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## **DIIS Brief**

# **Diasporas and Conflict Resolution – Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?**

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Diaspora and exile groups may play an important, but sometimes also controversial role in conflicts and political unrest in their countries of origin. This is by no means a new phenomenon. Yet, the growing number of intra-state conflicts, the enhanced possibilities for transnational communication, mobilization and action as well as the upsurge in domestic and international security concerns after 9/11, have heightened attention to the role of diasporas. For some, diasporas are irresponsible long distance nationalist or fundamentalists that perpetuate conflicts through economic and political support or intervention. Others have noted how diaspora and exile groups are committed to non-violent conflict resolution and may stimulate and reinforce local processes of democratization and post-conflict reconstruction in their countries of origin.

This brief discusses a number of issues surrounding the complex and sometimes ambiguous role of diasporas and exiles in conflicts in their country of origin. These include: the issue of how diaspora and exile politics is grounded in the local context of the everyday problems that the diasporas face in their countries of residence; how diaspora political transnational means of intervention in conflicts in their countries of origin is constrained or facilitated by other political actors and power relations; and the tricky issue of the accountability and transparency of diaspora political networks and campaigns vis-à-vis the wider collective of migrants and refugees or the population in the country of origin. The paper mainly draws on the case of Kurdish diaspora political networks in Europe, supplemented with examples from other diaspora and refugee collectives.

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## Introduction

Diaspora and exile groups may play an important, but sometimes also controversial role in conflicts and political unrest in their countries of origin. This is by no means a new phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the growing number of intra-state conflicts, the enhanced possibilities for transnational communication, mobilization and action as well as the upsurge in domestic and international security concerns after 9/11, have heightened attention to the role of diasporas.

Two fairly polarized views can be identified in studies of diasporas and conflict. On the one hand, the seemingly dominating position in the literature highlights the dark side of diaspora politics. In this view diasporas are long distance nationalists or fundamentalists that perpetuate conflicts through economic and political support or intervention without risking their own neck. It has been argued that in cases such as Ethiopia, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Israel, Palestine and Kosovo, diaspora groups have played major roles in augmenting conflicts (Collier and Hoeffler 2001; Lyons 2004; Vertovec 2005). Indeed, in the LSE yearbook on global civil society of 2003, diasporas fall under the heading of 'regressive globalisers', that is, 'groups which favour nation-state thinking through transnational means' (Kaldor *et al.* 2003). Diasporas are seen as part of the problem not as part of the solution.

On the other hand, it has been noted how diaspora and exile groups are committed to non-violent conflict resolution and may stimulate and reinforce local processes of democratization and post-conflict reconstruction in their countries of origin (Koser 2003; Emanuelsson 2005). This is reflected in current recommendations and policy papers promoting an enhanced role of diasporas in especially development but also democratization in their countries of origin (Hear, Pieke *et al.* 2004). This is not a policy area which is as firmly developed as that countering the dark side of diaspora politics. Nonetheless, it is a policy area which has attracted quite a bit of political attention throughout the EU, with more coherent public policy initiatives underway at both the level of EU institutions and in several EU member-states.

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<sup>1</sup> The term diaspora is here used loosely to denote groups of migrants, refugees and their descendants among whom there is an identity which refers to a homeland elsewhere.

It is not the point of this paper to discuss which side is right. There are plenty of examples of both types of diasporas to support either view. Importantly, different interpretations of diasporas depend on the view of the beholder. Irresponsible long distance nationalist for some are freedom fighters for others. Finally, and this is one of the main arguments of this paper, diasporas are often politically heterogeneous with political networks working towards different aims and with different methods.

Instead, the following discussions aim to highlight some of the dynamics which I believe integral to understanding the mobilization and role of diasporas in conflicts in their countries of origin. From an academic point of view the political networks and activities of diasporas go to the core of one of the central issues within social science, the fading dichotomy between the domestic and the international, challenging state-bound assumptions about political communities and societies underlying so much of the social science literature (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003c). Moreover, an analysis of the political institutional field of diasporas should not be confined to the triadic relationship between diasporas, homeland and country of residence launched by Sheffer in his seminal volume two decades ago (Sheffer 1986). Diaspora political mobilization, networking and action may take place along other lines, such as identification with a regional or religious community. Wider Muslim mobilization around the conflict in Chechnya, Palestine or Iraq being but one of many examples.

