2011. Among SPD council members, 5 per cent had a migrant background, but this was the case for only 2 per cent of the CDU/CSU and FDP council members. Among the city council members, the main motivation for joining a party was to have an influence on politics (75 per cent), followed by enjoyment of political work (63 per cent) and a wish to take responsibility as a citizen (57 per cent) (Schönwälder et al. 2011). Moreover, both a party's choice of candidates with a migrant background and the electoral behaviour of voters with a migrant background tended to be influenced not just by a party's stance on migration-related issues, but also by their policies on education and social justice, which traditionally tended to favour the political left (Wüst 2014).

The majority of the participants to this case study who had obtained German citizenship indicated that they participated in German elections. The choice of party tended to be influenced by its stance on migration and asylum policy, and respondents supported parties that lean more to the left. Next to voting, party membership was seen as another way to participate in the political life of Germany. Four of the Afghan respondents were members of the SPD, whereas no Syrian respondents were party members. Two of the Afghan party members had been residing in Germany for more than 10 years and had become German citizens. The other two arrived in Germany two years ago, and one was still going through the asylum process. The reasons for joining a German political party were diverse, and family background was explicitly mentioned by those who had recently arrived in Germany. Being





politically engaged as well as previous involvement in politics of their country of origin, but also the opportunity to gain experience in democratic practices emerged as important motivating factors:

I thought, I am here now and I would like to continue working in politics and I also want to study politics, so I thought it might be better to join a party. [...] I learn a lot about German politics and parties, but also about German culture. [...] Politics is my goal, my blood, I cannot live without politics. I have grown up with politics. Also because of the problems of my country, my country needs someone to help.

—Afghan male representative of an Afghan refugee organization 1, Berlin, 2017

Those who were newly arrived stated that their choice of party was influenced by the active stance of some SPD politicians with regard to the increasing number of people seeking protection in Europe. Furthermore, the party's agenda on immigration and migrants' rights, as well as positive perceptions of the party's policies related to social justice, were among the primary reasons for joining the SPD:

At the time, policies related to social justice and the immigration policy of the SPD better pleased me than the stance of the CDU. But in recent years, as I have observed the policy with regard to Afghanistan, I am more disappointed and I cannot identify myself anymore. Both the German Government and the SPD have been involved in the war in Afghanistan.

—Afghan male representative of a migrant organization 2, Bonn, 2017

As the above quotes indicate, both of the Afghan respondents who have been residing in Germany for a longer period felt that German participation in the war in Afghanistan in the 2000s, through both political and military intervention, contrasted with the party's liberal migration policies. The German response to the Afghan conflict and the stance of many respondents who were against foreign intervention strongly diverged, leading to disappointment and a more critical opinion on the party's policies. While Afghan party members tried to influence both internal and foreign policy through active lobbying, they perceived that their voices were ignored by German politicians.

Next to voting and party membership, engaging in consultative bodies, such as migrant advisory committees (Ausländerbeiräte) and integration or migration councils, was seen as a way to ensure the political representation of migrants at the local and regional levels. For instance, one Afghan respondent was a member of a city district migration council in Berlin, which comprises representatives of migrant organizations, local politicians, the police, staff members of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees as well as NGO representatives. The representatives of migrant organizations are not elected directly but have to apply for a position at the local integration office. The work of the migration council addresses the various aspects and challenges of migration and integration at the district level, ranging from the provision of integration courses to long-term programmes of anti-racism work. In addition, the respondent has recently been elected to the Council for Integration and Migration Questions in the state of Berlin (Landesbeirat für Integrations- und Migrationsfragen). This body makes recommendations on the further development of integration policy at the state level. Given the advisory function of these councils, the influence and capacity to shape migration and integration policies very much depend on the willingness and openness of the local and regional governments: 'Of course, they also

promise us a lot with the new government. On the one hand certain people were responsible for the fact that it [the council] was established in the first place. They take our suggestions very seriously, so we expect a lot from it' (Afghan male representative of a migrant organization 1, Berlin, 2017).

