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Diasporas as peacebuilders

ICIP
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INTRODUCTION

Diasporas as peacebuilders

ICIP

International Catalan Institute for Peace

The year 2024 has turned out to be one of the most convulsive and negative years for world peace, with ongoing wars in Palestine, Ukraine and Sudan that have led to unprecedented humanitarian crises. The degree of unrest and the intensity of the violence are such that the number of people who have had to flee their homes has risen to 117 million,[1] three times more than twelve years ago. Forty-three million of them have sought protection in another country and are, therefore, considered refugees. In the same period, asylum applications have increased to almost seven million. Behind these numbers, there are people and families whose lives have been cut short and who are beginning a new journey full of uncertainty, precariousness, fear and sadness.

While this massive forced displacement generates tension in the host countries, which struggle to absorb these people in the conditions and with the rights they deserve, there are also extraordinary cases of international solidarity all over the world. And it is important to note that 75 per cent of the world's refugees have been taken in by middle- or low-income countries. That said, there is also a growing trend, on a global scale, of hate speech towards migrants and refugees.

Many people expelled from their country of origin are expelled because of their social and political activism against authoritarian regimes and armed groups. They flee for their lives. They take with them their knowledge and their commitment to the ordinary good, fundamental social capital to work for political change in their country of origin from abroad, and their dedication, experience and tenacity to build a new life and to contribute to their host country, as long as they are given the opportunities to do so.

The increasing number of armed conflicts and the rise in various forms of violence indicate the need to innovate in peacebuilding analysis and responses. Clearly, new actors and tools are needed to complement the work of governments, the United Nations and civil society organizations.

“People expelled from their country have fundamental social capital and a commitment to work for political change from abroad”

In this sense, at ICIP, we believe diaspora communities have a potential for action that does not receive the recognition it deserves. We apply a flexible definition of the concept of diaspora, which includes migrants, refugees and exiles. Obviously, these are strongly heterogeneous communities that may even reproduce the political, ethnic, class, and gender factions and disputes of their country of origin when they are abroad. However, the common element is the emotional bond to their country of origin and their “immigrant” status in the host country. This bond facilitates dialogue in and from diversity in a context different from their own, which can contribute to new relationships and power dynamics to transform conflicts that have generated voluntary or forced migration.

Aware of this potential, ICIP’s “Memory, coexistence and reconciliation” program is committed to drawing attention to the contributions to peacebuilding made by people in the diaspora, amplifying their voices and supporting their actions.

Peacebuilding is a task that encompasses a wide range of actions aimed at reducing all forms of violence.^[2] The typical actions of people in the diaspora committed to political change are raising public awareness and documenting and denouncing human rights violations. At ICIP, we also support promoting dialogue at all levels, beginning with the various diaspora groups, to overcome prejudices and heal wounds. Based on the memory of the traumatizing events in the country of origin or the migratory process, this dialogue should help lay the foundation for current and future

coexistence. At the same time, it is also necessary to increase dialogue initiatives between the migrant population and the host country's population and institutions. This horizontal dialogue, based on dignity and mutual recognition, should help overcome institutional and cultural barriers and create the conditions for migrants to contribute their knowledge and commitment to the host society.

“We understand diaspora as a heterogeneous group of migrants, refugees and exiles, with emotional and social ties to their country of origin”

ICIP's work in support of diaspora communities received a significant boost from the collaboration agreement with the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition of Colombia. Over three years (2019-2022), ICIP acted as the Technical Secretariat of the Commission in Europe and promoted the coordination of one hundred social, academic and institutional organizations, Colombian and international, in ten European countries and gathering 800 testimonies of victims living in Europe.[3]

Similarly, ICIP's "Violence in non-war settings" program works mainly with organizations committed to peace and human rights in Mexico, and more recently, we have begun working in Central America. Furthermore, in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine and the war against Palestine, we have been in contact with diaspora communities from those two countries, as well as from Syria and Lebanon.[4]

In addition to supporting social organizations, ICIP is dedicated to documentation and knowledge production. In 2025, as part of the "Tools for Peace, Security and Justice" book series, we will publish the work methodology carried out with migrant women by the organization Mujer Diáspora. We have recently published the ICIP Report Women and Peacebuilding from the Diaspora and Exile in Europe, which addresses the relationship between diaspora, conflicts and peacebuilding from a gender perspective. The document describes how diaspora communities have proven to be spaces of

empowerment, solidarity, co-responsibility and mutual support that have facilitated their forms of organization.

Now, with the publication of this monograph, we aim to delve deeper into diasporic identities, how they are shaped and how they change over time, and what legal frameworks recognize them at local, regional and international levels. At the same time, we want to focus on concrete experiences of participation in peacebuilding processes and the daily experiences of people who have been forced to leave their countries of origin as a result of violence.

“With this monograph, we want to delve into diasporic identities, how they are shaped and how they change over time, and what legal frameworks recognize them, at local, regional and international levels”

In the first article, Metka Herzog and Lisa Ott of swisspeace analyze the participation of refugees from Colombia and Syria in peacebuilding initiatives in their countries of origin, Switzerland and Germany, respectively. The article reveals how participation is crucial to recognising exiles and their symbolic reparation.

The monograph then focuses on the second and third generations in the diaspora. Academics Bahar Baser (United Kingdom) and Mari Toivanen (Finland) reflect on how the descendants of refugees can inherit past traumas and be linked to a commitment to peace. At the same time, the article notes the need for networking and collaboration with local actors to make an effective contribution.

The article by Fanny Tittel-Mosser, a researcher at the International Center for Migration Policy Development, explores different public policies – from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027 to the national agendas of Georgia or Chad – to show how policymakers are beginning to recognize the potential of diaspora communities in peacebuilding

activities.

After these theoretical reflections, we include the personal experiences of three people who have had to migrate because of violence. First, Lebanese activist Carmen Geha, exiled in Catalonia, tells us about the effects of war on the civilian population in Lebanon and the consequences of migration, both physical and psychological and geographical. Carmen focuses on the exiled women activists who, for years, fought for freedom and equality in a country governed by warlords: "Migration isolates us; we are now an individual, not a group," she explains. However, she trusts in the strength of consolation and care and hopes to work for the country's reconstruction from afar.

**"We want to disseminate and recognize the work
of migrants, refugees and exiles in building more
just and peaceful societies"**

Also sharing the emotional impact of migration is Syrian activist and writer Marcell Shehwaro, who reflects on the best way to engage in activism from exile. From her personal experience, Shehwaro advocates maintaining a commitment to one's country of origin, with visible and active struggles, but without overshadowing voices from within the country. At the same time, she advocates defending the rights of exiles in their host countries in alliance with local movements.

Finally, we publish an interview with Zoya Miari, a Palestinian-Ukrainian refugee. After fleeing, first from the violence of the refugee camps in Lebanon and then from the war in Ukraine, she currently lives in Switzerland, where she founded the project "Waves to Home" intending to shatter stereotypes and false narratives associated with migration, exile and asylum. When she was just 22 years old, Zoya Miari became a One Young World Peace Ambassador.

This publication, disseminating the peacebuilding work carried out by migrants, refugees and exiles – work that is scarcely known or recognized – marks a new milestone for ICIP. The articles – some of them written by victims and survivors – reflect

the strength and commitment to build more just and peaceful societies through collective struggles and demands. We invite you to read carefully, with open and sensitive hearts.

[1] Data from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on the number of refugees, internally displaced persons and asylum seekers.

[2] See ICIP's definition of peace included in the institution's Strategic Plan 2024-2028.

[3] *Exile and the Colombian Truth Commission: An unprecedented collaboration experience*, ICIP and Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition of Colombia, 2023.

[4] In 2024, ICIP organized an international meeting with women activists from Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, in collaboration with the Institut Ramon Llull.

Photography

Movement workshop of the "Cuerpos Gramaticales" activity with the Colombian diaspora in Barcelona,  2017. Author: Ingrid Guyon.

IN DEPTH

Diaspora Participation in Peacebuilding

Metka Herzog and Lisa Ott

swisspeace

The general approach to diasporas was until recently to either ignore them entirely, or to see their intentions, power and capacity with suspicion and scepticism. Currently, the trend is changing towards seeing diaspora with a peacemaker potential, including them in all phases of peacebuilding, either for normative or utility reasons. Based on inclusive and victim-centred approaches, diaspora communities are sought after by policymakers and civil society actors as partners in peacebuilding projects; however still seen with suspicion and dependent on the willingness of countries of origin and international community as to which diaspora group and in what form they will be engaged.

This synthesis highlights the engagement of diaspora and internally displaced people (IDPs) in the peacebuilding efforts of Syria and Colombia, drawing on our own as well as our swisspeace colleagues' experience and a review of literature on diaspora mobilization and transitional justice. Furthermore, it discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by diaspora actors in navigating their roles in peacebuilding efforts, highlighting the importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and sustainable partnerships. Overall, this paper underscores the indispensable contribution of diaspora communities to building long-term and sustainable peace.

The reasons why 'diasporas clearly matter for homeland peacebuilding' (Shain & Barth 2003, 45) are both moral, on the grounds of deservingness, and seen as adding value to peacebuilding. Because of their multi-sited embeddedness (Horst, 2018), diaspora are credited with invaluable context-specific knowledge of the country of origin and as a potential bridge-builder through their networks in the countries of settlement. Not only

may they contribute to peace with their unique perspectives, experiences and skills, but including them and their voices, also as victims and survivors, in reconciliation can be a contribution to recognition and thus symbolic reparations.

The calls for greater inclusion of the local actors and the importance of the right to truth in international law create a space for IDPs and diaspora to participate in conflict transformation and peace processes. This has further implications for influencing diasporas' stake in the homeland's future in a post-conflict reconstruction setting (Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2016) and can contribute to the search for durable solutions to peace and displacement.

“Including diasporas and their voices in reconciliation, their unique perspectives, experiences and skills, also as victims and survivors, is a contribution to recognition and thus symbolic reparations”

Diaspora communities, defined here by their political mobilization, have historically maintained strong ties to their homeland while simultaneously integrating into their countries of settlement. They come into existence through political mobilization by diasporic political entrepreneurs. As transnational actors, diasporas are deemed to possess unique resources, networks, and experiences that make them integral to peacebuilding processes in conflict-affected regions.

Considering that peacebuilders and human rights activists are among the most vulnerable to face forced displacement (Peace Direct, 2022), it is critical to recognize the agency and leadership potential among diaspora. With their contextual knowledge and a personal stake in peacebuilding, they are well placed to exert influence on the homeland's political situation. This can be done directly, by participating in peace negotiations or interacting with political actors and peacebuilders on the ground, or

indirectly through advocacy, lobbying to raise awareness of conflict-related issues and to mobilize international support. Cultural diplomacy and reconciliation initiatives are another key aspect of diaspora peacebuilding, as many communities use art, music, and storytelling to promote dialogue, healing, and understanding among conflicting parties (Kalnazarova, 2020). Furthermore, including diaspora communities who have been displaced by conflict in reconciliation initiatives plays an important role in the creation of comprehensive and accurate record of past crimes (Koinova & Karabegovic, 2016).