With this as a point of departure, the following is a mapping exercise of the complex field of diasporas and conflict resolution. In particular I want to focus on the following dimensions:

1. How diasporas go about influencing conflicts in their homelands, highlighting diaspora political lobbying and the use of transnational networks.
2. How diaspora political transnational means of intervention in conflicts in their countries of origin is constrained or facilitated by other political actors and power relations.
3. The tricky issue of the accountability and transparency of diaspora political networks and campaigns vis-à-vis the wider collective of migrants and refugees or the population in the country of origin.

4. Finally I want to end with some comments on the importance of dialogue with diasporas as an integral part of conflict resolution, emphasizing how the political plurality of diasporas can be a resource in promoting conflict resolution

The observations and arguments in this paper will mainly be illustrated with examples from the Kurdish diaspora political networks in Europe. The Kurdish diaspora is one of the worlds largest state-less diasporas, estimated at 30—35 million (Gunter 2004). The Kurdish diaspora in Europe, understood as Europe without Turkey, is estimated (this is really an estimation as there are no precise and reliable data on this) at around 850 000 with an 85% from Turkey (Kurdish-Institute 2005). Clearly the case of the Iraqi Kurds is highly interesting and topical, yet in the following I will mainly refer to the case I know in greater detail: Kurds from Turkey. Although many Kurdish diaspora associations and networks deal with the wider Kurdish issues, then major political associations continue to be differentiated along political conflicts in the different homelands of mainly Iraq, Turkey and Iran.

The sufferings of the Kurds are numerous, including the monstrous *Anfal* campaign by the Iraqi regime in 1988 and the violent conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish separatists which killed at least 35,000 people, and caused the displacement of very large numbers of Kurds. The conflict disfigured the country's political, economic and moral life from especially 1984 to 1999. And although the country has experienced six years of relative peace, recent events such as the bombing in *Şemdinli* indicate that this is far from over. As a recent commentary put it: 'the Kurdish regions of Turkey reflect not so much peace as the absence of war' (*Financial Times* 6 December 2005). The Turkish government does not seem to have used the latest window of opportunity to sufficiently address the problems of unemployment, discrimination, forced assimilation through the education system, or the provocative military presence. Clearly, the Kurdish question in Turkey is now firmly lodged within the process of Turkish accession to the EU, but the Kurdish issue may continue to be a thorny issue for Turkey in that respect.

In short, the case of Kurdish diaspora is a large and politically topical and sensitive issue for western governments. Moreover, the case of Kurds in Europe is interesting because they highlight three important features of diaspora political mobilization and long distance intervention:

First, the Kurdish case illustrates the complexity of diaspora formation and the fluid boundaries between economic migrant and political refugee. Not all Kurds, indeed far from all Kurds, are conflict generated political refugees. They are economic migrants, Turkish guest-workers, who have 'discovered' or started emphasizing their Kurdishness from afar. Kurdish nationalism has flourished in Europe due to the freedom of expression which was unavailable in Turkey.

Second, the Kurds are perceived as both peace wreckers and peace makers. This is not least because they are heterogeneous in terms of political networks, an important feature of diaspora politics which is often glossed over as we tend to refer to the most powerful groups as *the* Kurdish, Croat or Sri Lankan diaspora. The most well known Kurdish organization among the diaspora is the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), now called Kongra Gel, led by Abdullah Öcalan until his capture in 1999. But the PKK is certainly not the only transnational Kurdish political network. Among the Turkish Kurds you have KOMKAR, an organization related to the Turkish exile political party the Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK) which is organized throughout Europe and takes a more plural and peaceful line on the Kurdish issue in Turkey than that traditionally associated with the PKK. Similarly, among Iraqi Kurds there is a transnational network of associations who are more or less independent from political parties of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Emanuelsson 2005).

