

ENGAGING STATELESS AND STATE-LINKED DIASPORAS: WHAT ROLE DOES THE HOMELAND PLAY?

This comparative study focuses on the Assyrian (state-less) and Armenian (state-linked) diasporas in the Netherlands. To date there have been few systematic, comparative studies of the organizations involved in the diasporic field that reflect the commonalities and differences of stateless and state-linked diasporic networks. This paper aims at making a contribution toward filling this knowledge gap by exploring how the existence or absence of national structures shape diaspora engagement practices as well as the directions of diaspora contributions. These issues are analyzed with a specific focus on charity initiatives to the homeland and other transnational diasporic communities. The paper challenges widespread assumption that the diaspora-homeland relationship should be seen from the perspective of the so called “Solar System” where the diaspora is viewed as a “periphery” connected and belonging to one “center” (the homeland) to which all connections are directed and from where all the signals of mobilization come.

In order to avoid the essentialist tendency to represent the social world as a mosaic of static ethnic groups, the modern conceptualization of diasporas is deployed throughout. Diaspora formation is being discussed not as a “natural” consequence of migration, but rather as the product of specific processes of mobilization that is ongoing and remains incomplete. Therefore, the study places diaspora organizations at the center of the research. The paper is based on in-depth interviews with the representatives of diasporic organizations; participant observations of the main community events as well as document analyses.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of researching diasporic groups in terms of their social, political and economic potential has been recognized not only by academics but also by home and host governments as well as international organizations. Numerous authors agree that migrant communities turn into unexpected, but increasingly visible actors in the politics of their countries and communities (Vertovec, 2004; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004).

Though there is an increasing recognition of the importance of diaspora potential to pursue social, economic and political projects, to date there have been few systematic, comparative studies that reflect the commonalities and differences of stateless and state-linked diaspora engagement practices. Theoretical relevance of comparing state-less and state-linked diasporas has been underlined by Sheffer (2003). State-linked diasporas have independent and internationally recognized states, while stateless diasporas are not connected to a nation-state, their homeland has either not yet been physically achieved or has yet to be internationally recognized (Sheffer, 2003). He finds that the meaningful criteria to differentiate between the various existing ethno-national diasporas is the status of their respective homeland: whether they have been able to establish their own independent states. He argues that this factor substantially influence the structures, strategies and behaviors of these entities.

Notably, most studies into diaspora engagement practices relate to state-linked diasporas and there is a significant dearth in the available literature of studies on the mobilization of stateless diasporas. This paper aims at making a contribution toward filling this knowledge gap by exploring how the existence or absence of national structures shape diaspora engagement practices as well as the directions of diaspora contributions. The paper present comparative studies of diaspora engagement practices among state-linked and stateless communities: Assyrian and Armenian communities in the Netherlands. These issues analyzed with a specific focus on charity initiatives and collective financial transfers to the homeland and other transnational diasporic communities. The paper is based on in-depth interviews with the representatives of diasporic organizations; participant observations of the main community events as well as document analyses.

Before presenting the research results, I will try to examine closely the idea of homeland in as well as diaspora engagement spheres diasporic literature.

DIASPORAS AND THEIR HOMELAND

Scholars have reached the consensus that diasporas experience a feeling of “belonging” to the nation-state of origin may be problematic, since it is not always the case that the territories diasporas refer to as “homelands” are existing independent states.

For Safran (1991) the Jewish and Armenian cases of dispersal are “archetypical” models, where the absence of a physical homeland or statelessness is the most crucial factor in the formation of diaspora. Numerous

authors have emphasized the importance of having a vision or a reminder of an idealized place to which the members of the diaspora wish to return, when possible (Armstrong, 1976; Smith, 1986; Vertovec, 1997; Hovannesian, 2007). They state that though the process of diasporization leads to the loose for actual homeland or its existing borders are being changed, but it continues to be the key feature for diasporic identification.

Brubaker (2005) stated that despite the dispersion of its meaning, there are three core elements that remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora. These are dispersion (either traumatically or voluntarily and generally across state borders); homeland orientation (whether to a real or imagined homeland) and boundary maintenance (the processes whereby group solidarity is mobilized and retained, even accepting that there are counter processes of boundary erosion). Brubaker didn't necessarily identify the borders of homeland with existing nation state, but he emphasis the historical perception of homeland.

