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## ANALYTICAL ESSAY

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# Beyond Statist Paradigms: Sociospatial Positionality and Diaspora Mobilization in International Relations

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This article presents a new positional perspective for the analysis of diaspora mobilization in international relations (IR), seeking to shift debates beyond realist, liberalist, and constructivist thinking, and speaking to a cluster of sociopositional theories in IR. It provides a conceptual discussion and empirical illustrations of diaspora positionality—the power diaspora activists derive from their sociospatial positions in particular contexts—and its utility to account for different mobilization trajectories. Positionality as a sociospatial concept offers opportunities to analyze diaspora politics beyond statist paradigms, dominated by analyses of triadic relationships between diasporas, host states (immigration states), and home states (sending states). Diasporas have links to many contexts beyond host states and original home states. Such linkages structure their relationships globally. If diaspora entrepreneurs perceive themselves as deriving strong powers to achieve homeland-oriented goals from a particular sociospatial context, they are more likely to pursue claims through institutional politics and moderate means. If they perceive themselves as deriving weak powers from a context, they are more likely to engage with activist networks and pursue claims in transgressive ways. The conceptual discussion engages aspects of diaspora positionality in juxtaposition with other spatial concepts such as geographical proximity/distance and position in a social network. The empirical discussion brings patterns of mobilization trajectories from the Armenian diaspora mobilization for genocide recognition and the Palestinian diaspora mobilization for statehood, informed by a rich multisited fieldwork.

**Keywords:** diaspora, international relations, sociospatial positionality

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### Introduction

Transnational diaspora mobilization has become important in international relations (IR). A growing number of scholars on civil wars incorporate diasporas in their models as external nonstate actors in intrastate conflicts (Adamson 2002, 2013; Brinkerhoff 2009, 2011; Collier and Hoeffler 2000; Hall 2015; Kaldor 2001; Koinova 2011; Lyons 2006; Shain 2002; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Salehyan 2007; Smith and Stares 2007). Other scholars address diaspora mobilization from a transnational social movement perspective, seeking to explain conditions and causal mechanisms for mobilization (Adamson 2002, 2013; Koinova 2009, 2014, Sökefeld 2006; Quinsaat 2013; Wayland 2004). This article calls attention to the need to analyze diaspora movements from relational and positional perspectives and highlights the importance of positional analysis.

Does diaspora embeddedness in different contexts affect the trajectories for transnational mobilization, and if so, how? I argue that the concept of diaspora positionality—the power diaspora political agents perceive themselves or are perceived as deriving from their sociospatial positions in a particular context—has a strong potential to account for diaspora mobilization, though it has not been greatly discussed in scholarly analyses. Positionality as a sociospatial concept offers opportunities to analyze diaspora politics beyond statist paradigms, which are dominated by analyses of triadic relationships between diasporas, host states (immigration states), and home states (sending states). Diasporas have linkages to many contexts beyond host states and original home states. I argue that such linkages structure their relationships globally and endow them with different powers derived from different contexts. If diaspora political agents perceive themselves or are perceived as deriving relatively strong powers to achieve homeland-oriented goals from a particular sociospatial context, they are more likely to engage in institutional politics and pursue their claims through state-based and supranational channels, in what McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 7–8) call “contained contention.” If they perceive themselves or are perceived as deriving weak powers from a context, they are more likely to engage with activist networks and to pursue claims through both “contained” and “transgressive” contention.

I base my understanding of the term *diaspora* on Adamson and Demetriou: “a social collectivity that exists across state borders and that has succeeded over time to: 1) sustain a collective national, cultural, or religious identity through a sense of internal cohesion and sustained ties with a real or imagined homeland and 2) display an ability to address the collective interests of members of the social collectivity through a developed internal organizational framework and transnational links” (2007, 497). I use the term for nonhomogeneous social collectivities of migration waves, generations, social strata, and active or inactive members. *Diaspora political agents* are individual and institutional agents who actively make political claims on behalf of their original homelands. *Diaspora mobilization* designates the pursuit of claims and practices related to the original homelands through various trajectories—*institutional or activist* channels—and a variety of means, ranging from moderate (“contained”) to more radical (“transgressive”) politics or a combination thereof.

This article presents a new positional perspective for the analysis of diaspora mobilization in IR scholarship and seeks to shift debates beyond realist, liberalist, and constructivist thinking. The conceptual discussion focuses on four major aspects of diaspora positionality—relativity, power, fluidity, and perception—and juxtaposes positionality with closely related concepts such as proximity/distance and position in a social network. Patterns of mobilization trajectories may depend on the perceived powers diaspora political agents derive from the contexts in which they are embedded. The discussion is illustrated with empirical evidence from patterns of mobilization of two conflict-generated diasporas—Armenian and Palestinian—for genocide recognition and statehood, respectively. I do not

engage with causal inference, but demonstrate *patterns* of institutional and activist mobilization trajectories, associated with relatively weak or strong diaspora positionality in different contexts. I conclude by suggesting how diaspora positionality may apply to other cases.

### Transnational Diaspora Politics and IR Theories

During the 2000s, studies in the IR *realist* tradition began to recognize diasporas as important external actors, in particular, their role as *resources* for mobilization purposes. Diasporas can finance local factions, purchase and smuggle weapons, provide sanctuary to rebels, and recruit soldiers. A seminal large-N World Bank study showed that affluent diasporas can perpetuate long-term civil wars (Collier and Hoeffler 2000). Qualitative studies of the Armenian, Chechen, Kosovar, Sikh, Somali, Tamil, and other conflict-generated diasporas showed that intrastate conflicts resist resolution, since rebels reach to diasporas for financial support (Adamson 2002; Brinkerhoff 2011; Fair 2005; Kaldor 2001; Lyons 2006; Shain 2002; Shain and Barth 2003). Rebel groups with transnational constituencies based on kinship or religion are more likely to receive foreign support than others (Salehyan et al. 2011, 709). Refugees often facilitate the spread of arms, combatants, and ideologies; alter the ethnic composition of the host state; and exacerbate economic competition (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006, 335). Civil war is likely to spread when foreign agencies give resources to militarized refugees (Lischer 2005).

Realist theories consider diasporas as providing *material power* to radicalize intrastate conflicts from abroad or contribute to postconflict processes. This approach is limited in several ways, however. Emphasizing the primacy of material power renders other forms of power less relevant for diaspora mobilization. The theoretical implications are that diasporas with access to material resources are likely to be mobilized themselves or to be sought after for mobilization by external actors. It is not clear whether or not they will be mobilized through institutional or activist trajectories. Diaspora linkages to specific contexts are not factored in the analysis, even if studies observe that the effects of diaspora mobilization in geographically contiguous regions (Salehyan 2007, 55) and remote locations through “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1992, 1–10) are quite different (Cederman et al. 2013, 393). Moreover, even if realist accounts acknowledge extraterritorial relationships and diasporas as nonstate actors, the state—primarily the original home state—remains central in the analysis.

