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Intangible  
Cultural  
Heritage

## Survey report

# Intangible Cultural Heritage of Displaced Syrians

Prepared for UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section  
by Dr. Géraldine Chatelard  
with input from Ms. Hanan Kassab Hassan  
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The present document presents the results of a survey commissioned by the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in 2016 and was prepared by:

Dr. Géraldine Chatelard.

Two consultants, Dr. Chatelard and Ms. Hanan Kassab Hassan, conducted the survey for UNESCO. Ms. Hassan contributed the information on the results that she obtained.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this document are those of the specialists who conducted the survey; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

**Contents**

Introduction.....4

I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT .....4

    1. Effects of conflict-induced displacement on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.....4

    2. UNESCO and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in situations of armed conflict and displacement .....5

    3. The situation in Syria and UNESCO's action .....7

II. SURVEY OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY .....8

    1. Rationale and key questions .....8

    2. Approach and methodology.....8

III. SURVEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS .....9

    1. The effects of the armed conflict on the intangible cultural heritage.....9

    2. The role of intangible cultural heritage in the situation of displacement .....14

    3. Obstacles to expression and transmission .....19

    4. Opportunities and initiatives for expression and transmission.....22

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....27

    Recommendations for actions .....28

## **Introduction**

*The report below presents the findings of a survey on the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of displaced Syrians. It also provides recommendations that the international community and the national authorities might find useful in their efforts to safeguard living heritage and promote social cohesion.*

*The survey was based on interviews with 60 displaced Syrians and some members of the host communities who shared their experiences about safeguarding their ICH. The responses illustrate the important role that ICH can play in coping with displacement and enhancing bonds between refugees and host communities. It also demonstrates the ways in which displaced people find ways to continue to transmit and recreate their ICH. The respondents spoke about three main ICH domains, as explained in more detail below. These included customs and traditions ('adad wa taqalid'), traditional artistic expressions (fann/plur. funun), and craftsmanship (al-hiraf al-yadawiya).*

*The interviews showed that ICH provides a sense of belonging, mitigates psychological, social and economic resilience, and, in many cases, helps mediate conflicts by fostering intercultural communication and mutual appreciation. However, more support is needed to ensure the continued transmission of ICH in the particular circumstances of displacement, which entails encountering a new context and host community.*

## **I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### **1. Effects of conflict-induced displacement on safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage**

The political upheavals and armed conflicts affecting several regions of the globe in recent years have displaced millions of people internally and across borders. Attacks on cultural heritage and cultural diversity are another feature of some of the ongoing conflicts, particularly in the Arab and Sub-Saharan African region. Destruction and damage to tangible heritage have been widely mediated, and the global heritage community and concerned governments have mobilised to address them. By contrast, the effects of these crises on ICH, by nature a less visible cultural form, have been less widely considered. This type of heritage, transmitted from one generation to the next, is comprised of various domains, including but not limited to, local knowledge and know-how, artistic expression, crafts and traditions, religious practices and rituals, language and oral expressions, some of which are place-specific and/or tied to the physical (natural and cultural) heritage. All these elements, alone or in combination, form part of people's individual and collective identity and memory, cement social cohesion, and provide groups with a sense of continuity. There is little reason to doubt that ICH is also heavily affected as a result of war, destruction, death, displacement, and the associated disruptions to the social, economic and cultural fabric of communities.

Specifically, there are few details about the effects of displacement on the ICH of the millions of people who have fled the most recent conflicts. Yet, we can still make some assumptions on the basis of previous studies. The academic literature on refugees and displacement shows that people displaced by conflict may face violence, physical and psychological suffering, loss of property and livelihoods, and the death and scattering of family members. They may experience a radical separation from their places and communities of origin. All these factors inevitably induce changes in lifestyles and cultural practices. Several studies have also focused on displaced communities over the long term and found that, even in situations of geographic and/or social dislocation, these

communities can display cultural resilience. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have turned to various forms of cultural expressions that help them live through disasters. Such forms include *inter alia* rituals of grieving and mourning, collective practices of social bonding and remembrance, and the celebration of birth, marriage and other festive events. Within new environments, the performing arts or crafts skills can furthermore provide a source of livelihood, whereas traditional knowledge may be harnessed for survival.

An argument can be made that because ICH is embedded in social and cultural practices, representations, sense of belonging and identity, it 'moves' with its displaced bearers, who may use it to respond to social, economic, and psychological shocks. In exile, this 'soft' form of heritage may be central to the refugees' collective memory, cultural identity, and resilience. The rupture of the socio-cultural fabric brought about by displacement, however, is likely to entail the dislocation of contexts and channels necessary for ICH expression. Importantly, the social, economic, security, legal, or political context within which people are displaced may, as a side effect, not be conducive for them to express their ICH. In such situations, it is likely that some expressions and practices will be eroded or lost, while communities, groups and individuals, will transform others, which also may start to carry new meaning.

## **2. UNESCO and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in situations of armed conflict and displacement**

Complementary to other international instruments dealing with cultural heritage, the main goal of the 2003 UNESCO [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) is to ensure the viability, or safeguarding of the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Such heritage may be manifested in domains, including oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices about nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. This definition, provided in [Article 2](#) of the Convention, also includes the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with ICH.

While the text of the Convention includes provisions for safeguarding ICH in situations of emergencies, it does not make explicit reference to armed conflicts, nor to migration, either voluntary or forced, as possible threats leading to the deterioration, disappearance or destruction of ICH. Nevertheless, the [Operational Directives](#) for the Implementation of the Convention mention 'armed conflict' in relation to requests for International Assistance that constitute emergency requests (paragraph 50). The Operational Directives moreover contain a section on social cohesion and equity in Chapter VI on 'Safeguarding ICH and sustainable development at the national level,' which mentions the need for an inclusive approach to promote the contribution of ICH to social cohesion, dispute prevention and resolution, also elaborating on the potential role of intangible cultural heritage in restoring peace and security (paragraphs 194-197).

Since 2011, UNESCO has carried out activities in the framework of its [global capacity-building strategy for the implementation of the 2003 Convention](#). The Organisation has also collaborated with States Parties on several [safeguarding projects and programmes](#). An examination of these initiatives reveals that several States Parties have been subjected to at least one of the following circumstances: armed conflict, deliberate targeting of cultural property and/or diversity susceptible to affect ICH viability, and ancient or recent trends of

population displacement. Others have received large refugee populations, generally from neighbouring states experiencing war. Where conflicts have a regional dimension, several States Parties have had people leave the country to seek refuge, or become internally displaced, while receiving refugees from neighbouring countries at the same time. Generally, one can say that States Parties, not affected by population displacement, either as countries of origin or countries of reception, are the exception rather than the norm. Yet, only few of the recent capacity-building and safeguarding initiatives have considered these issues, mainly because knowledge on the subject is still limited and guidance materials have not yet been developed.

UNESCO fully recognises that safeguarding ICH in contexts of conflict-induced displacement poses specific challenges. The Organisation has taken steps to integrate ICH safeguarding in its initiatives that address heritage at risk. A [Strategy for the reinforcement of the Organization's actions for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict](#) (38/C49), was adopted by the 38th General Conference of UNESCO in November 2015.

This document identifies explicitly the “deprivation of cultural rights experienced by populations affected by conflict, particularly the growing number of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) worldwide,” including their “inability ... to fully practice intangible cultural heritage and to transmit it to younger generations” (Paragraph 3). Paragraph 6 further recognises that “Participation and access to culture and its living expressions, including intangible heritage, can help strengthen people’s resilience and sustain their efforts to live through and overcome crisis.”

Paragraph 30 sets a programmatic agenda: “Together with major humanitarian actors, such as UNHCR, IOM and ICRC, UNESCO will propose methodologies, tools and possibly joint operational activities to support the protection of cultural diversity as an integral element of refugee and IDP protection. Particular attention will be given to mainstreaming due consideration for refugees’ and IDPs’ cultural rights into the services that they are offered and benefiting from in camps and host communities. Cultural initiatives to promote mutual understanding between refugees/IDPs and host communities will also be envisaged.”

Furthermore, the 2016 public communication brochure, [UNESCO’s Response to Protect Culture in Crises](#), prepared within the framework of the [#Unite4Heritage](#) campaign, dedicates the following paragraph to ICH safeguarding:

“Over 60 million people have been forcibly displaced by conflict with many suffering from the direct targeting of their cultural references and often from diminished access to culture that deny them the enjoyment of their cultural rights. Refugees and displaced people tend to draw from their intangible cultural heritage as a resource for social and psychological resilience in the face of intense difficulties. At the same time, their intangible cultural heritage is threatened, not least due to the disruption of communities and families. Their ability to access and enjoy culture and cultural rights must be guaranteed in these circumstances as it helps them cope with the psychological distress of displacement, and ensures their well-being in adapting and settling into the new context of a host country. Indeed, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage requires States Parties to ‘take the necessary measures to ensure the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory’” (p. 6).

