From the Field:
"Teach Syrians how to live here, to communicate, how to exchange information and knowledge"

**GMJ Interview with Monis Bukhari,
Founder and Director of *Syrisches Haus***

Interview conducted by Christine Horz

Background: *Refugees do heavily rely on (social) media before and during migration, as the article by Anke Fiedler in this GMJ special issue impressively demonstrates. But what happens after refugees have reached their country of destination? Some become media producers like our interviewee, media and social media activist Monis Bukhari from Syria. He is the founder of Syrisches Haus (Syrian House) in Germany, an information platform from and for fellow Syrians who arrived here as refugees. This Facebook group currently has over 132.000 members – a huge part of the Syrian community in Germany. We asked him about his motivation and the goals of Syrisches Haus.*

Keywords: Syrisches Haus, refugees, Syrians in Germany, social media

Christine Horz: Were you a social media activist before fleeing to Germany?

Monis Bukhari: Yes, actually I've been a social media activist since 2006. Since 2002 I had been working on websites and I set up a forum where people could discuss issues. There were incidents in Syria in 2004 which are not well known outside of Syria and in which thousands of people were killed (Qamishli Uprising). It started with the protests of the Kurdish minority facing injustice regarding jobs and education. In 2004, the Syrian regime paid Bedouin tribes to attack the houses of the Kurds in the north east of Syria to force them to be silent. This escalated to a revolution from the Kurdish side. All the intellectuals, the elite in Syria, stood with this movement. So the regime detained tens of thousands – some people say six thousand, some people say eighteen thousand – that year. You can find a lot of information online about this development, for example on Wikipedia. In 2005, what we call Damascus Spring started in Syria, when many Syrians, especially

authors, composers, journalists signed a petition asking the regime for a change and demanding democracy and rights for all minorities in Syria. This again caused a big wave of kidnapping and detaining in Syria. Most of the people who signed this petition had to leave Syria, most of them left to Lebanon. In that year, we found ourselves having to move to a secret movement, where the regime wouldn't know what we were doing or discussing. One of them used to be called *Alsyrians* it was the largest one.

CH: That means there was a group that you joined?

MB: Yes. At first we met in a house of Walid Qaresly, one of the founders of *Alsyrians,* but later on the movement grew. This pushed me to find a virtual solution by using the Internet, because it would help us to avoid the regime from physically tracking us and listen to what we talk about. That year, I started using e-mail groups. I first found Yahoo groups, then I learned that Yahoo was using open source software that I could use independently on my server. I started hosting a group for our movement. It wasn't public; it was only for those affiliated with the movement. This was not yet social media; it was sharing emails in a very safe way. I had to learn about Internet security and I had to teach everyone who wanted to join this movement how to use his or her email secretly and safely. And this made me become an Internet activist. In my previous function, I used to offer my customers web design. But this also helped *Alsyrians* to quickly find solutions for the security and safety issue, because in the movement, I was the one who was technology-savvy and had experience with the Internet and web services.

CH: And after 2005?

MB: After 2005, I discovered Facebook. At first I didn't like it, I thought it would be a waste of time to be a member. However, in 2006 I read an article on the Internet that inspired me and so I created a new account, I started to learn about its features and how to set up a secure connection to Facebook. Back then Facebook was forbidden in Syria. We did not have the ability to access Facebook in a regular way. I had to use VPN and proxies to have the ability to login to Facebook. This both forced and encouraged me to teach the *Alsyrians* movement about Facebook. However, it was at that point not yet effective for exchanging messages with each other because at that time it still had no feature for secret groups. But there were thoughts and opinions that we wanted to share publicly. But for secret discussions we stuck to the group email list. I had become responsible for communication in the movement and had created a forum where members had to login using a password, so no one could read anything on the website without being a member.

CH: What kind of effects did that have on the development of the movement?

