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Accepted manuscript PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

'Diasporas building peace: Reflections from the Middle Eastern diasporas', in *Diasporas building peace: Reflections from the Middle Eastern diasporas Book Title*, ed. by Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer, pub 2018 (ISBN 9781138631137)

Publisher: Routledge

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Baser, B., & Toivanen, M. (2018). Diasporas building peace: Reflections from the Middle Eastern diasporas. In R. Cohen, & C. Fischer (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies* (pp. 345-353). (Routledge International

Diasporas building peace: reflections from the experience of Middle Eastern diasporas

Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen

In almost every conflict around the world today, diasporas are identified as critical stakeholders (Geukjian 2014; Probst 2016: 2; Shain 2002). Indeed, the growing importance of diasporas in contemporary world politics has brought more intense scrutiny to them. A burgeoning literature has thus arisen on their role as contributors to (and spoilers of) peace processes, as agents for post-conflict development, and as bridges between third parties and homeland political actors (Baser and Swain 2008; Cohen 2008; Pande 2017: 5). Although until recently diasporas were portrayed as victims of conflicts and/or as passive recipients of the politics of both homeland and host country, they are now more and more also seen as purposive and capable agents. This reality is being increasingly recognized by academics, as well as by NGOs and key political actors in both the homeland and host countries. As Cohen (1996) rightly put it almost two decades ago, yesterday's victims have become today's vocal challengers to existing political mechanisms and processes, both at home and abroad. If migration and refugees remain highly charged and visible topics in contemporary politics, diasporas will also continue to receive ample scrutiny and will surely attract greater attention in the future.

Diasporas from the Middle East

Diasporas from the Middle East were, globally speaking, the largest diasporic movements to form during the twentieth century. Whereas earlier migration movements from the region were more closely linked to outward labour migration, in the late twentieth century humanitarian migration resulting from inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts rose in importance. In scope and intensity, the migrations from Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Palestine (among other countries), have been tightly linked to societal and political developments within these countries. Middle Eastern diasporas today therefore constitute something of an amalgam of both labour (voluntary) and conflict-generated (largely involuntary) waves of historical migration. This has meant that, across the globe, the engagement of diasporic communities with homeland affairs has been neither homogenous nor straightforward. The 'politicized ethnic identities' (Wald 2009: 1304) of those in the diaspora whose migration have been conflict generated, have tended to sustain loyalties to the homeland. Establishing mature organizations and actively transmitting identities, traumas and experiences from generation to generation has allowed diasporas to have a range of capacities for mobilization and action. The environment of continual insecurity and crisis in the Middle East also perpetuates these migration flows and, with each emerging new calamity or conflict, the existing diasporas acquire new members.

An abundant body of empirical research shows how different diasporic groups from the Middle East participate in peace-making efforts in their conflict-ridden home countries. The types of Middle Eastern diasporic participation on which case studies have been based include establishing advocacy networks (Mavroudi 2008), lobbying policy makers in the host state (Baser 2015; Toivanen 2014), participating politically through external voting (Tabar 2014), taking part in conflict resolution (Geukjian 2014), investing and providing development support (Brinkerhoff 2008), and supporting reconciliation and justice-seeking endeavours (Bamyeh 2007). Mobilization has also occurred online, thanks to the new communication technologies and easy access to homeland media outlets (Alinejad 2011; Ben-David 2012; Helland 2007). The most commonly studied cases are the Palestinian, Lebanese, Jewish, Kurdish and Egyptian diasporas. Some, such as the Egyptian diaspora in the UK (Underhill 2016), have only recently mobilized following a crisis in the homeland. Others, due to statelessness and constant oppression – notably the Palestinian and Kurdish diasporas – have maintained consistent mobilization over time (Baser 2015; Mason 2007; Toivanen 2014). The Armenians of Lebanon (Geukjian 2014) and the Coptic diaspora from Egypt (Yefet 2017) are also widely studied providing insights into diasporic groups that are religious minorities in their respective homelands. The newly emerging Syrian diaspora

is also receiving a lot of attention in the literature, especially from NGOs and think-tanks offering humanitarian assistance in the region, for they see its members as providing a useful conduit to the local communities there (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015).