Other theories seek to integrate transnational diaspora politics into various IR paradigms. Shain and Barth (2003, 459) emphasize that mobilization can be studied in the theoretical space between liberalism and constructivism, because of the diaspora’s position “outside the state” but “inside the people.” *Liberalism* rejects the idea that states are unitary actors, asserting that identity-based and other interest groups formulate the state’s international preferences through the domestic political process (Shain and Barth 2003, 457–60; Shain 2007). This process is especially relevant for a liberal host state, where diasporas are relatively free to engage in political activities (Adamson 2002, 162; Kozlowski 2005, 12). Some diasporas succeed in foreign policy lobbying when they are well organized, find executive and legislative permeability, and advocate policies the government already favors (Haney and Vanderbush 1999, 345). Host states can experience policy capture by lobbies (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007), promote democracy (Shain 1999), and intervene in secessionist conflicts in response to demands from domestic constituencies (Saideman 1997).

The strength of liberalism is in the *unpacking of host-state processes* and in demonstrating the lobbying capacities of diasporas. However, this approach is still dominated by statist approaches to ethnic lobbies and the foreign policy of a host state,

especially in the United States, without factoring in transnational linkages between diasporas and contexts elsewhere. Such transnational linkages either are not part of the analysis or are mentioned but considered of little analytical value. The analysis is also tilted toward discussing mobilization through institutional channels rather than grassroots activism.

*Constructivism's* emphasis on nonstate actors and social processes beyond the state (Wendt 1999) offers further room to theorize about diaspora mobilization. Constructivism factors in the multitude of diaspora *identities* that change through interactions between actors and their environment; social processes affect relations between actors themselves, and internal processes shape individual identities (Shain and Barth 2003, 458). Power is not only materially based and resource oriented but *symbolic*, derived from the "authority to determine the shared meanings that constitute identities, interests, and practices of states" (Adler 1997, 336; Shain 2007, 137). It can be embedded in individual agency (Brinkerhoff 2016), and aid not only conflicts but postconflict processes with remittances, financial investments, philanthropy, and leadership for postconflict institutions (Brinkerhoff 2008; Lyons 2006; Orjuella 2008; Van Hear 2003). Diasporas can also have deterritorialized identities and participate in identity formation with the identities of nation-states (Adamson and Demetriou 2007, 491–92).

Scholars working with transnational diaspora mobilization have drawn extensively from IR constructivist accounts, which have integrated transnational social movements in their analysis. Parallels have been drawn between diasporas and human rights groups, which pressure their governments through "boomerang" (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and "spiral" effects (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999), as diasporas could be used as external agents to pressure domestic governments to implement political change. Diasporas mobilize when global and local opportunity structures open and reframe local issues to appeal to global actors (Bob 2005; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Tarrow 2005). These scholars argue that diaspora mobilization differs from transnational social movements because a particularistic rather than universalistic identity is being mobilized (Koinova 2009; Adamson 2013). But it resembles them in many other ways. *Political entrepreneurs* are crucial for such movements (Adamson 2002; Brinkerhoff 2011). They may be leaders of diaspora organizations or informal leaders beyond organizations. They may raise diaspora consciousness to maintain its identity or motivate it to act on homeland-oriented goals (Shain and Barth 2003). They act on local and global *political opportunity structures* (Adamson 2013; Cochrane 2015; Koinova 2011, 2014; Øestergaard-Nielsen 2001; Smith and Stares 2007; Wayland 2004); use *mobilizing structures* or formal organizational forms or networks; or become *transnational brokers* connecting networks (Wayland 2004; Koinova 2011; Adamson 2013). They use *framing* to reach and expand the message to specific audiences (Wayland 2004; Smith and Stares 2007; Adamson and Demetriou 2007; Koinova 2011) and build domestic or transnational *coalitions* to achieve common goals.

Constructivist accounts focus on diasporas as nonstate actors and stress that diaspora identities need not be treated as essential categories, but have gaps similar to those of other IR theories regarding the context in which diasporas are embedded. They consider that diaspora political agents are endowed with more individual agency than is available through their symbolic powers and do not address whether or not diasporas will mobilize more through institutional or activist trajectories. Depending on the sociospatial position diaspora political agents occupy in particular contexts, they will be endowed with different powers to act on opportunities or constraints.

In sum, none of the theoretical debates in IR can entirely account for trajectories of diaspora mobilization. Anchored in considerations of utility and material power, realist accounts nevertheless acknowledge that diasporic identities underpin

cross-border kinship networks and exert impacts on neighboring states and the international system. Liberalist accounts unpack interactions between diaspora political agents and a host state, but acknowledge that diaspora identities are intertwined with the organizational and material power of diaspora political agents. Finally, constructivist and transnational social movement accounts cannot neglect the importance of diasporas as sources of material power in a political struggle, and they acknowledge that diaspora political agents lobby host states and home states on an equal footing with transnational mobilization. Even if scholars seek to embed their work in one grand theoretical approach, in reality there is no perfect fit and their theorizing incorporates assumptions from various paradigms.

Several prominent scholars have recently concluded that IR theory anchored in macrotheoretic paradigms of realism, liberalism, and constructivism may have reached its limits. Whether because aggregate paradigms “lack shared incommensurable content,” with effective explanations cutting across them (Jackson and Nexon 2009, 908); or because specific puzzles necessitate Sil and Katzenstein’s “analytical eclecticism” (2010) to account for factors and concrete causal mechanisms (Bennett 2013, 460–61); or because they do not factor in reflexivity (Brown 2013), grand theories have opened space for mid-range theories. These fall traditionally under comparative politics, focusing on comparisons of states and more recently substate units such as cities and regions. Midrange theories are a growing IR trend (Lake 2013, 568).

In this article I speak to a cluster of midrange sociopositional theories and emphasize the need to think in positional terms when analyzing diaspora mobilization. Some of these theories focus broadly on interactions between agents, and how endogenous processes lead to continuity and change of phenomena as diverse as imperial orders (Nexon and Wright 2007; Nexon 2009), conflict resolution and peace-building (Goddard 2009, 2012), rebellion (Staniland 2014), democratization (Stroschein 2012), and informally institutionalized conflict dynamics (Koinova 2013), among others. To varying degrees these works relate to sociological studies, building on the ideas of Emirbayer (1997) about relational sociology and Tilly (1998) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) about transactional approaches to social movements. Network theories emphasize the importance of position occupied by specific actors. Power is not associated with material or symbolic resources, but is embedded in the position political agents occupy between fragmented networks, allowing them to act as brokers when bridging structural gaps (Adamson 2013; Brinkerhoff 2016; Burt 1992; Goddard 2009). Degree centrality in networks can be associated with social power, as actors “withhold social benefits such as membership” and “enact social sanctions as a method of coercion” (Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006, 11). Power can also be wielded by actors on the margins of a network, with options to exit the network and break unwanted links with central nodes (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 572). The crux of these theories is to consider power as derived from a system of ties in which agents are embedded and to demonstrate that interactions among ties define but do not determine agent behaviors. As discussed below, diaspora positionality is different from position in a network, yet it exemplifies agency in a system of ties developed globally among diasporas embedded in different contexts, beyond traditionally considered host and home states. The theory of diaspora sociospatial positionality speaks to a growing understanding of the need to challenge a triadic relationship between diasporas, host states, and home states, as diasporas mobilize in a variety of spaces—such as cities, online, refugee camps, supranational organizations, sites of global visibility, in spaces contiguous to or distant from the homeland (Brinkerhoff 2009; Adamson 2016; Brkanic 2016; Koinova and Karabegovic 2016; Kok and Rogers 2016; Van Hear and Cohen 2016; Gabiam and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016).