## Non-formal political participation

For those refugees and asylum seekers for whom avenues for formal political participation are closed, migrant- and refugee-led grassroots mobilization provides meaningful ways of expressing the challenges faced by their communities and to make their voices heard. Sparked by the suicide of an Iranian asylum seeker in an asylum accommodation centre in January 2012, self-organized refugee-led grassroots initiatives emerged in major cities across Germany to protest through rallies, marches and hunger strikes against people's precarious living conditions during the asylum application procedure. While asylum seekers have organized themselves since the 1990s, these older movements were more local and time limited. The more recent refugee-led grassroots movements tend to be more enduring, and their actors nationally and internationally connected (Klotz 2016; Schröder 2016). Hence, these forms of grassroots mobilization can be perceived as platforms through which both formally and legally authorized persons and marginalized groups can assert the legitimacy of their political voice.

For the participants in this study, the ability to exercise political rights in Germany was considered very important. Having been actively engaged in political movements in Afghanistan and Syria, respondents saw the need to continue their struggles for democracy and freedom in Germany. For instance, a migrant- and refugee-led grassroots initiative has emerged in light of the current political debate and policy environment in Germany which considers if there are safe areas in Afghanistan where rejected asylum seekers can be returned to. According to Afghan respondents who were involved in this initiative, it aims to mobilize solidarity in wider German society against deportations and to advocate for equal opportunities in the refugee integration process. As part of this initiative, the Forum afghanischer Migranten (Forum for Afghan Migrants n.d.) was established in Cologne by Afghan asylum seekers in 2016 to enable all Afghan people to participate in integration and language courses, to fight against deportations from Cologne to Afghanistan and to counter racism, discrimination and xenophobia. The activities of the forum range from practical assistance with government agencies and doctors' visits and the organization of information events on asylum procedures, to organizing political campaigns and protests. Another example is the protest camp organized by asylum seekers in front of the BAMF building in Dortmund in 2015. Around 100 asylum seekers protested for 54 days, demanding the repeal of the Dublin regulation, faster processing of asylum applications, facilitated conditions for family reunification, German language courses for all asylum seekers and facilitated access to work and higher education for asylum seekers. According to a Syrian respondent, who was one of the organizers of the camp, the movement was an important way to put pressure on local authorities to improve the living conditions of asylum seekers and to raise awareness among the wider German public.

Furthermore, according to some Syrian respondents, their political activism aims to challenge the discourse of pity that they feel is present in the current debate about refugees, as well as the exclusion of European refugee regimes, by highlighting the complexity and diversity of refugees' experiences. Moreover, they seek to connect the political struggle for human rights and against the marginalization and discrimination of refugees, with the geopolitical root causes of displacement, by providing information about the embeddedness of the Syrian conflict in broader geopolitical power struggles:



Our work could maybe provide input for people to change the narrative on refugees. Many people see refugees as people who popped up in the Mediterranean. For many people, the story begins only in the Mediterranean in boats. [...] We don't need to focus on what refugees are doing but what Syrians or Afghans are doing. We started to dismantle the term refugee itself.

—Syrian male respondent 1, Berlin, 2017

In addition, the arts and culture provided some respondents with an alternative space for political expression. For example, one Syrian respondent frequently organizes art exhibitions and literature festivals to provide an opportunity for Syrian artists and writers in exile to present their work to a broader audience. These events give artists a creative space to explore and express their identities, but also enable them to challenge discrimination and foster intercultural dialogue. Through their work, the artists often illustrate their troubling story of expulsion, flight and exile as well as their struggles for freedom, democracy and a better life in Syria.

The challenges and barriers to refugees' engagement in the host-country context are related to both their capacity and aspiration to become active members of society. Language is crucial not just for articulating political demands but also for experiencing and understanding the local context and culture. Speaking German is therefore seen as a basic requirement for becoming actively engaged in the host society. Many respondents emphasized that being in a refugee situation, most Afghan and Syrian newcomers were struggling to secure their basic needs and to build a stable life in a new society. The lack of financial, personal and political security constrained their capacity to become actively involved and limited the freedom and space for civic and political engagement, as they tended to be preoccupied with how to secure their livelihood. Some also expressed a fear of risking or losing their status, which made them reluctant to become openly politically involved.

