



Diaspora Humanitarians

How Australia-based migrants help in crises abroad

Syria Briefing

- Syria has experienced over a decade of military conflict, humanitarian emergencies, natural disasters and worsening economic crisis. As of 2024, approximately three quarters of the population requires humanitarian assistance. The Syrian diaspora in Australia has mobilised to provide economic, social and political assistance. From our survey of Syrian migrants in Australia:
 - › 91% of respondents communicated directly with those in Syria to provide support.
 - › 56% sent financial aid.
 - › 51% engaged in advocacy in response to the crisis.
 - › 47% provided information on migration pathways to Australia.
- The annual value of remittances sent to Syria decreased by US\$870 million between 2019 and 2020. Today, remittances constitute approximately a third of Syria's GDP.
- The Syrian Government has implemented legislation to reduce diasporic engagement in the country, confiscating property owned by the diaspora and making remittances difficult to access.
- The Syrian-born population is the sixth-largest migrant group from the Middle East and North Africa living in Australia. As of 2022, approximately 32,680 migrants born in Syria resided in Australia, compared to 7,610 Syria-born residents in 2001.

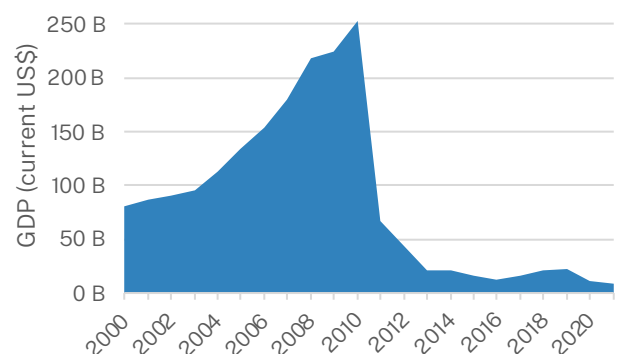
Responding to Crisis

Syria's economic collapse has exacerbated human vulnerabilities caused by the ongoing civil war. Between 2021 and 2022, Syrian GDP decreased from US\$22.6bn to US\$11.16bn, and inflation has increased significantly. As of 2021, the country's GDP per capita was just US\$420.6. Comparatively, the country's pre-war GDP per capita was US\$1,304.64.

Syria's economic collapse had multiple causes: long-lasting war and lack of connection to the international banking system made the country's financial situation highly vulnerable to economic shocks. A series of rapid shocks—including Covid-19 restrictions, a sharp fall in the international oil price, and collapse of the Lebanese banking system (which the Syrian economy relied on) – was too much for the economy to absorb.

The Syrian government's response to the economic collapse, including the removal of fuel and transport subsidies, led to widespread protest in the country's Southeast. The 2023 Türkiye-Syria earthquake exacerbated vulnerabilities in the country's Northwest. In 2024, 16.7 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance – the largest number of people since the civil war began.

Figure 1: Syrian GDP, 2000-2021



Diaspora Humanitarians

As part of the Diaspora Humanitarians project, 86 members of the Syrian diaspora in Australia (55 women, 31 men) were surveyed about their range of responses to the humanitarian crisis. These actions were grouped into five categories: (1) the provision of financial aid, donations or fundraising, (2) advocacy and media engagement, (3) direct communication with Syria to provide support and information (4) volunteering and employment in the humanitarian sector and (5) the sponsorship of migration to Australia.

This survey relied on snowball sampling of engaged diaspora members, and therefore provides a multi-level vision of the range of response by the Syrian diaspora in Australia to the economic collapse.

The most popular humanitarian response among the diaspora was to provide information or support over the phone to those directly impacted by the crisis, with 91% of survey respondents indicating that they took this action. 55% of respondents reported providing significant support in this way, and 36% reported providing minor support. Providing direct financial aid or fundraising for humanitarian organisations was also a popular means of offering support. 56% of respondents reported making donations in response to the economic collapse, with 19% making significant donations and 37% reported making minor donations.

Of survey respondents, 51% reported engaging in advocacy regarding the crisis. The majority of people engaged in a minor way with this avenue of support (41% of respondents), while a small proportion of the population reported significant engagement (10%). Providing information on migration pathways or sponsoring migration to Australia was less common, with 13% of respondents reported major engagement and 37% reported minor engagement with this action. Volunteering or being employed in sectors responding to the crisis was a less common response among the diaspora. Of all respondents, just 10% reported significant engagement with this action, and 33% reported minor engagement.

