When the House is on Fire: Ethnic Diasporas During Flare-ups in Their Countries of Origin

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In the last few decades, interest has increased in ethnic diasporas and their influence on conflicts and peace processes in the countries or regions from where they came. Although studies show that the impact of ethnic diasporas varies in different conflicts and at various times, there is sufficient evidence suggesting that a diaspora community can have a significant role. Research indicates that the existence of a large diaspora in the West can feed a conflict and exacerbate it (inter alia, by providing finance, supplying weapons, and by sending volunteers to participate in the fighting) but can also mitigate it (for example, through unofficial contact between diaspora representatives of the warring factions). The aim of this article is to examine the way that conflict in the country of origin influences diasporas, and more specifically how renewed flare-ups affect them. The innovation here is the emphasis on the period of renewed flare-ups as the time frame examined and on the changes within the diaspora itself, as a result of the developments in the homeland. The article discusses aspects of the diaspora community's identity, the sense of personal safety vis-à-vis rival diaspora communities, and the significance of the arrival of a new wave of migrants fleeing the conflict zone in the country of origin. Examining the diaspora is important as changes within it may serve as a yardstick for how the diaspora will continue to affect the conflict in the future. The article's case study is the ethnic Kurdish community in Germany and the renewed round of violence between Turkey and members of its Kurdish minority in 2015.

Keywords: Turkey, Kurds, diasporas, PKK, Germany

Introduction

Since the beginning of the new millennium, research concerning ethnic diasporas has flourished in different disciplines, especially in the field of international relations. While there are several types of diasporas,[1] the literature tends to emphasize ethno-national ones, because of the importance of nation-states in the international system. According to Sheffer, an ethno-national diaspora possesses certain features: It is a socio-political phenomenon created by a voluntary or involuntary migration, whose members view themselves as having the same ethno-national origin. They reside permanently as a minority in one or more host countries. Members of a diaspora are in regular or sporadic contact with what they perceive as their homeland and with individuals and/or groups from the same background living in other host countries. Despite the decision to live permanently in a host country, they maintain a shared identity, identify themselves as having a shared identity, and show solidarity with their group and nation as a whole. Diaspora members form ethno-national organizations and are active culturally, socially, economically, and politically. Among their activities, they build transnational networks that reflect the complex interrelations among the diaspora, host countries, the homeland, and international players.[2]

The importance of studying ethno-national diasporas within the context of the field of national security is that these groups are prominent transnational players. Researching this phenomenon also helps us understand how other transnational players—such as criminal and terrorist organizations—come into being and operate. Furthermore, diasporas and these organizations are often connected. For example, a terrorist organization may have a dominant influence on a diaspora (as is the case with the Kurdish underground, the PKK and the Kurdish diaspora). In other cases, entities in the diaspora join forces with criminal organizations to finance fighting in the country of origin. Moreover, researchers increasingly understand that national security also involves intra-national and extra-national legitimacy for policies pursued by various players. As Shain notes, governments and leaders in the country of origin who fail to pay attention to the diasporas could find members of the diaspora perceiving them and their actions as illegitimate, which could conceivably lead to their downfall.[3] Finally, by discussing diasporas, we are not bound by some of the notions about the importance of a person's physical presence in a specific territory as a requisite for preserving one's national

Demonstration in Munich, Germany against the invasion of the Turkish army into Afrin, Syria, February 10, 2018. Photograph: Alexander Paul / Getty Images, NurPhoto

identity. At the same time, this discussion further strengthens the fact that for many, the ethno-national dimension is a key component of their identity.

This article focuses on the Kurdish diaspora in Germany and its response to the collapse of the peace process between Turkey and the PKK, in 2015. The Kurdish diaspora is one of the most studied groups in the literature on diasporas, particularly because it is portrayed as having a negative role on the continued conflict in the country of origin. Therefore, a study of this diaspora and a relatively new period of analysis can help confirm or refute some of the existing assertions in the literature about diasporas and their function in extending the conflict in their countries of origin. Although Kurds are dispersed elsewhere as well, the center of the Kurdish diaspora is in Germany. An analysis of the responses of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany to the renewed fighting in Turkey in 2015 shows that this diaspora community reacted powerfully to the new developments because it had been greatly skeptical of the peace process and that the renewed fighting confirmed previously-held negative attitudes toward the Turkish authorities.