Finally, some - although not all - of the Kurdish associations have changed over the last two decades in terms of their political aims and the way they want to go about fulfilling these aims. Thus they disprove one of the oft-repeated assumptions in the literature of diasporas and conflict that diasporas groups are unwilling to accept a compromise because on the one hand the conflict is of low cost to them and on the other hand the conflict may have become an integral part of exile identity (Vertovec 2005).

### **From exit to voice – mapping the field of diaspora political intervention<sup>2</sup>**

Diaspora political interventions in conflicts in their countries of origin are a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The following list of forms of intervention is not exhaustive.

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<sup>2</sup> This and the following sections draw on analysis published in Eva Østergaard-Nielsen: *Transnational Politics: The case of Turks and Kurds in Germany*, Routledge, 2003 and Eva Østergaard-Nielsen 'Mobilisation politique des Kurdes et pratiques transétatiques', *Hommes et Migrations*, No 1252 (special issue on Trajectoires d'exils), Jan—Feb, 2005, pp. 68—77.

### *Economic support*

Diasporas may provide economic support for organizations or warfare in the country of origin. They may collect funds among the members of the diaspora, something that the Irish and Tamil diasporas have been noted to do. For instance, the work of Khalid Koser has revealed how the Eritrean government solicited a tax among the diaspora of two per cent of their income, issued bonds and auctioned housing plots (Koser 2003). In the case of the Kurds, the more or less voluntary contributions to the PKK collected among Kurds in Europe constituted an important source of finance for the military activities in Turkey and to sustain the transnational organizational infrastructure of the organization.

### *Political support*

Moreover diasporas may provide direct political support through networks and interchange of opinions and knowledge with actors in the homeland or, when possible, participate in the democratic solution to a conflict in their country of origin through participation in advisory councils or governments of transitions. In a few cases they can vote, Iraq being a recent case in point. But even when they cannot vote, they may still participate in elections through other means. For instance, during a recent Turkish election, Kurdish organizations in London engaged in long distance canvassing – calling home to family and friends urging them to vote for DEHAP which had complained of lack of access to local public campaigning. In another instance, Turkish Cypriots not only helped finance election campaign on the island but also on their own initiative and from afar produced media campaigns in main newspapers on the island supporting a candidate in the presidential election. They also produced a slot for the main TV-station on the island (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003a).

In terms of more indirect political support from abroad the diaspora can mobilize political support among the population and policy makers in their countries of residence or among international organizations. For instance, they can organize public events, demonstrations, big meetings and information campaigns (which also serve to mobilize the diaspora). The Kurds have organized large scale events to that effect calling for a solution to the Kurdish issue. Moreover, they can attempt to influence government policies in less confrontational ways by engaging in lobbying of central policy makers at the local, national or European level.

The lobbying activities of diasporas are more well-described in the context of the US, where different inroads to policy means that financing of electoral campaigns and the voting power

of large diasporas back up diaspora political campaigns at a somewhat different level than in Europe (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001). In Europe examples such as the Armenians in France or the Cypriots in the UK illustrate how large and influential diasporas use their political capital to influence government positions on the Armenian tragic historical events and Turkey's position in the EU and Cyprus respectively. Other than that diaspora political lobbying on behalf of the homeland does not really take place through the ballot-box.

Still, diasporas help keep the issue on the political agenda, contributing to what has been termed a diffusion of domestic politics between homeland and country of residence. Homeland political issues may come up in relations between local and national policy makers. In my experience, conflicts in the country of origin comes up in the relationship between other refugee or migrant groups and their local or national political representatives in other contexts in Europe, but more sporadically and with less traceable effect.

The choice of means varies not only among diasporas but also within them. In the case of the Kurds, some Kurdish associations have turned to mainly confrontational and even violent activities, especially in Germany, while others have insisted on peaceful means in terms of lobbying and dialogue. Confrontation and violence does attract attention of the media, but in the case of the Kurds it has also been a double edged sword, as it has barred them from direct interface with mainstream central policy makers in their countries of residence and origin.

