

Idil Osman

BA in Journalism Studies and MA in Creative Writing from London Metropolitan University
PhD in Media from Cardiff University
SOAS, University of London



Media, Diaspora and the Transnationalisation of Conflict

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Diaspora communities have emerged in Western countries in unprecedented numbers due to migration and rapid development in communication and transport technologies in the age of globalisation. This has resulted in diasporic media playing a key role in enabling a reconnection of diasporic populations with a mediated homeland. This reconnection becomes more poignant amongst diaspora communities that feel marginalised, racially discriminated against and battle threats of xenophobia, Islamophobia and other forms of social exclusion in their adopted Western homes. This makes mediated co-presence more powerful than physical co-presence as diaspora individuals try to find community at a distance (Siapera and Veikou 2014).

Taking the Somali diaspora community as a case study, this article explores conflict-generated diaspora, their engagements with their homelands and the centrality of diasporic media in these engagements. The article argues that diasporic media can play a participatory role beyond facilitating connections with the homeland that can enable the transnationalisation of conflict dynamics. When conflict dynamics are manifested within diaspora social networks, the re-creation of conflict takes place, which then facilitates the engagement of diaspora with homeland conflicts, producing a cyclical progression of conflict re-creation.

Introduction: Contextualising Diaspora

In the context of conflicts of the twenty-first century, which are no longer fought or confined within the territorial borders they escalated from, conflicts are becoming dispersed and delocalised (Demmers 2002:85). Examples of the Tamil Tigers in London helping their counterparts in Sri Lanka, American-Jewish groups supporting right-wing extremists in Israel, and German Croats supporting the collapse of the former Yugoslavia are representative of such conflicts. The influence of these diaspora communities is often manifold and can take different political forms. In some instances, diasporic voices can plead for reconciliation and demobilisation (Demmers 2002: 86) but in many instances, they can feed and prolong the conflict.

As a complex social phenomenon, diaspora has many definitions and interpretations. Scholars differ in their understanding of diasporas based on contexts, origins and the differing natures of diasporas. Literature on diasporas is diverse and divided. Diasporas are not homogeneous units.

Individual members and groups within diaspora are 'stratified by class, caste, education, occupation, religious affiliation, cultural interests, urban or rural background' (Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999: 24) and often act from differing positions and backgrounds. A vast variety of actors, political, social and econom-

ic leanings constantly defines and redefines diasporas and their agendas (Bush 2007; Hall 2007). Class, cast, clan or sub-ethnic belonging and length of stay in the host country are typical factors that may divide or define diaspora groups (Bush 2007). Diasporas can often be somewhat of a reflection of alliances and divisions dominant in the country of origin, but they can also transcend from traditional structures and dividing lines and shape new realities instead (Horst 2008). Other discussions seek to differentiate groups that are the result of forced migration, violence or trauma, such as refugees and asylum-seekers versus migrants who have chosen to relocate for economic reasons (Cheran 2003).

Population movements across borders are not a new phenomenon, yet significant shifts in the scope of international migration, as well as rapid advancement of transportation and communication, paralleled by decreasing prices of the latter, make today's globalised world ever more interconnected (Held et al. 1999; Castles and Miller 2003), while at the same time, also contributing to further migration (Castles and Miller 2003). Movements of people of such scales across state borders cannot but have substantial economic and social consequences (Castles and Miller 2003). Due to their political and economic potential, comprehensive knowledge of multiple cultures, and easy access to networks of local partners in their home countries, diasporas are seen as potential instruments to reach foreign policy and development goals.

Diasporas engage in various transnational practices, such as remittances, relief, investment in development projects or for-profit ventures, and political activism that have wider development ramifications. A clear indicator of the increasing significance policy-makers give to the possible development and peace-making role that diasporas can play was when in May 2011, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance (IdEA), a non-profit organisation managed via a public-private partnership between the US Department of State, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Migration Policy Institute, to link diasporas to state and private development initiatives. Moreover, the United Nations and several of its agencies, the European Union, World Bank, IMF and major donor countries with their respective development agencies have had their own diaspora related programmes, seeking to mobilise diaspora's potential for development operations, poverty reduction in general or specific initiatives on the ground. Diasporic transnational actions are cross-border

activities of an economic, political or socio-economical nature.