“Considering that peacebuilders and human rights activists are among the most vulnerable to face forced displacement it is critical to recognize the agency and leadership potential among diaspora”

This paper explores the shifting claims from the national to the global, focusing on examples from Syria and Colombia, two countries that have experienced protracted conflicts and have seen significant diaspora engagement in efforts to build sustainable peace. We highlight research and engagement by swisspeace with displaced Syrians in Germany and internally displaced in Syria as the first example (Mayoraz, 2023) and with Colombian diaspora in Switzerland (Beristain, Franco and Ott 2023, Wiesman 2023).

Political engagement of displaced Syrians

Syria has seen massive displacement, with millions of Syrians now living as refugees or IDPs. This experience of displacement poses significant challenges for their inclusion in peacebuilding and political processes. While the Syrian uprising in 2011 acted as a unifying factor that politicised Syrians abroad, the conflict escalation, with rising ethnicization and radicalisation in Syria also affected the patterns of diaspora mobilisation in Europe (Danish Refugee Council 2018). Political, ethnic and religious fragmentation, and the resulting lack of trust between Syrian groups, thwart

constructive organisation, which is further paralysed by the extraterritorial power of the authoritarian country of origin.

At the international level, the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2254 made inclusivity one of its eight guiding principles for effective mediation. Participation of the Syrian people is considered utmost important for determining the country's future, including in the pursuit of safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPS to their home areas. As the UN Special Envoy for Syria in 2016, Staffan de Mistura, launched the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), this involved inviting Syrian civil society actors, including those in diaspora, to share their views with the mediation team in parallel with the formal negotiations (Turkmani & Theros, 2019). From the outset, swisspeace was tasked with facilitating the participation of civil society in the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva through the CSSR. With the political process of the formal talks at a standstill, this mechanism has allowed the various members of civil society to continue to exchange views and to exert pressure on the parties to the conflict to work towards a political solution within the CSSR (Siegfried, 2019).

“Despite the obstacles, Syrian diaspora and internally displaced people have found ways to engage in the civic and political life of their country from afar”

However, even with an organized and institutionalized space for civil society actors which is considered to set new standards for inclusive mediation practice (Hellmüller & Zahar, 2018), the civil society was in practice excluded from contributing to operative decisions (Mayoraz, 2023). Syrian diaspora, particularly those who have been displaced by the conflict, may lack the political influence or leverage to effectively advocate for their rights and interests in formal peacebuilding settings. Most refugees and IDPs, who position themselves against the Assad government, risk losing their space in Syrian society and are not progressing in discussions on vital issues such as safe and dignified returns to Syria.

The role of the displaced as a potential actor is largely defined by the recognition of the state of origin (Toivanen & Baser, 2020), which shows the instrumentalised use of diasporas for their agendas aimed at controlling populations abroad. While the Syrian government has occasionally expressed willingness to engage with Syrian refugees and encourage their return to the country, this rhetoric is often coupled with calls for loyalty to the government and may be seen as an attempt to bolster support for the regime rather than a genuine interest in including them in peacebuilding processes.

Despite the obstacles, Syrian diaspora and IDPs have found ways to engage in the civic and political life of their country from afar, focusing on informal forms of participation. This includes providing humanitarian aid and support to refugees (Mayoraz, 2023). Through fundraising and coordination with international NGOs, they have supplied food, medical supplies, and educational resources to civilians in war-torn regions.

The younger diaspora who was involved in the Syrian uprising tends to be more focused on advocacy and raising international awareness and support for opposition actors (Mayoraz, 2023). They have organized protests, media campaigns, and lobbying efforts to highlight human rights abuses and pressure governments and international organizations to act. For example, the support by the Syrian torture survivors, human rights lawyers and activists provided to the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) in launching universal jurisdiction cases against members of the Syrian government as part of the Koblenz trials can be seen as a form of peacebuilding through justice (ECCHR, x). While the trials were conducted by the German judiciary, the Syrian diaspora played a crucial role in supporting the legal process, providing evidence of atrocities committed by the Syrian government, expertise, and advocacy to ensure that justice was served for the victims of human rights abuses. Enjoying relative autonomy as they operate from abroad, the Syrian diaspora could gather information and testify, which would not be possible for the Syrian population at home (Cavallaro, 2022).

“With no clear path to peace, Syrian refugees in Europe expressed feelings of despair and

powerlessness and therefore oriented themselves towards small-scale humanitarian aid”

Given the lack of perspectives for a conflict resolution, the focus for Syrians in Germany also shifted towards supporting the integration of refugees in Germany (Mayoraz, 2023). Navigating a new life in Germany has been a difficult experience. First, refugees report reliving of traumatic experiences with severe consequences for their physical and mental health. Second, their insecurity and the lack of peace is perpetrated through the continued threat that people may face in destination countries (fear from the secret services monitoring activities abroad) and the continued concern for the ones left behind. Thirdly, there are uncertainties for asylum seekers who have not (yet) obtained long-term legal residence (Dijkema, Grossenbach and Herzog, 2024). Fear of being returned to Syria is very present among Syrians in Germany, therefore the question of not recognizing Syria as a safe space remains central in terms of advocacy goals (Mayoraz, 2023).

Clearly the stage of conflict influences diaspora participation (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017). With no clear path to peace, Syrian refugees in Europe expressed feelings of despair and powerlessness and therefore oriented themselves towards small-scale humanitarian aid and support to refugees. The second example of this paper will show how inclusion of the diaspora in peacebuilding can take different forms if a negotiated peace or settlement has been reached.

Participation of Colombian diaspora in dealing with the past and peacebuilding

More than five decades of internal armed conflict in Colombia have resulted in 6.8 million Colombians fleeing inside the country (UNHCR, 2024) and more than one million Colombians fleeing to neighbouring countries, other Latin American Countries, North America, Europe, Australia and beyond. As many of them had been politically active in Colombia, they continued their activism while on the move and when arriving in their countries of settlement. Thus, informal networks of solidarity, peacebuilding and of

political activists have existed outside of Colombia as early as the 1950s and 1960s.

From 2018-2022, the Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-repetition established on the basis of the 2016 Peace agreement between the Colombian government and the guerilla group FARC-EP, became the first truth commission world-wide which systematically conducted extra-territorial truth-seeking in the diaspora.

“The collection of over 2100 testimonies from the Colombian diaspora underlines the significant role that displaced populations can play in uncovering the truth and contributing to a nation’s healing and reconciliation process”

Its extraterritorial work to collect testimonies from the Colombian diaspora, demonstrates the potential of diaspora mobilization in dealing with the past (also referred to as transitional justice) processes which are an essential element of sustainable peacebuilding. The collection of over 2100 testimonies from the diaspora underlines the significant role that displaced populations can play in uncovering the truth about human rights violations and contributing to a nation’s healing and reconciliation process.

During 6-months preparation phase, Commissioner Carlos Martín Beristain was tasked to focus his efforts on the “Colombia outside of Colombia”, the diaspora, which is represented nearly in all countries of the world. Based on the previously existing international contacts in the CEV network, the Commissioner launched the process in more than 24 countries by travelling to each one of them, knocking doors and creating alliances.

When the Commission concluded its mandate in 2022, a full chapter of its final report entitled “The Truths of Exile. The Colombia out-side of Colombia” was dedicated to the

stories, resistance and challenges of the Colombians in exile. But beyond the publication of a written report, the process in many places had more far-reaching results: Several of the witnesses giving their testimony to the CEV in the process, mentioned that this was an important moment to officially experience recognition of their work, resistance and pain (Wiesman 2023). Also, a public ceremony which the CEV held in Bogotá to give visibility to the stories and struggles of those in exile, contributed to recognition. Also, in many instances, the process contributed to strengthen the communication and collaboration among victims (including across conflict lines).

“The innovative Colombian Truth Commissions’ process was largely bottom-up, learning-by-doing, step-by-step approach”

In other instances, expectations could not be met and the process led to frustrations as the pre-existing networks were weakened at least temporarily to some extent due to the temporary focus of the work on the CEV. After the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidency of Iván Duque, who did not value the peace agreement and did not prioritize its implementation, many felt exhausted and demotivated for some time.

While the process was formally initiated by the CEV in Bogotá, the innovative, learning-by-doing, step-by-step approach, the different realities in the different host countries and the different funding situations meant that the process was also largely bottom-up (Franco and Ott 2023).

Conclusions

Examples of engagement of diaspora in the peacebuilding efforts of Syria and Colombia reveal both commonalities and discrepancies that highlight the complexities and potential of involving displaced populations in conflict resolution and dealing with the past.

The two illustrated initiatives which started as top-down UN or governmental actions demonstrate that bottom-up work still needs to be done. The feeling of ownership among the participants was strong and they were not just passive users or beneficiaries of either the CSSR or the CEV (Turkami and Theros, 2019, Franco and Ott 2023). Both processes have developed over time, with different participants playing an active role in the reframing of the design. The flexible architecture of the Colombian Truth Commission allowed for adjusting to the different realities in different host countries of the diaspora, while the CSSR developed from first having participation predominantly from those living outside of Syria to becoming more inclusive for the civil society from regime-controlled areas. With the developed sense of ownership, both processes led to positive outcomes in terms of breaking down of barriers and transforming conflicting views.

“A transnational perspective that recognises migrants offers an opportunity to build peaceful and inclusive societies in pursuit of long-term and sustainable peace for their countries of origin and residence”

As we underscore the importance of inclusion in the peacebuilding processes, our findings also show that bottom-up work entails a struggle for the individuals involved: to disagree and negotiate with other participants on the strategy, lobby towards above, and deal with the expectations that are not met. Complex and messy, conflict and peacebuilding are not clear-cut linear processes. This has implications.

Over the course of the conflict, at different stages of the conflict, at different stages of the implementation of peace agreements and in different political situations, the priorities of the diaspora change. Depending on the stage of the peace process, different activities for diaspora participation are needed. At the same time, as peace negotiation processes are complex and non-linear, it is difficult to have a clear information strategy towards the diaspora to clarify what the participation will lead to. It is therefore easy to

raise expectations that cannot be fully met.

Diaspora participation can also be exhausting, as refugees struggle to integrate in their new countries of residence. The peace-migration nexus therefore urges us to study peace and peacebuilding in different places and across borders (Krause and Segadlo, 2021), including in host countries. Recognising the different experiences that people have had in their countries of origin and that they may continue to have in host countries brings new narratives and perspectives.