Moreover, recent emergency action plans to safeguard the cultural heritage of countries under conflict ([Libya](#), [Iraq](#), [Yemen](#) and [Syria](#)) demonstrate a growing attempt to incorporate ICH safeguarding.

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage examined at its eleventh session (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 28 November to 2 December 2016), a document entitled [Intangible Cultural Heritage in emergencies](#) (ITH/16/11.COM/15), which discussed the role of the 2003 Convention as part of the UNESCO Culture Sector's response to emergency situations. Paragraph 10 recognises that, in situations of emergencies, including displacement, "intangible cultural heritage can be directly affected and threatened while it can also be a source of resilience and recovery," and proposes, when operationalizing the Convention, to take into account both of these two dimensions. In the spirit of the Convention, Paragraph 13 further states that

"... it is critical that it be the concerned communities, as the bearers and primary safeguarding actors, who are the ones to identify how the conflict or the disaster situation has affected their intangible cultural heritage as well as how they might draw on their intangible cultural heritage as a resource for addressing the multiple challenges they face. In cases where the mobilization of experts is called for, it should be to facilitate, but not replace, those identifications by the communities, groups or individuals."

Finally, mainstream humanitarian organisations do not incorporate culture as part of their assessments of disasters, emergencies, or displaced peoples and refugee needs. Culture and cultural heritage are also not part of their programmatic agendas, nor of their advocacy efforts for refugee rights. On 25 November 2016, a web search was carried out on the the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) web-portal retrieved 11,481 documents produced by the organisation and its humanitarian partners on the Syria Regional Refugee Response. Only two dozen items mentioned the words 'culture' or 'cultural.' They almost exclusively concerned cultural norms and behaviours within the framework of psycho-social interventions, such as those focusing on mental health, early marriage, or sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Other initiatives exist, but they lack visibility, traction, sustainability and, most probably, broad and long-term impact.

### **3. The situation in Syria and UNESCO's action**

Since 2011, Syria has experienced a civil war that has evolved into a conflict involving international actors. Insecurity, destruction, and direct targeting of individuals and communities by the various warring parties have created one of the world's largest population displacements in recent decades. In November 2016, UNHCR [estimated that almost 4.8 million Syrians were refugees](#) in neighbouring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq). An even larger number was displaced inside Syria and [one million had requested asylum in Europe](#). The UNHCR reported a smaller number of asylum seekers or refugees in several Arab countries, North America and Oceania. In total, it is estimated that half of the Syrian population have become displaced as a consequence of the ongoing war.

Syria's heritage has been one of the most affected by recent conflicts, prompting UNESCO to launch on 1 March 2014 the 3-year [Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage project](#). Funded by the European Union and supported by the Flemish Government and the Government of Austria, it included training on the 2003 Convention

for concerned stakeholder groups. In this context UNESCO organized a [First Aid Support Meeting on Syrian Traditional Music](#) at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in May 2016. It identified some of the challenges involved in ensuring the continued practice and transmission of ICH in situations of conflict and displacement, and what could be done to address them.

## **II. SURVEY OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

### **1. Rationale and key questions**

Despite some initial experiences in the field of ICH safeguarding in emergency situations, there lacks knowledge and experience on the role of communities in both safeguarding their ICH at risk in emergencies and mobilizing ICH as a tool for preparedness, resilience, reconciliation and recovery. The goal of the survey was thus to contribute to UNESCO's efforts to address this existing gap in knowledge.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage Section commissioned two consultants to carry out a field based qualitative survey on ICH with displaced Syrians, notably in Jordan and Lebanon. The survey intended to contribute to a better understanding of the changing role and function of ICH in the context of displacement, its potential for resilience and peacebuilding, the new threats arising for its viability, and the ways that communities try to address them to continue to practice and transmit their ICH. The survey also intended to serve as a basis for recommendations on how different stakeholders, including UNESCO, could support ICH safeguarding efforts in emergency situations. It was guided by the following questions:

- What are the social and cultural functions of the ICH of displaced Syrian communities, groups, and individuals? How far have these changed due to the disruption of 'pre-displacement' ways of transmission and the psychological, economic, and social challenges involved in conflict situations? What are the relevant social characteristics to consider, including, but not limited to, gender, age, education level, and specific vulnerabilities (handicaps, trauma, etc.)?
- Do displaced people experience their ICH as a source of psychological and social resilience and if so, in what way? Do gender and other social characteristics make a difference?
- Can ICH improve the living conditions of displaced people, together with their resilience and relationships to their host communities?
- What are the specific new threats that communities, groups and individuals face to practice and transmit their ICH in the context of displacement? What do concerned communities or other stakeholders do to overcome them? Do these affect all social groups in the same way, in particular, with regard to gender?
- What safeguarding challenges can communities not address alone? What could other stakeholders do to support them in their safeguarding efforts?
- How does ICH play out in building ties between the displaced population and the host community?

### **2. Approach and methodology**

The survey approach was informed by Article 15 of the 2003 Convention, Chapter III.1 of its Operational Directives, and [Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural](#)



[Heritage](#). These documents elaborate and provide guidance on a safeguarding approach that acknowledges the central role of communities, groups and individuals who are the bearers of the ICH. They recognise that communities, groups and individuals are the stewards in defining their heritage, identifying threats, and deciding on how to address them.

In August 2016, the consultants, in coordination with the Intangible Heritage Section, developed a questionnaire and preliminary list of interviewees. The list specified the names of people who were already familiar to the consultants, or particular profiles of potential interviewees, with a view to cover a broad variety of ICH domains relevant to Syria. UNESCO Field Offices in Jordan and Lebanon provided additional input on the questionnaire and the interviewee list.

The interviews were carried out between September and November 2016. The questionnaire and approach were tested jointly by the two consultants, who met in Beirut for four days in September, to conduct four interviews together. Initial contacts with displaced Syrians were made through various entry points (personal contacts, volunteers with NGOs, and through an Internet search, including social media). Further contacts were found through snowball sampling, and in consultation with UNESCO Field Offices in Lebanon and Jordan. Efforts were made to ensure gender and age balance, and to include some organisations supporting ICH maintenance and transmission. Some members of the host community were also included in the list of interviewees to explore if and how ICH could be a factor of cultural exchange and social cohesion between refugees and their host community.

Thirty individual interviews were conducted, together with several focus group discussions. Some Syrian respondents were in Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Europe. In total, over 60 people contributed to the survey. The consultants also reviewed several web sites and Facebook pages related to Syrian ICH, and drew additional background information from their knowledge of the regional context, and from their Syrian contacts.

### **III. SURVEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

By way of introduction, it is interesting to note that Syrians usually distinguish between three domains of ICH (and not five domains, as mentioned in Article 2 of the Convention). The first domain refers to customs and traditions (*'adad wa taqalid*) and encompasses a wide range of ICH, such as oral traditions and expressions, cultural practices related to social norms (such as hospitality, customary law, etc.), knowledge about nature, traditional health care, and religious and social rituals and events, including the performing arts (dance, music, singing, poetry, narrations, recitations, etc.) that take place during such events. The second domain refers to traditional artistic expressions (*fann/plur. funun*), which encompasses music, dance, storytelling, poetry, shadow theatre, etc. performed in front of an audience by professional or semi-professional performers. The third domain includes craftsmanship (*al-hiraf al-yadawiya*), even if artisans' know-how and skills are also considered arts (*fann*). This survey focused on these three domains of Syrian ICH.

#### **1. The effects of the armed conflict on the intangible cultural heritage**

When testing the questionnaire, the consultants quickly realised that displacement could not be dissociated from armed conflict. The respondents were keen to discuss how the various domains of ICH they were practicing or involved in had been profoundly affected by the physical, social and economic havoc caused by conflict. They also highlighted that such disruptions were factors prompting their displacement. Because the conditions and

contexts of expression or performance are different for each ICH domain, this section will consider them separately.

The production and marketing chains of **handcrafted products** has been hit hard by the ongoing conflict. Many artisans have been killed. Those still alive cannot procure raw materials from within the country as circulation and extraction or transformation have been impeded by the conflict, or because the prices of these goods have excessively increased. Raw materials from abroad have become unaffordable due to the difficulties of importing goods inside embargoed Syria. Insecurity hampers people's movements and negatively affects relations between artisans, customers, and dealers, who act as intermediaries. Artisans face risks to move between their houses and workshops. Sizeable goods cannot be delivered because roads are blocked and vehicles cannot always circulate. Workshops, together with equipment and tools, have been destroyed. The demand for all types of non-essential goods has collapsed as customers can no longer afford to buy them. In many cases, people sell their belongings to make ends meet, and put their family-owned handicraft pieces on the market, with the supply greater than the demand. Craft is no longer a sustainable source of income. These untenable conditions have prompted many of the skilled Syrian artisans to leave the country, as the examples from the survey demonstrate below.

