

# CURRENT HISTORY

November 2016

*“[D]iaspora politics can be viewed as not only enhancing or challenging state power in particular cases, but also contributing to new forms of global identity politics that transcend state institutions.”*

## The Growing Importance of Diaspora Politics

FIONA B. ADAMSON

A few decades ago, there was little interest in diasporas and their politics beyond a few “classic” cases such as the Jewish or Armenian diasporas. Today, diaspora politics—forms of political engagement that link constituencies in one country with a real or imagined “homeland” somewhere else—are omnipresent, part and parcel of everyday politics around the world. Diasporas are being courted by state policy makers, heralded by international organizations such as the World Bank, and increasingly seen as influential global actors. Why?

Part of the answer lies in larger changes associated with globalization. Many of the same forces that have contributed to a rise in international migration—such as structural changes in the global economy, enhanced global connectivity, and the search for a better life—have also facilitated forms of diasporic political engagement that traverse state borders.

New technologies and the rise of global media and communications allow dispersed populations to engage in transnational politics in real time. This allows them to influence political events in ways that have attracted the attention of both governments and non-state actors—such as political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Diasporic networks that connect populations across different nation-states can be used to facilitate the cross-border transfer of resources, skills, ideas, and influence. Being positioned in such advantageous ways gives them political power.

At the same time, the basic features of diaspora politics—of populations living in one coun-

try and engaging transnationally with the politics of another—are certainly not entirely new. In the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many migrants maintained close ties with their countries of origin, sending remittances or participating in homeland political movements.

Groups such as the Irish nationalist Fenians organized in the United States to oppose British rule in Ireland; overseas Chinese communities on the West Coast of the United States and Canada were called on to support the 1911 Revolution in China; and Czechs and Slovaks in the United States were the driving force behind the establishment of Czechoslovakia as an independent state in 1918, following the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. Italians who migrated to the United States in the early twentieth century were so closely connected to Italy that they were often referred to as “birds of passage”—large numbers of them made frequent trips back and forth, sent remittances in the form of money and care packages to family members left behind, or eventually returned home.

In fact, much of what is thought of today as diaspora politics has been studied and understood in the past under different labels—as immigrant or ethnic politics, “ethnic lobbying,” or emigrant, exile, or expatriate politics. In the United States, Cuban-American, Irish-American, and Polish-American organizations have all participated in US domestic politics, formed interest groups, and lobbied on behalf of their communities, but also for causes and policies related to their respective countries of origin. What has changed over time is the conceptual frame used to understand such politics, as well as the ways they intersect with other features of globalization.

---

FIONA B. ADAMSON is a senior lecturer in international relations at SOAS, University of London.

## WHAT IS A DIASPORA?

The above examples raise the question of what exactly is meant by the term “diaspora.” How are diasporas different from immigrants, refugees, expatriates, transnational ethnic groups, exiles, émigrés, or transnational or overseas communities? Do Americans abroad constitute a diaspora? What about Mexicans living in the United States? Are Asian-Americans also members of Chinese, Korean, Cambodian, Vietnamese, or other diasporas? And does a shared religious or sectarian identity constitute a diaspora? It is common parlance to speak of a global Jewish diaspora, but can we speak of Hindu, Yazidi, Coptic, Zoroastrian, Catholic, or Muslim diasporas?

The answers to these questions are not obvious and, indeed, scholars have spilled much ink debating what constitutes a diaspora. In some earlier accounts, forced dispersal from a homeland and the associated trauma of exile were considered to be important elements—as in the examples of the Jewish and Armenian diasporas. Yet in contemporary usage the notion of a diaspora has taken on a broader meaning. It is often used as shorthand for any transnational group that maintains a sense of national or ethnic collective identity by cultivating strong ties with each other and with their real or imagined homeland.

Some have suggested that the “world of diasporas” is composed of different types based on the original causes of dispersal. Robin Cohen of Oxford University has proposed a typology of diasporas based on the categories “victim” (such as the Jews and Armenians), “trade” (Chinese and Lebanese), “imperial” (British), and “labor” (indentured Indians). Others have identified “conflict-generated” or “refugee” diasporas (Tamils and Syrians, for example).

