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**The Political Importance  
of Diasporas**

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### **Abstract:**

Belonging to a diaspora entails a consciousness of, or emotional attachment to, a place of origin and its culture. The paper examines the role diasporas play in migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries.

### **Keywords:**

diaspora, transnationalism, tsunami, dual citizenship, dual nationality

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## **The Political Importance of Diasporas**

Over the past 25 years, diasporas have increasingly become significant players in the international political arena. Examples of such politically active diaspora communities are the Jewish-, Greek-, Cuban- and Armenian-American associations that represent some of the strongest lobbies in Washington, DC. Diasporic Iraqi groups and individuals played crucial roles in encouraging American military intervention in Iraq in 2003. Many countries, such as Israel and Armenia, regard their diasporas as strategically vital political assets, while others, such as India, the Philippines, and other migrant-sending countries, have been recognizing the massive contributions their diasporas make through remittances.

There are many supporting reasons or conditions why, over the past few decades, such diasporas have become more prominent on the world stage. The development of new communication technologies have improved abilities to mobilize, and multiculturalism policies in receiving countries have revitalized ethnic pride and assertiveness. Also important are the growth of economic resources due to swelling migrant numbers, and the profound changes in the world political system itself as more democratic nation-states have emerged following the fall of communist regimes. In a range of policy areas today — including foreign affairs, economic development, and international migration — the place of diasporas increasingly needs to be taken into account.

### **Contested Definitions**

“Diaspora” is a word of Greek origin meaning “to sow over or scatter.” Until fairly recently, the historical Jewish experience provided the archetype: forced expulsion and dispersal, persecution, a sense of loss, and a vision of return. Over the past decade or so, however, “diaspora” has become a term

of self-identification among many varied groups who themselves or whose forbearers migrated from one place to another or to several other places. Observable in a multitude of websites (a Google search gives close to four million hits for “diaspora”), most self-described diasporas do not emphasize the melancholy aspects long associated with the classic Jewish, African, or Armenian diasporas. Rather, they celebrate a culturally creative, socially dynamic, and often romantic meaning. For example, one Indian diaspora website states that:

The Diaspora is very special to India. Residing in distant lands, its members have succeeded spectacularly in their chosen professions by dint of their single-minded dedication and hard work. What is more, they have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual links with the country of their origin. This strikes a reciprocal chord in the hearts of people of India.

Also, any longed-for return to the homeland now tends to be downplayed in favour of ideological identification or transnational practice that can link the scattered community with the homeland. Today, self-defined diasporas tend to find esteem — and a kind of strength-in-numbers — through using the term.

This shift in the adoption and meaning of “diaspora” has undoubtedly caused some confusion and stimulated debate. In a burgeoning body of literature, academics across the humanities and social sciences often disagree on contemporary definitions of “diaspora,” its typical reference points, characteristic features, limits, and social dynamics. Critics of the term “diaspora” object to the ways it may suggest homogeneity and a historically fixed identity, as well as values and practices within a dispersed population. And who decides who belongs, and according to what criteria? Is it normally based on original nation-state, religion, regional, ethno-linguistic or other membership criteria? Is descent the only defining condition of membership — and for how many generations after migration?

In order to have real meaning, claims and criteria surrounding diasporic boundaries and membership should be self-ascribed. It seems illegitimate for others to decide if a person is part of a diaspora if they do not regard themselves as part of such a group. Belonging to a diaspora entails a consciousness of, or emotional attachment to, commonly purported origins and cultural attributes associated with them. Such origins and attributes may emphasize ethno-linguistic, regional, religious, national or other features. Concerns for homeland developments and the plight of co-diaspora members in other parts of the world flow from this consciousness and emotional attachment.

Such a definition cuts through questions around the number of generations passed, degree of linguistic competence, extent of co-ethnic social relations, number of festivals celebrated, ethnic meals cooked, or style of dress worn. That is, just “how ethnic” one is does not affect whether and to what extent someone might feel themselves part of a diaspora.

With such an understanding, we can appreciate how diasporic identification may be lost entirely, may ebb and flow, be hot or cold, switched on or off, remain active or dormant. The degree of attachment — and mobilization around it — often depends upon what events are affecting the purported homeland. Natural disasters, conflicts, and changes of government tend to bring out such attachments. For example, the Asian tsunami in December 2004 mobilized Sri Lankan, Indian, Thai, and Indonesian groups abroad.

When actual exchanges of resources or information, or marriages or visits — take place across borders — between members of a diaspora themselves or with people in the homeland — we can say these are transnational activities; to be transnational means to belong to two or more societies at the same time. At that moment, the diaspora functions as a transnational community. When such exchanges do not take place (sometimes over many generations), but people maintain identification with the homeland and co-

ethnic elsewhere, there is only a diaspora. In this way, not all diasporas are transnational communities, but transnational communities arise within diasporas.