The idea that the homeland can be seen as a product of collective imagining rather than as having objective existence has been agreed by most of the scholars. The idea of homeland is the criterion that has been shared by majority of scholars that try to construct comprehensive definition for diasporas and differentiate them from other groups (Safran 1991, Faist 2010). The shared homeland is what conceptually distinguishes diaspora from transnational social movements and any other transnational community (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999).

The main progress/change in the diasporic literature on the conceptualization of the homeland so far has been the shift from primordialist approach to the constructivist one (Wiclock, 2017). Diaspora formation is not being discussed as a "natural" consequence of migration any more, but rather as the product of specific processes of mobilization that is ongoing and remains incomplete. Recent theories look at how concept is used as a basis of collective mobilization (Reis, 2004; Brubaker, 2005; Tololyan, 2001; Wahlbeck, 2001). Similarly, instead of taking for granted that the idea of shared homeland produces diasporic identities it has been argued that homeland is "imagined" through mobilization process. Brubaker (2005) discusses that diasporas must be invented or mobilized to come into existence. Thus, diasporas are being discussed as "type of consciousness" or as a "category of practice."

Though, the "imaginative homeland" has been accepted by many of the scholars, the distinction between existing and "non-achieved" states and its implication into diaspora engagement practices has not been widely researched. Moreover, most of the recent studies on diasporas are evolving around homeland - nation-state networks and connections (Sinatti & Horst, 2015, Abramson, 2017, Tettey, 2016).

DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

Philanthropic sentimental performances are key defining aspects of diasporas. Diasporas exist in their ability to mobilize fellow diaspora members to common cause. It is this organized action, driven by ties of co-responsibility, this is the key differentiating factor of diasporas from ethnic communities (Werbner, 2002).

The fusion between state-nation-territory-homeland and its implication on diaspora engagement practices leaves room for several contradictions. The widespread assumption that the diaspora-homeland relationship should be seen from the perspective of the so called “Solar System” (Weingrod, 2005) can be questionable. Here the diaspora is viewed as a “periphery” connected and belonging to one “center” (the homeland) to which all connections are directed. Schiller (2009) argued that while belonging is usually attributed to the nation-state level, there are often specific localities that benefit from migrant contributions (Schiller, 2009). Additionally, there may be a division between the concepts “homeland” and places where the community members were born, raised and spent some significant periods of their lives before coming to the country where the diasporic community is placed.

Van Hear and Cohen (2017) proposed to distinguish three spheres of diaspora engagement: household and the extended family sphere, the known community sphere and the imagined community sphere. Engagement in the known community sphere takes place in spaces where one has lived, among people one knows. It is the sphere of encounters connected between past and present (schools, neighborhood, workplaces, and more). In this sphere Van Hear and Cohen (2017) distinguishes hometown associations, home-village associations, old school associations as main form of diasporic organizations. The imagined community term here is borrowed from Anderson (1983) referred to the nation with which one has affinity without necessary knowing the members. This is the sphere where the greater degree of mobilization is required than do the more routine activities of the household and community spheres. Van Hear and Cohen (2017) underline that mobilisation within the diaspora needs to be added the initiatives taken by those state actors who imagine a nation beyond the state’s borders. They may seek to connect to their nationals abroad, encourage diasporic forms of citizenship and loyalty, and intervene, perhaps militarily, to protect ‘their’ diasporas (Gamlen, 2014).

Sheffer (2003) mapped diaspora engagement differences based on the status of their homeland: whether they are state-linked or stateless diaspora. He argues that stateless diasporas are more engaged in attention to solving their problems in the homeland, in transfer of “seditious resources”, such as combatants, weapons, military equipment and money. State-linked diasporas are more engaged in perfectly innocuous exchange through similar trans-state networks. State-less diasporas networks have been used for transferring resources needed by the liberation fighters of ethnic groups. Though this issue has been discussed in diaspora literature, there are very few studies reflect organizational structures and activities of state-less and state-linked diasporas in comparative manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews: I conducted interviews with the representatives of the main diaspora engagement actors: migrant/diaspora organizations, “core/elite” members of diaspora as well as with individual Armenians and Assyrians living in the Netherlands.

