

Nationalism in the Diaspora: a study of the Kurdish movement

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Nationalism, ethnicity and conflict

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The peoples of the world no longer live in isolated corners of the globe. The processes of globalization have created a smaller world, but the world has no singular culture, nor a single language. The contact between peoples has led to the construction of national identities and ethnic groups. Moreover globalization has dispersed the world's ethnicities, making few, if any, states ethnically homogeneous.

Today, nationalism is not limited to a particular region; globalization has dispersed nations, forcing them from their idealized homeland. This spread of people has brought about a new form of nationalism that operates outside of a particular country. The term diaspora was initially used to describe the spread of the Jewish people throughout the world, however it is now used to describe a people who have been dispersed from their original homeland, have a strong ethnic identity and wish to return to their homeland. Diasporas have been dispersed from their homeland, but have not forgotten it, for whatever reason they have maintained a strong national consciousness without a state of their own.

The Kurdish people are the largest nation lacking a state. Many Kurds have been thrown from their traditional homelands, often violently. They form a diaspora, and I'll use the Kurdish example as a case study to examine the forces that create and sustain a long-distance nationalism.

1. Formation of a diaspora

Kurdistan refers to the traditional homeland of the Kurdish people, though it was never the home of Kurdish people alone. During the 16th century, Kurdistan was split between the Iranian and Ottoman empires, and was further split into Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian parts after the dissolution of the Ottoman empire in the post World War I era. Today, half of the worldwide Kurdish community lives within the borders of Turkey. The treatment the Kurds have been subject to in Turkey plays a major role in the formation of a Kurdish diaspora, as I will now discuss.

The stateless Kurds have never had their pleas for a state of their own heard by the governments now controlling their historic homelands. Turkey rejects the notion that separate ethnic identities live within the borders of the Turkish state, maintaining that all within Turkey are "Turks." In Iraq, the totalitarian government never entertained notions that the Kurds should have the right to govern themselves. Since the 1920s, Turkey has actively engaged in "minority destroying" practices in response to the Kurdish minority. For example, in 1924, the Turkish Constitution was altered to forbid the use of any language that is not Turkish, preventing Kurds from taking Kurdish names or receiving instruction in Kurdish at school.

1.1. A people in exile

The present Kurdish diaspora is a direct result of nation-building tactics. The Kurdish people are now a people in exile from their homeland. Unsurprisingly, the Kurds began to rebel against the Turkish oppression in the 1920s, which resulted in even harsher policies from the Turkish government. In 1934, the Turkish Government passed a “Resettlement Law” that explicitly states its primary goal was to assimilate persons with other cultures, a law that was primarily aimed at assimilating the Kurdish people. As a result of this law, many tribes of Kurdish people were forcefully deported from southern Turkey. In both Turkey and Iraq, recent policies have led to enormous population displacements, forcing millions of Kurds to leave their homes.

These and other nation-building tactics have forced many Kurds to live in exile. Kurdish people cannot express their Kurdish heritage in traditional Kurdistan, however they have found opportunities to do so in liberal western states. This has created a Kurdish diaspora, with communities of Kurds living in states throughout Europe. The Kurdish example shows how a diaspora community can be created. In the general sense, diasporas are often created from war refugees. Due to the forceful removal from their homes, the diaspora communities generally create a nationalism that can be called transnationalism.

2. Decentralized Nations

The Kurdish nation is unlikely to have ever formed had its members never left Kurdistan. This paradox seems incomprehensible at first. How could the scattered Kurdish people form a nation? To answer this, I will first discuss factors that create a diaspora community.

2.1. Creating a transnationalism

Martin van Bruinessen writes, “The so-called second generation, consisting of immigrant workers’ children who have grown up in Europe, tend to be much more interested in Kurdish identity and Kurdish politics than their parents were,” [4] a claim that seems impossible at first glance. Wouldn’t persons who grew up in Germany, speaking German and participating in German culture be less Kurdish than those who were raised in traditional Kurdistan?

