Diaspora as Diplomats
Rethinking the Role of Transnational Communities in Shaping Non-State Armed Groups

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Abstract

How do non-state armed groups (NSAGs) engage with their diaspora networks? The literature on armed groups has long recognized the importance of "rebel diplomacy"—how armed groups conduct their international relations through peace agreements, negotiations, and political wings abroad. Rebel diplomacy is typically understood as a core component of rebel *governance*, and it focuses on the interactions between NSAGs and external actors such as states, international organizations, and NGOs. However, these activities are often considered in isolation from diaspora networks, which tend to be categorized as external, third-party actors. I argue that diaspora networks should be understood as a fundamental form of rebel diplomacy, and that this framework can help us better understand contemporary conflict dynamics. To develop this perspective, I categorize diaspora-NSAG engagement into three types: as providers of material assistance, supporters of ideology, and agents of peace. This shift in perspective challenges the portrayal of diaspora networks as unorganized or incidental to NSAG governance. I demonstrate the structured and strategic ways in which these transnational communities can shape the operations, resources, and international standing of the non-state armed groups they are connected to—for better or for worse.

Keywords: Non-state armed groups, Rebel diplomacy, Diaspora networks, Transnational politics

Introduction

Armed Groups and Rebel Diplomacy

Members of rebel groups often act as diplomats. In the shadow of conventional warfare, a neglected form of global diplomacy is challenging the norms of foreign policy: rebel diplomacy. These non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are not the unorganized and one-dimensional structures the international community might believe them to be,[1] but often strategic communicators wielding diplomacy as they seek statehood or legitimacy. Rebel diplomacy involves establishing international offices, cultivating media relationships, and dispatching political representatives abroad. These nonviolent tactics adopted by armed groups—which tend to be violent in nature—reimagine how political movements gain legitimacy in an interconnected world. From the Biafran secessionist rebels in Nigeria hiring Mark Press, a Geneva-based PR firm,[2] to Sikhs in India establishing the Council of Khalistan in 1987 to serve as their foreign policy arm,[3] armed groups employ a variety of organizational strategies to gain momentum and build solidarity. Understanding these diplomatic tactics is crucial for aid actors, scholars, and policymakers developing engagement strategies that bridge violent conflicts and increase NSAG compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL).

Bridget Coggins, who introduced the concept of rebel diplomacy in 2015, challenged the binary of violent versus nonviolent tactics.[4] Scholars have since recognized that rebel groups operate within a nuanced spectrum of strategic communication that defies traditional categorizations of non-state behavior. Much in the same way as states and de-facto authorities, rebel groups employ a "strategic use of talk,"[5] or diplomacy. Rebel groups tend to adopt state-like tactics such as professionalizing their external communications or creating alternative channels of international influence. Departing from the traditional monopoly of state-based diplomacy and

attempting "strategic social construction,"[6] armed groups are not seeking to change existing norms, but rather to be included in the group to which these norms apply.

Diplomacy is no longer a tool reserved for governments that set forth treaties, trade agreements, or alliances—all of which cannot be *formally* done by NSAGs.[7] Although armed groups often lack direct access to formal diplomatic channels with opposition state authorities or governments, they can still engage in a form of indirect diplomacy. This article is interested in the many ways in which rebel groups can practice this track-two diplomacy: foreign transactions, political wings abroad, meetings between representatives, propaganda, and beyond.

Further on the legality of this diplomacy, an armed group's cells or offices abroad, for example, are not official or legitimate in nature. There is debate on how these extensions of armed groups should be studied. Plundrich claims "it is impossible to speak of [rebel groups'] embassies or 'para-consulates' in the sense of substate actors and states rather than operational bases or secret cells."[8] Meanwhile, Huang claims that "To neglect these international dimensions of rebellion is to miss a critical component of how non-state entities conduct armed confrontations against their more formidable state opponents."[9] This article offers critical insights into NSAG dynamics and the ways in which they differ from states, without conferring political legitimacy or moral validation to the armed groups themselves.

The geographic reach of rebel diplomacy is varied and complex. For example, the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) operated a foreign headquarters, Eelam House, in London.[10] And if a NSAG cannot go abroad, forms of public diplomacy are more accessible now than ever—Benjamin Jones and Eleonora Mattiacci's quantitative analysis proves how a single rebel group in the Libyan civil war used Twitter as a public diplomacy tool, eventually leading to material support from the United States. [11] These strategies allow rebel groups to

leverage global norms and public opinion to moderate the conduct of their adversaries, even without traditional diplomatic recognition. These circumstances make the study of rebel diplomacy both crucial and complex.

There are several ways to address NSAGs in the literature. This article references rebel groups, armed groups, and NSAGs interchangeably—it is prioritized in understanding a group's relationship to its diplomatic tactics, rather than its different internal structures.