MB: We had what I would call a wise leader. He was disabled. He had no ability to move at all, but he could talk. He communicated with all of us and used to play the role of a conflict resolver. But in 2010, this leader of *Alsyrians* passed away, and because of our various religious and ethnical backgrounds we fell into the trap of fighting over who should lead and who should speak on behalf of our movement. Our previous leader had always contained these internal fights, especially when this happened in the online forum.

For me, this conflict was like a small version of Syria. Actually, during our work in *Alsyrians* we had conducted a study in 2009 on diversity in Syria. Two of us travelled all over Syria, and we found out that Syria has 39 religions divided between 45 sects, and 9 ethnic groups. So Syria is very mixed and our movement represented this mixture as well. As the one responsible for communication I found that the forum I had created offered them tools to have more fights, small and big ones. When the group leader passed away, no one could integrate the community anymore. However, I did try to do this with two colleagues: One of them was responsible for the archive but he also summarized all the email discussions and announced the report to all the members. The other one was responsible for non-digital, offline communication. The three of us tried to save the movement but I must admit that we failed. But then 2011 came. Many Syrians, especially the elite and the intellectuals – most of whom used to be part of *Alsyrians* – started to talk about the revolution in Syria that should follow the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. Because of what I had seen in *Alsyrians*, especially on the website, the forum, the group, and Facebook, I was one of the voices who warned that we as Syrians are not ready for a revolution in Syria. And this discussion started in January 2011.

CH: Do you think your suggestion that Syrians were not ready at that time for a revolution was because media were supervised and nobody could really freely connect and interconnect between the different movements, or was it just a too early state for a revolutionary movement?

MB: It was both. First of all, Syria had had no civic movements since the 1960s. Back then, we lost all the democratic tools in Syria. For example, we had no parties, no public political discussions, we had a leader who presented himself as god that we should obey unconditionally. In such an environment, people have no tools and no resources to solve their conflicts. Conflict exists in all communities around the world. But there are communities who have experience and knowledge of how to solve conflicts. But in Syria there existed nothing like that. We had no role models. Even in *Alsyrians*, while most of the members were journalists and authors, most of them were publishing outside Syria because inside Syria we had no real media. All the media were controlled by the regime, so people had no

sources from which to get facts or different opinions or role models for conflict solution. There was the possibility either to believe the regime voice and follow it, or not believe it and ignore it, only believing one's own voice. So instead of having a dialogue in Syria, we had 21 million opinions, which was the number of inhabitants in Syria at that time.

CH: So, you say what was missing was a public sphere to discuss problems in Syrian society. And what happened then in 2011, you suggested that Syria was not ready for a revolution?

MB: I was one of the few voices who said that we needed a revolution but we were not ready for it yet. Unfortunately, the majority accused us that we were with the regime or that we are afraid of changing the regime for hidden reasons. In this setting, our voice was very quiet, no one could hear it. And even within *Alsyrians*, only three or four subgroups said it would not be a good time for a revolution, and I used to be one of them while hundreds of members thought that then was the perfect time.

CH: Why did you warn not to start a revolution in 2011?

MB: Syrians did not really know each other and so no one really knew what the interests of the other society members actually were. This was a result of the regime's way to rule: by dividing the Syrians. For example, Syrians should have had the ability to travel inside Syria. But even this was merely possible. The regime in Syria stopped all the railways in 1967. So if I were in Damascus, for example, I would have had no idea that there were people speaking a language other than Syrian, other than Arabic. If I met them for the very first time, I would have thought they were not Syrians. I would have been surprised, because all that I would have known was my city, my local community. This is one example. While in Syria we have 39 religions, before the revolution the media only talked about two of them. That means 37 religions in Syria were largely unknown to the people. Buddhism for example exists in three villages in one area in southern Syria. Syrians used to know about this before 1969 because in 1967 the regime carried out a population census. However, in 1970 the regime announced wrong numbers concerning the population. After that, Syrians had no idea about the Buddhists, for instance.

