

Converting Resources to the Cause

Social movement scholars have long held that resources increase a movement's readiness to engage in collective action and the likelihood that movements will survive and achieve at least some of their goals (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McAdam et al. 1996, 2001). These resources often come from organizations that sponsor social movement activity, such as NGOs and professional organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The catch, however, is that elite sponsorship puts limits on what movements can do (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Staggenborg 1988) because revolutionary change inherently threatens sponsors' social standing and power. As a result, patronage can make mobilization possible, but it also compromises activists' abilities to achieve radical social change. Constraints imposed on the grassroots by elites can therefore become a major dilemma for movements that require external resources to fulfill their missions.

While the top-down sponsorship of movements is an important subject that I address here and in Chapter 7, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to how activists serve as *peer patrons* of allied movements for the express purpose of revolutionary, radical change. Yet, this is precisely what makes diaspora mobilization so important in world affairs (Adamson 2002, 2004, 2016; Smith and Stares 2007; Vertovec 2005). As the previous chapter illustrates, diaspora movements can ameliorate resource shortages in highly repressive, underprivileged locales by remitting a range of tangible and intangible resources homeward. Based on my analysis of the Arab Spring abroad, this chapter argues that doing so hinges on a process I call *resource conversion* – that is, the capacities of diaspora activists and their movements to convert personal and collective resources to shared political projects rooted across borders.

Here, I argue that two major types of resource conversion mattered during the Arab Spring abroad. The first type consisted of activists' *transnational*

network ties to family and friends in the home-country. Once converted to the revolutions, these ties became cross-border conduits for information and material exchange (Kitts 2000). They also enabled activists to expand their contacts from kin to previously unknown partners through introductions, vetting processes, and referrals. Both preexisting and emergent cross-border ties deputized activists abroad as broadcasters, representatives, brokers, remitters, and volunteers for resistance efforts and made the channeling of remittances possible.

The second type of resource conversion that made the Arab Spring abroad possible was the conversion of diaspora activists' *capital* to rebellion and relief efforts. Capital took *fungible and material* forms, such as when activists moved cash and medical equipment to home-country locales under siege. They also converted their expertise and skills – what social scientists call *social capital* – to the Arab Spring (Portes 2000). Social capital ranged from doctors' medical knowledge to activists' language interpretation and translation skills, previous experiences in public relations, and technological savviness. Capital conversion lent invaluable resources to the revolutionary struggles and gave activists a way to participate in the action, whether directly or indirectly. Taken together, these different forms of capital facilitated each tactic in the transnational repertoire.

To evidence this process, this chapter illustrates how Libyans in the United States and Britain had few problems overcoming the hurdles posed by physical distance to help their compatriots due to *sufficient* resource conversion. Syrians and Yemenis, however, faced a number of different challenges owing to waning or absent network ties and insufficient capital. As Table 1.3 (column 5) summarizes, Syrians' resources decreased from being largely sufficient to insufficient over time, and Yemenis' resources remained insufficient for the revolution's duration.

The comparison illustrates how resource conversion to political causes transforms distant sympathizers into transnational forces for radical change. While diasporas channel considerable resources homeward to their families amounting to billions of dollars each year (World Bank 2018), this chapter demonstrates that whether or not those resources get channeled to *politicized* causes is another matter. Owing to differences in community-level wealth, education, and activists' emigration circumstances, diaspora movement capital may be or become insufficient to address needs on the ground, even when demand for their support is high.

6.1 THE CONVERSION OF CROSS-BORDER NETWORKS

6.1.1 The Conversion and Expansion of Libyans' and Syrians' Cross-Border Ties

The conversion of Libyans' and Syrians' ties to family and friends in the home-country was the first type of resource that made diaspora intervention possible during the Arab Spring. By serving as the diaspora members' eyes and ears,

sources on the ground provided them with testimonials and information for use in their roles as broadcasters and representatives of the revolution. At the onset of the Libyan uprising, for example, activists began “calling up friends, calling up family, getting all of these [pieces of] information,” as M. of Enough Gaddafi! explained.¹ Their allies also sought out sympathizers in the diaspora to help them smuggle out information. As Muhannad, an independent Syrian American activist from Southern California who had lived for part of his youth in Hama, affirmed,

People were sending me videos of anything they can document, any kind of crime or shooting at a protest so they can clear it off their phone and I can upload it to social media. It would all go to YouTube. We’d also get phone calls: “can so-and-so send you this and that?”

Because being caught with video recordings could be a matter of life and death, connections to persons like Muhannad provided the means for dissidents to smuggle out information as quickly and safely as possible using the Internet. In this way, transnational networks provided the infrastructure needed to engage in information wars (Keck and Sikkink 1998), refute regime propaganda, and attract favorable attention from outside media.

Activists’ preexisting contacts also snowballed into a widened network of pro-revolution activists on the ground seeking to broadcast their plight. Referring to her colleague Omar in the Libya Youth Movement, Ayat recalled, “When things began, I called my cousins, Omar called his, we started asking people on Facebook for their contacts – whoever was willing to talk.” Having direct contacts with protesters and fighters on the ground was also important in establishing activists’ credibility and legitimacy. As referenced in Chapter 5, activists were keen to voice demands on behalf of the Arab Spring, but not to speak *for* the revolution or revolutionaries who were facing the greatest risks and costs of dissent. Abdulaziz Almashi, a doctoral student in London who became a full-time activist after the Assad regime cut off his scholarship, attested that they amplified revolutionaries’ demands by broadcasting their allies’ exact claims.

On the outside, we must reflect what our people need on the inside of Syria. We have a connection with media activists in every single city in Syria via Skype or Facebook, and we are always in touch with them. We ask them, what do you *exactly* want? What message do *you* want us to deliver on the outside? So we take our instructions from *them* and deliver it to the public, the media.

¹ Respondents perceived that Skype was a safer method of communication than speaking over the phone, because those using the phone from regime-controlled areas such as Tripoli had to speak in a kind of impromptu code. The platforms that became popularized and normalized in 2020 as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, such as Zoom, were not yet available.

In turn, dissidents at home were often eager to team up with members of the anti-regime diaspora to amplify their long-repressed voices and play a role in resistance. Rahma, who worked with Enough Gaddafi! to speak with foreign media from Tripoli, attested, “I kept changing my SIM card. I was kind of scared. But I wanted to try and do *something*.”

Network ties to persons at home also made the sending of remittances possible. Based in London, Assad, of the organization World Medical Camp for Libya, recalled,

Using our own connections in the country, we started to make contact with people – the hospitals and doctors in the hospitals that we know in areas that were either liberated or where they were fighting for it to be liberated. We distributed through smuggling some satellite phones to each of these hospitals so they can call us with their needs. They also confirmed deliveries. We carried on doing that the whole time.

For some, these contacts solidified into direct, sustained communications with persons on the front lines. Dr. Shalabi of London attested,

Through Skype, a friend got me the details of a doctor in Canada. This doctor got me the details of a friend of his who ran the Misrata port and had satellite internet. I was able to speak to him, but it was very hard to gain people’s trust. When I called him, he was like, “who are you?” I was like, “I got your contact details from this chap in Canada. I’m Ahmed Shalabi, a Libyan doctor working from the UK. I want to help, but I need to know what you guys need. Get me a doctor.” He said, “Okay, give me one hour, I’ll get you a doctor from the hospital where all the injured are being taken and he’ll tell you what they need.” So I got him, an hour later, and this doctor now is a friend for life. It was an honor working with him. He told me, “I need *this, this, this*.”

Diaspora members also relied on their contacts at home to smuggle and deliver the aid they had acquired to hard-to-reach areas. Salam recalled that getting supplies to these areas was dependent on the extraordinary resourcefulness and bravery of smugglers and fighters.

