



Centre for  
**Global  
Cooperation  
Research**

Report of the 11<sup>th</sup> Käte Hamburger Lecture

# Identity and Political Mobilization of Diasporas: A Gendered Perspective

with Professor Nadje Al-Ali

21 April 2015, Duisburg



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*The 11<sup>th</sup> Käte Hamburger Lecture addressed the topic of “Identity and Political Mobilization of Diasporas: A Gendered Perspective” with **Nadje Al-Ali**, Professor of Gender Studies, SOAS University of London. It took place on 21st April and was organized by Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research in cooperation with Volkshochschule Duisburg. This event was embedded in a two-day InHouse & Guest Workshop on “Diaspora as Agents of Global Cooperation”. The purpose of the Lecture was to analyse the identity formations and political mobilizations of Muslim diasporas in Europe and beyond through a gendered lens.*

*The lecture started with a welcome remark by **Sören Link**, Mayor of Duisburg. In his speech he pointed out that the topic of the Lecture was timely and highly relevant for Duisburg where the Centre is located. During the past decades Duisburg has been shaped by different migration waves. Eventually this led to the present diversity in Duisburg and the whole Ruhr area.*

## Lecture



Al-Ali began her talk by depicting her family history and thereby her personal experiences with diasporic dynamics. She recounted how her father as a student was among the first wave of diaspora that came from Iraq to Germany in the late 50s. The 70s and 80s saw the migration of a number of male political exiles. In the context of the war with Iran and the atrocities conducted by Saddam Hussein’s regime, a new wave of refugees, including entire families, arrived in Germany also during 1980s. It is not until the 90s that a much larger group of Iraqis fled the impacts of the first Gulf war and subsequently economic sanctions.

Initially, mainly younger and middle aged men managed to make the long and hazardous journey. A few years later some of the immediate relatives followed through family unification schemes. Another wave of migration ensued the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the increased sectarian tensions as well as the consequential lawlessness. For the first time female Iraqis started to migrate without male family members. The latest crisis and atrocities linked to the Islamic State (ISIS) brought about another wave of asylum seekers. By now the political developments and history of Iraq resulted in the flight of millions of Iraqis and the creation of an immense diaspora.

Al-Ali mapped the different migration waves with an aim to illustrate the important conceptual points she addressed in her lecture. What is now considered to be an Iraqi diaspora actually consists of multiple and overlapping waves of migration. They all originated in specific historical circumstances and motivations; including changing social, economic and political upheavals.



Furthermore, the Iraqi diaspora, like diasporas from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, comprise different types of migrants, ranging from refugees, asylum seekers and forced migrants to those seeking labour, education and family unification. Moreover, different trajectories of displacement and migration shaped identities and political orientations according to the specific social, economic and political circumstances and conditions in countries of settlement.

However, empirical evidences in Al-Ali's research show that the relationship between the specific trajectory of migration and the level as well as kind of political involvement is not straightforward and is complicated by other factors. Without limitation posed by the political developments in the country of origin, a person changes the positionality towards the developments and conflicts. Further factors include the politics in the country of settlement, accessible resources, available social as well as political networks, individual inclinations and experiences.

One major variable and aspect, often neglected when identities and political mobilization of diasporas is addressed, is gender. While several waves of Iraqi migrants were predominantly male, in more recent decades women have increasingly joined the growing diaspora: first as part of family reunification schemes, and later in their own right, seeking refuge, asylum, education and employment. This corresponds to a wider global trend suggesting the **feminisation of migration**. However, Al-Ali stressed, a gendered lens is not solely about noticing whether migrants are male or female. The gendered lens should shed more light on the differences between women and men in migration motivations and trajectories, the specific experiences of the journey or the processes of settling down. A gendered lens, Al-Ali stated, is interested in **configurations of power, inequalities and injustices**. The multiple and complex processes in which gender is constituted and constitutive of other power relations and hierarchies, especially the ways how they intersect at specific historical moments and empirical contexts.

A female migrant is **a woman in two unequal gender regimes**: her country of origin and the country of settlement. At the same time she is positioned in regard to unequal relations of, for example, economic class, nationality, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. It is the way the different variables interact that shapes influences on her, her chances in life and hence her own relative power or powerlessness. This is also true for male migrants.

Additionally, Al-Ali addressed the changing meaning and significance of diasporas. Over the past years, it has become a term of self-identification among



many different groups who migrated or whose ancestors migrated. Belonging to a diaspora entails a consciousness of or an emotional attachment to commonly claimed origins and social attributes associated with these origins.