Diaspora Networks as External Support

"External supporters" play crucial roles in shaping the tactics and strategies of armed groups during conflict. Even groups with de facto authority, who may have the legal authority to participate in diplomacy, cannot meaningfully avail themselves of the legal or political privileges accorded to states without first receiving widespread support. While much of the literature focuses on "external supporters" such as states or other organizations providing resources to influence rebel groups' tactics, the role of diaspora communities has been overlooked in the context of rebel diplomacy. Diaspora networks, often deeply connected to conflict in their homeland, may have a unique and consequential influence on armed groups. Marina Petrova's quantitative study on the effects of diaspora support on the probability of an armed group switching to nonviolent tactics is one of the few explorations of this relationship.[12] However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the diverse and complex relationships between diaspora communities and armed groups. Why do diasporas support armed groups? Why are some armed groups more connected to their diaspora than others? What are the determinants and conditions of diaspora support?

Existing scholarship has treated rebel diplomatic activities as discrete phenomena, divorced from diaspora networks—typically cast as external observers. This framing neglects the dynamics of transnational political mobilization. Diaspora networks are not peripheral actors

but rather an engine of rebel diplomacy, providing critical infrastructure, financial resources, and international legitimacy that sustain these groups' global communications strategies. I argue that diaspora networks should be understood as a fundamental form of rebel diplomacy; the overseas activities and support structures that constitute what we typically call "rebel diplomacy" are, in fact, largely driven and sustained by members of the diaspora.

The concept of diaspora has been subject to scholarly debate for years. The term's origins can be traced back to the sixth century BC, when it was primarily applied to displaced Jewish people and often bore a negative connotation.[13] Grossman defines diaspora as "a transnational community [whose members] emigrated or were dispersed from their original homeland but remain oriented to it and preserve a group identity."[14] Shain and Barth define diaspora as "a people with a common origin who reside [outside] the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland."[15] The concept of a homeland is the throughline. Does it matter whether the diaspora's conception of a homeland is real, or a symbolic attribute? Khalistan, for example, is the Sikh homeland, however it is also a movement and can be thought of as an *imagined* homeland. Baser and Swaina argue that it doesn't matter—attachments to one's homeland are kept one way or the other.[16] Accounting for the diaspora's varied definitions, this article identifies diaspora as a group of individuals living outside their country of origin, typically in at least one host country, who maintain transnational ties to their homeland and their community. "Diaspora support" will refer to a member of a homeland affected by armed conflict, that has engaged or contacted an armed group in their homeland for purposes of support or meditation. In some cases, it also refers to former members of an armed group that have migrated yet maintain a connection.

In no way are diaspora communities homogenous—their creation occurs for different reasons, they have varied and complex relationships to their home countries, and some diaspora

members may not actively consider themselves as part of a diaspora. Nevertheless, their power lies not just in resources, but in their ability to translate lived experience into agency.

Roots, Rights, And Representation

While anthropological and sociological discourses of the diaspora focus on complex impacts on collective identity and nationalism, international relations scholarship is primarily focused on the State-diaspora relationship and its ramifications for international law. Traditional doctrines, such as the Draft Articles on Diplomatic Protection, are often state centric and disregard diaspora interests. Armed groups are not covered as the bearers of responsibilities for their diaspora, and the host state has a duty towards the home state under the rules of state responsibility. Larissa van den Herik says that diasporas are seen as objects of a State's interests: "international law is not neutral or agnostic to the existence of diasporas, and that it does entertain a specific posture."[17] This highlights a flaw at the heart of the IR discourse: does the relationship between non-state actors and diasporas differ with its dynamics and implications, despite adopting state-like tactics?

Diaspora networks become involved with conflict in their home countries for a variety of reasons. While some armed groups have no relationships with the diaspora of the state they inhabit, others have defined relationships with direct financiers or mediators. A common attributed reason is the notion of nationhood and consciousness. The incentive is driven by a desire to maintain the memory of their homeland and keep the emotional attachments of solidarity and kinship.[18] When a diaspora's homeland is affected by conflict, it is more likely to develop comprehensive networks based on solidarity to preserve identity abroad. Scholars link diaspora behavior to the notion of a secure homeland—"the idea of a potential return to the homeland is always there and that affords them a legitimate stake in the way they interfere with homeland policies."[19] Daub supports this view, and adds that geographical proximity also

makes support more likely, adding that a "conflict-driven migration background" is more of an indicator of support than a diaspora with economic reasons due to greater sympathy for rebel opposition for the incumbent government.[20] Demmers describes this long-distance involvement as a "virtual conflict," where diaspora communities live homeland conflicts through "the internet, email, television, and telephone without direct (physical) suffering, risks or accountability."[21] So although sociological scholarship has explored diaspora relationships with conflict in the homeland, there is a lack of understanding regarding their links to the non-state armed groups—despite the majority of armed conflict being non-international in nature.

