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Engaging refugees and migrants as peace advocates

How Germany can contribute to Peace in Syria and Afghanistan

Katja Mielke, Esther Meininghaus \ BICC

Policy recommendations

\ Engage refugees and migrants as peace advocates

German policymakers—especially of the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO), the Federal Ministries of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and of the Interior (MoI), and federal states—and educational organisations should draw upon the engagement of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan and Syria as agents of change who have a positive influence on peace processes.

\ Create civic engagement for peace programmes that offer refugees and migrants in Germany opportunities to engage themselves in peace for their countries of origin

Civic and peace education organisations (such as adult education centres, Civil Peace Service—Ziviler Friedensdienst) should jointly develop new civic engagement for peace programmes that refugees and migrants themselves can join to engage for peace for their country of origin. These programmes should build on refugees' and migrants' past experiences of war, politics and future visions specific to their respective country of origin so that they are meaningful for those engaged and the population groups they represent.

\ Launch new funding formats to support self-determined civic engagement for peace

GFFO, BMZ, MoI and state governments should provide decentralised funding through civic education institutions (political foundations, bpb, Ipbs, ifa) for two types of addressees conducting civic education for peace programmes: Civic and peace education organisations and direct funding for Syrian- and Afghan-led initiatives. They should provide longer-term project funding, funding for independent initiatives, funding to rent meeting spaces and support unbureaucratic and transparent funding application processes. The GFFO should consider providing funding in addition to existing funding lines by the MoI to join expertise on civic education (MoI) and peace support (GFFO).

\ Link Afghan and Syrian civic education for peace initiatives in Germany to peace processes

The GFFO should act as a facilitator in linking Afghan- and Syrian-led peacemaking initiatives in Germany with official track 1, 2 and 3 peace processes mediated by bodies like the United Nations (participation, advisory roles).

Engaging refugees and migrants as peace advocates: How Germany can contribute to Peace in Syria and Afghanistan

Introduction

In this *Policy Brief*, we argue that the significant potential of Afghan and Syrian refugees and migrants in Germany and beyond as peace advocates and change agents in contributing to peace processes in Afghanistan and Syria must be recognised. Today, Afghans and Syrians constitute the highest numbers of immigrants in Germany and Europe. As of 31 March 2020, Germany's population included 798,999 individuals with Syrian and 265,192 with Afghan citizenship (BAMF, 2020, p. 120). Furthermore, because the Afghan conflict has been ongoing for 40 years, the share of persons with German citizenship is comparatively high among persons of descent from Afghanistan. By persons of descent from Afghanistan and Syria, we mean individuals with refugee status, those who have been naturalised as German citizens and persons who migrated to Germany for reasons unrelated to conflict (such as work, education).

Until now, German policymakers have largely refrained from tapping their potential to act for peace for at least three reasons:

- 1\ Afghans and Syrians are often still perceived as refugees and migrants who are recipients of benefits (protection, aid, services) rather than individuals with agency. Also, they are largely deprived of their agency to be politically engaged. For example, in national elections, foreign nationals cannot vote, and they are not allowed to form political parties in Germany.
- 2\ When German policymakers consult them or support them in their commitment to their country of origin, they are narrowly ascribed the role of contributing to humanitarian and development aims (editorial, FMR 60, 2019)—ignoring political aspirations.
- 3\ Afghans and Syrians are assumed to seek local integration in Germany, which civic education programmes and funding lines aim to support (that is civic participation, language proficiency, vocational training, social engagement). There is no

funding line that would allow persons of Afghan and Syrian descent to initiate peace initiatives for Afghanistan and Syria in Germany. This is why, in contrast to current practice, there is an urgent need to alter German policies to allow for the political participation of immigrants in peace efforts for their country of origin.

Scholars and practitioners agree that refugees' and migrants' involvement in peace processes renders these processes more sustainable. They further recognise that exile populations should be involved in confronting the past to increase long-term prospects for peace. Peace processes are inherently political. Integrating refugees, migrants and naturalised citizens into peace processes opens a new political field that civic engagement for peace needs to address. To not leave this field to political or religious extremist groups, German policymakers need to strengthen incentives that enable adults in Germany to participate in civic engagement for peace for their countries of origin in a self-determined manner and, eventually, to facilitate translating these into participation in more formal peace processes. Until now, in contrast, the lack of tailored support for comparable civic engagement for peace initiatives inside Afghanistan and Syria as well as among Afghans and Syrians living abroad has catalysed political fragmentation and led to the widespread lack of concrete, broad-based political programmes and long-term visions for reform in the Afghan and Syrian peace processes. In the following, we show how these groups' support of civic engagement for peace in their origin countries can contribute to peace processes in Syria and Afghanistan.

