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Introduction to the Special Issue:

Diasporas from the Middle East: Displacement, Transnational Identities and Homeland Politics

Bahar Baser & Amira Halperin

Migrants and refugees from Middle Eastern countries are scattered around the globe, predominantly in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Region, Europe and the USA. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of migrants living in the Middle East more than doubled, from about 25 million to around 54 million.¹ Some of this growth was due to individuals and families seeking economic opportunities. But the majority of the migration surge, especially after the war in Syria began in 2011, was a consequence of armed conflict and the forced displacement of millions of people from their homes, many of whom have left their countries of birth.² Furthermore, the estimated number of immigrants to Europe between mid-2010 and mid 2016 was 7 million, not including 1.7 million asylum seekers. Among these European countries, Germany recorded the highest level of immigration, followed by Britain, France, Spain and Italy.³ These migration flows not only reflect the existence of drivers of migration due to conflict in the Middle East, but also reveal the potential formation of new diasporas throughout time or growing size of the already existing ones in host countries all around the world. Mobilization has also taken place also in online platforms, thanks to the new communication technologies and easy access to homeland media outlets. The technological

¹ ‘Middle East’s Migrant Population More than Doubles Since 2005’, Pew Research Center Report (2016), <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/10/18/middle-east-migrant-population-more-than-doubles-since-2005/>.

² Ibid.

³ ‘Migration to Europe in Charts’, *BBC News*, 11 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-44660699>.

revolution transformed the experiences of refugees throughout the stages of their journey: pre-migration, in transit and in the new surroundings. Millions of refugees from the Middle East use smart phones and social media applications to receive information about the host states, as a survival tool during the escape process, navigate border crossings, and to receive information on political situations and the possibilities of return.

Previous discussions of diaspora often underlined the traumatic dispersal from a given homeland and put emphasis on the involuntary nature of departure. Although currently diaspora has gained a much broader meaning encompassing labour migrants as well as temporary migrants and international students; it is still important to remember what lies at the core of this concept as it gives us hints about the motivations behind diaspora mobilization towards their homeland. Especially conflict-generated migrants form diasporas through social and political mobilisation; and they become impactful actors in both host and home country politics. Without doubt, diasporas are heterogeneous entities and groups within a diaspora community might have different needs, experience and agendas about future actions. Therefore, within a diaspora community one can observe diverse organisational patterns, interests and identity formations. Their mobilization patterns and diasporic agenda is also very much dependent on the political, social and economic opportunity structures that they encounter in their country of residence.⁴ If the opportunity structures in the host country enable diasporas to lobby the host governments, become visible in public sphere to make their voice heard or form interest groups; then diasporas are more likely to have a say in policies and politics that determine their agenda. If the host countries are closed for diasporic influences, diaspora mobilisation may still happen but it will not be as impactful as in other cases where diaspora voices are present in politic. For instance, the recent political debates in Europe and

⁴ Sarah Wayland, 'Ethnonationalist networks and transnational opportunities: the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora', *Review of International Studies* 30(3) (2004), pp. 405-426.

the USA depict migration as a problem rather than an asset for European countries. Xenophobic discourses are on the rise even in countries such as Sweden which were considered to be migrant-friendly for many years. These political changes will certainly have an influence on the capacity of diasporas to get mobilised and influence politics at home and abroad. However, despite this negative atmosphere towards immigrants in the Global North, diaspora studies literature suggest that the impact of diasporas is proliferating during the last decades.

There is a burgeoning literature on how diasporas became critical stakeholders in conflict resolution and development in their homelands.⁵ Many authors focus on their role as contributors to (and spoilers of) peace processes⁶, as agents for post-conflict development⁷, and as bridges between third parties and homeland political actors.⁸ For a long time, researchers

⁵ See for instance Ohannes Geukjian, 'An Ignored Relationship: The Role of the Lebanese Armenian Diaspora in Conflict Resolution (1975–90)', *Middle Eastern Studies* 50(4) (2014), pp. 554-567. Yossi Shain, 'The role of diasporas in conflict perpetuation or resolution', *Sais Review* 22(2) (2002), pp.115-144.

