



Literature Review:

The role of civil society in managing memories of disputed territories

January 2020

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 823803.



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DIASPORA, CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONFLICT - Arsen Hakobyan

Arsen Hakobyan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (National Academy of Science, Armenia). Arsen's previous research explores topics concerning the anthropology of violence, ethnicity and memory and diaspora groups. Below Arsen discusses Diaspora as civil society actors and their role in transnational activism. In conclusion, this review highlights the need to go beyond a simplistic and oppositional depiction of Diaspora as 'peace-makers' / 'peace spoilers' in order to understand the multifaced role they play in peace building efforts.

Conceptualising Diaspora and the role of memory

The usage of the term 'Diaspora' often carries the connotation of forced resettlement, due to expulsion, racism, or war, especially during ethno-nationalist conflicts. Meanwhile, Brubaker notes that the use of the term 'Diaspora' has been widening. According to him, an element of this expansion 'involves the application of the term diaspora to an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space' (Brubaker 2005).

This paper discusses the interaction between Diaspora, civil society and memory/conflict. How do Diaspora become a civil society actor? What is the role of Diaspora as a political actor in the context of conflicts, and what is the role of memory in this process?

William Safran suggests six criteria to distinguish diasporas from migrant communities. According to his definition, the concept of Diaspora should be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral,' or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated

and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran 1991). Most authors mention three main Diaspora features: (a) scattering in at least two directions; (b) connection between the real and imaginary homeland; and (c) awareness of Diaspora identity that unites compatriots living in different countries (Butler 2001).

The concept of 'homeland' includes the following markers: the group maintains a myth or collective memory of their homeland; regards their ancestral homeland as their true home, to which they will eventually return; being committed to the restoration or maintenance of that homeland; and the members of group relate 'personally or vicariously' to the homeland to a point where it shapes their identity. (Brubaker 2005, p. 5. Weiner 2010, p. 75. Cohen 2008).

Brubaker introduced a new concept of Diaspora- the 'accidental Diaspora'. He connects the emergence of such Diasporas with the disintegration of large state formations, leading to a change in political borders. The main idea put by Brubaker as the basis for identifying 'accidental Diasporas' is not the movement of people across borders, but the movement of the borders themselves. 'Accidental Diasporas,' in contrast to already known historical or labor diasporas, arise instantly, as a result of a sharp change in the political system, contrary to the wishes of people. They are more compact than labor diasporas, which tend to be scattered in space and weakly rooted in host countries (Brubaker 2000).

According to Tölölyan, Diaspora is the paradigmatic Other of the nation-state, who have been the ally, lobby, or even the precursor of the nation-state (Israel), the source of ideological, political, or financial support for national movements (Palestinian), or the source of new ideas, new money, and new languages for the newly independent homelands (Armenia, Lithuania) (Tölölyan 2007).

Researchers have identified different types of Diasporas and are attempting to classify them. Cohen identifies the following types of diasporas: victim diasporas (Jewish, African, Armenian, Palestinian), labor diasporas (Indian), trade and business (Chinese, Lebanese), cultural and imperial (British, French, Spanish, Portuguese) diasporas (Cohen 2008).

Sheffer distinguishes the following types of diasporas: Diasporas with deep historical roots (this includes Armenian, Jewish and Chinese); 'dormant' diasporas (Americans in Europe and Asia and Scandinavians in the USA); 'young' diasporas (they are formed by Greeks, Poles and Turks); 'nascent,' that is, only at the initial stage of their formation (they are just beginning to form Koreans, Filipinos, as well as Russians in the former Soviet republics); 'homeless,' that is, without a 'home' state (diasporas of Kurds, Palestinians and Gypsies fall into this category). 'Ethno-national' is the most common type of diaspora. Their characteristic feature is that they feel behind the back the invisible presence of 'their' state; diasporas 'scattered' and diasporas living compactly. (Sheffer, 2003, 165).

Diaspora, trauma and memory

Armenian Diaspora is affected by the Armenian Genocide and the passing of trauma from one generation to the next (Cohen 2008). In this case, it is the Armenian Genocide of the early 20th century, which has led to the formation of a large part of the diaspora and still plays an important role in the Armenian identity (Cohen 2008).

As Assmann and Shortt mention, 'Memory is not only susceptible to changes, it is itself a powerful agent of change. Accredited with the power of transforming our relationship to the past and the ability to revise former values and attitudes, memory can create new frames of action. By working through past hatreds and resentments, memory can contribute towards reconciliation and new forms of co-existence, opening up the possibility of a common future. A mere change of regime cannot in and of itself usher in a new social contract. In order to achieve reconciliation and social integration, the often oppositional generational and cultural memories also need to be respected, and/or adapted and/or contained' (Assmann, Shortt, 2012).