### Diasporas and Sociospatial Positionality: Conceptual Discussion

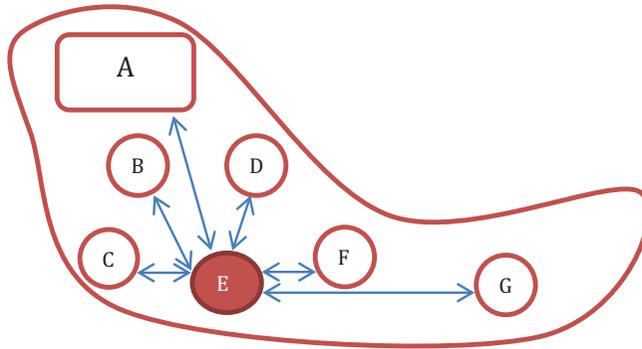
This section outlines the characteristics of diaspora positionality as a social-spatial phenomenon, along with several closely related sociospatial concepts. It also addresses how positionality relates to agency and structure and implications for diaspora mobilization.

The term *positionality* originates in feminist theory. Gender, ethnic, racial, and religious identities are defined not simply as essentialist categories of individuals, but as positions these individuals occupy in a set of relationships (Haraway 1988; Maher and Tetreault 1993; Nagar and Geiger 2007). The external context in which agents are embedded determines their power vis-à-vis others, as a pawn on a chessboard is considered dangerous, powerful, or weak depending on its relationship to other chess pieces (Alcoff 1988, 433). Embeddedness in social locations has implications for effective attachments and sense of belonging (Anthias 2008, 15).

Feminism discusses identity-based positionalities but not others. Economic geographers have sought to close this gap by discussing how agents' knowledge is embedded *sociospatially* in different contexts and how such embeddedness endows them with powers vis-à-vis other agents with whom they interact (Sheppard 2002, 318). Global processes connect distant places, create linkages with some places more than others, and foster geographic inequalities in the global economy. These linkages can reproduce power relations in a path-dependent manner (319).

I take these debates further by defining the term *diaspora positionality* to capture the power diaspora political agents perceive themselves or are perceived as deriving from the sociospatial context in which they are embedded through a system of ties to hostlands, homelands, and other global locations where diasporic brethren live. Diaspora political agents operate in what sociologists call "transnational social fields" (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004), adding a transnational dimension to Bourdieu's ideas about the "social field" as a domain within the state where the repeated formal and informal interactions between individuals and institutions structure their positions of power (Bourdieu 1985). They also operate in "transnational social spaces" (Faist 1998), with different states and subunits within them, such as cities, villages, and regions. The key point of this article is that sustained ties among diasporas in these transnational fields structure their relationships and endow diaspora political agents with different powers depending on the linkages they maintain with specific contexts. Diaspora activists might physically live in a host country, but have weak linkages to it, while maintaining thicker linkages to a homeland or to a third context where diasporic brethren live. A disjuncture between physical residence and sociospatial linkages need not be the rule, as diaspora political agents might have thick linkages to a hostland as well. Yet such a disjuncture is indicative that diaspora activists are empowered by the contexts in which they maintain thicker linkages in sociospatial terms; they might have more person-to-person interactions, stronger institutional affiliations, and more abilities to draw on material and symbolic resources from that context, and to interpret meanings related to it, among others.

By employing the concept of positionality, I account for political phenomena beyond observations that diasporas act as "rooted cosmopolitans" (Tarrow 2005), formulate claims transnationally yet organize activities in specific neighborhoods (Nagel and Staeheli 2010), and act in line with "division of labor," utilizing different segments of their network to pursue shared political goals (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007; Lyons and Mandaville 2010). I argue that a relatively strong positionality vis-à-vis a certain context—whether hostland, homeland, or a third location—endows diaspora political agents with more capacity to pursue homeland-oriented goals through institutional channels and "high" politics, especially in liberal societies. A relatively weak positionality is more likely to be associated with grassroots activism staged locally or transnationally.



**Figure 1.** Diaspora positionality in a transnational social field.

A. Homeland.

B, D, F, G. Diasporas in different hostlands/other contexts z.

E. Diaspora in a reference context.

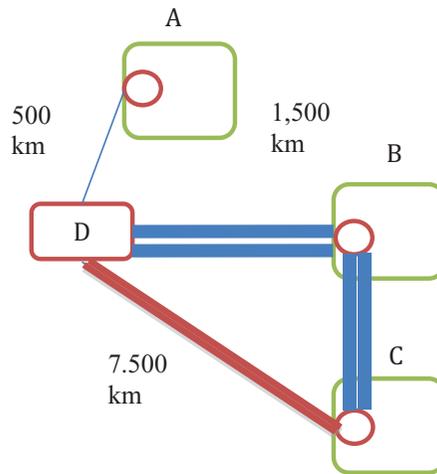
Arrows. Relational ties between diaspora in context E vis-à-vis agents in homeland and diasporas in other contexts.

External boundary line. Delineation of the transnational social field of sustained interactions among different agents.

Figure 1 illustrates the nonstatist perspective used in this article. Diaspora political agents in hostland context E are linked not simply to home state context A, but also to diaspora brethren living in other contexts (B, C, D, F, G). These relationships challenge statist thinking about a triangular relationship between diasporas, host state, and home state, and include a multitude of other contexts. The arrows point to the interactions among diaspora political agents in a transnational social field that spans multiple state and substate contexts.

#### *Diaspora Positionality in Juxtaposition to Other Spatial Concepts*

Sheppard (2002) argues that three important aspects define sociospatial positionality: *relativity*, *power*, and *fluidity*. Positionality is *relative*, since “the conditions of possibility for an agent depend on his or her position with respect to others” (2002, 318). Diaspora positionality addresses the fact that diaspora political agents with strong links to a particular context might have specific value for other agents in the transnational social field: “Space is more than geography” (Beck, Gleditsch and Beardsley 2006, 27). Embedded in a certain context, diaspora political agents can take advantage of a conglomeration of unique sociospatial characteristics of that place, such as institutions, networks, resources (Adamson and Koinova 2013), political culture, infrastructure, regime, history, position of the state in the international system, and others. This is because “places are sites where people live, work, and move, and where they form attachments, practice their relations with each other, and relate to the rest of the world” (Massey 1991; see also Leitner et al. 2008, 161). Linkages to certain contexts could provide a relatively better position to pursue certain homeland-oriented goals (see Adamson and Demetriou 2007; Lyons and Mandaville 2010; Koinova 2012). For instance, a diaspora embedded in a country with a pluralist interest representation system might be more inclined to lobby than if it were embedded in a country with a corporatist interest representation system. This was the case of Kosovar political activists seeking state independence, who focused on the United States, a context conducive for lobbying (Koinova 2013). Diaspora political agents embedded in a global city such as London are more prone to mobilize a variety of networks (Adamson and Koinova 2013) than their brethren in smaller urban or rural areas.