⁶ Bahar Baser, 'Intricacies of engaging diasporas in conflict resolution and transitional justice: The Kurdish diaspora and the peace process in Turkey', *Civil Wars* 19(4) (2017), pp. 470-494.

⁷ Dina Ionescu, *Engaging diasporas as development partners for home and destination countries: challenges for policymakers*. (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2006). Nicholas Van Hear, Frank Pieke, and Steven Vertovec, 'The contribution of UK-based diasporas to development and poverty reduction', *ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford, for the Department for International Development* (2004). Amba Pande, 'The role of Indian Diaspora in the development of the Indian IT industry', *Diaspora Studies* 7(2) (2014), pp. 121-129.

⁸ Bahar Baser and Ashok Swain, 'Diasporas as peacemakers: Third party mediation in homeland conflicts', *International Journal on World Peace* (2008), pp. 7-28. Dumisani Moyo, 'Alternative media, diasporas and the mediation of the Zimbabwe crisis', *Ecquid Novi* 28(1-2) (2007), pp. 81-105. Feargal Cochrane, Bahar Baser, and Ashok Swain, 'Home thoughts from abroad: Diasporas and peace-building in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32(8) (2009), pp. 681-704.

approached diasporas as victims of conflicts and/or as passive recipients of the politics of both homeland and host country, however in contemporary literature they are considered as important non-state actors with impact and agency.⁹ This reality is being increasingly recognized by academics, as well as NGOs and key political actors in both the homeland and host countries. As mentioned above, migration-related issues seem to be on the agenda of home and home states in the future and therefore the importance of diasporas and their actions will also continue to attract attention from researchers.

Diasporas from the Middle East were formed as a result of the largest migration movements during the twentieth century.¹⁰ These migration flows included voluntary and involuntary migration which arose from economic needs as well as seeking a more secure environment due to the existence of conflicts in their homelands. Migration from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Lebanon have been widely studied and their diasporas mobilized in the Global North by creating associations based on ethnic, religious and sectarian ties. Considering that almost all countries in the Middle East still suffer from low and high levels of conflicts, it is possible to argue that these diasporas are growing day by day with the new migration waves after critical junctures arising from subnational, national or regional conflicts. Accordingly, academics are trying to understand the transformation of diasporas from victims to challengers, as Robin Cohen¹¹ put it, and they try to theorize their motivations for activism for homeland and hostland related political, social and economic affairs in the light of the existing theoretical frameworks

⁹ Robin Cohen, 'Diasporas and the nation-state: from victims to challengers', *International Affairs* 72(3) (1996), pp.507-520.

¹⁰ Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen, 'Diasporas building peace: Reflections from the experience of Middle Eastern diasporas', *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, (London:Routledge, 2018), pp. 345-353.

¹¹ Cohen, 'Diasporas and the nation-state'.

in migration and globalization studies.

Middle Eastern diasporas form advocacy networks¹², lobby home and host country governments and other institutions at the local, national and international level¹³, affect political processes in their homelands by expatriate voting mechanisms¹⁴ or become critical agents of development in their home countries.¹⁵ Their repertoires of action vary: they organize demonstrations, petitions and sit-ins¹⁶ or they use online platforms widely to make their voice heard and to spread their supporter base.¹⁷ All in all, it can be said that, whatever happens in their homeland affect their identity formation and mobilization patterns-and agendas- while at the same time they become involved in political mechanisms in their homelands one way or another.

As their agency grew, host country governments as well as international institutions have

¹² Dana Moss, 'The ties that bind: Internet communication technologies, networked authoritarianism, and 'voice' in the Syrian diaspora', *Globalizations* 15(2) (2018), pp. 265-282.