In the context of the 'traumatic memory' or 'victim Diaspora,' the collective memory could get a political dimension and become part of national political ideology and political agenda, even at the international level. One example from the Armenian Diaspora, is the politicisation of the 1915 Genocide from the mid-1960s onwards. In 1965, on the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, thousands of Armenians gathered in Yerevan (Soviet Armenia) and across Diaspora communities, demanding global recognition of and remembrance of the Armenian Genocide after fifty years of silence. It was the first step in the struggle for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. While the taboos on the Armenians Genocide imposed by the Soviets started changing in 1965, 1965 also became the main axis for the post Genocide Diaspora, formulating new identity and discursive political practices.

Regarding the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, Hovannisian emphasizes that 1965 was a turning point for the revival of political activism in the Armenian Diaspora. As he mentions, 'it was not until 1965 that the politically fragmented Armenian diaspora drew together sufficiently for a united commemoration' and only after 1965 the Armenians began to externalize their concerns in a politically more organized way' (Hovannisian, 1994).

Tölölyan also mentions the changes that affected the transformation of the worldwide Armenian community into a diasporic socio-economic and political network after 1965. The changes at different levels of the Armenian community's concerns and worldwide relationships following 1965 events, brought about new dynamics leading to the emergence of an inclusive political sphere for the Armenian communities. These changes played an important role in the politicization of Armenians around the world within the context of redefined patterns and discourses in the community. Shifts at the discursive level created necessary grounds for emergence, consolidation and politicization of Armenian diasporic identity (Tölölyan 2000).

The issue of returning to the homeland is an important marker of identity for Diaspora. As Baser and Swan note, 'The idea of a potential return affords them a legitimate stake in the way they interfere with homeland policies. The notion of a 'secure homeland,' a place to return in time, plays a very important role in diaspora behavior, yet it has been proven by various cases that diaspora members are reluctant to leave the hostland when it comes to returning home if their goals are somehow achieved' (Baser and Swan 2009, 49).

Transnational diasporic activism

Sheffer draws attention to the urgency of the problems associated with the transnational nature of modern Diasporas. He notes that diasporas are increasingly influencing the situation in their places of residence, as well as reaching the regional and international level of decision-making in all parts of the planet. At the same time, in this sphere of scientific research, according to Sheffer, there are still many white spots, and one of them is the political aspects of the functioning of the diasporas, the trans-state networks and communication systems created by them that cross the borders of letting and receiving societies, as well as political weight and political loyalty of diasporal collectives (Sheffer 2003, p. 166-167). Trans-state networks include a variety of contacts and links established by social groups, political

structures and economic institutions across state borders. Sheffer believes that the ability to create cross-border networks stems from the essence of ethnonational diasporas, and the structure of these relations is very complicated and confusing. It is not possible to fully control the resources and information flowing through these trans-state networks. However, if the authorities in receiving and sending countries are not able to control these flows, they may be suspicious of lack of loyalty on the part of the Diaspora, and this, in turn, may provoke political and diplomatic confrontation between diasporas and their homelands, on one hand, and host states, on the other.

Tölölyan (2000) examines the Armenian diaspora's shift from exilic nationalism to diasporic transnationalism and mentions that 'the process of transition in the Armenian diaspora process is not synchronized. It began at different times and proceeds at different speeds.' According to him, 'In the wake of the contemporary transformation, which is framed by and within globalization, the Armenian diaspora no longer consists of a series of exile communities, fragments of the nation awaiting real or even symbolic repatriation. Rather, diaspora is, and is regarded by an ever larger majority of its members and of its contentious leadership as a permanent phenomenon' (Tölölyan 2000). Tölölyan notes that the Armenian transnation now includes Diaspora, Armenian and Nagorno Karabakh Republic. (Tölölyan, 2000)

The public sphere is important for civil society in terms of the action of citizens organized informally and formally in voluntary groups. As Calhun (2011) mentions, the public sphere works by communication, combining cultural creativity, selective appropriation of tradition, and reasoned debate to inform its members and potentially influence state and other institutions. Public communication does not simply flow in an undifferentiated fashion. Whether at a national or a transnational level, public sphere is composed of multiple partially overlapping publics and counter publics. These bring forward different conceptions of the public good and sometimes of the larger, inclusive public itself.

The value of a public sphere rooted in civil society rests on three core claims: first, that there are matters of concern important to all citizens and to the organization of their lives together; second, that through dialogue, debate, and cultural creativity, citizens might identify good approaches to these matters of public concern; and third, that states and other powerful players might be organized to serve the collective interests of ordinary people—the public—rather than state power as such, purely traditional values, or the personal interests of rulers and elites. These claims have become central to modern thinking about democracy and about politics, culture, and society more generally (Calhoun, 2011).