Migrant/Diaspora organizations: Migrant organizations create and maintain transnational networks. These are essential for developing organized, institutionally mobilized and sustained connections between diasporic communities as well as between the diaspora and homeland in order to ensure material and

cultural exchange. Tololyan (2000) posits that migrant organizations form an institutional base for diasporic communities and even goes so far as to name them, metaphorically, “governments-in-exile”. So-called “governments” of migrant communities do considerable work in political, social organization and mobilization, particularly in Middle Eastern states where traditionally governments neglect the material and social needs of minorities. Among the migrant organizations that are addressed are ethnic associations, alumni associations, religious associations, professional associations, development NGOs, political groups, supplementary schools, and virtual organizations.

Core/Elite members of diaspora: Sheffer (2003) finds that “core” members of diasporas establish local and trans-state networks that deal with the complex relations between diasporas, their host countries, homelands, and international actors. Tololyan (2000) similarly argues that the network of elite members of diaspora is important for creating the imagined diasporic trans-nation. Elites are also in charge for controlling institutions and funds; deciding the direction and vision of diasporic identity. Identification of elite-members was based on “snowball” technic.

Interviews and focus group discussion with Armenians and Assyrians: These are relevant for understanding their willingness (or reluctance) to join the diasporic community, the main resources that they are willing to input into transnational diasporic communities.

Participative observations of the main community events: I combined the interviews with participative observation, in order to fully understand the dynamics involved in the diaspora engagement practices. These included participation in church gatherings, political and cultural activities as well as other social events.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

General characteristics of the Assyrian and Armenian communities in the Netherlands

The Assyrian and Armenian diasporas has fallen into the “stateless” category for a long time. In the case of the Armenian diaspora, the first independent republic was established in 1918 and was followed by the establishment of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (1936-1991). However, there was no major connection between the state and the diaspora, since the contacts were strictly controlled and programmed by the central Soviet government. Therefore, the diaspora has developed as a separate entity from the state. Moreover, a major part of Armenian diaspora consists of individuals who come from the region known as Western Armenia—currently in the territory of Turkey that was lost due to the Genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The Armenian diaspora started to bridge its ties stronger with the Armenian state and current Armenian territory after the independence from the Soviet regime. Nowadays, the Armenian government regards its diaspora as strategically vital for its political, social and economic impact. Armenia has established the Ministry of Diaspora in 2008 in order to maintain sustainable connections with the Armenian migrants abroad. Assyrians have been stateless for a very long time, since they claim to be the heirs of the Ancient Assyrians. The Assyrian Empire, named after Ashur has lasted from 2500 B.C.E to 612 B.C.E (the fall of the empire to the Medes). Nowadays, Assyrians are known as one of the oldest Christian minorities in the Middle East.

Assyrians refer to a geographic area within the borders of northern Iraq, northwest Iran, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Turkey as their homeland (Hanish, 2013).

Armenians and Assyrians have the same event as the main reason for diaspora development, which is the Genocide in 1915 in the Ottoman Empire. This is also a central identity marker for these groups. Both groups have similar sizes of population living in the Netherlands and have settled organizations for their social-cultural preservation. General characteristics of the selected communities are summarized below:

	Armenian	Assyrian
Type of diaspora	State-linked	Stateless
Territories that diasporas refer as homelands	Armenia	Assyria (Northern Iraq, northwest Iran, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Turkey)
State support	Ministry of Diaspora, local embassy	None
Worldwide diaspora population	7 million	3.2 million
Population in the Netherlands	20.000	25.000
Main migration dates and reasons	since 1950s- ongoing (due to conflict in Syria and Iraq)	since 1960s- ongoing (due to conflict in Syria)
Migration reasons to the Netherlands	Labour migration, war	Labour migration, war, political and religious repression
Main sending countries	Turkey, Armenia Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Russia, Greece, Syria	Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon

As the table shows both communities are quite heterogeneous since they migrated from different countries and in different period of time. The Armenian community consists of the generations of Armenian diaspora formed after the Genocide (from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Greece) followed by migrants from Armenia. A similar pattern has the formation of the Assyrian community in the Netherlands. Many, who fled from their original homes into other Middle Eastern countries, just one generation later, migrated to the West: for instance, from Turkey to Iraq and then to European countries.

The heterogeneity has caused a great degree of division within the Assyrian diaspora since it has faced strong self-identification problem. Assyrian population that once had mainly strong religious identity based on Christian faith in the Middle East, has undergone a process of national identity formation. As a result two ethno-national identifications have been generated: "Assyrian" and "Aramean". Though these groups share the same language, faith and image of the homeland, they do not cooperate with each other and are in constant struggle of putting two groups under the same name. Those who refer themselves as being the adherents of the Assyrian empire name themselves Assyrians. The other big group name themselves as being Aramean, and they underline their Christiana faith as a group identity marker. Respondents state that this is the most important obstacle for the Assyrian community to create larger engagement of the diaspora, since strong internal divisions and unwillingness to collaborate extremely weakens the community.

