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Global Studies

Diasporas in Global Politics

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Executive Summary

The rise of diaspora politics poses a challenge to traditional approaches to foreign policymaking that tend to emphasize bilateral state-to-state relations, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs organized around universal, humanitarian agendas. Whether trying to assess the impact of diasporas in terms of exacerbating civil wars or promoting peace, contributing to democratization efforts, or transforming the meaning and practice of citizenship, the need today for policymakers and other practitioners involved in foreign affairs, development, and national security to gain a better understanding of how diasporas shape political outcomes is paramount. This policy brief, based on a three-year comparative study of diaspora impacts on homeland politics across nearly twenty national settings, identifies some of the key policy opportunities and challenges associated with diaspora politics.

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From elections in Liberia and Croatia to local governance in Mexico and Morocco to civil wars in Sri Lanka and Somalia, diasporas play a key role in contemporary global politics. With remittances outpacing foreign direct investment and official development assistance in many parts of the world, the World Bank and other donors have recognized diasporas as pivotal players in economic development. The potential—if sometimes overestimated—threat posed by diaspora support for international criminal and terrorist networks also receives significant attention. Just as important but less appreciated, however, is the fundamental importance of diasporas to some of the more mundane aspects of day-to-day political life around the globe. The questions largely remain the same: who gets what, who wins, who pays—but today transnational migration and instantaneous communication gives political voice to distant constituents, often thousands of miles removed from the settings where their influence is felt. In short, most politics remains local, even as the actors and processes shaping them are increasingly globalized.

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Politics, diaspora style

Diasporas, in the present context, are not simply groups of people who share the same national origin, live outside their country of birth, and wish to remain tied to their place and culture of origin. Such transnational links are common but generally focus on maintaining family, religious, and cultural links and are not particularly political. Sometimes, however, a leader or political movement will cultivate a particular sense of diaspora consciousness or commitment so as to advance a specific political agenda. The Croatian diaspora, for example, was “imagined” or “invented” in the 1990s in response to a specific set of opportunities and threats associated with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Globalization, with its inexpensive communications and ease of travel, has made this type of transnational mobilization more attractive and has multiplied the access points for local political contests.

Diaspora politics takes advantage of the ability to mobilize in and across multiple national settings and to leverage the comparative advantages of different locations. One set of political tasks (e.g., fundraising, public relations, lobbying) may take place in one country while another set of tasks (electoral or military campaigns, mass mobilization) may take place in another. Networks affiliated with Islamist activists in the Middle East, for example, might focus on fundraising in the North America (where cultures of private philanthropy are more highly developed than in Europe), but use the United Kingdom as a base for coordinating meetings due to its relative proximity to the Middle East, or for media operations. If an organization is banned in one country, such was the case with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fundraising and other critical political operations simply migrate to other locations. While many diasporas actively lobby in Washington and other major capitals, a

growing number have recognized new sites of global influence, and today target the World Bank, NGOs, and businesses active in their homelands.

Furthermore, globalization increasingly empowers diasporas to exert direct political influence on their homelands rather than limiting their activities to lobbying the governments of countries in which they reside. Senegalese in France, Somalis in England, Kurds in Germany, Moroccans in Spain, Serbians in Sweden, Sikhs and Tamils in Canada, and Croatians and Ethiopians in the United States intervene directly in the often quite contentious politics of their homelands. The arenas in which political contests play out are not necessarily the settings in which their outcomes will be felt most directly. For example, candidates for president in the Liberian elections of 2005 opened their campaigns in the United States in recognition to the fundamental ways that Liberian politics is transnational and many of the most influential constituencies do not reside in Liberia. Politicians in a variety of settings today regard an effective transnational campaign as essential to victory.