The regime actually also tried really hard to stop all communications, Internet and Facebook and Twitter later. The population was not allowed to use the Internet until 2001. The Internet existed in Syria but was only available for 60,000 people who had special permissions from the government to use it. But people of Syria – like any community – had their desire for communication. So social media was a tool where the people for the very first time had the possibility to explore, meet other Syrians, talk to them. When Facebook, for example, created the groups feature for the first time in 2006, users started grouping based on their local communities, for example in groups for Damascenes, groups of people from

Aleppo. Later, and unfortunately only during the war, Syrians started to meet Syrians from other cities on Facebook. For the first time they started to talk to each other. Their motivation was the revolution, the fights, the news.

CH: How was social media use possible under tight control by the regime?

I can talk about my experience as an example. I knew IWPR, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. This is a NGO teaching journalists how to protect their identity online. So they taught me how to protect myself. And I transferred this knowledge to my friends. But thousands of Syrians had indeed the same knowledge, and once one is online one can learn this knowledge how to use the VPN, the private networks, how to use the tools, hide your IP, open forbidden websites, how to encrypt your connection. Because of the tight control in Syria, the majority of the people using the Internet had to learn this, how to protect themselves and – indeed – to act like hackers.

Still, thousands had to face real detainment, some of them being accused and convicted to long years in prison. A friend of mine from Damascus who lives in Tunisia now was in jail between 2004 and 2011. All he did was write some facts about what he saw in the north east of Syria, the uprising of the Kurds in 2004. First, he got rejected from being published in newspapers. So he posted it online – not on Facebook, but in a well-known forum in Syria. It was not a secret one, and therefore he could easily by accused and convicted. Many people just like him faced years in jail due to online activity.

Monis Bukhari was born in Damascus, Syria in 1978. Monis now lives in Berlin and holds a degree in art, cinematography and photography. He gained professional experience in graphic design in the communication and advertisement sector. Monis is a certified coach for digital security and is currently working as an advisory consultant for the Charta der Vielfalt, an association of German corporations, supported by Ernst & Young, a global consultancy firm. He also counsels WDR and other public service media in Germany about refugee-specific programming. Monis Bukhari caught our attention during a search for refugees active in media at the webspace of re:publica 2013 and 2016, the biggest media conference in Europe, where he was an invited speaker.

CH: You managed to come to Germany. What did you do during your time here and why did you leave Syria?

MB: I came to Germany in September 2014. Actually, I had no plans to flee Syria and stay here. I came because of a job offer from MICT, a media assistance NGO occasionally funded by the German foreign office. They wanted to found an FM radio network in Syria. I had talked in May 2013 during the *re:publica* about a radio station which I had previously developed in Syria. It was called *Baladna FM*, which means "my home", and we started it in 2012 with 52 members all over Syria. We had no office, no space to meet physically in Syria. All the teams were

communicating online. This forced me to establish a mechanism where you could communicate and work virtually. The main program was broadcasted 6 hours daily, so we had to fill it with content. I trained and taught the team how to use Dropbox as a secure file system and we worked on Facebook to communicate. Voice communication via Skype was hardly possible, due to the bad Internet connection in Syria. Teams that worked on a program or a report couldn't meet – even when they were in the same city. It was not safe. So they had to work and record in their own safe place. The *re:publica* was very interested in representing it because it was very unique in the Middle East. So there I talked about this, and the foreign office had the idea of founding an FM network in Syria where people could get easy access to information via FM, avoiding the Internet which is even more controlled these days.

When I came to Germany I already had the connections to build this network. My plan was to go back once it was done. I was contracted for 6 months. When my contract ended my flight went to Amman in Jordan, but at the airport they didn't allow me to enter the country again. They said that I was unwelcome in Jordan and that I had to leave. I had only two choices then: to go to Istanbul because Syrians were allowed to get in without a visa, or to go back to Germany. My German visa was still valid, so I decided to come back to Germany. I still had my flat for two more weeks so I used the time to make a plan. After four or five weeks I started *Syrian House*. The idea behind it was to connect those who were living here. At the beginning it wasn't *Syrian House* for Germany. At the beginning it was *Syrian House* in Berlin.