Such examples demonstrate the multiple ways in which different diasporic groups and their members participate in homeland affairs, as well as the internal heterogeneity of diasporas themselves (Van Hear and Cohen 2016). They also speak volumes about the contradictory effects that diasporic activism can have on perpetuating a conflict instead of providing a means for peace building. As Probst (2016: 2) argues, 'the role of diasporas is not unconditionally positive or negative', for they have multifaceted roles to play in conflict. The debate on whether diasporas are 'peace-wreckers or peace-makers' (Smith and Stares 2007) has dominated discussions on the role of diasporas for the last decade. Most of the literature has been based on case studies of a specific country and findings have been highly context-dependent. For instance, scholars studying security or terrorism have focused on how diasporas prolong conflicts by giving material and non-material support to terrorist organizations, in the context of increasing suspicions about diasporic engagement. The dominant perspective has been that diasporas have been involved in non-transparent actions that were potentially altering political situations in their homelands and that a better understanding of the mechanisms they were using to prolong conflicts while undermining the surveillance mechanisms of the host countries was needed (Hoffman et al. 2007).

Scholars from a social movement background have underlined that diasporas mobilized similarly to advocacy networks and that their actions could be better understood from a social movement perspective, with its focus on mobilizing resources and social capital (Biswas 2004). Another strand of research have focused on the positive impact that diasporas can have on homeland conflicts and specifically highlighted their role in post-conflict reconstruction and development, whether it be through investing in the homeland economy or by acting as a third party between donors and homeland governments (Cochrane et al. 2009; Kent 2006). The ongoing debates, despite multiple approaches, have all concluded that diasporas are multifaceted and not at all homogenous. Therefore, within a diasporic group, there could be multiple clusters of different ideological, religious, ethnic or economic backgrounds and with varying agendas for the homeland and host country. For instance, McAuliffe (2007) clearly shows how first- and second-generation members of the Iranian diaspora are divided across religious lines, even as both maintain their transnational links with the theocratic Iranian state. The Alevite diaspora from Turkey has also set up separate associations from those established by Sunni-Muslim groups coming from the same country (Sökefeld 2006). Moreover, a diasporic group can alter its strategy during a conflict – a stance towards a homeland struggle is not static. Diasporic identities are fluid and so are their political aims and goals (Smith and Stares 2007).

All these points have left scholars pointing to the significant dilemma host countries face when addressing the question of 'how, when and who to engage' among their local diasporas in conflict resolution in their homelands. Since clearly 'diasporas matter', the questions that follow are 'what impact' do they have and 'under what conditions'? - questions that still remain to some extent unaddressed in the literature. Original case-study-based research offers the prospect of gaining significant insight into these questions although the jury is still out on whether diaspora's role in conflicts is positive or not.

What conditions the resolution and prolongation of conflict?

Not all diasporas from the Middle East wish to engage in homeland affairs (Asal and Ayres 2017). Those that do adopt different means of exercising their influence in homeland and host country politics. Moreover, the overall impact will depend on the political and societal contexts of the homeland, as well as of the host country, not to mention the diaspora's ability and motivation for engagement. The political opportunity structures in the sending and receiving countries, diplomatic relations between them and the robustness of transnational channels (networks and institutional structures) are factors that influence a given diaspora's impact on homeland peace-making or peace-wrecking (Baser 2015; Sökefeld 2006; Yefet 2017).

