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Diaspora Transnational Politics: Peace Contributors or Spoilers? Yemen; a case study

Reem Mousad AlForassy

**ABSTRACT:**
This paper focuses on more specifically those active on social and classical media. The researcher attempts to explore the function of diaspora media on development and peace initiatives. She tries to answer two main questions after setting the theoretical framework. The first question is, what are the chances of Yemeni 2011 diaspora mainly, journalists, lawyers, human rights advocates, former politicians “active on media” etc, to contribute to peace processes? Second, what is the nature of their contribution?

Importance of this paper lies in the fact, as Lyons (2004) pointed out, “research on conflict-generated diasporas and their roles in homeland conflicts is new and more cases studies need to be conducted.” This attempt to understand this role is the first on Yemen. Due to limitation of time and space, results of this research though nongeneralizable still reflects the general nature of this role.

**KEYWORDS**
Diaspora, Transnational Politics, Peace Contributors, Spoilers, a case study, social, classical media, peace initiatives, Yemen.

**Introductions**
Conflicts and its complexity has become a serious challenge to the world and to practitioners trying to resolve them. Variety of conflict resolution methods have been developed to help ending conflicts, including but not limited to, formal diplomacy, soft diplomacy, track one diplomacy, track two diplomacy, and multi-track diplomacy (Diamond & McDonald, 1996; Ziegler, 1984; De Magallanes, 1988; Montville, 1991).

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This paper focuses on track two mainly diaspora and more specifically those active on social and classical media.

The researcher attempts to explore the function of diaspora media on development and peace initiatives. She tries to answer two main questions after setting the theoretical framework. The first question is, what are the chances of Yemeni 2011 diaspora mainly, journalists, lawyers, human rights advocates, former politicians “active on media” ...etc, to contribute to peace processes? Second, what is the nature of their contribution? Importance of this paper lies in the fact, as Lyons (2004) pointed out, “research on conflict-generated diasporas and their roles in homeland conflicts is new and more cases studies need to be conducted.”

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**Diaspora the lexicon:**

Basically, diaspora the lexicon has been defined by several scholars differently, yet the concept remains similar. Van Hear defines it as, “populations of migrant origin who are scattered among two or more destinations, between which there develop multifarious links involving flows and exchanges of people and resources: between the homeland and destination countries, and among destination countries. “(Van Hear et al. 2004). Demmers further confines the concept to the existence of an initial “trauma” at the roots of the migration process. Likewise, (Safarn: 1991) relates it to: “voluntary or involuntary dispersion: a collective memory about the homeland; a troubled relationship with the country of settlement; a commitment to the homeland’s safety and prosperity; the presence of an issue of return; though not a commitment to do so; and

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consciousness and solidarity that can be expressed through the creation of diasporic organization.”

More specifically, Robin (2016) highlights “…although diaspora are now well-established players in the global politics and economy, their role remains controversial. He further concludes that “diaspora have variously been described as war-mongers, peace-builders, or ambivalent in their influence on conflict.” Similarly (Ziegler, 1984; De Magallanes, 1988; Montville, 1991; Diamond & McDonald, 1996) 6 points out to diaspora role in peace processes both positively and negatively.

In 1981, Joseph V. Montville, then a U.S. State Department employee, coined the phrases Track One and Track Two diplomacy, classifying diaspora as a main player in Track Two.7 He defines it as, “… unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aim to develop strategies, to influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict”. He emphasizes it can’t substitute track one but rather complements it. 8

Similarly, Diamond (1996) attempting to analyze this track effect, argues that it comes both at direct and indirect forms. Directly through workshops or peace initiatives bringing conflicting parties together to develop personal relationships. While indirectly via formulating and shifting public opinions at home and internationally. It attempts at reducing the sense of victimhood of the parties and rehumanizing the image of the adversary” 9

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**New wars, mobility and boundaries:**

Notably, the new types of conflicts, mobility and boundaries constitutes its own rules upon diaspora (Kaldor, 1990). Diaspora political weight has evolved immensely since the early 20th century due to several factors.

1) the rise of new patterns of conflicts,
2) the rapid rise of war refugees,
3) the increased speed of communication and mobility; and
4) the increased production of political and cultural boundaries.

Hence civil war migrants are now referred to as “Conflict-generated diaspora” (Mohamed and Osman 2008). Those fleeing Ethiopia, Kenya, Armenia, Kurdistan, Palestine, Syria and Yemen are examples among many. They usually but not always carry higher sense of victimhood, trauma and belonging to their homelands the researcher believes.