At one point, the World Food Program wanted to go deliver food, but they couldn’t because of protocols. Because we’d been going and coming from Zintan back and forth and we had a great relationship with the fighters there, we decided we would create a post in Zintan and deliver all the food there. Once we got there, we were still worried about how are we going to get this [aid from Zintan] to Yefren. We decided to seek out the Boy Scouts – not the children, the Boy Scouts organization [in Libya].² We purchased, I think it was like seventeen, mules. They carried it to Yefren on mules, because there was no other way to get it in there, the roads were occupied by Gaddafi’s troops.

Taregh of Oxford also reported that his contacts made the movement of volunteers possible, both Libyan and foreign, from Cairo into Benghazi.

² Colonel Gaddafi was a Boy Scout in his youth and allowed the organization to operate in Libya.

He said, “We were connecting people together so people who wanted to go over there to help out would have [other] people that would wait for them and look after them.” Ayat recalled,

There were a lot of journalists who we gave instructions to go to the Egyptian border, and we had our relatives go meet them and bring them in early on. Technically, anybody could’ve driven in, but it was very early and nobody really knew how to assess the situation. So we said, okay, if it makes you feel better, they’ll drive you in.

Taken together, activists’ preexisting cross-border connections and the new-found alliances forged over the course of the revolution enabled them to get information out and resources in. According to Assad of London, this was all made possible through

Contacts. You know that theory, six degrees of separation? In Libya, it’s probably three. If you think about the logistics, they’re almost impossible to do in these circumstances. But because people knew each other, and we could talk to each other, and this person vouch for this person and this person vouch for that person, we managed to create the network that actually functioned.

As Sarah of London recalled, “Everyone tried to use their own contacts and expertise” in some way, often at the request of revolutionary forces themselves, to address needs on the ground.

6.1.2 The Decimation of Syrians’ Network Ties over Time

While Syrians initially had sufficient network ties to undertake the same kinds of interventions as their Libyan counterparts, these critically important relationships were decimated over time by the regime’s systematic targeting of activists in Syria and its depopulation of the country. Lina of Chicago, for instance, recalled that as of 2013, “I stopped doing any of the Skype work anymore [because] a lot of the people I knew are dead or they disappeared. Most of the people I knew in Homs, they all died, one after the other.” Razan from Britain similarly attested that the hemorrhaging of activists from Syria left her without a clear way to contribute to the revolution.

I had a lot of contacts with people on the ground, [working] with them secretly, translating articles for them. They’d be inside Syria or they’d tell me we’re going offline; if anyone asks about us, don’t worry, we’re going to go to such-and-such base. All of this happened the first year of the revolution. Those are probably the best kind of moments of my life, where I actually felt like I was part of the revolution, because I was helping facilitate protests inside wherever it was by being in contact with these people. But then I lost contact with [almost] all of them. They either left Syria or died.

Ibrahim al-Assil in the United States, who continued to work with activists on the ground as of 2014, confirmed that the overall number of available volunteers had been slashed drastically by regime repression.

In Damascus now, it's also very, very difficult to find activists because most of them got killed or detained or they had to flee the country, or they are now very afraid to become involved. Because now if someone is detained in Damascus, most probably they will never be released again and they will die in a detention center. So whether inside or outside Syria, it's now more difficult to find volunteers.

As activists' cross-border contacts were depleted by violence, so too were their abilities to broadcast, broker, and remit aid. In this way, no-holds-barred repression by the Syrian regime has largely succeeded in severing the links forged between insiders and outsiders, and the transnational advocacy networks that made auxiliary activism possible.

The fragmentation of the Syrian opposition on the ground, discussed at length in Chapter 3, also damaged activists' network ties over time. Nidal Bitari, a Palestinian Syrian activist with the Syrian Expatriates Organization, stated that the problem with mobilizing to support the revolution was that "you don't know for whom you are promoting now or advocating." For this reason, Dr. Radwan Ziadeh and Marah Bukai, who had joined the Syrian National Council at its founding in August 2011,³ withdrew from this body in 2012. Explaining her decision, Marah said,

³ The Syrian National Council was formed in August 2011 to represent the revolution from Istanbul. This included those who had been a part of the 2005 Damascus Declaration (see Chapter 2), the Kurdish Future Movement, Muslim Brotherhood members (who held over a quarter of the seats), and members of the Local Coordination Committees. However, the council lacked authority and a grounded presence in Syria and was subject to internal disagreements (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). Several leaders resigned in March 2012 citing corruption, Muslim Brotherhood domination, and a failure to gain international support for the Free Syria Army (FSA). A Kurdish coalition known as the Kurdish National Council (KNC) also departed over differences regarding the Kurds' regional sovereignty. In November 2012, a more sweeping National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed in Doha as a result of international pressure; this body absorbed the original SNC and included more FSA representatives and liberals. Coalition offices, referred to as the *Etifaf* (<https://en.etifaf.org/>, accessed November 27, 2020), were granted as foreign missions under the leadership of Ahmad Jarba. Optimism was short-lived, however, as the coalition suffered from the same problems. Muaz Khatib, the coalition's first president, resigned after only six months in response to a lack of support and meddling by outside states. By May 2013, major groups condemned the coalition and demanded more representation. As described by Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami (2018: 188),

The Coalition, like the SNC before, produced the ugly spectacle of factions and personalities squabbling over the throne of a country which was going up in flames. . . . The ability to put aside personal and factional interests for the sake of a common goal, to adapt, to accommodate the other's point of view, requires a background level of trust in the national community and its institutions, and long experience in democratic collaboration. Syria had been a cast-iron dictatorship for four decades, so these conditions did not apply. Beyond that, the Syrians had no Benghazi in which to base themselves, no field on which to enact transitional authority.

Accordingly, "despite its hard work and diplomatic progress, all the Coalition won on the ground from its participation was the heightened disgust of activists" (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018: 190).

There is no transparency. From where are [the SNC members] getting the money to hold their huge meetings? We've never seen any of their sources. And was this money used to buy arms? And then sent *to whom*? We don't know. *From whom*? We don't know. And I don't want to be part of that. I told the head of Muslim Brotherhood frankly, if we don't know from where you are getting the money . . . I have no interest. You cannot *use* me. Use someone else. [With this] mistrust, corruption, lack of transparency, no accountability, no responsibility – who will trust you? How could United States of America trust you? How could the Syrian *people* trust you?

Dr. Ziadeh also withdrew in November 2012 after being with the council for almost a year because there was “too much in-fighting, too much losing focus.” Sabreen, an activist from Southern California, left her position working for the Syrian Interim Government's Assistance Coordination Unit in Turkey for similar reasons. She explained,

In the unit, there was a lot of corruption going on. People were directing humanitarian aid to some of their hometowns so they would gain credibility in it. And the people who founded this unit – who are some of the most legitimate people I've ever met in my life – a lot of them left because they couldn't handle the corruption. People that stayed are the ones who went on strike basically. So then we went on strike and they decided to bring us a new CEO who turned out to be just as corrupt.