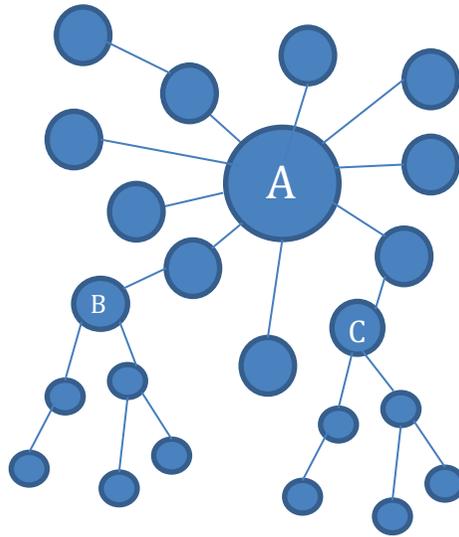
**Figure 2.** Geographical distance.  
A, B, C. Diasporas in different contexts.  
D. Homeland.

The relativity aspect concerns not only where diaspora political agents are placed, but also *what kind of linkages* they maintain to the reference context. The geographical *proximity* or *distance* of diaspora activists to a particular context, measured in Euclidean terms, does not necessarily determine that they will have strong or weak linkages to that context. Research has shown that dense connectivity shortens distances and facilitates diffusion of ideas and practices between agents in different contexts (Gleditsch 2002; Buzan and Wæver 2003; Katzenstein 2005); see Figure 2.

The geographical (Euclidean) distance between political agents embedded in contexts A and D is shorter (500 km) than that between D and B (1,500 km) and D and C (7,500 km). Yet sustained interactions between D and B and between D and C shorten the sociospatial distance between the agents forming the respective dyads.

In transnational diaspora politics, linkages between diaspora political agents based in different contexts can be thick or thin, depending on the frequencies and nature of exchanges. Thick linkages occur when agents are involved in sustained interactions with frequent communication, societal integration, travel between locales, circular migration, joint participation and planning of events, and other common activities. Thin linkages are usually limited to communication patterns in which ideas and information are exchanged with little strategic and tactical involvement. The thickness of linkages affects the sociospatial distance of diaspora political agents from a reference context, rendering their positionality relatively strong or weak vis-à-vis that context. For example, diaspora political agents living in Brussels potentially have a better comparative advantage to lobby European Union (EU) institutions than if they lived in London. Their positionality will nevertheless be relatively weak if they do not maintain regular interactions with EU institutions, networks, and policy makers.

*Power* is the second defining characteristic of positionality, as some positions are more influential than others (Sheppard 2002, 318). The power of diaspora political agents is influenced but not determined by the material, institutional, and symbolic resources in a specific place. The power of diaspora activists is also not exercised in line with Dahl's classic definition: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (1957, 202–3). Diaspora political agents embedded in particular contexts have no capacity to coerce other agents to lobby institutionally or engage in grassroots activism. They



**Figure 3.** Position in a social network

- A. Node in a position of high degree centrality with ties to numerous other nodes.  
 B, C. Nodes in positions of structural equivalence, as they connect similar constellations of nodes in the system of relationships.

have no direct authority relationship. Power is also not to be found “everywhere,” in the Foucauldian sense, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge, and “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1991; Rabinow 1991). Power is clearly positioned in specific locations of the transnational social field in which diasporas operate. Power in positionality is rather what Lukes (2005, 2007), Berenskoetter and Williams (2007), and Ringmar (2007) call “*power to*,” the empowerment of agents to achieve certain goals, in this case homeland-oriented goals, through embeddedness in a particular context. The sociospatial characteristics of this context—institutions, networks, resources (Adamson and Koinova 2013), political culture, infrastructure, regime, position of state in the international system, and others—and the linkages to it provide the power base for diaspora political agents to mobilize.

The third characteristic of positionality is *fluidity* (Sheppard 2002). Positionality can change depending on changing opportunities and constraints in the reference context and the linkages diaspora activists maintain to it. Linkages to particular contexts might be assigned more or less relevance for the achievement of a homeland-oriented goal, or become stronger or weaker over time. For example, for the goal of achieving statehood, Kosovo political agents did not seek the US-based diaspora after the 2008 proclamation of independence. They shifted their lobbying efforts to the UK-based diaspora, embedded in a EU-member state and considered in this period of more value for lobbying other EU members that had not yet recognized Kosovo’s statehood.

Positionality is also a *perceptual* category that captures not an objective state of affairs, but subjective perceptions of agents. To help elucidate the perceptual property of positionality, I juxtapose it to a *position in a network*, a spatial concept with recent IR attention (see Figure 3). In network theory, a position of power commands high centrality or thick interconnectedness with other parts of the network; weaker positions are less connected and more marginal. A network position has objective properties, measured by number of ties, centrality (eigenvector and in-between centrality), and patterns of participation in clusters of relationships with other nodes. Power is embedded in a node or clusters of nodes in different parts of the network. Two actors may be close or far apart in a network but have structurally equivalent

positions if they share patterns of ties with other actors (Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006; Cao 2010).

Positionality is different from position in a social network, since there are no objective measurements. Subjective interpretations about how power is embedded in specific contexts can affect how actors relate to those contexts. Diaspora political agents can perceive the strength of social contacts in some instances as deriving from strong institutional connections and proximity to the majority race and religion in a hostland (Koinova 2014), and in others from the thickness of linkages to an original homeland or another context.

*Agency, Structure, and Implications of Positionality for Diaspora Mobilization*

I argue that contexts in which diaspora political agents are embedded shape their behaviors but are not deterministic. The relationship between diaspora agents and context can be uneven; perceptions can be similar or diverge, and linkages can be thicker for some diaspora activists and thinner for others. Linkages to a sociospatial context do not necessarily mean they will be utilized to achieve benefits; political agents need *autonomous will* to actualize potential power from a context. Lukes argues that “power to” achieve—in this case a homeland-oriented goal—is “a potentiality, not an actuality—indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized” (2005, 69).

With such options, how do we look at a particular diaspora when seeking to analyze its trajectories for mobilization? First, a diaspora is not a monolithic entity; thus, one cannot make analytical judgments about a diaspora per se, but only about the multitude of diaspora agents engaged in the mobilization process. Aggregation of diaspora political agents’ perceptions may nevertheless take place, in line with what Sen (1993) considers “positional objectivity,” as people in the same position are more likely to make the same observations or judgments. Diaspora activists could similarly view the sociospatial characteristics of the context—institutions, networks, resources (Adamson and Koinova 2013), political culture, infrastructure, history, position of the state in international system, and so on—and their linkages to that context as empowering or disempowering them to achieve certain homeland-oriented goals. Aggregation of individual views could then take place without essentializing diasporas and without ascribing to them collective perceptions or powers.

