

# **The Displaced Syrian Diaspora: A Cultural Assessment and Potential Implications for Organizational Dynamics**

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*This paper explores the cultural values of the displaced Syrian people as they flee their war-torn country. The analysis provides insight into a unique refugee population that now reaches into the millions. It also provides implications for organizations that must assimilate this displaced group into their workforces consisting of different national and organizational cultures. The cultural assessment was conducted using the 5-D Hofstede model of cultural values. It compared the cultural orientations of the Syrian diaspora with those in the countries where the displaced people may eventually settle, as well as Germany, which has already accepted many Syrian refugees. The assessment also contrasts the current findings on Syria with those originally obtained by Hofstede in 1980. The results of this study indicate that integration of the refugees may be difficult. Suggestions for managing the displaced Syrian diaspora are discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Syria, a country that gained its independence in 1946, was ruled for many years by Hafez al-Assad. When he died in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad, was elected president in an uncontested election. A politically divided country, Syria became a victim of the Arab Spring. Anti-government rebels protesting the rule of Assad were met with harsh resistance by the Syrian army. In the chaos of the rebellion terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Nusra joined in a struggle to capture control of the country. The bloody civil war resulted in millions of Syrians fleeing their country (Kahn & Khan, 2017). Many fled to Germany, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, welcomed the refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 5.6 million Syrians have fled their country (UNHCR, 2018). This continuing diaspora into Turkey and other countries has resulted in a massive humanitarian crisis. With an end to the hostilities not readily apparent,

the refugees are unlikely to return home anytime soon, if ever (Kirisci, 2017; Vignal, 2018). Integrating these displaced people, who have their own unique culture, into other countries and cultures presents challenges for organizations that will likely employ millions of the Syrian refugees.

## CULTURAL VALUES AND ASSESSMENT

This study compares the cultural values of the Syrian diaspora with that of neighboring Middle Eastern countries and Germany, a Western European nation that has accepted over one million of the refugees. The study uses the classification model of Geert Hofstede for cultural comparisons. Hofstede's model is the most commonly used one for analyzing a nation's cultural values. Aside from the original 50 countries analyzed in his early publication (Hofstede, 1980), the model has also been recently used to understand the cultural values of other countries, one example being the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq (Rarick, Winter, Barczyk, & Merkt, 2014). Hofstede proposed that management theories were not universal, but rather, culture bound. Effective managerial behavior, he argued, should be predicated on a firm understanding of cultural values (Hofstede, 1980a; Hofstede, 1980b; Hofstede, 1983; Hofstede, 1993; Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 1997; Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede's work has been widely cited in various academic disciplines (Kirkman, Lowe & Gibson, 2006) and is often used to explain organizational behavior from a cross-cultural perspective.

Hofstede's research originally identified four dimensions of culture - power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. Power distance refers to the degree to which members of a society expect power to be shared among themselves. Cultures with high power distance expect that people with power will be treated differently than those without power. Status differentiation in high power distance cultures is prominent and acceptable. In low power distance cultures power differentials are not expected, nor considered desirable. Individualism is a dimension that refers to the importance of the individual over the group in terms of societal focus. Individualistic cultures place an importance on people's rights and responsibilities and expect societal members to take care of themselves. This is contrasted with collectivism in which the societal focus is on the group. One's identity is determined by group membership. In collectivistic cultures the group responds to the needs and interests of its members. Masculinity refers to the extent to which a culture values competition, assertiveness, and the acquisition of material goods. This is contrasted with femininity, which values nurturing, relationships, and a concern for others. Uncertainty avoidance is the last of the four dimensions. It refers to a culture's collective tolerance for ambiguity. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures rules and regulations are established to reduce the uncertainty of the future. In such cultures people feel more comfortable in having assurances of what will happen in the future. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures change and ambiguity are not considered a threat.