The opaque dealings of various groups representing the anti-regime movement also undermined ties between veteran activists abroad and their allies on the ground. Malik al-Abdeh, co-founder of the Syrian Justice and Development Party and Barada TV in London, withdrew from publicly supporting opposition forces after he uncovered a scandal implicating a member of the Syrian National Council.⁴ Malik said,

⁴ According to Malik,

Around February 2012, one Syrian opposition figure who was big within the Syrian National Council, his brother was murdered in Aleppo in mysterious circumstances. So he went on *Al Jazeera* and said my brother is a martyr, the regime killed him because they couldn't get to me so they killed my brother instead. On the same day, an armed group from Aleppo called the Abu Amara Brigades claimed on their Facebook page that they had killed him because he was a regime spy. Then later that day, they took down this post from their Facebook. So I thought, this is interesting. It's one or the other, it can't be both. So I got one of the journalists at Barada TV to look into the story. Eventually we spoke to the members of the Abu Amara Brigades and they said, yeah, we killed him because we warned him several times, he was with the pro-regime militia, was using his restaurant as a meeting place and he was supporting them . . . I asked them, why did you take it down on the Facebook? Well, he said that what happened was the brother of the guy who was killed was so embarrassed by the fact that his brother was supporting the regime and he's supposedly this opposition guy. There were bribes going down. So I said, are you prepared to go on the record and say this? They're like, yeah, fuck it. We're going to go on the record and expose this. Okay, fine. So I said that this is investigative journalism at its best, right? So to be fair, we need to phone the guy [in the Syrian National Council] to get his story. We called him and spoke to his right-hand man, his personal secretary. The personal secretary went crazy. He said, we're gonna fuck you up. Tell Malik that 'this is like a personal challenge. You mustn't

In my very naïve British kind of upbringing, this is a citable offence! You can't have a politician lying in that way. So I spoke to the head of the whole channel [of Barada TV] and said, look, here's the story. And he's like, *what are we going to gain from exposing this? We've got everything to lose and nothing to gain. The regime is going to love the fact that an opposition leader is lying. We're just going to be seen as causing a shitstorm within the opposition, and we're going to get hassled from that guy. So just drop the story.* I said, alright. But that evening, I went home and I thought, how am I any different than the editor of those government-run state-owned newspapers in Syria? This is self-censorship. This is not what the revolution is about, and if I can't hold those people to account now when they're in opposition, imagine when they're in a position of power! They'll probably send people to kill me in the TV station. I'm living in London and I'm subject to censorship. Where is this revolution going? So that made me say, this is completely messed up, and there's a lot of corruption and incompetence on the part of the opposition. [After that], I decided to take a step back. People called me [for interviews] and I said, I'm not available. I turned down all these requests to go on TV.

As Malik's case illustrates, the questionable – if not outright authoritarian – practices of some opposition leaders and rebel groups led many activists to rescind their support for the official bodies and organizations representing the Syrian revolution in 2012 and beyond.

6.1.3 Yemenis' Shortage of Cross-Border Ties to Arab Spring Participants

In contrast to their Libyan and Syrian counterparts, Yemeni activists in both host-countries reported being plagued from the start by network ties shortages with Yemenis on the ground. Some southern activists did have direct ties to various wings of the southern secessionist movement, as mentioned in Chapter 2. These activists withdrew their support shortly after the onset of the revolution due to concerns about northern co-optation, as explained in Chapter 4. Accordingly, their direct ties were diverted from the revolution effort back to the secessionist cause. Furthermore, while some non-secessionist activists had relatives in the protest encampments, activist leaders with no direct kin living in major urban centers reported feeling separated from revolutionaries on the ground. Besides those Yemeni Americans who were in contact with individuals such as Atiaf and Raja (see Chapter 4), few respondents reported connecting with activists outside of their kinship networks in Yemen. Shaima, one of the most active organizers in Birmingham, recalled that having relatives in rural areas left her disconnected from revolutionary centers.

say this.' He also said that's not his brother, it's just a guy who has the same surname or something. Anyway, just complete bullshit. So I said okay, fine, but those guys are prepared to go on the record and say he was a regime stooge and they killed him. So what's the response? He went crazy. At that point, I realized, this is the big story, this is the big political scandal. Because that means that guy's a liar. He went on *Al Jazeera* and said my brother's a martyr knowing that he wasn't a martyr.

When we were getting reports from Yemen ourselves, from my cousins in the village, you didn't *feel* it. Even though they held an opinion, they didn't feel part of the revolution. They didn't live it because they weren't in the city.

Awssan, an organizer in London, emphasized that without family in Sana'a, he too felt detached and uninformed about the movement in Change Square. While his colleague Ibrahim could "contact his cousin in Sana'a" to get information,

Trying to find out what's happening in Yemen was the most difficult thing. Getting in contact with the right people in Yemen, independents who would give me an idea of what's happening on the streets, it was [difficult].

Disconnection between insiders and outsiders therefore limited activists' abilities to serve as broadcasters and representatives or to channel resources to field hospitals and media centers in the encampments. Ahmed Alramadi, who participated in the Change Square movement and was detained and tortured by regime agents before gaining a visa to come to the United States in May 2011, explained to me that this was due to "a lack of connections. The Yemenis abroad had [few] informants or local links inside," he recalled. Instead, he affirmed that the focus of Yemenis on the outside was on broadcasting, "like protesting in front of the United Nations to get us attention." Because many of the most active organizers in the diaspora did not possess direct ties to activists on the ground, their roles as Arab Spring supporters were more indirect, and even ambiguous.

In light of this chasm, some activists were fearful of *misrepresenting* the revolution. Ahlam in New York, for example, was extremely concerned about people in Yemen "telling us to back off. I just had thoughts about, like, what is my role as somebody who hasn't really lived there? I'm privileged, and [do] I have the right to speak on behalf of these people? It was really bothering me." This self-reflexivity was echoed by activists across the three communities, but Libyans and Syrians were able to assuage this concern by communicating revolutionary demands strictly as instructed by their partners on the ground.⁵ Furthermore, the only method to get aid into the revolutionary encampments was either for Yemenis to wire funds to individuals on the ground, such as their family members or activists like Atiaf, for in-person delivery to the squares. Yet, useful connections in this regard were sparse at best.

⁵ Yemeni regime corruption and sabotage also stood in between diaspora members and the contacts they did have on the ground, which remained a significant obstacle to remitting resources. To illustrate, when Safa and her colleagues in London worked to ship a container of aid to Aden in partnership with a local NGO in 2011 (after the revolution's end), Safa reported that doing so created "a fucking nightmare. In Yemen, they tried every trick to block it, saying that the papers are all wrong. To the last second, this shipment was not going to happen. We had so many people trying to sabotage it." While getting about thirty thousand pounds' worth of aid to Yemen was a "beautiful" thing, Safa described the process as perilous because the diaspora remained dependent on corrupt or incompetent Yemeni bureaucrats to allow the aid in.

6.2 THE CONVERSION OF CAPITAL: FUNGIBLE RESOURCES, MATERIAL AID, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

6.2.1 Libyans' Capital Conversion: Sufficient over Time

Libyans and Syrians alike intervened by tapping the wealth of the anti-regime diaspora, thereby converting cash into funds for rebellion and relief. Given Gaddafi's long-standing expulsion and isolation of the business classes, civil society leaders, and other elites, his repression came home to roost as wealthy individuals funded insurgent action against him. But so too did ordinary Libyans, including students and non-wealthy families forced to leave Libya with very little, make tremendous sacrifices to channel resources to the cause. Among Libyans in the United States and Britain, no respondent reported difficulties in converting fungible resources and acquiring material goods for the Arab Spring from their conationals. Dr. Mahmoud Traina recalled that after getting to Cairo, for instance, he found that Libyans there "had amassed a crazy amount of money – about one million dollars – from different expats," which they used to purchase aid and drive caravan of medicine and food into Benghazi. Another US-based activist recalled,

We had a registered bank account and an EIN number so we could collect money. We collected about twenty thousand dollars' worth of funding and about three hundred thousand dollars' worth of medical equipment. I took these boxes with me over to Malta, and this cash. There was a group of Libyan businessmen. They had these ships and were sending supplies, arms, and stuff like that, over to Misrata. They also had a shortage of milk and medical supplies and diapers, [so] that's what we spent a vast majority of our cash on. It was just kind of, how do you get these needs covered?

Activists also poured their own individual capital into the cause. As a medical doctor working in Cardiff, Niz used his personal finances and social capital to recruit five co-workers to treat injured fighters in Libya.⁶ He explained, "We paid and planned everything down to the last little detail for them to fly from Cardiff to London to Egypt, to be driven into Benghazi, to be driven to Ajdabiya and back to Benghazi where they were staying in a safe house." In another case, an activist from Manchester attended a psychiatry conference in Norway in order to beseech doctors to come to Tunisia and volunteer their services with refugees. Using private donations from fellow Libyans, this individual helped to arrange for nine doctors from Norway to come to Tunisia in June to address the needs of traumatized Libyan women.