¹³ Eszter Kovács, 'The power of second-generation diaspora: Hungarian ethnic lobbying in the United States in the 1970–1980s', *Diaspora Studies* 11(2) (2018), pp.171-188. Anca Turcu, 'Reactive limits to diaspora enfranchisement policies: a conceptual categorization', *Diaspora Studies* 11(1) (2018), pp.1-24. Matthew Godwin, 'Winning, Westminster-style: Tamil diaspora interest group mobilisation in Canada and the UK', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(8) (2018), pp.1325-1340.

¹⁴ Laurie Brand, 'Expatriates and Home State Political Development', *Mashriq&Mahjar* 5(1) (2018), pp.11-35.

¹⁵ Cindy Horst, 'Making a difference in Mogadishu? Experiences of multi-sited embeddedness among diaspora youth', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (8) (2018), pp. 1341-1356.

¹⁶ Roya Imani Giglou, Christine Ogan, and Leen d'Haenens, 'The ties that bind the diaspora to Turkey and Europe during the Gezi protests', *New Media & Society* 20(3) (2018), pp.937-955.

¹⁷ Amira Halperin, *The Use of New Media by the Palestinian Diaspora in the United Kingdom*. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). Jowan Mahmud, *Kurdish Diaspora Online: From Imagined Community to Managing Communities*. (London, Springer, 2016).

started developing policies to utilize their growing potential in conflict resolution and development projects in the Global South. Diasporas from the Middle East, despite their heterogeneous nature, have still been considered as partners, or in other words, as bridges to increase the outreach of Western Countries to the Middle East. For instance, the IOM (International Organization for Migration) formulated projects on “Diasporas and Development” which aimed at linking diaspora communities with development processes. Their activities included “diaspora mapping” initiatives which helped them to assess the potential of diaspora communities for positive engagement in their homelands.¹⁸ The Council of Europe organized workshops for training diaspora youth to empower them and increase their participation in policy making processes.¹⁹ It has also been reported that the European Union is developing policies to “improve relationship between diaspora organizations and their countries of origin”.²⁰ Host country governments also established policies to make diasporas partners in their development and public diplomacy projects. For instance, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry created specific programs to incorporate diasporas and several Norwegian NGOs have been working development investment strategies in the Global South with integrating diasporas in these mechanisms.²¹ Also, the Dutch government put in place a programme that supports Ghanaian diaspora entrepreneurs to start and grow business in their homeland.²²

Not only host countries but also home state actors show interest in engaging with diasporas.

¹⁸ <https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/diaspora-and-development>

¹⁹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/north-south-centre/-/call-for-participants-diaspora-youth-training-course>

²⁰ <https://www.devex.com/news/eu-pushes-diasporas-role-in-development-93533>

²¹ Liisa Laakso and Petri Hautaniemi, eds. *Diasporas, development and peacemaking in the Horn of Africa*. (London, Zed Books, 2014).

²² <https://www.dutchdevelopmentresults.nl/projects>

Recently diaspora studies scholars have shifted their attention towards how home-states create mechanisms to incorporate their diasporas in their foreign policy agendas as well as to tap their resources. As Adamson puts it:

“It is not surprising that increasingly many states are seeking to secure a political advantage by engaging with or managing “their” diaspora. In a globalized world, this gives states an additional source of power and a sphere of influence that extends beyond the physical borders of the nation. Once shunned or ignored by policy makers, many diasporas are now viewed by state actors as potential sources of revenue and investment, as lobby groups for promoting state interests abroad, or as ambassadors that can facilitate bilateral trading relationships.”²³

Home-states organize annual conferences to celebrate their diasporas, trigger interest in homeland affairs and create initiatives to make diasporas play the role of negotiators between the homeland and the country they currently reside. Diasporas, therefore, not only affected domestic policy discourses, but also did they become foreign policy tools for home states’ soft power and public diplomacy efforts.²⁴ Diaspora groups might be expected to lobby host country governments for homeland interests or the latter might simply assume that diaspora groups build bridges between the two. In such cases, usually government-friendly diaspora groups are chosen to become a tool of soft power and public diplomacy by the governing elite. This is also

²³Fiona Adamson, ‘The Growing Importance of Diaspora Politics’, *Current History* 115(784) (2016), p. 293.