Second, there are implications for the mobilization trajectories if diaspora political agents consider themselves empowered through a particular context. If their positionality is relatively strong vis-à-vis a reference context, they are more likely to engage in *institutional politics*, pursued through state-based and supranational channels and through what McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 7–8) call “contained contention.” These actions are observable in nonviolent rhetoric, petitions, demonstrations, media, public documents, and lobbying. If their positionality is relatively weak vis-à-vis the reference context, political agents are likely to be either disengaged or engaged with *activist networks*, other migrants, and civil and (un)civil society agents, in a local or transnational context. Such transactions can take place through contained or transgressive contention—episodic, public, collective interactions in which at least some parties are newly identified actors and adopt “unprecedented or forbidden” means (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 7–8). Repertoires could include boycotts, violent demonstrations, recruitment of fighters, arms purchases, and fundraising for overt or covert agendas.

The mechanisms that link positionality and modes of mobilization are beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that positions of power tend to reproduce themselves (Sheppard 2002, 319). Diaspora agents with relatively strong positionality would tend to reproduce links through interactions with elites from above; agents with relatively weak positionality would tend to

reproduce interactions with nonelite agents from below. Even in the same place, city, or nation-state, diaspora political agents with different positionalities might show different trajectories of mobilization.

### **Diasporas and Sociospatial Positionality: Empirical Examples**

This section illustrates the conceptual components of sociospatial positionality with empirical evidence from the mobilizations of the Armenian and Palestinian diasporas. Both are conflict-generated and linked to polities experiencing contested sovereignty. The notion of homeland incorporates not only original homelands such as Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Palestine, but also neighboring territories where ethnic brethren live. The transnational social field in which diaspora political agents operate incorporates original homelands, *de facto* states, neighboring territories, and diasporas across the globe. Both cases exemplify patterns of relatively strong and weak positionalities vis-à-vis different contexts, likely to be associated with specific mobilization trajectories emanating from them. The empirical data are illustrative and do not engage in causal analysis, which needs to be conducted in the future regarding specific puzzles and contexts. These cases do show that approaches focused solely on a triangular relationship between diasporas, home states, and host states do not account for these relationships, and that scholarship needs to include sociopositional reasoning about the embeddedness of diasporas in specific contexts and how it shapes mobilization trajectories.

Methodologically, this article builds on both secondary literature and extensive fieldwork in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany (2009–2015), informed by more than 120 semistructured interviews. The main body of data was collected between 2013 and 2015 in English, Swedish, and German. Respondents were selected through open sources and snowball sampling on the basis of their formal and informal participation in political claim making for relevant homeland political goals. The interviews were semistructured and included demographic information capturing individual characteristics of diaspora political agents and sections on hostland migration integration regimes, political lobbying through the institutions of the state and transnational channels, and transnational engagement through person-to-person networks and supranational and global institutions. Interviews were anonymized to protect the respondents' identities, in line with research ethics requirements.

#### *Armenian Diaspora Mobilization for Genocide Recognition*

A century ago the collapsing Ottoman Empire massacred and exposed to death in the Syrian desert an estimated 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians. The Armenian genocide has been recognized by the European Parliament, parliaments or governments of twenty-three countries, and numerous key institutions and political figures. It is officially denied by the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, despite a growing movement for recognition in its civil society. It is not denied but still not recognized by other states. Recognition has shaped the relationship between the Armenian diaspora and the independent state of Armenia since 1992, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh (1992–1994), and its aftermath.

A well-mobilized Armenian diaspora has maintained memory for a century (Tölölyan 2000; Sheffer 2003). The United States, France, and Lebanon were the largest migration destinations for genocide survivors and became hubs for migrants from later waves. The conflict-generated diasporas in these countries formed durable linkages with other diasporas in Europe and the Middle East based on memories passed through families. They built three major transnational diaspora parties (Panossian 1998; Tölölyan 2000; Shain 2002) with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation's (Dashnak) most influential.

**Table 1.** Empirical application of the theory of sociospatial diaspora positionality

	Armenian diaspora	Palestinian diaspora
Relativity	Thicker linkages to Western countries on genocide recognition issues than to Russia, despite high population numbers	Thicker linkages to Lebanon from Palestinians in Germany and Scandinavian countries; to the West Bank and Gaza from United Kingdom and United States; and to Gulf states from United Kingdom and France
Power	Empowerment through context in France and the United States, but disempowerment in Germany despite high population numbers	Empowerment through context in the United Kingdom, but disempowerment in Germany and the United States, despite high population numbers
Fluidity	Shifts of empowerment away from Lebanon during and after the Lebanese civil war	Shifts of empowerment of the PLO from Egypt to Lebanon to Jordan to Tunisia
Perception	In the same context, Germany, perceptions of relatively weak positionality among Armenians from Turkey and of relatively strong positionality among Armenians from Iran	In the same context, the United Kingdom, perceptions of relatively strong positionality among secular and Islamic networks operating in the transnational social field to affect Palestinian affairs in different global locations

Positionality is a *relative* concept, as diaspora political agents have thicker linkages to certain contexts than to others. The Armenian diaspora in Russia, for example, formed on the basis of migration from territories of the former Soviet Union and Armenia proper (Galkina 2006, 181), is the largest (estimated at above one million), and Russia is the most important emigration destination for Armenians except for the United States. Yet Armenian diaspora agents in Russia have much less global influence regarding genocide recognition than their brethren in other contexts. Linkages between the Armenian diaspora in Russia and Armenia proper are thicker than those to eastern Turkey, a place of memory where genocide took place. Such thickness could be attributed to durable transnational interactions, also involving circular migration especially regarding Moscow, where an estimated 60,000–1,000,000 Armenians live. Fluctuation of numbers is not surprising, as many jobs are temporary (Grigoryan 2014). To invoke the distinction between positionality and proximity/distance, Armenians in Russia are geographically closer to Turkey than to their brethren in the United States or France, but sociospatially more distant. Armenians in Russia, while numerous and well linked to Armenia proper, have relatively weak positionality vis-à-vis this context to pursue genocide recognition. They remain with relatively little political mobilization.

To further elucidate the relativity aspect, I show elsewhere thicker linkages to the United Kingdom as another reference context. Armenian diaspora agents in the United Kingdom consider their positionality relatively strong because of connectivities on several levels. The diaspora is partly assimilated (Walker 2009, ix) and highly integrated in British society (George 2009, 67–69), including through citizenship. Armenian identity is considered complementary to that of British citizens (Ohanian 2009); the social distance to the majority is relatively small due to similarities in race and religion, and Armenians enjoy a good media reputation compared to other diaspora groups. A relatively strong positionality, despite UK resistance to officially recognizing the 1915 killings as genocide, has been

associated with diaspora political agents engaging primarily in lobbying through institutional channels (Koinova 2014). Activists, including the Armenian Church and Community Council, have built on earlier contacts through the British-Armenian All Party Parliamentary Group in the House of Lords and organized visits of parliamentarians to the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan (ACCUK 2014). In 2015 Baroness Caroline Cox, traditionally engaged in Armenian issues, asked the government to openly recognize the killings as genocide (HART 2015). Pressure exerted via the Freedom of Information Act revealed ministerial conversations regarding whether or not it should do so. Despite relatively low numbers (around 20,000), diaspora political agents utilized strong positionality vis-à-vis the host state to lobby institutions rather than protests or transgressive contentious politics.

