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Diaspora Theorizing and the Diasporas of the Middle East

Ipek Demir[1]

Abstract

This article presents a brief overview of diaspora theorizing and provides a case for expanding the temporal and spatial boundaries of existing diaspora research. It not only questions methodological amnesia and methodological nationalism in diaspora research in general but considers these as impediments to a better and more rigorous understanding of the diasporas of the Middle East in particular. Providing various examples, it seeks to make better connections between empires, colonialism, and diasporization.

Keywords: *European colonialism, Muslim diaspora, Palestinian diaspora, Kurdish diaspora, Syrian diaspora, Ottoman Empire.*

Cultural plurality is woven into the fabric of the Global North due to colonialism and empires. This, if recognized, can allow us to question the often-told White/European history versus our racially diverse today.[2] Another aspect of cultural plurality is that many diasporas in the Global North have expanded our understanding of equality, freedoms, and dignity, as well as our experiences of these. This is why I have conceived of diasporas of the Global South as one of the core decolonizing forces in the Global North.[3] Yet much diaspora research has traditionally confined

[1] Ipek Demir, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. Email: I.Demir@leeds.ac.uk.

[2] Roshi Naidoo and Jo Littler, "White Past, Multicultural Present: Heritage and National Stories" in *History, Identity and the Question of Britain*, ed. Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[3] Ipek Demir, *Diaspora as Translation and Decolonisation* (Manchester University Press, 2022).

our understanding of diaspora to the ontology of the nation-state, to "homeland" or "hostland" politics, and as identified by Thomas Faist, often through a focus on single case studies.[4] Research on diaspora has thus only partially accounted for the transnational character of diasporic interventions, frequently reproducing methodological nationalism. As such, empirical research in this field has introduced temporal and spatial limitations on understanding diaspora, prioritizing the links between diasporas and their nations/nation-states, erasing the links between empire and migrations, and wedding diasporas to a nation-state. Or, it has at times been reduced to acknowledging the hybrid identities and spaces diasporas develop. Below, I will first unpack these broadly and explain how and why we need to question the methodological amnesia and nationalism in diaspora research further. I will argue that we need to better understand diasporas and how they are not just products of globalization but also makers of globalization. I will also identify the consequences of such rethinking for understanding diasporas of the Middle East.

Diaspora theorizing took off in the 1990s. Two main trends of diaspora theorizing emerged. One of these approaches identified the key characteristics of diaspora. For example, William Safran and Robin Cohen provided refined definitions of diaspora using Weberian ideal-type approaches.[5] Such work undertook much-needed conceptual clarification and elaboration, bringing rigor, clarity, and coherence to the concept. The second dominant approach was led by scholars who paid attention to hybridity, fluidity, and subjectivity, and thus to the complex identities that developed in the process of diasporization. Exemplified by Avtar Brah, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall, they critiqued the

[4] Thomas Faist, "Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?" in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods,* ed. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 25.

[5] William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–99, https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0004; Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Routledge, 1997 [2023]); Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers," *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1996): 507–20, https://doi.org/10.2307/2625554.

privileging of the point of origin in diaspora theorizing and instead turned their focus on the multiple, hybrid, and fluid ways diasporic identity and space are created and re-made.[6] I conceptualized these two dominant approaches to diaspora theorizing as "diaspora as an ideal type" and "diaspora as hybridity." The first group came under scrutiny, facing accusations of being locked into gardening tropes of origins, roots, and soil. Yet, the diaspora as hybridity approach also had its limitations: if all cultures are in some form of fluidity, hybridity, and rethinking subjectivity, then we do not make significant gains in diaspora theorizing by also identifying these in diaspora. Most importantly, however, scholars of diaspora theory who established the field in the 1990s specifically made empires and colonialism central to diaspora, unlike much diaspora research that followed them. I sought to return to this in my attempts to rethink diaspora in the context of empire and colonialism and to push against what I called methodological amnesia alongside methodological nationalism in diaspora and migration research.

Not just historical diasporas, but even today's many diasporic migrations were made in, through, or by recent empires, including the emergence and collapse of these empires and the nationalist projects that followed them. Empires and colonialism, through settlements, wars, plantations, indenture, expansions, and the movements of people through force or population exchange, have often been instigators of diasporization. Yet diaspora research, and especially the single-case studies that dominate the field, remain wedded to the idea of the nation-state as the primary vehicle of diasporization. As such, methodological amnesia—that we ignore the temporal dimensions, namely the colonial and imperial axes of the movements of peoples—tends to be standard in the study of diaspora. I argued that diaspora should instead be understood as inscribed and

[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994); Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Routledge, 1996); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso, 1993); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

entangled in a series of historical and political processes associated with empire and expansion—including nationalist responses to these.