Whereas, in policy circles the question of diasporas as potential **peace makers or peace wreckers** has been a particular momentum given the wide range of conflicts and forms of violence as well as attempts of conflict resolution and peace processes. At this juncture, a gendered lens is instructive because of the different significance of *peace* for women. For them, Al-Ali argued, it does not merely mean succession of armed conflict. Rather violence exists on a continuum. Al-Ali claimed that historically and cross-culturally there is a relationship between the increased militarization and the rise of gender violence. This has implications on the type of political mobilization amongst women in the diaspora, whose nationalist, ethnics, or political struggles are often merged with struggles for more gender based rights and equalities.

Next, Al-Ali stressed the importance of transnational networks and activities in shaping diasporic identities and political mobilization. Hence, transnationalism is vastly transforming social, political and economic structures and practices amongst migrant communities. Contradicting assumptions apparent in media and policy debates, comparative studies have shown that **the higher level of transnationality, a person has, does not automatically result in a lower integration.**

Furthermore, only limited attention has been paid to the various ways transnational fields and activities are gendered. Women and men are positioned differently in terms of prevailing gender ideologies and relations within both their country of settlement and their country of origin. These regulations determine their identities and political activities. On the one hand, this leads to obstacles posed by social customs and normative rules. On the other hand, gender ideologies and cultural norms might enable women to engage with women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds or political convictions easier. And as women were perceived to be less significant for political processes, their transgression of talking to the other side seemed to be less threatening. Nevertheless, Al-Ali stressed that this does not suggest that women are to be essentialized as natural peacemakers.

The final issues, Al-Ali introduced, concerned the specific debates and issues of Muslim diasporas in Europe. First, she raised the point that even though the number of Muslims in Europe is growing, Muslims remain a small minority. European Muslims come from many different national and ethnic backgrounds, from various classes, from rural or urban areas. They had different experiences depending on their nationality, ethnicity, level of religiosity or secular values,



age, gender, and sexuality. Some have lived in Europe for several generations and others have arrived more recently. Thus, she recognised Steven Vertovec's<sup>1</sup> notion of **super-diversity** as useful in capturing the dynamic interplay of variables when looking at the identities and political mobilization of people of Muslim origin in Europe today.

Secondly, she added to Vertovec's conceptualization of super-diversity the broad continuum of secular, religious and, Islamist identities and positions. The vast majority of Muslims are not sympathetic or supporters of political Islam and especially not in its violent manifestations. Moreover, just like many people of Judaeo-Christian background might be culturally identifying with specific religious tradition, so are many Muslims. The general designation of *Muslim*, Al-Ali argued, tends to conceal more than it reveals.

In her third point Al-Ali urged for **the rethought concept of Europeanness** and European identities, as well as its composites national identities. Islam and Muslims must not be seen as external to Europe, but as a part of it for a long time. Indeed, she noted, some countries in Europe are doing better than others in recognizing that they are an integral part of a diverse and pluralistic society.

Finally, Al-Ali concluded, contestations of gender norms, relations and identities are central to cultural constructions of social identities. As feminism and masculinities as well as wider gender norms and relations have increasingly gained centre stage in debates and protests on all sides, it is clear that a gendered lens is crucial for academics and policy makers alike.

## Comments



The lecture was followed by comments from **Jochen Hippler**, University of Duisburg-Essen, and **Ariane Sadjed**, University of Vienna, and an open discussion with the audience moderated by **David Carment**, Professor at Carleton University Canada and Senior Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg /Centre for Global Cooperation Research.

In their response to Al-Ali's lecture, Hippler and Sadjed agreed with her statements about the complexity of community status. Moreover, Hippler stressed the shifting and unstable features of the terminology in regard of describing a community. Additionally, he stated, the meaning of being a part of a transnational network is changing; on the one hand, due to different waves of migration and on the other hand, due to the digitalization, which eased the

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<sup>1</sup> Vertovec, Steven (2007): Super-diversity and its implications, in: Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol. 30, No. 6, pp. 1024-1054.



communication possibilities. Thereby, it is easier to maintain the link to the country of origin. Sadjed accented the diversity of the category of Muslim further. Beyond that she submitted a critical contemplation regarding the meaning and content of the terminology *Europeanness* by considering the history of the European society.

At the close of the lecture, an intense discussion evolved around the concept of Europe, Muslim identity and the possibilities and limits of women in a diasporic community. As a whole, Al-Ali's thoughts gave a new perspective and impetus for the encompassing workshop.

Report written by Fentje Jacobsen

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