Diasporas, it is crucial to recognize, are important tools in the hands of a wide variety of political actors. One of the most important factors shaping the nature and outcome of diaspora mobilization therefore relates to the question of who is doing the mobilizing:

- **Opposition parties in the homeland** rely on diasporas not only for operating funds but also as a source of ideas and leadership. While the importance of financial support from relatively wealthy diasporas is clear, diasporas play a more diverse set of roles in homeland politics. When a state such as Ethiopia becomes increasingly authoritarian, it is not surprising that opposition politics is displaced to communities in Washington and elsewhere that then engage in the political work of articu-

lating agendas, validating leaders, and building parties. The relative political freedom available in the diaspora advantages the perspectives and agendas of those at a distance, shaping politics in particular directions.

- **Insurgent groups and separatist movements** have long relied on the mobilization of diaspora sentiment. The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front sustained its struggle in large part through the support of the Eritrean diaspora. In Sri Lanka, the LTTE extracted crucial resources from the Tamil diaspora to sustain their war effort. Recent reports indicate that a small number of Somali-Americans have become engaged in active support for al-Shabaab insurgents in Somalia. In some cases the most engaged populations are those at a distance, so that Oromos in Minnesota or Tamils in Toronto and London can control the boundaries of what is politically acceptable. In other cases, however, diasporas that maintain geographic proximity to the conflict, such as Afghani refugees in Iran or Rwandans in eastern Congo, retain their links to militarized networks and play significant roles in homeland conflict.
- **Homeland governments** increasingly reach out to “their” diasporas. What were sometimes seen as suspect populations in the past are now perceived as partners and assets to promote homeland development in a globalized world. The importance of remittances and the state’s interest in sustaining such flows have led to new policies of providing homeland identification cards, setting up specialized government bureaus, and sometimes offering voting abroad or dual citizenship. In some cases reaching out to populations at a distance is a useful strategy to avoid engaging with more difficult populations at home. Offering political rights to Dominicans in New York, for

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example, is far less threatening than recognizing the political rights of Haitians who have lived for many years in Santo Domingo. Croatia and other states with significant diasporas have reserved special seats in parliament for those who live outside the territory. Emigrants and their countries of origin are negotiating new forms of citizenship based on greater voluntarism, a greater emphasis on citizen rights over obligations, and the legitimacy of multiple affiliations.

- **Countries of settlement** also find advantages in encouraging diaspora mobilization. The roles played by Jorge Mas Canosa and the Cuban American National Foundation and Ahmed Chalabi through the Iraqi National Congress demonstrate the symbiotic relationships that sometimes exist between a host state and opposition diasporas. In addition, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as well as the World Bank and other major donors have identified diasporas as important intermediaries to their homelands. Diaspora groups that can promote conflict resolution and reconciliation to overcome polarized political relationships in the homeland are often sought but rarely found.

Diasporas shaping political outcomes

Some early observers of globalization anticipated an age of cosmopolitan, liberal democracy. In contrast the qualitative impact of global diasporas on homeland politics has been far more diverse and often not particularly liberal. In many cases traditional forms of power and authority such as patrimonialism, sectarianism, and hyper-nationalism can operate quite readily through transnational processes to advance their parochial agendas. Diasporas sometimes engage in a kind of romantic “long-distance nationalism” that prioritizes divisive symbolic issues rather than engaging in the pragmatic horse trading of interest-based politics. While highly

dependent on context and difficult to generalize, there seems to be a general pattern whereby diasporas amplify the extremes of a given political spectrum, consequently weakening the moderate middle:

- **Traditional forms of patron-client relationships have not disappeared** with the spread of cell phones and websites. Instead, localized political networks have gone global. Political notables with access to resources – village “big men” if you will – may now be living abroad while retaining influence through diaspora networks. If someone in rural Liberia wishes to appeal to the central government in Monrovia for support, for example, the closest social link may be to use a cell phone to call a relative in Philadelphia who is known to have political connections in Monrovia. Geographic distance does not always erode political influence.
- **Diasporas can amplify political extremes...or not.** The impact of highly mobilized diasporas on homeland politics is diverse. In some cases, diasporas seem to be more radical and reinforce local leaders and movements that engage in politics through categorical, black-and-white frameworks. Indians in the diaspora contributed to the expansion of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In a significant number of cases, however, economic migrants (as opposed to conflict-generated diasporas) play important roles in fostering good governance, democratization, and increased transparency. Some Mexican hometown associations, for example, have demanded and received annual audits and open bidding for development projects in exchange for significant financial contributions from the diaspora. Diasporas often follow rather than lead the radicalization of a political movement in the homeland.