Peacebuilding programmes and projects, such as truth and reconciliation initiatives, benefit from the inclusion of transnational voices as they can create spaces for bridging the different perspectives of those who have stayed, been displaced, fled or returned. A transnational perspective that recognises migrants, stayers and returnees as peacebuilders therefore offers an opportunity to build peaceful and inclusive societies in pursuit of long-term and sustainable peace for their countries of origin and destination.

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Photography

“Arpilleras” workshop of the “Cuerpos Gramaticales” activity with the Colombian diaspora in Barcelona,  2017. Author: Ingrid Guyon.

IN DEPTH

Second and Third Generation are Essential Peacebuilding Agents

Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser

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During the last few decades, research has shown that diasporas can play a significant role in peacebuilding efforts. By using case studies from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka, scholars have argued that diasporas show a willingness to act by sending remittances or acting as social and cultural bridges between their homeland and country of settlement. Indeed, they can participate in lobbying and advocacy efforts, and contribute to skills and knowledge transfer. Thanks to their extensive national and transnational networks, they can also contribute to reconciliation and conflict prevention efforts.^[1]

Such work to raise awareness regarding diasporas' agency in peace and conflict processes has made diasporas visible in peacebuilding landscapes. Policymakers and other stakeholders have started paying attention to issues related to victimhood and justice by including diaspora members in their agenda – practically or discursively. While the first-generation diaspora members who migrated mainly for conflict-related motivations have been long considered in research literature on peacebuilding efforts, the role that the so-called second and third generations of the diaspora can play has been largely overlooked. Whereas the focus has been on the so-called first generation, the migrants who have arrived in a new country of settlement, their children and grandchildren appear to be less interested in issues related to their parents' homeland. Thus, they participate to a lesser degree, if at all, in the political and civic spheres of

their ancestral homeland.

“Diasporas can participate in lobbying and advocacy efforts, and thanks to their extensive national and transnational networks, they can also contribute to reconciliation and conflict prevention efforts”

Studies have shown that the second and third generations continue to be interested in the events in their parents' homeland. However, to a lesser degree than their parents and, significantly so, in a different manner than their parent's generation.^[2] The descendants of the first generation are embedded in the social spaces that transcend well beyond the political and national spheres of their countries of birth. In concrete terms, this means that they are familiarised with their ancestral homeland through existing kinship relations, through narratives and information of homeland events in the news media. At times, migrants' children might even hold dual citizenship and be directly involved through such a status in the political and institutional spaces of their parent's homeland.

A diversity of factors such as pre-existing networks, family ties or associative structures that the second and third-generation members have access to due to their parents' migration often enables their peacebuilding efforts. Furthermore, second-generation members, often more familiar with virtual spaces and tools, can resort to technological means to become politically active in their parents' homeland. It is not uncommon that the second, and to some degree, the third generation also identifies partially with their parents' ethnicity, all the while identifying themselves as citizens of their country of birth.

Conflicts compel people to migrate. The formation of diasporas usually occurs after the displacement due to the lack of human security conditions in the country of origin.

However, in other cases, political developments in the country of origin create motivations for political mobilisation in the homeland. The first generation usually leads diaspora politics, and it forms most diaspora networks, which are then inherited or transformed by subsequent generations.

“While the first-generation diaspora members have been long considered in research literature on peacebuilding efforts, the role that the so-called second and third generations of the diaspora can play has been largely overlooked”

Future generations in diasporas are not immune to homeland conflicts. They are also affected by ongoing or past conflicts in various ways. Through reliving the past and post-memory accessing mechanisms, some members of diaspora communities may inherit cultural traumas and the willingness to act for peacebuilding and justice, seeking to right the wrongs that affected their ancestors' life trajectories[3]. They might have formed hybrid identities and developed loyalties to multiple contexts. Such transnational stance comes with opportunities and challenges when engaging with political affairs in contexts of both country of settlement and the homeland. This transnationality not only shapes the lived experiences of the second and third generations but can also be seen in their efforts to participate in peacebuilding in their homeland. Before delving into examples of such efforts, we will briefly discuss the enabling and disabling factors of such peacebuilding efforts undertaken by diasporas.

Factors shaping diasporas' transnational participation

Diaspora politics have often been approached through the triadic relationship between the homeland, country of settlement and the diaspora. According to this view, one of the major factors shaping the possibilities for diasporas to mobilise and to take part in homeland affairs, including in peacebuilding efforts, is the political and institutional

opportunity structures of both the country of origin and the country of settlement. These refer to diaspora members', including their descendants', legal political and social rights, citizenship laws and social policies.

The diaspora can take part in the political processes of the country of origin through long-distance voting if they hold their original citizenship and provided that long-distance voting is legally possible for former residents, who are still citizens of the country. Turkey is an example of this. It became possible to cast long-distance votes for diaspora members in the presidential election in 2014 and the parliamentary election in 2015. In the 2023 elections, the Turkish diaspora constituents formed a 400,000 electorate in France and a staggering 1.5 million in Germany.

In addition to this, discursive opportunity structures, in other words, how the diaspora members can diffuse their message in the public sphere and how they can shape the public discourse to raise support, can also be consequential in shaping diaspora members and their descendants' possibilities to take part in the political affairs of the ancestral homeland. One such example comes from the Kurdish diaspora in Europe that successfully diffused their message in the European media space during the ISIS attack on the small Kurdish city in Syria, Kobane, during the winter of 2014 and 2015. Notably, the narrative of the Kurdish female guerrilla fighters combatting the ISIS terrorists was a powerful one and one that was used in lobbying the European governments for support.^[4]

“A diversity of factors such as pre-existing networks, family ties or associative structures that the second and third-generation members have access to due to their parents' migration often enables their peacebuilding efforts”

Also, the bilateral and diplomatic relations between the homeland and the country of settlement are a factor in shaping diaspora members' transnational participation,

enabling or disabling it. One of the most recent examples is from the Russian diaspora, particularly of those members who oppose the current government. The space of participation in Russia's political sphere has been further curtailed by the hampering of diplomatic relations between Russia and countries where the Russian diaspora has formed. It has been suggested that it makes sense to add the "global community", in other words, international actors in different assemblages, into this triadic relationship between the homeland, country of settlement and diaspora.^[5] Lastly, the transnational dimension is also a pivotal aspect to include since diaspora members' transnational action is based on transnational networks, affiliations, practices and narratives, either pre-existing or newly created ones. The transnational diaspora networks and associations are one factor that can significantly foster participation in the ancestral homeland's political processes or, when lacking, impede it.

The second and third generations are more embedded and familiar with the political and institutional opportunity structures in their country of birth, the country of settlement for their parents. Their parents, in contrast, might be more familiar with the political and institutional opportunity structures of the country of origin. Similarly, the second and third generations' peacebuilding efforts can significantly differ from those of their parents and grandparents. Therefore, it is vital not to automatically approach the subsequent generations' peacebuilding efforts through the same analytical lenses as employed to their parents' participation. Indeed, there is a risk of missing some key aspects, as discussed below.

What impacts the peacebuilding efforts of the second and third generations

Through diasporic circulation we approach second and third-generation transnational participation, including in peacebuilding efforts. Through this concept, we refer to transnational engagements and actions through which migrants' descendants aim to improve the conditions in their parents' homeland either at a distance (both online and offline) or *on site*. Their actions can take place via institutional or non-institutional means and include even temporal migration and short-term visits; economic, social, and 'political' remittances (such as long-distance voting); lobbying; providing logistical

support in times of political disturbance; and online political activism such as blogging, campaigns to raise awareness and so forth.

During peace processes and post-conflict phases especially, second-generation diaspora members' interest in homeland affairs can be rekindled by significant political developments, and their transnational activism can become more visible and sustained. Dormant diaspora members who did not actively participate in diaspora politics might prefer to do so at critical junctures. In these cases, there are windows of opportunity for these diaspora members to influence decision-making processes in their homeland and the country of settlement. For the second generation to be able to contribute to peacebuilding, we need to understand that several factors are at play.

“Through reliving the past and post-memory accessing mechanisms, some members of diaspora communities may inherit cultural traumas and the willingness to act for peacebuilding and justice, seeking to right the wrongs that affected their ancestors’ life trajectories”

Firstly, one such factor is the homeland's political landscape. Taking the Russian war in Ukraine as an example, which has led to the formation of new diaspora movements from both countries, the states' approaches are very different and open to diaspora influence in both cases. When the political atmosphere is more open, the second-generation diaspora members might engage with homeland actors involved in peacebuilding efforts and collaborate on projects willing to bring positive change.

The second generation has the potential to contribute to national and transnational civil society and mobilise support for the peace agenda that is either rooted in the homeland or encouraged by transnational advocacy. The homeland's approach towards the diaspora, specifically towards the new generations in the diaspora, is crucial in

such cases. Are they accepted as legitimate actors in peacebuilding processes? Are they side-lined and designated to become spectators of such processes by the homeland actors, or is their agency accepted, and are they perceived as a legitimate voice? This depends on the type of conflict, the homeland actors' expectations of the diaspora and the leverage that the diaspora can have on political processes, among other factors.

Secondly, the second generation's willingness to contribute to positive change is critical for their contribution to peacebuilding in the homeland. However, this is not enough to make meaningful contributions, as they sometimes face challenges despite their will and leverage. Peacebuilding usually occurs during political transitions that are generally fraught by political instability. Political landscapes in the homeland may show tension, political rivalry, and mistrust. Deep-seated distrust and divisions among different ethnic, religious, or social groups may pose challenges to reconciliation efforts. Overcoming historical animosities and building trust is a complex and time-consuming process.

“During peace processes and post-conflict phases especially, second-generation diaspora members’ interest in homeland affairs can be rekindled by significant political developments, and their transnational activism can become more visible and sustained”

Homeland's political elites may perceive diasporas as a security threat or a source of instability. Moreover, diasporas might be perceived as dissidents or those who left the country in conflict; therefore, their legitimacy might be questioned during political transition. Previous literature shows that diaspora interventions are sometimes not welcomed by political elites or the stayers in the homeland.^[6] Those who never left in times of hardship might question diaspora interventions and not treat their actions as organic to the society they left behind.

Moreover, diaspora perceptions of peace might differ from local perceptions. This has been the case in Cyprus, where the Cypriot youth in the diaspora and on the island have divergent opinions regarding the definition of a peaceful future for Cyprus.^[7] The second generation, which has no prior experience of the ancestral homeland context, might feel doubly side-lined by such approaches. In some cases, the issue of “dual loyalties” can be put forward by the political elites of the homeland. The second-generation diaspora members’ loyalty to their ancestral homeland can be questioned as they are embedded in both country of residence and origin contexts. There could also be legal and policy barriers which hinder second generations’ actions. In some cases, they might not have the citizenship of their parent’s homeland, or they might not have the right to vote or stand in elections.

