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# Business people in war times, the ‘fluid capital’ and the ‘shy diaspora’: The case of Syrians in Turkey

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Due to intensive conflict, a significant amount of Syrian capital flight has funnelled to Turkey since 2011. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted in five major Turkish cities which have hosted the highest number of Syrian business people, this paper first reveals the convergence of the interests of the host state and of the displaced capital owners, as well as the increasing transnationalization of Syrian economic practices. It then assesses the capacity and/or willingness of the Syrian business people to organize themselves as an interest group regarding their interests in Turkey and to assist the process of conflict resolution in Syria. Finally, the paper reflects upon whether a hybrid identity is in the making within the Syrian business diaspora in Turkey. Our findings suggest that the Syrian business diaspora in Turkey is evolving itself into a transnational business community, and developing hybrid socio-economic practices. Yet, we delineate this flourishing community as ‘shy’ because the issues concerning both domestic and Syrian politics are carefully being avoided to keep stability and unity within. This consequently hinders the Syrian business community to form itself as an interest group in Turkey focused on conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria.

**Keywords:** Syrian business diaspora, capital flight, Turkey, transnationalism, conflict resolution, shy diaspora, hybridity

## Introduction

The Syrian conflict has had a profound impact on the business community in Syria. According to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR 2015: 28), both public and private investment dropped to 9.2 per cent of the GDP in 2015. The long-continued war led to widespread closure and bankruptcy, and many

businesses experienced a sharp decline in production due to the sanctions imposed by the US, the European Union, and the League of Arab States (Abboud 2012). In 2013, profit losses of six of Syria's fourteen private banks were between 40 and 95 per cent (Abboud 2013). Some businesses on the other hand, adapted to crisis situation and relocated their enterprises within Syria from the conflict zones to the 'safe areas' in the Mediterranean coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus with the encouragement of the regime. According to the Syrian Chambers of Industry, 109 factories relocated their operation in Syria in 2013 and 2014 (Ahmed 2015). Private investment in the regime-controlled areas, however, was badly affected by the government policy of price liberalization which increased the economic cost, deteriorated effective demand, and caused foreign exchange rate depreciation and volatility (SCPR 2015: 28).

Syria's business community has also been deeply affected by the emergence of the war economy. A new group of businessmen emerged who exploited wartime opportunities by engaging in intermediary activities for the Syrian regime to circumvent sanctions, and/or the smuggling of weapons, goods, and people. The rise of new economic actors in the thriving war economy has further fractured business community, and has obscured business class' stance in post-conflict context of Syria. Thousands of Syrian businessmen have hence decided to leave 'the regime or the regime's cronies' and move to the neighbouring countries (most notably, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, UAE, and Egypt), mainly due to the security, political, and economic concerns (Chang 2015: 2). Capital flight constitutes therefore one of the most important dimensions of the Syrian war with its considerable impact on the current course of the conflict and post-conflict process in Syria.

Due to the simplicity of Turkish business legislation applicable to Syrian business people and pre-existing business relations, Turkey has become a commercial hub for the Syrian business diaspora. The number of companies established with joint Syrian capital has multiplied almost 40-fold since 2011 and trade with Syria in border cities like Gaziantep, Mersin, and Hatay far exceeds the 2010 levels (Özpinar *et al.* 2015; Abboud 2017). Export revenues of these cities have significantly increased due to the fact that many Turkey-based Syrian firms have counterparts in Syria. Out of the 363 foreign-owned companies which were created in Turkey in January 2014, 96 were Syrian-owned (The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey-TOBB 2015). The Gaziantep-based Syrian Economic Forum reported that 'since 2011, Syrians have invested nearly US\$334 million into 6033 new formal companies' (Uçak and Raman 2017), constantly scoring at the top of the list of foreign founders of new companies since 2013 (Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey-TOBB 2017). In 2017, Syrians established over 2000 new companies in Turkey, with the capital of US\$90 million. (Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey-TOBB 2017). According to the recent report published by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV 2018), Syrians established 7243 businesses in the last seven years in Turkey. Only in the first half of 2018, 778 businesses were established by Syrians.

Syrian capital flow to Turkey provides glimpses into the understanding of reception policies and the governance of Syrian refugees in Turkey. [Bélanger and Saraçoğlu \(2018: 2\)](#) highlight the state-market convergence in shaping Turkey's policy towards the Syrian refugees. They argue that 'the legal terms and conditions of the Turkish state's temporary protection regime, the state's *ad hoc* leniency towards the use of refugee labour in the informal sector and the disciplinary effects of the state's regulations have formed the basis of the state-capital nexus in the governance of Syrian refugees and created a favourable context for the Turkish business and capital owners to take advantage of the Syrian refugees'. Due to high number of Syrian refugee numbers in Turkey—the registered number as of June 2020 is 3,585,198 ([data2/unhcr.org/en/situations/Syria/location/113](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/Syria/location/113)), hence thanks to the increasing labour force, Turkey has been able to attract further foreign investment, especially to border regions. Despite such increase in capital flows in the Turkish border cities, it has been reported however that bigger opportunities have been missed in terms of attracting Syrian investments in Turkey ([Oytun 2015: 18](#)). According to the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, 'around 25 billion dollars have been transferred to Europe through Greek Cypriot banks' (*ibid.*). Syrian entrepreneurs have also been creating employment in Turkey. According to report prepared by Ucak and Raman (2017:9), 'On average, they employ 9.4 people and report that most of their employees were previously working in the informal sector'. (55 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), stated that they are planning to hire new employees over the coming year (8.2 on average).

