Over the last decades, diasporas and transnational communities have progressively more become politically active. Fueled by the process of globalization, international migration has increased substantially. Building on established diaspora structures and capitalizing on the opportunities of an integrated world economy, many of the expanding communities have either already become established political actors or have a growing potential to exercise political influence in their respective host societies in the future. This development will have remarkable effects not only on the countries of residence, but also and arguably even more importantly on the homelands of diasporas and transnational communities as these groups increasingly exercise political influence in both spheres.

This lecture will give a broad overview over the process of political activation of diasporas and transnational communities. Firstly, it is going to clarify the term “diaspora” and will establish a working definition. The first question has to be: What is a diaspora? Secondly, the lecture will describe the growing importance of transnational communities in a globalized world: What makes diasporas so important right now? What connections are there between a rapid globalization and a perceived proliferation of transnational communities and groups? Why do they seem to become more and more important in a globalized world? Thirdly, the lecture is going to give a classification of different forms of political influence diasporas potentially command in both their host countries and homelands: How can diasporas exercise political influence? What resources can be activated by diasporic and transnational groups? What special features make diasporas attractive as political agents for their homelands? What problems might arise from this role? Fourthly, several case studies are going to illustrate the theoretical findings from different perspectives. The lecture will cover the Indian Americans as an example for a homeland-supporting diaspora and the Iranian exile community in the United States as a model for a regime change-advocating refugee group. Furthermore, the Sikhs and the Kurdish diaspora will be described as communities without a homeland in search for statehood. Additionally, the Tamil diaspora and its connections to the LTTE and the Sri Lankan civil war will be analyzed.
What is a Diaspora?

The term “diaspora” is derived from the Greek “dia speirein” which means “to scatter around” and refers generally to many forms of dispersion (Mayer 2005: 8). In ancient Greece, this had a positive meaning in the form of colonization and the conquest of far away coasts for the motherland, particularly during the archaic period from 800 to 600 B.C. (Cohen 1997: 2). However, the phrase soon became synonymous for captivity and suffering. The forced exile of the Jewish people, first in Babylon after 586 B.C., later all over the world after the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D., became the prime case for a diaspora community. Until the late twentieth century the very word “diaspora” was almost exclusively applied to the Jewish expatriate community. Hence, diaspora was connected to the experience of a loss of home and to the inability to find a way back. This was even further emphasized by the (Christian) interpretation of dispersal as a punishment by God himself for not obeying the rules of the Lord (Cohen 1996: 507). This is evident in a striking passage from the Old Testament:

“The Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the farthest parts of the earth to the ends thereof: and there thou shalt serve strange gods, which both thou art ignorant of and thy fathers, wood and stone. Neither shalt thou be quiet, even in those nations, nor shall there be any rest for the sole of thy foot. For the Lord will give thee a fearful heart, and languishing eyes, and a soul consumed with pensiveness: And thy life shall be as it were hanging before thee. Thou shalt fear night and day, neither shalt thou trust thy life.” (Deuteronomy 28, 64-66)

This interpretation of diaspora as punishment and suffering is one of the most prominent foundations of any attempt to understand the Jewish experience of life in a diaspora. However, the gradual dissociation of the term from the forced exile of the Jews opened up the opportunity to use the word to describe other migrant groups that reside away from their homeland. Particularly the African-American community began to link the experience of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade to the Jewish diaspora and began to use the word diaspora in reference to the African slaves that had been brought to the New World by force and their descendants. They found a powerful voice in the writings of Stuart Hall who in the 1980s explicitly demanded an “awareness of the black experience as a diaspora experience” (Hall 1996: 447, emphasis in original). Some
proponents of this view also connected to the idea of returning to an ideal homeland and applied the Hebrew “Zion” to Africa – rather than to Jerusalem as in the case of the Jewish diaspora.

These developments (among others) paved the way for a broader understanding of diaspora. One of the most important and fruitful attempts to re-define the term came in 1991 in the first issue of the journal “Diaspora” with William Safran’s groundbreaking article about “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”. Safran sees Diasporas as “expatriate minority communities” that are defined by six main characteristics:

1. A history of dispersal: Diasporas are dispersed from an original center to at least two “peripheral” places.
2. Myths and memories about the homeland: Diasporas keep a “memory, vision, or myth” about their original home.
3. Alienation in the host countries: Diasporas “believe they are not fully accepted” by their host country.
4. A desire for eventual return: Diasporas see their ancestral home as “a place of return” when the time is right.
5. Ongoing support for the homeland: Diasporas are committed to “maintenance or restoration” of their original homeland.
6. A collective identity shaped by the homeland: Diaspora consciousnesses are “importantly defined” by the relationship with the original homeland. (Safran 1991: 83-84)

With this definition Safran established a basic framework that served as a yardstick for all academic discussion since. Especially the criticism and controversy proved to be of great value for the field of “diaspora studies”. In particular, it was point four of Safran’s list (the desire for eventual return) that brought many dissenting arguments and has today been widely deleted from broad definitions of diasporas and, even broader, diasporic groups (Mayer 2005: 8-14). It is not only in this respect that the discourse has emancipated itself from the archetype of the Jewish diaspora. As James Clifford notes this “ideal type” does not work very well – a “sharp definition” apart from the Jewish diaspora, however, still seems to be very difficult to achieve (Clifford 1997: 289). The proliferation of expatriate groups in a more and more globalized world and the many self-acclaimed diasporas further complicate the matter and almost necessarily lead to
Robin Cohen describes the dilemma more than a decade later: “From the mid-1990s diaspora was chic and, it seemed, nearly everybody who was anybody wanted to be part of one” (Cohen 2008: 8). But obviously a simple rule applied and still applies: “Not everyone is a diaspora because they say they are” (Cohen 2008: 15).

Cohen’s highly influential book “Global Diasporas” (1997) brought new impetus to the discussion. He modified Safran’s list by bringing together two of the original points into one argument, amending two others, and adding four more features. Cohen’s definition of Diasporas hence includes nine main characteristics:

1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions: dispersal “often accompanied by the memory of a single traumatic event” or a “great historic injustice”.
2. Possibility of expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions: “scatter for aggressive or voluntarist reasons”.
3. A collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements.
4. A collective commitment to the homeland’s maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its very creation (completely “imagined homeland”).
5. The development of a return movement.
6. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time, based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and a believe in a common fate: “strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation”.
7. A troubled relationship with host societies, a (perceived) lack of acceptance.
8. A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members of the diaspora in other countries of settlement: “bonds of language, religion, culture and a sense of a common fate”.

For Cohen, these nine points form merely “fibers of the diasporic rope” – the more characteristics a certain group possesses the stronger their diaspora and their diasporic identity is (Cohen 1997: 179-187; Cohen 2008: 161-162). With this recourse to an earlier analogy by Wittgenstein, Cohen was able to establish a flexible framework of definition that allowed for an even broader understanding of diaspora. Now and in sharp
contrast to other definitions, a certain group did no longer have to fulfill all the
preconditions in order to fall under the category of “diaspora”. This creation of “weaker”
and “stronger” diasporas has been widely criticized, particularly with regard to the
resources and (economic and political) powers of a certain diaspora. When exactly is an
expatriate group a diaspora, when can it no longer be considered one? The great
inclusiveness of this approach is, at the same time, its most profound weakness. Even
more criticism was sparked by Cohen’s categories of diasporas. Cohen developed one
of the first systematic typology by distinguishing five different diaspora forms: victim
diaspora, labor diaspora, trade diaspora, imperial diaspora, and cultural diaspora