Thirdly, the second generation’s ability to participate in peace, coexistence, and dialogue processes can be characterised by the political landscape in the country of settlement. Previous literature shows that diasporas are not homogenous and might reproduce the political dynamics and ethnic/religious/ideological cleavages of their country of origin in their new countries of settlement. These fragmentations within diaspora groups can also be transformed by spatial and temporal factors in the transnational space, and new divisions might occur in the countries of residence. Those second-generation members interested in diaspora politics might find it hard to align themselves with diaspora organisations as they sometimes do not find such fragmentations meaningful. In other cases, research shows that their parents’ decisions highly influence them, and they develop loyalties towards their ancestors’ political orientations and mobilisation patterns.^[8]

“When the political atmosphere is more open, the second-generation diaspora members might engage with homeland actors involved in peacebuilding efforts and collaborate on projects willing to bring positive change”

Lastly, besides such inherent factors, the country of settlement's approach towards the diaspora's involvement in homeland politics is essential. In some cases, such transnational engagements are encouraged by the governmental actors in the country of settlement. We see initiatives where the political parties, think tanks, and civil society organisations in the country of origin organise workshops and conferences to encourage the diaspora to act as bridges between the two contexts and foster positive change. In other cases, where one party in the conflict is criminalised and stigmatised, we observe that such labels either deter the second generation from participating or prevent them from having open discussions surrounding the very concepts of peace and reconciliation.

Diaspora youth's involvement in movements such as LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the PKK (Kurdistan's Workers' Party), even during times of peacebuilding efforts, have created undesired altercations for Tamil and Kurdish youth in their countries of birth such as Canada, France or Germany as these groups were criminalised and designated as terrorist organisations by international organisations. [\[9\]](#)

Conclusion: Second and third generation building peace transnationally

Second- and third-generation transnational participation in peacebuilding efforts only occurs sometimes. The homeland must have an open political and social landscape for their contribution. The political elite and the local populations need to accept diaspora interventions as legitimate. Also, members of second- and third-generation diaspora must find channels to make such interventions. Fragmentations within the diaspora and stigmatisation of their political movement or ethnic/religious/ideological groups not only in the homeland context but also in the country of settlement might hinder their genuine engagement efforts.

Furthermore, the lack of institutional efforts inherent to the diaspora or the homeland may make it harder for the second and third generations to impact the processes significantly. Transnational advocacy might bring some visibility and demonstrate

support for peacebuilding. However, such efforts might translate into something other than meaningful change in the homeland context. Diaspora leadership and sustained and extensive networks with homeland actors become vital for continued diaspora engagement in positive change. Building trust and establishing such relationships require long-term investment by diasporas in both countries of origin and settlement contexts.

“Diasporas cannot contribute to peacebuilding in the homeland without forging meaningful collaborations with local actors”

Armed conflict or violent encounters between diaspora groups are rare, but many examples confirm such assumptions. The recent Muslim and Hindu violent encounters in Leicester, United Kingdom, cannot be interpreted separately from Indian politics and homeland politicians’ rhetoric towards each group. Similarly, the escalation of conflicts in the country of origin might spur violent encounters in the diaspora, as the recent example of Nagorno-Karabakh has demonstrated. Armenian, Turkish and Azeri diaspora youth attacked each other at protest events in France and the United States.

Diasporas might not be actors at the negotiation table or be at the frontline of peacebuilding efforts in the homeland. Conflict resolution or management approach might perceive their role as minimal. However, diasporas have much to offer if we approach peacebuilding from a conflict transformation lens. Diaspora engagement in peacebuilding can take many shapes and forms and is a long-term process. Transnational activism that includes advocacy, justice-seeking, and mobilisation for issues such as human rights eventually contributes to creating awareness at home and abroad and demonstrates a willingness to bring peace and justice.

Diasporas cannot contribute to peacebuilding in the homeland without forging meaningful collaborations with local actors. However, it is essential to underline that peacebuilding efforts should not be confined to the borders of the homeland. In the age of diasporas, we observe that conflict dynamics are recreated in the transnational

space and tensions between “adversary” groups are transported or continue to be (re)produced in the homeland context. Peacebuilding efforts, therefore, need to be transnationalised to address the grievances of diaspora groups as well.

Finally, we suggest that diasporic youth can also contribute to positive change in diasporic landscapes and address conflict dynamics in diasporic landscapes. Peacebuilding efforts in contemporary times cannot be a one-directional exchange between diasporas and countries of origin; they must also be understood from a transnational lens.

[1] See studies by Bush (2008), Orjuela (2008) and Cochrane and colleagues (2009).

[2] See studies by Hess and Korf (2014), Baser (2015), Karabegović (2018), Toivanen and Baser (2020) and Toivanen (2021).

[3] See the studies by Karabegović (2018), Müller-Suleymanova (2023) and Baser and Toivanen (2024).

[4] See Toivanen (2021).

[5] See the study by Birka (2022).

[6] See Baser and Toivanen (2019) and Galipo (2018).

[7] See the study by Dizdaroğlu (2023).

[8] See the study by Toivanen (2021) and Baser (2015).

[9] See the studies by Hess and Korf (2014) and Toivanen (2021).

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Photography

Juana Sánchez, Colombian exile in Barcelona, ☒☒ one of the protagonist of the documentary *Para volverte a ver*, produced by ICIP and Mandorla Films. Author: ICIP.

IN DEPTH

From the margins to the mainstream: integrating the diaspora into peacebuilding through public policy

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The concept of diaspora engagement in political reform, peacebuilding, and reconciliation is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that has gained increasing attention in recent years. Diasporas, characterised by their transnational ties, hold significant political capital that can be leveraged for positive change in both their host countries and countries of origin. Contrary to viewing diasporas as threats, recognising their potential as active contributors to peace and development efforts is essential for harnessing their unique resources and perspectives.

Diasporas are major contributors to their countries of origin, not only in terms of financial support but also through political and social engagement. Their involvement in development and humanitarian response activities has been extensively documented^[1], showcasing their growing global impact. The emergence of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus underscores the interconnected nature of humanitarian relief, development programmes, and peacebuilding initiatives. This emphasises the need for coherent approaches to addressing vulnerability throughout crises and afterwards. While the diaspora's role as a humanitarian actor has gained recognition in recent years, there is still a need to further explore their contributions to peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

The diaspora can play diverse roles in both host and homeland contexts. Understanding the heterogeneity within and between diaspora communities, as well as the generational dynamics of diaspora activism, is crucial for comprehensively assessing their impact. Additionally, factors such as access to political rights, integration level, and recognition of their potential impact their capacity to influence policy-making mechanisms and peace processes.

“Contrary to viewing diasporas as threats, recognising their potential as active contributors to peace and development efforts is essential for harnessing their unique resources and perspectives”

To effectively harness the potential of diasporas in peacebuilding and reconciliation frameworks that facilitate their positive engagement must be established. Addressing challenges such as inclusivity within diaspora communities and maintaining neutrality is essential for maximising their contributions. Neutrality refers to the need to finding common ground and avoiding internal conflicts within the diaspora community. It is about creating a space where everyone feels welcome to participate, regardless of their political inclinations or opinions on a specific contentious issue. This can be achieved, for example, by avoiding involvement in homeland politics altogether or encouraging open discussions on various issues while maintaining a respectful environment where people can disagree without resorting to hostility.

By creating collaborative environments and comprehensive policy frameworks, diasporas can be empowered to promote participation in development processes, ultimately contributing to sustainable peace and prosperity globally. In this paper we will look at what policy frameworks and initiatives already exist to support diaspora engagement and peacebuilding and propose recommendations to bridge existing gaps.

Policy framework for diaspora engagement in peacebuilding

The role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding efforts has gained recognition at various levels of policymaking, ranging from global to local initiatives. As the world faces complex challenges related to conflict and sustainable development, leveraging the potential of diasporas has emerged as a crucial strategy for fostering peace, resilience, and inclusive development. Policy frameworks are beginning to acknowledge the potential of diasporas in peacebuilding activities. This section explores the evolving policy frameworks at the global, European Union (EU), and regional levels, emphasising the importance of recognising and involving diaspora communities in peacebuilding efforts.

At the global level, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN in 2015, represents a significant step forward. This framework emphasises a holistic approach to end poverty and set the world on a sustainable path to prosperity, peace and social justice. SDG 16 specifically focuses on achieving “peace, justice and strong institutions,” recognising the crucial role of these elements in fostering a sustainable future. Unfortunately, while SDG 16 acknowledges the interconnectedness between peacebuilding and sustainable development, it lacks explicit recognition of the diaspora’s potential in these efforts. This recognition is still lacking in the 2023 “New Agenda for Peace“. In parallel, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) underscores the importance of diaspora engagement in achieving sustainable development and fostering peace.

“Objective 19 of the 2030 Agenda underlines the role migrants and the diaspora can play in peace and reconciliation processes in their countries of origin, especially women”

Objective 19 underlines the role migrants and the diaspora can play in peace and reconciliation processes in their countries of origin, especially women in peacebuilding. It calls for policies that enable migrant and diaspora women to fully participate in society, including in political decision-making, peacebuilding and community dialogue

in countries of origin, transit and destination and for the creation of safe public spaces for them to do so. This objective acknowledges diaspora's extensive social and economic networks that can be leveraged for disaster response, facilitating the channelling of critical resources in times of crisis. Additionally, their familiarity with their homeland's culture proves invaluable in developing long-term solutions that address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable recovery.

Diasporas can also foster cultural exchange and understanding between their communities in the host country and their country of origin, helping young generations to rediscover their history from a different perspective than their parent's personal experience (see example of Rwanda).

Within the European Union, the New European Consensus on Development, adopted in 2017, reflects the key themes of the 2030 Agenda and explicitly recognises the diaspora as a major actor in development processes. Organised around the "five Ps" – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership – the consensus acknowledges the diverse capital that the diaspora brings. This document underlines the need for collaboration and establishing partnerships to leverage the diaspora's potential for sustainable development, which inherently includes peacebuilding efforts. In line with the 2030 Agenda, the EU has committed itself to promoting peace, prosperity, and social justice globally. Additionally, the EU emphasises the role of women and girls as key agents of development and change, highlighting their contributions to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and humanitarian response.

Additionally, the Council of Europe (CoE) underscores the importance of diaspora engagement in peacebuilding and state-building processes. Diaspora groups are recognised as transnational actors who contribute to building and strengthening peace, development, trade, human rights, and cultural exchanges. However, the potential of diaspora members in state-building processes is often underestimated or overlooked, leading to a lack of systematic collection of information and evaluation of diaspora activities. The CoE Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies recommends measures aimed at strengthening the potential of diaspora involvement in state-building processes. These measures include active participation in political, cultural,

and social life in both host countries and countries of origin. By enhancing diaspora involvement in state-building, policymakers can leverage their expertise and networks to foster peace, stability, and inclusive development.