Michael Bond, working with Hofstede (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), helped to develop a fifth dimension to the model. Originally termed Confucianism dynamism, this dimension is now more frequently referred to as long-term orientation. It reflects the extent to which a society encourages and rewards future-oriented behavior such as planning, delaying gratification, and investing in the future. Further research into cultural values uncovered yet another dimension referred to as indulgence/restraint (Minkov & Hofstede, 2011; Minkov, 2013). This dimension measures the degree to which a society permits or suppresses the expression of human desires. Indulgence/restraint was not included as a variable in this study due to the lack of comparative data. The more established five dimensional (Five D) Hofstede model was used to analyze the data in the current research.

Hofstede's work gained great popularity in cross-cultural research and attracted competing models and critics. Other popular models of cultural classification have been developed and evaluated including the Schwartz theory of basic cultural values and the Globe Project (Moalla, 2016). Critics of the Hofstede model have expressed concerns about the generalizability of the findings, the level of analysis, the assumption of political boundaries of countries as cultural entities, and the validity of the survey instrument itself (Blodgett, Bakir, & Rose, 2008; Mc Sweeney, 2002; Smith, 2002). Others have challenged the assumption of the homogeneity of each culture studied (Sivakumar & Nakata, 2001).

Venaik and Brewer (2013) are critical of both Hofstede and the GLOBE investigations and caution against using their findings in marketing management research and practice. The fifth dimension, long-term orientation (LTO), has been challenged on the grounds of conceptual validity (Fang, 2003). Grenness (2012) points out the problem of the ecological fallacy in Hofstede's work in which the predominant traits of a culture are generalized to individuals within that cultural group, and not accounting for individual differences. Beugelsdijk, Maseland & Van Hoorn (2015) have suggested that cultures change over time and the original Hofstede rankings may be dated. Some have even questioned the validity of a national culture and the value in predicting organizational behavior (McSweeney, Brown & Lliopoulou, 2016). While there is some validity to the many concerns raised by Hofstede's critics, his research represents the oldest and most comprehensive analysis of cultural values. No theory of cultural classification is without its critics and limitations. While Hofstede's approach may be "blunt" to use the words of Jackson (2011), it nevertheless provides useful insight into understanding important cultural values.

This paper provides a glimpse into the cultural values of the Syrian diaspora and compares it with the values of countries where the refugees may eventually settle. The cross-cultural comparison shows that organizations in those countries may experience issues with integration and that adaptations may be required to facilitate effective organizational dynamics. By having a solid understanding of the cultural dimensions of its workforce, employers can make more effective and successful human resource decisions. Studies have shown that considering national culture in the process of staffing results in more favorable and beneficial person-organization matches (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Studies have also shown that understanding and properly managing national culture dimensions in organizations have been positively related to firm success (Li, Lam, & Qian, 2001) and profitability (Martins & Lopes, 2016).

## **METHOD**

This investigation of cultural values was conducted in a non-governmental organization (NGO) operating in a refugee camp in Turkey. It involved surveying 59 adults living in the camp. The sample consisted of 38 males and 21 females whose age ranged from 20-49. The respondents' median age ranged from 25-29.