Diasporas and Conflicts in the Country of Origin

The literature dealing with diasporas tends to stress the negative role a diaspora might play vis-à-vis a conflict in the country of origin—for example, by financially aiding militant groups; shipping weapons to group members fighting in the country of origin; expressing political support for radical factions in the country of origin; and even participating in acts of violence and terrorism. There is also another side, however, manifested in attempts by diaspora members to support moderates and encourage negotiations by "exporting" liberal values to the country of origin, with emphasis on dialogue. Moreover, a diaspora can strengthen civil society organizations in the country of origin, help reframe the conflict, and aid in reconstruction once the battles are over.[4] Studies indicate that diasporas resulting from conflict and involuntary flight tend to hold more radical stances than diasporas that arrived in their host countries for economic reasons. It has also been shown that diasporas tend to hold more extreme positions if their homeland is not a sovereign state than diasporas that are connected to one.[5] While the literature referring to the impact of diasporas on peace processes and conflicts in the country of origin is growing, researchers still have not yet paid sufficient attention to how various stages of a conflict influence the diaspora community and, in particular, to the ramifications that renewed violence after a period of calm might have on it.

One striking characteristic of the diaspora is its connection to the homeland. It poses a dilemma, however, as to why members of the diaspora do not reside in their country of origin or homeland. One solution that members of the diaspora take to deal with this dilemma is to emphasize the importance of maintaining their identity. Other than working to prevent assimilation of group members, members of diasporas (especially those who lack a nation-state) feel that their main task is to preserve their ethnic group identity.[6] In this sense, key events (a peace process or a violent conflict) cause the diaspora to engage in greater introspection than before. Moreover, as Demmers claims, while the groups in the homeland who are physically involved in the conflict may experience fear, hunger, pain, and tension, certain members of the diaspora will experience anger, frustration, and alienation.[7]

The renewal of violent conflict in the country of origin may have implications for diaspora members. First, a violent conflict will accentuate aspects of their identity. In many cases, especially when the diaspora is

the result of conflict in the country of origin (that is, flight or involuntary migration), renewed hostilities will strengthen existing attitudes and feelings of "it is the same old story" and will confirm negative perceptions about the opposing side. The current threat will become part of the general narrative of the overall threat facing the diaspora group and will be compared to previous threats.[8] Moreover, the renewed sense of threat will mobilize diaspora members and they will be more willing to provide economic aid, engage in lobbying efforts, and even volunteer as fighters in the country of origin. A minority among the diaspora members may rethink or reinforce their previous attitudes about the futility of continuing the conflict. Second, renewed violence in the country of origin might also lead to confrontations with members of rival diasporas in the host country and could impact the personal safety of members of the diaspora community. Fearing such clashes, the authorities in the host countries may become more aggressive toward demonstrations held by the diaspora group to express solidarity with those in their country of origin and could limit the diaspora community's activities. Third, renewed conflict could result in a new wave of migration to the diaspora, with social changes and differences between the waves of migration having the potential to cause tensions within the group and affect its modus operandi.