Such classifications present an oversimplified picture because they suggest that diasporas exist as homogeneous groups. They also ignore the fact that many forms of dispersal come about due to a mix of types of migration and motivations for migrating. For example, the Turkish and Kurdish-origin populations that live in Europe today include immigrants (and their descendents) who left their home countries as a result of state-sponsored labor migration, family reunification, political exile and expulsion, and irregular migration, as well as others such as mobile business elites and students.

Furthermore, as the sociologist Rogers Brubaker has noted, there are cases in which a diaspora emerges not from “people crossing borders” but

rather from “borders crossing people.” In the latter case, a group becomes dispersed when political boundaries are drawn or redrawn, as when empires collapse and new states are created. The collapses of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Soviet empires all produced examples of this kind of “diaspora formation,” including Hungarians living in Romania; Kurdish populations spread across Turkey, Iraq, and Syria; and Russians “stranded” in Estonia and Latvia.

An individual’s sense of belonging to a particular ethnic, national, or religious group is often quite subjective, however. Indeed, it can vary over time and across space. It is this element that complicates attempts to pin down the definition of diaspora, since attachment to a real or imagined homeland is difficult to measure and subject to change. Not all those who migrate from one place to another maintain a strong connection with the place they left. And yet, many people can feel a strong personal, emotional, and political identification with a real or imagined homeland that they have never lived in or even set foot in—some diaspora activists are several generations removed from their “homeland.”

This means that definitions of diaspora that rely only on ethnicity or national origin can be misleading or problematic. They essentialize a group based on a particular category and ignore the larger political context, including the internal politics and differences that help explain how diasporic identities are formed and maintained—and also why they fade away or become insignificant. What is more interesting than agreeing on a definition is to examine the politics surrounding the idea of a diaspora. When and why is the language of diaspora used by different actors? What does it mean to invoke the category of “diaspora” and when does it become politically salient?

This is important because there are many cases in which a change in politics appears to “awaken” a diaspora or, alternatively, causes the reverse to occur—when a diaspora appears to become “dormant.” The 2011 Arab uprisings, for example, produced a flurry of diasporic political engagement by populations that had connections to countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya, but who may not have previously viewed themselves as part of a diaspora. Similarly, the level and nature of Irish-Americans’ political involvement with their “homeland” shifted dramatically over time. Whereas Irish communities in the United States contributed to groups such as the Irish Northern Aid Committee during

the height of the Troubles in the 1970s and 80s, the Northern Ireland peace process of the 1990s led to a general depoliticization and weakening of these diasporic attachments.

## COMPETING CLAIMS

Diaspora politics—like all other forms of politics—cannot be understood apart from the larger configurations of power and interests from which they emerge. These may include politics within the so-called home country, but also the politics of the country of residence, the broader geopolitical context (including the interests of international organizations or third-party states), and, importantly, politics within the diaspora itself. Some would argue that any manifestation of a diaspora is a political phenomenon.

Invoking the term “diaspora” can be politically useful for a range of different types of actors. Individuals or organizations who claim the authority to speak on behalf of a diaspora can be seen as representing an influential constituency. They may gain access to policy circles, resources, and networks in both their country of residence and their “homeland,” as well as increasing their status within the group they are seeking to represent.

Diaspora politics is therefore often as much about *who* represents or claims to speak for the diaspora as it is about the political demands being made. In some cases there may be intense competition for the role of the legitimate “voice” of the diaspora, often based on political configurations back “home.” Old political rivalries and competition may be transplanted into, reemerge, or transform in new contexts. The Eritrean diaspora, for example, is strongly divided between government loyalists and various opposition groups—divisions that can be traced back to the struggle for independence from Ethiopia that took place from the 1960s through the 1980s, and have persisted since Eritrea achieved independence in 1993.