Moreover, the nature of contemporary wars is global and lack a center of gravity or what Demmers calls the” deterritorialisation.”  They are not necessarily tied to one certain location or battlefield but can be played out at unpredictable places and are globally spread (Münkler, 2005). Increasingly, conflicts seem to become dispersed and delocalized.  Besides, he argues that the nature of external support for contemporary conflict has become increasingly transnational. And that diaspora communities have become the obvious group to mobilize this external support.

Subsequently, type of wars, pace and scale of the globalized world paved room for what Demmer calls the “transnational Politics” or what Anderson (1992) describes as “the status living politics form long-distance.” Transnational Politics assisted

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Mexican politicians campaign for votes and financial support in Southern California. Franjo Tudjman’s electoral campaign received 4 $ million from Croatian diaspora later rewarded by 12 out of 120 seats in recognition of their support. 14

Moreover, what is unique of today’s new wars is that they undermine the legitimacy of the state. Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria are examples of civil wars where belligerent movements claim their legitimacy over the state. Taliban, Daesh, Al-Shabaab, Haftar, Al-Huthi are examples among many. The researcher believes that diaspora is now transnationally trying to fill this gap of international representation. They are active in Human Rights office or at Security Council corridors. Not all diaspora the researcher claims but those skilled, eloquent active personnel.

Most importantly, diaspora is credited with invaluable context-specific knowledge (Horst, 2010). 15 In addition to their access to further cultures, languages, experiences, relationships, new skills and values. They have access to the host country’s governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Not to mention their advantage to follow international broadcast media or newspapers both in their new or local languages, either during visit to their country or electronically.16

Having this insider and outsider leverage is crucial to diaspora role.

**So, are they Hawks or Doves?**

That been said, diaspora is seen as both peace contributors and spoilers to their war-torn homelands. Scholars are still divided in to two camps arguing both diasporas’ constructive/deconstructive roles.

Markus for instance, challenges the negative perception of diaspora as conflict drivers and unscrupulous long-distance nationalists. He identifies three major

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contributions. First, the remittances which enhances economy stabilization specially when state is non-active. Second, their engagement in humanitarian and Human Rights platforms. Beside their social media presence which enhances the space for ideas contestation and freedom of thinking if not freedom to speak.

Khmer diaspora in Vietnam (1979) for instance had a vital role in expulsing Polpot’s genocidal regime from Cambodia. Likewise, the sudden upsurge in strength of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during 1998 was mainly attributed to the fundraising efforts by the Albanian diaspora in the West. Similarly, history of Sierra Leone over the last quarter century is an ideal case. The online newsletter Focus on Sierra Leone published in the UK broke the siege imposed by RUF rebels and played a valuable conduit for advocacy and lobbying for a negotiated settlement Ogunyemi argues. He points out to the two exiled Sierra Leoneans, who migrated to Guinea, opened a radio station as a mouthpiece for the thrown government. Similarly, the news-sheet (Peace) formerly published twice weekly on Eritrea in Houston, Texas, as a means of informing exiled Eritreans of events and issues concerning their homeland, a connector that keeps Eritreans identity. They pointed out that “We … promote accuracy in public debate and the media in Africa. The goal of our work is to raise the quality of information available to society across the continent.”

Similarly, International Migration Organization (IOM. 2013) in a study concludes that diaspora bring two fundamental advantages to humanitarian assistance, peace and long-term development support: they can influence public opinion in the host country; help sustain interest, funding and international engagement in post-crisis phase.

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Interestingly, their participation is a multiplier of local ownership. Research on diaspora involvement in peacebuilding in Somalia indicates that diaspora members are representatives for local communities, their war experience ‘gives them the moral authority to speak against the continuation of the conflict’ (Abdile:2007).  

However, (Anderson; 1992; Collier, 2000; Demmers, 2002; Lyons, 2007) argue that diaspora contribute to hindering and sometimes spoiling peace opportunities. He claims that because they are insulated from local conditions, “…they are more likely to take more extreme stances on a conflict and actively support parties they favor. Diaspora groups created by conflict and sustained by memories of the trauma tend to be less willing to compromise and therefore reinforce and exacerbate the protractions of conflicts.”

The researcher argues that this can’t be only attributed to diasporas trauma experiences but also to the context in their host country. In certain cases, the stance they choose to stand with or against aligns with the policy of the host states. For instance, Yemeni diaspora in Saudi Arabia can’t contribute positively to their homeland not because they have developed extreme stances but simply because they can’t jeopardize their safety and source of living in Saudi Arabia. Conflicting parties hence and host communities in certain context contribute in shaping the type and lobbying potential of diaspora engagement.