“As the world faces complex challenges related to conflict and sustainable development, leveraging the potential of diasporas has emerged as a crucial strategy for fostering peace, resilience, and inclusive development”

Beyond the global and European levels, regional organisations such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Commonwealth, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have also highlighted the importance of diaspora engagement in peacebuilding and development. For example, SICA promotes regional integration to achieve peace, freedom, democracy, and development in Central America. Similarly, the Commonwealth aims to promote development, democracy, and peace among its 54 member states. SADC focuses on sustainable economic growth, good governance, and durable peace and security among its fifteen southern African member states.

The importance of integration and access to political rights for diaspora members

Integration and access to political rights are fundamental aspects of fostering inclusive societies and ensuring the full participation of diaspora members in their countries of residence but also in their countries of origin. This section delves into the importance of integration and political rights for diaspora members, highlighting policy frameworks and initiatives aimed at facilitating their inclusion and participation.

The EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027 outlines a robust framework to enhance integration policies across member states. This plan aims to

contribute to the broader social inclusion agenda, drawing on strategies in education, culture, employment, non-discrimination, and equality. By working closely with member states, local authorities, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders, the EU seeks to strengthen integration efforts and promote the active participation of migrants and the diaspora in society.

The EU emphasises the role of civil society organisations, educational institutions, employers, and other stakeholders in achieving comprehensive integration policies. Building strong partnerships is crucial for enhancing the integration process, and the EU actively supports civil society through regular consultation and dialogue. Increased opportunities for EU funding under the Multi-annual Financial Framework further incentivise member states to involve various stakeholders, including diaspora organisations, in designing and implementing integration programmes.

Objective 19 of the GCM, mentioned previously, also underlines the need to facilitate political participation and engagement of the diaspora in their countries of origin and residence as an essential feature for ensuring their voices are heard and their interests represented. This includes involvement in peace and reconciliation processes, participation in elections, and contributing to political reforms. Establishing voting registries for citizens abroad and providing opportunities for parliamentary representation are critical steps towards enabling the diaspora to exercise their political rights effectively and contribute to the democratic process.

“Integration and access to political rights are fundamental aspects of fostering inclusive societies and ensuring the full participation of diaspora members in their countries of residence but also in their countries of origin”

While many countries allow voting from abroad and dual citizenship, conflict ridden countries can be more cautious in granting such rights to avoid diaspora “interference”

in internal politics. Challenges to building trust after decades-long civil wars and political conflicts, red tape, and resistance to change (due to inflexibility and/or limited capacity) have, often, impeded further implementation of participatory initiatives. In Colombia, for example, diaspora engagement faces challenges stemming from decades-long conflict and political divisions. Despite efforts to form associations and engage in collective action, trust issues and fragmented diaspora dynamics hinder effective participation. Red tape and bureaucratic hurdles further complicate diaspora initiatives, highlighting the need for streamlined mechanisms to facilitate engagement.

Such attempts do however exist, leading to various level of achievements. In the next section we will see concrete examples of national initiatives put in place to try to improve diaspora's political participation with the aim to supporting peacebuilding.

Trends in conflict countries and national policies

In the pursuit of sustainable development and peacebuilding, countries facing conflict and post-conflict situations can adopt specific policies and frameworks to harness the potential of their diaspora communities. This section explores trends in conflict countries and their national policies, highlighting initiatives aimed at leveraging diaspora engagement for development and reconciliation. The examples proposed are taken from the EUDiF [global mapping on diaspora engagement](#) and additional research pieces produced under the project. The following examples show how governments have officially granted a peacebuilding role to their diaspora by including them in their national policies.

Both Georgia and Chad recognise the importance of diaspora integration in the host country, in their national development agendas. Chad's National Development Plan emphasises promoting diaspora integration as a strategic objective, reflecting a broader commitment to governance and peacebuilding. Similarly, Georgia's migration strategy prioritises creating an inclusive environment for the diaspora, leveraging their contributions for socioeconomic development and in particular to facilitate peaceful cohabitation of various religions, cultural and ethnic groups. This reflects both countries ongoing challenges linked to political divisions and instability.

“While many countries allow voting from abroad and dual citizenship, conflict ridden countries can be more cautious in granting such rights to avoid diaspora “interference” in internal politics ”

Ethiopia and Kenya have developed comprehensive policy frameworks to engage their diaspora communities in national development and peacebuilding efforts. The Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict-affected regions globally and each country in the region has experienced political turmoil for decades. Ethiopia’s diaspora policy focuses on strengthening relationships between citizens abroad and promoting advocacy for national development. It also aims to strengthen participation in the democratisation and peace building process for individual and national gains, create a conducive environment for joint development, and uphold the diaspora’s rights and interests abroad. Kenya’s foreign policy emphasises diaspora diplomacy, recognising the diverse skills and expertise of Kenyans living abroad as valuable assets for national transformation. Kenya’s Third Medium-Term Plan underlines the importance of diaspora contribution to security, peace building and conflict resolution.

Rwanda’s diaspora engagement related policies and frameworks have developed from its troubled past. They aspire to maintain peace and reconciliation as well as to harness different forms of diaspora capital. The focus is on promoting cohesion, as can be seen for example in the National Strategy for Transformation 2017-2024 and Rwanda’s Diaspora Policy (2009). Rwanda’s government has actively engaged its diaspora community, recognising their role in rebuilding the nation post-conflict. To allow the diaspora to take up that role, Rwanda’s Vision 2020 strategy includes measures such as facilitating the right to regain citizenship which is key to give the diaspora full access to political participation. However, underlying tensions related to historical ethnic divisions persist, impacting peacebuilding efforts.

In Somalia, it is interesting to note that the latest National Development Plan (2020-2024) shifted from giving a clear role to the diaspora in terms of enabling peace and security to understanding the humanitarian-development nexus and the diaspora's role in times of crisis. These changing roles follow the evolution of the peace-making process and related priorities in the country.

“The diaspora can play diverse roles in both host and homeland contexts. Understanding the heterogeneity and the generational dynamics of diaspora activism, is crucial for comprehensively assessing their impact”

Additionally, Lebanon's diaspora plays a significant role in supporting the country amidst sociopolitical challenges. This can be linked to the Lebanese policy of “concord” vis-à-vis the diaspora. Although proper legislative support is still lacking, the “concord” approach can be translated as the government's support to diasporic networks and organisations across religions and ethnicities. Among other, it motivates its expatriates to exercise their democratic rights. Accordingly, the diaspora, particularly during periods of civil unrest, demonstrates a strong sense of solidarity and commitment to addressing Lebanon's systemic issues. Through peaceful protests, fundraising initiatives, and advocacy campaigns, the diaspora amplifies voices for change and contributes to grassroots movements for reform.

However, even when there are favourable dispositions towards diaspora engagement, challenges persist in some contexts. For example, in Sudan, conflict disrupts ambitious development projects aimed at addressing critical healthcare challenges. Despite efforts to collaborate with international partners and diaspora communities, conflict and political instability blocks initiatives such as capacity building for healthcare professionals. The recurring nature of conflict impedes sustainable development, underscoring the need for long-term peacebuilding strategies.

Diaspora as peacebuilders: promising practices

In the field of diaspora engagement and peacebuilding, several promising practices and initiatives stand out, showcasing the diverse ways in which diaspora communities contribute to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and sustainable development.

One notable example is the Conference on Diaspora Engagement in Sri Lanka's Post-war Development, Reconciliation, and Sustainable Peace. Organised by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), this conference delved into the complexities of diaspora engagement in post-war Sri Lanka. It emphasised the multifaceted nature of diaspora identities and their contributions beyond traditional narratives, highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to diaspora involvement in peace and development initiatives. Still in Sri Lanka, International Alert, engages with civil society, local businesses, donors, and government entities to promote inclusive peacebuilding efforts. It facilitates dialogue, supports young politicians in advocating for peace, and promotes the positive role of the diaspora in reconciliation processes, both within their communities abroad and in Sri Lanka.

“Policy frameworks at the global, regional and national levels underscore the significance of diaspora engagement, offering avenues for collaboration, resource mobilisation, and capacity building”

Furthermore, grassroots initiatives like the Global Somali Diaspora's International Conference provide platforms for diaspora communities to convene, exchange ideas, and contribute to peacebuilding efforts. By bringing together Somali delegates from around the world, this conference fosters collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and collective action toward economic growth and sustainable peace.

In the field of humanitarian response and peacebuilding, initiatives such as DIASPEACE demonstrate the potential of diaspora networks in crisis situations. This EU-funded project studied the political activities of Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean diaspora organisations in Europe, shedding light on their contributions to conflict resolution and humanitarian efforts. Another example, in Sudan, diaspora responders have played a crucial role in supporting the situation, offering media advocacy, fundraising, and remote volunteering opportunities to address various challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, we wish to particularly highlight the important role played by women and youth in peacebuilding. Projects like Peace Therapist exemplify the innovative ways in which youth diaspora members leverage technology and expertise to provide psychosocial support to vulnerable populations. Founded by a young refugee team, Peace Therapist offers online therapy sessions in multiple languages, catering to refugees traumatised by war and natural disasters. Through such initiatives, diaspora communities harness their skills and resources to address mental health challenges and promote resilience among affected populations.

Similarly, Mujer diaspora (Diaspora Woman), a diaspora organisation founded by women from various backgrounds, and originating from the Truth, Memory and Reconciliation Commission of Colombian Women in the Diaspora, provides a dedicated space for women to engage in psychosocial healing, reconciliation efforts, and advocacy. With hubs in London, Barcelona, and other locations, the organisation addresses the exclusion of women's voices and experiences in peace processes, contributing to broader societal healing and empowerment.

“Recognising the vital role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding is essential for achieving sustainable development and fostering resilient societies worldwide”

Overall, these examples underscore the importance of recognising and harnessing the diverse talents, experiences, and networks within diaspora communities to advance peacebuilding, reconciliation, and sustainable development efforts worldwide.

Conclusion and recommendations

Recognising the vital role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding is essential for achieving sustainable development and fostering resilient societies worldwide. Policy frameworks at the global, EU, regional and national levels underscore the significance of diaspora engagement, offering avenues for collaboration, resource mobilisation, and capacity building. By leveraging the diverse assets and networks of the diaspora, policymakers can strengthen peacebuilding efforts, advance inclusive development, and contribute to the attainment of the SDGs on a global scale.

Integration and access to political rights are indispensable for cultivating inclusive societies and empowering migrant communities. Initiatives outlined by the EU exemplify the critical role of policy frameworks in facilitating integration and enabling the diaspora to participate fully in political, social, and economic lives in their host and origin countries.