A well-connected individual who claims to represent diaspora interests can have a disproportionate influence when conditions are ripe. For example, Ahmed Chalabi, who founded the Iraqi National Congress opposition group in the 1990s and had close personal connections with neoconservatives within the US government, played a key role in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq,

including feeding intelligence to the US and British governments that was later deemed to be bogus. By claiming to represent the will of the Iraqi people in the diaspora, he helped legitimize the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Strategies designed to mobilize a transnational constituency by delineating its members as a diaspora can be an effective means of engaging in political battles in the so-called homeland. For example, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) insurgent group in Turkey placed a great deal of emphasis on fostering a sense of a distinct Kurdish diaspora in Germany in the 1990s among the broader community of migrants from Turkey and their descendants. This included promoting Kurdish language and culture, and setting up Kurdish media and political structures, in order to develop a national identity and set of political loyalties that competed with those offered by either the German or Turkish states.

## COVETED RESOURCE

It is not surprising that increasingly many states are seeking to secure a political advantage by engaging with or managing “their” diaspora. In a globalized world, this gives states an additional source of power and a sphere of influence

that extends beyond the physical borders of the nation. Once shunned or ignored by policy makers, many diasporas are now viewed by state actors as potential sources of revenue and investment, as lobby groups for promoting state interests abroad, or as ambassadors that can facilitate bilateral trading relationships.

States are formulating official engagement policies to connect with populations around the world that could be considered diasporas. These can be citizens who live abroad or populations that have historical, linguistic, or other connections that could be activated. For example, India uses the category of Non-Resident Indian for citizens living abroad and the term Person of Indian Origin (PIO) for those of Indian origin or ancestry residing elsewhere, excluding citizens of neighboring South Asian nations including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. PIOs can include people up to four generations removed from India. South Korea has different policies toward members of its diaspora based on location—treating Korean populations in the United States differently from those in China.

---

*New technologies allow dispersed populations to engage in transnational politics in real time.*

---

In some cases, two different states can compete for the loyalties of the same population. South and North Korea have both directed policies toward the *Zainichi*, or Korean population in Japan, while China and Taiwan have competed for influence among overseas Chinese.

Official state diaspora policies can include setting up special ministries or forms of representation for overseas populations. For example, in 2010 France created eleven overseas constituencies that allowed French expatriates to elect their own representatives to the National Assembly. In the same year, Turkey established an Office for Turks Abroad and Related Communities that was designed to consolidate its ties with populations such as Turkish citizens or their descendants in Europe—groups that Turkey had historically engaged with through its embassies and consulates or by sending religious clerics abroad via its Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).

By granting dual citizenship and promoting direct investment opportunities to a global diaspora, states can tap into the resources and social capital of transnational constituencies beyond the borders of the nation. This can be a valuable source of foreign investment. In 2015, annual global remittances amounted to around \$600 billion, and in some countries they constitute more than 50 percent of gross domestic product. It is no wonder that organizations such as the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration have been promoting diasporas as important actors for global economic growth. India, Mexico, and many other countries have devised policies that encourage remittances and use them to fund development projects. Mexico's 3x1 program, for example, links grassroots hometown associations in the diaspora with local infrastructure projects, offering matching government funds as an incentive for emigrants to contribute.

Mobilized diaspora populations can also be used to promote a nation's interests abroad. States can enhance and extend their power by courting diaspora organizations and encouraging them to engage in lobbying and public diplomacy—a post-modern form of traditional power politics. Effective models of political lobbying by one group form the basis for other groups' strategies. In the United States, the American Israel Public Affairs Commit-

tee (AIPAC) is often cited as a successful model of an effective lobby group, and it has been studied and emulated. For example, the United States India Political Action Committee was established in 2002 following the AIPAC model, and was credited with successfully lobbying the US Congress to pass the US-India Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 2008.

More recently, the negative political rhetoric toward Mexico and Mexicans emanating from Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential campaign prompted the establishment of the American Mexican Public Affairs Committee as a means of enhancing the image of Mexico and Mexican-Americans. Again, AIPAC was seen as a model for the organization, and a number of Jewish organizations have formed political alliances with Mexican-Americans and are providing advice on how to publicly respond to toxic rhetoric and political attacks.

Some political observers have expressed concern that such lobbying groups can undermine the ability of governments to formulate foreign policies based on the national interest. Others argue that this concern rests on a particular view of the national interest and does not necessarily represent the realities of contemporary policy making in an interdependent world. Many national interests are already transnational or global, due to factors such as the globalization of finance, trade, and investment, as well as challenges such as climate change or terrorism that transcend the territorial confines of states.