Most of the research on the Syrian displacement has not contributed a great deal to our understanding of diaspora business activity in the host countries. Following [Brubaker \(2005: 12\)](#), we use the term diaspora as 'a category of practice, which is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties'. As the dependency of the Turkish economy on foreign inflows has consistently increased, the Turkish state saw displaced Syrian capital as a way to meet the rapidly increasing need for foreign inflows to finance the economy, and designed legal and institutional arrangements of the governance of the Syrian refugees in favour of capital owners. Turkey has consequently enjoyed a large amount of cash flows through Syrian companies, as well as joint partnerships investors. At the same time, however, the Syrian business diaspora has sought to decrease its dependence on Turkey's market and political conditions through expanding their transnational opportunities and maintaining businesses within multiple fields that span borders. Increasing transnationalization of economic activities of the Syrian business people in Turkey and the proliferation of transnational economic spaces, practices and opportunities delineate hence the Syrian capital in Turkey as a 'fluid' one, ready to move away in case of major crises. By revealing this dimension of the diaspora business in the host countries, we aim to enlarge the discussion on diasporic business communities and contribute to literature on diaspora entrepreneurs in the course of the protracted conflict. Also, thus far, there have been relevant studies on the role that the diaspora entrepreneurship plays on the development

of the home countries. For instance, [Chrysostome \(2014\)](#), [Newland and Tanaka \(2010\)](#), and [Minto-Coy \(2016\)](#) analysed their contribution to the socio-economic development of the home country. [Elo \(2015, 2016\)](#) studied the impact of diaspora networks on international business in the home country and suggested a typology of diaspora entrepreneurship. [Brinkerhoff \(2016\)](#) scrutinized the positive role of diasporas to promote institutional reforms in the countries of origin. However, there is still not much study on how the diaspora business people can assist in the process of conflict resolution while the conflict is still going on in their home countries. The second aim of our paper hence is to assess the capacity and/or the willingness of the Syrian business people to organize themselves as an interest group in Turkey with the aim to assist the process of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria through remittances, philanthropy work and participation in peace negotiations. As such, we would like to expand existing knowledge on the ways in which diaspora entrepreneurs can assist in the resolution of an on-going conflict in home countries. Finally, a limited amount of research on the Syrian business people mostly depicts them as a fixed entity, and focuses on their impact on the host countries' economy ([Özpinar and \*et al.\* 2015](#); [Errighi and Griesse 2016](#)). This body of research tends to focus on the Syrian business migrants' ethnic identity and assumes a great deal of ethnocultural incorporation and of fixed practices among them in a given context. Our empirical evidence reveals that while the Syrian business diaspora in Turkey is evolving itself into the transnational business community, it also forms new hybrid business practices in the host country. Our paper, therefore, seeks to contribute also to the flourishing literature on multiple spatial and temporal contexts in the analysis of diaspora business activity in which hybrid practices are formed in the host countries, as well.

### **Fieldwork and Methodology**

To reach our objectives detailed in the introduction of this paper, and observe closely the real-life and material consequences of the Syrian capital flight to Turkey revealed above, in 2018–19 we conducted an extensive fieldwork in Istanbul, Adana, Mersin, Hatay, Gaziantep, and Bursa.

Our fieldwork was divided into four phases between August 2018 and February 2019. We conducted the first part of the fieldwork in August in Istanbul, the second part between September 16 and September 22 in Adana, Mersin, Hatay, and Gaziantep, the third phase in October 18–24 in Bursa and the fourth phase in December 2018–February 2019 in Istanbul once again.