Empirical Background

The Kurdish diaspora in Germany is the result of several waves of migration. It is difficult to attain precise data on its size, in part because group members are often labeled by their country of origin rather than by their self-identification. However, the number of Kurds in Germany is estimated to be between 600,000 and 1.2 million,[9] of which some 85 percent is from Turkey and a minority from Iraq. Some came to Germany for economic reasons and over the years have been able to express their Kurdish identity, which was not possible within Turkey.[10] Others migrated to Germany because of the violent conflict between Turkey and the PKK, which erupted in the late 1970s, and because of the oppression experienced in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, peaking in the Anfal campaign in the late 1980s. The Kurdish diaspora is viewed as a classic example of an ethno-national community that plays a negative role in the conflict in the country of origin. This view is congruent with the theoretical literature, which asserts that diasporas created as a result of

conflict and diasporas lacking a nation-state tend to have more radical stances than diasporas connected to sovereign states. Nonetheless, and as Nielsen stresses, the Kurdish diaspora also encompasses organizations supporting a pluralistic approach and non-violent means such as dialogue to end the conflict in their country of origin.[11]

The violent conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish PKK was particularly severe between 1984 and 1999. After the arrest and incarceration of the leader of the PKK in 1999, the conflict waned, but worsened again in 2004. Between 2008 and 2011, secret talks were held between the heads of the Turkish intelligence service and high-ranking members of the PKK. The existence of the process, also called the Oslo process, was leaked in 2011. Due to the leak, it was decided to hold the process in the open, which led the PKK to declare a unilateral ceasefire in 2013 and withdraw some of its troops to northern Iraq. The ceasefire ended in July 2015, however, as the result of an attack by the Islamic State in a town located on the Turkish-Syrian border, which targeted a group preparing its travel to help the Kurds in Syria. For the PKK and many in the Kurdish minority, Turkey has not done enough to protect the Kurds of Turkey and even helped the Islamic State in its war against the Kurds in Syria.

The Kurdish Diaspora and the Renewal of the Violent Conflict in Turkey

The renewal of the violent conflict between Turkey and the PKK occurred when the Kurdish diaspora as a whole was doing relatively well. Several factors contributed to its prosper. First, the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq successfully had strengthened its position, especially since the Second Gulf War in 2003, which helped to strengthen the entity's state-like manifestations. Second, the upheavals in the Arab world were seen as an opportunity for a "Kurdish Spring."[12] And finally, the first-time success of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to cross Turkey's high electoral threshold (10 percent) in June 2015 also contributed to the sense of unprecedented accomplishments. In 2015, in speaking about the strengthening of the diaspora, a veteran member of the Kurdish community in Germany stated that "if there is going to be any peace with Turkey, it will be down to the diaspora. And that's true for conflict too. We are becoming as strong as the Armenian and Jewish diaspora. Assimilated Kurds in Turkey cannot

make peace—or war—without us. We [diaspora Kurds] have suffered. And we [diaspora] will be a part of the decision-making process, if there are going to be any decisions."[13]

An analysis of statements made by members of the Kurdish diaspora shows great skepticism about the peace process with Turkey. A typical response is that the peace process was not truly a peace process and that the Turkish side was never honest about it. For example, "Of course, we [diaspora Kurds] want peace. Who would not want peace? . . . But Turkey is not serious about making peace. Erdoğan is just playing with us. He needs Kurdish votes and he has used us to stay in power since 2002."[14] In response to the question if he was surprised by the collapse of the peace talks, the secretary general of the Kurdish community in Germany wrote that, "Given the strong electoral success of the HDP, we were not surprised by the failure of the peace process, since a power hungry individual such as Erdoğan would never tolerate a strong opposition party . . . [We were surprised] by the political and military brutality preformed right in front of the eyes of the world" Moreover, "even during the peace process, the Kurdish community in Germany as well as other Kurdish organizations maintained a critical view of the Islamist and neo-Ottoman policies of Erdoğan's government."[15] It was also said that the Turkish president renewed the fighting because his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), did not win the majority it had expected in the June 2015 elections.[16]

