THE POLITICS OF CONFLICT-GENERATED DIASPORAS

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Over the past decade, the literature on diaspora politics has been growing. The concept of diaspora is a much-debated one, with definitions generally focusing on core features, such as its being: a voluntary or involuntary dispersion; a collective memory and myth about the country of origin; a troubled relationship with the country of settlement; a commitment to the homeland's safety and prosperity. Other core features include the presence of the issue of return, though not necessarily a commitment to do so, or a diasporic consciousness, which can be expressed through the creation of diaspora organisations. From that perspective, groups of migrants may constitute a diaspora if, with time, they develop these organisational and imaginative elements upon which they develop a shared identity.

Among these types of diasporas, those which originate from conflict areas have attracted the most attention. These are believed to create "instability" in their places of settlement, and are thought to share links with "international terrorism". Such processes have been described in the literature as part of "conflict transportation" or "conflict importation", which can pertain to two (possibly interrelated) configurations: when members of groups fighting in the country of origin carry on the fight in the country of settlement, or when a diaspora group, through its (perceived) conflict-related activities in the host and/or in the home country, creates tension either within the society of settlement, or between its home and host countries. The recent US-Turkey tensions around the US-based activities of Fethullah Gulen are a case in point.

Conflict transportation is most often discursive and symbolic, thus including the use of verbal and symbolic violence. Symbols are displayed during public events like demonstrations and commemorations, but can also be used in community-based publications. For instance, every July 9th in London, members of the Greek Cypriot diaspora celebrate the 1821 uprising in Cyprus. On July 21st, members of the Turkish diaspora celebrate the "Turkish Peace Operation of 1974": an event known to Greek Cypriots as "the invasion". Conflict can also be imported at a social level, with high rates of endogamy and spatial segregation. In Belgium, for instance, members of the Rwandan Hutu diaspora are mostly living in some specific parts of Brussels like Matongé or in Flemish towns like Termonde,

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Each year in London, the Turkish and Greek Cypriot Diasporas hold separate rallies, symbolically fighting over which community has a legitimate claim to represent Cyprus abroad.

Verviers or Dendermonde, whereas the Rwandan Tutsi diaspora mostly inhabits Brussels' city centre. Finally, conflict can be transported at the physical level, with the destruction of property, assault, demonstrations or interethnic/interreligious clashes.

Many factors play a role in conflict transportation, and determine the characteristics and evolution of the identities and politics of diaspora groups. The process of migration is often unsettling because of the radical uprooting it entails. Migration therefore often generates a sense of identity insecurity, especially when marginalisation, discrimination and racism are experienced in the countries of settlement. This in turn generates a redefinition of group and individual self-perceptions and identities, often in the direction of a rediscovery of, or over-investment in, one's roots and origins. In that sense, radicalisation processes observed in diaspora politics can stem from the need to maintain the culture and traditions of the group in a situation where it is put under considerable stress.

In parallel, a process of re-traditionalisation happens, as groups place emphasis on what are seen as their values and symbols, giving importance to cultural or religious elements that are considered pillars of their identity. Interestingly, the re-traditionalisation of diasporas often targets cultural elements that are not necessarily central to the culture of their places of origin, such as religion in the case of the Cypriot diasporas. In addition, for many diaspora groups such as the Armenians, the importance of religion derives not only from its centrality in national identity back home, but also from the fact that it stands as a key distinguishing cultural element in societies of settlement, and possibly also vis-à-vis other diaspora groups.

In parallel, the need to be heard by institutions in the country of settlement can lead to the blurring of differences between groups originating from the same region. Diasporas tend to refer to a wider cultural group which is more easily identifiable and respected in the host country. This is for instance the case of some sections of the Turkish Cypriot diaspora living in the United Kingdom, and identifying with the Turkish diaspora more generally, or for some sections of the Greek Cypriot diaspora identifying with the Greek diaspora more generally. Similarly, gangs of young South Asians in London are mostly composed along religious lines, but not necessarily national ones.

Institutions, instruments and policies set up by countries of origin (such as Ministries of Diaspora in Armenia, Georgia, Ireland or Serbia, among many other countries) also play a role in the politics of their diasporas, and help maintaining structural links, channelling remittances, but also controlling the expression of political opinions in the diaspora. The

stronger these links are, the more diaspora politics tend to reflect the official discourses of the home country of each diaspora group, even if a large section of the concerned diaspora doesn't agree with such views.

Internal divisions cutting across conflict-generated diasporas also impact on how they mobilise at the political level. Ethnic entrepreneurs can play on those divisions and choose to invest in conflict-related identities in order to foster support and mobilisation among diaspora members. Interestingly however, ethnic entrepreneurs are often more interested in what happens in countries of settlement than in countries of origin. In many cases, instead of being 'long distance nationalist' organisations supporting the conflict parties in home countries, conflict-generated diaspora organisations dedicate a considerable part of their resources to welfare, educational, charity-related, and cultural activities in host countries.

The legal status that diaspora groups enjoy also plays a role in their mobilisation, as it affects the capacity of diaspora members to intervene publicly. Empirical evidence seems to suggest that having no legal status entails a radicalisation and a reactivation of pre-existing conflict identities and divisions. However it is worth remembering that access to legal status can vary across diaspora groups, as shown in the case of the various sections of the Rwandan diaspora, which is partly legal in status, and partly illegal.

In short, while it is true that many diaspora groups maintain strong links with their countries of origin and cultivate their cultural, political and religious ties in the countries of settlement, this does not necessarily translate into straightforward "conflict importation" processes. What the study of the politics of conflict-generated diasporas suggests is that when radicalisation happens, it does so in a non-linear way. Both endogenous factors such as socio-economic deprivation sometimes faced in host societies, and exogenous factors such as escalating events occurring in the home country can precipitate the political mobilisation of diasporas. Taking into account the historical but also context-dependent features of conflict-generated diasporas as acting in a transnational space that is neither entirely here nor fully there, it is therefore necessary to better analyse and understand their internal politics.

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