These cities were selected since they host the majority of the Syrian business community. Amongst them, Istanbul hosts the general Syrian trade and tourism business, and Syrian restaurants, bakeries, sweet shops and jewellery stores have revived the socio-economic life in Fatih and Aksaray ([Figure 1](#)). In Gaziantep, the Syrian businesses are predominantly active in textile, shoe, soap, and food factories. The Syrian business has revived the dormant sectors such as the olive oil soap and woman shoe production, while the poorer Syrian refugees have provided cheap labour for the host business community in Gaziantep (Interview with the



Figure 1.  
Fatih-Aksaray-Istanbul restaurant

Editor-in-Chief of Dünya Economy Newspaper in Gaziantep, September 2018). Gaziantep is about to open the 6th organized industrial zone, indicating the increased industrial activity. Mersin is the main centre of Syrian export and import activity in Turkey, since it also enjoys being the location where raw materials reach the south of Turkey from other countries (Figure 2). In Mersin, the Syrian imports and exports have contributed to the overall international trade volume of Turkey (<https://www.tr.undp.org/content/turkey/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2019/11/mersin-suriyeli.html>). Trade with Syria in the border cities like Gaziantep, Mersin, and Hatay significantly surpasses their pre-war levels. While before the war, Turkey's western regions and the Istanbul's area had the largest share of total exports to Syria, after the war, the share of the southern regions of Turkey has increased drastically from 20 to 60 per cent (Aita 2017). For example, after having decreased from US\$98 million in 2011 to US\$63 million in 2012, Gaziantep's export to Syria increased by 467 per cent to US\$354 million in 2013 (Data obtained from Gaziantep Chamber of Industry: <http://gso.org.tr/>).



*Figure 2.*  
**Mersin organised industrial zone, September 2018**

The majority of these exports are made up of basic consumer goods for which production in Syria is halted or cut back because of the war. Export revenues of these cities have significantly increased as many Turkey-based Syrian firms provided basic consumer goods through their counterparts in Syria (Karasapan 2016).

Being one of the most important textile centres of Turkey, Bursa has mainly attracted textile industry investment (especially baby and children textile) from Syria. Relevant Syrian investments have also been made in more rural and peripheral areas of Turkey, such as Kadirli where the Sharabati Denim, one of the biggest fabric manufacturers in the Middle East, has built a huge denim factory (Figure 3) and Maras where the Syrian businessman Mahmoud Zakrit has established an important dairy factory. These initiatives have also been possible thanks to the generous grants offered by TKDK (the Agricultural and Rural Development Support Institution in Turkey) to investors willing to operate in Turkey's peripheral areas.

We conducted a total of 35 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews with Syrian business people who have started a business with a capital no less than US\$100,000, civil society representatives and local chamber of commerce officials. In addition, we had many informal conversations with local Turkish and Syrian communities in the cities we visited. All of our business people interviewees were male, and the majority of them had a university level education. About two-thirds



*Figure 3.*

**Sharabati Denim JNR Fabric Factory, Kadirli, September 2018**

of our interviewees were from Aleppo (the rest was from Idlib, Afrin, Hama, Darayya, and we had only one interviewee from Damascus). They are currently active in manufacturing, textile, energy, and restaurant sectors in Turkey. According to the editor in chief of *Dünya Economy* newspaper in Gaziantep who was one of our interviewees, the Syrian business community is generally viewed by the host communities in the cities we visited in Turkey as educated, cultured and experienced people, with advanced business networks in the Middle East. They are considered to have hence revitalized the business environment in the small cities, which were not particularly internationalized before.

To recruit participants, we used a snowballing technique, asking each interviewee to recommend others who could offer additional insights. All participants were interviewed on a voluntary basis. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded using eight research questions as organizing themes such as the challenges faced by Syrian business people to start a business and engage commercial activities in Turkey; how they have been overcoming them; and the relation of Syrian business people with the host business community in Turkey.

Our fieldwork comprised observations of real-life situations such as chatting over a coffee, having lunch/dinner together, observing our respondents in their working environment (businesses), attending business meetings, etc. and semi-

structured interviews with Syrian business people, civil society representatives, and local chamber of commerce officials. We were particularly interested in to find out whether there are any organizations to represent their economic and political interests in Turkey, and if yes, whether they are willing to join such organizations. Our interviews also sought answers to how the Syrian business people see the current political discussions about the Syrian refugees in Turkey, and how these discussions affect their business strategies in Turkey and beyond. We were curious to discover the Syrian business people's relations with other groups of Syrian refugees and whether they are involved in public efforts on organizing relief and other humanitarian needs of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. We also wanted to understand which factors shape the future plans of Syrian business people in Turkey, whether they have transnational ties with the exiled Syrian business people based in the region. In addition, we aimed to learn how the Syrian business community assess the activities of the Syrian Business Forum in Turkey, whether they are affiliated with any political forces, such as Syrian National Council or Syrian National Coalition and whether they provide financial and other support to political parties/organizations, social movements, or civil society organizations. Finally, we sought answers to how the Syrian business people envision the post-conflict Syria and whether they are willing to be part of post-conflict reconstruction and development processes in Syria.