Today, technology makes it far easier for groups to function as transnational communities for identity maintenance and political mobilization. In particular, cheap air travel and phone calls, the internet, and satellite television have made staying in touch affordable. Indeed, the proliferation of websites testifies to the strength of “digital diasporas” supporting common interests and identity.

Diasporic identifications may be multiple, too, depending on the criteria used. The same individual may consider herself to be part of a global Hindu population or a dispersed community of Swaminarayanis (sect), Indians (nation-state), Gujaratis (state or language), Patidars or Patels (caste and sub-caste), Suratis (dialect and region) or villagers. These do not rule each other out. Moreover, any one such dimension of identity may be dormant or active transnationally.

Finally, in conceiving diasporas we should resist assumptions that views and experiences are shared within a dispersed population despite their common identification. This is especially the case among diasporas of people who migrated at different historical junctures. Awkward encounters or serious intra-diaspora conflicts tend to arise as new waves of migrants meet people of previous waves who preserve bygone traditions or who left with greatly differing political views and circumstances. Vehemently anti-Castro, pre-1962 Cuban émigrés may clash with Cuban migrants who are “children of the Revolution”. Sometimes, there is a lack of communication and interaction when an earlier wave of migrants comes from a different social or economic class than a later wave. For example, a previous generation of migrants may have had very limited communication with, or knowledge about recent events in, the homeland although they still have ethnic pride. They may have

little in common with a fresh wave of highly politicized refugees or exiles who are wholly absorbed with cultural and political changes in the homeland. Conversely, to the embarrassment or dismay of new migrants, the well-established diaspora communities in the destination country might promote “long-distance nationalism” and believe in some of the most right-wing and reactionary forms of ethnic exclusivism and patriotism.

### **Diaspora Politics**

Political interests and activities within diasporas are certainly nothing new. Historical studies of migrant communities indicate the considerable degree of political engagement-from-afar evident at least 100 years ago. At present, we can broadly observe a variety of ways — many similar to these historical forms — in which internationally dispersed social groups mobilize and undertake a range of electoral and non-electoral political activities.

Different diaspora-based associations may lobby host countries (to shape policies in favour of a homeland or to challenge a homeland government), influence homelands (through their support or opposition of governments), give financial and other support to political parties, social movements and civil society organizations, or sponsor terrorism or the perpetuation of violent conflict in the homeland. Global networks of diaspora associations sometimes engage in mass protest and consciousness-raising about homeland-related issues. Following the 1999 capture of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, organized mass demonstrations among Kurds took place in dozens of localities around the world, bringing Kurdish issues to worldwide attention. Homeland nation-states themselves may reach out to engage the political interests of diaspora populations. Making provisions for dual citizenship and/or nationality is one way for countries to reach migrants. There is now an upward global trend in the prevalence of dual citizenship/nationality, both in terms of people having it and states allowing it.

It is estimated that more than a half-million children born in the United States each year, who are American citizens automatically, have at least one additional nationality. Of course, many policymakers in migrant-receiving countries are unhappy about this, believing that people should only have allegiance to one flag and loyalty to one state. In migrant-sending countries, sometimes dual citizenship has been difficult to push through many governments since domestic politicians tend to see the disadvantages. They often feel that "absentee" voting might give too much influence to people living outside the country. Indeed, expatriate votes are of concern to many countries with sizable diasporas. This was recently felt around the Iraqi election in January 2005, when over one million Iraqi expats were expected to have a major impact on results. In fact, only a quarter actually registered to vote. Other cases demonstrate how overseas nationals may return home en masse to participate in elections, which has happened in Turkey and Israel, sometimes with political parties paying for flights. Migrants also may vote in large numbers at overseas embassies, as during recent Indonesian and Algerian elections.

The weight of diaspora interests and support sometimes leads to special forms of representation in governments or indeed special ministries for diasporas. A prime illustration of diasporic political payoff occurred in 1990 when Croatians abroad donated \$4 million towards the election campaign of Franjo Tudjman and were subsequently rewarded with representation in parliament: 12 of 120 seats were allotted to diaspora Croats — more than allotted to Croatia's own ethnic minorities.

The money diaspora populations send home is highly sought by many countries (developing or not). Hence, numerous governments now offer to their nationals abroad special foreign currency accounts, incentives or bonds for expat investment, customs or import incentives, special property rights, or privileged access to special economic zones.