A well-known glass-blower in Damascus, moved to Tyr in Lebanon after his workshop and furnace were destroyed. Similarly, a manufacturer of wooden furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl, could no longer source this material from the Euphrates region or the Philippines and as a result, could not fulfil his orders from customers in Saudi Arabia, his most lucrative market. Thus, he decided to leave Syria after his workshop in Jobar, a Damascus suburb under siege, was destroyed and all his workers had left.

A seasonal stonemason on restoration projects at the World Heritage archaeological site of Bosra, in the Daraa Governorate, explained how all restoration work stopped when the conflict started. Initially, an increase in the cost of cement created a demand for building or fixing houses with cut stones. However, after his workshop was destroyed and he lost the tools of his trade, he was faced with growing insecurity and consequently resolved to seek asylum in Jordan.

Another respondent, in Hama, used to manufacture wooden furniture, including straw chairs and stools that are essential items of traditional Syrian coffee shops and restaurants. The war made poplar wood and straw unavailable and the consequent insecurity prompted him to seek refuge in Jordan, leaving his tools behind.

An artisan, who made mattresses and eiderdowns using Syrian wool and cotton, explained that there was a continued demand for these goods due to their superior longevity compared to similar items made with synthetic material. In the village of Babilla in rural Damascus, the respondent had a small workshop, but performed much of his work at home. The conflict made it impossible to procure wool from the region of Deir ez-Zor, a city destroyed by combats, and demand for his goods plummeted because houses were destroyed and it was no longer safe to transport his goods. After his own home and many of his tools were destroyed, the respondent left for Cairo.

A dealer specializing in antiquities and high-end crafts had a business in Damascus where she played a crucial role in linking artisans with markets in Syria and abroad. The conflict

caused the crafts sector to stagnate because of the difficulties to procure quality raw material and access customers. Many artisans were killed or displaced, and the remaining ones abandoned their trade. As a result of the conflict, the respondent decided to move to Beirut.

The bleak atmosphere of death, detention and destruction is not conducive to rejoicing, and affects **the performing arts and festive social or religious events**. The situation regarding these forms of cultural expression is particularly complex in a country that is now fragmented and under the control of different political and/military entities.

In areas outside government control, musicians no longer participate in the musical exchanges, networks, and associations of performers, festivals, TV and radio programmes sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and other public institutions. These activities, although they have not completely disappeared, are curtailed and only take place in those government-controlled areas least affected by the conflict.

In the region of Daraa, which is part of the largely rural Hawran, what is known as *hawrani* popular music, performed by bands of musicians and singers who have modernized the traditional genre, is no longer performed during weddings. This is also the case with the hugely popular traditional *dabke* line dance, spontaneously executed during all festive occasions. Other rural areas have experienced similar trends. However, in many regions, traditional tunes are still played with new lyrics conveying a political message. Social dances can also take place to celebrate military and political gains. A case in point is the north-eastern region, now renamed Rojava, where Kurdish popular culture and language, long repressed by the Damascus government, are experiencing a revival. By contrast, in regions held by violent extremists, traditional music and dance have been banned.

Many of the performers, professional or social, interviewed in the survey were displaced internally or across borders due to the conflict. Two respondents from Deraa Governorate - a well-known folkloric singer, who used to perform at social events, and a music teacher and player of several traditional instruments -- now live in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. Another young man very active in *dabke* lines during weddings and other festive occasions, was displaced like many of his friends and fellow-dancers from Deraa to northern Jordan.

In urban settings, physical destruction and the disruption of government have led public institutions and programmes, together with concert halls and theatres, to close. In addition to the suspension of festive events, this has affected the professional musicians specializing in the repertoire of urban religious and secular music. For instance, an *'oud* player, and former director of the Aleppo music conservatory that closed its doors, is now in France. Another musician from Aleppo who plays the *daff* (a frame drum) in ensembles performing Sufi music and secular *qudud halabi*, moved to Gaziantep in Turkey. Similarly, a vocalist who specialises in religious hymns and was a member of Zanubia -- a troupe of musicians, singers and dancers performing the Sufi *sama'* ceremony -- fled in the beginning of the conflict in his village of Babilla, near Damascus, to take refuge in Lebanon. Other members of the troupe are now scattered.

Other forms of performing arts have also suffered. The best Kargeuz (shadow theatre) artist was jailed at the beginning of the conflict, together with his son to whom he had passed his art. A storyteller (*hakawati*) and actor who used to perform in a cafe behind the

Umayyad mosque in Damascus, fled the bombing of Zabadani, his village to the west of the capital. The cafe too was eventually shelled.

Popular cultural practices, such as **food preparation and the provision of hospitality**, are essential social customs from which Syrian individuals and families derive pride and identity. These have also been seriously altered by the war. Syrian cuisine has several regional variations based on local produce, and recipes are transmitted between women of the family. Homemakers draw distinction, self-esteem and a sense of social purpose from their cooking skills. One important set of items is the *mune*, or non-perishable provisions. *Mune* can be very important to a Syrian woman's sense of responsibility towards her family. A mother of four who participated in a focus group discussion declared:

“Because of bombings, we fled our village in the region of Daraa and took refuges in Jordan. Against all odds, I looked for the first opportunity to cross back the border to fetch the preserves I had left behind. I wanted to make sure I could provide for my family in a foreign country.”

With the war, many large Syrian cities have become affected by serious food shortage after supply lines in the rural areas have been cut off. Around Damascus, orchards have been decimated by fighting, making olives, walnuts, and other fruits unavailable. The production and distribution of the prized Aleppo pistachio, *frike* (roasted green wheat) from Daraa, *kishk* (drained and dried yogurt) from the Qalamun Mountains, in the north-east of Damascus, and several other rural products have come to a standstill. One woman who used to live in Damascus and has now moved to Germany, described how she could no longer find any of these ingredients at the local market. This situation prevents women from preparing the delicacies that they are famous for, including the *mune*. Another respondent could not find food supplies in Jobar, near Damascus, because the area was under siege and was compelled, as a result, to move to central Damascus. Some rural areas were less affected. One woman who was living in the oasis town of Sukhne, in the eastern part of the Homs Governorate, continued to prepare her usual supply of *mune* for the winter until she moved to Lebanon in the face of violent extremism.

As in other Arab countries, receiving guests and providing for them is central to the Syrian culture of hospitality. This duty cuts across all social distinctions, and smooths relations between people of various backgrounds. Hosting guests has its own etiquette that includes greeting formulas, the preparation and offering of drinks (coffee, tea, etc.) and generous amounts of food, and at times the lodging of guests who must be made to feel welcome and comfortable. Young people learn the protocol and rituals of offering and receiving hospitality from direct experience and observation. Two Syrian families who convened to discuss how their displacement to Jordan was affecting hospitality practices started with describing the negative effects of the conflict. In rural Damascus and Daraa, where they were from, grudges between warring parties created widespread mistrust between individuals, and hospitality was not extended or accepted beyond very close circles of relatives and friends as a result. Within such circles, Syrians faced increased demands for hospitality from people who have fled insecure areas, seen their homes destroyed, etc. In a situation of limited resources, food supplies, and amenities (electricity, water, etc.), hospitality has been overstretched, its rules drastically simplified, and it is now experienced as a burden.

**Traditional health care** is another ancestral social practice affected by the conflict. Syria used to have a well-developed public medical care system, albeit with less reach in rural

areas where traditional healing was still practiced alongside modern medicine. With the war, many medical facilities were bombed, and the medical personnel died or fled. A traditional healer from Abu Kamal (also spelled Al-Bukamal), in the far south-east of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate, used to offer his services free of charge like the other members of his family who share what are considered God-given skills. His main healing techniques were cupping (*kasat alhawa*) and bloodletting with leeches (*hijama*) which, he said, the Bedouin favour over modern medicine. He embedded his healing practices within spiritual beliefs, reciting chapters (*suwar*) from the Holy Qur'an while treating his patients, who were mostly affected by psychological diseases, or possessed by genies (*jinn*). With the war, he saw a vast increase in the number of patients who were unable to reach medical facilities. As a result, many were losing their psychological balance, and some even had fits of madness. He wanted to keep healing members of his community, but had to flee when his city came under attack. He now lives in Lebanon.

A 61-year-old grandmother explained that as a younger woman in her hometown of Bosra, in the Deraa Governorate, she was a traditional midwife (*qabile*), a skill passed on between women in her family. She gave pregnant women advice before childbirth, assisted and comforted them during delivery, and provided care to the mothers and their newborns, such as washing the infants in salted water to kill germs. She also advised on breastfeeding, and knew which plants increased lactation. She did not take money for her services as she saw her know-how as a gift from God. Several decades ago, the Ministry of Health medicalised childbirth and her skills became obsolete. In the past few years, with the destruction of the medical facilities, and the death and displacement of the medical personnel, childbearing women in her community started turning to her again, and she revived her practice to help them. Her son, who provided for her, was killed in combat, and she had no choice but to seek refuge in Jordan with one of her daughters. Before leaving Syria, she taught a younger woman the basics of traditional midwifery.