In order to discuss the charity activities of the Dutch Assyrian and Dutch Armenian communities, it is important to have a closer look at the functioning organizations. Dutch Assyrian and Dutch Armenian organizations can be grouped as:

	<i>Assyrian</i>	<i>Armenian</i>
<i>Religion-based organizations</i>	Syriac Orthodox Church Assyrian Church of the East	Armenian Apostolic Church
<i>Organizations with political orientation</i>	Branches of the main Assyrian political parties in Syria and Iraq (Assyrian Democratic Organization, Assyrian Democratic Movement) Assyrian Federation Netherlands	Branches of Armenian political party (Armenian Revolutionary Federation)
<i>Organizations with social-cultural orientation</i>	Assyrian Mesopotamian Association Enschede, Assyria Foundation–Netherlands, the branch of “Assyrian Universal Alliance” ethnic organization, Help Christians in Syria	“Ani” Armenian Community, Maastricht “Abovyan” Cultural Union “United Armenians in the Netherlands”, “Ararat” Union, “Gladzor” youth union, “Tatev” Union “Dodrecht, Armenian union”

I propose to discuss the charity activities of two communities’ organizations based on “religious” – “non-religious” distinction, considering that the Church is the core institution both for the Assyrian and Armenian diaspora communities.

Religious organizations

Assyrian and Armenian respondents find that Christianity is an essential group-identification marker. Assyrians respondents believe that without maintaining distinct religious identity they would undoubtedly have been assimilated into the Muslim world in which they have lived since the Arab conquests of the region in the seventh century. Similarly, religion played a major role in the unification and defense Armenians from Muslim countries (i.e. Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria). For example, in Turkey, Armenians did not have opportunity to maintain their ethnic belonging through other institutions such as political parties since it was forbidden by the state. Consequently, the Church has been the central binding institution for their community.

The research showed that despite the importance of the Church for both communities, Syriac-Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church have different features when it comes shaping communities and prioritizing areas of charity activities.

Syriac-Orthodox Church

Syriac-Orthodox Church is one of the main organizations that shapes Dutch Assyrian/Aramena network. It has 12 functioning churches in the Netherlands. The observations and the interviews show that the Church is highly attended by Assyrians (both by young and elderly people). The churches provide places where people socialize and connect with each other. Many respondents stated that in condition of absence of the statehood the Church is the main organization that plays important role in preservation of the Assyrian communities in diaspora.

Syriac-Orthodox Church stays neutral when it comes to ethno-national identification (Aramean-Assyrian) and political struggles (Independent state or autonomous region). Ethno-national “Assyrian” and “Aramean” identification is being changed with more generic name of “Syriac”. As a consequence, charity activities initiated by the Church are being joined both by people who identify themselves as being 'Assyrian' and 'Aramean’. The charity activities of the Church are mainly directed to the Christian (Syriac Orthodox) populated areas of Iraq and Syria. The Church provides relief to the war-affected Syriacs: these include food, medicine, clothes and other necessities.

“We are very concerned about those who are in the Middle East. We collect money and send needy and poor people either directly through our Church or through sister Churches. We try to be engaged in only in philanthropic activities and not politically.” Patriarch

“We send money, clothes. For example we say to our people: “Ok, people, we need to collect clothes”. Believe me, next day the Church looks like a huge store, it is absolutely full.” Representative of Youth Union of the Church

Parallel to these short-term humanitarian activities, the Church participates in long-term rehabilitation to the displaced that is being organized by worldwide network of the Syriac-Orthodox Churches:

“Recently we decided to build a new monastery in Lebanon who will also have an orphanage for children affected by war. The patriarchy initiated this, so we send money from here.” Priest

Assyrians that are actively engaged into the political struggle and nation building activities are more critical about the role of the Church and all the donations that go through the Church to their homeland. Majority of interviewees have mentioned that among older generation the Church has “unconditional trust”. The reason is that the Church was the central institution around which Assyrians gathered in the Middle East and the symbol of “protection from the Muslim world”. Therefore, they are ready to donate immediately for any reason if the Church calls for it:

“My mother donates for every reason. For example, once she said that she heard that you have to donate a euro for each of your bone. Next day she donated 270 euros, because she believed it will save her soul.” Representative of a politically oriented organization

Armenian Apostolic Church

Armenian Church works very closely with the Armenian state and, unlike the Assyrian diaspora, there are no disagreements about the engagement strategies. The Church was one of the first organizations that responded to the Four Day War that took place between Armenia / Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan in 2016¹. The Church initiated collective fundraising activities among the Armenian community. The collected money was transferred to the governing body of the Armenian Apostolic Church and later on to the state of Nagorno-Karabakh. This was the main collective donation organized by the Dutch-Armenian community in collaboration with the state. The involvement of the Armenian Church in the protection of the homeland explained in a following way:

“Of course, our primary mission is the salvation of the human soul, but we should not forget that we are Armenian Church. We will always stand for Armenia and for the protection of our homeland. Therefore with the help of the Dutch Armenians we will support our homeland with whatever we can.” Priest

Religious institutions play an important mediating role, by spreading the information on charity activities initiated by the Armenian government. For example, there is all-Armenian fund that has a mission to unite Armenians in Armenia and overseas to overcome the country’s difficulties and to help establish sustainable development in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. They organize fundraising activities annually. However, the representatives of the Church and migrants stated that the mobilization readiness to make contributions is much higher when it comes to emergency response situations. Moreover, respondents showed hesitation in participating in annual collective donations. Most of the interviewees told that they prefer to collect money at local community level and deliver it to a trustworthy person. The reason of avoiding to join transnational initiatives is being explained with lack of trust:

“When the call of collecting money comes from big organizations then people hesitate to donate. There is a lack of trust, there are always talks among Armenians that they don’t know whom the collected money goes. Whereas, if there is someone whom they really know then they would collect and transfer money. For example, we have an Armenian language teacher that initiated donations. Almost everyone in our community immediately contribute.” Representative of a socio-cultural organization

The Dutch-Armenian Church also mediates charity activities directed to vulnerable Armenian communities abroad. The main initiative was in support of war-affected places and populations of Aleppo, Syrian. For this purpose the patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Syria has visited Armenian Churches in Amsterdam, Maastricht and Almelo in order to explain the situation in Syria as well as to embark upon a fundraising campaign. The representatives of these organizations have stated that initiative was mainly supported by Armenians that migrated from Syria. They explain that though Syrian Armenians self-identify themselves as being Armenian, they refer to Syria as their “second homeland” as they feel responsible also for its future.

¹ The Four Day War or April War began along the Nagorno-Karabakh line of contact on 1 April 2016 with the Nagorno-Karabakh Defense Army, backed by the Armenian Armed Forces, on one side and the Azerbaijani Armed Forces on the other. The clashes occurred in the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). The clashes have been defined as "the worst" since the 1994 ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“Non-Religious” organizations

The research results show the organizational structure of the Armenian and Assyrian communities have structural differences. Assyrian organizations have gained more centralized and transnational character with establishment of the Assyrian Federation Netherlands (AFN). AFN is an umbrella organization for existing social, cultural and humanitarian organizations in the Netherlands. The Federation channels local organizations’ efforts into one collective narrative. This serves as an empowerment for the stateless nation to live on as a collective, or at least to represent their situation as such to themselves and others. In the case of Armenians, the community doesn’t have coordinating body and the organizations are scattered around the country.

Assyrian Community

Assyrian Federation Netherlands plays the main role in transnational arena by being a member of the Assyrian Confederation in Europe. The Confederation has the aim at unifying the voice of the 500,000 Assyrians living in Europe by bringing together the Assyrian national federations from several EU countries. Currently their main concerns for collective fundraising initiatives are the protection of Assyrian people in Iraq and Syria as well as support to the soldiers of the Assyrian Army in Iraq (the Nineveh Plain Protection Units).