Acquiring an independent role as a political actor in peacebuilding necessitates as a first step a political opportunity structure in the host country that facilitates diaspora lobbying, para-diplomacy and advocacy work towards host-state political actors (Baser 2015; Geukjian 2014). Even where the host country is open to this kind of activism, diasporic groups may not be particularly successful. Yefet (2017: 1207) argues that although the Coptic diaspora in the USA has been successful in terms of lobbying Congress and effectively raising White House awareness of the plight of the Copts, they have had little influence on shifting US foreign policy towards Egypt in a direction that would favour their agenda. Extensive political opportunities in the host country have in this case been superseded by other factors that have limited the diaspora's impact. The compatibility of the national interests of both homeland and host country is thus a highly pertinent factor in the equation. Resource attributes – particularly levels of

education, integration and financial heft – are also major determinants of a diaspora's success. For instance, Skulte-Ouaiss and Tabar (2015: 160) have found that the presence of these resources has been crucial to the ability of the Lebanese diaspora in Australia, Canada and the USA to affect homeland affairs in Lebanon. Moreover, growing Islamophobia and securitization since 9/11 have placed significant obstacles in the way of diasporic groups from the Middle East (Howell and Shryock 2003). Often, discussions on terrorism dovetail with the migration issue and the question of refugees and diasporas (Schmid 2016). Where a diaspora is portrayed as sympathizing with groups listed on the US and EU list of terrorist organisations, the prospect of being criminalized and having severe restrictions on self-representation and activism/mobilization is ever-present.

Also, the homeland–diaspora relations are not always rosy. When debates about homeland affairs between homeland political actors and diasporas erupt into conflict, the latter may find themselves in a challenging situation. First, there may be a fundamental disconnect between local political actors and the diaspora over expectations of how the latter will contribute, participate, and/or exercise influence in the homeland. As Khachig Tölölyan notes in relation to the diaspora–homeland nexus in the Armenian case: 'they want service and money from diasporans, not thoughts or opinions' (cited in Shain 2002: 104). Second, the homeland might consider the diaspora a threat to its own security or interests. The Kurdish diaspora in Europe and elsewhere has often contested the Turkish state's sovereignty from abroad, resulting in considerable diplomatic tension between European countries and Turkey (Baser 2015; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003).

As mentioned, diasporas are not merely victims of surrounding circumstances; they also exercise agency and make use of their capacities to shape and influence events proactively (Geukjian 2014). The diaspora's *capacity and motivation* to influence a homeland conflict (Freitas 2012: 5) is immensely important in terms of determining the scope of its actions. Some groups may have higher levels of motivation but less capacity to influence peace outcomes, while others might proceed with caution despite having significant resources at their disposal. Some might have adverse aspirations about the conflict yet lack the capacity to act as saboteurs, while in other cases the capability will be present but the group may remain indifferent. In many cases, the diaspora's impact remains solely philanthropic (Yefet 2016: 1210). More importantly, different political orientations, cross-cutting loyalties, as well as, among other factors, ethnic and religious backgrounds, can cause diasporas to have divided interests among themselves (Probst 2016: 6). The actions of their members are hindered by divisions that mirror existing cleavages in the homeland, or emerge from newer rifts because of shifting conditions in the host country. Developing projects for diasporic engagement will be complex for home and host countries, as well as for third parties, unless these facts are considered.

Diasporic engagement in peacebuilding at various stages of a conflict

Literature on peace-building and conflict resolution in different states or regions that are politically unstable, and/or in the process of democratic transition is abundant (Cochrane et al. 2009). This research shows that diasporic involvement is dependent on the stage of the conflict and the various other factors mentioned above. As Bercovitch (2007) has noted, each phase of the conflict – from conflict prevention to the post-conflict scenario – generates different diasporic behaviour offering varying options for intervention.

