Axes of Solidarity – Diasporas

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Introduction

The term 'diaspora' is commonly used to refer to members of a particular community, people or population group that are dispersed around the globe, geographically separated from their home-land. Thus, back in 1989 William Safran defined diaspora as 'that segment of people living outside the home land.'[1] More recently scholars have critiqued such a broad definition, pointing out that it fails to sensitise us to the very varied conditions under which people leave their home country. Thus R. Cheran has sought to distinguish between diasporas and transnational communities. According to Cheran,

> All diasporas are transnational but not all transnationals are diasporas. In other words, if transnationalism is a condition of *living*, diaspora is about a condition of *leaving*. Diasporas are the result of forced migration whereas transnational communities are the result of voluntary migration.[2]

This distinction can be quite problematic. Most migrants decide to leave their home as a consequence of a range of push and pull factors - of which the fear for their well-being if they remained might be just one, alongside the dream of a better future for the children and the expectation of a better standard of living for the family.

Whatever the dilemmas of distinguishing between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration, the distinction sensitises us to the fact that the manner in which members of diaspora communities leave their home-land and relocate to a new place can have a significant impact on their political identity, and hence influence how they relate to ongoing conflicts back home. Thus one might expect those who left their homeland because of the threat to their well-being occasioned by political cleavages and violent conflict to carry such divisions with them into the diaspora. It would also seem more probable that those who joined the diaspora as economic migrants prior to the intensification of any subsequent conflict, perhaps travelling from home to host country in a one-stop journey, are more likely to hold on to a vision of their home society before it was fragmented, and as such are perhaps more likely to take an active interest in supporting constructive peace actions compared with those who remain 'locked in' to the combat. The communities of Greek and Turkish Cypriots living in North London, some 100,000 in number, are an interesting illustration of this phenomenon.

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[1] W. Safran, 'Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return', *Diaspora*, v. 1, n. 1, 1989. Quoted in W. Zunzer, *Diaspora communities and civil conflict transition*, Berghof Occasional Paper no. 26, September 2004, p.5. Accessible via www.berghof-center.org/

[2] R. Cheran, *Diaspora circulation and transnationalism as agents for change in the post-conflict zones of Sri Lanka*, Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2004, p. 4. Accessible at www.tamilnation.org/diaspora/articles/diaspora.pdf

Observing the way in which Turkish- Cypriot businesses exist alongside Greek-Cypriot ones, Wolfram Zunzer has remarked,

> Divisive politics at home have not resulted in more social divisions abroad. ... If differences of opinion exist, both sides have learned to live together regardless. In a way the community lives in the good old days of Cyprus here in London. Whether they speak Greek or Turkish, whether they go to a Greek Orthodox church or to a mosque, they are Cypriots first. Both groups in London want to see the island of their origins reunified.[3]

The distinction alluded to by Cheran and others also serves to sensitise us to the very important fact that diasporas are not homogeneous. Members of a diaspora can carry with them not only the divisions of caste and class, tribe and ethnicity, that fractured their home society, superimposed on these can be the new divisions generated from their residence in their host countries. Amongst the more significant 'new' divisions are those caused by members of the same broad population group living in different host countries around the world, often enjoying different rights of citizenship and consequently experiencing varying degrees of personal security. For example, Tamils in Canada can enjoy the rights of citizenship not enjoyed by their fellow migrants in France. Consequently members of the Tamil diaspora in Canada tend to be more active and more vocal in relation to the Sri Lankan conflict than those in France. Furthermore, new generations grow up speaking different languages, and their view of the world is inevitably influenced by the experience of living in different societies and cultures. In certain cases the sons and daughters of migrants focus more on their lives in what is for them their country of origin, and feel less involved with the conflict that caused their parents to resettle in a new country. Thus, referring to members of the Somali diaspora, Zunzer has observed that 'There is a great gap between first generation refugees and second generation migrants: while the first generation is still highly politicised and interested in Somali affairs, the second generation has hardly any interest in even visiting the country.'[4]

In addition to socio-economic, generational and cultural differences, members of the same broad diaspora group can manifest contrasting political preferences and orientations. Jonathan Freedland of *The Guardian* told of being on a discussion panel at a London venue with a Palestinian-born leader of the Muslim Association of Britain who, when asked about the