⁶ According to Benamer (2012), 707 doctors registered in Britain had obtained a primary medical degree in Libya as of 2012. He cites the number of Libyan doctors in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and Canada as about 1,120 without disaggregating these numbers. These figures do not count those who completed their primary medical degree in USA and Britain or those working toward an MA or PhD in the medical sciences.

TABLE 6.1. *Libyan groups and organizations created for revolution and relief during the 2011 Arab Spring, as reported by respondents*

Diaspora Group/Organization Name	Exclusively an Apolitical Charity?
USA	
Lawyers for Justice in Libya ^a	No
Libya Coordinating Group	No
Libya Outreach	No
Libya Youth Movement ^a	No
Libyan American Association of Ohio	No
Libyan Council of North America	No
Libyan Emergency Task Force	No
Libyan Humanitarian Action	No
New Libya Foundation	No
Britain	
Lawyers for Justice in Libya ^a	No
Libya Link ^a	No
Libya Youth Movement ^a	No
Libyan British Relations Council	No
World Medical Camp for Libya	No
Other	
Libya AlAhrar ^a (Qatar-based)	No
Libya AlHurra ^a (Tunisia-based)	No

^a Denotes multinational membership.

In addition to remitting directly, diaspora activists also channeled resources into the formation of new organizations staffed to support lobbying and relief efforts. These groups are listed in Table 6.1.

Because the revolution was relatively short-lived – lasting from February 2011 until Gaddafi's capture and execution in October – respondents reported that they were able to donate their time and resources to sustain a new set of pro-revolution diaspora organizations. Furthermore, those who traveled to Doha to work on the revolution satellite station had their hotel expenses paid either by funds supporting the National Transitional Council (NTC) or by wealthy Libyan donors. To that end, the creation of new organizations with low-to-no operating costs by the rank and file enabled activists to channel additional donations directly to the rebellion itself.

Libyans' full-spectrum role in the revolution was further bolstered by their social capital, including skills and experience in the areas of media, law, business, medicine, technology, politics, and civil society. Because knowledge and skills in these areas were needed to buttress a revolution that "needed everything," activists reported that their expertise came to be converted to the revolution in different ways. For instance, Fadel, a Libyan American who had worked for the US State Department in the past, was contacted by NTC

Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil to help them in lobbying the Obama administration for assistance. Fadel recalled that as an ad hoc advisor to the NTC, he helped them to formulate an argument for intervention based on the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. Having worked previously in the NGO world of Washington, DC, he recounted,

I have a lot of American friends who were involved in the Responsibility to Protect. I said we have to use this, and I sent it to them [the NTC] in English in an email – I still have this email – and they said, can you send this to us in Arabic? They couldn't read it because in the '80s, Gaddafi banned English. So I sent it to them [in Arabic] and said this is what we're going to do. It has never been used before, but we know Gaddafi is going to [retaliate] at that level. So that was the first advice, in terms of how we can go about getting the support of the international community and the framework we can use.

Fadel, among other respondents, continued to advise the NTC informally as a member of “their supporting cast” throughout the revolution.

In another example, Dina converted her skills in communications to assist in brokerage with dissidents and CNN. She recalled,

I ended up getting contacted by a producer from Anderson Cooper. I'm sitting here aspiring to get a job in the media; my master's is in communications. So I'm getting firsthand experience in something I really wanted to do and hopefully really contributing to a cause at the same time! I had all these media contacts that just converged. People that I hadn't heard from in years were like, “Hi Dina, so I'm working on getting some contacts for Libya and was hoping [you could help].” It's just because, you know, there's not very many Libyans. From that day, I was literally the on-call consultant for *Anderson Cooper 360°*, really working closely with the entire editorial production team to figure out what we're doing for the show for the night, five days a week.

Activists also used their social capital to address the traumas of sexual violence among Libyan refugee women. They did so by mobilizing to change the norms surrounding the social stigmatization and shaming of assault victims. Salam, for example, said,

We tried very hard to raise awareness in Libya about rape. We produced these [recordings], one in the Amazigh language, one in a Tripoli accent, one in a Benghazi accent, where boys, young men, would speak, explaining to people that, listen, these are victims. They didn't do anything wrong. You shouldn't be ashamed of them. We wanted to get the message out that, one, these people need help, and for a long time. It's not like, oh, your physical wounds are healed, you're fine. I don't think that Libyans understand culturally that the psychological effects of rape are sometimes lifelong. And we kind of wanted to stress that. I know that Libyan expats, especially the female Libyans in America, were just adamant on this.

Diaspora members also came to represent the revolution itself by joining the NTC to fill in gaps in leaders' professional expertise. After working with CNN, Dina of Southern California came to be recruited by the NTC as an advisor and assistant due to her professional expertise in communications. After working for Mahmoud Shamman at the AlAhrar satellite station, he introduced her to

the Interim Prime Minister of Libya, Mahmoud Jibril. “I ended up managing all of his press,” she recalled, and she traveled during the revolution back and forth from Doha to Libya to assist the prime minister directly.

Others remitted their much-needed expertise in medicine to the conflict. Dr. Ahmed Shalabi in London, for example, was relied upon by donors and his colleagues in the newly formed World Medical Camp for Libya to determine exactly what types of aid should be purchased and sent to the front lines.

They needed a doctor’s touch, and that’s when I really came in. People were already flying to Egypt to get stuff into Libya. They were asking me for a list of things, saying I have this amount of money, tell me what I need to buy. I told them what I thought we should buy, one, two, three, four, five. I [also] started trying to get meetings with other doctors, Skyping my doctor friends here in the UK with a variety of specialties and asking them, okay, bone injuries, what do I need? Anesthetics, what do I need? That’s the first-ever list I formed.

Dr. Traina of Southern California also emphasized that activists relied on doctors to determine what supplies to purchase because “some requests were for things that they had been living without for twenty years and other things were more medically urgent. You’d have to sort through these lists and see what was most urgently needed. That was mostly my role.”

Activists additionally lent legal expertise to the revolution. M. in the United States and Mohammad in London, for example, joined a transnational network of Libyan lawyers to assist in the documentation of the revolution and to help build a case in the International Criminal Court against the regime. She said,

I got on this call [with] these Libyan lawyers, all fairly young, I would say forty years old and under, all living abroad. They were trying to handle all of the different requests that they were getting in, because the foreign governments in whatever country they lived in were looking for some consultations. At the same time, there were things going on in the ground that needed to be addressed as far as collecting evidence, fact-finding, investigating, so I started working on that as well. I was a law student, but it was really interesting because we basically were helping set up investigative committees in Libya to collect evidence.

As the war progressed, activists also lent their strategic and logistical know-how to the revolutionary forces who were largely comprised of inexperienced or civilian volunteers. Abdo G. from Manchester attested,

We set up something called Libya Link. We founded this as a way to provide expertise in international law, humanitarian law, as well as our own strategic tactical type skills. So if you had the skill, the strategy, you could pool your opinions or even get involved in logistics to save a life, and maybe win a battle. Objective number two was to help empower the youth, and there were two types. One was the youth who were playing their parts in the operation centers on the front lines. We were providing support to train them up, give them strategies and tactics, logistical type stuff, as well as [for] the youth who were working on the humanitarian side.

When I asked Abdo how he was able to advise a nascent army using a professional background in business strategy, he replied,

Our background was not primarily military, but we all had to do what we had to do. So if we had to develop military expertise, we developed military expertise! A lot of it was actually the experience from the business world. Strategy is strategy at the end of the day. If you're from the business world or commercial space, you're being competitive and we took some of those ideas and strategies to the opposition space. Scenarios were done using various game theories. For training, we looked at the needs and developed on that. We had access to skills in those respects, and we had ideas about what can be done.