With a growing number of members we renamed it *Syrian House* in Germany. Previously, we did the very same thing in Egypt and in Jordan – we also had Facebook groups *Syrian House* in Egypt, *Syrian House* in Jordan. In all the cases it was set up for the very same reasons: to teach Syrians how to live there, to communicate, how to exchange information and knowledge.

While preparing for this special edition of GMJ-DE, it was almost impossible to miss Syrian House. The Facebook group has been covered by influential media, certainly also because it is one of the biggest community sites that connects a large number of members. With respect to the almost non-existing community media sector in Germany, Syrian House is the exception to the rule.

CH: Could you please describe what *Syrian House* Germany provides to its members?

MB: *Syrian House* is a safe platform where Syrians can exchange experiences and knowledge without facing posts from hackers or viruses. I do a lot to keep this away from the platform. For example, in *Syrian House* I delete 200-300 spam posts daily. It is unbelievable. Most of it is pornography. Besides that, there is also religious advertisement, people who want you to follow their religion. But it comes from outside of Germany, from people who have no intention to live here. Many posts have no relation to anything regarding the situation in Germany. For

example, somebody posted how to cook this or that. I edit the posts on the group's wall. I want to make sure that only things are posted that have a real relation to the cause of the group.

CH: You said you receive some religious advertisement. Is it coming from Salafists or other religious groups?

MB: Most is from Salafists or ISIS people who just want to invite more people to their cause. Besides, they keep accusing the refugees that they fled Syria rather than defending it. And not only ISIS. Like the regime, the pro-regime people keep posting pictures of refugees and claim that those are fighters that killed Syrians. The *Syrian House* group is not a good environment in my opinion to accuse somebody without any evidence, just to post a random photo claiming that this is his name and his address and he did this and that. Facebook should not be misused this way.

CH: Talking about spam: do you also get racist hate mails from Germans?

MB: Thousands and thousands. But I never talk about them. I never share them, I never repost them, and never talk even to the media about them, because I face the very same things from some of the Syrians. It is normal in every community. I better focus on the positive sides.

CH: How many members does your group have today and how is it managed?

MB: More than 132,000. *Syrian House* now consists of many Facebook groups, a Facebook-only network. First of all the groups are based on local communities. As an example, we have 16 local groups: *Syrian House* in Berlin, *Syrian House* in Dortmund, etc. Besides, we also made groups based on their profession, such as Syrian engineers in Germany, Syrian artists in Germany, dentists, etc. Each one of those groups has its own admin. The network is based on local teams, so the admin lives in the very same city. If the group is based on a certain profession, the admin is someone from the same environment. I myself focus on the main and largest one, *Syrian House* in Germany, and actually I am hoping to find some kind of support and funds so we could all meet in one of the German cities for one or two days in order to get to know each other personally. Currently I do not have any kind of financial support. But I am trying to found an association – Verein – so *Syrian House* would be able to receive funds and develop its work.

CH: What is your personal motivation to develop such a network?

MB: Even though in Syria I was one of the people who said that then was not a good time for a revolution, I was still part of the revolution. I am also responsible

for it, so I should share part of the responsibility of what happened to the Syrians. I am in Germany now and maybe in this way I can support this group of Syrians, who can learn how to live in peace and maybe in the future they can teach the rest of the Syrians in Syria how to live in peace and develop our country.

CH: What kind of projects did you develop with *Syrian House*?

MB: I am working on three things. The first one is a cooperation with Ernst & Young, a global business consultancy. We are communicating with all the big companies in Germany trying to find solutions for the Syrians – the experienced ones, the professionals – to be employed.