In this context, the Somali diaspora serve as an illuminating case study. They have been instrumental in development and service delivery, creation of business networks with neighbouring countries and the Gulf States, and creating telecommunication networks and media outlets as Hammond explains:

It is no exaggeration to say that the private sector is the lifeline of Somalis. Somali businesspeople have shown remarkable resilience in adapting to challenges including insecurity, displacement, travel restrictions, lack of a formal banking sector, and absence of a formal investment climate. Somali business people are renowned for having built telecommunications businesses that offer the cheapest telephone calls in East Africa, an efficient and trusted remittance system that charges much lower commission rates than western-organized companies, and import/export businesses that are able to operate under the harshest of conditions, providing an income to producers and traders as well as much needed goods to consumers (Hammond 2011: 83).

Mapping the Somali Diaspora

The lived experience of the Somali people has been built on unique resilience mechanisms that allow them to weather the storms and avoid catastrophic outcomes. One of the reasons is that mobility is a central aspect of Somali culture. Pastoral nomadic lifestyle assumed cycles of regular internal migration (at times also migration beyond colonial borders) conditioned by climate, the environment and seasonal shifts. Literature also suggests a link between sustained economic activity, survival strategies by livelihoods in post conflict or crisis settings and diaspora engagement (Hammond and Vaughan-Lee 2012). Migration has been synonymous with the Somali experience. From the pastoral nomads who are regularly on the move in search for better pasture to the seafaring adventure seekers who travelled to, and settled in, many ports across the Middle East and Europe (Abdi 2015), Somalis are known to be on the move. Since fleeing the outbreak of the civil war in 1991, they have formed considerable migrant groups in many countries across the world and are estimated to be 1.5–2 million in total. The majority of them can be found in North America and the UK.

Despite having a common language, ethnicity and religion, the Somali diaspora are

heterogeneous. They are differentiated by the variety of clan memberships and associations of home territories, which have important implications for their political and social identities (Hammond 2011). Differences also occur in generational terms, where the lived experience of an older Somali diaspora differs significantly from the younger population. The older generation has a vivid recollection of life in Somalia and fleeing the war whereas the younger generation has no such memories (Hammond 2011). Majority of the older generation diaspora share a never wavering wish to return to their homeland. They have not permanently left their country of origin to start a new life elsewhere. In an age of globalisation, characterised by accessible transportation and rapid communication, Somali diasporas have remained intimately connected with their homeland.

Memories of Conflict and Connections to the Homeland

An important point that needs to be acknowledged is that the Somali diaspora's sense of belonging with their homeland and subsequent engagements with it is surrounded by memories of the war they survived: heinous atrocities that were carried out by Somalis against Somalis. They were friends, colleagues, in-laws, neighbours and citizens of the same nation. These memories remain vivid in the minds of many Somali diasporas, carrying with them traumas that have gone untreated.

In 2011, I co-authored a book (Daahir et al. 2011) that sought to capture the double migration experiences of Somali-Europeans who moved to the UK. It was astounding how detailed the recollections of the older interviewees were when asked about their first migration, fleeing from the war, which in 2011 took place 20 years earlier. Qamaasha, a Dutch-Somali mother who lives in Leicester, UK was one of those interviewees:

I saw my pregnant neighbour and husband get slaughtered in front of me. They left two children behind, a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old. Images of my impending death filled my head. When I couldn't take it anymore, we fled for Kismaayo in the South. En route I saw a man who was half dead, still wriggling, with several of his internal organs displayed. I can never forget the barbarity and gruesomeness I witnessed.

Qamaasha's recollection shows how war memories can remain edged in the conscious of the survivor and those memories remain

alive as the years go by. The psychological and social impacts of carrying these kinds of memories have long been documented to be silently horrific (Holdeman 2009; Brewin et al. 2000; Kulka et al. 1990). Conditions ranging from depression and stress to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other emotional disorders have all been linked to war-induced trauma. The cultural stigma that is attached to mental illness in the Somali society means many feel unable to seek treatment.

Therefore, the likelihood of untreated trauma-related conditions having an impact on the lived experiences, behaviour and activities of the Somali diaspora is very high. The close connection they have with their conflict homeland makes it even more unlikely that they will forget.