_Cohen’s typology of diasporas (1997)_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim Diaspora</th>
<th>Labor Diaspora</th>
<th>Trade Diaspora</th>
<th>Imperial Diaspora</th>
<th>Cultural Diaspora</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africans</td>
<td>Italians</td>
<td>Lebanese</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Diaspora</td>
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<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>Turks</td>
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<td>Portuguese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palestinians</td>
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<td>Irish</td>
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<td>French</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victims of</td>
<td>Indentured,</td>
<td>Networks of</td>
<td>Colonial and</td>
<td>Culture, ideas,</td>
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<tr>
<td>disasters and</td>
<td>contract and</td>
<td>trade and</td>
<td>military structures</td>
<td>religion, music</td>
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<tr>
<td>exile</td>
<td>guest workers</td>
<td>transportation</td>
<td></td>
<td>and life style</td>
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Although Cohen conceded the preliminary character of his typology (and made minor
adjustments in the 2008 second edition), he was criticized heavily. In one of the most
common arguments it has been noted that Cohen wrongly suggests clear-cut
boundaries between diasporic manifestations that are simply non-existent. Instead of
being marked by fixed classifications diasporas show themselves to be hybrid forms
that do typically not fit into Cohen’s typology (see Mayer 2005: 13). Although it must be
questioned whether the creation of a fixed and inflexible system of categories was
Cohen’s intention, the critics’ argument is valid. Parts of the Indian diaspora, for
instance, can be accurately described as labor diaspora while other parts do equally
accurately fit into the trade diaspora type. The same holds true for the Armenian
diaspora, which may be seen as a victim diaspora as well as a trade diaspora. The
Jewish diaspora has, after the creation of the state of Israel, even been portrayed as
fitting into all five categories. Robin Cohen himself has taken up this criticism by further

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clarifying what was his basic argument from the very beginning: “It is normal, indeed *expected*, that real diasporas will differ from their prototypical ideal types” (Cohen 2008: 17, emphasis in original).

As for the definition of diaspora itself, it might be argued that the addition of even more variables has been of limited value. Still, the scope of Cohen’s definition is rather broad and unspecific. One way to get to an acceptable and for practical purposes usable working definition might be the reduction of complexity and the concentration on vital points. Consequently, a definition used by **Kim D. Butler** in 2001 drastically reduced the explanatory factors to four points:

1. Diasporas must be dispersed to a minimum of two destinations.
2. There must be some relationship to an actual or imagined homeland.
3. There must be a self-awareness of the group’s diasporic identity.
4. The Diaspora has to exist for at least two generations. (Butler 2001: 192)

To this “checklist”, Butler added four dimensions of basic Diaspora research: Besides a deeper analysis of reasons for and conditions of dispersal or relocation there should also be a profound examination of a threefold relationship network diasporas usually command. This triad structure consists of relationships with the homeland, relationships with the host country, and interrelationships within the diaspora (Butler 2001: 194-209). For Butler, an exact understanding of this construction and the interdependencies between the three vertices homeland, host country, and diaspora was of prime importance. However, the approach was neither able to provide a binding guide for the use of the term “diaspora” nor to resolve the ongoing debates.

In 2005, **Rogers Brubaker** bundled much of the frustration and confusion into his critical essay about the “diaspora diaspora”. According to Brubaker, the very term itself has been dispersed into a state of diaspora. Because of its wide use it is scattered to all parts and all corners of society. This “diaspora explosion” has been characterized by different developments: First and foremost, the number of groups and communities that have been labeled a “diaspora” or call themselves a “diaspora” has increased dramatically. Additionally, the term has conquered the academic realm, widely used in almost all segments of literature, cultural, political, and social studies. Furthermore, “diaspora” has found its way into the non-academic world, particularly through media and popular culture – nowadays, one can read about such interesting things as a “handball diaspora” or a “diaper diaspora”. Finally, there are more and more new
usages of the word in different new combinations or neologisms such as “diasporization” or “diasporist” (Brubaker 2005: 2-4). These developments have made any scientific use of the term very problematic:

“The problem with this latitudinarian, ‘let-a-thousand-diasporas-bloom’ approach is that the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness. If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power – its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora.” (Brubaker 2005: 3)

A direct consequence of this problem is that Brubaker identifies only three generally agreed upon but rather vague characteristics of a diaspora:

1. Dispersion
2. Homeland orientation
3. Boundary maintenance (Brubaker 2005: 5-6)

The condition of dispersion has to be included into any attempt to define the term since it is part of the very foundation of the word, historically and linguistically. But Brubaker’s approach allows for intra-state diasporas – a dispersal to foreign countries is no longer necessarily required. The orientation towards an existing or imagined homeland is particularly important as a source of values, identity, and loyalty. The (sustained) alienation in host societies might be interpreted as both a forced and passive process (through, for instance, social and economic marginalization) or as a voluntary and active form of seclusion (through, for example, deliberate endogamy) (Brubaker 2005: 5-7). In all, however, such a minimalist definition framework has to be useless for all practical purposes, which is exactly where Brubaker’s criticism of the disproportional use of the term starts. His pleading for an application of the term “diaspora” based on the linguistic practice and without much analytic substance remains nevertheless dissatisfying (Brubaker 2005: 12).

The total reduction of complexity has not necessarily added to clarity of the term “diaspora”, while the over-determination of the word by including too many characteristics has also failed to generate a workable definition. A practical usable definition has to re-unify both positions in a pragmatic way. A suitable starting point could be Kim Butlers approach. The threefold relationship construction of diasporas that
Butler rightfully understands as a central field of academic interest and scholarly research may as well function as a prime definition of the phenomenon itself. In other words, while Butler constructs the multidimensional linkages after establishing a definition of the term “diaspora”, one might as well take this network structure as a first and primary definition for this very diaspora. Then, the heavy burden of controversy over terminology and over correct use of a historically overloaded expression may be laid aside. Thereby, one might re-open the discussion for a more pragmatic understanding of a diaspora that is constructed and defined not by the past but by the communication and exchange structures of the present. Therefore, this will be included as an essential point in the following working definition: Diasporas are expatriate communities that permanently reside in at least two host countries and constitute a minority there. They are characterized by an oftentimes idealized and mythical memory of an ancient, real or imagined, homeland. The experience-spheres of the diaspora are constructed out of a threefold communication and interaction network with the homeland, with the host society, and with other communities of the same diasporic identity.

Of course, this definition largely builds on preceding classifications. However, there are some points that are particularly emphasized. Since the diaspora is strongly characterized by the communication and exchange processes between different groups of this very diaspora it has to be present in at least two foreign regions just to allow for such structures. The experience-sphere in the host country is marked by a position of minority. A diasporic group in a country ceases to exist once it constitutes a majority there and practically incorporates the former host country into some sort of motherland. Therefore, the minority position has to by quantitative. It can also be qualitative in a way that the diaspora is marginalized, badly treated, or even oppressed by the host country – but this is not part of the definition. Here, a reference is made to Robin Cohen in allowing for fruitful and mutual enriching forms of living together. There is some evidence that suggests that such a positive note of diaspora is true for more communities than one might instantly think of which seems to be particularly applicable but not limited to Western liberal and plural societies.

Naturally, the relationship to a real or imagined homeland is of prime importance to the diaspora. Nonetheless, a desire for return or the establishment of a return movement is not included as a mandatory element in the working definition. There are many diasporic groups and communities that partly or totally lack a realistic drive towards returning to some sort of ancient home. In its scope, the definition is
designed to include many different forms of diasporic awareness. Exile and refugee groups, for instance, do qualify under certain conditions. The most important reservation is a **permanence clause** that is part of the definition. There seems to be a tendency in the academic realm to spread the term diaspora to refugees and people that are living in exile even without necessarily implying such a qualification (see Van hear 2004). In order to be recognized as a diaspora under the working definition, however, the settlement outside the home country has to measure in generations and decades, not years or even months. Hence, Palestinians do qualify as a diaspora under these conditions while the refugees from the Darfur region in Sudan that have crossed the borders into the Chad or the Central African Republic do not – yet.