Lastly, national policies and frameworks in conflict countries increasingly recognise the pivotal role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding and development. Despite challenges like trust issues and bureaucratic hurdles, diaspora engagement remains pivotal for fostering resilience, reconciliation, and sustainable development in conflict-affected contexts.

[1] Aman, M. *Diaspora Organisations as Strategic Agents of Development*. African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC), 2014. Horst, C., Lubkemann, S. and Pailey, R.N. "The invisibility of a third humanitarian domain". In *The New Humanitarians in International Practice* (pp. 213-231), 2015. Routledge; Nagarajan, N., Smart, B. and Nwadiuko, J. "Diaspora engagement in humanitarian emergencies and beyond". *The Lancet*, 386(9998), pp.1015-1016, 2015. Plaza, S. and Ratha, D. eds. *Diaspora for development in Africa*. The World Bank, 2011.

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Photography

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IN DEPTH

The day-to-day: Surviving Lebanon's ongoing man-made disasters

Carmen Geha

Political activist, scholar, and an expert in women's political and economic participation and refugee policies

I struggled a lot to write this article on the potential role of Lebanese women in the diaspora. I began thinking about peace and recovery but it took me to a very dark place in my mind. Peace with whom? Peace how? What kind of recovery is even possible? How can we make peace with a group of politicians who left explosives at the port for six years and used our homes as shields for weapons? How can we recover from the banking collapse of the century? How can we move past the material and human loss that this political system has caused? I hesitated to write this essay but then decided that if right now peace and recovery are not an option, I must at least write the story and share our painful journey to this moment.

I was the last person you would expect to leave the country. In fact, I had made it my mission for many years to convince friends and colleagues to return to Beirut. I was convinced that we could collectively challenge and reform a century-old oppressive and violent system of governance. Challenge it we did, but reform it we could not. There were many people like me, my close friends and allies were all equally invested in Lebanon, we dedicated our lives to this beautiful country. It was not altruistic entirely, Lebanon gave us so much back. We had meaning and home, we had shared struggle and solidarity. We felt it was our turn to break the generational cycle of trauma, corruption, sectarianism, and abuse. We would do better for our children, students, and for our parents.

But 2020 came and with it not only the port explosion but the largest man-made financial crisis of the century. We lost our homes, hospitals, schools, and restaurants in the explosion. Our parents and us lost all our savings. Yes you read that right, the banks in Lebanon loaned the corrupt government for so long that they went bankrupt and defaulted. Every dollar saved was now worthless in a country with nearing 500% food inflation.

So I left, most of us did, some stayed. When I came to Barcelona, I realized that our experience is not unique. Many women migrants escape similar harsh realities, many activists are not able to fix their countries. In fact, all across the world, collective feminist mobilizing has come under attack and increasingly so. In this world of increased oppression, we barely hear about the lives of women who risk everything and who lose the battle for democracy and human rights. We know very little about those countries left to reel in poverty and destruction because warlords refuse to truly build an inclusive version of peace. This is an essay about a country that remained governed by warlords who constructed peace deals only to keep themselves in power, and with whom no peace can be inclusive and no recovery would be right. There is no peace and recovery without accountability for mass crimes.

“This is an essay about a country that remained governed by warlords who built peace deals only to keep themselves in power, and with whom no peace can be inclusive and no recovery would be right”

When I lived in Beirut, I had such a powerful voice and a great sense of clarity. I did not realize that voice and clarity at the time, I thought I was distraught and angry. Some of it of course was anger, you get to be angry when you live under the mercy of a century-old sectarian system ruled by a bunch of warlords. You get to be angry when the public sector that ought to protect you discriminates against you as a woman in every aspect of your private and public life. You get to be angry when those warlords coalesce to

cause of the largest man-made economic collapses of the century. And you get to be angry when you realize that they had knowingly stored explosives at the port for years before it exploded in your face. Anger, I always thought, was an important impetus for taking action so much so that I used to start my courses by asking students what makes them angry to understand what moves them to take action. We were all very angry but we were powerful and clear, and we were *altogether* mobilized against *all of them* who were ruining our lives.

Today, four years after a crushed revolution, I am not sure if we constitute a diaspora or even what that means for the women who fled Lebanon. What I do know is that borders and time-zones are real and they separate us physically from being together. My memories of marching shoulder-to-shoulder are a painful reminder that we had to make the choice to walk alone, in a new country.

Leaving was the last coping mechanism we had against a political class so adamant on killing its own people. I know that many have stayed in Lebanon, voluntarily or involuntarily, and deserve our solidarity and attention. But this essay is about the ones who left and who – by leaving – lost any chance to march side-by-side again. We protested so much over the years in Lebanon I can still smell the tear gas, the sweat and blood, the burning tires, and the sound of broken glass under my feet. Equally important to protesting was all the generative co-creation and building of solidarity that we did around the issues that were harming us from marriage, divorce, sexual harassment, violence, and equal access to the labor-market. In the end, all of it was worth the time and energy because collective mobilizing offered us solace and community when we needed it the most.

**“Leaving was the last coping mechanism we had
against a political class so adamant on killing its
own people”**

This essay is another act of protest to make visible the invisible labor of so many women that created and sustained political activism for so long. It is about the women

who helped break the silence on taboos, built inclusive organizations, and marched in their thousands. It is about labor and love that goes undocumented in history and which gets erased and forgotten when corrupt politicians re-emerge as victorious tyrants. It is also an act of protest against becoming invisible as migrants and the daily homework we do to lift each other up, aspiring one day to be together again albeit it in a new place.

What happened?

I often ask myself how I can explain what happened to people here in Barcelona, to new friends who care and want to know. Over the phone my friend cynically tells me to begin from 1943 when Lebanon gained its independence from the French and then walk people through until August 4, 2020 when the port exploded with 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate. But that of course would be too long a story and too exhausting to narrate. I think it suffices to pause at three recent moments and what those moments illustrate about this tiny country's complex history.

The first moment that comes to mind is the flame of hope and defiance that took over the streets of the country from North to South in October 2019. When Lebanon's civil war ended in 1989 the warlords granted themselves amnesty for war crimes and proceeded to govern the country using the state as their private property. Thirty years of corruption had eroded public trust in the warlords and led to an unprecedented wave of mass protests crystalizing in a revolution against "all of them (*kellon yaaneh kellon*)."

This "all of them" grouped together was more than a powerful slogan, it was an indictment of shared responsibility of the men who claimed charge of a country and who brought it to its knees. At the time, this revolution soothed an otherwise depressed nation and awakened in us the opportunity to speak out, stand together, and imagine the Lebanon we wanted.^[1]

It was not long before "all of them" hammered down on peaceful protestors using their tyrannical expertise to oppress, violently beat up, arrest, and launch a unified counter-revolution. At the same time, another moment comes to mind in January 2020 when we realized that the banking system had collapsed taking with it all our deposits and

stealing our parents' hard-earned pension. This was the culmination of "all of them" stealing for so long leading to the banks defaulting and a 90% currency deflation.[2] As we watched our savings disappear, an estimated 80% of the country was pushed into poverty just at the time as COVID19 hit Lebanon. Suicides were becoming daily occurrences by parents who could not feed their families. Home to over 1 million refugees, Lebanon, as a non-signatory to the Geneva Convention, had no safety net for neither citizens nor refugees and had mismanaged what resources were provided by UN agencies to aid in the suffering of both refugee and host communities.

"There is a shattered nation that has pushed hundreds of thousands into having to migrate therefore displacing the women who were so crucial to crafting hope"

The final moment would come months after we were already isolated in our homes. Just before 6pm on August 4th, 2020 the Beirut port exploded killing more than 220 people, wounding 6,000, and destroying 300,000 homes, schools, hospitals, and small businesses.[3] It has been the fourth anniversary of this mass collective trauma and not a single person has gone on trial or to jail. In fact, just like the post-war era, it appears today that the criminals and perpetrators are stronger than ever obstructing justice, refusing to elect a president, and evading all reforms that would help the economy recover. Which leads us to this moment now of a shattered nation that has pushed hundreds of thousands into having to migrate therefore displacing the women who were so crucial to crafting hope.

Politicizing hope and despair

Lebanon's women, Lebanese or non-Lebanese, were historically at the forefront of organizing for equal rights, mitigating conflict, and collectively mobilizing. Lebanon's political system hurts its women the most and women have always had the most to lose if the warlords prevail. With no right to pass nationality to our children, no civil

court system, no equal employment rights, and no laws to protect from violence, of course we had no choice but to self-organize. Everywhere you look over the last few years, it was us who came together to protest putting up tents, taking turns to babysit, shut down roads, and craft a narrative that would include our rights in the ongoing revolution.

During COVID19 and financial collapse, it was us who set up support networks, fundraised to save students and colleagues from eviction, and broke the silence on the increased domestic violence. After the explosion, it took us less than a day to mobilize for relief and recovery across the city. You could see us showing up with brooms to clean wipe glass, attend public funerals, and pick up the pieces left of local businesses, schools, and hospitals. Hope was a political project woven by pieces of co-creation, moments of movement, and the desire to not slip into unsurmountable sadness. Hope was a strategy to defy what we were told was impossible. What was true of hope became also true of despair.

In my ongoing research with feminist activists in migration today the most repeated sentiment is something a former colleague told me, “We were so naïve, I hope that I will never become naïve again.” For a long time, I mis-interpreted despair as withdrawal and as a finality. But as I listened carefully, I realized that the politics of despair can be a powerful coping mechanism. Lebanon’s women are not so naïve as to think that they can take over a killing machine. We knew when to protest and we knew the moment when protest was falling on deaf ears, and we carefully withdrew to protect our wellbeing and that of our loved ones. “It made sense that we all go together to the streets but when I saw many people getting hurt and bleed, it also made sense for me to stay home for the sake of my children,” my friend recounted.

**“We had no choice but to self-organize.
Everywhere you look over it was the women who
came together to protest putting up tents, taking
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include our rights”

This withdrawal from political confrontation brought with it three elements of migration that are salient in our experiences. First, is the physical migration away from a public sphere that is literally trying to burry us alive.^[4] This entails a first stage in our migratory process that focuses on our corporeality as a first step in restoring a sense of control over our bodies. “Every time they shot at us I felt my dignity shattered again for being in harm’s way as I demanded peacefully that those men be held accountable,” my friend put it very eloquently. Second, is the psychological migration away from ideals that no longer served us as individuals and as a collective. To me personally, I felt a sense of responsibility to change my narrative because I was worried that my students would continue protesting a losing cause. As my colleague put it, “so much has been burnt down and destroyed, I would not be able to live with myself if another young man or woman are dragged into a police interrogation.” With this psychological migration came a new political voice that was slowly making sense of the great loss we had endured both morally and financially. Third, is the act of geographically migrating away from the country. There is not a single woman I know who would describe this migration as voluntary. “We were pushed to leave, I know I am lucky to be alive and to have this privilege, but I do feel displaced and even three years later I do not feel part of this new land I am inhabiting,” my friend contends.