During our interviews, we encouraged informants to openly share what they thought was important for them regarding their host country and their diaspora status in doing business in order for us to grasp the genuine contribution of the Syrian capital and business people in Turkey. Our semi-structured interviews aimed to capture the role of the Syrian capital in the emergence and articulation of interconnected economic and political spaces and practices in Turkey and beyond. We first wanted to discuss the challenges our interviewees have experienced while doing business in Turkey as Syrians and their views on the effects of the Syrian capital flight in the Turkish economy due to the expansion of the increased demand for labour, the cash injections through the establishment of new companies, as well as joint ventures with local partners. Second, our questions aimed to scrutinize the capacity of the Syrian business community to organize themselves as an interest group regarding their economic interests and legal rights as well as their ability and/or willingness to exert the economic, political and socio-cultural influence on other groups of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Finally, our questions sought to explore the possible engagement of Syrian business diaspora in assisting the process of conflict resolution and (post-) conflict reconstruction process in Syria, with a focus on remittances, philanthropy work and participation in peace processes, etc. During the interview, we also asked about the specific context of each city. We worked with Arabic–Turkish interpreters in each city, although various interviews were also conducted in English and Turkish (respectively working and native languages of the authors), as some Syrian business people have become fluent in Turkish by now.

In the following section, we will look into the convergence of the interests of the host state and of the displaced capital owners and analyse the characteristics of the

Syrian capital and emerging Syrian business diaspora in Turkey within the context of the shifting political economy that displacement generates. The fourth section examines the capacity and/or willingness of the Syrian business people to organize themselves as an interest group regarding their political and economic interests in Turkey, and to assist the process of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria with a focus on remittances, philanthropy work, and participation in peace negotiations. Since Syrian entrepreneurs continue employing traditional business practices in Turkey and a considerable amount of them have become Turkish citizens together with their extended families, and the remaining have already applied for the Turkish citizenship, the last section scrutinizes the degree to which the Syrian business people have developed a hybrid identity. Here, we suggest that increasing transnationalization of the Syrian business diaspora in Turkey has developed in parallel to the formation of a hybrid Syrian business community. This hybridization, we argue, has the potential to help form a hyphenated Syrian–Turkish identity in the near future.

### **The Shifting Political Economy of Displacement**

The Syrian capital in Turkey well reflects the shifting political economy dynamics that displacement creates. In her research on the displacement economies in the southern Africa, [Hammar \(2014: 3\)](#) introduces the compelling paradoxes of displacement in which ‘opening occurring as well as closures; dislocation and movement at the same time as confinement and stuckness; creation as well as destruction; wealth accumulation alongside impoverishment’. In her analysis, Hammar mainly highlights the changing forms and dynamics of accumulation, distribution, and exchange in times of crisis and displacement. In the case of the Syrian capital flight, displacement has created new opportunities and articulated an interconnected transnational economic spaces and practices by altering the patterns of the production and distribution.

The expansion of transnational flows of capital across borders and boundaries has thus far flourished into an immense body of work on transnational diaspora business in various disciplines ([Portes \*et al.\* 2002](#); [Round \*et al.\* 2008](#); [Riddle \*et al.\* 2010](#)). Yet, the literature on the transnational economic practices of newly emerging refugee diasporas in the Global South is still very limited ([Mencütek 2020](#)). Our paper contributes therefore to this emerging empirical literature on the economic activities of business diaspora in the host countries of Global South by focusing on the Syrian capital flight funnelled to Turkey. Focusing on the multi-sited economic networks of the Syrian businessmen diaspora further challenges the dualistic thinking that conceptualizes migration ‘in linear terms, starting with migrant leaving a sending state, going through their arriving in a host-state, and ending with their integration or assimilation in a host-state’ ([Koinova 2018: 1259](#)). Many of the works on the activities of migrants mostly highlights the relationship between transnationalism and integration to analyse whether involvement in transnational activities (political, social, cultural, and/or economic) limit or accelerate the integration processes of the migrants in their host countries ([Portes \*et al.\*](#)

2002; Tsuda 2012; Dekker and Siegel 2013; Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Şimşek 2018). These studies mostly use transnationalism as migrant's origin country engagement to assess the correlation between sustaining ties with the home country and integration in the host country. Portes *et al.* (2002: 6) argue that 'to the extent that such (transnational economic) activities are successful, they may allow immigrants to fulfil their economic targets *without undergoing a protracted process of acculturation*' (Emphasis is ours).

The analysis on the emergence of transnational economic spaces adds to the ongoing discussion on resisting and surviving strategies of conflict-generated business diaspora in host–homeland contexts. Basch *et al.* (2005: 8) defines transnationalism as processes to analyse how immigrants build social fields that span borders, as well as 'to see the ways transmigrants are transformed by their transnational practices and how these practices affect the nation-states of the transmigrants' origin and settlement'. This definition enables us to challenge the portrayal of diaspora communities as victims or passive actors, and to recognize their capacity to influence on multiple spatial and temporal contexts. In our case, we argue that the changes in accumulation, production, and distribution patterns of Turkey-based Syrian business people strengthen their resisting power in a spatial and temporal limbo where uncertainties prevail regarding political and legal status.