Sadly, but unsurprisingly, **customs linked to death** feature prominently in the narratives of the Syrians we spoke to, even when the interviews focused on other ICH domains. Most Syrians have experienced the death of family members, relatives, friends, or other members of the community. Funeral rituals are meant to remember and respect the dead, ensure transition of the body and soul of the deceased, and comfort the bereaved. In Syria, each religious group has its specific funeral beliefs and customs, yet some core practices are common to all, such as the burial of the dead in consecrated graveyards. Condolence ceremonies, held over three days, are serious social commitments in which large numbers of people express their sympathy. These three days also coincide with the mourning period.

Insecurity has deeply affected the usual course of funeral and mourning rituals, which are now expedited. One example is bathing and enshrouding the deceased in white cloth, a canonical obligation for funerals in line with the Islamic tradition. Unlike in some cultures, corpse washing is considered a sacred task that brings social respect. Washers are in demand, but many have fled. For example, one respondent, who cared for deceased females, used to be employed by a funerary office near Damascus, but had since been displaced between the areas of Damascus and Baker al-Homsi and is now a refugee in Jordan. Before the war, they used to perform their services in hospitals or homes in an elaborate fashion, taking time to wash, perfume and shroud the body in linens, recite from the Holy Qur'an, and provide comfort to the family of the deceased. The respondent also described how they assisted families to receive female visitors during condolence ceremonies. The war now makes such movements dangerous. Often, the deceased are

washed by the family at home, and there are no wakes, condolence ceremonies, or marches to carry the body to the graveyard. In cases where condolences are received, they are reduced to one or two days. The government furthermore forbids organising funerary rituals for regime opponents. Many families are deprived of the body of a deceased member and can at best hold a memorial ceremony. Not being able to perform funerary and mourning rites adds to the trauma of people bereaved by the loss of loved ones.

This survey could only cover some of the ICH of displaced Syrians. Many more exist, and it is very likely that few of these cultural expressions, customs, skills and know-how have been spared by the long conflict.

## **2. The role of intangible cultural heritage in the situation of displacement**

In our interviews with displaced Syrians, we used open-ended questions to ask our how they assessed the importance and role of ICH in relation to their experience of forced-migration and/or exile. Several salient themes emerged from the conversations, although the various roles assigned to ICH were not always easy to disentangle. ICH provided psychological and spiritual comfort, a sense of community and continuity, social and cultural capital to adjust to a new environment, and could be a source of income. Furthermore, it acted as a medium to maintain various levels of identity, support mutual aid and cohesion between Syrians, and bridge relationships with host societies. Finally, in certain cases, ICH can be harnessed to overcome conflict and tensions between Syrians and with members of host societies. In various degrees, ICH thus contributes to the psychological, social and economic resilience of displaced Syrians.

The line is particularly fine between the **psychological comfort** displaced Syrians derive individually from the practice or enjoyment of their ICH, the role ICH plays as a channel of **social support and cohesion**, and its functions to **maintain identity and impart a sense of belonging** to the displaced.

Syrians, regardless of where they have moved, have become separated from family members, relatives and friends who remain in Syria or sought safety abroad. Whenever death occurs within the circle of loved ones, distance prevents caring for the body of the deceased, and the dispersal of people makes grieving together impossible. The absence of the body dematerialises death, yet mourning rituals are structuring elements in the lives of many displaced people. In Jordan and Lebanon, condolence ceremonies are organised in private homes, at times over several days thanks to the prevailing security. These events can draw large numbers of visitors who learn of the death through word of mouth, the print or social media, and, at times, local Syrian TV or radio stations. Visitors are received in a simple fashion because of limited space and financial means, yet at least basic rituals are performed: a picture of the deceased is displayed together with religious or national symbols, visitors express their sympathy using standard phrases, they remember the deceased, and they drink unsweetened Arabic coffee. Such gatherings provide **psychological support and a sense of community**, and their religious or political dimension helps to make sense of death, particularly in a context of violence and/or exile. They are particularly important for displaced women who have few other opportunities or places to socialize.

Death may happen in displacement, a situation which presents relatives with another type of challenge. The Syrian corpse washers we interviewed in Lebanon and Jordan are now

called upon by fellow nationals to perform washing and shrouding inside the homes, and prepare bodies for burials in line with Islamic tradition. Their presence reassures the bereaved that the appropriate rituals are followed, and that the deceased is treated respectfully. This provides **a sense of continuity** in practices and spiritual beliefs that may ease the trauma associated with loss and burial in a foreign land.

Giving life is another socially significant threshold many Syrian women find agonising to experience in a foreign environment. The traditional midwife mentioned above described how she helps Syrian mothers deliver in the Jordanian town where she now lives. Besides providing them and their newborns with personalised care, she also gives them spiritual support by framing her services as part of her religious duties. Although hospital delivery is available to Syrian women, some do not know where to go or prefer **a familiar environment**, particularly when they have no female relatives to accompany them to the maternity ward.

Syrian displaced people often mentioned traditional food as helping them go through the arduous experience of displacement, as it provides a taste of home. Within households, cooks, who are mostly but not exclusively female, strive to recreate the aspect and flavours of regional dishes with different ingredients and limited financial means. They derive pride from their ingenuity, and see food as the most readily available means to **transmit Syrian, regional and familial identities between generations** within the household. Some Syrian women we interviewed cooked with Syrian neighbours to save money by pooling available resources, and to **rebuild social relations**.

The performing arts, too, play a role in **maintaining identity and belonging**, and easing the hardships of exile. This is particularly true for music, but also for storytelling, dance, popular theatre or TV series that draw on folklore, popular expressions and regional accents. These forms of ICH help refugees, be they practitioners or audiences, **adjust to a new environment** by giving them familiar bearings.

Among Syrians with a tribal background, some individuals played a decisive part as **keepers of collective identity and social cohesion** in displacement. One respondent we interviewed was a figure of authority from the rural Jawlan (Golan Heights), a region affected by a massive displacement episode in 1967 when two thirds of the area were occupied by Israel. Now 77, he described how as a young man he settled in a suburb of Damascus, together with many people from his area of origin. He has long been considered the living memory of the displaced Jawlanis. He keeps in mind the genealogies of tribes and families, the names of occupied villages, the fauna and flora, traditional foods, games, objects of daily life, etc. He is also a reference about tribal customary law and social norms. People in his community used to ask him to give speeches at weddings and funerals, and invited him to reception rooms (*madafa-s*) where Syrian rural and Bedouin communities discuss issues and deals. In these venues, he would share his encyclopaedic knowledge and mediate conflicts. Since the Syria war started in 2011, the *madafa-s* have closed and social gatherings have come to a halt. A large part of the Jawlanis settled near Damascus have been displaced to Jordan. While the respondent was spared exile, he worried that he can no longer pass on his oral knowledge, and that scattered Jawlanis may not keep their collective memory and identity.

Similarly, another respondent who holds a position of authority within the tribal system was displaced from Deraa to Jordan in 2011. This respondent, now 71, was praised for his skills as a poet performing *qasida*, a genre spoken in colloquial Arabic at public events. Topics

include love, eulogies, praises, epic stories, tribal histories, satire, friendship, care of elders, pride, honour, the homeland, war and politics. *Qasida* is a cultural expression transmitting knowledge and memory, and educating about social norms. Additionally, the respondent plays a key role to resolve some types of conflicts between Syrians in Jordan or on both sides of the border, and between Syrians and Jordanians. In Syria, as in Jordan, tribal customary law (*'urf 'asha'iri*) is acknowledged by the government authorities, and allowed to run its course alongside state law (*qanun*) for criminal offenses involving physical injury, death or insult to honour. Customary law remains largely unwritten, and people turn to a traditional judge (*qadi 'asha'iri*), like the respondent, in cases of blood and honour, where several male members of a kinship group are held collectively responsible for the action of one single member. Hence, when someone is killed in Syria, retribution can be sought among the kin of the murderer displaced in Jordan. The respondent described how he mediates between parties, helps negotiate compensation for the blood spilled, and restores social peace. As a respected figure of authority, he also negotiates such settlements between Syrians and Jordanians.

The two above examples embody the tribal system and values, a heritage that provides displaced Syrians with **social capital**, and contributes to their **social resilience**, or collective capacity to cope with threats using available resources.

In several instances, ICH also provides displaced Syrians with **cultural capital** and allows them to **recover lost livelihoods**, even in the absence of economic capital. The stonemason displaced from Bosra now works as a builder in northern Jordan. He has recently integrated a project run by the German Archaeological Institute in Umm Qais to perfect his stone cutting skills for the restoration of archaeological sites. He sees stone masonry as his portable trade and a source of income that supports him in displacement.

The carpenter from Hama is employed in a workshop in northern Jordan, where he makes all kinds of woodwork, including typically Syrian wooden and straw seats for which there is a new demand in cafes and restaurants. He fled Syria without his tools and equipment, and cannot afford to open his own workshop in Jordan. Yet the intangible nature of his know-how allows him to pursue his trade in displacement.