Assyrian Federation in the Netherlands is actively engaged in donations that provide funding to the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU). This initiative was formed in late 2014 in Iraq to defend Ninveh Plain (a region where Assyrians in Iraq have traditionally been concentrated) from Islamic State. The international platform of donation calls Assyrians worldwide to help funding the training, arming and deploying of the NPU. The donations are directed to the families of soldiers so that they can sustain themselves while fighting against ISIS. The financial support is coming mostly from Assyrians in the US and Europe:

“Now we are establishing a huge army. I send money to one soldiers. I pay the amount that a soldier needs per month. My brother does the same so we pay 2 soldiers in Iraq. Someone else pays for a general.” Representative of a politically-oriented organization

“We are not buying guns for our soldiers to fight. Our donations are for the families of soldiers, because from Iraqi State they earn only 100 dollars, how can a family live with this money?” Representative of a politically-oriented organization

Another significant aspect of Assyrian transnational engagement is provision of humanitarian support to people in their homeland (Syria and Iraq). These funds are used to provide immediate, effective, life-saving assistance in the disaster area. Humanitarian organizations were formed as a response to the crisis in the Middle East and for reaching specifically Assyrian populations. As the interviewee noted:

“When the war in Syria has started, the priority for us was to have a humanitarian organization to send money to our people. The money that different governmental and non-governmental organizations send to Syria is being used for all communities, also for Muslim communities. Therefore, a very little part or no money is being received by Christians and Assyrians in particular” Representative of a humanitarian organization

A considerable part of the humanitarian initiatives have transnational character: they are either being initiated by other well-established Assyrian communities or being joined by them. Respondents explained that European diaspora represents just a territorial unit of the Assyrian nation. As one of the leaders stated, *“European borders do not play much role for Assyrian diaspora”*, since they are well-networked and implement a number of projects together. The Dutch Assyrian community cooperates with the communities in Sweden and Germany as well as with communities in the USA. For example, The Dutch Assyrians participate in donations organized by the organization named *“Assyrians without border”* that is established in Sweden. The organization works to improve the lives of the Assyrian people in their countries of origin (Syria, Iran, Iraq, Turkey). The organization has a number of projects from long term development initiatives to emergency response. The ones that have been supported by the Dutch Assyrian community are assistance of Assyrians in emergency situation, provision of scholarship to Assyrian students.

Another humanitarian support that has been initiated in the Netherlands and supported by diasporic networks was a *“A Christmas gift for Ninveh”*. This project’s target group was Assyrian children in Northern Iraq. The initiator of the project noted:

“Young and old have been traumatized because of the horrible events in the past years. The Christian Assyrians have been continues target of political groups and extremists. This has caused many families to leave their homes to a safer place. I do hope that we, from Holland and the rest of the world, can offer these people a special Christmas greeting by sending them a gift!” Representative of a socio-cultural organization

The transnational network of the Assyrian diaspora is also well connected with the territories that they refer as homeland in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. The existing needs and priority areas of help are reported by the NGOs functioning in their homeland and diaspora organizations react to it. These NGOs also offer financial transactions from worldwide diaspora to Iraq and Syria. Turkish part of "Assyria" plays the role of the mediator of financial transfers. Due to the conflict financial transfers to Syria are restricted, therefore the collected donations are being taken by a trustworthy person to Turkey and then to Syria by crossing the border.

The Dutch-Assyrian charity activities are being directed not only to their homeland but also to the communities worldwide. The main role here plays *“Assyrian Universal Alliance”* organization. This is a network of Assyrians worldwide that has the aim of preserving Assyrian nation. The union is particularly in initiating charity activities for Iraq and Syria. However, other Assyrian communities in need are also being supported. An example of these activities was the construction of schools, provision of transportation for schoolchildren in Assyrian populated villages in Armenia and Georgian.

Armenian Community

Armenians don’t have coordinating body and collaboration for transnational diasporic charity activities is not common. Armenian organizations tend to initiate charity activities at local community level. The main event that has mobilized Dutch Armenian socio-cultural organizations was the Four Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to the representatives of these organizations, as soon as they had information on conflict escalation they mobilized their members to discuss how they can support the homeland. They state that *“a considerable amount of money”* was transferred to the boarder communities, families of soldiers and fallen soldiers. Notably, there was no cooperation between local organizations in

order to deliver the gathered money. They found their own channels to deliver the donations and they haven't cooperated with state institutions.

“There was a person that was planning to travel to Armenia, so in one day we said «ok, we will collect money, everyone can contribute as much as they can». We didn't collaborate with any other organization. We knew a person who was informed about those people that were affected during the war and were ignored by the state. We collected and delivered our donations to concrete people.” Representative of a socio-cultural organization

Parallel to socio-cultural organizations, there are small charity organizations. They provide small scale money, clothes donations to vulnerable families, support selected people to gain vocational education in order to ensure further financial income for their family.