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[3] W. Zunzer, *Diaspora communities and civil conflict transformation,* Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004, p. 31. Accessible at www.berghof-center.org/

[4] Zunzer, p. 33

recognition of Israel by Hamas, insisted that this would never happen - 'It is the same as asking rape victims to recognise that their rape was legitimate ... We will never do that!' [5] Such intransigence was very much at odds with the position of most Palestinians on the ground, who have come to acknowledge, however reluctantly, the reality of Israel and have had to accept that the imperative of peace requires its recognition..[6] For Freedland this was an example of the phenomenon of 'the irresponsible diaspora' - where the political stance of those living outside their homeland is out of touch with the positions taken by those still there. He contrasted this irredentist stance with that of a group of British Jews who took a full-page advertisement in a national newspaper to call on Israel to halt the collective punishment of the Palestinian population in Gaza consequent upon the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian forces. The broader point Freedland was seeking to make by citing these two contrasting stances of diaspora groups in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was that no diaspora community is a monolith, 'they are as varied as the societies with which they identify.'

So - when we come to consider the potential role of diasporas in supporting unarmed resistance movements in their home country, we need to bear in mind that they are diverse and complex organisms that can replicate and reproduce all the divisions and cleavages that helped drive the conflict from which many of them fled. By way of an illustration, Mohamoud, in a report written for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, records that in 2005 there were little more that 1300 Rwandans living in the Netherlands, yet they had 13 organisations representing diverse interest groupings.[7]

One further introductory observation should be made that is relevant to our understanding of the actual and potential roles played by members of diaspora communities in relation to resistance movements and conflicts in their home countries. Due to the twin 'revolutions' of cheaper long-distance travel and the burgeoning growth of the internet and other forms of electronic communication, contemporary members of diasporas can remain much closer in touch with developments and occurrences 'at home' than previous generations, and thereby play a more significant part than ever before in the struggles within their homeland.[8]

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[5] J. Freedland, 'We need to engage with all strands of Muslim opinion', *The Guardian*, 12th July 2006.

[6] See, for example, the National Conciliation Document Of The Prisoners, 11th May, 2006. http://www.jmcc.org/documents/prisoners.htm

[7] A. Mohamoud, *Mobilising African diaspora for the promotion of peace in Africa*, report for Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 2005, p. 9. Accessible via www.afrikabeleid.nl/docs/

[8] One example is the *Electronic Intifada*, which was founded in 2001 and has used the internet to send out regular news items and reports from Palestine.

Main channels of diaspora engagement with homeland struggles

There are four main ways in which members of diaspora communities can support resistance movements with which they identify.

1. Financial remittances and community development aid
2. Providing political and strategic input to the resistance movement
3. Preserving and promoting forms of cultural resistance
4. Advocacy work in host countries

1. Financial remittances and community development aid

Perhaps the most common manner in which diaspora members support struggles in their homeland is through the remittances sent home to support family, relatives and friends. Worldwide, the flow of remittances exceeds $100 billion a year.[9] According to some estimates, remittances to Colombia exceed the value of any category of legal exports except oil.[10] In my own research on the Palestinian intifada of 1987-91 I found that most Palestinian families were dependent to some degree upon the financial support of one or more family-members living and working outside Palestine, very often in one of the Gulf states. Without this support Palestinians would not have been able to sustain their struggle for as long as they did. The stemming of the financial flow in 1991, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, intensified the level of economic suffering in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and, along with a number of other factors, helped explain the decline in the commitment to unarmed resistance against the Israeli occupation. [11]

Apart from the financial aid from individuals to their own family networks, there is another category of financial aid provided by diaspora communities in support of resistance movements at home - the payment of unofficial taxes, tithes or contributions to organisations that use the funds to support the struggle, whether it be an armed or an unarmed movement. Just as Irish-Americans made donations to NORAID which were used to support the Republican movement in all its guises in Northern Ireland, so the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) have a

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9 C. Koppall et al, *Preventing the next wave of conflict: Understanding non-traditional threats to global security,* Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 2003, p. 59.