The landscape of global conflict is transforming, and beyond scholarly contributions to the literature, this research is as timely as it is fascinating. There are over 450 armed groups of humanitarian concern across the world as of 2023, and at least 195 million people live in areas controlled by armed groups.[22] In this new geopolitical terrain, rebel groups are no longer just armed insurgents, but complex political actors navigating intricate pathways to legitimacy and change. From the political rise of Hezbollah to the fall of the Syrian government at the hands of rebel groups, ongoing conflict stresses the need for new pathways for engagement with armed groups.

This article proposes novel typologies of diaspora relationships with armed groups: as agents of peace, as providers of material assistance, and as supporters of ideology. The purpose of this research is to analyze the possible factors that sustain and develop diaspora involvement in armed groups, and more broadly in rebel diplomacy. By analyzing empirical cases with qualitative enquiry under a new categorical framework, this article provides a multilevel analysis that contributes to our understanding of armed conflict.

Diasporas as Providers of Material Assistance

Migrant remittances have become an indispensable component of national economies worldwide, with significant implications for economic stability and social development. The existing literature on remittances has long emphasized their power, highlighting their capacity to influence key social development indicators—housing, education, and healthcare—in ways that international development and humanitarian aid often cannot.[23] This impact is pronounced in the context of armed groups, where economic contributions from diaspora communities represent one of the most accessible and reliable forms of external support, frequently surpassing domestic civilian contributions.[24] Armed groups, recognizing this potential, devote extensive resources to securing and managing diaspora funding.[25]

The numbers tell a compelling story. At the height of their insurgency, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) received an estimated $1.5 million per month from the Tamil diaspora, which was dispersed across Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.[26] In the 1990s, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) relied heavily on financial support from Irish-Americans, in what became a textbook case of diaspora funding in the literature on NSAGs.[27] Organizations such as the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID) played a pivotal role in fundraising efforts, officially claiming to support the families of imprisoned Irish republicans.[28] However, critics accused NORAID of acting as a front for the IRA, channeling funds directly to the paramilitary group.

Why are diaspora communities effective at mobilizing resources? Diaspora members benefit from greater wealth and freedom of expression in economically prosperous countries. Their physical distance from a region under conflict also absolves them from immediate repercussions for supporting rebel causes. A detachment from the realities of war allows diaspora communities to frame conflicts through ideological or nationalist lenses, often

fostering a romanticized or uncompromising vision of the struggle. They can influence wars without witnessing their immediate consequences.[29]

This financial relationship introduces a complex dynamic. By accepting diaspora funding, rebel groups enter what political scientists call a principal-agent relationship. The diaspora acts as a principal by providing resources to the rebel group, the agent.[30] The rebel group, in accepting this support, enters an implicit contract with the diaspora, where the diaspora gains influence over the group's strategies and action as the rebel group may depend on continued diaspora backing to sustain its efforts. To maintain financial backing, rebel groups must navigate a delicate balance between their operational needs and the priorities of their benefactors, potentially recalibrating their actions to align with diaspora interests.

Yet, measuring the precise impact of these financial flows remains a challenge. Obtaining reliable data on diaspora funding is nearly impossible—few openly admit to financially supporting armed groups in their homeland.[31] A significant portion of financial transfers to conflict zones bypasses formal banking channels, with the hawala system playing a crucial role in regions like Afghanistan and Somalia.[32] The term "hawala," derived from the Arabic word "hawil," refers to a worldwide method of transferring money, widely utilized by migrant communities for remittances and business transactions. Hawala operates based on a network of trust, adhering to well-established yet informal rules.

Understanding when and why diaspora members fund armed groups complicates the common assumption that external financial support inevitably fuels greater violence. By examining these funding relationships through a principal-agent framework, a distinction emerges between voluntary and involuntary contributions—one that fundamentally shapes how diaspora support influences conflict dynamics.

Voluntary Vs. Involuntary Contributions

When diaspora funding flows voluntarily, it often reflects deeply held political convictions and communal ties. The U.S. government's designation of Al-Shabab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in the early 2000s made it more difficult for Somalis abroad to send money through formal financial institutions. As a result, some diaspora members resorted to a risky, yet effective method to circumvent these barriers and continue providing financial support to their homeland.[33] Somali diaspora physically transported suitcases filled with money, a practice which gained popularity as traditional remittance channels became more restricted. In 2015, members of the Somali diaspora remitted at least $1.3 billion to Somalia, accounting for approximately half of the country's gross national income and 80% of total investments.[34]

Financial backing from diaspora is not always a direct, individual effort. Through a complex web of NGO partnerships and strategic business investments, the Tamil diaspora channeled between $200-300 million each year to the LTTE,[35] while simultaneously facilitating critical weapons procurement networks through their international connections. Tamil households in Canada and the UK can donate up to $650 per year depending on the LTTE's immediate needs,[36] and in France, donations could reach as high as $2,728 per family.[37]