In addition to applying their social capital to the revolution directly, activists also expanded upon their existing skill sets to convert their professional expertise into activism. For example, Dr. Shalabi described that his role was not only that of a medical consultant for the London-based charity World Medical Camp for Libya, but that he also became a buyer and supplier of aid. He described how, after receiving a list of needed medical supplies to send to Libya, he was left with the question:

How do I get them? So I started Googling pharmaceutical companies in the UK, equipment companies, I went to my local pharmacist in the hospital asking him about costs. I needed to know everything! I started getting lists of companies and calling them about antibiotics, external fixators, [asking] which ones are the cheapest? I managed to find a company that sold used medical equipment, contacted them, and I got great prices from them, it was like a godsend. The next problem was, how do I get them to Malta? We have to find air shipping! One of the other guys in the charity managed to get a Libyan friend who coordinated with this freight company, they stored everything we got for free, and they managed to get all of the stuff air-freighted all the way to Malta. We had to make sure that everything was in place, that all the boxes were ready. It was nonstop. At the time, I was a foundation year-one doctor, someone who just recently graduated, [and] I was given the full responsibility of getting the lists, making the purchases, talking to the companies.

Like Dina and Dr. Shalabi, many other respondents found themselves promoted beyond their years in their roles as revolution supporters.

Many diaspora members traveled to the front lines to convert their capital to the effort. Abdallah Omeish, a Libyan American filmmaker from Los Angeles, snuck into Benghazi during the first week of the revolution to film a documentary on the resistance. He focused on telling the story of Mohammed Nabbous, a revolutionary activist in Benghazi who became a hero for broadcasting a livestreamed video of the city on the web before he was killed.⁷ Others lent their medical expertise to the injured. Dr. Traina, for example, volunteered to transport aid and lend his skills in Benghazi.

We were getting reports of people getting killed and the hospitals being short-staffed, [and about] a lack of medicine and supplies, and I started talking with some of my

⁷ See *Libya 2011: Through the Fire* (Omeish 2011).

childhood friends [about this]. [One of them] called me and said we need to help, we're trying to get some medical supplies in. [Around] the twenty-second, I went to Cairo. While in contact with hospitals in Libya, we immediately went about arranging a caravan of medicine and food. We went to Benghazi so we drove through the border. People from all over were coming [to Cairo], it was a diverse group. By the twenty-seventh, we had a shipment put together of four trucks of medicine and another three or four trucks of food items and drove them into Libya. Then I went to help in one of the hospitals in Benghazi and they were pretty overwhelmed. The hospitals were not equipped to handle the amount of major trauma that they had to deal with.

M., who was in her second year of law school when the revolution began, also recalled an opportunity to serve on the revolution's transnational, diaspora-driven legal team even though she had not yet obtained her law degree.

I attended a training there at the ICC, which was really interesting because it was only for lawyers with ten years' experience. Ten years ago, I was in fifth grade, you know! So after I completed that training, I then went to London to meet up with some of the lawyers I was working with, but only really on the internet. There was one in London, one in Paris, one in Spain, one in Dubai, some in Libya. In London, we had a series of consultations with [Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office] Alistair Burt [to] discuss with him the issues that were going on, and we'd phone in someone on the ground in Libya to explain more, or what the UK could do to support them. So we did a lot of that that summer – ICC cases, investigating, but also advocating in general. My colleague who was with me went to the UN to advocate there, we had a lot of things going on at that time. We created guidelines for pro-revolution fighters once the armed conflict began on how they could comply with international rules of engagement without violating any sort of human rights. We did so at the request of the National Transitional Council. Basically we boiled them down to little flip cards that they could carry with them, laminated little cards, which was a flow chart of if you're in this situation, what do you do, what don't you do. So we were engaging at all different levels on the legal front.

In all, by pushing many of Libya's most well-to-do and highly educated out of the country in search of freedom and opportunities, the regime produced a highly skilled and well-resourced diaspora primed to mobilize against the regime under the right conditions. As M. remarked,

Those abroad ended up becoming very educated, very well-connected in their societies, and they were able to influence from the outside. That was something that Gaddafi did to himself, because he did forcefully exile those people. Everyone used their kind of expertise and their skills to contribute in any way they could. A lot of influential Libyans were consulting other governments, and were well-connected enough to raise a lot of funds for aid. Not a single thing was left undone, I think, by Libyans abroad.

6.2.2 Syrians' Capital Conversion: From Sufficient to Insufficient

The exact figures remain unknown, but there is no doubt that Syrians abroad have remitted tens of millions of dollars to Arab Spring organizations and charities over the course of the rebellion and war (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015).

The fundraisers I attended during my ethnographic observations of the well-to-do Southern California community, for instance, raised tens of thousands of dollars for SAC and humanitarian aid from a single event. Leaders also used their resources to establish a number of new organizations dedicated to rebellion and relief, listed in Table 6.2.

TABLE 6.2. *Syrian groups and organizations created for the revolution and relief during the Arab Spring (2011–14), as reported by respondents*

Diaspora Group/Organization Name	Exclusively a Charity/Service Org?
USA	
American Relief Coalition for Syria	Yes
American Rescue Fund	Yes
Coalition for a Democratic Syria	No
FREE-Syria	No
Karam Foundation	Yes
Maram Foundation	Yes
Southern California Coordinating Committee	No
Syria Relief and Development	Yes
Syrian Support Group	No
Syrian American Engineers Association	Yes
Syrian American Humanitarian Network	Yes
Syrian Christians for Democracy/Peace ^a	No
Syrian Emergency Task Force	No
Syrian Expatriates Organization	Yes
Syria Justice and Accountability Centre ^a	No
Syrian Institute for Progress	No
Syrian Sunrise Foundation	Yes
Texans for Free Syria	No
United for a Free Syria	No
Britain	
Bristol Justice for Syria	No
British Solidarity for Syria	No
Global Solidarity Movement for Syria	No
Hand in Hand for Syria	Yes
Help for Syria	Yes
Human Care Syria	Yes
Rethink Rebuild Society	No
Syria Relief	Yes
Syrian Christians for Democracy/Peace ^a	No
Syrian Legal Development Programme	No
Syrian Parliamentary Affairs Group	No

^a Denotes multinational membership.

The sufficiency of Syrians' resources is not surprising given their relatively high degree of wealth and educational attainment in comparison to other immigrant groups. Syrians' socioeconomic and educational mobility have been high in the United States due in part to the fact that their origins were middle-class to begin with, as well as the fact that many came abroad specifically to obtain advanced degrees and white-collar work. Of course, not all Syrian activists were wealthy. However, their community-level wealth was initially sufficient to fund the pro-Arab Spring effort in different ways. In the United States, for instance, the median annual wage for Syrian immigrants was reported as \$52,000 in 2014, compared to the \$36,000 median wage for all immigrants and \$45,000 for US-born workers (Dyssegaard Kallick et al. 2016). In the same year, 27 percent of Syrian immigrant men held an advanced degree of some sort; 11 percent were business owners compared to 4 percent of immigrants and 3 percent of US-born persons; Syrian business owners additionally earned an average of \$72,000 per year (Dyssegaard Kallick et al. 2016). Researchers also report that Syrian immigrants have relatively elevated levels of English-language abilities, home ownership, and naturalization compared to all immigrants and the US-born (Dyssegaard Kallick et al. 2016).