Armenian diaspora political agents in the United States and France are in a much more *powerful* position to mobilize than those in Russia and the United Kingdom. Their contexts create power potentialities that might not be available elsewhere, but diaspora activists need to opt consciously to actualize them. The United States is a global power in the international system. Diaspora embeddedness in a global power creates potentialities to affect politics in more influential ways than if positioned in a peripheral state. Moreover, the US pluralist system facilitates relatively easy building and sustaining of lobbies. Armenians have been well integrated in the United States, and diaspora political agents have recognized and acted on the opportunities available in this context. Although they number only 483,366 (ACS 2011), they have built a powerful lobby, compared to the more numerous but less influential Chinese- and Arab-Americans. The lobby has been a major driving force for genocide recognition, also advocating stronger US-Armenian relations and less military and economic aid to Turkey.

Given US foreign policy interests in keeping relations with Turkey as a North Atlantic Treaty Organization member and ally in the war against global terrorism, Armenian lobbying in the United States is not easy, but it has been remarkably sustained. Lobby organizations have put concerted efforts toward congressional resolutions and presidential statements and called on President Obama to characterize the 1915 events as genocide in the 2015 State of the Union message. The diaspora political agents' embeddedness in a global power also shapes how others in the transnational social field perceive them. Armenian-American institutions became major leaders alongside authorities in Armenia in the 2014–2015 global campaign for genocide recognition. Armenia's foreign ministry characterized the 2014 congressional resolution as an "important step on the way to restoration of historical truth" (MFA 2014). Diaspora activists in European countries looked to US activities and occasionally sought formal or informal partnerships (R1 2015; R2 2013).<sup>1</sup> US-based celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, who visited the genocide memorial in Yerevan in April 2015, attracted global attention (Walker 2015). Popular celebrities have been sought after as public diplomats to take political stances on genocide recognition.

Estimated at 350,000–400,000 (Akgonul 2003), Armenians in France lead Europe in campaigning for genocide recognition. The French context empowers diaspora political agents to pursue genocide recognition in a different way from elsewhere. Here cultural production and historical legacies of host-state support for genocide survivors are of high importance. Numerous Armenians with careers in entertainment, literature, and music act as diplomats for genocide recognition and support for an independent Armenia. Most notable is singer Charles Aznavour, who built a charitable foundation to support victims of the 1988

<sup>1</sup> Respondent 1 (R1) 2015. Armenian activist in Frankfurt close to the AGBU, *author's telephone interview*, 26 October; and R2. 2013. Armenian youth activist close to HAYDAT, *author's interview*, June 14, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Armenian earthquake and supported Armenia's independence and genocide recognition and in 2009 was appointed ambassador to Switzerland. France in 2001 was among the first countries to recognize the genocide with a special law and even sought to criminalize its denial in 2011 (Willsher 2012). The constitutional court ruled the law unconstitutional on grounds of contravening freedom of speech, but a new draft bill was submitted to parliament (News.am 2015). President François Hollande has been an outspoken world leader directly urging Turkey to recognize the genocide.

In contrast, Armenian diaspora political agents in Germany have considered their positionality relatively weak. In this country Armenians are relatively few, estimated at 50,000–60,000 (Embassy of the republic of Armenia 2015), but more than in the United Kingdom. They are organized in church societies, parties, and nonprofit and youth organizations. For example, The Rhein-Main area, where many Armenians live, has forty-two officially registered organizations (Armenian Church 2015). Nevertheless, at the time of fieldwork in 2015, activists point to a major impediment to lobbying efforts in this context: the unresolved relationship between Germany and its past (R3 and R4 2015).<sup>2</sup> Aligned with the Ottoman government at the time of the genocide, some German officials were informed and even complicit about the mass killings (Hosfeld 2013; Hoffmann 2015). Acquiring citizenship has also been more difficult in Germany than in other countries in Europe, and powerful Turkish organizations have been considered an impediment because they may publicly bring up antigencide claims. As a result, diaspora political agents have not lobbied as successfully as in other countries. They attribute more impact to Pope Francis's statement endorsing genocide designation (Yardley and Arsu 2015), to German politicians, and to Bundestag deliberations about the "genocide resolution" (BBC 2015) and its eventual recognition in 2016, than to their own lobbying (R5 2015).<sup>3</sup> Their activism has been primarily targeted toward educating the larger German public.

Sociospatial diaspora positionality can be *fluid*, depending on changing aspects of the reference context or pursuit of specific goals. Such fluidity is well observed in the Lebanese context. Lebanon accommodated survivors, established parties, and in 1955 opened Haigazian University in Beirut, the first Armenian university outside Armenia. A memorial was erected in 1965, and the genocide was officially recognized in 2000 (Auron 2003). Diaspora political agents lost their crucial historical role because of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), when Armenians migrated *en masse* to the United States, France, and other European countries. But the Bourj Hammoud area in Beirut had earlier exported cultural productions to the rest of the diaspora. Armenians in Lebanon now watch TV from the Republic of Armenia (Migliorino 2008) and cultural productions from France and the United States. Lebanon as a reference context and its diaspora positionality role have changed, even if the goal of genocide recognition has not.

Finally, even if they are located in the same country, diaspora political agents can have different *perceptions*, depending on individual sociospatial linkages. In Germany, several respondents perceived themselves as inhibited from pursuing genocide recognition because they had arrived from Turkey, where many were assimilated and needed to learn the Armenian language and customs in the host country (R6 2015).<sup>4</sup> A few with origins in Iran felt more empowered in Germany, with more international contacts, and pursued activities on issues beyond genocide recognition, such as support for political and social processes in Nagorno-Karabakh (R4 2015).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless,

<sup>2</sup> R3. 2015. Academic and activist, *author's interview*, April 21, Berlin, Germany; and R4. 2015. Armenian activist, *author's interview*, April 16, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>3</sup> R5. 2015. Armenian community leader, *author's interview*, April 23, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>4</sup> R6. 2015. Armenian activist close to a civic organization, *author's interview*, April 10, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>5</sup> R4. 2015. Armenian activist, *author's interview*, April 16, Berlin, Germany.

living in Germany, they perceived themselves as challenged in lobbying German politicians. They displayed a degree of Sen (1993)'s "positional objectivity," because of aggregation of their views in the same country.