Cultivating transnational practices has been incorporating the Syrian business diaspora into different networks beyond home-states and host-states. It is our understanding that Syrian business diaspora has sought to decrease its dependence on Turkey's market and political conditions through expanding their transnational opportunities and maintaining businesses within multiple fields that span borders. Increasing transnationalization of economic activities of the Syrian business people in Turkey and the proliferation of transnational economic spaces, practices, and opportunities delineate hence the Syrian capital in Turkey as a 'fluid' one, ready to move away in case of major crises.

While based in Turkey, many of our interviewees talked about their dense and active networks that cross geographic, political, economic, and cultural borders of nation states. The two-thirds of our interviewees mentioned that they continue keeping their production facilities running in Syria, albeit at a limited scale. They have also commercial ties with the wider Middle Eastern, European and African countries through goods export and import of capitals. According to Uçak *et al.* (2017:9), 'Thirty-nine per cent of Syrian SMEs have reported regional trade as the primary opportunity in Turkey, followed by serving the Syrian refugee market and the Turkish market, at 23 per cent each.' Syrian business people especially from Aleppo had many networks and extensive ties with the other Arab countries in the Middle East. They have hence been creating further regional trade links including Turkish border cities.

One of our interviewees in Gaziantep said that all the packaging for the Syrian products now have a 'Made in Turkey' label which is a guarantee of quality for their products abroad. He continued:

‘Made in Turkey’ label makes our products more competitive around the world. After having shifted our production to Turkey, we started going to the international fairs and found new customers in Europe as well as in the Middle East.

However, none of our interviewees indicated that they primarily target the Turkish market for their products. Syrian products produced in Turkey are usually destined to the Middle East countries and some European countries, too. They are also largely intended for the sizable Syrian community living now in Turkey. Syrian products hence have not created a tangible competition to local Turkish products.

Syrian capital flight constitutes spatial projects that create innovation, competitiveness and economic development in their new environment, and beyond (Riddle *et al.* 2010; Brinkerhoff 2016). Stoyanov *et al.* (2018: 238) argue that ‘the observed ability of transnational economic actors to control and manipulate the host country environment reveals an important deviation from the established understanding that foreign nationals are in an unfavourable position’. In the Turkish context, one can argue that the survival character and the economic success of the Syrian business people resonate continuities in the Turkish public regarding ‘foreignness’ in economic realm. In the Ottoman Empire, the three non-Muslim communities—Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish—and foreigners who enjoyed privileges through capitulation agreements had higher participation rates in commerce related activities and finance (Buğra 1994). According to the industry census in the early 1910s, around 80 per cent of the single-proprietor firms were owned by non-Muslim minorities (Yamak 2006: 209). Following the defeat in the Balkan Wars, destroying the prominent position of ‘foreign’ elements in economy became the major policy of the Ottoman and later Turkish governments’ in the project of creating a national economy (Agir and Artunc 2019). As Elo and Minto-Coy (2019: viii) suggest, therefore, ‘in spite of their highly significant contributions, migrant businesses face challenges and difficulties that stem from their ethnic identity’ in Turkey as elsewhere.

### **The Capacity of the Syrian Business People to Organize Themselves as an Interest Group: The ‘Shy Diaspora’**

There is a vast literature on conflict generated diaspora mobilization in the host and origin countries during the process of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction (Kleist 2008; Brinkerhoff 2011; Koinova 2011; Carling *et al.* 2012). Scholarship on diaspora mobilization has traditionally analysed diasporas as ‘peace-makers’ or ‘peace-wreckers’, without conceptualizing any in-between or alternative situations (Baser and Swain 2008; Koinova 2018: 1263). In recent years, however, there has been a growing scholarship challenging this dichotomous thinking and introducing multiple spatial and temporal contexts in the analysis of the factors that shape diaspora engagement in home and host-states, such as multi-sited embeddedness and durability of conflicts (Koinova 2017; Horst 2018; Mavroudi 2018). ‘Refugees, just like labour migrants, are not static, nor are they locked in fixed

practices' (Al-Ali et al. 2001: 594). Their motivations for engagement in their host countries or transnationally need to be scrutinized in their specific circumstances and their transnational business activities, for instance, cannot simply be explained in terms of globalising capital, time space compression and the internationalization of labour (*ibid.*: 591). As Syrett and Keles (2019: 61) argue, 'much current theorising has failed to set out how the causal processes for diaspora politicisation are jointly affected by conditions in the homeland and settlement localities, and state-centred approaches on their own remain unable to explain variant patterns of diaspora mobilisation across all host-homeland contexts'.