What I have called methodological amnesia is a bedfellow of methodological nationalism. The latter is a limitation with which migration studies itself has been concerned for at least over the last two decades. In their influential article, Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller called out methodological nationalism. They defined it as the naturalization of the nation-state in the social sciences, inviting us to think beyond the national-territorial as the main unit of analysis.[7] Still a decade after their influential intervention, methodological nationalism remains rife. As Ulrich Beck and Daniel Levy stated, the "national-territorial remains the primary container for the analysis of social, economic, political and cultural processes."[8] Over a decade after this point of interjection, it is not difficult to repeat it verbatim; it is dominant and omnipresent in many publications on diaspora but also in many of the papers presented at IMISCOE, the leading migration conference in Europe. I argue the endurance of methodological nationalism in diaspora and migration studies is partly due to pushing the spatial boundaries of research beyond the borders of the nation-state but still conceptualizing migration within the history of the nation-state, thus not extending it temporally. A simple yet striking example of this is the discourse of "unprecedented migrations" to Europe we see today expressed as "unprecedented floods," "extraordinary record levels of migration," and "unique levels of migration," often used for justifying harsh prevention strategies,[9] forgetting that "in the course of colonial history, European populations moved in greater numbers and with a greater effect on the

[7] Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-state Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2, no.4 (2002): 301-334, https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043.
[8] Ulrich Beck and Daniel Levy, "Cosmopolitanized Nations: Re-imagining Collectivity in World Risk Society," *Theory, Culture and Society* 30, no. 2 (2013): 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412457223.
[9] Lucy Mayblin and Joe Turner, *Migration Studies and Colonialism* (Polity, 2021).

populations they encountered than is the case in the course of migration to Europe."[10]

Suppose we rethink diasporas in the Middle East with this in mind, for example. In that case, we can find multiple consequences of methodological amnesia and methodological nationalism for studying diasporas and for policy.

First: many indigenous groups in these areas have often been turned into "ethnic minorities" understood and conceived of within a state. Kurds in the region are a prime example of this. Despite being one of the Indigenous peoples, they are typically conceived of and analyzed as a minority within nation-states—be it in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, or Syria. Kurdish studies has also contributed to this by making the nation-state the natural (and most desirable) form for explaining the Kurdish issue. As such, Kurdish studies, alongside many area studies in the Middle East, have failed to disrupt methodological nationalism. Additionally, the focus on the ethnic minority/nation-state nexus is a form of presentism; it is read back into the region's history when, in fact, such an organization or self-identification did not necessarily occur, at least in this format. Instead, as Nilay Özok-Gündoğan[11] argues, Kurdish nobility negotiated with the Ottoman center and periphery, shaping the region's social, economic, and political landscape. Omitting reference to colonization as well as to imperial and national politics in the region and an overfocus on the history of the nation-state ends up reinforcing a bounded understanding of today's minoritization of Indigenous populations, such as Kurds.

Second: how existing racial, ethnic, sectarian, and religious demarcations in this region were turbocharged and enhanced through European colonialism is often ignored, reducing explanations of conflict in the region to contemporary nation-state policies and priorities. From the

[10] Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (Polity, 2021), ix.

[11] Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, *The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire: Loyalty, Autonomy and Privilege* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

1800s onwards, and with the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire, European colonialism became more firmly entrenched in the Middle East. Millions of people were transferred, subjected to population exchanges, banished, expelled, fled, and became diasporized. In this region, the Ottoman Empire's "tolerant yet unequal" millet tradition was turned into rigid demarcations through numerous and varied European colonial interventions and the ensuing violence of nation-states. European rulers made numerous interventions and interjections to protect Christians in the Ottoman Empire whilst no equivalent rights existed for non-Christians in European empires.[12] Such European incursions were seen as a threat, contributing to certain groups being approached with suspicion in the area, increasing their hypervisibility and otherization, fully contributing to their diasporization. Assyrians,[13] Armenians, Kurds, and Yezidis were some of the major victims of colonial and later nation-state violence in the Middle East. Even Turks and Arabs were dispersed and expelled. Many of those groups made hypervisible came to be perceived as disloyal or exchangeable, if not disposable.[14] They ceased to be seen as rightful members of the body politic. We thus need to pay much more attention to the legacies of empires and colonialisms in the re-bordering of the Middle East and how they have turned numerous Indigenous populations into diasporas.

Third: how local and European racisms converged to contribute to a racist modernity and borders in the region are forgotten, again, due to methodological amnesia and nationalism. For example, when Britain took over the colonial rule of Palestine in 1917, putting an end to 400 years of Ottoman rule, they "rationalized" land ownership and tried to impose British land policies. These were based on British notions of private

[12] Saba Mahmood, "Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 2 (2012): 421, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417512000096.