The Kurdish diaspora community in Germany saw the failure of the peace process and the terrorist attacks by the Islamic State on Kurdish targets as a Turkish conspiracy against them and even as part of a systematic policy of the different Turkish governments over decades, of which the outcome would inevitably be more bloodshed and death.[17] Officials in the Kurdish diaspora explained Turkey's attacks on Islamic State targets only as a cover to attempts to prevent the establishment of autonomous Kurdish cantons in northern Syria and as a diversion from what was, in practice, an attack on the PKK strongholds in northern Iraq.[18] These sentiments evidently strengthened the Kurdish diaspora's lobbying efforts, which included turning to the German government, the European Union, and NATO.[19] While it is more difficult to find evidence of increased financial support for the PKK or volunteer fighters from the Kurdish diaspora, it is estimated that money, in fact, has been transferred to the PKK.[20] Nonetheless, some have suggested

a different solution. For example, it has been said that "to keep Erdoğan from being victorious, the Kurds must take care not to fall into the trap of violence and to continue the peace process at all costs."[21]

Some of the distrust can also be attributed to the fact that half of the time in which there were peace talks, these talks were held in secret. Consequently, few in the Kurdish diaspora knew of their existence. A leading Turkish journalist and writer claimed that "what was called the 'peace process' was never transparent. Meetings between the Justice and Development Party and the Kurdish underground were always held behind closed doors and civil society was never included. Even the reasons for the breakdown of the process were never revealed to the public. How can you trust something about which you know nothing?"[22]

The renewal of violent conflict in the country of origin also increases the risk of violent clashes between rival diasporas in the host countries. Addressing this risk, the secretary general of the Kurdish community in Germany said, "We are very concerned by the developments. More than anything, we don't want the conflict to spill over into Germany. We appeal to all Kurds in Germany to keep the peace. Non-violent protest is a democratic right, but our political rival is in Ankara, not Berlin."[23] One German newspaper noted that "the Kurdish conflict is coming to Germany."[24] This concern led German opinion leaders to call for greater state involvement to reduce tensions between Turkey and the PKK.[25] Conflict fatigue was also evident. A journalist from a German-Turkish background wrote, "The PKK is once again showing its old terrorist reflexes and the state is going back to its authoritarian reflexes."[26] In this context, parties supportive of the PKK and who have opposed the German government's labeling of the PKK as a terrorist organization are facing difficulties in challenging this classification because of the renewed fighting in Turkey. Being defined as a terrorist organization means that using the PKK leader's picture at rallies in Germany is banned, as is the use of other symbols of the organization, which angers some in the Kurdish community.[27] Local German newspapers have claimed that by using the PKK symbols, the Kurdish diaspora seeks to provoke the rival Turkish diaspora.[28] A German-Turkish political scientist even defined the Kurdish problem as the Achilles heel of Turkish-German relations.[29] Thus, the conflict in Turkey has an affect that goes beyond the internal hostilities

between ethnic groups in Germany and even leads to tensions between Germany and Turkey.

It is still too early to assess the influence of the 2015 wave of migration on the Kurdish diaspora. However, it is worth noting that, in addition to Kurds who fled Turkey, there are also Kurdish refugees who came to Europe because of the Syrian civil war. Furthermore, after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 and the subsequent widespread purges of the civil service, the number of political asylum seekers increased. Thus, both the Germany authorities and diaspora organizations are facing a range of challenges associated with the new migrants from Turkey and Syria (and even Iraq). Some feel that this trend will only increase. For example, it has been said that "the reason for the Turkish government's attack and use of military and police forces is that these regions voted for the HDP, which received more than 90 percent of the votes. The people in these regions do not feel safe. They are afraid for their lives. The outcome will be another wave of migration to Europe."[30] In the diaspora it has also been commonly claimed that Erdoğan wants to settle Syrian Arab refugees in Kurdish-majority regions in order to drive out the Kurds who will eventually leave Turkey altogether.[31] The fact that since 2012 the Turkish diaspora has had the right to vote in Turkish elections and in referendums also has increased the politicization of the Turkish and Kurdish diasporas. Before every election cycle, Turkish politicians come to speak to voters in diaspora centers. Kurdish diaspora members have even depicted attempts by Erdoğan and other Turkish politicians to hold political rallies in Germany as endeavors to undermine the country's social stability.[32]

