

# How Refugee Diasporas Respond to Trauma

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The global refugee crisis has raised pressing questions about how to manage hundreds of thousands of people on the move and alleviate their suffering. These problems are magnified by conflict and disarray in their countries of origin, and transit or host states that lack the capacity or political will to accommodate refugees. While such concerns currently occupy the limelight, the long-term effects of the crisis have received less attention. Even if refugees may at some point return home under intergovernmental agreements, many will remain in their new homes, or move on to other countries. Eventually they will form conflict-generated diasporas with durable links abroad. Such diasporas could be a source of economic development, but also of further conflict.

Lessons learned from experiences of previous refugee waves and their subsequent diaspora activism could inform policies toward refugees today. I have been leading a large-scale European Research Council project on “Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty” that has yielded insights into when, how, and why diasporas mobilized for causes related to their countries of origin in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. (The project is based on comparative fieldwork with over 200 diaspora activists in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and France.) These lessons relate both to integrating refugees in host societies and to the contexts in which conflict-generated diasporas engage in political activities locally and globally.

## LIVES ON HOLD

Preoccupied with dramatic images of refugees crossing international borders despite rough seas and barbed-wire fences, the media are less attentive to another side of their ordeal. This is the period when refugees are in transit or have reached a host-state destination, but have no legal documentation to work or study. Such periods may be

short, up to a year in the best circumstances, but more often they are prolonged.

Some might not be eligible for asylum in one country if they are recognized as refugees in another. Asylum applications may be misplaced, rejected, and appealed. In the meantime, refugees often live in densely populated camps or dismal private accommodation, vulnerable to attacks by racists and xenophobes. They are stripped of their ability to make decisions about their own lives, even though they used to make such choices perfectly well on their own before they were forcibly displaced. Other agents—states, governmental and nongovernmental organizations—now make the vital decisions for them.

Numerous Kosovo Albanian, Bosnian, and Palestinian diaspora activists whom I interviewed in Europe said that their lives were painfully put on hold during such periods. Some became prone to depression. Others found that working with the diaspora community and seeking to help those left behind was their most meaningful experience.

Refugee-based diasporas maintain identities shaped by trauma, which often become frozen in time. Trauma is embedded in family narratives, transmitted to subsequent generations, and integrated into their self-image. Such traumatized identities distinguish conflict-generated diasporas from those that migrated for voluntary and economic reasons.

One way to prevent traumatic identities from solidifying over time, and leading to volatile long-distance nationalism, is to empower refugees early on in their migration journeys. Helping them move as quickly as possible from a mental state of victimhood to one in which they feel that their sense of human agency has been restored is essential. For example, Swedish activists in Gothenburg, and more recently local activists in Coventry, England, have sought to develop opportunities for refugees to engage in volunteer work in their host society.

In a refugee crisis, volunteering is usually associated with a humanitarian approach whereby the

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privileged and charitable provide social services to the less fortunate. As good-willed and necessary as such endeavors may be, helping refugees volunteer and empower themselves channels energies in productive ways and creates a sense of purpose. Through volunteer work, refugees can learn valuable skills, practice the local language, and acquire new social networks, which may prove useful when they begin searching for jobs after acquiring legal documentation. But state-funded programs are necessary to structure volunteering endeavors, in order to ensure that rules of engagement are well defined and to protect refugees from abuse and exploitation.

### POWERS OF ATTRACTION

A common narrative among diaspora activists from refugee backgrounds is that they wanted to reach another country than the one where they settled, but were stymied by a lack of financial means or an eligible passport. Different countries exercised different powers of attraction for those on the move. For some the dream was to reach the United States, drawn by its reputation for fostering entrepreneurship; for others it was Sweden, because of its generous welfare system; another group preferred Canada and its mixture of both of those incentives. Some were disappointed with what they could achieve in their desired destinations, but others were able to match their personal convictions with new opportunities and eventually convert them into assets for their projects of transnational mobilization.