The most important part of the working definition is the special emphasis on the threefold **network structure** of a diaspora. In order to create a diasporic awareness and identity a local community needs three different spheres of diasporic experience and exchange. Firstly, the collective memory of an oftentimes idealized and mythical homeland constitutes the sphere of origin without which no diaspora can exist. Secondly, the communication and interaction between a local community and other groups of the same diaporic origin and identity in other countries of residence secures not only a valuable exchange of knowledge and experience but also functions as a mutual re-affirmation of the diasporic identity. Third and finally, the residence sphere connects the local community to the host society. Only the interplay between all three of these experience spheres forms the historic, cultural, and social self perception of a diaspora and constitutes the diasporic identity (see Rösel 2000).

**Network structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Community</th>
<th>Homeland</th>
<th>Diaspora</th>
<th>Host Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other Communities</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Residence</strong></td>
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**The Growing Importance of Diasporas in a Globalized World**

Diasporas do not emerge at once – their creation, establishment, and maintenance is, in the words of the British historian Judith M. Brown, a “long-term business” (Brown 2007: 29). Nonetheless, the world has witnessed what seems to be a steady increase in the
number of diasporas and transnational communities. There seems to be a natural and obvious correlation between a more and more globalized world and diasporas that are able to make use of this transition. It is, however, hard to find real causal connections between the two phenomena. What is undisputed is that there is some sort of “affinity” between globalization and “diasporization”: “Globalization and diasporization are separate phenomena with no necessary causal connections, but they ‘go together’ extraordinarily well” (Cohen 2008: 154).

The process of globalization has had three crucial effects for the formation and maintenance of diasporas and diasporic communities. During the last decades, it has become substantially easier for diasporas to, firstly, emerge and to, secondly, be sustained over a long time. Additionally, diasporas have, thirdly, become more powerful vis-à-vis nation states that are struggling to maintain their traditional realms of political and economic influence.

First, the proliferation of diasporas: Over the last thirty to forty years the number of Diasporas and diasporic communities has increased considerably (Sheffer 2003: 113). This is of course, at least partly, a result of a greater willingness of academics and scholars to use the phrase “diaspora” to describe transnational expatriate groups. But it is also an objective development for which hard evidence can be found. Never before in history have we witnessed larger migration flows, never before in history have we seen more people living outside their country of birth. An important catalyst has been the process of decolonization and its consequences (Rösé 2000). New migration movements have been emerging, and a new self-awareness of a national, an ethnic or a social identity independent from colonial bonds and ties has created new communities, some of which became diasporic.

Even more important than this seem to be the practical consequences of a more integrated world. The first and foremost essential precondition for the proliferation of diasporas has to be seen in the new possibilities of cheap long-distance travel. Although it may sound somewhat trivial it is absolutely necessary to emphasize this development – there can be no over-appreciation for this. Technological advances have allowed for an affordable global system of mass transportation that has no precedent in history and that has been shaping new forms of international migration (Cohen 1997: 162-165). This has led to what some scholars mark the “democratization of diaspora” (Rösé 2000). Virtually everybody has at least some sort of opportunity, albeit a long shot for most of the world population, to travel to nearly anywhere on this planet. This “diaspora for everyone” has opened up prospects for much of the developing world.
At the same time, the new possibilities of global travel and transport have been accompanied by political changes with significant consequences (Cohen 1997: 162). The collapse of the Communist and Socialist world has, just like the process of decolonization, lifted many restrictions. Aspiring a new “democratic century”, numerous limitations in travel have disappeared. Some borders, for instance within the European Union, have become almost invisible (Sheffer 2003: 117). Nonetheless, a true borderless global society is not to be expected anytime soon. But even where there still are heavy restrictions on the movement of people, loopholes of, for instance, family reunification have provided for enough room to sustain diasporas or even create new ones. Additionally, illegal migration represents an ever-increasing problem that largely remains out of control. To sum up the argument, increased transnational migration because of more possibilities and less restrictions has led to a proliferation of diasporas.

Second, the maintenance of diasporas: The utilization of diasporic resources and the preservation of diasporic identities depend on the effective implementation of the network structure that has been described before. The threefold communication and interaction system between a diaspora and its homeland, its host society, and other communities of that diaspora is vital to its continuance. Here, the development of “transnational technology” has facilitated the maintenance of Diasporas enormously (Wong 2005: 50). Especially the Internet revolution and the new forms of electronic communication such as e-Mail and chat rooms have made it easy for members of a Diaspora to stay in connection with the different parts of the network. Also, the sheer capabilities for creating and sustaining such systems of communication have improved drastically, as the following example illustrates: A single Scotsman named Mark Devlin has built up a network of English-speaking foreigners in Tokyo. He started by publishing a magazine targeted at the British expatriate community, but the real catalyst has been the establishment of an Internet portal in order to connect different community members with each other. Now, Devlin has almost single-handedly created a social network of about 100,000 “expats” – all by basically using a computer in an office room (Caryl 2006: 66). Such a development would have been unthinkable a mere fifteen years ago – and, although definitely a remarkable feat, it has become a regular part of diaspora communication in a globalized world. Also, the relationship between diaspora members and their homeland has profited substantially. Linkages, once established, can be sustained at virtually no cost. The forerunner has been “Bollystan” (the global Indian community), which should come as no surprise, given the IT-expertise of the very important Indian “dotcom diaspora”. The network “sulekha.com” is a prime example of
how Diaspora members can, at the same time, form a network within their own community and establish deeper relations to their homeland.

A quotation from Donald M. Nonini condenses the first two points (it has become substantially easier for diasporas to emerge and to survive):

“The heightened velocity of movement of people, goods, and capital and the increased robustness of the sociotechnological infrastructures of globalization in large part explain why it is that some contemporary diasporic groups have been able to rapidly extend within a few decades beyond transnational social networks of migrants moving between homeland and host societies toward the formation of more formalized and permanent diasporic institutions that span both homelands and host societies – […]” (Nonini 2004: 565)

Nonini’s observation directly leads to the final point of effects that globalization has had and continues to have on diasporas – third, the new power of diasporas: The process of globalization has led to a phenomenon that might best be described as “deterritorialization” (Cohen 1997: 157-156). The classic notion of the modern nation state as the sole source of power has ceased to exist. In fact, we are probably witnessing a retreat of the nation state as a viable concept of organization at least in the economic world. The integrated world economy has left multi- and transnational actors in a very powerful position vis-à-vis nation states and their governments. A rapid acceleration of movements of people, goods, and capital at ever decreasing costs across what is left of borders has empowered not only multinational corporations but also diasporas which, by the way, in some respects bear an astonishing resemblance to global economic actors. Especially the virtually unrestricted flow of capital has given diasporas and diasporic communities a potent tool to exercise a new influence: Taxes and remittances both play vital roles in a trend that has been dubbed as “institutional shopping” (Rösel 2000). There are numerous mobility and withdrawal options that a diasporic group may find helpful in order to find arrangements with host societies that are mutually beneficial. In other words, particularly large and affluent diasporas possess a formidable instrument to “blackmail” nation states and set conditions for their economic endeavors and entrepreneurships. Traditional duties of loyalty to the country of residence do, if at all, only to a certain limited extent apply to diasporas. In any case, they do not form any constraint to a rather instrumental interpretation of a nation state (Cohen 1996: 517-520). In the competition between different loyalties the diasporic
identity offers many advantages, especially among first-generation migrants, which a
nation state simply cannot deliver:

“Bonds of language, religion, culture and a sense of a common history and
perhaps a common fate impregnate a diasporic relationship and give to it an
affective, intimate quality that formal citizenship or even long settlement
frequently lack.” (Cohen 2008: 173)

Of course, the influence of different diasporas and transnational communities varies to a
enormous degree. But as a general trend, diasporas have amassed more influence,
leverage, and power. An important reason is that, particularly in comparison to nation
states, they have proved to be very adjustable to the challenges of globalization:

