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## Diasporas and conflicts: Dangerous liaisons?

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*The recent arrival in Europe of refugees fleeing conflict areas has triggered a renewed interest in the relations between diasporas and conflicts. These relations are traditionally epitomized by the peace makers/peace wreckers dichotomy, whereby diasporas contribute either to conflict resolution or to conflict escalation and maintenance in their countries of origin. Research however suggests that the links between diasporas and conflicts are actually significantly more complex, and involve processes of conflict transportation and conflict autonomization in countries of settlement, but also of diasporas' investment in conflicts with which they have no pre-established relation. These processes have important consequences on the territory and space in which conflicts are expressed, and/or which conflicts generate. Diasporas can therefore be seen as spaces where conflicts can be renewed or resolved, but also expanded and distorted.*

Over the past few decades, diaspora studies have greatly expanded to cover fields that had previously been described as ethnic politics, ethnic lobbying, immigrant politics, or expatriate politics. There is in particular a growing interest in diaspora politics, and in how countries of origin try to harness their diasporas for their own political objectives. Diaspora scholars have also invested in tools used by mobilisation sociology, and have started paying closer attention to mechanisms leading to diaspora mobilization such as key events

and junctures. New themes, such as the study of the influence of diasporas on transitional justice programmes, keep emerging, but it is undoubtedly the links between diasporas and conflicts that have recently attracted the most media, policy, and academic attention.

### Definitional debates

The recent arrival in Europe of refugees fleeing wartorn countries has played a central role in the renewed interest in the links between migration, diasporas and conflicts. In parallel, the concept of diaspora has become extremely popular among migrant and refugee groups themselves, and in policy-making communities. This increased popularity of the concept has led many diaspora scholars to call for caution, and to remind us that "diaspora" has, at least in the academic literature, a precise meaning. In other words, not all migrants or refugees are part of a diaspora, and not all groups of migrants or refugees will eventually become part of a diaspora. In order to understand this, it is useful to go back to the commonly accepted features of a diaspora: a voluntary or involuntary dispersion; a collective memory and myth about the country of origin; a troubled relationship with the country of settlement; a commitment to the homeland's safety and prosperity; the presence of the issue of return, though not necessarily a commitment to do so; and finally a diasporic consciousness and solidarity that

can be expressed through the creation of diaspora organisations. Keeping these definitional elements in mind, groups of migrants may constitute a diaspora if, with time, they develop these organisational and imaginative elements upon which a common identity can develop. In other words, time and structure are what might set apart diasporas from other groups of migrants. Of course, what the immense popularity of the concept among migrants' groups themselves suggests is that there is a (political, economic, social, cultural...) added value in using it, which is another issue well worth examining.

Definitional difficulties and debates further increase when one wants to study the links between diasporas and conflicts. Just as there are different types of conflicts (intrastate, interstate, internationalized, etc.) that can provoke migration, there is a great variety of configurations leading to the constitution of what is commonly called a "conflict-generated", or a "conflict-induced" diaspora. Diasporas that have been formed because of a conflict can be very small, or so large that their numbers far exceed that of their country of origin, as in the case of Armenia. Some of these diasporas are stateless, while some others can rely on a powerful home State. All these groups are extremely complex entities that display a striking internal diversity. As such, it is worth recalling that there is no such thing as a purely "conflict-generated diaspora", because diasporas are constituted by several generations or waves that might be generated by different factors. For instance, some sections of the Lebanese diaspora correspond to what is usually called a "trade diaspora", while some Lebanese have fled their country because of the civil war. Think also about what is usually called "the Rwandan diaspora". Using the singular to describe a group that is so deeply divided, along generations, ethnicity and types of political mobilization, is obviously a sort of language abuse.

### **Traditional approaches to the links between diasporas and conflicts**

The relations between diasporas and conflicts are extremely complex, and can pertain to different mechanisms, some of which are well known and studied, such as the phenomenon of conflict-generated migration, or the "peace making" or "peace wrecking" capacities of diaspora groups. Diasporas are notably often suspected of playing a significant role in the escalation or maintenance of conflicts in their home countries, for instance by sending remittances, weapons, or sometimes by taking part in the fighting. Popular and historical examples notably include the Tamil diaspora,

which raised funds, generated political and diplomatic support, and also expanded the LTTE's networks for weapons procurement. The role played by the Irish diaspora in the conflict in Northern Ireland, the Palestinian diaspora and its support to PLO and Fatah, the Kosovo Albanian diaspora's support to the Kosovo Liberation Army, or the "weekend fighters", travelling from Germany to fight during the war in Bosnia, are just a few examples among many.