Pnina Werbner uses the term ‘diasporic public sphere’ in reference to British Pakistani Muslims. She defines it as ‘a space in which different transnational imaginaries are interpreted and argued over, where aesthetic and moral fables of diaspora are formulated, and political mobilization generated’ (Werbner, 1998, 11). The diaspora dynamics takes place through encounters that physically unite people. That is why, Tölölyan argues, that in a Diaspora, as within nation-states, the reproduction of culture and of contesting visions of collective identity is a quotidian, persistent, and costly activity, conducted by larger groups of intellectuals, some of whom are associated with-or, in the case of most teachers, dependent upon-organizations and institutions that offer material support and make ideological claims. These institutions constitute a diasporic civil society that nurtures and sustains the public sphere of debate and cultural production (Tölölyan, 2000, 109).

In the contexts where diaspora is seen as a soft power and a political actor, special emphasis is being placed on diasporic networks, through which expatriates often advocate the cultural and civic attractiveness of their home country and spread its soft power over the host society (Blarel 2012; Nye 2004, 2011; Watanabe 2008).

Ishkanyan analyzes the impact of transnational diasporic activism on Armenia, and situates this discussion within the discussions of globalization and global civil society (Ishkanyan, 2005). Cocherane discusses interconnection between the Diaspora, civil society and peace building and argues that 'Diaspora groups are clearly constituent elements of civil society and such people often take an interest in conflict and peace building efforts within their countries of birth. The argument here is that Diaspora groups are a central component of civil society and should be included in any analysis of its contribution to peace building' (Cocherane 2007).

According to Bercovitch, diasporas play a role in politics on four levels: 'the domestic level in a host country; the regional level; the trans-state level; and the level of the entire dispersed group in other countries' (Bercovitch 2007, 21). On each of these levels, the diaspora can be either maintaining, defending or promoting its interests.

Diaspora, conflict and peace building

The role of Diaspora is discussed in the context of conflict, peace and resolution (Baser and Swan 2009; Koinova 2009; Pirkkalainen and Abdile 2009; Shain 2002 etc.). However, despite 'the diaspora – peace – conflict nexus has developed into an area of key research interest, particularly within conflict - and diaspora studies, this is an emerging field of study, but one which remains largely underdeveloped' (Pirkkalainen and Abdile 2009, 5). In the practical level, as Tölölyan mentions: 'As yet, neither scholars, nor the international community, nor diasporas have sufficient experience of how to cooperate in resolving conflicts involving homelands' (Tölölyan, 2006).

The focus has often been on diaspora as 'peacemaker' or 'peace spoiler.' Pirkkalainen and Abdile note a third category of the role of diasporas in conflict. The related literature notices, that the debate on diaspora and conflict can be divided into three categories. First, migrants or diasporas can be perceived as agents for promoting peace and development. The second and opposing conceptualization is

that these two groups can have a negative or even destructive impact. The third argument is that they can simultaneously be ‘peace-makers’ and ‘peacebreakers’ (Pirkkalainen and Abdile 2009, 5).

The volume edited by Hazel Smith and Paul Stares defined a debate, seeking to understand whether diasporas are ‘peace-makers or peace-wreckers’ when relating to original homelands experiencing conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. The volume sought to challenge simplistic notions that diasporas are either moderate or radical actors, and brought empirical evidence that they can be both. (Smith, Stares, 2007)

Tölölyan discusses the role of Armenian Diaspora and Armenia in the context of conflict resolution posing a question-‘History and Geography?’ and analyzes similarities and differences in State (Armenia) and Diaspora attitudes towards Armenian-Turkish relations, Nagorno Karabakh conflict and related security issues (Tölölyan, 2006).

Due to globalization, as well as an increased number of ethnic conflicts, diasporas have become important political actors that can be very influential, given their increased ties with the homeland (Smith and Stares 2007, 21). Because these links have broaden, the ability of diasporas to influence conflicts in their homeland have also improved.

On the other hand, Koniova distinguishes four types of Diaspora political mobilization—radical (strong and weak) and moderate (strong and weak), and argues that dynamics in the original homeland drives the overall trend towards radicalism or moderation of a diaspora mobilization in a host-land (Koniova, 2013).

The role of diasporas in different types of reconciliation is very complicated. Young and Park describe the case of the Liberian Diaspora and their role in the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project (2009). This was the first of its kind that included a Diaspora population (Young and Park 2009, 341). Young and Park even argue in their article that there might be possible legal obligations in involving Diaspora in the reconciliation process as victims – and especially important for what is termed ‘victim Diaspora.’ (Young and Park 2009, 349). The memory can be a part of the reconciliation process because the memory can play a key role in processes of change and transition. Through a cosmopolitan lens, Andreas Huyssen draws attention to memory’s positive role in the processes of change, noting: ‘In the best practice scenario, the cultures of memory are intimately linked, in many parts of the world, to processes of democratization and struggles for human rights, to the expansion and strengthening of the public spheres of civil society. (Huyssen, 2000, 36). DisTerrMem provides an opportunity to explore the how the memory of conflict and trauma shapes, and is shaped by, Diaspora. An agonistic approach in the context of disputed territories can also help to break down the simplistic oppositional roles of ‘peace-makers’ / ‘peace spoilers’ to demonstrate the complex and multifaceted role of Diaspora in peacebuilding efforts.

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