I feel there are three reasons why second-generation exiles are more nationalistic than their parents, and it’s also these reasons why transnationalism occurs and persists. First, the increased difficulty integrating in modern society makes exiles less likely to integrate fully or even partially into their new state. Integration does not need to actually be arduous, rather it only needs to be *perceived* as difficult or unwanted. “They” don’t want to accept “us.” An individual’s belief that he is in exile only magnifies his reluctance to integrate.

He has been forced into a society that doesn't want him, which in turn makes him reject his new host nation and look elsewhere for acceptance, namely towards his exiled home. Second-generation exiles are more likely to want to return to the homeland for several reasons. A second-generation exile grows up fully aware of her status as "the other." She sees the discrimination her parents are subjected to, from both the exiled homeland and the new home, and believes that a state for her nation will solve all that she and her parents have been subjected to. Additionally, it's likely that she's grown up hearing news from her homeland, reports that promote an ethnicity she has always been acutely aware of. As a result, she becomes increasingly nationalistic, creating hope that she may someday return to the homeland. I believe that dreams of return are primarily only dreams, an exiled Kurd need not want to return to Kurdistan in order to participate in the Kurdish diaspora. He or she only needs to maintain the belief that an independent Kurdistan will benefit Kurdish people.

I feel that the second reason transnationalism exists is precisely the same reason that nationalism exists. For a nation to survive the scattering effects of exile, the nation must draw on their collective "deep resources." Anthony Smith presented three resources with which one can measure the strength of a nationalism [12]. I feel that we can use these same three resources to gauge the ability of a nation to survive even when scattered across the world. These resources are (1) a collective memory and specifically a 'golden age,' (2) religious beliefs and a notion that the community is the 'chosen people,' and (3) an ancestral homeland. In the case of a diaspora community, their ancestral homeland has been taken away, so its myth strengthens the nation and serves as a center point to bring the community together. Moreover, as Joshua Kaldor-Robinson points out, diasporas can involve themselves within the nation in several different ways [7]. Diaspora communities can create the "narrative of the nation," they can emphasize the timelessness of the nation by their refusal to integrate, and they can invent tradition. And perhaps more importantly, diaspora communities can influence the views and actions of nationalists back in the homeland.

Finally, technology is the wheel that drives diaspora nationalism. The other ideas give reasons why transnationalism exists; technology is *how* it exists. Instantaneous worldwide communication is so widespread that it has drastically reshaped the way communities can and do communicate. The printing press reshaped communication within a community, but television, radio and the internet are completely reforming the connections in information-spread networks. To fully understand how greatly technology has enabled diaspora communities to thrive, I will take a much more abstract approach by examining the networks underlying human interaction.

2.2. Rethinking locality

Humans have always had contacts, other individuals who they could share information with, but in recent years the number of contacts each person has on average has steadily increased to an estimated 400-1000 per person [13]. More important than simply gaining more contacts, people now have the ability to maintain communication with another regardless of the physical distance separating them. In creating instantaneous world-wide communication, humans have restructured the topology of the social networks connecting one to another.

Social networks are marked by the presence of neighborhoods, groups of individuals who are strongly connected, and long-distance contacts. In forming a social network, geography has a great deal of influence, and it's geographic limitations that give social networks a distinctive structure. Two friends are likely to have a third, common friend. These groups of friends that form neighborhoods, a cluster in the network where almost everyone involved knows everyone else in the cluster. Neighborhoods still exist in social networks, and they are likely to always exist, however the nature of the long-distance contacts has changed dramatically in recent years.

Figure 1 illustrates how a social network might have looked about 200 years ago, while Figure 2 presents a modern social network. Combined, the two figures reveal the change in structure of social networks. The primary change that has occurred in the last hundred years is the addition of many more long-distance contacts. People are now able to make contact with persons extremely far away in physical distance terms. This creates a situation where people have many friends outside of their neighborhood, enabling information to disseminate through a community rapidly. Without going into details, it's been shown that the new structure of social networks *greatly* improves the speed that information spreads [1, 8].