The day-to-day

I have to be honest, I love living in Barcelona and this is unique among my friends who moved to other places around the world. I do not feel like a stranger every day, even though I know that I am not from here. And I do not feel excluded. I say this to explain that for me, this essay is not about how I feel out of place and how much I miss home, which I do. I rather want to explain the day-to-day experience of this physical, psychological, and geographical migration that we have had to undertake in order to preserve our physical wellbeing and slowly to work towards our mental wellbeing and recovery. This movement away from Lebanon has taken away so much from us. Not only do we have to watch our aging parents from afar, miss our siblings, and continue to

witness the country's deterioration, we also do this without a breath left to shout.

“I want to explain the day-to-day experience of this physical, psychological, and geographical migration that we have had to undertake in order to preserve our physical wellbeing and slowly to work towards our mental wellbeing and recovery”

Back in Lebanon, we were activists, nurses, professors, actors, sisters, and daughters. In migration we are an individual, not a collective, trying to navigate endless labyrinths of bureaucracy which we have no say in. Our professional careers take a step back as we tend to accept whatever jobs allow us to stay afloat. Migration isolates us and personalizes our experiences. What we used to do collectively is now up to us individually to figure out.

I know that this magazine is dedicated to diasporas mobilizing. But I do not know what sort of diaspora our generation of feminist activists constitute. I am not sure if we will ever collectively work to try to democratize Lebanon again. I am not sure that this is the best option for our safety and wellbeing. I am not sure if that goal is worth a lifetime of work. What I am sure of is that we did survive the unthinkable and in migration – much like in Lebanon – the seeds for solace and healing will come from us and for us, and that keeps me doing every day. I am also sure that our struggle is not unique and that there are countless women like us. Finally, I am sure that our new homes in migration need us too, we have a perspective on collective action and navigating geopolitics that makes us see the world in multi-dimensions. We can contribute to peace and recovery, but maybe not for the goals of a nation taken hostage by corrupt criminals. Time will tell.

This article was written before the Israeli assault on Lebanon and the shaky ceasefire that came in December 2024.

[1] For more on mental health and revolution in Lebanon, see [“Revolution Soothes a Depressed Nation”](#), by Carmen Geha in *The New Arab* published December 2019.

[2] See: European Parliament, [“Situation in Lebanon: Severe and Prolonged Economic Depression”](#).

[3] See: Human Rights Watch, [“They Killed us from Within”](#).

[4] See, [“The Feeling of being Buried Alive,”](#) by Carmen Geha in *The New Arab*, August 2020.

About the author

Carmen Geha

Political activist, scholar, and expert in women's political and economic participation, refugee policies, and collective action in the Middle East and North Africa. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of St. Andrews (2014). She is a Research Fellow teaching gender and globalization at the Barcelona Institute for International Studies (IBEI) and an Associate Fellow at Chatham House.

She is also a Non-Resident Fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative and advisor on the women's political participation program. She was a Maria Zambrano Fellow at Pompeu Fabra University (2022-2024), a tenured Associate Professor at the American University of Beirut (2020-22), and has held visiting positions, including as a Fulbright Scholar at Harvard University (2021), research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (2018), and the Watson Institute at Brown University (2015). She's co-founder and Managing Director of Soltara Consulting, a growing network of consultants specializing in strategy design, leadership development, and knowledge mobilizing for inclusive policies and practices.

Photography

Beirut Port Massive Explosion site. Hundreds of tonnes of wheat appear among the rubble as Lebanon's backup wheat silos got demolished, 2020. Author: Ali Chehade Farhat.

IN DEPTH

The Syrian exile: From «let's do something» to «What can be done?»

Marcelle Shehwaro

Syrian activist, feminist and writer

March 2024 marked the end of my tenth year of exile from Aleppo, my hometown. On March 17, 2013, I was detained for several hours, and by the morning of March 18, I had left Syria, aware that any attempt to return could lead to my assassination or prolonged imprisonment at the very least. I had spent most of my thirty years living within a relatively confined geographic and social circle in my city, which lacked diversity in terms of class, sect, and religion—except during the years of the revolution. My decision to engage in the Arab Spring through demonstrations, writing, and political organizing led to over a year of security persecution before I finally fled the country. I crossed into Turkey through the then-open borders, heading toward a Turkish city called Gaziantep.

Early on, I realized the profound emotional impact of being forcibly uprooted from my country. To cope with the pain of this uprooting, I clung to the belief that my exile was temporary—not years, but mere months. I followed political developments with both an analytical and a personal lens, considering what each change might mean for my return. During those initial years of displacement, I had neither the desire nor the energy to assimilate into my new environment; the local resentment toward refugees only deepened my sense of alienation. I did not learn Turkish, nor did I make any efforts to build bridges or relationships. I was simply waiting to return home.

To resist accepting that I was exiled, I continued to view my role as an activist, a feminist, and a writer as unchanged. I behaved as if my connection to Syria—its streets, its public discourse, and my access to knowledge, information, oral history, and

observations—had not changed. I denied the limitations of maintaining only a virtual relationship with my country and the political constraints associated with it. In the rare moments when I acknowledged that I was now in a different country, under different forms of oppression, I quickly suppressed this realization, convincing myself that my exile was temporary. I firmly believed that I would return to Syria and that it was only a matter of time.

“Early on, I realized the profound emotional impact of being forcibly uprooted from my country and I clung to the belief that my exile was temporary”

I refused to accept the more likely outcome that I would not return to live in Syria, until after the Syrian regime’s relentless siege and bombing of Aleppo, which ultimately fell under regime control at the end of 2016. I think it was the beginning of my understanding of my own exile.

Exile intensified the limitation of our political choices in the relationship to our country. I want to live in my country, but I will die if I return. This creates an impossible choice between life and homeland. After prioritizing life over returning to Syria, guilt, rather than political change, became the driving force behind much of my political activism in the early stages of displacement.

Guilt is intensely self-centered, even when expressed in terms of the sake of “those we left behind.” It often assigns superhuman responsibilities to the individual to save others. Driven by the burden of guilt, we gravitate towards actions that promise immediate positive impacts, favoring short-term, directly effective solutions over long-term strategies. These are typically not political or cultural efforts but humanitarian work.

Consequently, many Syrian revolution activists, myself included, shifted from political resistance against the war and various occupations of Syria, and from cultivating a

political vision for a more democratic, dignified, and just future, to focusing primarily on immediate humanitarian efforts.

However, guilt was not the sole reason for this shift. The severity of the war, the collapse of essential daily life supports for our people, and a recognition, sometimes unacknowledged, of the defeat of the Arab revolutions and the suppression of the peoples' demands for liberation also played significant roles.

“I want to live in my country, but I will die if I return. This creates an impossible choice between life and homeland”

“We who survived must do something”

This emerged as the slogan for those of us who still possessed the energy to resist, while many others in exile either withdrew from public activism towards personal salvation, or to nihilism. Our means of resistance were limited to humanitarian efforts or the redoing of protests resembling the Arab Spring, albeit in our countries of refuge. These demonstrations, echoing the songs and chants from the revolution's early days, carried a raw honesty when voiced in the streets of our homelands as we tried to reclaim them from political oppression. In contrast, in foreign lands, our protests often went unnoticed, the local passersby indifferent, sometimes unable to differentiate our flags from those of other nations. These protests represented a blend of nostalgia and a firm assertion that, despite our exile, we remained connected to that brave and dignified chapter of 2011. Over time, however, we gradually began to acknowledge, at least to ourselves, that small-scale demonstrations in our countries of refuge were not the most effective means of sustaining our political struggle in the diaspora.

In the face of ongoing catastrophic situations, pausing to reflect on what this “doing something” might be felt like a luxury. There is no time to contemplate our complex circumstances, despite knowing that the only solutions to our complex political challenges demand deep thought—a luxury we perceive we cannot afford.

The rush in choosing methods of resistance, or outright withdrawal, among the exiled activists comes with many misleading assumptions. It presumes a homogenous diaspora among the politically exiled, that this diaspora holds similar or unified roles, regardless of geographic differences, levels of political and racial oppression, and the concentration of refugees in each country. It overlooks the passage of time which invariably alters our relationships with the country and its dynamics.

“Over time we gradually began to acknowledge that small-scale demonstrations in our countries of refuge were not the most effective means of sustaining our political struggle in the diaspora”

It now requires more effort and time to access and understand local knowledge that is not written down. We were once locals, but not quite so anymore. A decade ago, I could effortlessly gauge the relationship between a Syrian employee's salary and the price of a loaf of bread. Now, I need to convert both to dollars in a way that is far from intuitive just to grasp such a basic fact.

Without acknowledging that I have lived in two different countries outside of Syria—Turkey and the US—each with potentially different roles for me. Without accepting that I have been out of Syria for 10 years and that the Syria I knew has significantly changed. Without admitting, too, that I might never return and may have to make a new country my home for as long as I lived in Syria, I remain stuck in my methods of resistance, dominated by certainty rather than dialogue. We risk becoming entrenched in repeating programs and methods, rather than truly listening and forming new collective demands.

What could be done in the slightly longer term in the battle for liberation? What is my personal role? What does the country need in its new political context? These are necessary yet infrequently asked questions.

What if we acknowledged that traditional methods of nonviolent struggle have failed to protect lives from genocides in conflicts from Yemen to Sudan, Palestine, and Syria? And to admit as well that armed resistance has also not improved people's lives either. And that we, despite our varying perspectives, from leftists and feminists to human rights defenders, are facing an ideological and humanitarian defeat. That our various methods of resistance have become insufficient in offering any political hope for a more just future.

“What if we acknowledged that traditional methods of nonviolent struggle have failed to protect lives from genocides and to admit that armed resistance has also not improved people's lives either?”

What if we shifted from the “let's do something” mindset, valid in the urgent face of loss of life, to asking “What can be done?” From certainty to humility and uncertainty. To accept that the next phase of our struggle in the diaspora relies heavily on experimentation and collective rethinking, moving beyond the obligation to act towards exploring new forms of struggle. This shift could pave the way for more strategic, intentional approaches to our struggles for liberation.

What can be done to support our people both inside and outside the country?

How can we politically shape demands and messages without overshadowing the voices of those within the country, without marginalizing them or oversimplifying their diverse experiences by treating them as a monolithic group?