Finally, there is the role of the media and the internet. The term digital diasporas indicates how diasporas are prolific internet users. Websites serve as platforms for information campaigns mobilizing the members of the diaspora as well as the wider public. Indeed, much diaspora political activity takes place in Cyberspace, but I hesitate to herald this as an important lobbying tool. In my research, the Internet is rather an important source of internal mobilization and communication between members of the diasporas dispersed in many countries!

Similarly, the electronic and printed media serve as important vehicles for news and political commentary for the diaspora. The availability of homeland media means that Kurds can stay in touch with political events in the homeland. Turkish or Kurdish newspapers are available in corner shops in any European city with a Turkish or Kurdish population, and both Turkish

state owned and private TV channels are easily accessible throughout Europe. But importantly, in the Kurdish case the diaspora serves as an important platform for media that is banned by the Turkish state. The publication of newspapers has not attracted as much attention as the production of satellite TV. First *Medya TV* and now *Roj TV* produce cultural, educational and political programs and news that are broadcast throughout the diaspora and in Kurdistan. Needless to say, the Turkish government has tried to curb this activity since the beginning, as indicated by the longstanding struggle for Kurdish TV channels to uphold their European national broadcasting licenses. The debacle between the Danish and Turkish governments over the Danish license of *Roj TV* in December 2005 is a recent example of this.

### **Diaspora politics does not take place in a political or institutional vacuum**

The situation of diaspora or exile is often seen as a free-haven or a platform from where diasporas can launch campaigns and activities that are impossible in the country of origin. But this is, as illustrated in the case of the Kurdish media activities, only partly true. Diasporas operate in a political national and international context which serves to both constrain and facilitate their activities. In order to understand why some diasporas receive support and others not, it is necessary to uncover what interests are at play in defining who is a good and who is a bad diaspora.

#### *The role of the state of origin*

While the state of origin cannot control political dissidence to the same extent as when it takes place on its own territory then it does possess a series of long-distance instruments. Thus state of origin may engage in mobilising efforts abroad through outreach policies aimed at countering dissidence and mobilizing loyalty among emigrant and refugee groups. Moreover, in cases with large groups of overseas dissidents, homeland governments may put pressure on receiving country governments to curb diaspora political activism. Turkey, Morocco and a host of other 'sending countries' have been noted to engage in this type of long distance public policy (Levitt and Dehesa 2003; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003b).

Importantly, surveillance and intelligence keeps the state of origin abreast with diaspora political movements and activities. As a consequence, members of the diaspora may become exiles while abroad. For instance, during the 1980s, Turkish trade union activists in Germany



critical of the Turkish government would have problems getting their passports renewed and be unable to return to Turkey for fear of repercussions due to their political work abroad. Kurdish activists who arrived as economic migrants (or as children) have become political refugees from afar.

#### *The role of the state of residence*

Similarly, the state of residence for diasporas are not just midwives but also gatekeepers as they lay down rules and constraints for diaspora political attempts to influence conflicts in their countries of origin.

Needless to say, diaspora political organizations and activities have to keep on the right side of the law and are not tolerated if they are perceived to constitute a domestic or international security threat. The ban on the PKK in Germany is a case in point. The PKK continued its activities in Germany throughout the 1990s in various guises and staged public events in those neighbouring countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands, where the PKK was not banned. In the case of the Kurds arguably the events of the 9/11 and the subsequent round of anti terror laws have to some extent submerged the individual stances of European states. The European list of terrorist organizations has included the PKK and later KADEK and Kongra Gel since spring 2002.

For those diaspora political movements that are not banned, and hence often much less visible, it can be difficult to attract the attention for the diaspora political cause. Elsewhere I have argued that the extent to which policy makers turn a blind eye to diaspora political lobbying is closely related to how this lobbying fits in with government bilateral and multilateral relations with the country of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001). Moreover, domestic concerns, such the presence of an opposing diaspora or migrant group with more economic and political clout, may also deter policy makers from engaging more closely with the diaspora political group.