The new structure of social networks greatly influences diaspora communities. First, the short paths between nearly everyone allow members in the diaspora to find each other. And the network structure allows information to spread quickly within the diaspora, since members can easily maintain contact with their friends and relatives back in the homeland. Importantly, the new structure of social networks makes it virtually impossible for a member of a diaspora to *escape* news and influence from the homeland. Even if an exiled diaspora member cuts off all ties to her homeland, her local neighborhood contacts keep her in touch with the happenings of the homeland. Since any member within the network is only a few steps away, communication throughout the community occurs nearly instantaneously and ideas are mobilized quickly. An idea can be expressed to few, and those few can easily spread it to the entire, interconnected community. Also, since the diaspora community is so closely connected to the homeland nation, the two groups can keep their goals congruent, and this "closeness" also allows

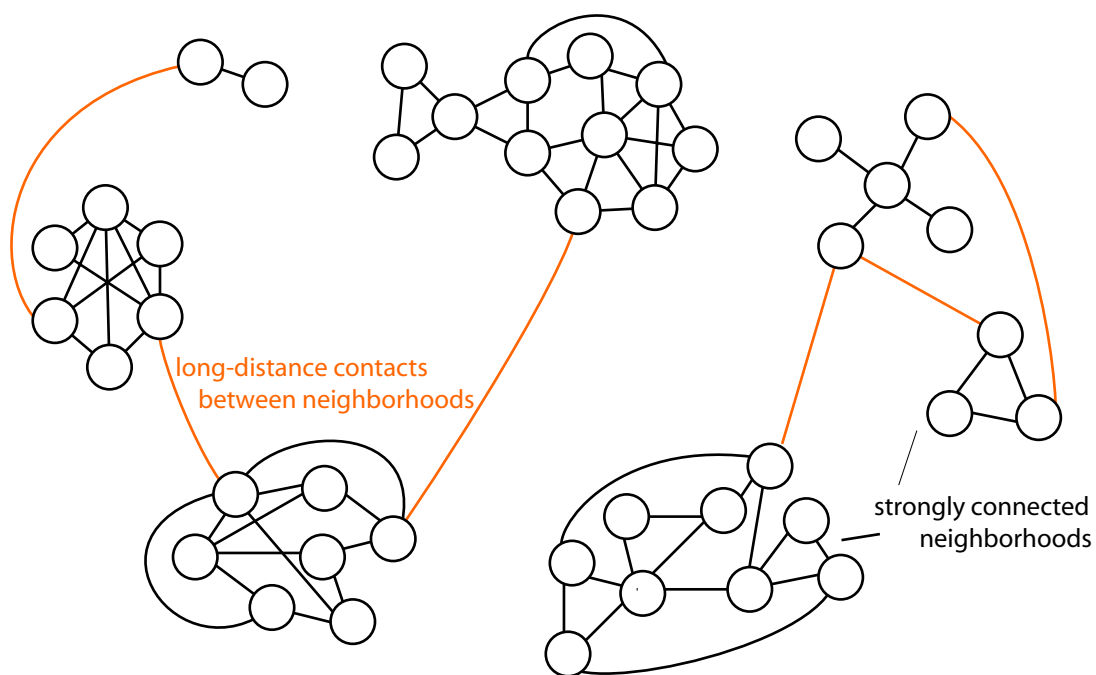


Figure 1. How a social network might have looked about 200 years ago. Persons with a large amount of physical space separating them rarely became acquaintances. Note the presence of clustered neighborhoods, with the occasional long-distance contact connecting neighborhoods.

