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Diasporas and International Relations

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Diasporas are dispersed ethnic or national groups across different countries. They have influenced international politics since ancient times and they continue to do so today. Diasporas are non-state actors that interact with state actors, primarily their host state – the state they currently live in – and their homeland – their country of origin. They have a unique role in international relations because they find themselves in between two countries, sharing in two cultures, having an emotional investment in two nations, and preserving social connections in two societies.

As mobilised groups with a strong sense of identity, diasporas can play a role both in domestic and in international politics. As far as domestic politics is concerned, they may influence both the domestic politics of their homelands and the domestic politics of their host states regarding issues that are of interest to them. In the realm of international relations, they have the power to influence both national foreign policy decisions and the decisions of international organisations.

Diasporas and Homelands

Diasporas are often in agreement with the policies of their country of origin regarding foreign policy issues facing the homeland and they mobilise in support of such policies. An example of such a cooperation between diaspora and country of origin is the collaboration between Jewish Americans and the Israeli government regarding the security of Israel. However, Safran (2005) argues that diasporas tend to harbour stronger sentiments of hostility towards the historical enemies of their ethnic homeland and to have a more maximalist ethno-national vision and greater territorial claims compared to those of their co-ethnics living in the homeland. Hence, they tend to lobby for what is considered important to them, not to the political leadership of their country of origin (Shain 2002: 120-123). This is where disagreement between diaspora and homeland stems from. Past foreign policy disagreements between the government of Ireland and Irish-Americans regarding Northern Ireland or between the government of Armenia and Armenian-Americans regarding the recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey as a requirement for normalised relations between Turkey and Armenia, offer examples of foreign policy disputes between homelands and diasporas.

Diasporas and International Relations Theory

Regardless of the strong voices of diaspora organisations and their smaller or bigger impact on international politics, the role of diasporas in international relations tends to be ignored or understudied. In classical realism's and neorealism's state-dominated international system, diasporas are not seen as significant political actors. However, certain realist theorists have attempted to place diaspora within a realist analytic framework by considering it an extension of the homeland state whose role is to promote the homeland's national interests (Papasotiriou 2000). Papasotiriou (Ibid.) notes that diasporas can influence the foreign policies of the host state only when the diaspora policy goals are in accordance with – or do not threaten – the host state's national interests.

Liberalism recognises that non-state actors can play a role in international relations. Diasporas, functioning as political pressure groups, may alter foreign policy outcomes in accordance with the liberal paradigm. Moreover, the neoliberal concept of transnational networks and the multiple channels of global interaction that complex interdependence identifies (Keohane and Nye 2000) reflect the institutions and activities of the diaspora.

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Diasporas, International Conflict and Development

Diasporas are often involved in ethnic or international conflict either by promoting conflict resolution (Sheffer 2006) or by fuelling the conflict. There are cases where the diasporas of two conflicting sides have found common ground in a neutral country where they reside. An interesting case is Cyprus with its two conflicting communities, the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots. In the Green Lanes area of London, the two diaspora communities tend to co-exist more than in their divided homeland. This interaction between the two communities in this British neighbourhood is reminiscent of their common Cypriot past (BBC 2005). Therefore, diaspora, being geographically removed from the homeland and the source of conflict, may experience the conflict through a more moderate lens.

However, quite often diasporas sustain or reinforce a pre-existing ethnic conflict. An example of this is offered by the transnational dispute over the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia between Greece and F.Y.R.O.M. (Danforth 1995). In the 1990's the diasporas of the two states in Australia and Canada got involved in a bitter political and social conflict that was more intense than what the people in their respective homelands experienced. This conflictual situation in the diasporic realm may have contributed to the prolonged state of the dispute between the two states.

In several other historical and contemporary cases diasporas have also sustained and fuelled conflict in their homelands by supporting either political or para-military organisations. One of these cases is that of Kosovo. According to the Albanian American Civic League, the main source of funding, lobbying and recruitment for UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army or KLA) was the Albanian diaspora.

The mobilisation of Zionist organisations in support of the creation of Israel is an example of the leading role of diaspora in shaping international and national structures. After the establishment of the Israeli state, Jewish diaspora organisations and Palestinian diaspora organisations have supported their own sides of the conflict. However, different diaspora organisations may support different political actors in the homeland that share their own view on the conflict and which work either towards conflict resolution or towards adopting a more militaristic attitude against the enemy.

Despite past diaspora involvement in ethnic conflict, international organisations recognise the potential of diasporas to contribute to conflict resolution and to social and economic development of their homeland. UNESCO has focused on the importance of diaspora networks, the Diaspora Knowledge Networks in particular, and their potential for contributions to peace and development in their native countries (Mahroum & De Guchteneire 2006). Their varied set of skills, experience, connections, dual perspective and commitment to the well-being of their homeland make them important actors in any plan for development or reconstruction.

A 2009 UNDP report on the role that the Somali diaspora can play in conflict resolution and development in Somalia (Sheikh & Healy 2009) suggests particular actions and policies that aim at the positive involvement of the diaspora in the homeland's affairs. Scholars and practitioners suggest that diasporas could also play a stronger role in development and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka (Bandarage 2009), in Sierra Leone, Liberia and other African countries in the Horn of Africa, and in the Great Lakes region (Mohamoud & Osman 2008). However, Orjuela (2008) stresses that diaspora involvement in post-conflict reconstruction may actually reproduce inequalities and grievances that were the cause of the conflict rather than reduce them.

In several cases of financial crises, diasporas have mobilised both for the collection of funds and for supporting investment in their homelands. During the current Greek economic crisis, the Greek diaspora, primarily in the United States, has been involved in various activities that aim at the alleviation of human suffering caused by the crisis, at the development of the Greek economy through investment, at the support of entrepreneurship (The Hellenic Initiative), and at influencing US policy-making regarding the Greek economic crisis and its handling by European and international institutions (Marans 2015).

Conclusion

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Diasporas are political and cultural bridges between two countries. They are *de facto* cultural ambassadors of their homeland in their host country and of their host country in their homeland. They can have a powerful international voice both as special interest groups in national foreign policy making and as transnational civil society networks. Moreover, their transnational interests and activities are centrally placed in our globalised and complex world. The past contributions of diaspora in international relations and the current potential of diasporas as agents of positive change in international politics has to be more widely recognised and has to be reflected in future policies and international activities that aim at the promotion of international peace and development.

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About the author:

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