²⁴ See for instance Alan Gamlen, Michael E. Cummings, and Paul M. Vaaler, ‘Explaining the rise of diaspora institutions’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (2017),pp. 1-25. Alexandra Délano Alonso and Harris Mylonas, ‘The microfoundations of diaspora politics: unpacking the state and disaggregating the diaspora’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (2017),pp. 1-19. Gerasimos Tsourapas, ‘Why do states develop multi-tier emigrant policies? Evidence from Egypt’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(13) (2015),pp. 2192-2214.

one of the reasons why minority nationalisms find an enabling environment abroad to flourish.²⁵ Therefore, home-states' engagement with their diaspora is not always linear. As Turner very-well demonstrates in the case of African diasporas, states formulate negative and positive engagement mechanisms.²⁶ While perceiving some diaspora groups as assets, home states might also try to curb transnational activism of others who are perceived as threats to national or regime security. Negative engagement mechanisms, then, might turn into transnational repression activities²⁷ and extraterritorial security measures can be taken by home states to suppress diaspora voices.²⁸

In this special issue, our aim is to contribute to these discussions on the activism of diasporas from the Middle East. The papers included in the special issue focus on a variety of topics related to diaspora mobilisation for homeland related matters. Although there are a few special issues dedicated to diaspora movements, this would be one of the first recent special issues dedicated to understanding the contemporary diasporas and their actions in the Middle East as well as in their respective host countries. We have an interdisciplinary approach that brings together sociologists, political scientists, international relations specialists as well as anthropologists. More importantly, we are bringing authors from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and from all around the world which saves this issue from a euro-centric orientation and brings in current debates from the Middle East, Europe and the USA together.

²⁵Vera, Eccarius-Kelly, 'Interpreting the PKK's Signals in Europe', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2(11) (2008), pp. 10-14.

²⁶Simon Turner, 'Staging the Rwandan diaspora: The politics of performance', *African Studies* 72(2) (2013), pp. 265-284.

²⁷ Moss, 'The ties that bind'.

²⁸David Lewis, "'Illiberal Spaces: Uzbekistan's extraterritorial security practices and the spatial politics of contemporary authoritarianism', *Nationalities Papers* 43(1) (2015), pp. 140-159.

The authors focused on diaspora-host country collaborations, transformation of diasporic identity throughout time and different layers of diaspora groups which sometimes clash and compete for resources in the home and host countries. Some articles focus on the contemporary issues including the current refugee flows that signal diasporas-in-the-making while others put emphasis on historical evolution of these identities and the role they played during critical junctures in their homelands. They take religious and ethnic identities into account by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of each diaspora community from a specific homeland.

Oula Kadhum's article focuses on how diasporas contribute to the development of democracy through transnational civil society building. Kadhum offers a fresh account by focusing on diaspora activism from a civil society building perspective. Her in-depth case study which focuses on Iraqi diaspora activism in Sweden, she assesses co-development projects financed by Sweden's International Development Agency (SIDA) between Swedish international partners and Iraqi diaspora organizations from 2004 to 2008, right aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. The merit of the article is its specific focus on diaspora-host country institutional collaborations, which is a quite overlooked topic in diaspora studies. After a careful examination of diaspora contributions to post-invasion Iraq, she finds that the security situation created a barrier in front of effective positive diaspora engagement. By critically scrutinising Swedish-Iraqi diaspora collaborations, she reaches to the conclusion that despite the existence of good intentions and good ideas, on the ground diaspora's role stayed quite limited.