The corpse washers we interviewed in Lebanon and Jordan receive a modest payment for their services. The midwife who is now in Jordan does not accept money, but is rewarded with small gifts of food or non-food items. The displaced women who participate in crafts or cooking activities with NGOs receive small incomes that contribute to supporting their households. This is often a radical change in their roles considering that, in Syria, most were not working outside their homes. This situation has further implications in terms of maintenance and transmission of skills, an issue we will touch upon in the following section.

All the musicians interviewed in Turkey, France, Jordan and Lebanon derived an income from the practice of their art, albeit to various degrees. In the following section, we will explore how the context of displacement affects the capacity of musicians and other ICH bearers to continue, transmit, and live off their practice.

The different social uses of ICH are closely intertwined with the desire our Syrian interlocutors expressed to **preserve their identity** in displacement, and use their cultural expressions and artisanal skills to **reach out to host societies** and **improve the perception** of displaced Syrians.



The practice, enjoyment and transmission of ICH reinforce different layers of identity and a sense of belonging. At the forefront of those is **familial identity**. Across the variety of ICH domains surveyed, most of the practitioners interviewed learned their skills and know-how from intergenerational transmission within the family. A popular singer from the Hawran was proud to introduce us to his mother in the prefab housing unit where he now lives with his family in Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. He has long turned to her for traditional lyrics and tunes that used to be played on the [mijwiz](#) (double-pipe reed flute typical of rural areas), and that he arranges with what used to be solely urban instruments (such as the *'oud*) and with an electric keyboard. Two other respondents drew from family traditions of Sufi ritual performances to become professional musicians. Another respondent learned stone-masonry from his father at a time when cement was not yet the main building material, and was proud to have maintained his skills to this day. The same goes for the respondents with expertise in manufacturing traditional furniture or making mattresses and eiderdowns. Traditional health care practices, together with the care of the dead, are ancestral family legacies. The etiquette of hospitality and rituals of mourning and celebrating significant life events are learned from childhood in the context of the family. The knowledge of tribal customs, history and law, together with the art of Bedouin poetry, are generally transmitted from father to son. Evidently the preparation of fresh or preserved foods is a know-how mothers, stepmothers and grandmothers pass on to the younger generation. In some of these cases, the entire family derives its reputation from its excellence in one or several associated ICH domains, at times involving trade secrets. As a central component of familial identity, ICH cements relations between generations, and provides individuals with social status within the family and in society at large.

At another level, ICH practice and transmission is important to share **religious practices**, which may play a strong role for the identities of the bearers, through the preparation of specific foods, the performance of musical genres, dance styles, storytelling, religious rituals, oral expressions, etc. Furthermore, many of our interlocutors concurred that ICH can help displaced children and youth stay connected to the homeland and maintain a sense of what it means to come from **Syria** while in exile. They also insisted that Syrians in displacement draw on a **shared core of cultural practices, attitudes and beliefs** to interact with other Syrians beyond political and ethno-religious differences exacerbated by the war.

Finally, several examples testify that ICH allows displaced Syrians to **build bridges with their host societies**. Take the example of storytelling (*hikaya*), which the respondent from Palmyra occasionally performed in Jordanian schools and cultural centres in front of audiences where Syrian and Jordanian children and adults mingle. He would often ask members of the public to complete the stories or share their own versions. Interactive storytelling helps participants realize that Syrian and Jordanian popular cultures are close and convey similar sets of values. Following the [Al-Hakawati project](#) run by a network of Arab and Swedish NGOs, similar sessions have now been organized in Lebanon and Sweden. In Sweden, the stories are told in both Arabic and Swedish, in areas with high concentrations of Syrians and other Arab refugees and migrants. Wherever they take place, these performances foster inter-cultural communication and integration by encouraging Syrians to value their living heritage, and by generating interest from the host communities.

The storyteller above was invited to perform in one primary school in the town of Mafraq, where many Syrians have settled. Following the performance, the headmistress, gathered mothers of Syrian pupils to collect traditional children songs and nursery rhythms. The

corpus is now taught to school children alongside Jordanian songs. The headmistress sees this initiative as important for child development as it helps Syrian children make the transition between their home country and Jordan, equips them with a knowledge they will be able to bring back to Syria when they return, improves their integration in and motivation at school, and fosters communication and better relations with Jordanian children and teachers.

Two respondents, now living in France and Turkey, described how they have found favourable environments where the Syrian urban musical heritage is valued. They now perform at festivals, and participate in encounters with musicians from the host society to open a dialogue between musical traditions.

Another 25-year-old respondent was a passionate *dabke* dancer at weddings and other festive events in his village near Daraa. He had to stop the practice after the war started and was displaced to Irbid in northern Jordan. There, through the NGO in which he volunteers, he met Jordanian youths sharing his interest and was invited to join their informal *dabke* group. He was interviewed with a Jordanian member of the group. They both agreed on the importance of this shared cultural heritage for the development of friendship and respect between Syrians and Jordanians.

In Mafraq, examples of Syrian stonemasonry and woodwork have become part of the cityscape. The carpenter from Hama was praised by his employer for the quality of his work, and was asked to teach his skills to a Jordanian co-worker. Likewise, the stonemason is also training Jordanians through a programme run in cooperation with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. Both Syrian craftsmen consider that, although they have not regained a level of income and social status equivalent to the ones they had in Syria, their skills have allowed them to become respected members of the communities where they have settled.

Women interviewed about cooking in Zaatari village, Jordan, also mentioned limited but existing exchange of food and recipes with Jordanian neighbours, providing an opportunity for social interaction, mutual understanding, and improving the image of Syrians in the community. Perhaps the best proof of this process is that two Jordanian women from the village actively participated in the focus group discussion.

To conclude this section about the role of ICH in displacement, we provide some responses to the question “**What does ICH mean for you?**”

- “Our customs and traditions that remain when everything else is destroyed.”
- “Something you can take with you everywhere you go.”
- “Customs and traditions that make us Syrian and Arab. What we fall back on in times of hardship.”
- “Our traditions and the glue that keeps society together.”
- “Our origins, what we were raised with.”
- “A gift of God passed on by our ancestors.”
- “An essential part of the identity and future of the Syrian people.”
- “Art and heritage are what can save us as Syrians.”

- “A treasure for our country, and an endless source of unique art forms.”
- “Something in-between folklore and a living know-how. The artistic identity of our region. An open heritage, a mould that we need to preserve but within which we can incorporate all local and new art forms.”
- “A living culture accumulated by members of our community over centuries, and that is also part of the shared heritage of humanity. Our history that nobody can take away from us. The inexhaustible bag of spices my mother left me, which I took with me from Syria, and with which I flavour the food of the diaspora.”

### 3. Obstacles to expression and transmission

This section records the main obstacles that the Syrian refugees we interviewed face to practice and pass on various elements of their ICH. Families and communities are dislocated and dispersed. People lack familiarity with their environment, and many are traumatised and despondent. Pressing concerns for the rebuilding of livelihoods often take precedence over cultural expressions. Social and institutional contexts are not always conducive, and the refugees may face certain restrictions on their activities in the host countries.

In pre-war Syria, public institutions played a prominent role in providing channels of expression for some ICH elements, particularly the performing arts. This is apparent from the 2010 [Assessment of the State of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Syrian Arab Republic](#) prepared by Syria in the framework of the MedLiHer project, and was confirmed by our interviews. The Ministry of Culture, through a network of cultural centres in the governorates, sponsored heritage and folklore troupes of musicians, singers and dancers in rural and urban areas, organised exchange visits and festivals in the country, worked closely with the national TV and radio to provide performing opportunities for artists, and financially supported their participation in international festivals. Music conservatories in Damascus, Aleppo, and several other Syrian cities taught practical and theoretical aspects of religious and secular music. Several non-governmental bodies in various regions of Syria were also involved in supporting the practice and transmission of traditional music, singing and dance. Other contexts provided opportunities for performance and transmission of knowledge: these ranged from the rituals and ceremonies of the various religious communities, social events like weddings where musicians were hired to perform and guests engaged in traditional dance, private musical events organised by amateurs, etc.

In displacement, **the channels and contexts of expression are dislocated**. Host states, particularly those bordering Syria where most refugees are now concentrated, do not all have well-structured institutions to support ICH performance that could support the participation of refugees in cultural life. Performers who have settled in rural areas, or in refugee camps where movements are restricted, are at a particular disadvantage. One respondent, who now lives in a Lebanese village remote from urban centres and who participated twice in concerts in Beirut, further found that the Lebanese public had little taste for religious chants, and that the initial interest for arts and culture of people from Syria had waned with time. The storyteller from Palmyra also highlighted the absence of public places, such as cafes, restaurant or parks which he needed for transmissions.