Just as states can reach out to "their" diasporas overseas as a way of enhancing their power, governments of the countries in which diaspora groups reside can also leverage these transnational connections for their own purposes. Government ministries and agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, and Germany's Agency for International Cooperation have all worked with domestic diaspora groups to cooperate on overseas investment, philanthropy, and development. By treating remittances as a form of foreign aid, states can channel transnational financial flows in ways that enhance their status as significant players in the arena of international economic development.

---

*Some diaspora activists are several generations removed from their "homeland."*

---

## REMOTE CONTROL

Diaspora politics provide many opportunities for diverse sets of actors, but they also have their downsides. For example, there is a fine line between a government embracing its diaspora and exploiting it for remittances or taxes. The extension of voting rights to a country's citizens living abroad is usually viewed as a progressive move, but it can also be a way of monitoring or controlling them—as when authoritarian states have encouraged overseas citizens to register with embassies in order to participate in largely uncontested elections. States can employ diaspora engagement policies as a means of surveilling overseas citizens and repressing activists and opposition groups operating abroad. In an age of digital media and online activism, this leads to new forms of transnational state repression that extend the reach and control of a regime beyond its national borders.

Governments' diaspora engagement policies can also be viewed by some as interfering in the domestic political life of other nations. Following the July 2016 military coup attempt in Turkey, a German court put restrictions on who could speak

remotely to crowds at public demonstrations and prohibited a video-link appearance by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at a rally held in Germany. But it is not just the German state and its institutions that may have problems with the transnational reach of the Turkish state—many German citizens whose families originated from Turkey may not wish to be identified as part of a diaspora. They may feel themselves to be German; or they may hold a diasporic identity based on their opposition to the homeland's state or regime, rather than support for it. This has historically been the case with overseas populations that have connections to Turkey but identify primarily as Kurdish, or as members of other ethnic or religious minorities, not as Turkish.

A gap may sometimes emerge between the political demands put forward by diaspora spokespeople and the preferences of those they purport to represent. Overzealous diaspora activists have at times distorted the interests of the populations they claim to be lobbying for, or even in some cases placed them in harm's way. An example is the case of the 1998 attacks on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia

*Current History* presents a new e-book:

### **Public Spheres: A Current History Anthology**

What is the state of the public sphere around the world today? In an era of digital communications, information overload, and pervasive state surveillance and censorship, is holding the government to account by means of rational debate still feasible? Can the public sphere still play such a role in the twenty-first century? *Current History* sought some answers to these questions by commissioning a series of essays on the public sphere in each of the different regions covered by our monthly issues. The pieces collected here originally appeared in the journal from September 2015 to May 2016.

#### ESSAYS INCLUDE:

Sebastian Veg on China

Alexander Etkind on Russia

Marc Lynch on the Middle East

Philip Oxhorn on Latin America

Jan-Werner Müller on Europe

Arvind Rajagopal on India

Ebenezer Obadare on Africa

For more information, contact: [editors@currenthistory.com](mailto:editors@currenthistory.com)

following the Asian financial crisis. At that time, a global Chinese diaspora, led by activists in the United States, mobilized on behalf of their “ethnic kin” in Indonesia. The ethnic Chinese population in Indonesia, however, resisted these efforts, asserting that they considered themselves to be Indonesian rather than part of a diaspora. Similarly, many of those living in Coptic enclaves in Egypt or Armenian communities in Turkey may resist or resent the political activities of diaspora organizations operating in North America or Europe. And surely many Iraqis do not think highly of the lobbying efforts of Iraqi diaspora groups in the United States and Europe that made a case for the 2003 invasion.