Homeland Connections

The diaspora's humanitarian responses to Syria's economic collapse was shaped by their pre-existing connections to their homeland.

Remittances

The World Bank estimates that the proportion of the Syrian economy comprised of remittances has more than doubled since the beginning of the civil war. The World Bank estimated that approximately 30% of Syria's real GDP was comprised of remittances as of 2017. As a result of the ongoing sanctions regime against the Syrian government, no official estimate of the value of remittances sent to Syria has been published since 2010.

As of 2021, most remittance recipients received between US\$100 and US\$200 a month. Compared to average wages in Syria, this is significant. Due to ongoing infrastructure destruction, "derisking" measures in response to the international sanctions regime, and collapse of the Lebanese banking sector, successfully sending remittances through registered money transfer operators (e.g. Western Union) is very difficult. As a result, most remittances arrive through informal channels – notably *hawala* (underground banking) and the physical transfer of money across the Syrian border.

Syria's reliance on informal remittance networks has made the country vulnerable to remittance shocks. Globally, Covid-19 had a limited impact on remittance transfers. However, restrictions on physical movement – both domestically and internationally – reduced Syria's capacity to receive remittances. Domestic legislation implemented across Europe, Jordan and Türkiye designed to curtail the financing of terrorism and money laundering has further reduced access to remittances in Syria.

As a result of legislative action, access to remittances in Syria has reduced. Since 2013, the Syrian Government has required all foreign currency sent to the country to be converted into Syrian pounds - encouraging people to use riskier informal remittance channels. Since 2020, the Government has made accessing *hawala* networks significantly more difficult, and possession of foreign currencies has been criminalised. Measures – such as the confiscation of ID cards upon relinquishing territory – has reduced civilians access to funds sent through these informal channels. The government's 2021 decision to tax inbound remittances has further increased reliance on informal remittance channels.

Diaspora Institutions

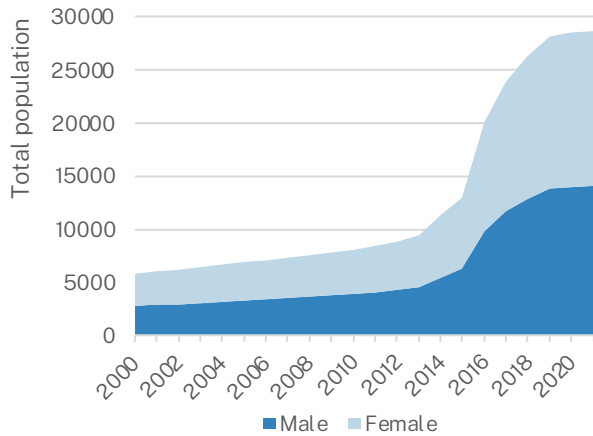
Syria has a large diaspora. As of 2017, it was estimated that 8-15 million Syrians lived outside of the country. The diaspora is also diverse, comprising of refugees and voluntary migrants. Since the 1970s, individuals have fled Syria to escape the Assad regime. and the country has experienced a long-lasting 'brain drain'. The Syrian diaspora is generally united by its opposition to the Assad Regime.

The Syrian Government's diasporic engagement has reflected its adversarial relationship to the country's diaspora. In 2018, it introduced a law requiring Syrians to prove their property ownership to local authorities within a period of 30 days. For the millions of Syrians living overseas, doing so was impossible. As a result, the government effectively confiscated the property of millions of people. Other legislation, including the lack of an automatic right to return to the country, is also targeted against the diaspora. Some diasporic engagement is less adversarial. In 2021, Syria updated its Civil Status Law. Rather than having to register vital events (e.g. birth, marriage) within 90 days, the Syrian diaspora now has 9 months to disclose these events. However, Syrians living abroad are still unable to access ID cards.

The Australia-Based Diaspora

The humanitarian responses of Australia's Syrian diaspora to Syria's economic collapse has been shaped by their continuing connections to their homeland, by their dynamics of migration to Australia, and their experiences of settlement. This briefing primarily uses data from Australia's 2021 census.