As we acknowledge our privileges in asylum countries, it is crucial not to see this as a hierarchy of suffering but as a way to hold our role and the space for our voice accountable. Over time, many of us learn multiple languages of globalization and gain

greater access to universities, the press, and platforms with global reach. Whether intentionally or not, we often become seen as the model of the 'good immigrant.' Amidst this, how can we use these advantages to advocate for improved rights for all, both inside and outside our homeland? How can we amplify their struggles without taking over the voices of those who lack means of communication such as the internet, electricity, and have limited opportunities to travel and participate?

The rights to life and dignity of those within our countries are neither more nor less important than our own—they are equally critical in our collective pursuit of land, justice, and democracy. How do we ensure that our approach remains as grassroots as possible? Are we listening adequately to those with whom we share our struggle, particularly those who remain in catastrophic living conditions?

“How can we politically shape demands and messages without overshadowing the voices of those within the country, without marginalizing them or oversimplifying their diverse experiences by treating them as a monolithic group?”

What can be done collectively and meaningfully online, beyond the trends and influencers?

Our activism in the diaspora often risks falling into the trap of neoliberalism due to its forced reliance on social media and virtual spaces, which can lead to the commodification of issues to make them more marketable. Activism can take on a highly individualistic tone that is appealing for marketing on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, transforming us from members of a collective movement into individual influencers followed as if they were pop celebrities, and turning our causes into competitive trends. Withdrawing from virtual spaces, however, seems less effective in resisting this trend towards influencer-dominated phenomena.

How can we make the most of virtual communication spaces despite their limitations, and avoid forming rhetoric and demands that impose additional burdens on those we aim to support? How can we belong to movements as one of many activists not the one and only?

What can be done to foster as much collective action as possible?

This might begin with acknowledging that we have lost access to our streets and the organic ability to organize with our communities back home. Once we accept this, we should aim to expand our definition of community, adopting a more intersectional approach. In Aleppo, I could have organized in my neighborhood, on my street, or at my university. In New York, I can build sisterhood and allyship with individuals beyond our national identity and unite around a global liberation movement. The challenge is to accept that the nature of our collective has evolved for us in the diaspora. From this acceptance, we should strive to counteract individualism and instead forge a new, intentional collective.

What resources do we have at our disposal to think collectively in times of defeat and widespread genocide, rather than simply organizing another protest or commemorating events like Women's Day, Human Rights Day, and the anniversary of the revolution?

“We should stay engaged with the issues of our homelands, ensuring that our struggles and stories remain visible and active, but simultaneously, it is essential to immerse ourselves in the political landscapes of our new countries, advocating for our rights and forming alliances with local movements”

What can be done? This question should be our guiding question. How can we create spaces to collaboratively envision creative answers to that?

What can be done within the political spaces in our new countries as refugees?

What is our role today as refugees, not only in political change in our home countries but also in our host countries that are increasingly becoming hostile towards refugees? How can we balance that with our focus on our homeland rights? How do we play a role in creating change, not through assimilation and conformity, but through resistance and enriching diversity?

To achieve this, we need to cultivate a dual focus on our political commitments. We should stay engaged with the issues of our homelands, ensuring that our struggles and stories remain visible and active. Simultaneously, it is essential to immerse ourselves in the political landscapes of our new countries, advocating for our rights and forming alliances with local movements. This requires learning the political systems, understanding local issues, and finding common ground with activist groups. It is crucial to actively work to demand these activist spaces to become more inclusive and supportive of refugees

What can be done?

It is okay to admit that in the face of the massive oppression we are witnessing in our world today, the answer to what can be done is not clear or concrete. In my country, Syria, the regime has been as fascist as ever, hundreds of thousands have been killed, hundreds of thousands are still missing, and millions have been displaced to countries that are outright xenophobic. Inside the country, people are bombarded and targeted; five different countries occupy different regions of Syria, along with many foreign militias. Many of our population are still in refugee camps, and many more live below the poverty line.

It is okay if we, the newly exiled, do not have a clear answer in the face of these ever-changing challenges. As long as we resist withdrawing into political apathy, nihilism, and complete surrender to the injustices of the world. As long as we keep that question alive, with humility, curiosity, compassion, and courage. Let's keep asking, over and over, what can be done?

This article has been written before the fall of the Syrian regime in December 2024.

About the author

Marcelle Shehwaro

Marcelle Shehwaro is an activist, feminist and writer from Aleppo, Syria. She holds an MFA Degree in Nonfiction Creative Writing from Columbia University and is currently working on her book project in which she explores her activism and participation in the 2011 Syrian Revolution. In 2015, Marcelle's online series, "Dispatches from Syria," offering insights into her life and activism in Aleppo, received the Online Journalism Award in the category of Online Commentary.

Marcelle has co-founded and serves as the chairperson for "Do not suffocate the truth." This campaign is dedicated to assisting survivors of chemical weapons attacks and actively challenges denialism regarding the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. Marcelle has taught University Writing at Columbia University and a number of online creative writing classes to women inside Syria. Marcelle is a frequent contributor to the Syrian publication al-Jumhuriya and she has published essays in Global Voices ADI Magazine, and Heinrich Boell. She has also been featured in multiple books about the Syrian Revolution.

Photography

"Arpilleras" workshop of the "Cuerpos Gramaticales" activity with the Colombian diaspora in Barcelona,  2017. Author: Ingrid Guyon.

INTERVIEW

Interview with Zoya Miari, Palestinian-Ukrainian refugee

Eugènia Riera Casals

Internacional Catalan Institute for Peace

The daughter of a Palestinian father and a Ukrainian mother, Zoya Miari, grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon where armed clashes and shelling were constant. In 2021, amid an escalation of violence, the family decided to emigrate to Ukraine in search of a more hopeful future. The following year, in 2022, Russia invaded the neighbouring country, and war broke out. Zoya and her family emigrated again to Switzerland. In this journey, she has experienced first-hand unequal treatment based on her origin: stigma as a Palestinian refugee and empathy as a Ukrainian refugee. At 22, she created the “Waves to Home” project and became a Peace Ambassador for the One Young World summit, on a path of struggle and resilience to break stereotypes and false narratives.

You have become a refugee twice and lived a double experience. You say that one side of you, as a Ukrainian refugee, is being empathised and sympathized with, while the other side, as a Palestinian refugee, is being dehumanised. How do you live this duality, and why do you think that happens?

Yes. I have always felt this internal conflict for this double standard. If I introduce myself as Ukrainian to other people, it is easy for them to be empathetic. When I decided to move to Switzerland after escaping from the Ukrainian war, in just ten days, I received the status of a refugee, which allowed me to work. In just ten days! For the first time in my life, I was allowed to work. That never happened before in Lebanon.

Here, the role of the media and the internet is vital. The Western media have humanised my Ukrainian side through the language they use, while the same media dehumanise my Palestinian side. They talk about Palestinian children being dead, and they are not saying by whom they were killed or not naming it as a genocide. So I wonder how is it possible for me to be seen different if I am the same human being? Just because I hold one or another passport, can that dictate my life?

We need to learn from the way that Ukrainian refugees have been treated to treat other refugees in the world, from Palestine, Congo, Sudan or wherever.

So, do you act to transform these languages and the mainstream visions? How do you do that?

There are so many stereotypes about refugees, like being poor or uneducated, and I want to change the narrative. I genuinely believe in the power of storytelling. When I came to Switzerland, I lived with a Swiss family who said: “Zoya, you have a powerful story; you need to share it”. Therefore, I started sharing my story in schools, and then it went to newspapers, conferences, etc. I found that storytelling connects people on a human-to-human level. I made them look at me as a human rather than all of these identities. I found the power of storytelling, and I have been using this tool for two or three years.

“I found that storytelling connects people on a human-to-human level. Then they look at me as a human rather than all of my identities”

Is that also the purpose of your project, Waves to Home? How does it come out?

In 2022, after escaping the war in Ukraine, I participated in the One Young World, a global summit for young leaders. It was the first time that I connected with Palestinian people from Palestine. I never had friends from Palestine because they are not allowed to come to Lebanon, and we are not allowed to go to Palestine. We talked about our stories, struggles, and definitions of home. We felt a genuine and deep connection

because we created a safe place to be vulnerable and talk to share the pain we carry as refugees, migrants, or displaced people. There was so much power within ourselves; many people worldwide needed that.

This is how we created this global storytelling movement, Waves to Home, which started with refugees and migrants from different parts of the world talking about their stories and sharing them resiliently. Instead of having this pain paralyse us, making us victims in life, we have the power of storytelling, changing how we tell our stories to the world and ourselves.

What does “home” mean to you?

That is a beautiful question. I used to question myself my whole life because I never felt at home in Lebanon, Ukraine, or Palestine; I never felt at home in Ukraine, as I had not lived there my whole life, and the same is true in Palestine. I have never been to Palestine because, as Palestinian refugees, we were never allowed even to visit it. Therefore, my home is a place that I created within myself. It is the safest place, and I take it with me wherever I go.

The power of storytelling also means presenting yourself as an actor who can transform violence instead of being a victim.

Yes. We, refugees, all carry pain, but this pain could be used positively or negatively. I can use the pain to limit me or to create another cycle of violence. On the other hand, I could use my pain and tell myself a story that does not limit me but rather a story of being a warrior and a fighter. The way I would use my pain is to promote peace. Therefore, instead of becoming a violent weapon, my pain would become a peaceful weapon. I was able to create peace in my story because of the way I see my own story.

“Instead of having the pain paralyse us, making us victims in life, we have the power of storytelling, changing how we tell our stories to

the world and ourselves”

What does “peace” mean to you?

We can only talk of peace if we are talking about justice because peace and justice come together. I can only be a peace ambassador if I am fighting for justice.

Is your work from the diaspora focused on your countries of origin (Ukraine and Palestine) or your host country (Switzerland)?

We work in a global movement. I am not only covering my Palestinian or Ukrainian side; we are also working with Sudanese storytellers and other communities. There is something familiar among all the refugees: our struggles and the way we understand each other's pain. If you are fighting for someone who is oppressed, you have to fight for all the oppressed people, and we have to look at humans for who they are as humans.

Palestinians are being dehumanized and not looked at as humans, who are moms, dads, and children. I have been in Auschwitz to learn about the history and to change these narratives. I like the message of “no one is free until everyone is free”.

“I was able to create peace in my story because of the way I see my own story. Instead of becoming a violent weapon, my pain would become a peaceful weapon”

Is this also a way to fight against polarisation and promote dialogue between communities?

This is very important. When I share my story, I do that without saying, “I’m Palestinian” or “I’m Ukrainian” because then people would connect with me on a human level, which is the power of storytelling. To create a safe space, we start our activities with this question: “Who are you as a human without telling me your achievements or your

external identities? Just tell me who you are as a human.”

Most of the time, we share similar values. Therefore, this is what storytelling can do. We, the oppressed people, are all against oppressive regimes and injustices. We are together against something bigger than us.