“Deterritorialized, multilingual and capable of bridging the gap between global
and local tendencies, diasporas are able to take advantage of the economic and
cultural opportunities on offer. Globalization has enhanced the practical,
economic and affective roles of diasporas, showing them to be particularly
adaptive forms of social organization. As diasporas become more integrated into
global cities, their power and importance are enhanced.” (Cohen 2008: 155)

Diasporas and Political Power

Given their enhanced status in a globalized world, it should not be surprising that many
diasporas seek to translate that improved position into political power and influence. In
fact, their potential to accumulate “political capital” (Wong 2005: 49) is even magnified
by the rapid pace of technological innovations which diasporas tend to utilize better than
other political actors. There seems to be a trend that the possibilities to “cash in” on the
opportunities of political participation of diasporas are more and more met by an
increasing willingness of the transnational communities to actually do so. Diasporas are
becoming true “interactive forces in the shaping of world politics” (Wong 2005: 51).
From a different perspective, political involvement in the country of residence may also
be seen as an important indicator for the full establishment of diaspora in that particular
host society. In a simple phase model three stages are identified: After the creation of a
socio-economic base (first) and the integration into the public sphere of the host society
(second) the political activation and empowerment marks the third and final step (Brown 2007: 173-174).

**Political influence of diasporas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host Country</th>
<th>Homeland</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>direct</td>
<td>indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote (if eligible)</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run (if eligible)</td>
<td>Agenda setting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct action</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lobbying</td>
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There are many different ways of how diasporas and diasporic communities can flex their political muscles. As for the host country, the most obvious and “natural” form of direct political participation (at least from a Western democratic point of view) is to take part in elections. However, the right to partake in a ballot oftentimes depends on the citizenship in the host country, which has to be obtained before one becomes eligible to cast a vote. Hence, more often than not only small parts of diasporas and diasporic groups are actually entitled to vote, especially among newer diaspora communities of the first generation. Nevertheless, once attained, the right to vote in the host country can prove to be a valuable political resource. This holds particularly true if the diasporic community constitutes a relatively large and locally concentrated electorate – a feature that has, for instance, helped the Cuban-Americans in the United States to maximize their relative political impact in the southern part of Florida. They play an “outsise role” (Rieff 2008) – because of the interplay between residence and voting discipline their relative political impact exceeds their absolute number. Patterns of settlement play a crucial role. Mechanism such as chain migration can work to the advantage of the diaspora if they result in the formation of a voting stronghold in a certain area. A prominent recent example is the Swedish town of Södertälje near Stockholm. This town of 80,000 has witnessed the influx of thousands of Christian immigrants from the Middle East, particularly from war-torn Iraq, which has sent more than 2,000 refugees to Södertälje within the last two years. In all, Södertälje alone has received more Iraqi refugees than the United States and Canada combined. These migrants were quickly connecting to and integrating into a long-established Assyrian diaspora and are likely to form a potent voting block in the years to come once they are granted the right to partake in elections.
Still, there is one thing even better than being able to vote for the host nation’s candidates – to have own candidates running for office in the host country. Just like the procedure of voting this clings on the question of eligibility. And just like the right to vote this can be a powerful source of influence. The Indian diaspora, for example, has been very successful in this respect: PIO (People of Indian Origin) have served as Presidents and heads of government in as many as five countries other than India – Guyana, Singapore, Mauritius, New Zealand, and Fiji. Piyush “Bobby” Jindal, a second generation Indian American, has been elected governor of Louisiana in 2007, the first PIO to hold such a high-ranking office in the United States. Politicians of Indian origin have also been successful running for high positions in Canada, Great Britain, and South Africa. Out of a mere 60,000 member-strong Indian diaspora in Germany, two PIO have been elected to the German Bundestag (Sebastian Edathy, SPD, and Josef Winkler, Greens), a remarkable over-representation of this rather small group.

Given the difficulties that often accompany the quest for citizen rights in the host nation and the unwillingness of many expatriates to give up their citizenship of the homeland (which oftentimes is cherished as an important symbolic connection to the country of origin), many diasporas have to rely on indirect ways of political influence. Most common are attempts to educate politicians and the broad public about political issues of interest to the diaspora or its homeland through interest groups, lobby organizations, or cultural association. This can range from publications and mailing campaigns to advertisements and media operations. Here, the utilization of the Internet and its vast possibilities play an important role. By these and other means, diasporas can have some impact on the political discussion in the host nation and thereby work as an agenda-setting instrument. There have been spectacular media campaigns in order to shape the political agenda of a host society, most notably by transnational groups that try to gain attention to the problems of their homelands. A recent example is the worldwide Georgian diaspora which during the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008 was vigorously calling for support and help from the Western nations. Organizations such as the Georgian Student Association in the United States were trying to put the issue high on the agenda demanding swift action on part of the U.S. government. Burmese refugees in Thailand have repeatedly been calling out to local and international politicians to take action to better the situation of the 140,000 inhabitants of the refugee camps along the Burmese-Thai border and, in the long run, the create the necessary conditions for them to return home. In contrast to the Georgian diaspora, which was gathering support for the government of their homeland, most of the
Burmese refugees worldwide are calling for a regime change in their country of origin. This is evident for most exile groups. Another case in point is the very active **Tibetan diaspora** that tries to create awareness for their grievances in numerous countries. They found a spectacular stage for their protests in the months before the Olympic Games in Beijing. Here, the function of agenda-setting has been quite successfully combined with efforts of direct action. Tibetan activists were disturbing and even partially halting the prestigious event of the Olympic torch relay, thereby gathering huge media coverage and much public attention which in turn made it substantially easier to communicate political aims.

Generally, it is not uncommon to take **direct action** in order to further political causes in the host nation. An overwhelming majority of such actions are non-violent and, for the most part, completely harmless, such as demonstrations, sit-ins or the like. In the 1980s, **South African exile groups**, for instance, managed to bring worldwide attention to the intolerable crime of Apartheid in their home country through demonstrations and media-affine activities. Until today, peaceful mass protests have proved to be a valuable and often-used instrument to articulate political claims. To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the fact, that this constitutes a credible and widely accepted form of political involvement, at least in the Western democracies. Often-cited examples are the demonstrations of parts of the **Muslim diaspora** in the wake of the controversy surrounding the Mohammed cartoons in 2006. Some of the largest protests took place not in the Islamic world, but in London, Paris, and Rome. While these demonstrations were mostly peaceful, direct action can also mean violence, crime and terrorism as is evident in what some scholars call the **“Jihadist diaspora”** (Atran 2005: 9). This small segment of the Muslim diaspora has resorted to terror strikes in order to pursue a somewhat nebulous agenda. In this respect, the train-bombing attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005 come to mind. Sadly, especially the Madrid case did indeed have a lot of political significance as the conservative government of Spain lost its power in the following general election because of its poor handling of the terror attacks, a probably unintended but still effective result of the direct action of the “Jihadist diaspora.” As a consequence of the change in government, Spain pulled its troops out of Iraq, ending its military engagement in that region. Although cynics immediately expected more such actions encouraged by the eventual outcome of the Madrid train bombings, no comparable attacks have hit Western Europe (yet).

However, it must be a prime focus of political analysts and security experts to describe,
explain, understand, and, ideally, predict the diasporic structures that further and foster terrorism and violence.

**Funding efforts** and campaign finance can also be usable instrument of political empowerment, but only in countries that allow for such measurements. The United States of America serve as a prime example. Large contributions to electoral campaigns can guarantee access to important and influential politicians after they have been elected to office. Particularly very affluent diasporic communities like the **Korean**, the **Chinese** or the **Indian diaspora** can find a powerful political instrument in their “cheque-writing abilities”. There are many more ways of possible **lobby efforts** that may be used by diasporas depending on the legal opportunities in and the political attitudes of the host country. On of the most common forms of participation are hearings in the legislative process. Many countries offer the opportunity to bring in different outside views at one point during legislation. Before committees, diaspora delegates or professional lobbyists might be able to testify, bringing in their expertise and specific knowledge (for instance about their region of origin or certain religious matters), thereby helping to formulate law proposals or even shape political agendas.