In parallel, the idea that diasporas can act as "peace makers" has been gaining ground over the last decade amongst policy makers, though it has remained comparatively under-researched. In the existing academic literature, less attention tends to be given to financial assistance provided by diasporas for nonviolent objectives, even if in many cases this contribution is significant. In the Northern Irish case for instance, many more U.S. dollars have been donated for peace than have ever been given for violent purposes. There are multiple ways in which diasporas can have, and indeed have had, a positive impact on conflicts raging in their countries of origin. They can for instance help to bring parties to the negotiation table and enhance communication between them, as the Ugandan Acholi diaspora in London has done in 2006–2008 between representatives from the government of Uganda, the government of Sudan and the Lord's Resistance Army. Diasporas can support conflict's termination, contribute to the sustainability of the peace process, and play a major economic role in the post-conflict and reconstruction phases. Diasporas, especially those settled in wealthier countries, can offer crucial financial support in this phase to undo the effects of a conflict and to help stabilize and reconstruct the country.

However, because of their high internal diversity, attempting to harness diasporas for conflict mitigation or peace building purposes can be risky. Diasporas always play varied roles in a given conflict, and different groups and individuals within the same diaspora may have different approaches. Even where a diaspora is united on objectives, it may play a positive role in peace-making and at the same time play a negative role in terms of contribution to a continued conflict. And it can also choose to play neither role. The example of the Croatian diaspora, which both funded armed conflict and, in the later conflict stages, was also active in support for peacebuilding, is an example worth keeping in mind. Likewise, within the above quoted "Rwandan diaspora", there are for instance those who have, after the genocide, advocated for revenge – the "peace wreckers" – while others have orga-

nized mediation and reconciliation activities, or relief support – the “peace makers”. Instead of being a collective political actor, diaspora communities can be thought of as sites in which processes of conflict or peace take place. They can thus be vectors of conflict and conflict resolution at the same time. There are however clear differences according to the conflict stage: lobbying and advocacy activities by diasporas seem to be greater when the conflict is acute but take a second place to survival and adjustment to the country of settlement when the conflict de-escalates.

### Unpacking the diaspora-conflict nexus

Only a scarce number of studies are dedicated to analyzing and understanding other aspects of the relations between diasporas and conflicts, that is for instance how conflicts in home countries might affect the life and mobilization of diasporas in their countries of settlement, or how conflicts can be transported through diaspora practices, and/or through instrumentalizations by countries of origin. Examples of such “transportation” processes are however plentiful, such as the recurrent clashes between Kurdish and Turkish diasporas living in various European countries, or between youth gangs of South Asian origin in London. It is also important to recognize that conflicts in diaspora settings can “autonomize” themselves, and therefore become significantly different in shape and in issues from conflicts raging in countries of origin, therefore giving birth to a new conflict cycle. Recent events have also drawn attention towards the fact that diasporas can become involved in conflicts with which they have no pre-established connection, through what can be called “global networks of solidarity”, which might themselves be based on political ideology, religion, language, and so on. Transnational solidarities around Palestine are a good case in point. All these potential linkages between diasporas and conflicts have been feeding securitization discourses in both countries of origin and in countries of settlement, whereby diasporas are generally represented as potentially dangerous.

In addition, these connections have important consequences on the territory and space in which conflicts are expressed, and/or which conflicts generate, for instance by expanding the conflicts’ space to the territories that the diasporas inhabit, or by expanding the conflicts’ lifespan, notably through the memories diasporas keep of them, which perpetuate conflicts sometimes long after they have ended in countries of origin. Diasporas can therefore be seen

as spaces where conflicts can be renewed or solved, but also expanded and distorted.

At the practical level, this entails paying attention to, for instance, contentious spaces where diasporas are created, or which diasporas create, but also to contentious events or time junctures at which the articulation between conflicts and diaspora groups is effected. Beyond countries of origin and countries of settlement, actors such as diaspora organizations, or transnational organizations such as Churches, play a major role in shaping and maintaining the links between diasporas and conflicts. Spaces in which these links are activated, including at the micro level (e.g. neighbourhood, communal spaces, etc.), or in transnational forums (e.g. Internet) are also worth examining. In sum, it is important to understand diasporas’ engagement with regard to conflicts raging in their countries of origin or elsewhere as the result of a conjunction of various factors, which are never completely reducible to the country of origin and/or to the country of settlement.

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