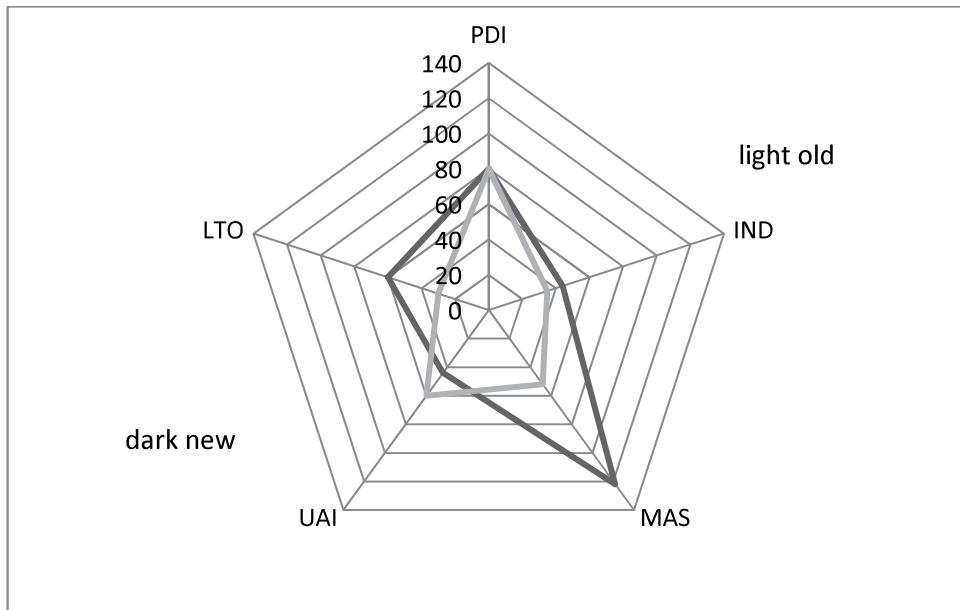
Cultural values were measured in the study using Hofstede's Values Survey Module (VSM 94). The items in the VSM 94 measured the culture of the Syrian diaspora using the 5-D model of Geert Hofstede, which includes the dimensions of power distance (PDI), masculinity (MAS), individualism (IND), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO). Value scores were determined using the formula found in the VSM 94 Manual. The scores for the value dimensions obtained in this study were compared to the scores obtained by Hofstede ([www.geert-hofstede.com](http://www.geert-hofstede.com), 2018). Comparisons were made with select countries including Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, and Germany. Scores for the value dimension from all of the countries came from Hofstede's published results. In addition, the results were compared with the data from Hofstede's original study of Syria.

## **RESULTS**

The survey results indicate that the Syrian diaspora is high in power distance, moderate in individualism, very high in masculinity, moderately low in uncertainty avoidance, and high in long-term orientation. There were differences in the cultural dimension scores of the diaspora compared to the scores of Syrians analyzed in the original Hofstede study. Figure 1 shows the scores for the diaspora on the five cultural dimensions compared to the original Hofstede study. In the graph the Hofstede study results are labelled "old" and the current study of the diaspora labelled "new." The graph shows significant differences in the scores for uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and masculinity. Questions can be raised about why these values are different, with one possible answer being that years of internal conflict altered the cultural values of the Syrian diaspora. Regardless of the reason, the current

values of this population should be compared with the cultural values of the countries into which this population may eventually integrate. This is important because it has implications for employers who wish to develop workplace policies that successfully facilitate the person-organization fit of members of this cultural group.

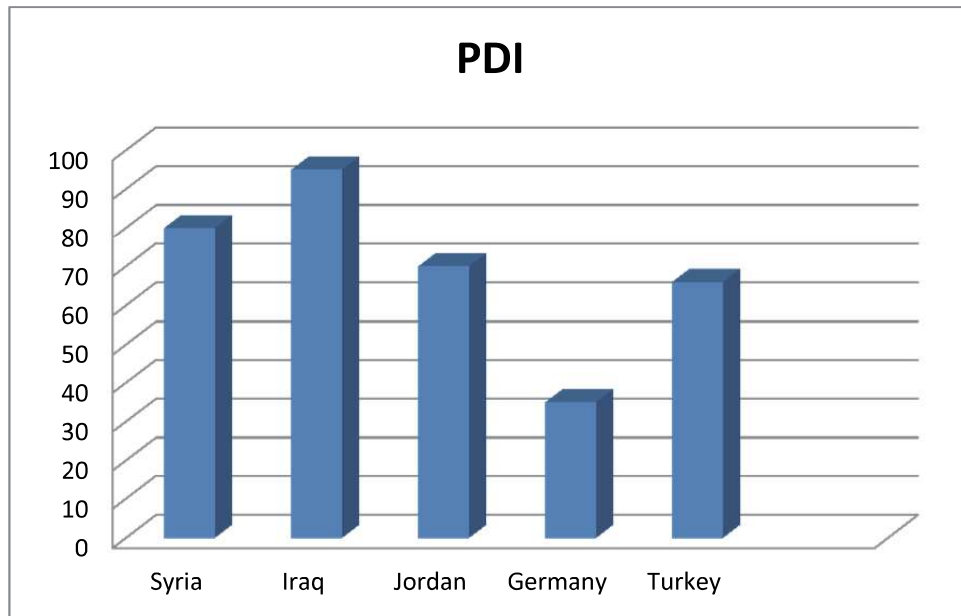
**FIGURE 1**  
**SCORES ON THE FIVE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS FOR THE DIASPORA AND HOFSTEDE'S ORIGINAL STUDY**