Correspondingly, Syrian activists reported converting their social capital to the anti-regime effort. As mentioned in Chapter 5, engineers like Khaled worked to lend their expertise and skills by partnering with Syrians at home to rebuild infrastructure destroyed by the regime and its backers. Lobbyists like Mouaz Moustafa, with years of experience working as a congressional aide in Washington, DC, and then as a member of the Libyan Emergency Task Force, went on to form the formidable Syrian Emergency Task Force to lobby for sanctions against the regime. Law students like Y. lent her legal expertise to the cause, arguing that the Responsibility to Protect doctrine should be applied in the Syrian case, and not just the Libyan one. Youth activists like Razan and Alaa, mentioned in Chapter 4, used their tech savviness to communicate with activists on the ground to coordinate and publicize protests. Doctors like Fadel and Ayman lent their labor by working with groups like the Syrian American and Syrian British medical societies to perform life-saving surgeries inside liberated zones and refugee camps. Syrian Americans like Hussam, with years of experience as a civil rights activist for Arab and Muslim minorities, transferred his organizing and fundraising expertise to the Syrian American Council. I watched in awe firsthand as he helped to raise tens of thousands of dollars for the Syrian American Council in community meetings held in hotel ballrooms in Anaheim, California. In all, a well-educated and highly professionalized activist community offered an immense degree of intangible support to the revolution and relief efforts.

However, as the need for aid increased over time with Syria's growing humanitarian emergency, these organizers' main donor base in the

anti-regime diaspora came to be tapped dry. Dr. Ziadeh in DC attested that the millions of Syrians who had been displaced and rendered unemployed over the course of the war came to be wholly reliant on the support of their family members in the diaspora, which diverted aid from the political to the personal.

When we talk about four million refugees in neighboring countries and nine million displaced, everyone has his family affected. My mother crossed the border into Turkey⁸ along with my sister. I have another brother in Jordan and a sister in Lebanon. I'm responsible for [them]. No one can afford that for two or three years, no matter the income you have. This is why the Syrian communities here [now] focus much more on their immediate families.

This is not to say that members of the diaspora ceased to donate to charitable organizations or to volunteer altogether. But at the same time, the anti-regime community could no longer be relied upon by organizers to write enough checks to supply the donations needed to meet the ever-expanding needs of millions of Syrians. As Nebal of London explained, "What's the point of asking someone, some Syrian, to donate money when you know he himself has to provide food for three, four, five families already?"

Organizers also reported that protest participation had waned significantly by 2014 for all events except commemorative activities in large part because of financial difficulties. Haytham in Manchester explained that they amassed funds to pay for protesters to travel to London for "six, seven months until we were exhausted financially, because every coach costs one thousand pounds." Nebal, an organizer with the group British Solidarity for Syria, attested that participants came to feel that their time and resources would be of better use elsewhere.

At the very beginning, it was easy to go every Saturday to demonstrate. Nowadays, many in the community would say, what's the point of spending two hours every Saturday protesting? – it would be better for me to work and make some money to send to Syria instead. And I totally agree with that. But as a symbol, it's [important to have] big marches to mark the anniversary of the revolution, to mark the big massacres.

Overall, fungible resource conversion declined as the revolution became prolonged and created an extreme humanitarian crisis.

The conversion of Syrians' social capital to the revolution was also compromised due to their dependence on insiders willing to receive and use this resource in local contexts. Many activists found that they had no one, and nowhere, to channel their skills *to* once their allies were killed, captured, or displaced, as discussed above. As their abilities to convert social capital

⁸ For detailed information about Syrian refugees in Turkey and across Europe, see Carlson and Williams (2020).

consistently declined over time, this deprived Syrians of the “brain gain” (Kapur 2010) needed to supplement the underequipped resistance.

6.2.3 From Resource Shortages to Professionalization

A decline in fungible resource conversion among anti-regime Syrians in the United States and Britain caused many informal groups to die off after volunteers and donors became exhausted. I found that organizations without the financial backing of a board or wealthy donors to pay for one or two full-time staff by 2014 had since closed or become comatose. At the same time, organizers responded strategically to these hurdles by channeling remaining resources into the formation of formal, professionalized organizations that specialized in addressing a specific dimension of the rebellion or relief effort. This professionalization enabled some activists to withstand unfavorable conditions by switching from a self- or community-sustained emergency response to long-term advocacy focused on a particular area of need. The legal accreditation that came with formalization also enabled activists to solicit funding from sources outside of the Syrian diaspora, such as by NGOs, which counteracted resource depletion and fears that informal remittances would become associated with support for terrorism (see Chapter 7).

At the same time, formalization imposed regulations and constraints on activists’ work, which limited their abilities to adapt creatively and spontaneously⁹ to needs on the ground. Respondents attested that the formalization process required donors to divert some portion of their contributions to the maintenance of diaspora organizations themselves. Haytham, director of Manchester’s Rethink Rebuild Society, described how his organization’s survival depended on the commitment of wealthy private donors to pay for staff salaries.

From January 2012, we had an office for our British Syrian Community of Manchester. At that time, I was doing my PhD. I opened this office daily for three hours in the evening time and it stayed like that for one year. At that time, the money came job by job. Let’s say that, okay, we need the coach to London [to hold a protest], we need one thousand pounds. After I finished my PhD, I told them, look, I have to find a job or continue with you for any amount of money just to live on. [The donors] said we need you, so stay with us. Two years ago, we started to make it more systematic. So now people are paying, let’s say, a regular payment of twenty pounds a month, and we have some businessman paying more to cover the cost of the office, employees, some activities. Now we are five people after a long journey. We moved here to this proper office one year ago.

⁹ On creativity in the Arab Spring, see Bamyeh (2014); on the importance of spontaneity in social movements, see Snow and Moss (2014).



FIGURE 6.1. The Rethink Rebuild Society advertises its mission to the diaspora community during a Syria Day celebration in Manchester, England, in 2013. The last line states, “We believe that our work with the Syrian diaspora will strengthen the determination to rebuild Syria, in spite of its destruction through war and conflict.” (Photo credit: Dana M. Moss)

Mouaz Moustafa, the full-time executive director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force in Washington, DC, also explained that his political advocacy work is funded by his organization’s board.

The boards of my organizations are all Syrian and they donate for the salaries and the office space and so on for the team that we’ve got. That’s why we’ve lasted a really long time, four years of doing this regularly and it’s a lot of money, even though compared to other organizations and lobbies it’s little money. But for them to sustain that for a very long time is admirable.

In contrast to the formation of these DC-based lobbying organizations, I did not find any interest group organizations in London dedicated full-time to

lobbying or political advocacy as of 2014. While official statistics on their community wealth is lacking, this suggests that the smaller community in Britain, which is also made up of more recent immigrants, lacks the wealth of their counterparts in the United States. Though respondents reported some ad hoc volunteer-based lobbying efforts, including by a handful of volunteers comprising the Syrian Parliamentary Affairs Group and Syrian Christians for Democracy, most interviewees lamented the weakness of the British Syrian community's lobbying efforts. The Parliamentary Affairs Group, for example, was only formed *after* the failure of the British government to launch strikes in retaliation to the regime's chemical weapons attacks of August 2013. This group was also comprised largely of Syrian doctors who volunteered on a part-time basis.

Other informal organizations that had previously engaged in advocacy, such as the British Solidarity for Syria, were inactive by 2014. Nebal, a former coordinator of this group, explained, "To be honest, we've got no resources." Mazen E. of London agreed, describing in a separate interview, "We have some small groups, lobbying groups or parliamentary groups. They're not professional by any means. These things need a lot of financial support and professional support. Unfortunately, we haven't got it." Syrian American professional groups, on the other hand, continued to represent and broker with a range of officials across governmental institutions and think tanks. While these groups were unable to change the Obama administration's policy on Syria outright, as the next chapter explains, they continued to work with allies in the US government to provide information to and consult with policymakers. Some, like Mouaz, continue their work years later, including at the time of this writing.