In fact, the temporary nature and precariousness of their legal status not only influences refugees' and asylum seekers' capacity to engage but also limits their aspiration and desire to do so. The insecurity of residency limits the willingness to invest in building a new life in an unstable environment, and also affects the feeling of belonging to the host society. Integration is a two-way process; it is as much about the way in which destination countries receive refugees as what refugees do to adapt to a new setting. In particular, respondents perceived that the current refugee debate, in which European societies are considered superior to refugees in a discourse based on a categorization of differences, reinforces a concept of 'otherness' through which the refugee is perceived as a non-legitimate part of society: 'Labelling someone as a refugee is a problem because whatever you do, you will not feel you belong in the society as a normal person. But we as Syrian civil society in Germany can do many things to change the stereotypes' (Syrian female respondent 2, Berlin, 2017).

Many respondents perceived that even if their voices were heard, they were seen as the voices of 'the refugees' and not of independent political actors. Moreover, newcomers were portrayed in the mainstream media and the public discourse as either passive victims in need of assistance or a threat to European society, identity and culture, which tended to reinforce the Western gendered stereotypes of the 'Muslim Other':

So I'm a migrant . . . somebody from Kosovo or Albania is also a migrant, the only difference is our hair and our skin colour. After New Year's Eve, women did not want to sit next to a refugee who has black hair. They think a person with black hair is dangerous, is a criminal.

—Afghan male representative of an Afghan refugee organization 3, Cologne, 2017

I feel that many think I was veiled in Syria and that I was not dressed like this [in Western clothes] in Syria. And when I arrived here I was empowered. At the same time women like me, not very religious, easygoing, feel that are not accepted by either society.

—Syrian female respondent 3, Berlin, 2017

As the above quotes indicate, barriers to engagement are not only found in the external structural context of Germany, but also internally within the Afghan and Syrian communities. Importantly, the ethnicization of the conflict in both countries of origin, in which power is more and more mobilized along ethnic and religious lines, creates societal divisions that are also reflected within Afghan and Syrian refugee populations abroad. As a result, those who are committed to liberal values find themselves struggling for recognition and legitimacy in both societies at once. Respondents noted that the fragmented nature of the Afghan and Syrian communities abroad limited the potential to generate a strong collective voice to raise awareness and mobilize solidarity for refugees and asylum seekers as a whole in Germany, as well as Syrians and Afghans in the countries of origin. In addition, respondents experienced stereotyping not just in German society, but also among their own communities, as traditional patriarchal structures persist in the exiled population and are sometimes even reinforced through the experience of forced displacement.

## 4. Country-of-origin context



### Afghanistan

The migration history of Afghanistan is marked by mixed migration flows, in which poverty, environmental hazards and recurring phases of instability and conflict can be seen as major factors in emigration (ICMPD 2013). According to the United Nations Population Division, Afghanistan's emigrant population (excluding refugees and asylum seekers) was estimated at around 4.8 million in mid-2015 (UNPD 2015). Forced displacement continues to play a crucial role in Afghan migration patterns, and the number of refugees or people in a refugee-like situation is estimated to be 2,666,213, excluding asylum seekers, which numbered 258,866 in 2015. The majority are residing in neighbouring countries. Pakistan was host to over 1.5 million and Iran to over 950,000 Afghan refugees in 2015 (UNHCR 2017).

The Afghan Government has not formulated any formal strategy, policy or programme to guide the active involvement of its diaspora and tap into its members' skills and resources. Thus far, migration policies and the National Development Plan focus on governing internal displacement and return, as these topics continue to be the main issues of concern in the Afghan migration context (Weinar 2014). At the same time, the political role of the Afghan diaspora has been highlighted in several studies. Diaspora representatives from diverse host countries had been involved in political negotiations and played a decisive role in the Petersberg Talks on the country's peaceful transition in Bonn in 2001 (Zunzer 2004). Moreover, Afghan citizens residing in Europe and the United States returned to Afghanistan and took three-quarters of the positions in the interim administration in the same year (Jazayeri 2003). In 2004, Afghan refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan were given the opportunity to participate in the country's first transitional elections in order to enfranchise the displaced population in neighboring countries. Despite the lack of funds, bureaucratic and political obstacles in negotiations with the host countries and the limited time frame for preparing the logistics of the election, the enfranchisement of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries can be regarded as a success, as they made up 10 per cent of the total 2004 electorate. At the same time, some critical voices argued that voting from Iran and Pakistan became highly politicized, since host countries tried to influence voting along ethnic lines to protect their political interests in the Afghan context (Slavu 2007; 2012).