Just as diasporas may aim at shaping the politics of the host nation they might likewise take part in the politics of their homeland. Here, many of the same techniques and ways of influence apply. **Voting** in elections is a common feature, especially through absentee ballots that have been used much more frequently than in the past. An important explanatory factor for this is, of course, that it has become significantly easier to follow (and influence) the politics of the homeland via electronic communication, the Internet, and satellite TV:

> “The ability of diasporas to actively participate and intervene in the politics of the homeland has been greatly enhanced and facilitated by the spectacular development of global media and communication technologies.” (Werbner 2000: 6)

Some governments have introduced new laws in order to grant their diasporic communities the right to vote. In 2006, the conservative government of Italy lead by Silvio Berlusconi introduced a law that allows Italian expatriates to take part in the general election, hoping that their votes would favor the governing coalition. But the majority of the 2.6 million strong part of the **Italian diaspora** that was now able to cast their votes for the first time chose Berlusconi’s opponent, Romano Prodi. In fact, the vote of the diaspora proved to be crucial for the overall result of the election and made
Prodi, not Berlusconi, the new Prime Minister – a rather paradox outcome of this electoral reform. However, two years later, Berlusconi was able to return to power. Many other countries provide opportunities to vote for their expatriate population, including Austria and Slovenia. Oftentimes, the votes of the diaspora are crucial to the overall result, as was the case in the general election in Slovenia in September 2008, when the 46,000 Slovenian voters abroad tipped the scales and handed the Social Democrats a narrow victory. Dominicans in the United States have been able to cast their votes for the president of the Dominican Republic for the second time in 2008. In the U.S. presidential elections on November 4, 2008, more than 100,000 Americans were eligible to vote in Germany alone. Apart from elections, diasporas may also partake in important political decisions of the homeland. For instance, in 2006 thousands of Montenegrin expatriates did cast their vote for the independence of Montenegro from Serbia. In any case, voting rights tend to be politically motivated – at the very least, there seems to be a certain expectation of the outcome of the diaspora vote. This may explain why the authoritarian government of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe virtually denies this right to the more than four million Zimbabwean expatriates, some of whom have been living in exile for decades. Members of the Zimbabwean diaspora can cast their vote in Zimbabwe only, which puts many if not most of the expatriates at the risk of being harassed, arrested, or even attacked. Hence, almost all Zimbabweans abroad have no choice but to abstain from voting. For the general election 2008, only 40,000 out of estimated three million Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa traveled to their homeland to cast their votes.

Although there are rarely cases of members of the diaspora running for office in their homeland, there may be some representation, be it the legislature or in the executive branch. The Italian diaspora nominates as many as six senators and twelve representatives to the parliament in Rome. In 2008, only the second time that Italian expatriates were able to vote, the diaspora witnessed hard-fought election campaigns over unbelievable distances. The electoral district won by Laura Garavini, for instance, included Western Europe, Russia, and Turkey. There are many more countries that have similar or comparable measures of representation. For example, the Croatian parliament reserves a certain quota of seats (depending on the voter turnout) for representatives of the Croatian diaspora. Likewise, the Colombian constitution offers a similar mechanism. Countries like India and Portugal have established councils and ministries in order to represent the expatriate population (Schiller 2004: 576-578).
Agenda setting in the homeland is used to a much lesser extend than in the host societies, partly because there is no particular need to create awareness for certain problems which the public in the home country is already aware of, and partly because of logistic difficulties. Still, it can be a valuable tool of political influence, but it is mostly limited to issues directly relevant to the diaspora itself like, for example, dual citizenship. Money as a political resource is of arguably even greater importance for the diaspora in respect to the homeland than it possibly can be in the host country. Direct investments from the diaspora in the homeland are a significant economic factor, especially in the developing world. Even more so, workers remittances constitute an oftentimes vital part of a homeland’s economic system. The economies of Mexico or the Philippines, for instance, are dependent on remittances. Both countries belong to the group of countries that receive the largest sums from their diaspora. For years, India has been at the top of that list. According to the World Bank, India received almost 27 billion US-Dollars from its overseas population in 2006 alone. This equates to 3.3 percent of the Indian gross domestic product. China is another important recipient of money transfers. Although the Chinese diaspora focuses on direct investments, the year 2006 saw the record sum of 22.5 billion US-Dollars in remittances go to China. Haiti receives just 2.5 billion US-Dollars per year from its diaspora, but this is more than the whole government budget. In Nicaragua, workers remittances almost equal the export revenues of the country. Because of the recent hyper-inflation in Zimbabwe, the large flows of remittances from South Africa are literally a matter of life and death for significant parts of the population. Even if it is not a matter of survival, only few governments can afford to lose parts of this money inflow which in turn gives the diaspora the opportunity to make their voice heard. Furthermore, the funding of political causes from the outside is a very common phenomenon. A prime illustration for this is the financial tapping of the Indian diaspora by the Hindu nationalist movement in India. Through the worldwide network of the Hidutva, political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that propose a strengthening of the Hindu character of India and, at least partly, denounce the separation of church and state, receive considerable financial support (Rajagopal 2004). This is just one form of what is often called “long-distance nationalism.” This at first glance contradictory and anachronistic combination of a, per definition, transnational and de-territorialized diaspora supporting the creation or maintenance of a nation state has gained momentum over the last decade:
We have entered a second age of long-distance nationalism and transnational nation-state formation. [...] Today’s current mass dispersal of migrants and the availability of rapid communications including mobile telephones, Internet, satellite television, and electronic money transfers facilitate efforts to organize social movements around a homeland from afar.” (Schiller 2004: 573)

In its most severe form, this “nationalism from abroad” leads to a call for action instead of a settlement by arguments. Unfortunately, the backing of direct action all too often translates into a support of violence, terrorism or warfare. Infamous examples include the Irish diaspora’s support of the IRA, the funding of separatist movements by both the Greek and the Cypriot diaspora, or the fueling of the Israel-Palestine conflict by diasporic extremists on both sides (Werbner 2000: 6).

In all, there are numerous ways to exercise political influence for Diasporas or diasporic communities both in their host countries and in their homeland. Diasporas can work as an agent abroad and further the foreign policy of their former home. This is a prime reason why many governments and “sending societies” now encourage political participation of their expatriate and diasporic communities. However, Diasporas are not necessarily employed easily to foster the interest of the homeland. In fact, the diasporic groups may as well pursue totally different aims, as some of the case studies will illustrate.

Case Studies

As being extensively described before, the relationship between an expatriate community and its homeland, be it real or “just” imagined, constitutes an essential part of a diaspora’s identity, its self-awareness and inner cohesion. Naturally, this process of constant self-assurance of a diasporic group should become easier if there is an actual, real homeland that can be pointed to. However, it may also be the case that the real homeland lacks certain qualities an imagined and, thereby, idealized “ancient home” would have. Hence, the relations between a diaspora and its homeland are not necessarily unconditionally supportive. In fact, the backing of a homeland government’s political course and the furtherance of its foreign policy is rather the exception than the rule. All too often, the diaspora has special interests or might even be internally divided over certain issues. Thus, there is a wide range of possible political relationships.
between a diasporic community and its homeland. The diaspora may be supportive, as will be described in the case of the Indian American community that is working hard to, for instance, improve Indo-U.S.-relations. However, it may also be in opposition to the politics of the homeland or even in opposition to the homeland’s government or its political and societal system. Indeed, a diaspora may actively pursue a regime change in the home country, as illustrated by the example of the Iranian exile community in the United States.