### **POWER DISTANCE**

The data indicate that the Syrian diaspora has unique cultural dimension scores. The diaspora is high in power distance with a PDI score of 80. This score suggests that members of the Syrian diaspora place a low value on equality among societal members. Figure 2 shows the PDI scores for the Syrian diaspora along with those for other countries in the region and Germany. The data show that with respect to power distance, the Syrian diaspora ranks most closely to Jordan and Turkey, but differs significantly from Germany. High power distance scores indicate a preference for power concentration and a more autocratic approach to management.

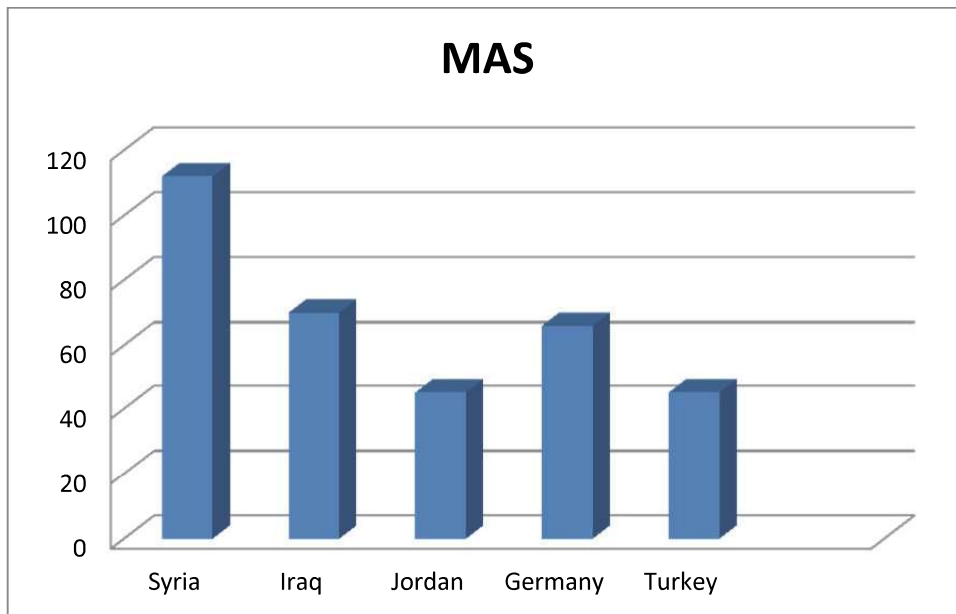
**FIGURE 2**  
**POWER DISTANCE SCORES FOR THE SYRIAN DIASPORA AND OTHER COUNTRIES**



### **MASCULINITY**

The data indicate that the Syrian diaspora has an extremely high regard for masculine values with an MAS score of 112, one of the highest in the world. Figure 3 shows the MAS scores for the Syrian diaspora along with the same comparison countries. The data reveal significantly higher masculinity among the Syrian diaspora than in any of the other comparison countries. Very high MAS scores indicate a very strong preference for materialism, rigid role relationships, competitive behavior, as well as aggressiveness in organizations.