Not all diaspora funding is voluntary. The LTTE systematically mapped Tamil households in Canada and the UK, assessing family incomes and imposing "expected" monthly contributions.[38] They align with a standard baseline "tax," which is levied as a minimum contribution to the Tamil cause. Those who resisted often faced direct intimidation within their communities or, often, threats to their relatives back in Sri Lanka. Canada and Europe—both home to large, affluent Tamil expatriate populations—became primary targets for these efforts. Beyond these forced contributions, the LTTE also financed themselves through drug trafficking, credit card fraud, and other illicit financial schemes.[39]

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) offers another prominent example of coerced financial relationships. In the 1990s, the German government estimated that the PKK extracted between 30 and 50 million Deutsche Marks (DM) annually through a mix of donations and racketeering within the Kurdish community in Germany.[40] In Berlin alone, these collections exceeded DM 1.5 million per year.

Many first-generation Kurdish immigrants in Germany, particularly those who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, accumulated significant savings despite poor living conditions. Often coming from economically depressed regions of southeastern Turkey, they secured stable, middle-class wages through unionized labor, enabling them to invest in businesses and property. These savings became a crucial source of voluntary contributions to Kurdish organizations, allowing early migrants to wield influence within the diaspora and play a direct role in shaping political and cultural movements abroad.[41]

However, much like the LTTE, the PKK soon structured a "taxation" system based on an individual's financial standing. According to Fiona Adamson's research on Kurdish mobilization, unemployed asylum seekers were expected to contribute DM 30–50 per month, while employed community members paid DM 100–300. For successful business owners, the rates could soar to as much as DM 3,000 per month.[42] In the early days of the conflict, money collected in Europe was initially funneled to a PKK office in Sweden, where it was consolidated before being transferred directly to the group's founder, Abdullah Öcalan, at his Damascus headquarters.

The PKK also relied on coercion to secure financial support. According to Rolph Tophoven, Director of the Terrorism Research Forum, 69 out of every 100 extortion cases reported in Germany in 1994 were linked to the PKK.[43] These funds were often extracted as "protection money," with Kurdish and Turkish business owners across Germany and other European

countries pressured into making forced donations under the guise of financial support for the movement.[44]

Coerced diaspora funding adds a crucial layer to the principal-agent framework, highlighting an imbalance of power where the agent—the rebel group—dominates the financial relationship. Voluntary supporters tend to exercise more influence over the groups they fund, often demanding accountability and strategic alignment. Involuntary diaspora funders, however, typically have little say in how their money is used, creating a more one-sided dynamic that can enable armed groups to pursue more extreme tactics without fear of losing financial support.

Crucially, diaspora funding does not always end when a rebel group receives de-facto authority—it can evolve into a permanent financial obligation under the new regime. This dynamic was the case for the Eritrean diaspora's backing of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) during the Ethiopian Civil War. The relationship between the diaspora and the EPLF dates back to 1961, dating back to their efforts to raise funds for the war effort.[45] In the 1970s, Eritrean refugees in Tripoli organized regular meetings to pool resources for the EPLF, providing funding for medicine, weapons, and educational materials for fighters on the ground. This donation network spanned globally, with refugees mobilized through NGOs such as the Eritrean Relief Association, which solicited contributions from host-country donors as the relief agency of the EPLF.[46]

Following Eritrea's independence, the government-maintained control over diaspora contributions through a mandatory 2% income tax on Eritreans abroad, alongside retroactive payments for consular services.[47] In recent years, the government has escalated coercive measures by fining families, further pressuring diaspora members to provide additional remittances. These tactics, while effective in sustaining the EPLF and later the Eritrean state,

illustrate how the principal-agent framework translates as an armed group transitions into a de-facto government. When the EPLF leadership transitioned into a provisional government and introduced a rehabilitation tax, support for the government continued, despite the ongoing practices of surveillance and coercion, as well as the government's performance.

As the World Bank concludes in a report on rebellions, "by far the strongest effect of war on the risk of subsequent war works through diasporas."[48] Unlike ideological or political support, financial backing provides armed groups with the material means to continue fighting, making it a particularly influential form of diaspora engagement. Whether voluntary or coerced, diaspora funding can sustain insurgencies, shape rebel strategies, and, in some cases, extend financial dependency long after a group assumes power.

Diasporas as Ideological Support

NSAGs invest heavily in shaping how they are perceived internationally. Diaspora members often spearhead these efforts, hiring public relations firms and lobbying on behalf of their homeland, seeking to mobilize broader sympathy and support for a political cause.[49] Unlike material assistance, which is often more transactional, ideological support demands ongoing mobilization and communication to create platforms for advocacy. From the Biafran secessionist rebels in Nigeria hiring Markpress, a Geneva-based PR firm,[50] to Sikhs in India establishing the Council of Khalistan in 1987 to serve as their foreign policy arm,[51] diaspora networks employ a variety of strategies to propagate NSAG ideology and propaganda.