The second one is my work with ITI (The International Theater Institute) and Gorki Theater in Berlin trying to provide possibilities for theater artists from Syria to work here and to become integrated in their environment. At the same time I'm working with Facebook and Instagram to support Syrian photographers and cinematographers. We will present their books and portfolios so they can be shown to the media. Maybe I will develop things like this for other groups as well, for example musicians.

The third thing is the media. So *Syrian House* is providing a forum for Syrians who are working in the German media, and at the same time trying to put Syrians in the media and on the media. Other than maybe leaving the media to talk about the Syrians, we encourage them to talk to the Syrians, so we help the media to find the perfect interview partner. If a filmmaker wants to make a documentary, we help him communicate with the Syrians. All the TV stations keep seeking the Syrians' opinions and we offer them to them. Aside from that, we are working with the main public stations to develop their work that is aimed at the refugees, for example, WDR, SWR, Deutsche Welle. We already have agreements and contracts with WDR and SWR and are working on one with Deutsche Welle and others. Besides, we are doing workshops at their offices to teach them about the Syrians and the Syrian culture. For example, I was surprised that some of the journalists had no idea that Syria has Christians and that we therefore know about Easter.

At the same time we work with bpb agency of political education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung) to provide workshops for Syrians, teaching them about German democracy. These workshops started in May 2016 and will continue. There, young Syrian refugees can meet German politicians face-to-face and have conversations.

CH: This sounds very ambitious, do you have colleagues or some other networks that support you?

MB: Most of the time, I work alone because of the lack of funds. But for example when I work at an institute or with foundations, they have teams who can do the work. I have volunteer colleagues in *Syrian House* but because of the lack of funds I can't ask them to devote too much of their time to do the task.

Bukhari's Syrian House, as well as other NGO media outlets, have powerful competitors in targeting refugees in the media. German media corporations such as Public Service Media (PSM) as well as institutions such as Telekom started providing special target group offers shortly after it became clear that Germany will face the biggest refugee influx in its post-WWII history. The Public Service Broadcaster ARD and its affiliated regional broadcasting station WDR for instance launched an ambitious Internet platform in four different languages. "WDR for you" has an Arabic, Farsi, English and German section. The platform links different radio and TV programs and covers information, reports and entertainment that the editors in charge perceive as interesting for refugees and volunteers. Arabic and Farsi-speaking reporters present some of the content. Moreover, Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) offers a "Guide for Refugees" with top stories and integration support for the migrants. In order to reach smartphone users the Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees, together with the Federal Agency for Labor and the Goethe Institute provide the Ankommen-App (Arrival App) that offers information necessary for the first weeks in Germany. The Public Service broadcaster of Bavaria (Bayerischer Rundfunk) supplemented the App with its editorial knowledge. The second biggest PSM station, ZDF, launched "ZDF Arabic" in December 2015. It offers topical reports in English and one of the main languages of refugees in Germany. However, other than WDR the German TV reports are only subtitled. Commercial broadcaster NTV created a new format "Marhaba TV". It is a novelty in German television that a fluently Arabic speaking German reporter presents interviews and reports in Arabic. Monis Bukhari communicates with these providers in order to help them to avoid misconceptions in the intercultural coverage.

CH: You mentioned that you are working on contracts with WDR and SWR, what does it comprise, what is your role in these kinds of offers for Syrian people in Germany?

MB: I have several to-dos. The first one is that I provide information on how to use social media in communication with Syrians. The second is consulting about suitable content for the Syrian community here. I am helping them to develop their Arabic content, and how to avoid content that could offend Syrians. Actually, there are still a lot of misconceptions between Syrians and the local media. As an example, a while ago, "WDR for you" produced a video interviewing a Syrian about how the Syrians feel about women in Syria, and how it was different to Germany. The problem is that the interviewee wasn't Arab, he was Kurdish. He wasn't able to speak Arabic, but the whole talk was about Arabs in Syria. So he gave very wrong information. And this raised a wave of rage and hate and anger amongst Syrians. Not only among the Syrians who are in Germany. That is why Syrians started a campaign against WDR and the WDR did not even have an idea about this because they cannot read Arabic and they are not communicating with the Syrians. My role here was to tell them about this. I asked them to delete this video immediately, or they will face hate campaigns against WDR and this would negatively affect all their projects of "WDR for you". They thought they were doing a good thing by interviewing a Syrian talking about Syrians. They thought that the Syrians are one nation and did not consider the fragmentation and in particular the huge conflict between Kurds and Arabs in Syria now. So Syrians took it as an affront.