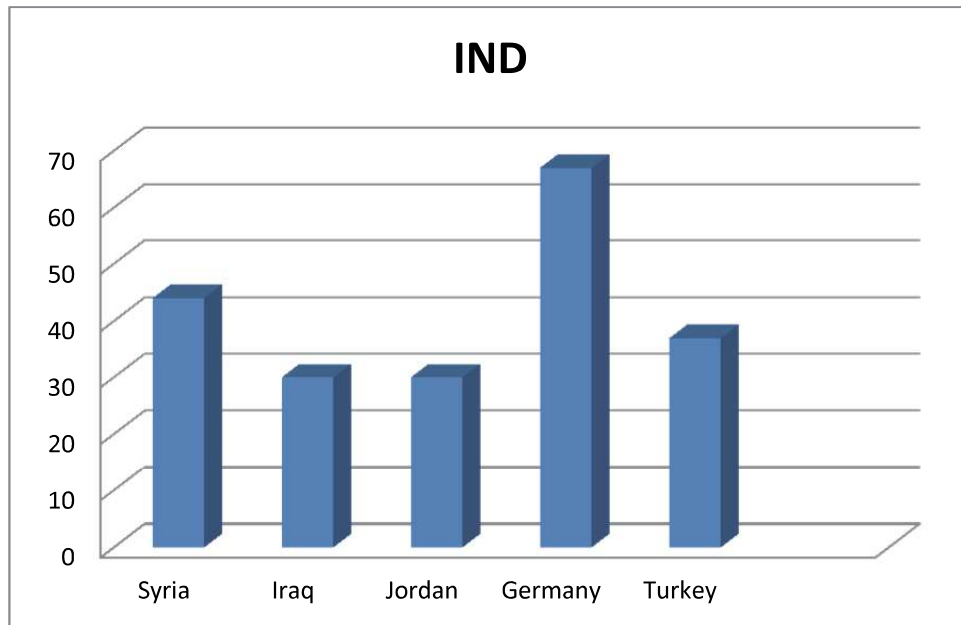
**FIGURE 3**  
**MASCULINITY SCORES FOR THE SYRIAN DIASPORA AND OTHER COUNTRIES**



### **INDIVIDUALISM**

The data indicate that the culture of the Syrian diaspora is moderately collectivist with an IND score of 44. Figure 4 shows the IND score for the Syrian diaspora along with the other comparison countries. With respect to individualism, the score is not too different from those of neighboring countries in the region. However, it differs significantly from the score for Germany. German individualism contrasts with the Syrian preference for more collectivist behavior. Moderate collectivist values place a stronger emphasis on the group rather than on the individual. Those values manifest themselves in the workplace in the form of collective responsibilities and activities.

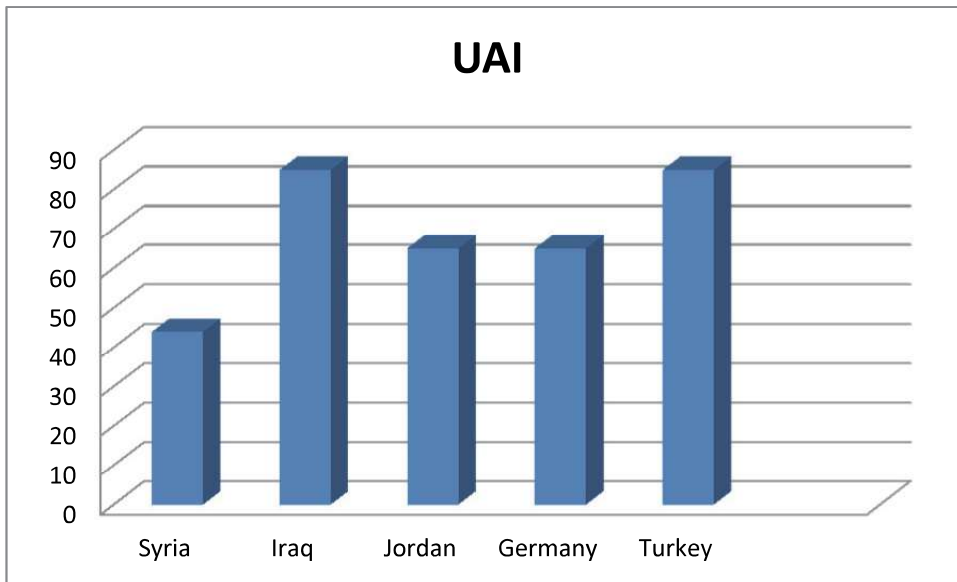
**FIGURE 4**  
**INDIVIDUALISM SCORES FOR THE SYRIAN DIASPORA AND OTHER COUNTRIES**