## Syria

Syria's migration history is characterized by several phases. Historically, the main push factors were high population growth, socio-political events and economic factors such as low economic growth and high rates of unemployment. More recently, the violent conflict that began in 2011 has caused mass displacement, forcing almost 11 million people to flee their homes by 2016, the majority (6.1 million) of whom were internally displaced. Of its 7.3 million emigrant population, 5.6 million persons are estimated to have left the country since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 (De Bel-Air 2016). Of these, the vast majority moved to neighbouring countries: Turkey (2.765 million), Lebanon (1.017 million) and Jordan (655,400) hosted the lion's share of Syrian refugees in the region in 2016 (UNHCR 2017).

Despite the increasing size and importance of Syria's emigrant population, diaspora-state relations are characterized by monitoring and control, rather than promoting inclusive political participation and rights. The Syrian Government is not able to exercise its full sovereignty abroad, but the state-run institutions of the Assad regime are involved in surveillance and intelligence measures to repress diaspora political activism and prevent the emergence of a political opposition from outside the country (Jörum 2015; Qayyum 2011; Ragab, Rahmeier, and Siegel 2017). In 2013, the Ministry of Interior issued a statement calling for the return of citizens who had left the country to engage in national dialogue to bring an end to the crisis (MPC Team 2013). Given the continuing threat to the civilian population, however, many diaspora representatives have been reluctant to respond to these government overtures (Ragab, Rahmeier and Siegel 2017). In the most recent presidential election in June 2014, officially registered refugees were entitled to vote at Syrian embassies of countries such as Lebanon, Iran and Jordan. According to the Syrian state-run Sana news agency, voting was possible in 43 embassies, while many governments opposed to the Assad regime, such as the United Arab Emirates, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Germany, banned the embassies from facilitating elections on their territories. Moreover, the international community, including the European Union and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, condemned the June 2014 election as illegitimate, as voting within the country was possible in government-controlled areas only (BBC News 2014; Darke 2014; Reuters 2014). Given the stage of the conflict as well as the absence of fair elections, raising awareness in the form of protests and demonstrations as well as political lobbying in the host-country context remain the only avenues for Syrians to participate in the politics of their country of origin.

## 5. Refugee diasporans' participation in their countries of origin

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The vast majority of respondents had been politically active in their country of origin before migrating to Germany. Many were socialized politically within their families. The young Syrian participants were among the protagonists in the peaceful struggle and resistance that took place on the streets to challenge the al-Assad regime in March 2011, demanding social, cultural and political change. Similarly, the young Afghan respondents who had left the country in the past five years had been actively engaged in civil movements that not only challenged the ideologies of the ruling political elites, but also demanded complex social change to break down the traditional patriarchal structures of gendered, generational, ethnic and religious hierarchies. In Germany, many felt obliged to continue their political activism from abroad by influencing decision-making on German foreign policy and by raising awareness of the situation in Afghanistan or Syria with the broader German public. In light of the Petersberg Talks in Bonn in 2001, the older generation of Afghans had organized mass protests against foreign intervention in the Afghan conflict. Syrian activists held demonstrations to advocate for recognition of the role of non-violent resistance in the Syrian conflict, and to amplify the voices of Syrians struggling for peace and freedom. Other protests aimed to raise awareness of the victims of chemical attacks and the bombing of Aleppo, or the starvation of the Syrian population in besieged areas. Next to mobilizing support with the broader public, both Afghan and Syrian respondents tried to reach out to German politicians through direct contact and conversations or in the form of open letters to lobby for a peaceful solution and an end to the ongoing conflicts.