Conclusion

The members of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany did not have a chance to accept the existence of the peace process before violence erupted anew, leading some to stick even more than before to their distrust of the Turkish establishment and its intentions. Therefore, diaspora representatives were not surprised when the talks collapsed, attributing malicious motives to the other side. However, despite the skepticism about the peace talks, they have still been surprised by the intensity of the violence since 2015. The diaspora also has shown signs of involvement (rallies, lobbying Western politicians, shipping material aid) because of the new difficulties facing the Kurdish minority in the country of origin, especially what has been seen as

a combined threat of the Turkish state and Turkey's supposed support of the Islamic State. At times, it seems that some have exaggerated the intensity of the threat, such as the accusation—to date unfounded—that Turkey intends to settle Syrian refugees in Kurdish-majority regions in order to drive out the original inhabitants. Amplifying the threat from Turkey can be destructive, and it will only make it more difficult to return to the negotiations table. The main influence of the renewed conflict in Turkey on the Kurdish diaspora in Germany was the reinforcing of the Kurdish diaspora's separate identity as well as the underscoring of the level of threat emanating from Turkey. There are also indicators that the conflict has affected the Kurdish diaspora's feeling of personal security while the new wave of migrants have also influenced the community. If the Kurds hoped that the Arab Spring would result in the West rethinking the Kurdish question, it would seem that, at least in Germany, the renewed fighting between Turkey and the PKK has not led anyone to reconsider the definition of the PKK as a terrorist organization. Thus, this has implications for the diaspora, because the authorities may read any expression of support for the PKK as support for a terrorist organization.

Statements by diaspora representatives that key events in their country of origin cannot take place without the involvement of the diaspora emphasize the diaspora's importance for both the country of origin and the host countries, as well as for relevant actors in the international community. While dialogue between all relevant parties and representatives of the diaspora may add another layer of complexity, it is highly significant in terms of reaching sustainable solutions. A dialogue with the diaspora (compared to one only with representatives from the country of origin) will almost certainly raise more concerns about identity and other non-material questions, which are seen as more difficult to resolve and thus are often postponed to later stages of negotiations; it is precisely such questions that are profoundly linked to the legitimacy of the proposed solutions as well as to generating support for the leaders conducting the talks. Hence, the very awareness of these dimensions of the conflict and to the identity-related threat perceptions may significantly contribute to formulating long-term sustainable solutions. Even if their implementation takes a long time, they may be preferable to other solutions discussed among a limited number of parties who are incapable of relating to all relevant aspects. It is important to note that the diaspora is hardly homogeneous and consists of many streams and organizations. Therefore,

it is critical to reach out to representatives of several organizations and not just to ones that are more inclined to dialogue. On the contrary, engaging in dialogue with the most hawkish factions of the diaspora may contribute to identifying the best solutions to the conflict.

In terms of national security, the increased importance of ethnic diasporas represents both an opportunity and a risk. On the one hand, as many state actors discover, diasporas can serve as a country of origin's soft power and help them advance their objectives in the international arena. For more than a decade, this has been Turkey's own starting point with regard to the Turkish diaspora in Germany.[33] On the other hand, rival diasporas can represent a complex challenge, having ramifications for both the country of origin and the host countries, as is the case the Kurdish diaspora in Germany and the challenge it poses for Turkish-German relations. Because of these two contradictory directions, it is worth emphasizing that a discussion about transnational players in general and diasporas in particular renders the national security discourse more complex and questions the practice of relating only to state actors. At the same time, the discussion about diasporas shows that the reference point continues to be primarily on how these actors generate and/or respond to state policy (in the Kurdish context, this relates mostly to Turkey, Iraq, and Syria), and thus in practice entrenching the existing structure of the international system as an inter-state system.

Notes

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1 The literature refers to religious diasporas (for example, the Muslim diaspora), diasporas from a particular continent (such as Asian-Americans), and diasporas from a particular city (for example, Hebronites). The literature also refers to diasporas from a gender perspective and to the attempt to break down nationality as a framework, such as the Queer diaspora.

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5 For more on diasporas created because of conflicts, see Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 2–4.

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