#### **UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE**

The data indicate that the Syrian diaspora is relatively low in uncertainty avoidance with a UAI score of 44. As shown in Figure 5, the diaspora has the lowest UAI score among the select countries, contrasting most significantly with Iraq and Turkey. A moderately low uncertainty avoidance culture is accepting of change and comfortable with uncertainty. Rigid rules and procedures in the organization are not seen as necessary or desirable.

**FIGURE 5**  
**UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SCORES FOR THE SYRIAN DIASPORA AND OTHER COUNTRIES**

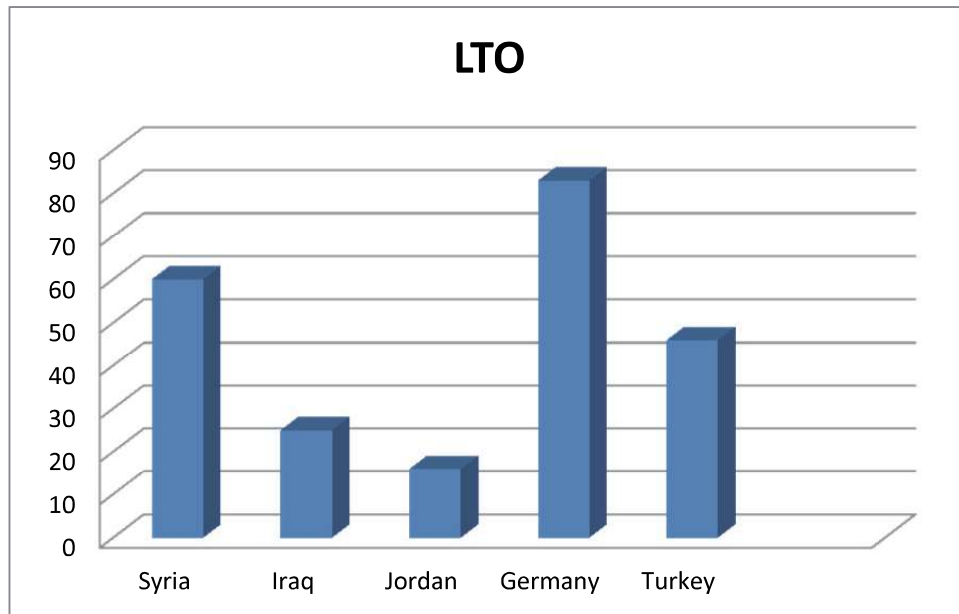


### **LONG-TERM ORIENTATION**

The data indicate that the Syrian diaspora has a culture with a relatively long-term orientation towards time with an LTO score of 60. As shown in Figure 6, the diaspora's time orientation is higher compared to its neighbors but lower compared to Germany. Cultures with a high LTO score are not overly concerned with the present and do not expect quick results. Thinking is long-term in nature and the managerial focus is not generally on present conditions and problems. Long-term cultures target their energies on what can be achieved in the long-run.