Political scientist Clifford Bob introduced the concept of "rebel marketing" to describe how armed groups strategically craft their image for international audiences.[52] His analysis shows that armed groups deploy a wide array of communication tools—from social media platforms and broadcast media to direct personal engagement—to cultivate their global brand and garner momentum for their ideologies. They primarily target transnational advocacy networks: a

complex ecosystem of NGOs, media, and civil society actors. Given their relationships within these networks and strong ideological ties to homeland struggles, diaspora members often serve as conduits for international support.

Existing literature on rebel diplomacy has increasingly focused on the strategic use of social media to engage international audiences. Yarchi offers a broader framework for analyzing how armed groups communicate across various platforms, distinguishing between limited-conflict organizations (LCOs) and total-conflict organizations (TCOs).[53] She classifies Hezbollah and Hamas, for example, as LCOs because they engage with the international community to *shape* the external environment in which they operate. In contrast, ISIS and al-Qaeda are categorized as TCOs because they primarily speak about the international community rather than directly engaging with it. While both models employ public diplomacy to gain support, they represent fundamentally different communication strategies: LCOs use public messaging to gain recognition and integrate into the international system, often presenting themselves as responsible political actors. TCOs reject that system altogether, using communication as a tool to promote revolutionary goals and undermine existing global norms.

This framework offers insight into how diaspora communities fit into broader public diplomacy strategies, often acting as ideological extensions of rebel groups abroad—not necessarily by endorsing their tactics or ideology, but by engaging with and amplifying these narratives within their host countries, thereby making them salient in new political and cultural arenas. Similar to LCOs, diasporas interact with foreign governments, media, and civil society to shape perceptions and influence policy—employing tools such as social media and lobbying to build legitimacy and sustain support for homeland causes. In this sense, diaspora networks frequently serve as the public-facing arms of NSAGs, navigating the diplomatic relations with strategic messaging that may align with or diverge from the tactics of the groups they support.

The Business of Rebellion

The Biafran secessionist movement, which culminated in the Nigerian Civil War from 1967 to 1970, offers a compelling example of how diaspora communities provide ideological support through strategic PR efforts. The conflict arose from long-standing ethnic tensions, particularly against the Igbo people, who sought independence following mass violence and political marginalization. As the war escalated, Biafran leaders both home and abroad recognized the need to shift international perceptions in their favor. In a groundbreaking move for its time, Biafra rebels hired Markpress, a Geneva-based public relations firm, in January 1968.[54] This marked one of the earliest instances of an armed non-state group using professional PR services to shape global narratives—an example of how diaspora-led efforts introduced business and entrepreneurship into rebel diplomacy.

Markpress, operated by William H. Bernhardt, played a pivotal role in crafting and disseminating Biafra's wartime propaganda.[55] Working alongside the Biafran Propaganda Secretariat, Markpress issued daily press releases, organized field trips for journalists, and orchestrated a communications strategy focused on three themes: jihad, genocide, and famine. This approach reframed the war in humanitarian terms, shifting global attention to the starvation crisis as a tool of extermination. Beyond media strategy, Biafra's struggle underscores the diaspora's role in shaping citizenship and political identity. The very notion of Biafra was largely fueled by Igbo communities outside the region, and even decades after the war, Igbo diaspora groups in the US and UK have been instrumental in the movement's revival.[56] Echoing Clifford Bob's concept of rebel marketing, NSAGs compete in a global marketplace of ideas to secure external legitimacy and resources. Within this framework, diaspora members should be studied not as peripheral supporters but as active participants who help craft and disseminate rebel narratives. In the case of Biafra, the push to internationalize

wartime propaganda was driven largely by diaspora actors, who saw strategic value in mobilizing transnational sympathy. Similar to LCOs, the diaspora's messaging strategy emphasized legitimacy and alignment with international norms.

Diaspora Leadership and Ideological Support

Diasporic use of propaganda has been well established in the literature. Less attention has been given to how a leader, while in diaspora, can actively direct a movement. Hasan Tiro, founder of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), is a powerful example of how diaspora leadership can go beyond support to leadership.[57] GAM was a separatist group seeking independence for the Aceh region of Sumatra, Indonesia. Antje Missbach explains that while living abroad, Tiro laid out the intellectual foundation of GAM, drawing on decades of archival research and publishing materials that reframed Aceh's history as one of undefeated sovereignty. Tiro's location in the West was not incidental; it provided strategic proximity to international forums where he could lobby and build legitimacy. Over time, his framing of Aceh's past and future came to dominate the movement's internal discourse, supplying the ideological backbone for the insurgency.[58] GAM itself was founded in 1976 as a response to long-standing political and economic grievances against the Indonesian government—broken promises of autonomy and the marginalization of Acehnese Islamic identity.[59] Tiro, a descendant of a prominent Acehnese family, spent 25 years in the United States before returning to Aceh, having shaped the ideological trajectory of an entire movement from afar.[60]