10 Personal communication from M. Garcia Duran, Coventry, UK, 15th July 2006.

11 See A. Rigby, *Living the Intifada*, London: Zed Books, 1991, pp. 16-17.

number of 'front' organisations throughout the world that collect money, with some estimates putting the amount raised as equivalent to $100 per head of the world-wide Tamil diaspora.[12]

Agencies and individuals amongst diaspora communities also raise funds for relief, reconstruction and development projects for their people back home. The building of hospitals, schools, community centres, along with investment in local economic enterprises, can help provide the means to satisfy basic needs which is a fundamental prerequisite of any sustained struggle, whether it be armed or unarmed. Moreover, to the extent that diaspora investment and aid can help people provide for their basic needs, it strengthens their steadfastness and their capacity to impose various forms of nonviolent sanctions involving types of social and economic boycott.

2. Providing political and strategic input to the resistance movement

As was remarked above, the internet and other developments in communications technology have enabled diasporas to remain in close touch with their compatriots at home. This has enabled diaspora groups with access to new ideas and expertise to feed these into the resistance movement. One simple example is the manner in which certain diaspora groups have coordinated the translation of key texts on nonviolent resistance and made these available to compatriots active in the resistance. Gene Sharp's *From dictatorship to democracy* has now been published in seventeen languages.[13]

Members of the diaspora are also in a good position to transmit new ideas and practices that can enhance the political impact of the resistance movement and increase its legitimacy in the eyes of significant publics and decision-making circles throughout the international community. One example of this type of symbiotic relationship concerns the role of diaspora groups supporting the struggle of the Sahrawi people to end the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. According to Maria Stephan and Jacob Mundy, writing in 2006:

> The local Sahrawi resistance is being supported by a strong transnational component led by members of the Sahrawi diaspora who are in daily communication with their compatriots using interactive internet chat rooms.

[12] Cheran (2004), p. 10.

[13] During the first Palestinian intifada, Palestinians from the diaspora associated with the Palestinian Centre for the Study of Nonviolence facilitated the translation of a number of Sharp's texts, including *Nonviolent struggle* (1988) and *The intifada and nonviolent struggle* (1990)

> This internet communication has helped promote unity, nonviolent discipline, and strategic coordination in the Sahrawi movement.[14]

Members of the diaspora with particular skills and expertise can also act in various types of consultancy and advisory roles on behalf of resistance movements. . It was expatriates who drafted the documents that formed the basis for the peace dialogue between different Somali groups in Nairobi during 2003-4, and it was members of the Eritrean diaspora that helped draft the constitution after the 1993 separation from Ethiopia.[15] It is also worth noting that at the time of writing the head of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) negotiating team, Anton Balasingham, lives in London.

Of course, tensions can arise between political leaders based in the diaspora and those remaining in the country of origin. There were a number of quite public disagreements between the Kosovan 'president' Rugova, living in Prishtina, and the head of the government-in-exile Bujar Bukoshi during the years of the resistance to Serbian rule.[16] Moreover, there is always the possibility that advocates of nonviolent resistance in the diaspora can grow out of touch with the 'realities' experienced by those living in the midst of the struggle. Thus, one of the participants at a conference on nonviolent resistance held in Bethlehem in January 2006 has reported that someone from the Palestinian diaspora suggested that his compatriots burn down and destroy their refugee camps as a way of increasing the moral and political pressure on Israel to negotiate a peace agreement. Coming from someone living a comfortable middle-class lifestyle outside of occupied Palestine, this proposal was not well received. [17]...

If diaspora groups can help strengthen the unity and coherence of a resistance movement, they can also foment divisions and factionalism, supporting local warlords rather than promoting nonviolent modes of struggle. Mohamed Guled, a Somali living in the Netherlands, reports:

> There are individuals among the Somali diaspora in the Netherlands who travel regularly to Somalia and Kenya carrying sometimes more than 10,000 Euro-s in cash which they give to the militia and faction leaders in order to buy favour. ... the financial support from the individuals and groups in the diaspora perpetuates the dominance of warlords, faction leaders and rebel

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14 M. Stephan & J. Mundy, 'A battlefield transformed: From guerrilla resistance to mass nonviolent struggle in the Western Sahara', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, v. 8, n. 3, Spring 2006, pp. 1-32, p. 2.