### Formal political participation

In contrast to participation in Germany, direct political involvement in the political processes of the countries of origin tends to play a subordinate role in both the Afghan and the Syrian contexts. While theoretically every Afghan citizen over the age of 18, regardless of his or her country of residence, is eligible to vote in Afghan elections, out-of-country voting (OCV) during the presidential elections in 2004 seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. To enfranchise Afghans around the world, the organization Afghan Peacemaker initiated an online petition to call for external voting rights for Afghans in the presidential elections of 2014. According to a member of the organization interviewed for this study, they successfully lobbied for the support of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan,

which saw OCV as an important measure for enfranchising the Afghan diaspora. Nonetheless, in light of tensions linked to accusations of manipulation and electoral fraud, OCV could not be achieved at that stage of the democratic process.

Moreover, another respondent who had been working for the IEC emphasized the considerable logistical efforts as well as the potential for political interference by neighbouring host countries as the major challenges facing OCV. Article 5 (5) of the 2016 Election Law states that refugees ‘have the right to participate in elections, if possible, in separate polling centers established by the Independent Elections Commission’. However, as of March 2018, no arrangements had been made for OCV of refugees in the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018. The fragile political context characterized by increasing instability, weak political institutions and corrupt electoral practices was perceived by the interviewees as a major challenge for refugees’ formal participation through voting and party membership. Many respondents expressed a strong mistrust of the political system in Afghanistan as, in their opinion, members of the political elite tend to serve their own interests in order to retain power and economic influence, rather than act on the needs of the population. Moreover, Afghan respondents emphasized that warlords accused of atrocities in the civil war of the 1990s had not been held accountable, but instead given influential positions in the Afghan political landscape, leading to a fragmented system that tends to reinforce entrenched ethnic divides:

We cannot talk about democracy [in Afghanistan] without secularism, without freedom of speech and freedom of belief, without alternatives, education and so on. Until then it is maybe a version of democracy but not a real democracy.

—Afghan female respondent 1, Berlin, 2017

Democracy must be able to defend itself, and the civilian population is currently paying the price. There are many forces that do not want to have a state under the rule of law, such as drug gangs and actors who benefit from corruption and nepotism. External forces are influencing the internal actors, and they mobilize the population and create divisions in the society. This is the result of a 40-year international conflict.

—Representative of Afghan development organization, Bonn, 2017

Given the limited political space and the continuing atrocities committed by the different parties to the Syrian conflict, Syrian respondents saw no space for formal political participation at this stage. In fact, Syrian respondents perceived voting in the election of their country of origin not as a human right, but as coercion to serve the purposes of state propaganda and manipulation:

It is not a real right, because you have to go and you have to vote for one person. No one will think of not going or voting against the president. So, I will not exercise my right because it is not done in the right way. [...] I think in general it is a good idea for people in the diaspora to have the ability to vote in the Syrian elections. But at this stage, it has no meaning or power to change anything. I don’t think it will make a difference unless there are guarantees that voting will be free and fair.

—Syrian female respondent 4, Berlin, 2017





Moreover, personal experiences of repression in the form of detention, torture, death threats and the disappearance of family members further strengthened the respondents' dissidence and resistance to the formal political system in Syria. While formal opposition parties exist in the Syrian political landscape, their influence was perceived by the respondents as non-existent, since these have to navigate the narrow political space under the ruling regime: 'Political parties in Syria are indirectly part of the system because they inherited the rules of the political game from the Baath party. So, they are corrupted on their own account. The role model, officially or unofficially, directly or indirectly, is the Baath Party. If the other parties want to do something, they imitate what The Baath Party is doing, because you imitate the powerful' (Syrian male respondent 2, Berlin, 2017).

### Non-formal political participation

The continuing violations of human rights and freedoms, as well, as the shortcomings of the international community in finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict, limit the space for the constructive political involvement of Syrian refugees in the peace and democracy-building processes of their home country. Some respondents have been engaged as civil society representatives in the Geneva peace talks to lobby for an end to the conflict at the international level. For instance, members of the Syrian Women's Network are part of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, which was initiated by Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy for the Syrian crisis, to enable civil society participation in the Geneva talks. The main aim is to lobby for a commitment to gender-sensitive peacebuilding and reconstruction as well as to enshrine the rights of women in Syria's future constitution. However, many of the Syrian respondents did not believe that the talks would have a genuine political impact and saw the discussions as disconnected from the reality on the ground in Syria.