This conflict continued to shape the Achenese diaspora. Before the insurgency, Acehnese communities in Malaysia were relatively integrated. However, as the conflict escalated, so did diaspora displacement and mobilization. By 2004, the Acehnese diaspora had grown to around 80,000, primarily concentrated in Malaysia. Smaller communities emerged across North America, Europe, and Australia, often supported by UNHCR resettlement. Many exiled

Acehnese formed political associations explicitly aligned with the separatist cause, reinforcing ideological ties to the homeland and amplifying the movement's reach abroad. Hasan Tiro's writings—pamphlets, speeches, and publications—circulated widely among diaspora communities, fostering unity among GAM supporters. These materials served as ideological anchors, framing the conflict not only as a political struggle but as a righteous and historically grounded cause. Diaspora networks amplified this messaging through magazines and online platforms that promoted Tiro's vision and mobilized support abroad.[61] Tiro and his supporters worked with organizations like the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) to spotlight human rights abuses in Aceh and seek global recognition for their cause. They also forged alliances with other separatist movements, including the Free Papua Organization and the Republic of South Moluccas.

While GAM's identity as a separatist movement makes it somewhat distinct from other armed groups, it was nevertheless militarized and engaged in violent resistance for years. What this case reveals is that diaspora actors can do more than reinforce NSAGs ideologies when they are a part of this category—they can create and steer them. These cases push our understanding of rebel diplomacy.

Lobbying As Ideological Leverage

Ideological propaganda is a strategic imperative for NSAGs. In conflicts where military success alone is insufficient for securing long-term goals, shaping public perception becomes a vital front of warfare. Despite the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) involvement in high-profile acts of terrorism throughout the 1990s—including the assassinations of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, as well as a suicide bombing that killed 100 civilians in Colombo—the LTTE managed to maintain a significant degree of international legitimacy.[62] Through sustained and

sophisticated publicity efforts, particularly in Western states, the LTTE portrayed itself as a national liberation movement engaged in a just war against an oppressive regime.

This speaks to a broader truth: propaganda and lobbying work together to garner support where military tactics alone cannot. Propaganda helps NSAGs claim the language of rights and resistance; lobbying operationalizes that narrative into influence over foreign policy, media discourse, and civil society alliances. In this sense, propaganda is not simply about persuasion—it is a tool of diplomatic positioning, a prominent component of rebel diplomacy.

The Tamil diaspora amplified international political support for the LTTE by spotlighting the Sri Lankan government's human rights abuses: "most lobbying took the form of crude propaganda disseminated via local libraries, mass mail outs, and community television and radio broadcasts."[63] The Eritrean diaspora legitimized the EPLF by engaging in sustained lobbying campaigns. Their efforts mobilized civil society support, particularly in Germany, and brought global attention to the Eritrean cause.[64] Lobbying occupies a middle ground between material and ideological support: while it may not directly fund operations on the ground, it advances the movement's political goals. In this way, it functions more as ideological support, since its power lies not in what it gives but in how it frames the struggle.

The Irish American diaspora offers perhaps the clearest example of how lobbying can evolve into direct strategic influence. When a delegation of Irish Americans visited Northern Ireland in August 1984, British authorities attempted to bar entry to Martin Galvin, the head of the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID), a group widely known for supporting the Republican movement. Despite the effort to block him, Galvin entered the region—along with other participants, some of whom were arrested. The reaction from British authorities underscored how seriously they regarded the diaspora's role: NORAID was not just a donor, but a political force capable of shaping international perception and legitimizing Republican

actors. NORAID had the ability to intensify pressure on the British state through transnational advocacy.

By the 1990s, the Irish American diaspora had transformed into a critical lobbying force with direct access to circles of political influence in the U.S. In 1995, Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams was granted an unprecedented, unconditional visa to the United States, enabling him to raise funds and meet with key political figures—including President Bill Clinton at a White House reception on St. Patrick's Day. Meanwhile, local politicians like New York City Councilwoman Katheryn Freed pushed resolutions defending Irish republicans from deportation, reflecting the extent of diaspora influence on U.S. domestic policy.

This influence evolved with the conflict. As Hobson and Matesan argue, the Irish American diaspora didn't just amplify rebel choices; it helped shape them.[65] During periods of cohesion within the Republican movement, NORAID acted mainly as a financial and political lifeline. However, when tensions emerged between Sinn Féin's political strategy and the IRA's military tactics, diaspora lobbying—particularly from groups like NORAID—pursued a dual approach: supporting peace talks while still justifying armed struggle.[66] Rather than pressuring Adams to abandon violence, many diaspora actors lobbied for U.S. support without preconditions, reinforcing his contested leadership at a critical moment.

By the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the Irish American diaspora was widely recognized as a key player in the peace process.[67] While it had not always spoken with one voice, its support—both militant and diplomatic—ultimately helped consolidate a leadership capable of shifting from the battlefield to the negotiating table.