“We find vulnerable families and try to help them. We don't collect huge money but even with little donations we are able to positively change lives of people. We find families that are really in need”. Representative of a humanitarian organization

These small charity organizations started gather additional funds after the escalation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. They stated that the donations were directed to war-affected boarder villages of Armenia, families of wounded or killed soldiers, restoration of destroyed houses and for buying equipment for army.

While in the case of the Assyrian diaspora internal division is stronger when it comes to ethno-national identification, in the case of the Armenian diaspora there were identified “sub-ethnic” differences based on the countries Armenians migrated from. The heterogeneity of Armenian community is being reflected on willingness to mobilize. Some respondents have stated that a part of Armenians that originate from countries that have well-established diasporic communities (such as Syria, Iraq, Iran) have more “nostalgic” orientation towards Armenia. They more tend to keep cultural, ethnic identity and heritage than to be active in collective financial transfers:

“The idea that Armenia has its own independent state on the map and borders, capital and president that should be accepted by every Armenian is very difficult for them. And Armenians active role hasn't yet oriented how to react or how to collaborate with Armenia. The majority of them cannot accept it and act accordingly.” Representative of a socio-cultural organization

The research identified that young Armenians have formed a transnational network of young Armenian professionals. Organizations with this profile are rare in Armenian diaspora since they differ from traditional cultural, social and religious associations. This is a platform for networking and exchange of professional experiences of Armenian living in different countries. The representatives note that this form of organization is especially attractive for those young Armenians that do not have “diasporic” profile and cannot be associated with traditional “diaspora-oriented” organizations. The organization hasn't initiated any charity activities, however during interviews they have stated that they move towards initiating sustainable development oriented actions. The projects can vary from agricultural development to solar system development initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Despite originating from countries with diverse social, political and economic background, from countries in conflict to more stable situation, the diasporic groups revealed to have rather similar patterns of engagement. The main concepts that unite and mobilize both the Armenian and Assyrian diasporas are the homeland protection and provision of assistance to the war-affected places and people. The tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq have been the main sources for diaspora mobilization.

The existence/absence of the state has a role in “positioning” the Church in two communities. The Armenian Apostolic Church closely cooperates with the state for the homeland protection and mediates charity contribution from the Dutch Armenian community. The Syriac-Orthodox Church stays neutral when it comes to the protection initiatives by Assyrians in order to protect their homeland. Rather, the Syriac-Orthodox Church directs financial resources on humanitarian help. The Syriac-Orthodox Church tries to overcome the fragmentation of the community based on “Assyrian”- “Aramean” self-identification. Eventually, this has led to better functioning religious identification and network creation.

The fieldwork results show that Armenian and Assyrian “non –religious” organizations have different structures and networks. The Assyrian diaspora has more centralized organizational structure. The absence of the state has led to better functioning networks between diasporic communities on the level of elite and organizational networks. The Assyrian Federation Netherlands plays the role of channeling local organizations’ efforts into one collective narrative. The “government” of the Assyrian community is also closely linked to the other communities via Assyrian Confederation of Europe. The state-less Assyrian diaspora uses the “resources” of other European and US based Assyrian communities as a donation channel. The network of diasporic organizations are directly involved into the “state-building” activities, such as financing the families of soldiers that are protecting their historical homeland.

In the case of Armenians, the community doesn’t have coordinating body and the organizations are scattered around the country. An important role in “transnationalization” of the community play the Armenian Apostolic Church that creates sustained connections between diasporic communities, as well as between the diaspora and the state. Local socio-cultural and humanitarian organizations prefer informal and person-to-person transfer of money and goods despite the fact that the Armenian government has initiated pan-diasporic fundraising activities. Though the government regards its diaspora as strategically and has established a Ministry of Diaspora in order to maintain sustainable connections, the engagement initiatives are mostly self-driven.

The directions of collective financial transfers show that both communities are far from being homogeneous. Internal diversity of Armenian community has affected also on the engagement directions. Armenians that have migrated from Syria are interested in provision of support to the “known communities”: Armenian-populated areas of Syria. Moreover, in the case of Armenian community the historical, idealized homeland does not always coincide with the current borders of Armenian state for “diasporic Armenians”. Therefore they are rather interested in reproduction of social-cultural identity than in participation of fundraising activities. Assyrian community also participates in philanthropic activities to

their communities worldwide, however the motivation is not based on individual connections or for the migration history but, rather, for supporting “the unknown community” of their co-ethnics.

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