**FIGURE 6**  
**LONG-TERM ORIENTATION SCORES FOR THE SYRIAN DIASPORA AND OTHER COUNTRIES**



#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS**

National culture can be a major determinant in the success of multinational organizations (Dartey-Baah, 2013) and any entities that employ diverse workers. Understanding the values, beliefs, and assumptions of people in organizations is critical to the promotion of effective and harmonious relationships. One's values system drives attitude, thinking, decisions, behaviors and actions. According to Scarborough (1998), value systems are inextricably linked to national culture at the macro level and to organizational culture at the micro level of analysis. Ultimately, this impacts workplace behavior and managerial practices. Integrating the Syrian diaspora into their host countries can be difficult because of the differences in their peoples' cultural values. While the diaspora are spread cross many different countries, a useful focus is their integration into German and Turkish organizations.

The Syrian refugees potentially have three options concerning residency. They may (1) return to their homes in Syria after the civil war ends, (2) stay in the countries where they presently reside, or (3) relocate to a third country. Given the level of chaos and prospects for peace, returning home does not seem likely, at least for the foreseeable future. Also unlikely for a majority of the population is resettlement to a third country such as the United States. While some refugees have resettled in the United States and Canada, it is a small percentage of the total refugee population and not likely to significantly increase in size. Saudi Arabia may be a better fit in terms of cultural values, religion, and language. However, the Kingdom has been reluctant to accept refugees who have fled Syria. The most probable outcome is that the Syrian refugees remain in the countries into which they have relocated. Given this likely outcome it seems practical to compare the culture of the diaspora with that of the countries hosting the refugees. While a large number of Syrians have fled to Jordan and fewer to Iraq, both countries present problems for the diaspora. Jordan may not be able to absorb large numbers of refugees in the long-term due to the size of its economy. Iraq is also problematic because of political instability, making a resettlement difficult.

Germany, with over one million Syrian refugees, has perhaps the greatest potential for integration based on the size of its economy and demographic composition. Because of its aging population, Germany has a need for workers. Turkey is another country with good potential for integration of the

Syrian refugees. It has absorbed a large number of them and is geographically close to Syria coupled with the fact that it shares a common religion.

If we conduct a cross cultural analysis, we can see challenges ahead for integrating the Syrian diaspora into German organizations. Significant differences between German national culture and thus organizational cultures exist. The most important cultural differences between Germany and the Syrian diaspora are on the power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance dimensions. Managerial systems based on the low power distance of German culture are in contrast to the high power distance of the Syrian diaspora. Employees with a high power distance cultural value expect a more direct and hierarchical system compared to that in low power distance cultures. Such employees will feel uneasy with more participative approaches to management. Although Germany is a masculine culture, the extreme masculinity of the Syrian diaspora may produce different views relative to what constitutes appropriate managerial behavior. There would likely be differences in competitive and assertive behavior in the organization. While not extreme, differences in the level of uncertainty avoidance may result in Syrian diaspora workers experiencing discomfort with the German need for policies and procedures to insure certainty in the workplace. Detailed plans and rigid procedures have the potential to create conflict with a population of workers that views the determination of future outcomes as futile.