**Media, communal consciousness and peace:**

Notably, diaspora have mastered the use of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and texting to coordinate and communicate not only their remittances but also ideas, politics, relationships, and concerns.  

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study that “…there is no group able to inform the needs to reshape a war-torn country than diaspora,”

Therefore, it is believed that recent technological platforms particularly social media has by far boasted their role. Silverman points out that “We are living in an age where truth and untruth are quite blurred.”  

26 They have become part of the diasporic communicative avenues for networking. These spaces helped the diaspora articulate certain views on home conflict. Arab revolutions are believed the outcome of Facebook rages where diaspora has played a vital role.27 During Libya uprising in 2011 a visible synchronization of media activity was masterminded by diaspora Ogunyemi claims.28 The limited democratic environment under Gadhafi’s absolute power, required an alternative to broadcast events. Diaspora community sourced news from and to Libya. Ogunyemi believes they received fund from countries that were keen to political change. He adds, “these counter media campaigns gave an impetus to an insurgency by the pro-democracy forces who linked with masses at home.” The researcher argues that unprofessional diaspora journalism “trans-communal journalism” has also complicated the scene in Libya.

Nonetheless, within media and conflict-research, a peculiar movement, namely “peace journalism”, has received increased attention over the last few years. 29 It challenges the conventional and modern conflict rhetoric’s criticized for its fueling conflict rather than diminishing it. Amina Abdul Karim a Somali woman posits that Somali Voice on CKCU radio can be a powerful instrument to bring Somalis together. 30 Skjerdal argues that while local journalists are subject to state repression, diaspora are free without no constraints to play the role of a

28 Ibid
mediator.\textsuperscript{31} Hanitzsch likewise argues” the contribution of professional journalists should include the role “peacekeeping forces.”

**Yemen Diaspora, Media and peace:**

OECD indicates that Yemen immigration rate is 184/203 ranking 17/18 in the region. Majority of Yemeni migrants are highly educated rating 146/157 and 14/16 in the region.\textsuperscript{32} After 2015 protracted crisis, this further motivated highly skilled journalists, activists and academia who participated in 2011 revolution to flee Yemen. Furthermore, war and lack of electricity blocked access to nonpartisan news. Hence people source of to what they think objective and pure news analysis has been through diasporas’ Facebook feeds, WhatsApp news groups. And the effect of information rises based on the accumulative popularity and credibility of this figure.

To further explore this phenomenon, the researcher interviews four Yemeni influential figures overseas to understand what is their role in peace endeavors back home? sampling criteria is based on; 1- Profession 2- Tribal origin 3- Host Country 4- Gender 5- Years since left Yemen 6- Age 7- Political Affiliation 8- Popularity level 9- Means and level of effect.

Pseudonyms are used for privacy. The following main line of inquiry among others are explored: 1) How do you evaluate the role of diaspora in promoting or hindering peace in Yemen? 2) Do you classify your political/ advocacy/ academic endeavor as peace broker? If yes, how, if no, why?

**Discussion:**

Basically, all interviewees agreed on the valuable role and effect diaspora play in easing or aggregating conflict in Yemen. A former journalist living now in Geneva argues that, “back during the 1960s Yemeni revolution would not have succeeded


without the hard work of Yemen Free Revolters later named Liberators Party. Cairo was their hub for change. Abdelaziz AlZubairi, Mohammed Said Noaman, Ali Abdul-Mughni among others called for freedom and used poems, news leaflets and radio channels to educate the public on the importance to revolt against tyranny which was seen as impossible to the simple poor civilians. She argues that” I am following their suit in utilizing the platform I have in Geneva to advocate for the needs, grievances and sufferings of Yemen. She adds, “Now I have access to the United Nations and Human Rights Offices here. I am a former UN employee in Sanaa with many connections back home. What I do now is attending all interviews, seminars about Yemen and advocate for Yemen needs and cooperate in preparing academic and policy brief papers. I share them with both Geneva and Yemen offices. I consider my self now a connector between national and international organizations.” She mentions various campaigns she and other Yemeni journalists in Geneva, America, Britain, Turkey and Sweden are lobbying for an international investigation on the Saudi led human rights violations on Yemen.