Peacemaking in displacement: Mitigating risks and strengthening peace advocates

Immigrants from conflict countries often remain engaged in political processes in their countries of origin. Exile populations can act as both peace wreckers

and peacemakers. How their relations with the country of origin plays out often depends on the nature of conflict “at home”, the international political “climate” and national policies in the country of residence that limit or support political activities of foreign nationals.

In Germany, policymakers often fear that any form of politicisation among foreign nationals might embolden political conflict in their country of origin or in Germany, or may lead to the emergence of extremist groups. We, however, argue that inaction risks giving space to radicalisation and the lack of commitment for promoting inclusive dialogue and broader processes of national reconciliation. Two examples illustrate the complex relationship between suppressed versus encouraged political (non)engagement and conflict versus peace(building):

- 1\ The situation among individuals of Turkish origin in Germany demonstrates how a lack of support for political dialogue has led to political segregation and conflict between a) supporters of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and political refugees who fled persecution by the Turkish government to seek refuge in Germany; and b) conflict between persons of Turkish and Kurdish descent. Kurds belong to an ethnic minority who have been discriminated against and persecuted by the Turkish government, which sees them as affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) that it has outlawed as a ‘terrorist group’. The close relationship between the AKP and some Turkish institutions and between the PKK and Kurdish institutions in Germany has led to a hardening of positions, which highlights the risk of ignoring ‘foreign’ politics in Germany.
- 2\ During the Cold War, German authorities, the media and the public supported Islamist Afghan exile groups, especially those who represented the fundamentalist Afghan resistance (mujahedin) in the conflict with the Afghan government and the Soviet intervention forces until 1989. This

emboldened the Islamist factions who started a civil war after the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992 and determine Afghan politics and the forty-year conflict until today. Such one-sided support missed the opportunity for inclusive dialogue with Afghan groups of all political spectrums, and it demonstrates how the consequences of such policies created conflict trajectories which remain problematic until today.

Against this backdrop, we argue for a policy change that supports self-determined civic engagement for peace programmes and the emergence of peace advocates. Individuals often remain part of networks, also in their country of descent, for instance through social media or personal contacts, and possess in-depth knowledge of that country’s needs and interests. This knowledge would make them ideal bridge-builders. However, in Germany, such peace initiatives are rare because their engagement is hampered by a lack of funding and support. For persons from conflict countries interested in joining such initiatives, civic engagement for peace initiatives in Germany could potentially serve to:

- \ share experiences of conflict and war (confronting the past);
- \ jointly develop peace narratives (e.g. peaceful visions for the future, building bridges across different political currents, discuss understandings of justice);
- \ learn mediation and conflict management skills which they can apply at the neighbourhood, municipality, state and national level, but also in peace processes (pro inclusiveness, dialogue, reconciliation).

In this manner, civic engagement for peace initiatives can serve as spaces where inclusive dialogue can be held (including different age groups, women, persons of different religious and political affiliations) and confidence among participants be built.

While it is crucial that these fora represent safe spaces¹, they can offer valuable opportunities for discussing politicisation and divergent political interests constructively. They may also be a starting point for developing concrete suggestions on including peace-focused civil society groups into existing peace processes. While we find that refugees' needs, knowledge and interests are often rarely represented in official talks, these initiatives open up an avenue for broader political participation. This is not limited to, but can also include, building knowledge of transitional justice formats that have proven successful in other contexts and developing ideas of how these might be applicable to similar processes at community or national level in Afghanistan and Syria.

German policymakers—especially of the GFFO, the BMZ and the MoI—and educational organisations urgently need to acknowledge and subsequently support the potential role of persons of Afghan and Syrian descent as agents of change, who can foster constructive dialogue processes and act as important bridge-builders for constituencies in their country of origin. Peace is not only crafted through interventions and programmes in (post-)conflict countries but also through interventions and programmes that may start in Germany.