15 Mohamoud, p. 8.

16 H. Clark, *Civil Resistance in Kosovo* (Pluto, 2000), p. 118

17 Personal communication from Jorgen Johansen.

> groups in the political theatre and prevents the emergence of an alternative nonviolent civilian leadership in the homeland.[18]

By contrast some diaspora groups can eschew partisan positions and work to promote some form of peace settlement. An example is the work of the Acholi community from Northern Uganda living in the diaspora, and concentrated in London. They have been active in creating opportunity for conflict parties and interested intermediaries to engage in dialogue. Unfortunately the violence continues, despite their best efforts.[19]

3. *Preserving and promoting cultures of resistance*

An important function of diaspora communities in relation to any type of resistance movement in their home country (armed or unarmed) is the preservation and celebration of aspects of the community's cultural heritage. Perhaps the best example of this is the Dalai Lama who, along with his community of Tibetan exiles in Dharamsala in Northern India and elsewhere around the world, has succeeded in maintaining and promoting the religious rituals and cultural practices of traditional Tibet. This form of cultural resistance remains a counter to what some would term the 'cultural genocide' practiced by China over past decades. It is also through the promotion of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and rituals that the Tibetan exile movement seek to raise awareness regarding the fate of their homeland. As Samdhonh Rinpoche, one of the Dalai Lama's key advisors, explained, 'The Tibetan culture has spread in the West during the last thirty years in a very big way and that is a source of strength for us. Now we believe that Tibetan culture may not completely disappear from the surface of the earth very easily even if Tibet does not get autonomy in the near future.'[20]

Diaspora groups can play a slightly different 'cultural' role by constituting an audience for artists from their home country and thereby enabling them and their work to appear in public. Invariably there is an overt political dimension to such events, seeking to influence wider publics by showing Palestinian films, Kosovan drama troupes, Burmese crafts or whatever. Thus, the Ethiopian diaspora was urged by one of its number to organise 'socio-cultural events on a regular basis throughout the world to raise funds, to introduce the rich culture and tradition of Ethiopia to the international community and at the same time highlight the plight

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18 Quoted in Mohamoud, pp. 28-29.

19 In 1997 they convened a 'kacoke Madit' (big meeting) in London with the participation of representatives of civil society, the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army. See N. C. Poblicks, 'Kacoke Madit: A diaspora role in promoting peace', in O. Lucima, ed., *Protracted conflict, elusive peace: Initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda*, London: Conciliation Resources, 2002, p. 62.

20 Quoted in A. McNair, 'Tibetan nonviolence movement revitalizes', *Peace Magazine*, October-December 2002, p. 6.

of the Ethiopian people under dictatorship and poverty.' [21] But beyond the particular political message of such events, there is the celebration of a culture that embodies and symbolises the traditions and the values to which a resistance movement might claim adherence. In this way such events can represent an affirmation of solidarity with a movement and a people, and help sustain hope for the future, communicating the message that whatever the balance of power might be on the ground, certain core cultural elements that in some way might 'define' a people and the legitimacy of their struggle will remain alive and will endure.

4. Advocacy work in host countries

One of the key elements of any unarmed resistance strategy is to strengthen the movement's support base whilst undermining the pillars upon which their opponent relies. This is an area in which diaspora groups can play a significant role, particularly with regard to raising the profile of the struggle in the international arena, highlighting its justness by comparison with the illegitimacy of the opponent's stance. To do this diaspora groups, like any other interest group, can pursue as full a range of advocacy activities as are available within their host societies and which, in certain cases, may extend to civil disobedience by those migrants possessing full rights of citizenship in their societies of settlement.

There are three target groups for such advocacy work - the diaspora community itself, wider public opinion, and key decision-making circles in the society of settlement and beyond. Targeting the diaspora community is generally aimed at mobilising them in solidarity with the resistance movement. Wider publics are targeted with a view to raising awareness and thereby eliciting sympathy and support. The hope is that this will result in pressure on politicians and others so that they will use their influence to work for a satisfactory outcome to the conflict. The available evidence would seem to indicate that attempts to exercise direct influence on politicians through mobilisation at elections only enjoy limited success. There are a couple of constituencies in Toronto where the proportion of Tamils in the electorate is sufficiently high to ensure the return of candidates who proclaim their concern about the plight of the Tamils. Likewise, in those constituencies in north London where there is a high proportion of members of the Cypriot diaspora, successful candidates tend to take a special interest in peace efforts to reunite the island.[22]

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[21] 'Beyond protest rallies, what next for the diaspora?', 13th July 2005, accessible at www.ethiomedia.com/newpress/what_next.html (Accessed 16th July 2006)

[22] See Cheran, p. 10-11 and Zunzer, p. 32.