Figure 2: Total Syrian-born population in Australia, 2000-2021



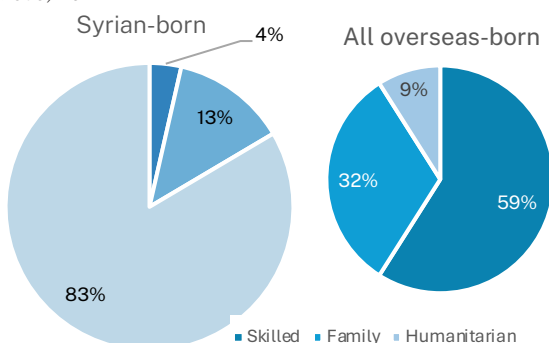
Dynamics of Migration

Australia's population in 2023 included an estimated 34,590 people born in Syria. This is a significant increase from the 29,096 Syrian-born migrants living in the country at the time of the 2021 census - when Covid-19 travel restrictions restricted migration flows.

Since 2001, when just 7610 Syrian-born migrants resided in Australia, the Syrian population in Australia has grown by more than 350%. The vast majority of Syrian-born migrants arrived in Australia since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. Between 2011 and 2015, 4556 Syrian-born migrants arrived in the Australia, and 15,605 migrants arrived since 2016. At the time of the 2021 census, 45.7% of Syrian-born individuals in Australia were citizens.

The diaspora overwhelmingly moves to Australia as permanent migrants. As of 2021, 25,035 Syrian-born individuals in Australia experienced permanent migration pathways: 83.5% were in the humanitarian stream, 12.9% were in the family stream and 3.6% were in the skilled visa stream.

Figure 3: Syrian and all overseas-born permanent residents in Australia, 2021



A smaller number of Syrian-born migrants also reside in Australia as temporary residents. As of February 2024, there were 299 Syrian-born individuals on temporary Australian visas: 21% held temporary skilled visas, 15% held student visas and 64% held other temporary resident visas.

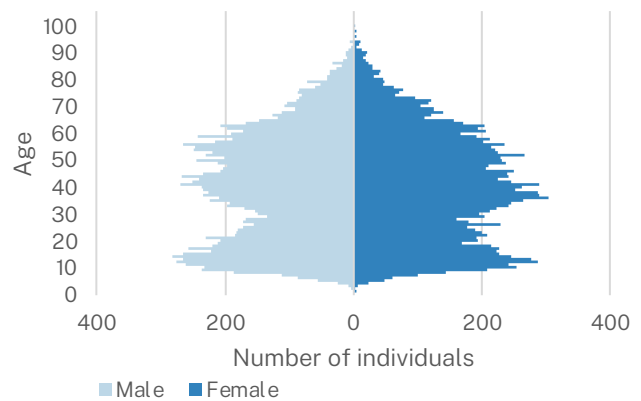
Population Dynamics

The diaspora's median age is similar to the Australian average, and a relatively large proportion of the population are children. The diaspora primarily resides in Australia's capital cities, particularly Greater Sydney. Approximately 64% of the diaspora has completed secondary school.

Demography

As of 2021, the median age of the Syrian diaspora in Australia was 40, slightly older than the population-wide average of 38. The diaspora is gender-balanced. In 2021, 49.2% of migrants were male and 50.8% were female. The population is primarily comprised of children and working-aged adults. In 2021, 21.2% of the Syrian-born population were under 20, 28.3% were aged 20 to 39 and 31.8% were aged 40 to 59. Notably, just 12.8% of the population were in their twenties. Compared to other emerging diasporas in Australia, the Syrian diaspora is relatively old.

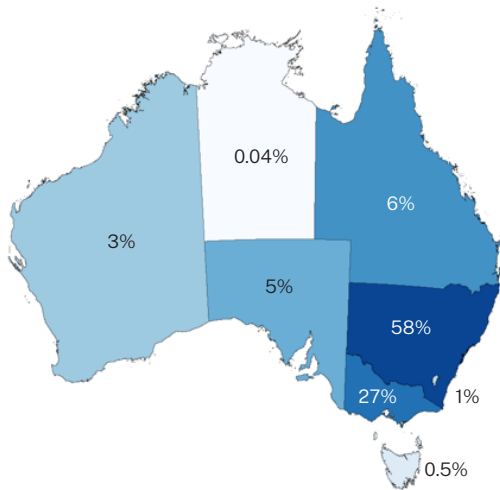
Figure 4: Population pyramid for the Syrian-born population in Australia, 2021



Geography

The Syrian born population overwhelmingly resides in Australia's capital cities, with 94% of migrants doing so in 2021. At the time of the census, 54% of the population resided in Greater Sydney, 26% resided in Greater Melbourne, 5% resided in Greater Adelaide and 4% resided in Greater Brisbane. Comparatively, 21% of Australia's population resided in Greater, Sydney, 19% resided in Greater Melbourne, 10% resided in Greater Brisbane and 5% resided in Greater Adelaide at the same time.