[13] Assyrians in this case refers to later Assyrians of the Ottoman Empire as opposed to the Ancient Assyrian Empire.

[14] Eva Pföstl and Will Kymlicka, "Minority Politics in the Middle East and North Africa: The Prospects for Transformative Change," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 14 (2015): 2489-2498, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1061132.

property of freeholders and tenants but were carried out via structuring land vis à vis pre-1917 Ottoman land policies, which had incorporated many other types of land use and ownership, including land held in *waqfs* and in common.[15] The British Empire commonly used rationalizations of land ownership such as in British India, Sudan, and Egypt. The expulsion of Palestinians cannot be understood without recognizing how these colonial restructurings shaped property and society relations, easing the colonization and occupation of the land and the dispersal of Palestinians. Over the decades, 80 percent of Palestinians have become refugees after being forced to leave.[16] The British-ruled Palestine mandate also imposed emergency regulations, giving it extensive powers to suppress local opposition and insurgency. Israel later adopted these punitive emergency measures and rules. To date, Israel uses these emergency regulations, left over from British-ruled Palestine, holding Palestinians under martial law and also encouraging their dispersal and diasporization. Israel "first applied [these emergency rules] to the 150,000 Palestinian Arabs who remained within the borders of the new Israeli state in 1948" and, after 1966, deployed them "in the occupied Palestinian territories. These typically include house demolitions, deportations, administrative detention, curfews, and closures."[17] Not only in dispersal but also in the reception (and rejection) of diasporas within and from the Middle East, empires and colonialisms have been erased. The Syrian diaspora in Turkey is a recent case in point. Whilst the glory of the Ottoman Empire is central to Turkish television series, festivals, identity, literature, tourism, and history books, the links between the contemporary predicament of Syria (and Syrians in Turkey) and centuries of rule of the Ottoman Empire in

[15] Martin Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies in Palestine, 1917–1936* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

[16] Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Abigail B. Bakan, "Anti-Palestinian Racism and Racial Gaslighting," *The Political Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2022): 508–516, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13166; Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (Metropolitan Books, 2020).

[17] Anne Irfan, "Israel: unpopular judicial reform involves repeal of law set up under British colonial rule in Palestine – here's what that tells us," *The Conversation,* July 26, 2024, https://theconversation.com/israel-unpopular-judicial-reform-involves-repeal-of-law-set-up-under-british-colonial-rule-in-palestine-heres-what-that-tells-us-210401.

the region are conveniently ignored in contemporary politics but also by much of academic research on them.

Fourth: there is little understanding and acknowledgment of how diasporas from the Middle East push back in how they extend rights and challenge racism. The latter intensified further as Islamophobia in the Global North became entrenched and widespread. Islamophobia, defined as fear and hatred of Muslimness,[18] means that many diasporas from this region have become racialized as Muslims; identification moved from being Asian, Turkish, Arab, Pakistani, etc., to "Muslim." There is pushback against the hyper-racialization of Muslims in Europe, and the Muslim diaspora is essential to this movement, yet again decolonizing the Global North through their interventions (e.g., People's Review of Prevent Report 2022).[19] The violence in Palestine has also been central in mobilizing Muslim populations and the making of the Muslim diaspora in the Global North. As such, the Muslim diaspora in the Global North is perhaps one of the exemplary cases for understanding diaspora beyond the ontology of the nation-state.

Going beyond methodological nationalism does not mean that we ignore nation-states exist or that they are a reality of our lives, but rather that we as researchers refrain from using explanatory categories, concepts, and understandings that are solely locked into the sources, vocabularies, and histories of the nation and the nation-state. A firm focus on the research methods and sources that contribute to the reproduction of methodological amnesia and methodological nationalism is therefore also crucially needed. Archives are often "national," our libraries are "state" libraries, our books in our university libraries are cataloged in country/area studies, "modern" history is often limited to European nation-state history, and our funding regimes are most often governed by

[18] Salman Sayyid, "A Measure of Islamophobia", *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014): 10-25.

[19] "People's Review of Prevent Report 2022," Prevent Watch, last modified November 5, 2024, https://www.preventwatch.org/prop/.

nation-state bodies, focusing on nation-state histories and interests. Hence, challenging methodological nationalism and amnesia is not going to be easy. The added challenge is that too much migration and diaspora research can be couched as "service" research, servicing policy development alongside the needs and priorities of government departments and organizations. In so doing, these also serve methodological nationalism and amnesia. Instead, we need to develop new categories and concepts while still challenging the resourcing and categorization of research. This is because diaspora research cannot be transnational if it continues to be trapped in the history of the nation-state and its sources.