Somali diasporas maintain links with their family members back home primarily through economic support but they are also active in the general reconstruction of the country. Somali diasporas make a major contribution to the Somali economy and livelihoods through remittances, humanitarian assistance and participation in recovery and reconstruction efforts (Menkhaus 2008).

The proliferation of telecoms companies in Somalia offering inexpensive and high-quality services is closely connected to the involvement of the diaspora and the remittance business. To accommodate for the demand for remittances, the major telecommunications companies have been driven to innovate to provide the best service possible for their customers, which includes having the widest reach and network, which also incorporates the transnational reach of diasporic media. These businesses have thrived as a result of established communal trust and are deeply intertwined with national and diasporic social relations (Stremlau et al. 2011). The spread of telecoms has been facilitated by the lack of a central government able to regulate the industry, thus allowing telecom companies the opportunity to operate throughout Somalia at will. Within the limits set by the general insecurity prevailing in Somalia, telecoms are often seen as paving the way for the development of a business sector in Somalia. While most of these companies are owned and operated by members of the diaspora, the telecoms revolution has, at the same time, transformed the ability of Somalis to connect with those living abroad and to build bridges between diasporic communities and Somalis at home.

Diasporic Media and Conflict Re-Creation

The media facilitates much of this homeland engagement. The Somali media based in the

diaspora has become pivotal and dominates the Somali media landscape. This is predominantly due to it costing very little to set up, having access to credit cards and the technical infrastructure in the West that is at the diaspora's disposal as well as having a stable and secure environment surrounding them.

Within the scope of homeland engagement, diasporic media provide platforms for developmental and humanitarian progress. This is often most visible when disasters such as famines or terrorist attacks that lead to massive casualties occur but can also be noticed through the various humanitarian and developmental programs featured on diasporic media. Community members often refer to how they saw a particular project or campaign on Somali TV stations or websites and consequently participated in them (Osman 2017; 2015).

But the day-to-day activities of diasporic media are more likely to transport and transnationalise conflict dynamics. There are three ways that Somali diasporic media is reproducing dynamics of the Somali conflict and thereby re-creating it. I have conceptualised these ways as the three Politics of Non-Recognition, Solidarity and Mobilisation (Osman 2017; 2015). Diasporic media provide spaces to promote political, religious and clan-centred ideologies that are often contradictory in nature. There is also evidence of encouraging a culture of non-recognition towards minorities and marginalised groups and the reproduction of an us-vs-them environment that can lead to negative mobilisation. In sum, diasporic media in addition to facilitating platforms for development and humanitarian engagement, also transnationalise and 're-create' the conflict amongst diaspora communities who then engage with the conflict at home, producing a cyclical re-creation of conflict.

The Somali web sites that have sprung up in various parts of the world depict a deeply divided society, one that is at the same time both integrated and fragmented. Political events that take place at home are analysed and argued about by diaspora members internationally (Issa-Salwe 2008). As Lyons (2004) points out, conflict-generated diaspora groups are social networks that link past conflict, the contemporary challenges of living in a host state and an aspiration of return to a particular piece of territory that is the symbolically important homeland.

Summary

The political weight of diaspora communities in intra-state conflict has increased in

recent years. Group identities are much less territorially bounded. The Somali diaspora is an acute representation of de-territorialised communities that are transnationally active in their homelands. We have seen that their engagement can have both positive and negative connotations. Establishing media outlets has extended the capacity for political engagement and mobilisation (Kaldor 1999: 86) as well as the re-invention of identity politics, changing with tides of opportunity.

What we have is therefore a complex reality when it comes to Somali diaspora engagement with the homeland. We have diasporas that engage as: (a) agents of peace and development; (b) 'spoilers' who negatively affect conflict and peace dynamics; and (c) actors supporting both peace and violence simultaneously. The opportunities presented by globalisation open up greater possibilities for territorially bounded connections, facilitated by online platforms, where people who are attached to particular homeland territories engage with one another politically in ways that can translate to offline activities. In the Somali case, there is a deeply entrenched imagined connection to the homeland territories that is reinforced and fortified by diasporic media. A key problematic variable here is that the clan animosity that escalated from the war has remained a 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg 2004) and continues to brew amongst the Somali diaspora both in action and in memory. Whilst there is potential for constructive diaspora engagement, and indeed evidence of it, there is a need to take a more measured approach towards diaspora potential as 'developers of their homeland'.

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