Consequently, diasporas may try to gain political leverage by finding common ground with host-country policy makers. One important trend is the use of human rights conventions as platform for dialogue. For instance, Kurdish calls for a solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey has increasingly been formulated in universalistic rather than nationalistic terms and backed up by references to UN and EU human rights charters.

Finally, a more subtle dimension, perhaps especially relevant to the European context is that diasporas are also embedded in the context of integration and political loyalty. Time and time again I have interviewed European policy makers who, although they understand the concern of the Kurdish diaspora, want these people to also focus on their situation in Germany, Holland, Denmark, etc. This is indeed something that Kurdish associations in Europe increasingly do. There is not necessarily any zero-sum relationship between the extents to which diaspora political groups engage in political events in their country of origin or in their country of residence. It is perfectly possible to do both and sometimes these two dimensions are inseparable or serve to reinforce each other. For instance, in several instances diaspora political lobbying has tied in the role of Kurds as a minority abroad with political lobbying on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Advocacy for Kurdish mother tongue teaching is a case in point, as lobbying for the introduction of such facilities for Kurdish children in Europe during the 1990s was backed up by a reference to the suppression of the Kurdish language in Turkey.

The linking together of campaigns for changes in Turkish domestic policy and migrant incorporation policies in the country of residence may seem like a clever strategy as policy-makers in the country of residence are far more likely to pay attention to a domestic than foreign policy issue. Yet, it is certainly also a manifestation of how the quest for recognition of ethnic or religious distinctiveness is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which straddles the country of origin and country of residence for migrants, refugees and exiles.

#### *Beyond the state*

In the early literature, analysis of the mobilization and influence of diasporas was often described in terms of their relationship with their two states. But the notion of a triadic relationship between homeland, diaspora and settlement country is too narrow to capture the complexity of diaspora lobbying and long distance intervention. Indeed, one of the defining features of diaspora politics is that it is not bounded by national state borders.

First, diaspora political networks use their transnational networks to pool financial resources and draw on expertise and manpower in sister organizations elsewhere. They reinforce their campaigns by coordinating them with political counterparts in other countries either in the form of producing joint information material or in organizing and coordinating activities

(demonstrations/mass meetings) to happen simultaneously. The worldwide simultaneous Kurdish protests in the wake of the capture of the then PKK is an obvious case in point.

Importantly, as is the case of other diasporas, Kurdish organizations also link up with organizations in other countries in order to have a European constituency behind them when they approach European institutions such as Council of Europe, the OSCE and the European Parliament where especially the Greens have facilitated hearings and seminars.

Finally, transnational networking takes place not just among organizations of the diasporas. Another much sought after strategy is to link up with other NGO advocacy networks. In the case of the Kurds, collaboration has been sought with human rights NGOs at the national or international level. And while some of these human rights organizations want to steer clear of being closely associated with certain Kurdish political associations, then their meetings reports, and advocacy provide an important platform and source of legitimacy for the Kurdish transnational advocacy for more rights for Kurds in the Kurdish regions.

### **Effect of lobbying**

What is the impact of diasporas on conflict and conflict resolution in their countries of origin? As mentioned, numerous studies have pointed to how economic support finances or sustains conflicts. But in terms of lobbying this is more difficult to measure. We have to be less ambitious in measuring the direct impact of diaspora politics and especially diaspora political lobbying in Europe than on the other side of the Atlantic. While diasporas such as the Kurdish do form an integral part of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, then it is difficult to trace the actual effect. I maintain that diasporas seldom make a government adopt a policy unless that policy is also in the national interest of the country.

Still, in the case of the Kurds, the fact that they have managed to sustain dialogue with policy makers around the Kurdish issue, and helped their contacts to keep pushing for a solution, is important in and of itself. But it has to be said that in my experience, without the economic and political power of the major diasporas in the US, many diasporas remain on the Hyde Park Corner of diaspora politics where central policy makers rarely pass by.

## **The democratic deficit of diaspora politics**

One of the claims of the more recent studies of transnational politics of migrants and refugees is that it is no longer the privilege of elite groups but that the grassroots element is stronger. However, there is still reason to question to what extent certain diaspora political organizations take their cue from the wider diaspora or the population in the homeland when defining their agendas towards the conflict in their homeland.