Our fieldwork shows that host-homeland engagement of the Syrian business diaspora is largely shaped by the mixed embeddedness of actors in broader contexts, including political and economic circumstances of settlement and homeland places. In relation to host-land engagement, we found that that Syrian business people engage in fewer host-land political mobilization activities. This may be due to both the political pressure of the rising authoritarianism in Turkey and alleged Assad regime's or ISIS assassinations of prominent Syrian political opponents, intellectuals, activists, and journalists in Turkey. Furthermore, it is a very well-known fact that 'as long as refugees are not certain about their legal status, in other words their rights to reside permanently in the host country, many members of this community will tend to avoid anything that might jeopardize their status' (Al-Ali et al. 2001: 588).

It is our observation that the majority of the Syrian business people preferred not to participate in any associational activities in politics and/ economics vis-à-vis the Turkish state regarding their commercial and political interests predominantly for safety, security, and serenity. The low level of associational activity impedes their willingness and/or capacity to organize as a unified interest group in Turkey. According to the Article 93 of the Turkish Civil code, the real persons of foreign origin who possess the right for settlement in Turkey may incorporate association or become a member of the existing associations. There is consequently no legal obstacle for the Syrian business people to form an association or become a member of one in Turkey. The Syrian Businessmen Association (SIAD), the biggest businessmen association based in Gaziantep has only 370 members in Turkey. One of our interviewees, who works at SIAD, highlighted that since 2015 several problems of the Syrian business people came to the fore, such as the lack of knowledge about Turkish business laws and the finance regulations in Turkey, as well as the lack of Turkish language among others. These issues hence led to the formation of SIAD, although the number of members has remained limited. He explained the reasons for the low level of associational activities among Syrian businessmen in Turkey as follows:

SIAD opposes Assad, but it's not a problem for us if someone supports Assad. Many people don't want to be attached to an association. They have some businesses in Syria, and they don't want to hurt that in SIAD.

Beside weak associational engagement, Turkey-based Syrian businesspeople are not actively vocal publicly about their own interests as well as the political

and economic rights of the other Syrian refugees in Turkey. According to one of our interviewees who is in textile business in Bursa:

People think that talking about politics is a shame. It's not their country. 95% of Syrians in Turkey don't want Assad, but they could not achieve anything else either. They cannot do anything here either. So their mentality is: we could not do anything. Let's save ourselves now. *Ya Garip kun edip*. [You're a foreigner, so behave well]

Apart from adopting the strategy of invisibility, hence being 'shy', the historical legacies of state and business relations in the pre-war Syria also hinders Syrian business people's interest group activities in Turkey. Following Bashar Assad's succession in power in 2000, the Syrian economy underwent liberalization process. During the process of economic liberalization in Syria, the regime fostered its own capitalist and 'aimed to survive the incremental transition to a partial market economy and since no significant business venture was possible without regime insiders taking a percentage, regime crony capitalists developed intimate partnerships with wider elements of the bourgeoisie' (Hinnebusch 2012: 101). In such an environment, more independent bourgeoisie who were not well connected to the regime was strongly monitored by the regime's security apparatus, and alienated in politics. Since 2005, a number of businessmen associations were established as mostly joint ventures between the regime supported businessmen and foreign business people (Haddad 2012). Our interviewees echoed pre-war situation as such:

The regime has polluted us. It built *Baathi* [pertaining to the ruling authoritarian Baath Arab Socialist Party in Syria] in every single one of us. In a dictatorship people lose morals. They're scared of each other so it's very difficult for us to come together here in Turkey. It's not our culture to gather to work together.

Syrian business people operating in Turkey are not used to form business associations and/or unions, as these [both of them] were prohibited in Syria under a dictatorial regime. As most of our interviewees confirmed, because of the lack of such experience before, and the current tense political and social context in Syria, Syrian business people are scared of forming any type of association in Turkey. They prefer to work individually. One of our interviewees in Gaziantep mentioned:

The Syrians are not used to such things, like forming independent associations. Everything was being done by the regime in Syria. There were no counterparts to either TUSIAD or MUSIAD in Syria. We are trying to learn here . . .

New trade experiences in Turkey and the interaction with the Turkish business community have however enabled the formation of *Syrian Business People Association* and *Syrian Economic Forum* in Gaziantep, where Syrian business people gather and talk about their socio-economic integration, legal rights and problems. The fact that most Syrian micro-level businesses operated for a long time without any formal registration and, as a result, did not pay taxes has created

resentment within the host community in all the cities where we have conducted our fieldwork. This was also because the Syrian business people were not used to operate in the more modernized Turkish business environment and its more advanced taxing and banking system. The lack of Turkish language has been a massive challenge for them, as well. The *Syrian Economic Forum* in Gaziantep has recently launched campaigns to formalize the Syrian businesses by providing technical assistance to Syrian business owners seeking to understand the operating environment and help them comply with the regulations. The Forum has also translated many Turkish investment laws into Arabic. This initiative has helped to normalize the relationship between the host and the Syrian businesses communities.