In order both to keep the diaspora politically interested as well as to sustain financial flows, politicians in countries of emigration often invoke solidarity among their expatriate nationals. This was exemplified in 1990 when Irish President Mary Robinson proclaimed herself leader of the extended Irish family abroad. During Vicente Fox's campaigning among Mexicans in California in 2000, he similarly played upon the broader boundaries of an imagined nation by declaring he would be the first president "to govern for 118 million Mexicans" — including 100 million in Mexico and 18 million living outside the country. And in his inaugural speech in 2002, Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki appealed to all Kenyans abroad "to join us in nation-building."

### **Nation-Building and Wrecking**

History provides many examples of nation-creation projects fashioned in exile; Garibaldi, Lenin, Gandhi, and Ho Chi Min all spent time abroad. Leaders of several "stateless diasporas" — Kurds, Kashmiris, and Sri Lankan Tamils among them — struggle towards such projects today. Diasporas play an increasingly significant part in the development of nation-building in poor countries and in ones which have undergone major transformation, such as Eastern European and former Soviet states. This is due to a number of factors, including access to economic resources, greater ease in communication and travel, and the large number of expatriate professionals and entrepreneurs who have skills and experience to offer.

The foremost means of diasporic nation-building comes through individual remittances, followed by hometown associations and charitable initiatives that directly affect economic development, poverty reduction, and capacity building. Governments of migrant-sending and receiving countries, international agencies, and academics are now paying considerable attention to the relationship between diasporas and development.

Another, related field gaining notice concerns the potential diasporas have for reducing brain drain in developing countries. Innovative national and international programmes for “tapping the diaspora” have been put in place so that home countries can access expatriate expertise, knowledge, and experience (as well as to external networks for trade, communications and technological development). One of the best known is the UN Development Program’s Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN), which began in Turkey in the 1970s and is now established in some 50 countries. The program supports thousands of emigrant nationals with professional expertise to return to their countries of origin and work for a few weeks or months, though some choose to stay longer.

Another mode of nation-building, or at least maintenance, comes through disaster relief. There are many examples of substantial aid flowing from diasporas following catastrophes such as Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998 and the earthquakes in Turkey in 1999 and in Gujarat in 2001. Diaspora groups relevant to areas throughout the Indian Ocean responded generously to the December 2004 tsunami, as mentioned earlier. Yet even where such humanitarian responses arise, corrosive diaspora politics may be present. According to reports, diaspora aid to Gujarat after the 2001 earthquake served to sustain anti-Muslim pogroms. There have been claims that various Tamil organizations collected money for Sri Lankan tsunami victims that was in fact used for weapons and materials for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Diasporas can also actively be involved in nation-wrecking when there is violence and war in the homeland. Diasporic groups have played major roles in fomenting and supporting conflict in places as diverse as Ethiopia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kashmir, Israel, and Palestine. Financial support may flow from various parts of a diaspora to insurrectionist groups or a particular government’s efforts to eradicate them. When this is an inter-ethnic conflict, two or more diasporas might be pitted against each other, as was evident in

the break-up of Bosnia. Diasporas may take part in efforts to resolve conflict and to sustain post-conflict reconstruction, such as in Eritrea and Sri Lanka. But with the money they send home, they can increase the risk of renewed conflict in the years immediately following an upheaval, according to a World Bank Report.

## **Conclusion**

Even though they reside outside of their or their parents' home countries' borders, many people regard themselves as legitimate members of its collective identity and socio-political order. But diasporic identities and activities tend to have differential implications for homelands and host countries. For host countries, the dual political loyalties suggested by diasporas may raise fears of mobilized fifth columns, "enemies within," and terrorist sleeper cells. Such suspicions can feed into racism and other forms of discrimination.

A further question with social and policy importance arises in host countries: does diasporic attachment — passive or active — hinder immigrant integration? Some argue that immigrants will never truly integrate if they are constantly looking "back home." Others say that only by maintaining strong ethnic and transnational bonds can migrants build the confidence they need to successfully incorporate themselves.

With regard to their national diasporas, homelands certainly want money and may appreciate lobbying, but they may resent too much political involvement. That is why some offer limited forms of dual nationality without extending too much by way of voting and parliamentary representation.

With regard to all these dimensions of diasporic political impact, diversity within diasporas must be stressed. In any case of lobbying, charitable donation, or conflict support, "the diaspora" rarely acts as one. Most

diasporas, whether based on ethno-linguistic or national criteria, include opposing factions and dissenting voices. These, however, are often muffled by better organized, networked, and financed actors, who are often the ones pushing nationalist or ethnic agendas.

Diasporas powerfully embody broader trends in the changing nature of nation-states. Today, national/ethnic identification, political community, and place of residence do not automatically fit together neatly. Instead, migrants have multiple attachments that modern technology has facilitated. Their political identities and practices are shaped between and within the contexts of both migrant homelands and host societies. This is an irreversible trend that policymakers should be conscious of when reconsidering any adjustments to immigration and integration policies. We cannot expect today's migrants simply to cut their roots.

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