Diasporas can define themselves by a connection to a homeland even if that home does not exist. The homeland may be lost, destroyed, occupied or completely imagined – the circumstances of the real or imagined loss do not matter for the identity of the diasporic group. Some diaspora communities, however, might devote themselves to the restoration or creation of a homeland currently non-existent. This is particularly true for refugee and exile groups that have been expelled from a homeland which has ceased to exist in its original form. The most cited and, at least to date, only example for a successful and complete restoration of such an ancient home is the Jewish diaspora that has re-created the state of Israel. Other diasporic groups seek to re-establish autonomy for former self-governing but now dependent and non-sovereign nation states. Historically, the creation of a complete new homeland modeled after an imagined representation has proved to be rather improbable. Nonetheless, two of the case studies presented here are trying to accomplish just this. While the Sikh diaspora attempts to, in their view, re-establish the homeland of Khalistan, the Kurds try to find a permanent and secure home in a nation state of Kurdistan for the first time in history.

Another

The Indian American Community
The Indian American community is a brilliant example for a political active diaspora group since it combines almost all of the theoretical ways of political influence. It is active in regard to both the host nation, the United States, and the homeland, India. Constituting a population of more than two million, the Indian American community has developed into a political force that is of prime importance for the Indo-U.S. relations. The nuclear deal between the two governments in 2006 and particularly its completion and ratification in 2008 would have been unthinkable if it was not for the supporting role of the Indian diaspora in the United States. In the words of the former Indian minister of External Affairs, Yashwant Sinha, Indian Americans are “extremely important sources of support for the Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence
and respect they command” (Mohan 2003). An Indian government report finds: “For the first time, India has a constituency in the US with real influence and status. The Indian community in the United States constitutes an invaluable asset in strengthening India’s relationship with the world’s only superpower.” (Singhvi 2001: xx).

There are many different avenues of political power the community has utilized: Regarding the United States, the Indian American community is actively participating in elections. A stunning number of up to 90 per cent of registered Indian American voters do actually cast their vote on election day, which should make the community a influential voting block. However, there are two major limitations: First, only relatively few members of the community are eligible to vote. A large portion of the Indian diaspora in the United States just came to the country within the last twenty years and has not yet obtained U.S. citizenship. Second, the community is geographically dispersed. Although there are certain regional concentrations in New York City, Chicago, Detroit, or Houston, the settlement pattern of Indian Americans resembles the average American population to an astonishing degree. While not yet a viable voting bloc, the community has had some success with Indian American candidates. The prime example, of course, is Piyush “Bobby” Jindal, who after serving a term in the House of Representatives was elected to the office of Governor of Louisiana in 2007, the first Indian American in such a high political position (Gottschlich 2008).

The Indian American community is also very active in the field of information. This involves general public education about topics pertaining the Indian diaspora or India which is done by organizations such as the Indian American Forum for Political Education (IAFPE) through publications and cultural festivals. Probably even more important is the education of institutions, politicians, and decision-makers. Here, the community has been able to establish a Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans which serves as a valuable platform to exchange information between Congress and the Indian diaspora. Through this meeting point, specific political, cultural, or professional organizations like, for instance, the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (AAPI) or the group Indus Entrepreneurs gain access to decision-makers and can use the caucus as a discussion forum that can help put problems and issues on the political agenda of Congress. Additionally, annual conferences organized by Indian American lobby groups such as the Indian American Friendship Council regularly invite important members of Congress through the caucus and offer both a platform for political talks and an opportunity for agenda setting.
Reluctantly, the Indian diaspora in the United States has also begun to employ its arguably biggest resource – money. The Indian American community has the highest income of any ethnic group in the U.S. and is now trying to translate this financial potential into political influence. Organizations like the US India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) help to channel campaign donations and to assure the impact of the Indian American contribution. In the 2002-2004 election cycle alone, the Indian American population has donated 16 to 18 million US-Dollars to election campaigns, thereby securing lasting avenues of influence. Naturally, Indian American candidates were among the top recipients of financial assistance. The aforementioned Bobby Jindal, for instance, was able to collect more than two million US-Dollars from members of the Indian American community for his 2004 Congressional campaign in Louisiana. Apart from this, the community also utilizes other lobby efforts and ways of influence. The Indian American Center for Political Awareness (IACPA), for example, has installed the “Washington Leadership Program” (WLP) that offers Indian American student internships in offices of members of the House of Representatives and of the U.S.-Senate thereby strengthen and deepen the relationship between the community and lawmakers in Congress. As a source of political power, direct action is relatively unimportant to the community. Other than occasional demonstrations, mostly against discrimination, racist violence, and hate crimes, the Indian American population has hardly been involved in such activities (Gottschlich 2008).

Concerning India, Indian Americans have been indirectly participating in the homeland’s politics as well. A well-known example is the financial support the Hindu nationalist Hindutva movement and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have received from large parts of the Indian American community. Here, the diaspora has not only contributed and donated money for political campaigns but also for direct action such as missionary work, often disguised under the signature of development assistance. The Maryland-based organization India Development Relief Fund (IDRF) is a notorious and often cited case in point (Rajagopal 2004). Associations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) employ a different tactic. They openly call for a coercive domination of Hinduism in India. However, it should not go unnoticed that liberal segments of the Indian diaspora in the United States have actively supported the secular Congress Party before the 2004 general election in India and continue to do so. In any case, the Indian American community is very engaged in the politics of both, the host nation and the homeland.
“Tehrangeles”
The Iranian diaspora in the United States is a prime example of an expatriate community that, at least to a large extent, advocates regime change in their homeland. The exile group of about 500,000 is concentrated in and around Los Angeles, which led to the phrase “Therangeles” to describe the whole community (MacFarquhar 2006). Their ways of political involvement cover a vast range of the theoretical possibilities mentioned before. Information, education, agenda setting, funding, lobby efforts, and direct action in form of demonstrations have all been among the “tactics and tools” employed by the Iranian diaspora in the U.S. They have “supported their host government in denouncing their homeland government” and “lobbied for reforms […] in their homeland”. They have also “lent legitimacy to boycotts and have supported other activist measures taken by [the] host government or international organizations” against the oppressive regime in their homeland. They have “initiated propaganda campaigns and more subversive activities against the homeland government” (Sheffer 2003: 216). A part of “Therangeles” is involved in what is called “The Iran Democracy Project”. This task force has been founded by Prof. Abbas Milani of Stanford University, an exile Iranian, and is funded by Iranian-American businessmen. Their goal is to encourage “change from within” in Iran by lobbying the U.S. government to pursue a foreign policy of engagement rather than (military) confrontation. According to the project, the United States should support reform movement in Iran by establishing diplomatic relations and, most importantly, lift the economic sanctions so the mullah government cannot use them anymore as an excuse for their own economic and social failures (MacFarquhar 2006). It remains to be seen whether this form of political involvement by a diaspora will be successful.

The Sikh Diaspora
The Sikh Diaspora and its political engagement in a drive for an independent Sikh homeland of Khalistan have been profoundly shaped by the impact of a “traumatic event” (Tatla 1999: 196-208). This catastrophic moment in the history of the Sikh nation was the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the most sacred and holy place in the religion of Sikhism, by Indian armed forces in June 1984. Hundreds of Sikhs lost their lives, and in the subsequent chain of events, thousands more have been killed or forced into exile. This proved to be the triggering incident, firstly, for a militarization of a secession movement in India, secondly, for the formation of a Sikh diaspora.
independent and distinct from the larger South Asian or Indian diasporic communities, and, thirdly, for the mobilization of that diaspora in the fight for Khalistan.