*Palestinian Diaspora Mobilization for Statehood*

The 1948 war for Israeli independence displaced 711,000 Palestinians (UN 1950) and was the defining moment for a Palestinian diaspora. Recurrent violence made more than 4.7 million Palestinian refugees eligible for UNRWA services (2010). During the *first intifada* (uprising), the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was the major diaspora-based organization making claims for liberation of Palestine, primarily through armed struggle (Hijazi 1986). After the 1993 Oslo Accords, which created the Palestinian Authority with limited self-government in the West Bank and Gaza strip, the PLO became part of the peace process. It remained active in the diaspora, but its influence waned. A *second intifada* after the failure of the 2000 Camp David negotiations to establish statehood saw the rise of the Islamic group Hamas, which used bombing as a strategy against Israel and was designated a terrorist organization by the United States and EU. Hamas won elections in Gaza in 2006, which led to the United States, EU, and Israel boycotting the Palestinian Authority, and eventually to a split rule between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza (Koinova 2014). Violent interactions and Israeli bombing of Gaza took place in 2008, 2012, and 2014, and continue to different degrees until the present.

The warfare increased mobilization domestically and abroad. Palestine was given "non-member observer state" status by the UN General Assembly in 2012, paving the way for statehood (UN 2012). This decision remains controversial; countries primarily in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have recognized Palestinian statehood, while Israel, the United States, and many countries in Europe have not (Walker 2015). Evidence from diaspora claims about statehood and refugee return illustrates how sociospatial positionality shapes diaspora mobilization.

Palestinians operate in a large transnational social field, where ties connect individuals in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem with those displaced in the Middle East, most notably the camps in Lebanon; Jordan, Syria, and the Gulf states; and the larger diaspora, primarily the Americas and Europe. Shiblak (2005) notes that the United States and Latin America were migration destinations even before 1948. Migration to Europe is more recent, starting in the 1960s, increasing after clashes between Palestinians and Arab governments in the 1970s, and especially driven by the Lebanon civil war to Britain, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. Increasing numbers sought asylum in Canada and Australia in the 1990s (Shiblak 2005, 10–11). There is a wave stemming from the Israeli bombings of Gaza and the civil war in Syria (2011–present).

The positionality of Palestinian diaspora political agents is *relative*. Some have thicker linkages to certain sociospatial contexts than to others. There is deep marginalization of refugees in Lebanon, relatively successful integration in the United States, and integration alongside isolation in Europe (Shulz 2005, 20). Linkages to original homelands shape potential diaspora political involvement. Refugees in Germany, for example, have thick linkages to Lebanon, where around 80 percent of the Palestinian population in Germany originate (Shiblak 2005, 13). Thus, activities in Germany were for a long time shaped in Lebanese circles (Ghadban 2005, 40). Thick linkages to Lebanon also exist in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries (Shiblak 2005), which accepted refugees from the 1991 Kuwait War (Abulghani 2005) and recurrent Gaza warfare. In contrast, the Palestinian diaspora in the United Kingdom is linked to Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza. There are also numerous links to the Gulf states from the United

Kingdom and France. As Hanafi notes: “Connections between the Palestinian periphery in Europe and the centre in the Palestinian Territories are clearly loose. North American communities, despite their more distant location, are generally better connected” (2005, 145).

The multiple contexts in which the diaspora is embedded, and the perpetuated condition of statelessness complicated by restrictive host-state citizenship regimes or chosen voluntarily by Palestinians to preserve the right to return, facilitate diaspora mobilization through transnational channels and network-based activism, not least because large groups of undocumented migrants and shadow workers also span borders. Their transnational linkages are person-to-person rather than institutionally bound to certain contexts. Even if relatively well integrated in some host countries, the positionality of Palestinian diaspora political agents vis-à-vis these countries can be perceived as relatively weak, as demonstrated by the UK context.

Palestinians in the United Kingdom—like Armenians—live in the same country and abide by the same laws, and many are well integrated (Nabulsi 2006). But their diaspora political agents perceive themselves as relatively weak to pursue claims through UK-based institutions for the following reasons. As I argue elsewhere (Koinova 2014), first is their relatively low identification with the United Kingdom: “Arabs in general behave as permanent residents in the UK, enjoy the benefits of democracy and the rule of law, but see themselves as part of the larger Arab world and are completely focused on events in Palestine” (R7 2010).<sup>6</sup> Even if exaggerated, this statement is indicative of certain attitudes. Second, Britain is considered the state where the Palestinian problem originated, as it permitted the formation of Israel. The historical context is not supportive of Palestinian claims for statehood. Activists argue that Britain needs to apologize (Nabulsi 2006, 212, 24–42; Safieh 2010, 116). Third, diaspora political agents consider that an active Israeli lobby opposes strong involvement in UK politics, building on historical links between the labor movement and Israel.

Even if considering their positionality relatively weak, Palestinian diaspora political agents point out that the UK context puts them in a position of *power* to organize through local and transnational activist networks. Liberal legislation, sharp class differences, numerous Islamic networks, and a relatively respectful attitude by the police are considered conducive to pursuing victim-based claims. London especially has been an important hub for mobilization (Adamson and Koinova 2013). It is considered the “media capital of the Arab world,” with numerous Arabic-language TV channels (R7, R8 2010)<sup>7</sup> and close to one hundred Palestinian journalists (Safieh 2010, 273). According to a government-based employee, Palestinians are more likely to engage through protest than through lobbying, since media attention in London can multiply their messages (R9 2009).<sup>8</sup>

Palestinian diaspora political agents in the United Kingdom developed numerous activities with local and transnational activist networks. Medical Aid for Palestine (MAP) engaged with humanitarian emergencies and long-term health issues in the West Bank, Gaza, and the camps in Lebanon (MAP 2010). Some charities have been publicly questioned about suspected links to radical groups, including the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund (Interpal) (Young 2010) and Viva Palestina (Ainsworth 2013). The Palestinian Return Centre has advocated for the right of return and commemoration of Nakbah, quite often through Islamic networks, including a growing Palestinians in Europe conference; Islamic Relief and Islamic Help, among other Islamic charities, has also been active. Diaspora political agents have also been involved with leftist networks. Stop the

<sup>6</sup> R7. 2010. Palestinian diaspora activist, *author's interview*, 7 May, London.

<sup>7</sup> R7. 2010. Palestinian diaspora activist, *author's interview*, 7 May, London; and R8. 2010. Palestinian writer and activist, *author's interview*, 7 May, London.

<sup>8</sup> R9. 2009. Palestinian diaspora activist close to PSC, *author's interview*, 20 August, London.

War Coalition (Slawson and Davidson 2014); Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (2015), and others actively lobby the UK government, but their strength has been in mobilizing activist networks locally and internationally, including through the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign. Pressure “from below” has affected public opinion, shifting toward more sympathy for Palestinian rights, especially after the 2014 Gaza warfare (Watt 2014). Such shifts have been conducive to changes in high politics; in 2014 the United Kingdom was the second country in Europe after Sweden to formally recommend Palestinian statehood (BBC 2014).