Derya Ozkul's looks at the development of the Alevi diaspora movement in Germany, with a specific focus on the establishment of the World Alevi Union. The article sheds light on how transnational religious movements are shaped by interactions between origin and destination countries' legal, political and social structures. She challenges the conventional wisdom that perceive religious diaspora movements as static and resistant to change. Drawing from existing theories on transformation of diasporic identities, she examines the agency of diaspora by

scrutinising external and internal factors that shape it. Building on previous studies on the Alevi diaspora²⁹, her analysis also creates new questions for further research with regards to the impact of diasporic transformations on Alevism itself.

Alice Alunni's article focuses on the mobilization of Libyan diaspora between 1969 and 2011. Covering a highly complex historical evolution of long-distance nationalism among Libyans abroad, her article explores the significance of the Libyan diaspora for the politics of the homeland and for nation building in Libya just before the critical political developments of 2011. Differently from the first two articles of the special issue, the focus in this article is mostly on the historical analysis of the migration flows. The long-distance nationalist projects enacted by opposition groups in exile have been carefully analysed based on Alunni's long-term engagement with the studied topic and extensive fieldwork. The most original contribution of the article is its merit to combine macro-level diasporic mobilisation narratives with practices of everyday lives of exiles. The article also presents a highly detailed methodological approach which enriches the main arguments of the paper.

Lilach Liv Ari's article brings a new perspective on Jewish diaspora studies. She compares two groups of Jewish migrants from MENA countries who reside in three cities in Europe; Paris, Antwerp and Brussels. Her original approach also arises from her methodology: she uses mixed-methods to analyse various ethnic identity formations and questions the very basic concepts of "transnational", "diasporic" and "local". In addition, she unpacks the differences between those who emigrated from Israel with North African Jewish migrants. Considering

²⁹ See for example: Martin Sökefeld, 'Mobilizing in transnational space: a social movement approach to the formation of diaspora', *Global networks* 6(3) (2006), pp.265-284. Martin Sökefeld, 'Alevi dedes in the German diaspora: The transformation of a religious institution', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (2002), pp. 163-186. Ayhan Kaya, 'Multicultural clientelism and Alevi resurgence in the Turkish diaspora: Berlin Alevis', *New perspectives on Turkey* 18 (1998), pp.23-49.

that only a few studies actually focused on Israeli migrants in Europe, this is a highly original contribution to the literature. Her paper contributes to the understanding of transnational ethnic identities versus diasporic ones among voluntary migrants from the same religious group but from different geographical areas in the Middle East, and offers possible explanations to different patterns of these identities.

Eyal Zisser draws our attention to a newly emerging diaspora as a result of the migration flows from Syria to the rest of the world. After providing the reader with a comprehensive background on the impact of the conflict in Syria on the migration waves from the Middle East towards the Global North, he explains the situation of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan as well as in Europe. He examines the political impact of the existence of Syrian refugee populations on the demography of other Arab states and concludes that their long-term stay may cause tensions. With regards to Europe, he argues that most Syrian refugees do not have the intention to return and the Syrian government is not interested in attracting their repatriation either. The article suggests that the international community could not deal with the refugee crisis properly and the traumatic dispersal of Syrians will continue to hurt the future generations whose situation is currently uncertain.

Balca Arda's contribution, on the other hand, departs drastically from the other articles in the special issue with its highly original focus on contemporary artworks outlining the current refugee flow from the Middle East to the West. Her insights inform us about how diasporas-in-the-making are perceived by contemporary art. She draws her theoretical framework on Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of ethical art versus aesthetics. Her critical approach to the depiction of refugees as voiceless victims who lack agency makes her further examine the notion of politics in artistic endeavours and to question the tension of aesthetic versus ethical demands in contemporary art. As an academic and an artist herself, she juggles these two roles quite successfully while she builds a critical argument on theorizing "how art can claim to

possess artistic value and a political undertaking on humanitarian matters while representing suffering”.

Together, it is hoped these articles will provide a contribution to the burgeoning literature on diasporas from the Middle East by making theoretical and empirical contributions to the on-going debates about the growing role of diasporas in contemporary world politics. We hope that they spur further research into the complex relationships that diasporas form within their own communities as well as with their home and host countries and the international institutions.