Given that in both the Afghan and the Syrian contexts, the political system leaves no—or at least very limited—room for formal participation, many respondents emphasized the importance of civil society and civic movements in bringing social and political change and transformation. As sources of hope, these movements, often led by the young generation, tend to pursue non-violent, non-sectarian and liberal goals through their mobilizations, and aim to promote alternative and progressive discourses in the conflict-affected societies:

There is a great hope. There are very active persons both in Afghanistan and abroad, who do not think in a dogmatic and fragmented way, who are for Afghanistan, the country and the people, who want to achieve something positive, peaceful and democratic based on humanist values, in particular the younger generation.

—Afghan male respondent 1, Berlin, 2017

Therefore, initiatives led by the Syrian and Afghan refugee diaspora aim to support these movements and to empower civil society actors on the ground by providing tools, knowledge and capacity-building. For instance, the organization Citizens for Syria, established by Syrian activists in 2013, aims to build a broad base of social actors to raise awareness of the use of violence and to promote aspirations of freedom, dignity, civil participation and shared development (Citizens for Syria n.d.). The organization has established a globally networked platform for civil society organizations, initiatives and activists to promote the development of independent civil society in Syria and provides capacity development training for Syrian NGOs inside and outside the country. According to a member of this organization:

This can build responsibility, where we build political change because these are the people on the ground and not just people from the international community. Civil society even if it is not working directly in the political system can build a base for society, can react, act and criticize, can think and develop ideas and can participate and get politically involved, if they have the skills.

—Syrian female respondent 5, Berlin, 2017

Another example is the Young Leaders for Syria project, jointly implemented by Citizen Diplomats for Syria, Friedenskreis Syrien and the European Foundation for Democracy. The project aims to build the capacity for political and social transformation in Syria and targets young Syrians from diverse backgrounds who have come to Germany since 2011. In a range of workshops, participants discuss topics such as identity, sectarianism, conflict narratives and conflict resolution. The main goal of this project is to develop a basis for democratic and inclusive development in the population of young Syrians in Germany. In addition, the objective is to promote participation in and integration into the local community through civic education and professional capacity building (Citizen Diplomats for Syria n.d.).

While the world is made aware of the suffering of the Afghan and Syrian people through the coverage of death, destruction and displacement, many respondents felt that non-violent grassroots initiatives had been neglected by the media and the political debate. In this regard, they pointed out that the dominant security and humanitarian narratives of the Afghan and Syrian crises produce an image of a continuously troubled East, reinforce stereotypes of the ‘fundamentalist, obscurantist Muslim other’ and neglect the agency of those who resist by non-violent means. Furthermore, respondents highlighted that in both cases the conflict is embedded in a broader historical context of colonial and imperial domination, and remains open to the external influence of geopolitical power struggles:

Afghanistan is just a typical example of cold war politics. As Malcolm X said, “By all means necessary” has the fight against so-called communism and also nationalism in some countries been fought. And in doing so, currents such as the Muslim Brotherhood and such groups have also been supported.

—Afghan male representative of a migrant organization 1, Berlin, 2017

We blame the international community: everyone not only the regime. We blame everyone for not making peace happen. The whole UN system and the big eight countries, they were all involved in what happened in Syria in many ways. The forced displacement that happened in Aleppo, Homs and other cities was happening under the supervision of the UN.

—Syrian male respondent 3, Cologne, 2017

The lack of a sustainable solution to the Afghan and Syrian crises was seen as a major barrier to genuine political participation by refugees and many respondents felt that a resolution lies out of the hands of Afghans and Syrians themselves.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

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Taking into account the relatively strict citizenship regime and the legal framework excluding non-European residents and non-citizens from formal decision-making institutions and processes in Germany, non-formal political participation provides an important space for refugees and asylum seekers to engage in the political life of their host country. Hence, migrant representative bodies, as well as migrant and refugee organizations, provide crucial mechanisms for political participation and opportunities for empowerment, often mainly at the local and regional levels. At the same time, however, these often lack human and financial resources, and binding decision-making power. Furthermore, the qualitative findings of this case study show that mobilization by refugee-led grassroots initiatives provides meaningful ways to express the challenges refugee communities face in the host country and enables their voices to be raised against discrimination. This political activism also seeks to connect the political struggle for human rights in the host-country context with the geopolitical root causes of displacement. At the individual level, there are challenges and barriers to the capacity and aspiration to become an active member of the host society. In particular, insecure legal status and the negative stereotyping of the refugee discourse can be seen as major hurdles to refugees' political participation in the host country.