Turkey, with a large number of Syrian refugees, has a culture which is not too far removed from that of the Syrian diaspora. The main differences can be seen in masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. The differences in cultural values for power distance and individualism are not too dissimilar between the diaspora and that of Turkey. Similarity in religion can be a factor to help integrate the Syrian diaspora into Turkish organizations. Offsetting this is the fact that the masculinity score for the diaspora is extremely high, and Turkey has a more feminine culture. Different cultural values concerning masculinity may produce different views concerning the importance of aggressive behavior and the meaning of winning. A perspective where winner takes all is in contrast to the feminine view of caring for others and the importance of relationships. Turkey's feminine orientation produces decision making based more on consensus, rather than conflict. In addition, gender roles are more fluid in a feminine culture and one can expect to see significant differences in the perception of the appropriate role for women in the organization. Relative to uncertainty avoidance, Turkey has a much higher score than the Syrian diaspora. Their stronger preference for rules and regulations in order to avoid an uncertain future may conflict with the low uncertainty avoidance of the Syrian diaspora who typically expect events to unfold as they happen. Organizational rules and policies may be seen as impediments – compliance to which is unnecessary. In a country that values uncertainty avoidance, new ideas and innovation are perceived as risky. Greater formal organizational control mechanisms are likely to be common. With a lower uncertainty avoidance score, Syrian diaspora workers may prefer control mechanisms that are more implicit and flexible. Relative to long-term orientation, the Syrian diaspora has a more long run perspective compared to Turkey, which has a fairly neutral LTO score, but is considered a short-term oriented culture. This may result in some concerns about the need to plan for the future and the greater importance of traditions. These cultural concerns, however, are not viewed to be as important as are the differences in masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. When the differences in cultural values are not very significant, the organization needs to make fewer changes and workers can more easily adapt to the prevailing norms.

Immigrants' overall life satisfaction and potentially their ability to be productive members of organizations depend on successful integration into a host country's culture. Angelini, Casi, and Corazzini (2015) determined that language proficiency, cultural activities, and social integration have the potential to enhance feelings of well-being in immigrants. As dissimilarity between cultures increases, the need to develop integration strategies increases.

Differences in national culture ultimately manifest themselves in workplace behaviors, which, in part, are mediated by organizational culture. Colquitt, Lepine, and Wesson (2017) define organizational culture as the shared knowledge of the rules, norms, and values that shape the attitudes and behaviors of employees. Because of today's increasingly diverse workforce, employees have different meanings for their tasks, wealth, success, power, equity, authority, and harmony. These differences impact on organizational cohesiveness and job performance. In organizations with significant numbers of new

immigrants, managers must learn how to manage cultural differences by adopting appropriate organizational practices and leadership styles. With increased migration and globalization, managing a culturally diverse workforce is becoming an increasingly important part of organizational dynamics. Cultural diversity can produce both positive and negative results for an organization. Managing the diversity to achieve positive outcomes requires a more strategic approach to human resource management and an enhanced design of managerial systems (Dalluay & Jalagat, 2016). In the case of the Syrian diaspora, one of the largest in human history, host countries must confront these cultural differences in order to produce effective organizational outcomes. In addition to Germany and Turkey, countries with a large number of Syrian refugees can expect to find cultural differences as these people become integrated into their mainstream populations. A greater understanding of these cultural differences and a willingness to adapt to them are necessary to achieve more effective and harmonious organizations.

## CONCLUSION

Using the 5-D classification model of Geert Hofstede, this paper assesses the cultural values of the displaced Syrian diaspora. It compares the results of the present study with those originally reported by Hofstede. Overall, the comparison shows significant differences in uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and masculinity. The data indicate that the Syrian diaspora has a high score for power distance and an extremely high score for masculinity. One possible reason for the shift in cultural dimension scores over time might be the conflict that has plagued Syria since the 2011 start of its civil war.

The analysis in this paper includes a comparison of the results for the Syrian diaspora with those for Germany, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey where the refugees may eventually settle. Based on these comparisons, German organizations can expect challenges as they attempt to integrate the Syrian diaspora into their workplaces. The results highlight significant differences between Germany and the diaspora on the cultural dimensions of power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. These differences are likely to manifest themselves in workplace behaviors and attitudes – ultimately impacting organizational cohesiveness and job performance.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the countries which have hosted and are posed to host people from the Syrian diaspora have a unique opportunity. To capitalize on it, they need to foster policies designed to help educate top managers in the dynamics of cultural diversity and organizational change. By adopting appropriate managerial practices and leadership styles, they can reap the benefits of a competitively strong, collectivistic, compliant workforce that is long-term oriented and tolerant of ambiguity.

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