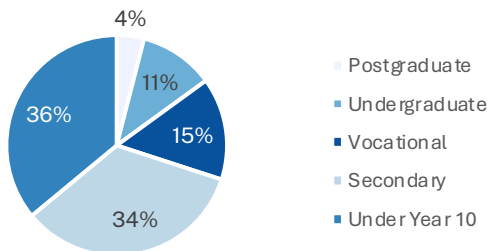
Figure 5: Geographies of residence of the Syrian-born population in Australia, 2021



Education

The Syrian diaspora in Australia possesses a variety of educational outcomes. Of the Syrian-born adult population in Australia, 15% have completed tertiary education (11% undergraduate, 4% postgraduate) and 15% of the adult population has obtained vocational qualifications (certificate level III or IV, advanced diploma). Reflecting the significant humanitarian flow from the country, and the disruptions caused due to their homeland's instability, 36% of Syrian-born adults in Australia have not completed above a year-10 level of education.

Figure 6: Highest level of educational achievement of the Syrian-born population in Australia, 2021

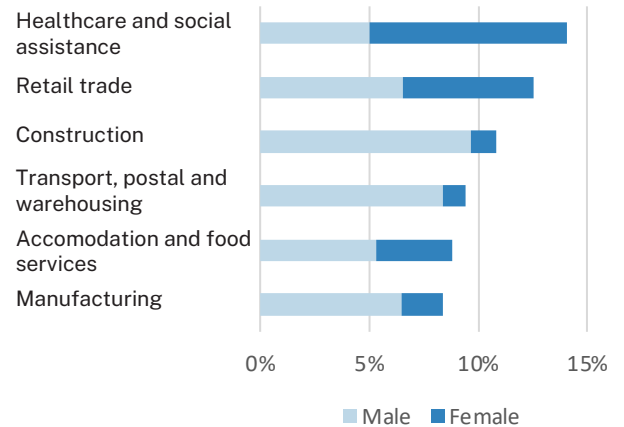


Employment

In Australia, the most populous sector of employment for Syrian-born individuals is healthcare. In 2021, 14% of the working diaspora was employed in this industry. Other leading sectors of employment include retail, which employed 12% of the working diaspora, and construction, which employed 11% of the diaspora.

Dynamics of employment for the diaspora are gendered. In 2021, 2406 women born in Syria were employed in Australia. Of this population, 25% worked in healthcare, 17% were employed in retail, 12% were employed in education and 10% worked in the accommodation and food services industry. 4209 Syrian-born men were employed in 2021. The leading sector of employment was construction, which employed 15% of working Syrian-born men. Additionally, 13% of working men were employed in the transport, postal and warehousing industry and 10% were employed in both the retail and manufacturing industries.

Figure 8: Leading sectors of employment for the Syrian-born population in Australia, 2021



Sources:

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Census of Population and Housing, 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022b), Permanent Migrants in Australia; Australian Department of Home Affairs (2024a), Permanent Migration Program (Skilled & Family) Outcomes Snapshot – Annual Statistics; Australian Department of Home Affairs (2024b), Temporary visa holders in Australia; ESCWA (2021), A Lifeline Under Threat? Syrian household remittances in light of sanctions, financial sector de-risking, COVID-19 and regional developments; Stokke & Wiebelhaus-Brahm (2018), Syrian Diaspora Mobilisation: Vertical coordination, patronage relations, and the challenges of fragmentation in pursuit of transitional justice; The World Bank (2021), GDP (currentUS\$); UNDP (2020), Compounding Crises: Will COVID-19 and Lower Oil Prices Lead to a New Development Paradigm in the Arab Region?.

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The Diaspora Humanitarians project aims to map the extensive humanitarian activities and contributions of Australia-based migrants to crises abroad. For more information see www.diasporahumanitarians.com