Issues concerning homeland politics, such as a possible conflict resolution, a post-conflict reconstruction, and transnational justice and reconciliation are also carefully being avoided within the Syrian business circles in Turkey in all the cities we've conducted our research, to keep stability and unity within this flourishing community. As a conflict-generated diaspora community, Turkey-based Syrian business people's main motive has been to survive under greatly uncertain political and economic conditions. Strengthening their own financial interests by cultivating new transnational economic linkages has developed as a crisis-driven necessity in a displacement context while they have tried to 'save themselves'. The lack of trust between the displaced Syrian business people and their home country's government also impedes Syrian business diaspora to be a significant actor in the current conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction processes in Syria. As [Chrysostome and Nkongolo-Bakenda \(2019: 29\)](#) put it, 'the lack of trust within diaspora communities and between them and their home country government doesn't allow them to pool their resources and talents in order to contribute to the development of their home country at their full potential'. Many of our interviewees indicated that as long as the Assad regime is in power, it is unimaginable for them to be part of any reconstruction efforts in Syria.

The Syrian business community in Turkey, however, seem to have an impact on their home country in fields such as poverty alleviation through remittances, philanthropy—concerning Syrian orphans and students both in Turkey and Syria—skills and technology transfer and business expansion. We particularly observed that there are increasing efforts among our interviewees to engage in philanthropic activities in areas under Turkish control in Northern Syria. At the time of writing, the Turkish government has increased its reconstruction efforts based on a private–public reconstruction model in North-western Syria. Even though we haven't delved into this topic in our interviews, it seems there is a potential for Turkey-based Syrian businesses to be involved in the Turkish government's reconstruction plans in northern Syria.

### **Towards the Formation of a Hybrid Identity?**

Hybridity involves the synthesis of two diverse 'forms, styles, or identities', which often ensues across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries ([Kraidy](#)

2005: 5). 'It also designates the constitution of new identities that possess a more 'transethnic and transnational character' (Anthias 2001: 625), and hybrids can also be considered as 'cultural brokers' full of discontinuities and ruptures (Bhabha 1994). According to Bhabha furthermore, hybridity is an 'in-between' term referring to a 'third space' and to ambivalence and mimicry. It is a disruptive and productive category (Kalra *et al.* 2005: 71) and it is how according to Bhabha (1994) 'newness enters the world'.

Hybridity is also considered as a progressive citizenly discourse and a participatory discourse of cultural citizenship (Joseph and Fink 1999) and an idea of cultural syncretism, rather than the cultural difference solidified by multiculturalism (Anthias 2001: 621). As opposed to diaspora, it indicates 'a process of cultural mixing where the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or "hybrid identities" (Chambers 1996: 50). In the case of diaspora hybridization, furthermore 'without the certainty of the nation-state or class-identity for comfort, hybridity becomes a contender for a "new model" of social possibility that will assert "uncertainty" as its political guide' (Kalra *et al.* 2005: 88). However, hybridity has been subjected to criticism as well, accused of elitism as it has been put forward by 'a new cultural class of cosmopolitans' (Pieterse 2001: 225) as 'an extension of the free market discourse of late global capitalism' (Moslund 2010:12).

Today, the Syrian business people in Turkey are operating in-between the traditional and free market economic and trade practices. Next to the modernized Turkish banking system, they still continue using for instance the old money transfer system-*hawala* for their economic transactions, where huge amounts of money are transferred through personal networks based on mere trust. Some of these exports are officially registered, but some of them are sold in black. The Turkish state ignores such exchange, even though it is aware of this, due to large amounts of hot money entering Turkey. According to a Syrian businessman in the textile business based in Bursa but originally from Aleppo, most Syrian business people in Turkey receive the payment for their exports through the *hawala* system. In our interviews, we have found that Syrian business people have not entirely adopted the cheque-based system as a way of stalling payments, since they deem that this system takes longer time and its prices are high. They are also more used to do business by cash, as they are not familiarized with working with banks, bank checks, etc.

We observe that operating in between the *hawala* system and the modernized Turkish business environment brings a hybrid character to the Syrian business community, next to their transnational character. It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to determine the degree to which the local Turkish business people have adopted these traditional Syrian practices so to be able to say something about a reciprocal effect. Yet, we can eagerly posit that the hybridity of the Syrian business diaspora in Turkey is not only limited to business practices. Syrian business people who have made huge investments in Turkey, such as up to a million dollar, have already automatically received the Turkish citizenship without

complying with certain criteria, like having lived in Turkey at least five years, knowing Turkish language at sufficient level and so on (Çetin *et al.* 2018). Some of our interviewees who acquired Turkish citizenship, for instance, did not speak any Turkish, although their children did. Other Syrian business people are also on the path of becoming Turkish citizens together with their extended families. Syrian business diaspora's children have been educated in Turkey for years; they speak Turkish fluently and we have observed that it's now a common practice among the Syrian business community to give Turkish names to their children born in Turkey to facilitate their integration into the Turkish majority. Many famous Syrian brands, such as restaurant and sweet shop chains, have also adopted Turkish names next to the traditional and well-known Syrian ones once they have established themselves in the Turkish market (Figure 4).