Even in situations when public cultural policies are well developed and movements unrestricted, displaced ICH practitioners must navigate new contexts to rebuild networks,

negotiate access to cultural scenes, and reach new audiences. Often, they are faced with the challenge of a foreign language. Even in neighbouring Arab countries, linguistic differences can be an obstacle. For example, the *hakawati* storyteller performed in Lebanon, but found that the audience was not receptive to Syrian *hikaya*-s because people did not understand the dialect.

To practice and transmit their knowledge, ICH bearers need institutional support, insertion in cultural and linguistic communities, and access to networks and places, such as concert halls, cultural centres, music schools, places of worship, etc. The music teacher in Zaatari camp spent a considerable amount of money to build a *madafa*, or reception room, adjacent to his prefab housing unit in the camp. Made from corrugated iron with the inner walls lined with fabric, it provides an independent space where displaced musicians gather and perform informally. Yet it is not soundproof and, in the cramped space of the camp, neighbours complained about the noise. Several of the musicians interviewed, besides performing publicly, are members of Sufi orders (*tariqa*-s), and used to meet at regular intervals in lodges (*zawiya*-s) in Damascus or Aleppo. These collective rituals in which music, songs and, at times, dance or bodily movements are performed and transmitted require not only a community to be carried out, but a suitable space, rarely available in displacement contexts.

In pre-war Syria, artisans were inserted in communities, and had access to supply chains and markets. In this case too, where know-how was transmitted through apprenticeship, public and non-governmental institutions, such as professional associations, played a key role in supporting and promoting traditional crafts. They helped diversify productions, set quality assurance standards, assisted with marketing, created heritage quarters with handicraft outlets, established training initiatives, and held several arts and crafts fairs and festivals in the country. In the countries where they have settled, Syrian artisans may not benefit from similar institutional support. In most cases, they do not have the necessary capital to buy tools and open their own workshops where they could train apprentices. Raw materials, many of which were sourced from various regions of Syria, are not available. Artisans would also need to rebuild market ties and establish a reputation, a process that may be too lengthy to consider in the face of pressing economic needs.

**Lack of financial means** is a major impediment to ICH expression and transmission that adds up to social and institutional disruption. The poet from Deraa has continued to play his role in mitigating and solving conflicts in the context of displacement. He is well respected including by the host community. In Syria, he used to maintain a large *madafa* where he could host over fifty guests, and would spend lavishly on hospitality when he received delegations requesting his mediation or conciliation for tribal disputes. He now feels ashamed to receive claimants in the small house he rents in the village of Zaatari, and to feed them chicken instead of more expensive lamb. His fellow displaced Syrians similarly refrain from organising social gatherings, which were the main events where he used to perform his skills as a poet and local historian.

Hospitality, which plays such a primordial role in lubricating social relations in Syria and throughout the region, has become too costly for most displaced families. Those who participated in the focus group discussion organised in Mafraq on the topic said that they tended not to accept invitations from other Syrians or from Jordanians because they could not reciprocate them. They were ashamed to show hosts their living and economic conditions. The vast majority of the refugees live in extreme poverty.

Poverty is an issue that affects all ICH domains. Households cannot afford ingredients to cook traditional dishes. The women we interviewed as part of a group discussion on food and cooking at the Anamel association near Beirut told us that they now had to work outside their homes to make ends meet, and therefore lacked time to prepare the elaborate dishes they used to cook several times a month in Syria. Families were similarly forced to cut down on expenses for religious festivals and weddings where special foods used to be prepared. The musicians from Daraa we met in the Zaatari refugee camp could not afford to buy musical instruments. The vocalist who we interviewed said that his sons, who followed him to Lebanon, now earn a living in construction projects and stopped practicing religious chant and mosaic art.

In cases when displaced people can afford them, **Syrian food products are not always available** in countries of displacement. Furthermore, the preparation of non-perishable provisions is difficult in **different environmental and living conditions**. One respondent, who was displaced from the rural arid region of Sukhne, now lives in a densely populated neighbourhood of Beirut where the climate is humid. She can no longer find the same products at the local markets, and lacks the suitable space and climatic conditions to dry *burghul* (cracked wheat), *kishk* (drained and dried yogurt), tomato paste, and prepare other types of *mune*. Transmission of her culinary knowhow to her daughter, which would have happened naturally in Sukhne, is now interrupted. Her situation, like that of many other Syrian women we spoke to, is a factor of both displacement across borders and rural to urban migration. It took another woman now living in Germany some time to find the Middle Eastern products in her host community. This made her realise how much Syrian traditional cuisine depends on climate, local produce, social life, and the form of the habitat.

The presence of large numbers of refugees presents host countries with economic, societal and security challenges. Some host governments have responded with certain **measures, which can inadvertently curtail the rights and autonomy of the refugees**. In a number of neighbouring host countries, most Syrians are forced to look for work in the informal sector due to restrictions against their access to mainstream job markets. Syrians are confined to certain professions (construction, agriculture, low-paid service jobs), which are not necessarily the ones suitable to practice and live off their ICH-related skills. Furthermore, in some cases, refugees found to be working illegally are at risk of being deported back to Syria or forced to live in camps where there are very few employment opportunities and most refugees depend entirely on humanitarian aid.

Syrians are deeply affected by their predicament and that of their country. **A large number are traumatised** by war, death, maiming, torture, destructions, displacement, extreme poverty, exploitation, negative perception by host societies, loss of loved ones, community, property, livelihoods, social role and status, etc. Despondency is a widespread feeling among the respondents we interviewed. For the most destitute, daily survival took precedence over concerns for cultural expressions, yet they still expressed attachment to their customs and traditions (*'adad wa taqalid*) that continue to inform their basic activities like cooking or attending mourning sessions.

We finally probed our interlocutors on factors of **gender and age** to explore if such demographic characteristics affected their capacity to express their ICH in displacement. In our sample, and based on other cases we know of, women appeared to be more easily integrated in income generating projects run by NGOs, where the main activities are cooking and crafts. It also seems that women are less susceptible to be checked, especially when they perform their trades inside private homes. This is the case with the traditional

midwife from Deraa, who can provide her services unhindered. At 61, age was more a concern to her than gender. Compared to men, women are at some disadvantage to find places to socialise and maintain their ICH collectively for lack of relatives or friends to visit, or public places and events where they can meet. Generally, the women interviewed did not see their gender as a specific challenge, but identified economic, psychological and social hardships linked to war and displacement as the main issues.

In Syria, males are traditionally the breadwinners and strive to maintain this role in displacement. This was the case with the craftsmen we interviewed despite their lack of capital to rebuild their production capacities. To this aim, some take the risk to work illegally. Here too, some mentioned age as an impediment to reinsert themselves in the labour market. The 70-year-old traditional mattress manufacturer said that he no longer had the stamina to start manufacturing mattresses and eiderdown from scratch in Cairo. His know-how is likely to die with him. The 47-year-old vocalist specialising in religious hymns considered that only younger musicians can integrate into new artistic environments, and wanted to return to Damascus where he believes the government can provide a suitable environment for him to perform his religious and secular singing.

In conclusion, and based on our sample, which is too small to allow for generalisation, the main factors bearing upon the viability of ICH in situations of displacement are the following: the displacement context (refugee reception policies, levels of humanitarian assistance, camp/non-camp settings, urban vs. rural, cultural and linguistic environment), refugees' economic situation and education level, together with the need to find suitable networks, channels and places for ICH enactment and transmission.

#### **4. Opportunities and initiatives for expression and transmission**

Despite the hardship they face in displacement, many Syrian refugees have found opportunities to practice and transmit their ICH in foreign environments. In this last section, we present individual cases and collective initiatives that have a value in themselves, and as examples of the conditions ensuring ICH viability in displacement. The presence of catalysts (such as Syrian artists and expatriates, media, intermediaries, and community-based NGO projects) are important to harness the desire of refugees to stay in touch with a cultural heritage that stands for their homeland and cultural identity. Digital technology, together with socio-political contexts in which they can enjoy cultural rights, are empowering many Syrians to keep their ICH alive and redefine it creatively through new channels of enactment and transmission.

A key issue for artisans is to keep or regain **access to markets and raw materials**. War has also displaced markets to the point that, even when there is no direct pressure to flee, artisans and craft dealers may need to emigrate to maintain livelihoods. This is illustrated by the case of the manufacturer of high-end wooden furniture whose crafts are in continuous demand, albeit not in Syria anymore. The artisan, who learned his trade from his father, explained that he emigrated to Saudi Arabia with his son after a client offered to help him open a workshop in that country, and access alternative supply chains for the raw materials he used to source in Syria. He now lives comfortably from his business, and ensures that ancestral skills and trade secrets continue to be transmitted within the family.

Marketing is an essential link for craftspeople to maintain skills, a source of income, and desire for transmission. One antique and craft dealer was not forced to move from Damascus to Beirut, but decided to follow displaced Syrian artisans to rebuild her

connections with them, and pursue her business. Her relocation also allowed her to reconnect with customers or retailers from the Gulf or Lebanon who had stopped going to Syria because of the war. By providing artisans with market linkages, she allowed them to recover their livelihoods and rebuild the capital necessary to acquire tools and raw materials, rent workshops, resume production, and take in apprentices.