Diaspora politics and forms of “diaspora engagement” can also be used by non-state actors. These are classic strategies employed by nationalist and separatist movements to mobilize material and political support for their causes. Conflicts in places such as Kosovo, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka have seen non-state groups garnering support in the diaspora. The Kosovo Liberation Army raised significant amounts of money abroad in the 1990s via the Homeland Calling Fund, which operated largely as an organized diaspora tax. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were similarly engaged in fund-raising in the Tamil diaspora in Europe, Australia, and North America until they suffered a decisive military defeat in Sri Lanka in 2009. The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front has been instrumental in mobilizing resistance to Indian control of Kashmir, especially in the United Kingdom, where it was founded and has remained politically active in the large Kashmiri diaspora. Arguably, even the extremist Islamic State (ISIS) has utilized forms of diaspora politics to enhance its power by engaging in online identity politics and encouraging migration to a religious “homeland,” its self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq, as a means of securing material support from abroad.

## TRANSCENDING BORDERS

What will be the impact of diaspora politics in the future? On the one hand, they have the potential to lead to new forms of ethnonationalism if political actors see an advantage in mobilizing transnational constituencies based on exclusivist forms of ethnic, national, or sectarian identities. Diaspora engagement policies can be viewed as an extension of earlier forms of nation building. Just as states have historically utilized the ideology of

nationalism as a means of securing the loyalty of populations within their borders, they are also increasingly trying to tie the loyalties of populations living abroad to the state.

But governments are not alone in devising nation-building programs aimed at transnational constituencies. Some private groups are also engaged in similar activities. For example, Birthright Israel is a privately run program that provides free trips to Israel for Jewish young people, largely from North America, with the aim of enhancing their feelings of belonging and attachment to the country. The program not only attempts to secure the continued support of an existing diaspora but also, in effect, creates new constituencies with sympathies for Israel that can later form the basis of state-linked diaspora policies. Such “globalized nation-building” activities form counterpoints to other global trends such as a rise in domestic multiculturalism, or national migration and citizenship policies that eschew ethnic or national criteria.

On the other hand, it may be that the old model of nation building—even in a new globalized form—is simply not adequate for understanding the broader impacts and meaning of diaspora politics. Formerly, a common analytical approach employed a “triadic” model that included the interests and characteristics of a “homeland,” a “host land,” and the “diaspora.” But this model never adequately captured the complexity and diversity of diaspora politics.

New factors such as the rise of the Internet and social media have fundamentally transformed the broader environment in which politics take place. Heightened levels of global connectivity and the ability to interact instantaneously and in real time have led to new types of transnational connections and politics. In this context, diaspora politics can be viewed as not only enhancing or challenging state power in particular cases, but also contributing to new forms of global identity politics that transcend state institutions and inhabit “non-national” spaces, such as cyberspace or global cities.

Cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and London are important spaces of diaspora politics that transcend national boundaries. These global cities act as nodes in broader diasporic identity networks, becoming sites for coordinated forms of transnational politics such as global solidarity campaigns around significant political events. In the spring of 2009, for example, thousands of

Tamil diaspora members took part in coordinated protests around the world alleging that the Sri Lankan government was committing war crimes, with events in Paris, New York, Washington, Sydney, Melbourne, Geneva, Berlin, Zurich, Oslo, Copenhagen, The Hague, and elsewhere. Similarly, during the battle for the Syrian town of Kobane in 2014, when it was besieged by ISIS, Kurdish groups in European cities such as London, Paris, and Düsseldorf staged street protests in support of Kurdish fighters defending the town.

The emergence of cyberspace as a new arena for political interaction also has the potential to create broader shifts in political consciousness and identity, allowing people to participate in a global “marketplace” of identities that exist beyond state control and to recreate national identities and institutions in a virtual form. Examples include the

emergence of a “Virtual Tamil Eelam” in the wake of the LTTE’s 2009 defeat, or online forums that recreate traditional institutions such as the Sikh langar, a temple kitchen serving free communal meals, as virtual gathering spaces.

In these respects, the “world of diasporas” may ultimately challenge many aspects of state-centric models of politics. The networked structure of diasporas means that they are ideally situated to inhabit new “non-national” political spaces such as global cities and cyberspace. Although states and other actors will have the motivation to continue to shape and harness the power of diasporas, the real impact of diaspora politics may ultimately be as a harbinger of new forms of global identity politics—politics that are shaped by but also transcend the limits and institutions of states. ■