The Sikhs constitute “a nation, a people, an ethnic group and a religious community” – a feature that is similar only to the Jews (Cohen 1997: 107). Most of them reside in the North Western Indian region of the Punjab. The Punjab used to be an independent kingdom but was incorporated into the British Empire and, after decolonization and independence in 1947, into the Indian Union. The new government’s refusal of an autonomous homeland for the Sikhs after the British left has caused feelings of being “misled” and betrayed among many of them – especially vis-à-vis a state of Pakistan that has been granted to the Muslim population of India. Hence, a secessionist movement within India was established. The expatriate community in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States also started to articulate the need for a Sikh homeland in the 1950s and 1960s. Some very optimistic members of the diaspora enthusiastically set up a consul-general’s office in Canada and began issuing passports and even money of a yet to be formed “Republic of Khalistan” (Cohen 1997: 111-113). However, the independence movement remained rather small until the tragic events of 1984.

The massive influx of refugees after the Golden Temple catastrophe not only enlarged but, more importantly, altered and transformed the Sikh diaspora. They emerged “as a distinct, visible, and identifiable diaspora, without the traditional association with other Indians” (Singh 1999: 293). Also, the “Khalistan movement” got new impetus, and the whole community found itself in a process of political mobilization in reaction to the events in the homeland. Generally, it is important to note that the Sikh diaspora mostly served as a mirror to political developments in the Punjab rather than being an active and initiating force on its own. Hence, while the diaspora community may well be seen as an instrument of “long distance nationalism”, it is only after 1984 that the expatriate community became a supporting, not a driving, force of Sikh nationalism (Singh 1999: 294-295, 297, 305). Nonetheless, “in the post-1984 era it is the Sikh diaspora that has spearheaded the international campaign for a separate Sikh state” (Singh 1999: 297). It did so through the formation of new organizations, which have since been vocal forces for the Sikh cause and active in the fields of information, education, and agenda setting in the host nations. Among the most prominent such associations are “The International Sikh Youth Federation” and, arguably even more importantly, “The Council of Khalistan/The Khalistan Council”. Both organizations have been founded in 1984, and both are especially active in North America and Great Britain.
This is not surprising considering that more than 80 per cent of the roughly one million expatriate Sikhs live in Canada, the United States, or Great Britain (Singh 1999: 299).

Besides the obvious and quite successful engagement in information and education, Sikhs have also been using measures of direct action. Here, the specter of terrorism has begun to haunt the community immediately after the events of 1984. On June 23, 1985, Canadian Sikh extremists placed a bomb aboard an Air India flight. In the crash of the plane, all 329 passengers and crew members died. While the terrorist attack gathered some attention to the problem of the Sikhs (although by far less than the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh bodyguards in the year before), it did cost the community a lot of credibility and political reputation. Consequently, the diaspora “desperately tried to distance themselves from terrorism” by denouncing violence, organizing peaceful demonstrations and resorting to non-violent forms of direct action (Cohen 1999: 114).

Today, the “Khalistan movement” is largely characterized by “material and moral” support for campaigns for an independent Sikh state. They nurture political associations in India and try to win influence for the Sikh cause through the support of political and peaceful direct action in the homeland (Tatla 1999: 209). However, there is no clear focus in the movement, there is a lack of leadership, and the Sikh claim has been harmed by rival factions both in India and in the Diaspora. Additionally, it might well be that “the Khalistanis […] may have boarded the historical train [of nation state-building] too late” (Cohen 1997: 126). Hence, the chances of creating a Sikh homeland appear to be rather slim, and even the fact that with Manmohan Singh a member of the Sikh community has become Prime Minister of India in 2004 might not necessarily be advantageous to such claims.

The Kurdish Diaspora

The Kurds are an unusual case since they represent a “diaspora within a country” in the respect that their imagined homeland of Kurdistan stretches over different states where the Kurds constitute ethnic minorities. These are mainly parts of South Eastern and Eastern Turkey, Northern Iraq, and North Western and Western Iran. Smaller sections of the Kurdish population live in Northern Syria, Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. So far, the Kurds have experienced a history of “violence, exile and displacement”, the narratives whereof constitute an important part of the Kurdish self-perception and the Kurdish identity (Houston 2004: 407). Strangely, it seems that the otherwise quite
oppressive Iranian regime is most lenient towards its Kurdish population. Iran is the only country where the area of Kurdish settlement is actually officially referred to as the province of “Kurdistan”. Before he was removed from power in 2003, Saddam Hussein used to repress the Kurds in Iraq in a brutal manner that included gross human rights violations, forced deportations, and mass killings. Right now, the Kurds have the opportunity to create a form of quasi-autonomous self-government in Northern Iraq. Independence, however, seems to be impossible at this moment. In Turkey, the Kurdish population has suffered and continues to suffer from mental, cultural, and physical suppression (Sheffer 2003: 406-408, 413). Not only has their history, language, and culture been marginalized and repressed by the Turkish government, but the terrorist actions of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) have led to increasing violence on both sides, the Turkish military and the Kurdish separatist. There have been severe human rights infringements: “Reliable sources suggest that in the years 1993 to 1999 up to three million people were forcibly expelled from their villages by the Turkish military in the war against the PKK […]” (Sheffer 2003: 405).

The political activities of the Kurdish diaspora aim at the creation of an independent Kurdistan or, if this cannot be obtained, at the greatest possible autonomy for the Kurdish minorities. Outside of the area of a “Kurdish homeland” stretching from Western Turkey into Iraq and Iran, the diaspora largely resides in the United States and in Western Europe, particularly in Germany (Sheffer 2003: 156). In all, there are approximately one million Kurds or people of Kurdish origin in Germany alone. They have come from all areas of “Kurdistan” including Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Among them are estimated 600,000 Kurds from Turkey.

A large part of the political work of the Kurdish diaspora aims at building awareness for their grievances through information and education. Thereby, the community also hopes to influence the political agenda of the host nations and to pressure the respective governments to act on behalf of the Kurdish population. This tactic has been particularly employed in the debate over a possible admission of Turkey into the European Union. The potential E.U.-membership of Turkey is the “key leverage” of lobbying for the Kurdish diaspora since it represents an issue the Turkish government cannot ignore and where the stakes are very high for Turkey (Bleis 2004: 329). However, information techniques are not only directed towards the host nation and its political elite. Maybe even more importantly, the radical wing of the Kurdish diaspora has generated a virtual information monopoly with regard to the Kurdish population in Turkey, thanks in large part to the TV station “Roj TV”. This Kurdish TV
DIASPORAS AND TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES AS POLITICAL ACTORS

channel reaches every single Kurdish household in Turkey via satellite and most often functions as a main if not sole source of information for most Kurds there. The attempt to set up a Kurdish network by the Turkish government to counter this information monopoly has largely failed, mostly for a perceived lack of authenticity. “Roj TV” remains the probably most trusted source of information among the Kurdish population in Turkey and elsewhere. Because of its radical contents, “Roj TV” has been prohibited by German authorities in 2008. Now, it broadcasts from Denmark, but most of its funding still comes from the Kurdish diaspora in Germany, marking a prime example of how intra-diaspora networks function over national boundaries. There are also numerous Kurdish newspapers in Germany, one of the most important being “Yeni Özgür Politika”. However, many if not most of these newspapers are mere propaganda instruments of the now banned PKK or its successor organization “Kongra Gel” (People’s Congress of Kurdistan) which has 1,000 members in the Berlin area alone and as many as 11,500 radical supporters in all of Germany. Although these figures are already causing concern, the fact that the number of quiet sympathizers of the more than sixty militant Kurdish organizations in Germany is very high is even more disturbing. This is evident in the thousands of people that participate in demonstrations for the Kurdish cause all over Germany. In December 2007 10,000 protesters showed up in Düsseldorf, in March 2008 16,000 demonstrated in Berlin, and in September 2008 40,000 rallied in Munich.

