How Refugee Diasporas Respond to Trauma

MARIJA KOINOVA

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

MARIJA KOINOVA is a reader in international relations at the University of Warwick.
privileged and charitable provide social services to
the less fortunate. As good-willed and necessary as
such endeavors may be, helping refugees volun-
teer and empower themselves channels energies in
productive ways and creates a sense of purpose.
Through volunteer work, refugees can learn val-
uable 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 en-
trepreneurship; for others
it was Sweden, because of
its generous welfare system;
another group preferred
Canada and its mixture of both of those incen-
tives. Some were disappointed with what they
could achieve in their desired destinations, but
others were able to match their personal convic-
tions with new opportunities and eventually con-
vert them into assets for their projects of transna-
tional mobilization.

In the United States, for example, first-
generation Kosovo Albanians managed to amass
significant financial power due to their entrepre-
neurship 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 re-
construction period.

In contrast, their compatriots who fled to Swe-
den 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 ben-
etits, including free education, which some even-
tually 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 pro-
grams 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 tran-
sit countries where they had spent a significant
amount of time. Thicker linkages abroad create
greater capacity to mobilize transnationally rath-
er than through host-state institutions. However,
state-based mobilizations are often less conten-
tious 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 uncoopera-
tive 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 dis-
mantle. In the Netherlands, for example, Bos-
nian diaspora activism centers on victim-based
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.