Moreover, a former Yemeni politician argues that post 2011 revolution witnessed the emergence of several diaspora TV channels and social media platforms. “I believe these platforms are crucial formulators of home public opinion”. He adds, “notice the number of Yemeni channels including but not limited to Balquees channel from Turkey, Al Yemen from Riyadh and Osan form Cairo.” “Regardless of their agendas which might be harmful to peace and reconciliation, they are a phenomenon to be analyzed thoroughly. Many diasporas use these channels to call for partisan rhetoric. They have further divided Yemenis and widened the gab which I think would be difficult to be rifted.”

A former academia who fled to Britain believes that aggression on Yemenis is also transnational. “I always try to attend seminars to speak for Yemen and really feel frustrated when in all panels Yemen is either unrepresented or spoken on behalf of by other nationals.” He argues that, “We Yemenis on diaspora still lack the
strength of lobbying to our home.” “Majority of the journalists, activists or academia I know have preferred to keep silent and mind their citizenship profile in Britain”. He adds, “Those who speak are not saying the truth, they are covering the atrocities of aggression on the innocent civilians just to please the Saudis and Emiratis here.” He further claims that “what I can do now is document the atrocities done and share them with international think tanks, organizations at least for future record.

And finally, a young researcher and founder of an influential think tank in Yemen argues that “this is the right time to bring people together and think collectively. This is the right time to deconstruct the stereotypes and old perceptions we have of the other.” The researcher tries to trace their center events and found a considerable hard work to bring all strata of Yemen society with international researchers, activists, journalists, law makers…etc., under professionally designed problem-solving workshops.

**Improvement Strategy:**

Diaspora contribution to peace is two sided. Their access to context-specific knowledge, transnational networks, access to inaccessible areas, diversity, access to international aid and media, long-term commitment and sustainability and legitimacy of external engagement as Bercovitch notes,” ‘People in the homeland are more accepting and willing to listen to advice from members of the diaspora than other foreigners’34. All these added values give their contribution a far more effective impact. However, same contribution has proven to be a source of more harm than good such as the case of Libya and that transnational hatred discourses Yemen witnesses. Furthermore, lobbying and fragmentation are crucial variables to create an impact. Interviewed Yemen diaspora believe that they still lack the lobbying effect, and that’s why they are low represented in international panels and seminars.

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The researcher truly appreciates the initiative of problem-solving workshops conducted by Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, for instance, which not only contributes in forming policies for relief, development and reconstruction for post conflict Yemen but also brings Yemenis to think together and break the stereotypes and propagandas constructed in a free and professional environment. Technology doubles this impact via the info graphs and short reports the center publishes online periodically. And to further insure impact, same workshops are conducted back home with active community members including but not limited to youth, NGOs staff, political representatives...etc.

However, role and impact of Yemen diaspora in general still needs more time to mature. To really influence, they need to go beyond sideline commentary; lobby efforts and think strategically. Moreover, recognizing diversity and their transnational engagements can have a positive effect on migrants’ participation as citizens in their country of settlement too. This will ensure activities targeted at diaspora organizations and individuals simultaneously targeting other relevant actors such as small CSOs – allowing for more networking opportunities.

Transnational nature of diaspora networks, through openness to collaboration and exchange across different countries of residence is also a significant step. This would enhance opportunities of international solidarity. It, specifically, on the case of Yemen would lessen the propaganda exported by the coalition countries mainly on human rights violation and islands manipulations.

Most importantly, initiatives and projects with an implicit peacebuilding aim are worth supporting. Not focusing on the conflict and its causes directly, but rather tackle a conflict in a more indirect way, addressing structural conflict factors and patterns, such as resource scarcity or livelihood opportunities for young people; is more realistic, applicable and it has more opportunity to bring factions together.

Furthermore, fragmentation setbacks which have deeply weaved its self within diaspora society cannot be changed overnight. Some redistributive systems do no harm, while others cause great inequalities and injustices. Accordingly, it is
important to focus only on fragmentation lines that are problematic to cooperation at the first place before heading up to structural issues which further deepens divides if tackled unwisely.

Diaspora should also focus on building capacities of their communities to boast response and effect. Those capacities include but are not limited to the followings:

![Four Skills for Effective policy practitioner](image)

And finally, diaspora should work more on enhancing the visibility of their contributions. Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies is a successful role model to follow. In terms of lobbying the center is working with different nationalities to pull international solidarity and at the same time benefit from their experiences and network. Working inside and outside Yemen is also a credit. Moreover, conducting seminars, workshops and meetings in Beirut, Amman, Genève and Sanaa creates a linkage among academia, practitioners, politicians and ends with very useful policy briefs and projects.

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