The discussion of ideological and material support in these two sections often falls into a binary framework, distinguishing between support for war and support for peace. However, as the case of GAM demonstrates, these categories are not always mutually exclusive. Diaspora

leaders and supporters may advocate for peace while simultaneously sustaining conflict through propaganda, lobbying, or financial backing. Their visions of peace may not align with conventional definitions, as some view military victory or political concessions as necessary prerequisites for lasting stability. The following section will explore how the diaspora, often portrayed as either war supporters or peace brokers, can occupy both roles simultaneously—challenging the assumption that these positions are inherently opposed.

Diasporas as Agents of Peace

Thus far, this paper has examined two categories of diaspora support for armed groups that hinge on active and direct engagement—material and ideological. Mediation, however, represents a different sort of relationship. It is a more delicate form of political engagement, one that relies not on partisanship or mobilization, but on credibility and perceived neutrality. As Touval and Zartman note, "In order to start negotiations, a mediator needs to be accepted by both parties."[68] Acceptance, in turn, depends on the mediator's ability to offer a resolution more attractive than continued conflict, and the potential to facilitate a mutually acceptable outcome.

In prevailing scholarship, diaspora communities are more commonly cast as obstacles to peace than as its facilitators. As Joanna Spear observes, they are often seen as long-distance nationalists—radical actors who exploit the freedoms and resources of their host countries to pursue uncompromising political agendas.[69] This critique is not without empirical foundation. For example, as analyzed earlier, the Eritrean diaspora's role in sustaining a war economy: Fiona Lortan estimates that by May 2000, Eritreans abroad had sent more than $400 million in remittances to support the country's resistance against Ethiopia.[70] These findings reinforce the assumption that diasporas primarily serve as engines of transnational conflict.

Yet such portrayals overlook the more complex and sometimes contradictory roles diasporas can play. Although this paper's primary focus lies in the connections between diasporas and armed groups, it is important to recognize that diaspora actors have also taken on roles as mediators and peacebuilders—particularly in post-conflict or transitional moments. Members of the Afghan diaspora, for instance, were instrumental in negotiations among tribal factions during the formation of Afghanistan's post-Taliban government. In Sudan, diaspora groups helped fund and operate private radio stations dedicated to broadcasting peace-oriented programming and encouraging civic participation in reconstruction.[71]

These examples raise a fundamental question: what makes a diaspora group a viable candidate for mediation? Beyond shared ethnic or national ties, their effectiveness depends on a unique blend of insider legitimacy and outsider detachment. Often, diasporas occupy a liminal space— removed from the immediate violence yet deeply embedded in the sociopolitical fabric of the conflict. Their distance from conflict positions them as credible intermediaries, particularly when traditional state or international actors are viewed with suspicion. In such cases, the diaspora becomes not just a stakeholder in conflict, but a strategic resource in its resolution.

Meetings And Mediations

One of the clearest ways diaspora communities have acted as mediators is by urging and facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties. A striking example is the Acholi diaspora's creation of the Kacoke Madit (KM) initiative, launched in 1996 by members of the Acholi community living abroad to raise awareness about the conflict in northern Uganda and explore peaceful solutions.[72] Meaning "a big meeting" in Luo, KM convened conferences in London in 1997 and 1998 that brought together Acholi community leaders, representatives of the Ugandan and Sudanese governments, and delegates from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) on neutral ground.[73] Unlike reactive or symbolic interventions, this form of mediation was

structured and deliberate, requiring significant logistical coordination and trust-building—underscoring the diaspora's strategic intent and legitimacy as peace actors.[74]

Despite its notable contributions, KM is rarely discussed in mainstream diaspora literature, which tends to emphasize more militant or nationalist diaspora activity. Yet KM's role in convening stakeholders and sustaining momentum toward peace was intentional and organized. A Nairobi-based KM2000 conference in 2000 further demonstrated its reach, and the organization's ongoing efforts—including a regularly updated website and weekly newsletter—speak to the diaspora's capacity for swift, coordinated, and community-driven mediation.[75] As the homepage of the KM site declares, "It is this inclusiveness, combined with a common concern to see that the conflict is brought to a peaceful end, that gives KM an unusual role in promoting and building consensus for sustainable peace."

As discussed earlier, the Irish diaspora also played a central role in supporting their affiliated non-state armed actors, both ideologically and financially. But beyond this material support, they were instrumental in promoting a political shift toward nonviolence and negotiation. Irish American organizations and community leaders strategically used their access to U.S. political institutions to open informal backchannels between Irish republicans and the American government.[76] These efforts included facilitating meetings between Sinn Féin and U.S. officials, helping to legitimize the political wing of the Republican movement and presenting it as a viable partner in peace.