CH: Obviously, there also exists a lack of intercultural knowledge on the German side. Could you describe other media content that maybe led to intercultural misunderstandings?

MB: We can talk about this for hours, but I can give you very small examples about what can cause problems. For example, Constantin Schreiber who has an Arabic magazine on the German news TV channel NTV is doing good work by speaking in Arabic in front of the camera. But most of the time he talks about his side, and then he says: "but you in Syria do this and that, you in the Arab world do this and that." This is very problematic. Because many Syrians will try to correct him, saying "you talk about us, but it's a mistake, we are not like this, we are like that." This causes conflict.

At the same time, as much as the Syrians have no idea about the diversity of their own nation, many Middle Eastern communities are like that. This is also a result of dictatorship and communicative isolation. So when Schreiber talks about Muslims, Arabs, Syrians, he's homogenizing all of them. It would be enough if he said, "we the Germans do this." That's it. You don't have to say, "but you do that."

CH: Does *Syrian House* also connect the refugees in Germany with the Syrians back home? Might there be a chance that it will encourage people to migrate to Germany or to another country, or not?

MB: *Syrian House* on Facebook has no aim of doing that. But of course, because it's Facebook and it's an open environment, everyone can read and see what we are posting on *Syrian House*. Many people who live in Germany now send me letters and still have family members back home who they connect with. So sometimes Syrians in Germany call me and say, "you wrote about X, and the person who told me is my cousin in Syria." Syrians who are in Syria can also be aware of the knowledge which is exchanged on *Syrian House* but I think it is not really interesting for them. For example, we talk about how to pay the electricity bills. And no one in Syria would be interested in this. However, on Facebook there are other groups whose only aim is it to give information about how to migrate. They tell people how to travel cheaply, or how to find refuge here, or how to arrive in Europe. In *Syrian House* even questions about visa are not allowed. The main theme is how to manage life in Germany.

CH: In an interview with SPIEGEL Online you were cited as saying that refugees have to accept German values. What do you mean by that – do you mean assimilation, or is it something more differentiated?

MB: Back then, I actually meant respect. In my opinion integration means that I respect you and that you can respect me. Integration is not to be melted into your community. So every society has its own values. To live inside this society I should respect its values, and in order to respect them I should learn about them. Learning is what I meant with "have to accept".

CH: Finally, would you please share with us the most interesting experiences or comments from your *Syrian House* group.

MB: The most exciting experience with *Syrian House* was when we talked about the campaign called "Danke, Deutschland". It was in May 2015, and I created an event on Facebook saying let's give away roses to Germans on October 10th. I was surprised that the majority of the Syrians here responded in a very positive way. Many went out on this day and they bought roses and some of them made dancing circles, *dabkeh*, to celebrate the day. Thousands of roses were distributed on that day. It made me really happy that it showed that people actually want to work together as a Syrian community. So if they get the chance they can achieve something. I remember during the very first days of the revolution in Syria we went out with roses, distributing them to the soldiers together with orange juice. The big response amongst the Syrian community and the Germans to the campaign "Danke Deutschland" left me with a positive feeling that the Syrian community in Germany will be part of the German society.

CH: Thank you very much for the interview!

You can connect to *Syrisches Haus* via:

- http://syrischeshaus.de/
- https://www.facebook.com/groups/SyrianHomeBerlin
- https://www.facebook.com/SyrischesHaus