One should also note that despite there are some issues of xenophobia between locals and Syrian refugees, both sides have developed mechanisms that have helped to keep social peace and this 'demonstrates the capacity of the receiving Turkish and guest Syrian communities in dealing with social problems' (Oytun 2015: 8). By being educated, coming from upper middle class in Syria and most importantly having the willingness to amalgamate with the educated Turkish middle class in Turkey, Syrian business people have indeed facilitated social



Figure 4.

**The famous Syria-based Zeitouna sweet shop now sold as Zeytunaoğlu in Turkey – Turkified version of the brand Zeitouna, February 2019**

cohesion between the huge number of relatively impoverished Syrian refugees and the host community. As in September 2019, there have been 450,000 Syrians born in Turkey (Mülteciler Derneği 2019). Marriages between Syrians and Turks are not common, but they have contributed to the integration of refugee communities. A majority of Syrians in Turkey are also made up of children or youth, and even without proper schooling, these young people have learnt and speak Turkish. (Oytun 2015: 8). All these recent developments may have opened the path to the formation of a Syrian–Turkish hyphenated identity and/or the formation of the ‘New Turks’ of the future. This is indeed a possibility that is not seen as extraordinary by several of our Syrian business interviewees, since they have posited that this would be such a new episode in the common history of the two nations. In the words of one our interviewees in Adana:

For hundreds of years, we have formed one common identity under the Ottoman Empire and we have been separated from each other only since a hundred years. Now, we have been reunited and this is the continuation of history.

The hybridization process of Syrian business diaspora in Turkey, thanks to both hybrid business practices and the acquisition of Turkish citizenship, indicate that ‘hybridity is better conceived of as a process rather than a description’ (Virinder et al. 2005: 71). It also reveals, as Wen-Ching argues, that ‘displacement and mobility are dynamic processes of “reterritorialization” which imply not only moving “out of place” (Malkki 1995; Den Boer 2015), but also processes laying out a place as home in uncertain, insecure and unstable settings’ (2018: 391–392).

## Conclusion

Our paper sought to unpack the different components among turkey-based Syrian business people to be able to analyse the impact of the Syrian capital flow to turkey, the degree of their convergence into the Turkish business market and hybridity. By investigating the Syrian business environment in turkey, our research also aimed to explore the wide-ranging factors that impede or accelerate interest group activity of conflict-generated diaspora groups in their host countries when the civil war in their own countries continues to evolve.

In our research, we found that while the Syrian capital in turkey has thus far created advantages for both the host and the Syrian business community, the Syrian business activity in turkey can be best described as transnational. It has been our understanding that Syrian business people seek to decrease their dependence on turkey’s market and political conditions through expanding their transnational opportunities. That’s why we have delineated the Syrian capital as the ‘fluid capital’ and the Syrian business diaspora in turkey as the ‘shy diaspora’. It would of course perhaps still be hasty to speak of the Syrian business diaspora as a purely ‘transnational community’, since most of them still live in a state of uncertainty, without a proper passport that can help them to travel freely. There’s still

the problem of not being certain about their legal status, that is their right to reside permanently in the host country, just like the Bosnian refugees' situation in host countries in late 1990s that [Al-Ali et al. \(2001\)](#) has articulately depicted. However, we have observed that the Syrian business community may still have more transnational tendencies than the rest of the high number of Syrian refugees in turkey.

This does not indicate, however, that the Syrian business people in turkey are mere economic migrants. It has been clear from our interviews that had there not been a war, most of our Syrian business interviewees would not move their businesses and families to turkey and give up their life in Syria for a new one in a neighbouring yet foreign country. Most of our interviewees showed up photos of their houses, factories, and/or businesses destroyed by heavy fighting and bombing and expressed their longing for the life that they have left behind in Syria. A prominent Syrian businessman in Gaziantep, who is very well known in Aleppo, even mentioned how he wished he would not have to meet us as a refugee in turkey but as a host in his mansion in Aleppo.

As a conflict generated diaspora community, turkey-based Syrian business people's main motive has also been to survive under greatly uncertain political and economic conditions. They hence engaged in fewer host-land political mobilization activities and impeded their willingness and/or capacity to organize as a unified interest group in turkey. Also, since a considerable amount of Syrian business people in turkey have become Turkish citizens together with their extended families, have learned Turkish fluently, others are waiting the results of their application while their children have been growing and/or educating in turkey, next to their transnational character, Syrian business people in turkey demonstrate a degree of hybridity as well. They have also started using the Turkified versions of the traditional Syrian names/brands for their products and businesses in turkey. This hybridization, we argue, lays out the foundation for the potential hyphenated Syrian–Turkish and/or the 'new Turks' identity that we may see emerging in the near future.

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