One frequent remark we heard during the survey was that displacement has led to heightened **awareness of the value of cultural heritage** and of the need to transmit it to exiled youths. For instance, an actor, playwright and theatre director who had little interest in ICH before the war, incorporated regional accents and expressions together with interludes of popular music in his most recent play [Love Boat](#), which he wrote and directed with Syrian refugees in Jordan. Several ICH practitioners are exploring new ways of keeping record of and disseminating traditional and popular cultural expressions, knowledge and know-how. The *hakawati* storyteller was considering writing down a corpus of *hikaya*-s together with an analysis of the linguistic technique of the storytellers. Another respondent was penning a volume about the popular heritage of the Jawlan region to ensure that his knowledge would be conveyed to future generations. The antique and craft dealer had a book project documenting details about the manufacturing of traditional handicrafts, including the precise terminology of decorative elements. The vocalist specializing in religious hymns wished to record a CD to teach the various genres of the Syrian musical heritage.

**Previous connections in host countries, a critical mass of Syrian ICH practitioners, together with the interest of host societies for Syrian cultural expressions** provide other opportunities for displaced performing artists to maintain their practice in exile, and insert themselves into or **recreate communities of practice**.

[Gaziantep](#) and [Istanbul](#) have become cultural hubs for displaced Syrian artists, intellectuals and activists. One musician now living in Turkey used to perform in festivals outside Syria, and had connections with Turkish artists. In Gaziantep, where he now lives alongside 250,000 other Syrian refugees, he found initial challenges, which he could overcome thanks to pre-existing connections, the interest of local musicians in Syrian traditional music, the presence of other Syrian artists, and the existence of an international audience. He joined and created several ensembles of traditional music, regularly participates in workshops to pass this heritage on to the younger generation, and lives off his art. He does not feel that his practice was negatively affected by displacement. Rather, the musical heritage he conveys helped him integrate in Turkey.

Another respondent had a similar experience in France, where he had studied architecture, and knew the language. He found it relatively easy to integrate into the musical scene, and now performs the *'oud* and *qanun* in concerts, prestigious festivals, and on the French radio. He believed that his age, 56, level of education, and experience as the director of Aleppo's music conservatory were assets for his adaptation. He views Europe, with its lively artistic life, financial support, audiences, and Syrian communities pre-existing the war, as a conducive environment for Syrian musicians. There were several other examples of successful integration of Syrian artists into European cultural scenes.

We also encountered **culturally sensitive initiatives by NGOs and individuals** that can make a real difference to ensure the viability of Syrian ICH in displacement.

The *'oud* player with a stable foothold in France felt he could engage in initiatives to teach traditional music to Syrian refugee youth. He is now artistic director of Action for Hope, an NGO he created with an Egyptian arts manager and cultural activist. The organisation provides “cultural relief and development programs to meet the cultural, social and psychological needs of distressed and displaced communities.” With funds from the Goethe Institute, the British Council and the Ford Foundation, they created two mixed music schools for Syrian refugee youths in Lebanon. The curriculum is aligned with that of a music conservatory, with a strict selection process and attendance requirements (five afternoons a week). Children are taught music notation, singing, and a variety of musical instruments and genres, including traditional Syrian ones, with a view to train the next generation of professional musicians. Between 2015 and 2016, 60 children were trained. Many displaced Syrian musicians have participated in workshops and concerts with the students, including one of the respondents to the survey.

In the constrained environment of the Zaatari refugee camp, two respondents described how they created a mixed choir where they give basic musical education to youth. The UNHCR donated an electronic keyboard and small melodicas for the children, and initially provided a space for the choir to meet. To connect children to the Syrian popular heritage, the musicians use recordings of pre-war Syrian TV programmes on YouTube. While at its height, the choir included almost 100 members, for lack of institutional support, this number has however decreased. The choir initiative competes with a large offer of activities for the youths run by humanitarian organisations with access to funds and facilities. However, on the basis of previous research conducted in the camp by the main author of this report, existing projects do not focus on ICH safeguarding.

Between 2014 and 2015, the Swedish NGO Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHWB) ran a Syrian oral tradition project called Al-Hakawati (the storyteller). It was developed and managed by a specialist of Syrian Ottoman architectural history, in collaboration with cultural organisations in Lebanon, Jordan and Sweden that have experience in using folktales as educational tools. More than 250 Syrian tales were collected in Syria and Lebanon, with a selection published in a bilingual Arabic-English anthology, including a CD recorded by two famous Syrian storytellers/actors respecting regional accents. Several performances were eventually organised in Lebanon, Jordan and Sweden, and training workshops held. One participant described how he discovered his skills for and interest in storytelling through training in the programme in Jordan. Before his displacement from Palmyra, he was working in his father's hotel after dropping out from an undergraduate degree in Arabic language. He now narrates Syrian popular stories in Jordanian schools and community centres upon request.

In 2016, CHWB partnered again with the Jordanian and Lebanese NGOs involved in the above project, respectively the Arab Education Forum and Al-Jana, Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts, to develop a skills transmission project involving Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian artisans. Workshops, led by the artisans, gathered local and refugee youth to learn skills, produce documentary films, and publish books. Noteworthy is that the two implementing organisations have long worked with Lebanese, Jordanian and Palestinian refugee youth within joint cultural initiatives that foster creativity, personal development, community building, and conflict resolution.

The two income-generating projects we visited in Lebanon (introduced below) provide opportunities for Syrian women to maintain their crafts or cooking skills in displacement, and contribute support to their households.



Ninurta (the name of a Sumerian god), an NGO created in Beirut in 2015 and supported by a French NGO (CCFD-Terre Solidaire) and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focuses on textile crafts to safeguard Syrian traditional skills, techniques and tools. It also provides Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and other underprivileged women an income. It was established and run by two women with an in-depth knowledge of traditional crafts: an artist and specialist of Syrian traditional textiles displaced from Aleppo and a Lebanese historian specializing in modern Lebanon and Syria. Both have previous experience supporting artisans in Lebanon and Syria, and marketing their products. Crafts include sewing, embroidery, print with wooden stamps, and jewellery-making, were all grounded in the rich tradition of Syrian textiles, but also allowed women to express their creativity. Of the 90 participating women, some start from scratch to build skills, whereas others develop pre-existing ones. The project incorporates a strong social component, providing a space for women to meet and exchange, and a playing and educational space for their young children. Marketing efforts are central with benefits going to the participating women and independent Syrian craftsmen (a weaver, a soap maker, and a glass blower) displaced in Lebanon.

Anamel (Fingers) was founded in 2014 in a Beirut suburb by a young middle-class Syrian woman with managerial skills displaced from Damascus. Hosted by a local Islamic organisation, it is funded by charitable donations and the revenues generated from the production of food and crafts items sold on the organisation's premises, through phone orders, or at fairs. The organisation builds on existing skills to provide an income to participating women, all of them Syrian, but does not frame its activities as ICH safeguarding. Although the products are of high quality, they display a tendency towards standardization, as is often the case with these types of social projects. For example, the offer of kibbeh, a combination of cracked wheat and meat, is very limited, whereas there exists scores of regional varieties that displaced Syrian women no longer have the time or financial means to prepare at home, and whose knowledge is at risk of being lost. The same is true for the textile products. While visiting the workshops, we held collective discussions with the founder/manager and two dozen women of all ages and regions of Syria about their know-how of regional food and craft traditions, and their interest in maintaining them and sharing them between themselves. There was a general agreement about the importance of maintaining these skills and items, and a recognition that they could provide a competitive edge in a context where many NGOs and cottage-industries offer food catering services and hand-made textile products. We believe that there is scope for sensitizing such NGOs to the cultural and economic value of drawing more creatively on traditional Syrian knowledge.

The vitality and even revitalization of Syrian ICH is further ensured by a host of initiatives conducted by refugees and expatriates through **traditional and social media**.

Globally, the use of digital technology and social media has changed the way and context in which ICH is performed, archived, disseminated, interpreted and recreated. Displaced Syrians are fully engaged in this movement. Social media platforms are widely harnessed by the Syrian diaspora, including displaced people in dire economic situations who prioritize spending on smartphones as key to maintain contacts with scattered relatives and friends, move along migratory pathways, and store their photos and other memories of home and their loved ones. ICH is captured by smartphones, tablets and digital cameras in the many locales where Syrians live, and is available through social media from any place in the world. We identified dozens of Facebook pages with memorial and cultural

content created by Syrian individuals or informal collectives. They featured proverbs, oral expressions, photos, videos, and descriptions of social and religious ceremonies, culinary traditions, and the performing arts. Some pages are dedicated to one ICH domain or practitioner, as is the case for some traditional singers, while others have a regional focus or cover all aspects of culture and tradition. ICH also circulates in a less structured way through personal Facebook and Instagram accounts, videos and audio recordings uploaded on YouTube, etc.