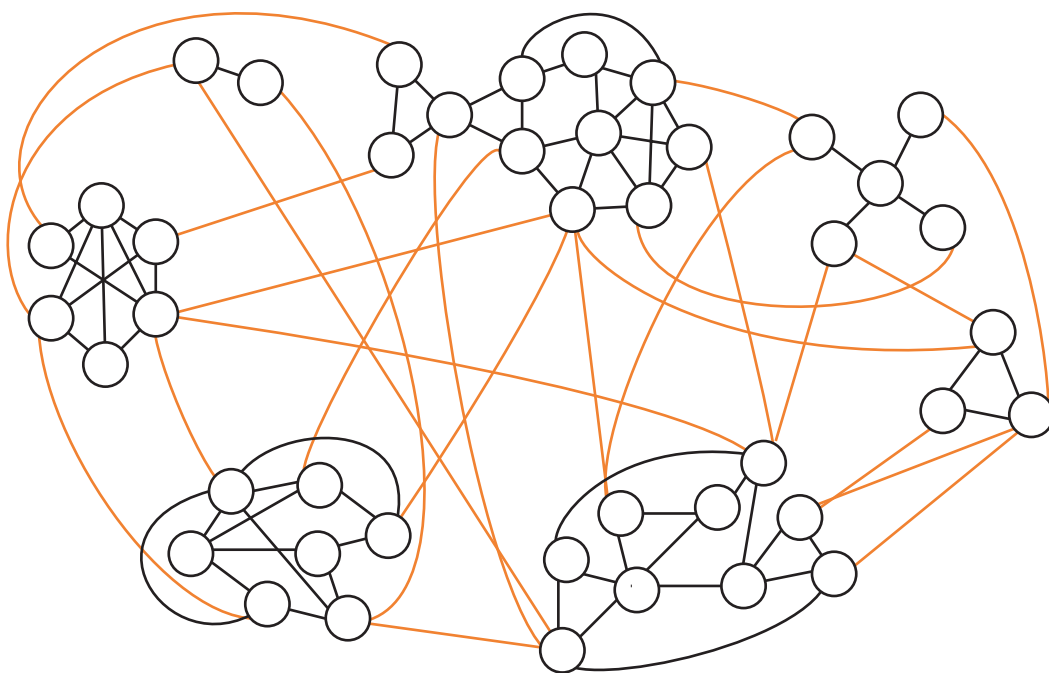


Figure 2. A modern social network. Long-distance contacts are prevalent, and they make the task of finding a short path from any person to anyone else much easier.

the ideas of the diaspora to influence the policies and discourse in the homeland. From an abstract point of view, communication in a diaspora can be compared to the communication in a particular research field, as both networks have the same underlying topology. New ideas in a research field are spread quickly; and for whatever reason, the opinions of some researchers are heard louder than others. Both of these statements hold true for a diaspora as well, even more so, since the members of a diaspora are fighting for legitimacy.

Beyond reshaping social networks, technology is empowering transnationalism in other ways. Since the Kurdish people have never had a state of their own, a standardized Kurdish language has not had the opportunity to develop. In recent years, the number of Kurdish websites has grown rapidly. Everything from journalistic and scholarly articles to Kurdish music, political propaganda, news and banned books are now online, available for anyone to download. Interestingly, the spread of Kurdish writings on the internet will probably lead to a standardized Kurdish language. In this way, technology has decentralized most aspects of the nationalism movement. Nationalism no longer needs to be local, the internet in particular allows anyone with a desire to participate to do so, regardless of their physical location.

3. Effects of the diaspora

Thus far, I have presented views on the formation of a diaspora, why diaspora communities exist and how diaspora communities are able to function so effectively. In this section I will discuss the possible effects of nationalism in the diaspora by examining the Kurdish example.

3.1. Influence on the homeland

Given the highly interconnectedness of the world as I outlined above, it should come as no surprise that diaspora communities have an enormous impact on the discourse and policies of the homeland. This has certainly been the case with the Kurdish diaspora.