Diasporas can play versatile roles when there is an ongoing conflict in the homeland. They can lobby host governments, push for economic sanctions and organize advocacy networks (Bercovitch 2007: 30). Transnational space provides an excellent platform for diasporas from the Middle East – especially for those who form a minority in the homeland – to mobilize and voice their demands without oppression or fear of persecution. That is why Kurdish and Palestinian diasporas, as the two largest stateless nations of the world, use this space to protest and contest the sovereignty of their respective states, which have undermined their identity, culture and even their right to exist. While the conflict endures in their homeland, they continue to lobby supranational institutions as well as host states to put leverage on their oppressors. For instance, Arab states encourage Arab diasporas all around the world to boycott Israeli products (Bercovitch 2007: 31). The Kurdish diaspora, on the other hand, puts a lot of pressure on the European Union to admonish Turkey for its human rights violations against the Kurds (Baser 2015).

Diasporans can also organize media campaigns, massive demonstrations, petitions and awareness drives to make their voices heard during a conflict. The Kurdish diaspora from Iraq organized widespread marches and hunger strikes during Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign, which killed thousands of Kurds in the late 1980s. Moreover, during the invasion of Iraq, the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora was highly supportive of US involvement and even provided political consultancy and intelligence to foreign governments during the war. However, the general Iraqi diaspora's reaction to the US invasion was much less focused and homogenous. Diasporans also quickly react to critical junctures in their homelands. During the so-called 'Arab Spring' they played an especially vital role in transmitting messages from the homeland to

a wider Western audience (Breuer et al. 2015). During the Gezi protests, the Turkish diaspora also reacted immediately and created awareness in Europe, the USA and Australia when the media in Turkey were heavily censored (Baser 2015).

Advocacy and lobbying are among the activities that diasporic groups can undertake during an ongoing conflict, for their efforts during this phase are more visible and detectable. However, when it comes to the actual peace process, a diaspora's engagement is more limited and its potential to make an impact on the ongoing process is minimal. One reason for this is that most peace processes are private and take place behind closed doors. This secrecy isolates third parties, including diasporas, unless the talks are explicitly designed to encompass them. Although they are designated actors for advocacy, their agency might be undermined during peace processes. Their inclusion/exclusion also depends on how crucial they are to the negotiating parties and how much leverage they have on each actor involved in the process. Diasporas can, in short, sabotage or accelerate a peace process depending on their own agenda and how compatible it is with that of the homeland actors. Moreover, diasporic inclusion in these processes prompts a question about representation. Diasporas are not elected by any constituency; they are merely mobilized (and often highly vocal) people claiming to represent a certain group. Therefore, their inclusion complicates the process. For instance, as Gertheiss (2015) has noted, both Jewish and Palestinian diasporas have had hawkish and dovish factions, each with varying agendas for a potential solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Diasporans are also becoming influential actors in transitional justice mechanisms, for more and more state actors are perceiving them as stakeholders in that process. They participate in truth commissions, testify in courts and support homeland actors and third parties in bringing human rights violations to the fore. Moreover, where transitional justice does not formally take place, diasporas invest in commemoration events that not only strengthen their ties to their kin in the homeland but also keep traumatic events on the agenda. For instance, the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora has been investing significant amounts of money and energy into achieving recognition of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign as a genocide in various European parliaments. With the help of the Kurdistan Regional Government's official representations in European countries they have been successful in this in Sweden, Norway and the UK (Baser & Toivanen 2017). Assyrians from Turkey have also lobbied the Swedish parliament to recognize the atrocities perpetrated against them during the Ottoman era as genocide. Kurds from Turkey also demand transitional justice and truth commissions in Turkey and constantly feed information to the local Kurds about other truth commissions around the world.