Another benefit of movement formalization was that the specialization of the pro-revolution diaspora's work enabled them to address needs in a way that used limited resources efficiently. M. of the nonprofit organization Help for Syria in London recalled,

To start with, we were not professional. Everybody – one a doctor, one a teacher, one a businessman – all wanted to help, and in the beginning, *everybody* was doing *everything*. We were going out demonstrating in front of the embassy, we were trying to go to the parliament in here, we were communicating with the newspapers, with the news, with the TV, networking, doing humanitarian work. Then we started realizing you have to specialize in something. It's wrong to do everything. Leave the doctors to do the medical field. Leave the psychiatrists to do [mental health] support. Even if you're going to do humanitarian, specialize either in nutrition or homes or clothes or children or women. That's why I withdrew from where I used to work in Turkey and Lebanon and Jordan. I am from the city of Suwayda. It's inside Syria and is very difficult to get to, it's in a city still under government control. There are a lot of displaced families in there, really in need. They cannot go to the Red Cross under their names because of their relations, their husbands and kids who are fighting. So that's where I concentrate my work, in an area where I can be more effective.

Lina of the Karam Foundation, based in Chicago, also realized after a time that doing both political and humanitarian work was unsustainable. Referring to

her experience and that of her fellow activists in SAC, she remarked, “We were so tired [because] we were so focused on the next emergency. We [decided that we] have to change our lifestyles because this thing is going to go on for a very long time.” For this reason, Lina came to prioritize the humanitarian work of the Karam Foundation and to focus on food deliveries and education, leaving medical aid to fellow organizations like the Syrian American Medical Society. Ibrahim al-Assil additionally recalled, “There is a huge need inside Syria. But at the same time, if we decide to do too many things, we will end up doing nothing.” Accordingly, once carried out solely through informal networks, aid work came to be conducted through formal Syrian-led organizations.

Relief-oriented activism was critical in reaching populations within Syria who were blocked by the regime from receiving aid from international organizations. Omar, an activist from Houston, described how his brother Yakzan, founder of the Maram Foundation, was compelled to formalize his efforts.

[My brother] was going inside Syria to the liberated areas along the border and then saw that there were a few hundred people in need. So we raised some funds [for] tents and things like that. The problem about this camp is that it’s not a regular refugee camp . . . The United Nations can’t give aid to those people. Red Cross cannot give aid to those people. At the beginning, we were tapping the local community here in Houston and a few people that we know to raise funds and to help those people. And then the numbers [of internally displaced persons] increased dramatically. We went everywhere trying to get funds for them. If you’re not an organization, then you can’t, [you don’t qualify for aid]. So then we established Maram Foundation to be able to raise funds to aid those people.¹⁰

Likewise, M. from Suwayda argued that the best use of his limited resources was to fill in the gaps of the relief efforts among the internally displaced and most needy inside Syria.

I decided that I’m going to do some things mainly [for] the children with special needs. Children being traumatized and badly affected by witnessing torture, rape, killing, things like that, together with the women and their families who have special needs as well. I set up a center in the city [where] we’ve done psychodrama, psychotherapy. We managed to enroll about seven or eight thousand children from the families who came to the city in the normal school in Suwayda. Any funds I get, I get whoever donated to transfer it directly to the people, and we don’t have any expenses because we are all volunteers. If they can’t get it to Syria, I’ll send it to Lebanon, and from Lebanon, they send it to Syria.

While funding from larger organizations enabled Syrian diaspora movements to survive and conduct life-saving work, this adaptation also brought its own sets of challenges. Reflecting upon his experience trying to fund the Syrian Nonviolence Movement, Ibrahim explained that one problem with relying on international NGO funding is that these organizations often dictated the work of the diaspora from on high.

¹⁰ See also Malek (2013) for media reporting on Yakzan’s activism.

To become full-time, [Syrian organizations] need a source of money and to be employed. Some of them, they got funds for that from NGOs, or they were employed [directly by] other NGOs. That has pros and cons. That means they're more professional, they have access to more money. But at the same time, they have less freedom to choose what they want to do. Because when you are part of an international NGO, they plan for you already what you can do. There are actually some NGOs who are ready to fund Syrian groups and give them kind of freedom and space where they can decide what they want to do. But also some of them, they have a clear or certain agenda and they say this is our goal and this is the kind of project we want you to do, [or] we don't support you.

Ibrahim also recalled that these organizations tended to sponsor projects with delimited start and end dates, rather than promoting long-term projects or empowering the growth of Syrian organizations themselves.

That said, some diaspora organizations have been able to harness funding from larger NGOs and major private donors to supplement their broader goals. Dr. Jundi of Syria Relief in Manchester explained,

[These organizations] have been raising lots of money in the name of Syria, but in reality, they haven't been able to use it because they either cannot take it into Syria or they opted to use it in the [easier] environment of refugee camps. Yes, there is a need there, but nowhere near as much as the need inside. So we have developed a very good working relationship with a number of major NGOs. We've managed to put proposals together that they would fund and cover part of our administrative cost. They couldn't deliver it, so *we* can deliver it, acting as their agent, and they'd get all the documentation that they need [from us]. That's been an important part of our success, because although a lot of our fundraising relies on the five, ten, twenty pounds that people give, the big bucks come from either big NGOs or charitable organizations that want to do something for Syria but cannot, or want to do something but are reluctant to be seen openly doing it. There are also a number of industrialists or businessmen of Syrian origin working in the UK, made their fortunes in the UK, and they want to give something back. Some of them actually cooperate with us in support of our programs. So that means we don't have to worry about these programs – we can focus on stuff they're not interested in, like food supplies and that kind of mundane thing that isn't visible.

At the same time, Syria Relief was not in any way allowed to be “political,” to discuss or affiliate with the revolution, or even use the opposition's flag or logo. This created a delicate situation for the organization. Dr. Jundi said that in one case,

We had somebody who, on his website, was openly selling items [with the revolution flag on them] and donating 20 percent of the money he raised to Syria Relief. We got reprimanded by the Charity Commission for it, even though we had nothing to do with it. We didn't ask for it, we didn't know that he was doing it – just because we were mentioned in the same sentence as revolutionary items, that was a no-no. So we have to be absolutely squeaky clean when it comes to abiding by the regulations.

Lina of the Karam Foundation lamented that despite the importance of fundraising, their efforts were woefully inadequate in addressing the needs of millions.

The problem is the work that we have to do is not the work of organizations – it’s really the work of *nations*. Because no matter what we do, it’s never enough. We can’t give out enough food, we can’t set up enough schools. The Syrian American Medical Society can’t help every single person that’s injured.

L., who had worked within Syria to deliver aid and fight with the Free Syrian Army for a time, noted that the formalization of aid transfers from the diaspora was problematic for both practical and moral reasons. He lamented,

When I gave out cash to families in need in Syria, to widows and orphans, [Syrians in the United States] told me it’s illegal for me to give out cash to civilians. That I need *receipts*. I’m like, are you *kidding* me? You *have* to break rules. That’s how you get results. You can never even *have* a revolution if you follow the rules! *The whole revolution is illegal!* It makes no sense.

As the poor response of states and international institutions to the Syrian crisis increased the need for diaspora intervention, activists shifted into full-time professionalized advocacy, thereby establishing a sustainable transnational advocacy field. While formalization had its limitations, this was the only option for movements facing an expanding humanitarian emergency and a losing war at home. That said, even as diaspora activists in the United States and Britain performed a number of critical roles in the cause through capital conversion, they nevertheless perceived their efforts as insufficient to meet needs on the ground.

6.2.4 Yemeni Challenges to Converting Material and Fungible Aid to the Revolution

Yemenis faced a different situation. In order to keep the pro-revolution protest movement legitimate in a diaspora plagued by conflict transmission (see Chapter 4), organizers deliberately did not establish formal organizations out of concern that participants would accuse them of co-opting, or speaking over, revolutionaries in Yemen. Mahmoud of Sheffield said that Yemenis had not “moved” to that extent in their history and that mobilizing the community became a big job. However, they “tried to make it less formal in order to keep everybody involved and not to create political fractures or fights for representation.” They were also “cautious about finances, because we were independent. We asked people to pay for themselves and we collected donations from people to pay [for others]” to go to London for demonstrations. Financial sponsorship of the pro-revolution movement came to be associated with co-optation, and for this reason, organizers relied on individuals to fund their participation and kept their initiatives informal. The activist groups they formed are listed in Table 6.3.