Not only because of the high numbers of supporters, direct action is a very useful strategy for the Kurds. Protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins are common. Regularly, parts of the Kurdish diaspora resort to violence in the host nations, particularly in Western Europe. In Germany, Turkish institutions have repeatedly become targets of violent attacks. In 1993, the Turkish consulate in Munich was stormed and devastated by a Kurdish mob. Turkish banks and travel agencies have been frequently attacked. There have been numerous clashes between Kurdish and Turkish militants, particularly in Berlin. The violent side of the Kurdish diaspora was also illustrated by the aggressive protests after the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, in 1999 (Sheffer 2003: 110). In fact, the PKK still has a large support base in Germany and is itself very active in this particular host country of the Kurdish Diaspora (Sheffer 2003: 221). There is a network of financial and material support for the PKK and its “direct action” in Turkey that is closely related to the realm of organized crime. Of course, this creates conflicts with German authorities and is not necessarily helpful to the Kurds’ political cause. From time to time, however, the diaspora may also take a
positive stand. When in 2008 three German mountain climbers were kidnapped by the PKK in Turkey, many Kurdish organizations in Germany called for their immediate release and actively lobbied for a peaceful solution of the crisis. Nonetheless, many of those voices did not go as far as to generally denounce the resort to violence by the PKK or questioned its legitimacy.

The Tamil Diaspora
The Tamil diaspora has, at least to a great extent, directly affected by the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. The conflict between a Sinhalese Buddhist majority and a Tamil Hindu minority has been raging for decades with tens of thousands dead. As a result, many Tamils have fled the country and migrated to various places. It is estimated that at least one in four Sri Lankan Tamils now lives outside of Sri Lanka (Sriskandarajah 2004: 493). According to the minimum and maximum of different estimates, the Tamil diaspora numbers between 700,000 and three million people (Radtke 2004: 250). It is dispersed all over the world. However, there is a strong tendency within the community to be concentrated in certain countries, regions, and cities, which is largely owed to the fact that most of the newly migrated Tamils seek the assistance of already existing social networks to establish themselves in the host country. Areas of such a strong local concentration of Sri Lankan Tamils include Canada (and here particularly Toronto with more than 70,000 Tamil inhabitants alone), Switzerland, or Denmark (Sriskandarajah 2004: 494). One of the largest communities that is very active in the politics of “long distance nationalism” resides in Norway – some of the Scandinavian states have been very attractive to the diaspora because of their rather lenient immigration laws in the 1980s when many refugees from Sri Lanka sought asylum (Fuglerud 1999).

Just as other diasporic groups, the Tamil diaspora is sharply defined by its relationship and, in this case more important, commitment to the homeland. Of course, the diaspora-homeland connection has been affected by the war and its consequences. Because information may be quite hard to get, expatriate Sri Lankan Tamils often do not have much choice in picking their sources of communication. This has been exploited by the LTTE (also known as “Tamil Tigers”), which has been able to play a dominating role in the process and in some aspects monopolize the flow of information between the Tamil diaspora and the homeland of Sri Lanka. The LTTE, which is fighting for an independent state of “Tamil Eelam” in the Northern and Western part of Sri Lanka and which is listed as a terror organization by many Western countries, has thereby succeeded in “politicizing” and mobilizing a large portion of the diaspora and in
recruiting them for a global support network to prop up their cause (Sriskandarajah 2004: 497). This system operates along some of the basic fault lines of political influence and mainly rests on three pillars:

First, publicity and propaganda: This relates to both the information and the agenda setting function in respect to the host societies. The LTTE network targets especially countries with large “Tamil expatriate communities”, for instance the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, or Australia. Here, “pressure groups” such as the Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils or the Norwegian Tamil Coordinating Committee are set up in order to employ the host country’s media and lead a “propaganda war”. Additionally, many organizations have their own newspapers, radio stations, and even TV channels (Radtke 2004: 253-254). The sometimes excessive use of the media is directed both at the parts of the Tamil diaspora not yet reached by the LTTE and its support system and, of course, at the host nation’s societies and governments in order to further the status of the Tamil separatist cause as a just and legitimate claim – this has been dubbed “playing the peace card” by some analysts (Chalk 1999).

Second, fundraising: Here, we find the funding of political causes and, in part, the support of direct action in the homeland. It is estimated that as much as 80 to 90 per cent of the LTTE’s financial resources come “from overseas”. The motivations for giving money to the LTTE vary greatly. While many older members of the Diaspora seem to fully believe in the “Tamil Tigers’” cause, new migrants may only pay in order to get access to the LTTE’s organizational structures that can help them get jobs and housing in the host country. In any case, there are extremes on both sides of the scale. While an unnamed wealthy medical practitioner in the United States is said to be willing to give 100,000 US-Dollar “at any given time” (he is believed to have committed more than four million US-Dollar to the LTTE’s cause so far), large portions of the Tamil Diaspora are rather involuntarily “taxed” by the “Tamil Tigers”: They have to pay so-called “contributions” of 1,000 US-Dollar per family – a tactic that has also be employed by terror groups like the ETA or the IRA to collect money from the Basque and Irish diasporas (Chalk 1999). Additionally, the LTTE has also been able to tap charity money donated by the Tamil diaspora for peaceful causes such as reconstruction and disaster relief. Oftentimes, these fund raisers are more or less openly hi-jacked by representatives of the LTTE who work with techniques of moral obligations by picking individuals out of the relative anonymity of the crowd and asking them directly to donate for the alleged cause of the event. For the most part, diaspora members have no choice
but to give money or, if they do not have cash with them, jewelry or other valuables. A similar strategy is employed by Tamil radio stations that publish lists with donors and publicly suggest donations by specific individuals who have not yet given, thereby creating a moral pressure that is hard to resist. Through these and other forms of a “moral economy” the LTTE has been able to collect huge sums even from those parts of the Tamil diaspora that do not eagerly embrace the LTTE’s cause (Radtke 2004: 254-257).

Third and finally, arms procurement: Of course, this a perfect example of the support of direct action, in this case terrorism and warfare, in the homeland. The LTTE has been able to build up a sophisticated and by now well-established network of arms trade. They use their own routes and connections and even employ an own fleet that allows them to operate under the radar of international arms control. Thereby, they secure a constant flow of arms and military technology, especially from China, North Korea, Myanmar (Burma), or the successor states of the former Soviet Union (Chalk 1999).

In sum, the Tamil diaspora’s support network has been crucial to the military success of the LTTE and proves to be a major obstacle to peace negotiations and attempts to find lasting solutions for the civil war in Sri Lanka. However, there is also a potential to help solving the conflict. If the diaspora activism can be directed towards processes of peace-building and reconstruction, there is some hope that the expatriate community can contribute to an end of violence (Sriskandarajah 2004: 498).

Conclusion

Diasporas already constitute highly influential political actors. The case studies, although only representing a very limited and narrow view of the overall phenomenon, have illustrated some of the vast opportunities that have opened up for diasporas and transnational communities and how certain groups have made use of them. As a summary of the overall argument, here are some conclusions in four thesis statements:

1. Diasporas will become even more important in the future. The ongoing “democratization of diaspora” caused by decreasing travel and communication costs will lead to a further proliferation of diasporic communities. There will be more, and they will be better organized and connected.
2. The position of diasporas vis-à-vis their host nations will be further strengthened, both economically and politically. The enhanced possibilities of “institutional shopping” by communities perfectly adapted to the challenges of the globalized world will promote their status and give them more influence.

3. At the same time, nation states will be increasingly able to rely on the support of their respective diasporas and expatriate population. Diasporas will become a prime player in bi- and multilateral relations. They will enhance and further the foreign policy and the interests of their homeland in exchange for more political rights such as dual citizenship and more political influence such as the eligibility to partake in elections in the homeland.

4. Diasporas will on a much greater scale exercise political influence in both, the host country and the homeland. Inexpensive and convenient global mass transportation and improved electronic communication will enable diasporas to make effective use of their political rights enhanced through measures of participation granted by both the host nation and the homeland.

References


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