Scholars have provided rich documentation on how Middle Eastern diasporas, among others, contribute to homeland development via economic and social remittances, long-distance political participation and return migration. For instance, in 2016 the economic remittances that migrants from developing countries sent back home amounted to three times the official aid flows and constituted more than 10 per cent of GDP in 25 developing countries (World Bank 2016). Economic remittances to the Middle East have been growing steadily, with Egypt becoming the top recipient in 2015 (World Bank 2016). An IOM (2010) study found that the Egyptian diaspora's economic remittances are employed not only to meet the daily household expenses of migrants' families back home but also for investment purposes. Studies such as Tabar's (2014) research on the Lebanese diaspora in Australia show the impact and relevance of long-distance voting to homeland political processes in post-conflict situations. On the other hand, diasporans returning after conflicts has previously been considered a precondition for post-conflict reconstruction. However, in a case study on Iraqi Kurds in Sweden, Emanuelsson (2008) shows that transfer of knowledge and expertise can also take place via partial return or transnationally without necessitating a permanent return. The development of digital technologies in the form of 'mobile money' accounts and electronic money transfers via smart phones enable low-cost and cross-border money transfers to be made to sending regions that can then support post-conflict reconstruction processes and development initiatives back home.

Studies have also shown that there is a continuum between peace-building and development activities once the homeland conflict has subsided (Horst et al. 2010). The engagement of diasporas in development activities can, in a post-conflict situation, become part of the reconstruction process. However, what shapes diasporic engagement in post-conflict reconstruction is the way the conflict has ended. For instance, Van Hear and Cohen (2016: 4) list three possible outcomes of a conflict that shape such activities: (1) stalemate (Afghanistan and Palestine); (2) negotiated peace and settlement (Lebanon); and (3) military victory by one side (Iraq). The result of the conflict shapes not only the motivations of diasporans to engage in post-conflict reconstruction – for instance, if they are on the losing side – but also their possibilities of doing so.

One factor to hinder diasporic engagement in homeland development and post-conflict reconstruction through official channels can be a lack of trust towards local institutions and financial instruments. Paasche's (2016) study on Kurdish return migrants in Iraqi Kurdistan, and their experiences of corruption

in the context of post-conflict peace, is an illustration of this point. A recent report by Malouche et al. (2016) shows that the members of Middle Eastern diasporas are more attached to their cities and immediate networks of family and relatives than to their countries of origin. The transfer of political, economic and social remittances often takes place via these more informal channels and personal networks. As a general trend, the study also shows that Middle Eastern diasporas are motivated to contribute towards their homeland development, regardless of their country of residence.

Conclusion

Diasporas are contemporary non-state actors whose importance has been acknowledged but whose influence has yet to be fully understood. They are stakeholders in virtually every conflict today and there is growing interest in exploring the intricacies of engaging them in conflict resolution. As they are not homogenous, their size, motivation and capacity differ and their networks are sometimes not evident; they constitute a complex partner for the home and host countries that seek to engage them in such processes.

Diasporas from the Middle East are a particularly challenging for policy-makers and third parties to discern. They usually come from countries in conflict and most of these groups are abroad because they are being oppressed or undermined by their respective states. In addition, they often actively contest the sovereignties and political legitimacy of these states at home and abroad. There are also groups in the diaspora that support the policies of their home state and this contributes to the multilayered nature of their interests and agendas. Although we have provided plenty of examples above, yet it is difficult to talk about a monolithic 'Middle Eastern experience', for each diaspora's capacity to exercise impact in homeland varies according to the opportunity structures, foreign policies and other political, economic and social factors in host states. Also, the openness of a home state to its diaspora's influence makes each diaspora's manoeuvring space very diverse.

What is demonstrated here is that diasporas from the Middle East continue to show interest in their homeland; they engage in various repertoires of action to influence policy making in both home and host country and they will continue to do so – perhaps with even more rigour as their agency keeps getting recognized by political actors. The importance of Middle Eastern diasporas in homeland peace-building and conflict resolution will only increase with the so-called 'refugee crisis' and their rising numbers in Western societies. However, with the growth of Islamophobia, xenophobia and the general rise of right-wing parties in the host countries they might also face more suspicion and more limited opportunities to intervene. Given such pressing conditions at home and abroad, diasporas are yet to carve out their spaces of representation.

Acknowledgement

The authors are listed in alphabetical order; they contributed equally to this chapter.

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