Indeed, a tricky issue is the extent to which diaspora and exile political movements, who advocate democracy in their countries of origin, have themselves managed to build democratic and popular institutions abroad. How representative are the diaspora transnational networks of the wider group of migrants and refugees that they claim to represent?

This issue is important in the light of how western governments, as recently witnessed in the post-conflict reconstruction process in Iraq, collaborate with diaspora political leaders. It is also an issue that may trouble those policy makers who find themselves approached by diaspora political lobbying. How to evaluate which organizations represent the actual diaspora.

Arguably the very nature of diaspora politics, the fact that it is barred from entering normal democratic process, render any normative evaluation of democratic representativity of diaspora political leaders difficult if not impossible. The statement of various Kurdish networks that *they* are the legitimate representatives of the Kurdish people is therefore not easy to verify.

In the case of the Kurds it is important to recognize that the various Kurdish transnational political networks work with different degrees of input from their membership base. And while some diaspora or exile institutions are seemingly less grass-root or bottom-up in their organizational set up, they nonetheless seem to enjoy widespread popular support of their cause, even if the actual number of supporters cannot easily be verified.

## **Final comments: Plurality and dialogue**

There is a lot to be said for working with diasporas in terms of conflict resolution. As stated by Lyons: “Working with diasporas often provides a very rich set of opportunities. Not because they are the primary driving force behind the conflict, but because first of all, they are accessible. You don't need to go off into the bush. Diasporas are often right in your back yard” (Lyons 2003). But as mentioned above it can be hard to determine exactly who speaks for the diaspora as there are usually more than one set of representatives. I like to finish with the suggestion that the fact that a diaspora may not speak with one voice may be a feature that can be used constructively.

Political plurality is often presented a weakness hindering the political influence of a diaspora. However, at the same time the fact that you have different political networks with different ideas about how to bring about a solution to the conflict in their country of origin can also be a strength. As pointed out by Lyons (2003), in the end these different political actors may have to sit down at the same negotiating table in order to secure a viable solution to the conflict. It is therefore potentially important to promote dialogue not just with the diaspora but also within the diaspora.

Moreover, dialogue is, in my experience, a vital first step towards compromise and moderation of the means and aims of diasporas. In some cases, radicalization feeds on marginalization. If an organization is excluded from dialogue with host-country authorities it has less incentive to modify its aims and strategies. And homeland political movements rarely disappear because they are banned. They change name or move their headquarters to other countries.

As mentioned, diasporas have been depicted as hardliners who are unwilling to accept compromises because the conflict is of low cost to them and may have become an integral part of the exile identity. The Irish, the Ethiopians and the Tamils and Kurds are cited as cases of this kind. One could add the case of one of the major Turkish Cypriots organizations in London, whose hard-line political stance on the conflict on the island is lamented by the political elite there (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003a). Yet, within diasporas such as the Kurdish there are also examples of political organizations which have entered a process of compromise. Recent work by the Swedish researcher Ann Katrin Emanuelsson

argues that those Kurdish organizations that are in closest contact with civil society actors in the country of origin are also the most moderate (Emanuelsson 2005). And in my earlier study of a Kurdish diaspora political network in Germany I found that while these associations advocated communism/socialism and outright Kurdish independence through organised demonstrations in the 1980s, then they increasingly formulated their goals in terms of human rights and democracy in Turkey during the 1990s. As they changed, they were increasingly invited to participate in the German political arena as can be validated by a marked rise in the number of meetings with mainstream policy-makers and increased co-operation with various NGOs who previously kept at a distance. This increased level of interaction further reinforced the moderate and comprising line within the organization.

By advocating that dialogues with the diaspora are made as inclusive as possible, I am not arguing for an endorsement of terrorist organizations. Rather, I am stressing the importance of not just lending an ear or a political role to the more resourceful groups, but to cast the net as widely as possible. This could prove an important part of recasting diasporas as part of the solution rather as part of the problem of conflict resolution.

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