Keeping their claims vague and their movements informal was tricky for organizers, however, for several reasons. Ahlam, a Yemeni activist youth with

TABLE 6.3. *Yemeni groups and organizations created for revolution and relief during the 2011 Arab Spring, as reported by respondents*

Diaspora Group/Organization Name	Exclusively a Charity/Service Org?
USA	
Popular Support Committee to the Youth Revolution in Yemen	No
Yemeni American Coalition for Change	No
Yemeni Youth Abroad for Change	No
Yemeni Youth for Change in California	No
Britain	
Change Point Liverpool	No
Independent Yemen Group	No
Liverpool Yemeni Youth Movement	No
Yemen Revolution Support Group	No
Yemeni British Coalition to Support the Yemeni Revolution	No

prior experience organizing for other minority rights campaigns in the United States, exclaimed,

It was a whole new ballgame because I realized I wasn't working within an *organization*. I haven't had any experience working with loosely affiliated groups, so I wasn't quite sure how the democratic process was working. People were like, don't tell so-and-so about this meeting! It's like, what is going on here? [laughs] But *it mirrored what was going on in Yemen*, all of the fractured things that were happening and how people were losing sight of the larger picture. How do you keep their morale up, and keep things really organized and clear, and not leave people out? Because people were coming from different places, and get really offended by little things. It's hard to deal with it when this isn't people's full-time job and coming to the table with a variety of skills. Really, *we should have just had one person manage that full-time*, but it was just different people.

Many respondents additionally attested that strategies to maintain the integrity of the diaspora movement by keeping it informal exacerbated the literal costs of movement participation. This was due to the fact that a significant proportion of the Yemeni diaspora community in the United States and Britain was working class to begin with. New York-based organizers also reported difficulties in sustaining protests because many of their supporters worked day and night running small businesses like bodegas and were preoccupied with child care. Morooj likewise attested that their Washington, DC-based movement lacked the resources to continue bringing attention to the Yemeni crisis in an effective way.

There was this sense of urgency, and that always is problematic because how do you build something that's long-term while still addressing the urgency of the situation? Does

[protest] really create change? It creates awareness, yes, to some degree. But ongoing protests, not really. You have to shift your energy towards something else. I was like, visibility is important. What else can we do instead? We tried to get more creative. [Tactics such as] flash mobs or messaging around the city, like wheat-pasting posters about Yemen. I could have taken it upon myself, but *it also takes resources and bodies to do that*.

Mahmoud, a Sheffield-based organizer, described that relying on self-funded volunteers and private donations to keep their movement independent and credible made it difficult to keep protest events going.

Honestly speaking, it was a high cost because the mobilization of people across cities exhausted us financially as well. With all of this, we do our normal jobs [at the same time]. The level of pressure that was on me was just crazy. Safa [in London], she was going mad because she is doing her full-time job and she put a lot of commitment into these activities.

Though some organizers sustained protests into the fall, others – such as in the Liverpool community – reported that their local movements were “well and truly dead” by the summer. Morooj of Washington, DC, echoed this, explaining,

[Protesting] was a weekly thing for a very long time. And then it just started trickling down. Not so many folks were coming down anymore, [feeling like it] doesn't make a difference. I would say [that the movement died] maybe towards the end of September. And it was just kind of like, what should we do? Should we gather? That's when it kind of died out. People were working, have families. They can't just dedicate six hours a day.

As a result of these resource shortages, organizers overwhelmingly reported feeling frustrated over their limited role and weak sense of efficacy. Adel of Dearborn cited that their Popular Support Committee to the Youth Revolution in Yemen was formed as “a reaction to what's going on back home. So if there is something major, then somebody will do something about it. And if there is not, it would just stay quiet.” Amel of New York also lamented that their ad hoc mobilization efforts had “no long-term strategizing, there's no long-term planning. You do last-minute protests. I feel that that works for the short term, but I don't feel that's effective in the long term.” Hanna echoed this sentiment, lamenting that for both the pro-secession and pro-revolution protests, “I've always felt our efforts were reactionary and we lose momentum after a rally or protest was over.” Without a sustainable organizational field, as in the Syrian case, Yemeni activists often felt left on the “backfoot,” as Omar in Liverpool attested.

As explained in Chapter 4, Yemenis' collective tactics focused on broadcasting and representing the revolution. To this end, many were able to convert their social capital to the mobilization effort. Safa, who had previously worked in public relations, issued press releases to the media about protest events in London. Awssan, with experience networking with Yemenis across Britain for

the Yemen Forum Foundation, converted these skills during the Arab Spring into organizing protests. Ibrahim Al Qataby, with years of experience under his belt mobilizing for human rights in the nonprofit sector in New York, transferred his skills in framing, internal organization, and communicating with the media to bring attention to protest events. That said, organizers attested that they carried a disproportionate burden when rallying inexperienced compatriots to the movement. Ibrahim, for instance, explained the problem with relying on volunteer labor and amateur activists during the revolution. At that time, he said,

We had lots of challenges. Our community was not very much involved in any political or human rights advocacy in the US. They were political in the sense where they understand what's going on, but they never took it to the streets in a form of organized advocacy. They read news, and specifically Yemeni news, but they never organized themselves into lobbyist groups Especially when a lot of them work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, when is the appropriate time for them to come out? And a lot of community [members] hardly understand how to use the media and the political system, how to navigate it. That was another challenge. When I first started doing this with my colleagues, almost everyone did not know how to get a police permit. Basics [like] how to phrase slogans, signs, how to frame [their messages]. And the few who know how to do it were completely swamped with a lot of extra burden. A number of us were overwhelmed. You're starting from scratch trying to guide people how to do advocacy, show them A to Z.

Accordingly, diaspora movements in the United States and Britain only possessed some of the social capital needed to organize and sustain community-wide mobilization. This dynamic was later echoed in a 2019 report from the Brookings Doha Center, which argues that although Yemenis abroad serve as a valuable resource for their war-torn homeland, “the poor mobilization and coordination among these Yemeni professionals is a major challenge” (Aboueldahab 2019: 1).

Another difference between Yemenis' group-level experiences and those of the Libyans and Syrians was the fact that little of their social capital seemed to reach the protest encampments in Yemen itself. According to respondents, this was due not only to their sparse network ties but also because the advice from the diaspora was not always needed or welcome. As Atiaf, a Yemeni American who participated in the uprisings in Sana'a, lamented, “Yemeni Americans would get into details about where people should march. I would say, leave it up to the people *in Yemen* to decide where to march!” The relational disconnection between insiders and outsiders plagued efforts among activists abroad to help their allies in concrete ways over the course of the revolution.

6.3 CONCLUSION

Diaspora movements that converted network ties and capital to rebellion and relief became transnational players in the Arab Spring in different ways.

Cross-border network ties with allies became crucial for broadcasting, representing, brokering, remitting, and volunteering on the ground. Fungible and material resources gave activists the means to augment anti-regime efforts directly and the capacity to build a new transnational organizational infrastructure. Social capital elevated activists' voice as advisors, interpreters, and participants in the revolutions. At the same time, not all diaspora movements were equally well-resourced and able to convert resources to the Arab Spring. When movements lacked or lost these varied forms of resources, as the Syrian and Yemeni cases across the United States and Britain illustrate, their voices in the revolutions become less effective and muted.

While resource conversion is a critical process for diaspora interventions, it is also insufficient to explain diaspora movements' roles in anti-authoritarian mobilizations at home. The following chapter demonstrates how the added factor of geopolitical support is also vital in facilitating diaspora movement interventions, including the movement of resources across state lines. Without this support, diaspora activists and their resources become caged inside host-country borders, and their voices in homeland struggles are rendered into merely symbolic displays of support.