With regard to the country of origin, the findings show that the protracted nature of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria limits the space for the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in formal political institutions and processes. In particular, in the Afghan context, despite the existence of legal provisions for political participation by the refugee diaspora through OCV, as of March 2018 no arrangements had been made for the organization of OCV during the Afghan parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018. In the Syrian context, in the absence of a functioning democracy, the existence of a legal framework for OCV rather than providing opportunities for formal participation, seems to heighten respondents' resistance to formal political systems. While both Syrian and Afghan refugee diasporas can be considered important agents of change with the potential to contribute to societal and political transformation in their countries of origin, they are unlikely to be able to resolve complex and protracted crises on their own. At the same time, the interview findings have shown that civil society movements are emerging among Syrian and Afghan refugee communities. Such movements have become transnational in nature, as activists continue the struggle for democracy from abroad. These can be crucial forces in the peace- and democracy-building processes of both countries. Led by a younger generation, these movements tend to promote alternative and progressive discourses that challenge not only

the established political system of their home countries, but also underlying societal structures such as patriarchy.

In light of the above, a number of policy options and recommendations are set out below.

## Recommendations

### For the host country

- The Government and decision-makers should consider legal reforms that would grant the right to vote in local elections to non-German citizens who have been legally residing in Germany for a long period of time. This would provide more incentives for the integration of refugees into the host society and enhance their sense of belonging. It would also provide political parties with incentives to address refugees' issues in order to mobilize eligible refugee voters.
- State and local governments, and decision-makers should enhance the support provided to migrant representative bodies and refugee-led organizations through the provision of funding and capacity building.
- Civil society organizations should involve refugees and asylum seekers in their programme design and implementation based on dialogue to ensure that their relevant needs are addressed. Civil society organizations are important actors in empowering refugees and asylum seekers in Germany. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the resources of refugees and asylum seekers and to engage with them on an equal footing.
- State and local governments should work together with civil society organizations, migrant representative bodies and refugee-led organizations to create more platforms that bring together refugees and asylum seekers with the general population to discuss issues affecting their communities.

### For the countries of origin

- The government and decision-makers in Afghanistan should consider adopting OCV mechanisms that would enable the free, fair and genuine participation by Afghan refugees in future electoral processes.
- The government and decision-makers in Syria should consider opening up spaces for the participation of and consultations with the refugee diaspora during the peace negotiations and the transition process.
- Civil society organizations in both countries should strengthen their links with the diaspora in order to benefit from the knowledge, experience and financial resources available among the refugee population. Strengthening transnational networks could also strengthen advocacy efforts.

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## Interviews

Afghan female respondent 1, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Afghan male respondent 1, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Afghan male representative of a migrant organization 1, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Afghan male representative of a migrant organization 2, author's interview, Bonn, June 2017

Afghan male representative of an Afghan refugee organization 1, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Afghan male representative of an Afghan refugee organization 2, author's interview, Cologne, July 2017

Director of Cologne Integration Council, author's interview, Cologne, August 2017

Director of Heinrich Böll Foundation, author's interview, phone interview, July 2017

Project manager, BAGFA, author's interview, phone interview, July 2017

Representative of Afghan development organization, author's interview, Bonn, June 2017

Syrian female respondent 1, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian female respondent 2, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian female respondent 3, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian female respondent 4, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian female respondent 5, author's interview, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian male respondent 1, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian male respondent 2, Berlin, June 2017

Syrian male respondent 3, Cologne, June 2017

## Annex. Glossary of terms

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### Asylum

A form of protection given by a state on its territory based on internationally or nationally recognized refugee rights. It is granted to a person who is unable to seek protection in his or her country of nationality and/or residence, in particular for fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

### Asylum seeker

A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and is awaiting a decision on an application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.