Violence in Kosovo, for example, escalated before the radicalization of the Albanian diaspora.

- **Distance empowers categorical politics.** In some cases politically active members of the diaspora favor hardline militants and can make civil wars more protracted and difficult to resolve. The impulse to demand categorical goals – liberate every sacred inch of territory! – may come more easily to those at a distance who do not necessarily pay the costs of the violence. Insurgent groups ranging from the Tamil Tigers to the Oromo Liberation Front are captives of militant diasporas that make political solutions to these conflicts more difficult. The intensity of the Armenian diaspora’s campaign to classify the 1914-1918 conflict with Turkey as genocide has complicated relations among Turkey, Armenia, and the United States, among others.
- **But can also help cooler heads to prevail.** At the same time, diasporas can be a force for peace. For years the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID) dominated the Irish-American diasporas links to the conflict in Northern Ireland and sustained the most militant leaders. In the 1990s, however, a group of Irish-American leaders created Americans for a New Irish Agenda (ANIA) to compete with NORAID and create a constituency for peace. ANIA played an important role in lobbying President Clinton to admit Gerry Adams to the U.S. and in supporting the Good Friday peace process in general.

Diasporas are not pre-destined to play one or another political role because, like political parties, interest groups, civil society organizations, and insurgencies, they are mobilized as instruments to influence political agendas across the spectrum. Diasporas are not always liberal or radical, tolerant or chauvinistic, any more than

any other political party or interest groups inherently embody these qualities. What is distinctive about diasporas is that they challenge contemporary notions of how political life should be organized. Globalization and human migration has disconnected the territorial state that regulates politics from the transnational actors and processes that influence outcomes. Some have bemoaned the long-distance nationalists who attempt to shape homeland politics as irresponsible but such transnational engagement is likely to be a growing part of political life in the coming decades and therefore needs to be figured into the calculations of policymakers and practitioners looking to influence particular political settings.

Policy implications: diasporas in the political mainstream

Understanding transnational political actors and processes is necessary to meet emerging global policy challenges. As policymakers in Washington DC and elsewhere seek to improve prospects for democratization or conflict resolution they should engage with key transnational political actors such as diaspora networks. Rather than seeing diasporas as out-of-touch, unrealistic, and troublesome intruders in homeland politics, they should be understood as the natural outcome of global migration and increased levels of interconnectedness in the world today.

Politicians around the world increasingly recognize the advantages of pursuing transnational strategies. These diasporas are not exotic or inherently dangerous but behave much like other political parties, interest groups, and civil society organizations seeking to mobilize constituencies to advance specific political outcomes. Those working in the policymaking world therefore need to:

- **Mainstream the diaspora factor.** Integrate analysis of the challenges and opportunities posed by diasporas across a wider range of foreign policy

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and national security issues;

- **Disaggregate diaspora.** Realize that, like the homeland settings whose politics they seek to influence, diasporas are themselves politically diverse. Diasporas are not and never have been unitary actors, and they rarely represent the full range of perspectives to be found among citizens resident in their homelands.

Diasporas also vary significantly across countries of settlement, with refugee and asylum policies in receiving states often affecting the political orientation of diasporas;

- **Diaspora impact metrics.** Develop clear criteria for measuring and assessing the political and developmental impacts of diasporas in particular settings and situations.

The Global Migration & Transnational Politics project at George Mason University's Center for Global Studies, from which this research draws, was made possible through the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.



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