One respondent now based in Germany created a Facebook page called Matbakh Gherbeh (diaspora cuisine) and a website aiming to “link the Syrians in the countries of exile by preparing dishes like those of their home country, using locally available ingredients, and to exchange the culinary experiences among them in a discussion that insures a familiar, intimate and humorous atmosphere and sharing results with the best recipes to make these dishes. It also highlights the impact of the Syrian cuisine on cuisines of countries of exile, and its influence on the general taste.” She said that her initiative “helps preserve an identity threatened by dispersal, and helps transmit cooking secrets the way a mother would to her daughter in a normal situation.” Browsing through her Facebook page, it is clear that the topic generates a wide interest among Syrians who discuss and share recipes from all regions of the country, and display great ingenuity to substitute missing ingredients with what is available in their new environments.

Syrian satellite TV channels run programmes dedicated to various ICH expressions, and are watched by displaced people both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, and by the wider Syrian diaspora. An unescapable reality of these networks is that they convey political messages. For example, poetry and songs using traditional genres may express support for a particular faction. This said, all but the most radical media refrain from promoting hatred against specific social groups. Furthermore, some topics lend themselves less than others to political discourse. In Amman, we interviewed the director of Orient News, a well-established TV and radio network, with a wide audience of Syrians, both inside and outside the country. The network runs regular programmes on poetry, music, and other aspects of ICH, always emphasising a shared Syrian identity and culture. During Ramadan, the TV usually dedicates programmes to food and cooking. In 2014, the 30 episodes of Tabbakh Ruhu (Cook of his Soul, the name of a vegetarian dish) were uploaded on YouTube. In late November 2016, the number of views ranged from 10,000 to 50,000, depending on the episode. In each of them, the programme host visits a displaced Syrian family in their place of residence in Jordan (e.g., an apartment in Amman, a tent in an informal refugee camp, etc.), and asks the lady of the house to cook a full meal typical of their area of origin using locally available ingredients. At times, men participated when they had a special skill, such as sweet-making. Cooking provided a pretext to discuss social customs, regional diversity, memories of home, and the displacement experience.

Radio Suriali (a play on words that can read as My Syria or Surrealist) is a grassroots non-profit online media organisation with a crew scattered between Syria and various countries of exile. We interviewed one producer displaced from Aleppo to Hamburg, Germany, and the programme director, displaced from Damascus to Bordeaux, France. Both young media developers, they create mostly entertainment and educational content with a focus on displaced and diaspora Syrians. Regular talk shows deal with various aspects of ICH (e.g., traditional music, famous musicians and singers, cooking, popular stories, traditional customs, the variety of ethnic and religious traditions, etc.). The programmes aim to allow displaced Syrians to tell their stories, maintain their links with the culture of their homeland, and keep a sense of identity and purpose while they are in exile or under duress in Syria.

Importantly, they also purport to rebuild the link between various social groups who are now at odds by emphasizing common cultural references.

A final aspect that should not be neglected is that conflict and displacement are compelling Syrians to be creative, display ingenuity and autonomy, and consider their ICH critically in a different light.

One respondent, now in France, said that a benefit of the current ordeal Syria is going through is that it forces a redefinition of cultural heritage in Syria in an inclusive way that incorporates socially and ethnically diverse traditions. For another respondent, the Syrian crisis has opened avenues recover diversity, including the practice of marginal cultural expressions to be practiced and visible, and spur grassroots initiatives for ICH safeguarding.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Few of the deeply rooted cultural expressions, customs, skills and know-how that constitute the ICH of individuals, groups and communities in Syria have been spared by the conflict that has engulfed the country since 2011. In displacement situations, ICH contributes to various degrees to the psychological, social and economic resilience of displaced Syrians, and endows them with cultural and social capital. Mourning rituals help people make sense of death in a context of violence and exile. Traditional midwifery eases the anxiety of delivery in an unfamiliar environment. Syrian food provides comfort to the consumers, and self-esteem to the cooks. For practitioners and audiences, the performing arts ease the hardships of exile by giving refugees familiar bearings. Some forms of ICH also provide displaced Syrians with opportunities to recover lost livelihoods even in the absence of economic capital. This can be the case with crafts and cooking skills, traditional health care practices, and the performing arts.

Furthermore, ICH can serve to bridge relations with host communities. Some forms of ICH mediate new social relations between displaced Syrians and the host society, improve the way Syrians are perceived, open up a dialogue between cultural traditions, allow for the development of friendship and respect between Syrians and the host country population, and help communities learn new skills. Moreover, ICH helps to manage and overcome conflict and tensions among Syrians and with members of the host community. The exchange of food and recipes with members of host communities provide opportunities for social interaction and mutual understanding. Interactive storytelling and the use of Syrian songs in schools foster inter-cultural communication and integration. Syrian musicians performing at festivals, and participating in encounters with artists from the host societies open a dialogue between musical traditions. The practice of traditional dance, a form of shared heritage between Syrian and neighbouring countries, allows for the development of friendship and respect between Syrians and members of host communities. Syrian artisans teach their skills to local craftsmen, and gain respect and integration through their know-how.

Finally, ICH may help to manage and overcome conflict and tensions between Syrians and with members of host societies. In displacement, a shared core of cultural practices, attitudes and beliefs allows Syrians to interact beyond political and ethno-religious differences exacerbated by the war. In countries neighbouring Syria, traditional mechanisms can help resolve conflicts between Syrians, including across borders, and with host societies. This endows displaced Syrians with social capital, and contributes to their social resilience, or collective capacity to cope with threats using available resources.

At the same time, Syrians who have taken refuge in a host country face a specific set of obstacles in the expression and transmission of their ICH: families and communities are dispersed; channels, networks and contexts of expression and transmission are dislocated; people lack familiarity with their environment; and many must overcome trauma. Pressing concerns for the rebuilding of livelihoods often take precedence over cultural expressions.

Despite the hardships they face, many Syrian refugees have found opportunities to practise and transmit their ICH. The presence of catalysts, such as artists, the media, intermediaries, and certain NGO projects, is key to harness refugees' desire to stay in touch with their cultural heritage and continue transmission and recreation.

The results showed that ICH in the context of displacement is a factor of cultural exchange, social cohesion and resilience. However, to ensure the safeguarding of their ICH, bearers need institutional support, including access to spaces, networks and places to continue transmission in the various domains.

Therefore, initiatives to safeguard the ICH of displaced Syrians and ensure that their ICH can serve as a source of resilience and bridge with the host communities in Jordan should be a priority for future action. The focus should be on supporting existing safeguarding initiatives of the communities, groups and individuals concerned to enhance their scope and impact. Such initiatives should:

- Be informed by an in-depth understanding of the importance and roles of ICH, particularly in situations of displacement.
- Aim at empowering Syrians to maintain the viability of their ICH and redefine it creatively through new or existing channels and contexts of enactment and transmission.
- Support exchange and communication concerning shared ICH between refugees and host communities, and benefit both.
- Build in priority on existing efforts and initiatives by the communities, groups and individuals concerned.
- Closely associate the community members of a practice, both Syrians and members of host communities, in the conception, implementation and evaluation of safeguarding initiatives.

However, it is important to note that there are also larger issues that affect safeguarding which go beyond the scope of action of individual stakeholders and the present survey. These include the lack of livelihood opportunities for refugees, economic challenges linked to accommodating large numbers of refugees, and little awareness of ICH and its potential to foster resilience and well-being.

### **Recommendations for actions**

The recommendations below give some direction on possibilities of strengthening ICH safeguarding in the specific context of displacement and its effects on the bearers and host communities in Jordan.

- Further in-depth study to understand the importance and roles of ICH, particularly in situations of displacement, and gather knowledge on the role of communities in both safeguarding their ICH at risk in emergencies and mobilizing it as a tool for resilience and reconciliation.

- Capacity building for national counterparts, such as ministries and policy makers, NGOs and Syrian community representatives, related to the preparation of safeguarding plans to support Syrians maintain the viability of their ICH and redefine it creatively through new or existing channels and contexts of enactment and transmission.
- The establishment of a mechanism or steering committee at the national level, involving various concerned stakeholders, including community representatives and national counterparts, to facilitate exchange and communication about ICH safeguarding. The mechanism or steering committee could support and facilitate communities to design, implement and evaluate safeguarding initiatives and bring the refugee and host communities together to safeguard their ICH.
- During the implementation of safeguarding initiatives, involve people with relevant skills and experiences, and organisations that can play the role of catalysts or enhancers. These could be cultural specialists with a knowledge of Syria and the host country and/or of the role of culture and heritage in displacement, conflict resolution, youth development, and community building. Others could be NGOs, digital media and technology professionals, or experts in the development and marketing of handicrafts.

All initiatives should be based on an inclusive approach, in line with the [Ethical principles for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage](#) and an emphasis on the ties that bind and enhance social cohesion. It is therefore essential that participants, organizations, partners, and experts adhere to an inclusive approach.