### Country of origin

A country from which people leave to settle abroad permanently or temporarily (IOM 2011).

### Diaspora

A group of individuals (and members of networks, associations and communities) who have left their country of origin but maintain links with their homeland. This concept covers more settled communities, migrant workers based abroad temporarily, expatriates with the nationality of the host country, dual nationals, and second- and third-generation migrants.

### Host country

The country where a refugee is settled. In the case of asylum seekers, the country where a person has applied for asylum.

### Internally displaced person

A person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence, in particular because of (or in order to avoid) the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-induced disasters, but who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border (United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights 1998).

### Migrant

Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (a) the person's legal status; (b) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (c) what the causes for the movement are; or (d) what the length of the stay is (International Organization for Migration 2011).

### Naturalization

Granting by a state of its nationality to a non-national through a formal act on the application of the individual concerned (IOM 2011).

### Non-formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, non-formal political participation is understood as participation in political affairs through non-formal means, such as civil society organizations, trade unions, consultative bodies, community organizations, grassroots movements and so on.

### Formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, formal political participation is understood as participation in decision-making through formal democratic institutions and processes such as national and local elections, referendums, political parties, and parliaments.

### Refugee

'A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (Refugee Convention, article 1A(2), 1951). In addition, article 1(2) of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention defines a refugee as any person compelled to leave his or her country 'owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality'. Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration states that refugees also include persons who flee their country 'because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order' (IOM 2011).

### Resettlement

The transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought refuge to another state that has agreed to admit them (IOM 2011).

### Transnationalism

The process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders (IOM 2011).

## About the authors

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**Nora Jasmin Ragab** is a PhD student and researcher at the Migration and Development research cluster at Maastricht University, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance. Her main research interest lies in the area of migration and development, with a focus on diaspora mobilization in conflict settings. The aim of her PhD project is to provide a broader understanding of the role and contribution of diasporas to conflicts and peace building in the country of origin by using the Syrian diaspora as a case. She finished her Bachelor's degree in Business, Economics and Social Sciences at Vienna University of Economics and Business and did her Master's in Public Policy and Human Development with a specialization in Migration Studies at Maastricht University. In addition to this research project she also collaborates closely with migrant organizations in her role as intercultural consultant, which gives her access to different migrant communities in Germany.

**Lina Antara** is a democracy support professional with a keen interest in electoral processes and human rights. She has worked as a Programme Officer at International IDEA since 2015, focusing on projects related to the political inclusion of marginalized groups. Previously, she worked with International IDEA's electoral support project in Myanmar, and with the Electoral Processes Programme conducting research for the Electoral Justice Database and the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. Prior to this, she worked for the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Parliament in Luxembourg. She also served as an election observer with the Organization of American States in Panama in 2014 and with the European Union in Liberia in 2017. She holds a master's degree in European law from the University of Luxembourg, a postgraduate degree in international election observation and electoral assistance from the University of the Basque Country, and a bachelor's degree in law from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

## About the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project

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Refugees have the potential to make an impact on the political life of both their host countries and countries of origin, as they often maintain transnational links with their homelands while at the same time they become part of the host society. Recognizing the dual role of refugees as political actors, the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project aims to explore the challenges and opportunities related to political participation of refugees in their host country and country of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms of political participation, the project explores issues of access to citizenship in the host countries, electoral rights in both host country and country of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, acknowledging that political life is not only confined to electoral processes, the project examines non-formal mechanisms of political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

In 2018 the project produced a report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, which draws on eight case studies carried out through interviews and focus group discussions with refugees and key informants in host countries with high numbers of refugees. It offers cross-country insights into the experiences of refugee communities originating from five of the largest source countries.

The Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Download the case studies and the full report:

<<https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/migration-democracy>>



## About International IDEA



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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

### What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

### Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<<http://www.idea.int>>

Drawing on individual perspectives of Afghan and Syrian refugees based in Germany, this case study explores the formal and non-formal political participation of refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and the ways in which they are able to participate in peacebuilding and democracy-building in their countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the case study explores issues of access to citizenship in the host country, electoral rights in both the host country and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, it examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

This case study is part of the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project and has informed the development of a longer report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, published by International IDEA in 2018.