In the United States, for example, first-generation Kosovo Albanians managed to amass significant financial power due to their entrepreneurship and relatively high social mobility in American society. They sent large sums to sustain the armed struggle for Kosovo's independence from Serbia in the 1990s. They also helped finance state-building efforts during the postconflict reconstruction period.

In contrast, their compatriots who fled to Sweden had to pay high taxes just like the rest of the Swedish population, and could not build more than average wealth. But they received good benefits, including free education, which some eventually utilized as an asset in their transnational engagement with Kosovo. They were able to assist

in improving the educational resources of the de facto state, participating in student-exchange programs and curriculum development.

Some diasporas, like the Armenians dispersed after the 1915 genocide, become more deeply embedded in their host states. Armenians abroad have often pursued international recognition of the genocide and the largely Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (de jure part of Azerbaijan, but functioning as a de facto state with close ties to Armenia). They have done so by lobbying the US Congress and the UK House of Lords, among other host-state institutions.

Others have maintained thicker social linkages to their places of origin—the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, for example—and to transit countries where they had spent a significant amount of time. Thicker linkages abroad create greater capacity to mobilize transnationally rather than through host-state institutions. However, state-based mobilizations are often less contentious or radical than transnational ones.

### UNRESOLVED SUFFERING

Beyond ties to home states, thick transnational linkages to cities, villages, and other specific places abroad also shape diaspora mobilizations. In my re-

search with Dzeneta Karabegovic, we found that survivors remained deeply connected to the site of their suffering in the former concentration camp of Omarska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and mobilized to create a memorial on the site of the camp. They used a variety of methods to rally support locally, nationally, and globally. They sent the European Union a petition asking it to pressure Serbia and Bosnian Serb authorities in the context of the EU enlargement process and to recognize their concentration-camp experience. They enlisted a multinational corporation in the steel and mining sector to pressure uncooperative local Bosnian Serb authorities to permit the building of the memorial. Activists also protested in front of the London Olympics Tower, a global landmark that was built by the corporation.

When a traumatic issue remains unresolved among diaspora, host state, and home state, conflict-generated identities and contentious diaspora mobilizations can be difficult to dismantle. In the Netherlands, for example, Bosnian diaspora activism centers on victim-based

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claims, including recognition of the Srebrenica genocide and other demands for memorialization, and has proved more contentious than in the UK or Sweden. The trauma stems from the involvement of Dutch peacekeeping forces in the 1995 surrender of the Srebrenica enclave to Serb paramilitary forces during the war in the former Yugoslavia. The paramilitaries killed some 8,000 Bosnian Muslims and Croats, unleashing ethnic cleansing and refugee flows. The contention in the Netherlands over the legacy of these war crimes is sustained by public debates, media polemics, and court cases launched by diaspora members.

There is a similar contentious dynamic among Palestinians living in the UK. Numerous Palestinian diaspora activists consider Britain the country originally responsible for their current suffering, since it was a major power behind the formation of the Israeli state, going back to the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Even if host countries seek to provide policy-based solutions to the needs of refugees, more awareness is often required to resolve historical traumas that connect states to diaspora populations on their own territories.

## PRESERVING DIGNITY

Preventive action is necessary to address the root causes that create refugee waves in the first place, including violent conflict in fragile countries, extreme poverty, and climate change. But once a dangerous refugee exodus begins, other concerns need to be considered.

Even if the immediate concern is how to govern refugees on the move, policy makers need to look closer into the contexts where refugees settle. Such places can stir diaspora mobilization because of their traumatic histories, but also because of their institutional and supranational power or high visibility, among other reasons.

Preserving the dignity of refugees is crucial to help traumatized people get their lives quickly back on track, empower their individual agency in productive ways, and avoid campaigns that fuel conflict. If human dignity is not preserved in the current refugee crisis concerning Syria and the Mediterranean, the international community will be in danger of repeating mistakes of the past, further adding to the refugees' traumatic experiences and possibly fueling more conflicts in the future. ■