Civic engagement for peace in countries of origin: A critical gap

A review of civic and peace education programmes and measures in Germany shows a critical gap. On the one hand, civic education for refugees has focused on providing support for integration into German society, through language courses, vocational skills-building, social engagement for civic participation and democracy-learning/ citizenship education. On the other hand, peace education (in Germany: “peace pedagogy”) points out ways of constructive,

non-violent conflict resolution and concentrates on developing practical skills for a peaceful transformation of conflicts at the individual and group level. Peace education offered to immigrants from conflict settings to date mainly consists of programmes that foster individual peace skills for the integration in Germany or an individual's reintegration into their country of origin after their return. What is missing in project work, programming and conceptually, however, is a collaboration of civic and peace education actors that allows immigrants to engage in peace in their country of origin while they live, and often have to or intend to remain, in Germany. This is what we term “civic engagement for peace for immigrants from conflict settings for their origin countries”.

Civic engagement for peace wants individuals to become change-makers in conflict transformation by allowing them to develop knowledge and skills for conflict resolution and decision-making. Funding broad-based grassroots initiatives for dialogue and exchange across social class, different age groups, political convictions, interests and “generations of immigration” (cf. Meininghaus & Mielke, 2019) could achieve this. Among persons of Afghan and Syrian descent in Germany, we find that different generations of immigrants since the 1960s remain largely disconnected from one another, thus limiting the prospects of mutual support and dialogue. By supporting different formats for exchange, Afghan- and Syrian-led initiatives can begin to bridge these gaps. Ideally, the design of these initiatives should allow for exploring different political systems without prejudices, for critical reflection of past experiences, developing future visions and joint learning. It should be up to participants from Afghan and Syrian descent within these initiatives to decide where their needs and topics for civic engagement for peace programmes are, not least to ensure that they are historically grounded in their own experiences. Such programmes must not seek to reproduce German politics but be open

¹ \ In the Syrian case, for persons critical of the regime, this entails the risk of intimidation of participants through the Syrian regime and their family members who live inside Syria (cf. Amnesty International, 2011). Initiatives should receive support to establish their own rules and mechanisms to mitigate such risks.

towards new ideas of civic education for peace meaningful to Afghans and Syrians to also attract interest among others from Afghan and Syrian descent to join. This is especially important for persons who arrived in Germany as adults without access to the German education system. For many individuals born in Afghanistan and Syria, respectively, who went to school there, school curricula did not include critical learning about different forms of political systems (e.g. different forms of democracies, electoral systems). In Afghanistan, we find no coherent history-writing from within Afghanistan for more than 40 years of war. In Syria, school curricula in this field consist of state propaganda in line with Ba'th party ideology (with the short-lived exception of areas controlled by other military and civilian groups since 2011).

Thus, newly designed civic engagement for peace programmes should entail a high degree of self-determination. They can also provide fora for a critical engagement with their own histories of war and develop political visions for a more peaceful future, including ideas for transitional justice processes. Historical literacy, the development of willingness and skills to confront the home country's and one's own individual conflictive past constitutes a crucial learning challenge, which could be supported by voluntary conflict-sensitive moderation (as practised by the Forum Civil Peace Service—forumZFD, for instance). We argue that civic education projects for adults are crucial as they provide a forum for confronting the past and can form a critical, independent political mindset. They can also encourage dialogue among persons of Afghan and Syrian descent, respectively. Given that many have made Germany their home and are here to stay, this is all the more important. Therefore, German policymakers—the BMI, GFFO and BMZ—should set incentives for education organisations and civic conflict transformation organisations to reconceptualise civic peace engagement programmes among immigrants of Afghan and Syrian descent in Germany.