This engagement was critical in securing Bill Clinton's campaign promise—directed at Irish American voters—to take a more active role in Northern Ireland, which led to unprecedented U.S. mediation in the conflict. Importantly, their increased political legitimacy and attention enabled by diaspora efforts contributed to the Irish Republican Army's decision to declare a ceasefire in the mid-1990s, marking a turning point in the conflict.[77] The case of the Irish

diaspora demonstrates not only the political leverage diasporas can exert but also their ability to steer armed movements toward negotiation and peace.

Effective Outcomes: Does Peace Occur?

Driving participation in peace processes is only part of the picture; diaspora actors have also played critical roles in shaping outcomes and sustaining post-conflict transitions. The case of the Somali diaspora during the 2002–2004 peace talks in Nairobi reveals how diaspora involvement can move beyond symbolic participation to meaningful, outcome-driven engagement. Members of the Somali diaspora from countries such as the U.S., U.K., Canada, Italy, and Australia took part in multiple rounds of negotiations, not only lending their voices to the process but also bringing with them critical expertise, resources, and international networks. Some served as advisors to faction leaders, while others—including respected academics—played formal roles in helping draft agreements, despite resistance from regional powers. Their input was not limited to technical advice; diaspora representatives helped bridge political divides by drawing on their experiences of exile and advocating for a more inclusive, civil society–driven vision of governance.[78] The impact of their efforts was tangible: the talks culminated in the establishment of the Transitional Federal Government, and many of the new leadership positions—president, prime minister, and ministers—were filled by returnees from the diaspora. This outcome underscores how diaspora actors, when substantively included, can play a decisive role not just in initiating dialogue, but in delivering durable political transitions.

A peacemaker reduces conflict or encourages an armed group to adopt nonviolent tactics. One way to measure this impact is to compare it to that of a foreign state. Marina Petrova's qualitative analysis of violent group-level data found that external support from diaspora is positively associated with rebels' adoption of nonviolent tactics, while support from foreign states is not. In fact, foreign states as supporters are not as effective influencers as diaspora.[79]

Future research can compare cases of external support from states to diaspora support for analysis. For example, in many instances, political elites at home go a long distance to keep the diaspora politically and financially interested in home country matters. Particularly when a country faces a difficult situation, they make various efforts to call upon solidarity among the diaspora members. Former Irish President Mary Robinson's proclaiming herself as the leader of the extended Irish family abroad is an apt example of how leaders try to strengthen the relations with the diaspora. Further, Armenia is extremely dependent on diasporic support and thus more permeable to the preferences of overseas Armenians.[80] Since Armenia's economy experienced a rapid collapse after the independence, Armenian diaspora's financial and political support became crucial for the nation's survival. Policymakers in Armenia tend to follow a foreign and domestic policy line drawn by the diaspora Armenians since they cannot afford to do the opposite. One of the top three aims of the political party's agenda is "strengthening relations with the diaspora." In the Armenian case, the diaspora has used its leverage to move the political parties towards perpetuating the conflict rather than peacemaking.

Studying NSAGs solely by categorizing their diasporas as perpetrators of conflict risks sidelining actors who, precisely because of their distance, may be best positioned to push for mediation. Expanding the literature to account for diasporas' constructive roles offers a more complete framework for understanding their influence, and opens new pathways for integrating them into peacebuilding theory and practice.

Conclusion

This article has argued that diaspora networks play central roles in the approaches and outcomes of non-state armed groups. By examining how diasporas provide material support, ideological support, and mediation, we see how transnational communities shape the trajectory

and legitimacy of armed movements in ways traditional frameworks often miss. These dynamics challenge state-centric views of diplomacy and reveal a form of diasporic influence rooted in shared—or conflicting—identity, motivations, and solidarity.

Understanding diasporas only as obstacles to peace obscures their full range of political agency. It flattens their role into that of spoilers, when in fact they often occupy a complex space between resistance and resolution. This has implications not only for how we study rebel diplomacy, but for how policymakers engage with diaspora actors in ongoing conflicts.

As global displacement continues to rise, diaspora engagement with armed groups will likely become more common, more visible, and more consequential. Whether in peacebuilding, advocacy, or governance, diasporas illustrate how communities assert agency across shifting political landscapes. Future research must grapple with the conditions under which diasporas can transition from supporting armed struggle to facilitating peace. Or how diasporas navigate internal divisions—generational or ideological—when engaging with NSAGs. Quantitative studies can employ large-N datasets of armed groups to compare the outcomes of conflicts where diaspora involvement is present versus absent.

Anthropological studies should also attend to the variation within diasporas themselves in the context of armed movements. Understanding differences in influence, motive, mobilization strategies, and how host state conditions shape political behavior is crucial to build on this study.

Diaspora networks are already shaping the strategies, legitimacy, and international presence of non-state armed groups. Understanding rebel diplomacy today requires recognizing diaspora engagement as a strategic and essential element of how non-state armed groups operate and govern across borders.

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