A typical example of an active diaspora organisation is the Cuban Democratic Directorate, which has campaigned since 1990 for the promotion of democratic change and respect for human rights in Cuba. On its website it lists some of the ways it has pursued its aim, including 'coordinating international campaigns in Latin America and Europe, producing radio broadcasts to Cuba, organising civic protests and giving direct support to the internal opposition.'[23] Methods of campaigning have included the holding of memorial events, adoption of 'prisoners of conscience', organising conferences, issuing press statements and various forms of printed and electronic publications, and lobbying political leaders to cease financial aid to Cuba. Another typical initiative of diaspora groups involves the establishment of research and information agencies to produce policy documents, educational materials and monitor developments in their homeland.

All such activities and initiatives have a broader purpose than advocacy. The holding of a cultural event to commemorate a particularly significant date in the history of the struggle can be seen as significant as a means of raising awareness amongst the diaspora community and wider publics, but they can also be important fund-raising events as well as a celebration of the symbols of resistance. Nadia Hijab has identified ways in which Palestinian institutions in the diaspora can link relief and rehabilitation with solidarity and advocacy. They can:

> a) Enable Palestinians to tell their own story and allow the international community to hear it first hand, so contributing to the growth of an international movement for Palestinian human rights;
>
> b) Provide protection for Palestinian resources and investments by mobilizing diaspora communities to help a school or provide free passage for goods and services;
>
> c) Increase the sources of assistance reaching the Palestinians to enable them to survive and endure until independence is achieved.[24]

Conclusion

People are moved by stories, and enabling those engaged in unarmed resistance to tell their stories to others is a powerful resource for any movement. One of the strengths possessed by diaspora groups when it comes to supporting movements for change in their countries of origin is that they can tell their own stories, thereby personalising the grander narrative in a

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[23] 'Principle activities of the Cuban Democratic Directorate from September 1990 to June 2004', www.directorio.org/history/history.php (Accessed 17 July 2006)

[24] N. Hijab, 'The role of Palestinian diaspora institutions in mobilizing the international community', *Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, 2004. Accessed at www.escwa.org.lb/main/pal/docs/PAIP06.pdf (18 July 2006)

manner which can have the capacity to touch and to mobilise others. Too often out-of-country sympathisers and solidarity activists travel to visit the locations where struggle is taking place, and one unsought-for consequence can be the weakening of the movement they sought to strengthen. Let me illustrate. In India there are a number of grass-roots popular movements campaigning against the expropriation of land and natural resources by multinational consortia. Anyone who opposes such industrialisation projects is anti-modern and 'anti-national'. Consequently, the participation of any non-Indian in protest demonstrations of any kind will be sufficient to label the movement as a tool of anti-Indian foreign elements, with subsequent loss of legitimacy and public credibility. The risk is not the same when it is non-resident Indians from the diaspora participating directly in the struggle, they do not stand out as foreigner and are therefore less likely to be used as a means of discrediting the movement. On the contrary, they can return to their host country with their own eye-witness accounts of the population displacement, the ecological damage and the suffering occasioned by such initiatives as the bauxite mining in the Kashipur region of Orissa.[25]

Without blinding ourselves to the fact that diasporas can be as divided as their societies or origin, with further divisions superimposed from their societies of settlement, and that they can consequently foment divisions within resistance movements struggling for change, it should be clear that they also have tremendous assets and resources to be utilised in support of such movements. As such it is important that those seeking to promote unarmed resistance movements as a means of transforming oppressive and violent circumstances should factor into their strategising the various diaspora communities around the world, not as external third parties but as potential partners in struggle.

[25] A major partner in this venture is the Canadian-based company Alcan, which has sparked the development of a campaign by members of the Indian diaspora in Canada called 'Alcan't in India'. For details of their activities see www.alcantinindia.org.