New funding formats supporting self-determined civic engagement for peace

To implement civic engagement for peace programmes and projects, the GFFO, BMZ, MoI and federal states should also create new funding formats for such initiatives in Germany. This involves:

- 1) Decentralised funding through institutions for civic education (political foundations, bpb, lpbs, ifa) for two funding lines: a) funding for civic and peace education organisations and b) direct funding for Syrian- and Afghan-led initiatives. Our research shows that in earlier state-funded humanitarian and development initiatives initiated by Afghans and Syrians, for instance, members of such associations have felt forced to adapt their projects and programmes to available funding lines. This is problematic because donor priorities have determined their contents, even when it was apparent to applicants that funding targets did not address actual needs. This problem is also reflected in measures inside Germany that largely aim for so-called systemic integration such as schooling, vocational training, etc., but which neglect significant needs for psycho-social support and political engagement for peace. Therefore, it is important that new funding lines should provide structural and financial support, but leave space for the contents of these initiatives to be developed by participants themselves in line with their own perceived priorities. Initiatives of this sort require places to meet and long time frames to work towards the skills required and while conflict remains ongoing. Reducing the bureaucratic requirements and procedures when applying for funding to form associations in Germany would also help to ensure equal access to funding across social and intellectual divides. For Syrian- and Afghan-led initiatives, civic peace service personnel (Forum Civil Peace Service, forumZFD) with significant expertise in peace initiative support in conflict countries could offer support as consultants and provide mediation—however,

only when expressly called for by these initiatives. The BMZ should examine under which conditions this is possible.

- 2) The GFFO should also consider providing funds, adding to existing funding lines for civic education by the MoI, both of which should liaise. The MoI is experienced in supporting civic education programmes in Germany, while the GFFO has expertise in providing peace support in conflict countries. They should join their fields of expertise to provide funding for civic engagement for peace initiatives which can, eventually, inform the peace processes for these origin countries. For this purpose, GFFO and the BMZ might need to adopt new types of funding lines without replacing existing ones (like BONGO, CIM). All funding allocations should be based on clear funding criteria, make decisions on allocation or refusal of funding transparent and support a self-determined, autonomous conduct of broad-based grassroots initiatives.

Link Afghan and Syrian civic engagement for peace initiatives in Germany to peace processes

Civic engagement for peace initiatives could be linked to peace processes in the long-term. By building upon individuals' knowledge of politics and life in Afghanistan and Syria and combining these with new ideas, civic education for peace initiatives can become fora for developing long-term political visions and ideas for feasible reforms with which Afghans and Syrians can identify. So far, our research shows that such visions—and support for developing these—have been noticeably scarce in both peace processes. The fact that significant numbers of persons of Afghan descent have lived in Germany for up to 40 years without having had a chance to engage in such initiatives, while the peace process has not yielded sustainable results, demonstrates how this opportunity has been missed so far for two generations.

Peace processes themselves are in urgent need of reform and of becoming more sustainable. Consider these facts:

- \ Official peace processes were only set up in less than half of all wars and conflicts globally between 1946 and 2003 (most others are military victories or unresolved) (Bercovitch & Fretter, 2004, p. 29)
- \ Only about one-quarter of these cases end with a peace agreement (1946–2015) (Kreutz, 2010, p. 246)
- \ Half of all peace agreements collapse within the first five years (Convergne, 2016, pp. 144–145).

Despite differences of the Afghan/Syrian peace processes and the new emphasis on “inclusive” peace processes with civil society, these figures point to severe flaws. Among these, the influence of patron states (that finance armed groups, for instance) and peace spoilers are well-known hindrances to longer-term peace. Another flaw is that both peace processes are characterised by a widespread lack of a) political groups/movements that have emerged organically and enjoy broad-based grassroots support and b) concrete, publicly known and feasible proposals by protagonists for reform in different sectors of government (e.g. security sector, education, economics, agriculture).² Civic engagement for peace programmes represent a crucial step towards reforming peace processes by addressing these highly critical gaps: To contribute to the formulation of concrete ideas from a broad, bottom-up flow of informed debates originating in self-determined agenda setting. In cases where these initiatives wish to be included into official peace processes (e.g. tracks 2 and 3), the GFFO and the United Nations, for instance, should develop transparent criteria for such initiatives to participate in official negotiations and/or to act as advisory bodies to these.

2 \ Both processes have in common that in Germany and elsewhere, entire privately initiated peace processes created by Afghans and Syrians have emerged, which usually reject foreign presence and interference (cf. Meininghaus & Mielke, 2019).

Introducing civic engagement for peace initiatives for persons of Afghan and Syrian descent, and possibly for those from other conflict settings, requires long-term support. Given the failures of peace processes around the world, we argue that such support for self-determined, bottom-up and critically informed visions for peace in peaceful environments can represent a significant step towards positive change.

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ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

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