A Kurd in the diaspora participates in the national discourse by utilizing technology. He may write emails, post on websites or even broadcast an internet radio show. He helps create the nationalist discourse; he's a virtual player in a deadly game. Diaspora communities do not face the same dangers as the homeland community, so the two groups develop differing agendas. Jolle Demmers notes that the homeland groups will likely experience fear, hunger, pain and stress, as they are physically involved in the conflict. Meanwhile, the diaspora groups probably feel anger, frustration or alienation [5]. This difference will affect the attitudes of both groups. Thus, the goals of the two groups differ, but are kept congruent due to the high degree of communication between them. In this way,

the homeland community is “bullied” by the diaspora community. After all, it’s easier to push extreme ideals when your safety can’t be threatened because of those ideals.

As diaspora communities are free from immediate dangers, they face no consequences for their actions. Rather, they can’t see the consequences in terms of immediate violence or action. The consequences of developing the long-distance nationalism are felt in the actions of the host countries towards the diaspora.

3.2. Influence on the host states

Beyond influencing the politics of the homeland, diaspora communities also affect the policies of their host countries. To examine this phenomenon, I will discuss the Kurdish presence in Germany.

A bilateral agreement between Germany and Turkey in 1961 sparked the first influx of Kurds from Turkey into Germany. While it’s difficult to estimate the exact number of Kurdish people living in Germany, Lyon and Ucarer state that around 500,000 Kurds could be mobilized within Germany [10]. The Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan or Kurdistan Workers Party is a group for an independent Kurdistan that was founded in 1978. While the PKK has launched several attacks in Turkey, they have found little success within the border’s of their traditional homeland. The Turkish government responded to the PKK’s efforts of mobilization with brutal procedures, however Germany was founded on the principles of a liberal democracy. As such, the PKK began to organize within Germany in the early 1980s, bringing a Kurdish separatist movement to Germany.

From the early 80s to 1993, the PKK influenced the German discourse by bringing every example of conflict within Turkey to the attention of the German public. The PKK would stage protest demonstrations, organize hunger strikes, hold large-scale demonstrations and even engage in highway blocks. The PKK was initially successful in gaining sympathy for their cause, however in 1993 the PKK was banned within Germany. The ban was the result of the violent practices of the PKK. The German authorities initially used their legal system to bring justice to the PKK members who participated in violent acts, but in 1993 the Kurds occupied the Turkish Consulate in Munich and took several hostages. Less than six months later, the PKK attacked several Turkish-owned business and the German authorities banned the organization outright. Naturally, the ban on the PKK did little to stop their violent actions, PKK initiated conflict actually increased in the three years after the ban. Banning the PKK forced the issue more, a Kurd within Germany was then forced to confront his Kurdish identity.

The Kurdish diaspora in Germany illustrates the effects a diaspora community can have on its host nation. First, the internal policies of Germany have changed due to the Kurdish activities there. But the German Kurds have influenced world politics as well, putting a strain on the relationship between

Germany and Turkey. Often, a major goal of diaspora communities is to influence the politics in their host country. For instance, American Jews in the early 20th century pushed the American government to support an independent Jewish state. By gaining sympathy, diaspora groups can gain influence over the policies of their host states.

4. Conclusion

By examining the formation and effects of the current Kurdish diaspora, I first illustrated how a situation can create a diaspora. Due to the nation-building policies of the states governing the Kurdish people's traditional homeland, the Kurdish people have been scattered throughout the world. I feel that diaspora communities are a result of a differing nationalism; after all, "state nation-building is almost always connected to minority nation-destroying" [9].

While the nation-building practices of states scatter people across the world, the spread of a single ethnicity isn't enough to create a diaspora community. I believe that the exiled people must believe that they cannot integrate into their new host nation. Secondly, the "deep resources" of the exiled people's ethnicity will form a bond between the exiles, and the desire for a homeland will lead them towards transnationalism. Finally, technology allows the scattered people to create a diaspora community. By making use of their social networks, the scattered people can find each other and unite. Without the contacts enabled by modern communication tools, diaspora groups would lose much of their power.

The emergence of diaspora groups has reshaped the way that nationalisms operate. Nation-states have not died yet, but they are no longer the only players in international politics. As people become more mobile, long-distance nationalism is only likely to increase. In the study of nationalism, transnationalism is a subject that can no longer be ignored.

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