Empowerment through context and potentialities to use *power to achieve* political goals are quite visible when comparing the UK and US Palestinian diasporas. Even though the US diaspora is larger, with estimates between 85,186 (ACS 2013) and 200,000 (Kurson 2015), than that in the UK, between 20,000 (Shiblak 2005, 13) and 40,000 (Nabulsi 2006, 258), US diaspora political agents do not face the same favorable sociospatial context. Migrant integration on an individual basis, rather than increasingly problematic multiculturalism as in the United Kingdom, did not produce large-scale discontent in large Islamic networks to easily integrate Palestinian grievance-based claims. Islamic appeal in the United States has been somewhat limited, not least because many earlier generations of Palestinians were Christian, and as Gertheiss argues, because securitization measures after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 suppressed overt activism (2016, 134). Leftist organizations and trade unions have also been historically weak. Potentialities for lobbying have been blocked by a powerful Israeli lobby, despite efforts by the Arab American Institute, American Task Force on Palestine, and Jerusalem Fund/Jerusalem Center to build awareness in Washington (AAI 2015; ATFP 2015; Jerusalem Fund 2015). A powerful mobilizer, the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, has sought political change through activist networks. This coalition of more than one hundred civic organizations, with a wide spectrum of political commitments to peace and justice for Palestinians and more broadly in the Middle East, includes interfaith, Christian, and Jewish organizations. Many of these have espoused the BDS campaign (End of Occupation 2015), which has “gained considerable ground among American Jews, primarily on college campuses” (Barghouti 2011). Especially after the 2014 war, the campaign has rapidly grown in both the United States and Europe.

Disempowerment through context is quite visible in Germany, with the largest population of Palestinians estimated at 80,000 (Ghadban 2005, 32). Lobbying and activism have been minimal compared to the United Kingdom and United States. Migrant integration is more challenging due to restrictive citizenship and asylum laws and limited rights during periods of delayed deportation (Ghadban 2005, 27–35). For diaspora political agents an even more important impediment has been Germany’s history with the Holocaust and staunch support for Israel as a reaction. Activities challenging Israel have not easily taken root among policy makers or civil society (R10, R11 2015).<sup>9</sup>

The UK role as a crucial hub for Palestinian activism in Europe is widely acknowledged among diaspora political agents from other European countries. In Germany, they look to UK activities and seek to facilitate diffusion of knowledge, especially with regard to the BDS campaign (R10, R12 2015).<sup>10</sup> Palestinian organizations in the Netherlands campaigned for divestment of a major pension fund from Israeli banks in 2014 (R13 2015; Visser 2014).<sup>11</sup> They have also kept

<sup>9</sup> R10. 2015. Palestinian academic, *author’s interview*, 22 April, Berlin, Germany; and R11. 2015. German politician, *author’s interview*, 23 April, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>10</sup> R10. 2015. Palestinian academic, *author’s interview*, 22 April, Berlin, Germany; and R12. Palestinian activist, *author’s interview*, 7 April, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>11</sup> R13. 2015. Palestinian academic activist, *discussion with the author*, 17 October. London.

close contacts with UK-based civic organizations and academic networks (R13 2015).<sup>12</sup> Even in Sweden, frontrunner of Palestinian statehood recognition in Europe, some activists sought to participate regularly in the annual conference of the Palestinians in Europe, organized by the Palestinian Return Centre (R14 2015).<sup>13</sup>

*Fluidity* of diaspora positionality is demonstrated by the changing context for PLO mobilization. Egypt played an important role in its establishment in 1964 after President Gamal Abdel Nasser sought to convene an organization to represent the Palestinians during an Arab League summit. The PLO was strongly influenced by Egypt during the early years (Robinson 2009). Palestinians (as well as PLO activists) in Egypt and Gaza enjoyed basic rights, such as public sector employment and property rights (El-Abed 2011). As Mattar argues, Yasser Arafat, Fatah and PLO leader (1969–2004), was a student activist in Cairo, but sought independence from Egypt, where his ideas about national liberation through armed struggle were not likely to take root. Seeking a context conducive to guerrilla operations, he briefly explored conditions in Syria and the West Bank, but eventually settled in Jordan, where refugee camps became his main source of recruits (2005, 59–61). Recurrent violence between Palestinian fighters and security forces culminated in the Jordanian civil war (1970–1971) and PLO expulsion (Robinson 2009). The organization reestablished operations in Lebanon, another conducive context because of the refugee camps. Expelled after the 1982 Israeli invasion, the last PLO headquarters before the 1993 Oslo Accords were moved to Tunisia, at the time headquarters of the Arab League (Palestine Facts 2015).

A final note illustrates how positionality is a *perceptual* category. Palestinian diaspora political agents in the same country consider themselves differently empowered to pursue statehood depending on individual sociospatial linkages. For example, diaspora sympathizers with Fatah and Hamas in various countries in Europe have networks that seldom cross except for large-scale protests against violence in Gaza, and more recently regarding some BDS activities. Diaspora political agents can be linked to the West Bank (for Fatah) and Gaza (for Hamas), but their perceptions of where they derive their power need not be directly linked to these territories. Visions for future statehood based on a two-state solution (the dominant international view) or one-state solution draw them to seek sympathetic constituencies, in the same country or internationally. Some diaspora members in the United Kingdom and France have ties with Gulf states and may keep businesses abroad (Hanafi 2005, 143), but sponsor political projects in their host country or another. Perceptions are individual and subjective but can nevertheless aggregate in line with Sen (1993)'s "positional objectivity": diaspora political agents could perceive themselves as more powerful to pursue claims for Palestinian statehood in the United Kingdom than in Germany.

### Conclusions

The concept of sociospatial diaspora positionality can be a major means to open statist paradigms and contribute to a growing understanding that a simple triangular relationship between diasporas, host states, and home states cannot adequately explain diaspora mobilization trajectories. This article has sought to shift attention toward a cluster of midrange sociopositional theories that have gained strength in IR since the mid-2000s. Diaspora sociospatial positionality accounts for the embedded agency of diasporas in multiple sociospatial contexts that span a transnational social field and the global locations in which diasporas live. The merits of positional analysis and major aspects of diaspora positionality

<sup>12</sup> R13. 2015. Palestinian academic activist, *discussion with the author*, 17 October, London.

<sup>13</sup> R14. Palestinian academic activist, *author's interview*, 9 September, Malmö, Sweden.

as a concept—relativity, power, fluidity, and perception—can be shown in juxtaposition to other closely related spatial concepts: distance/proximity and social network. The unique characteristics of a particular context (the conglomeration of institutions, networks, resources, historical legacies, regime, political culture, and position in the international system, among others) and sustained linkages with that context through frequent communication, societal integration, travel between locales, circular migration, joint participation and planning of events, and other common activities shape—if not necessarily determine—diaspora political agents' behavior. Positionality also has implications for the trajectories of diaspora mobilization. Diaspora political agents who perceive their positionality as relatively strong in a sociopolitical context are more likely to engage in institutional politics from above, through contained contention and moderate politics. If they perceive their positionality as relatively weak, they are more likely to engage with local or transnational activist networks, politics from below, and use contained but also transgressive contention.

The conceptual discussion is illustrated with empirical evidence from patterns of mobilization of two conflict-generated diasporas—Armenian and Palestinian—for genocide recognition and statehood, respectively. Choosing conflict-generated diasporas with linkages to multiple contexts of original homelands, *de facto* states (Nagorno-Karabakh and Palestine), and territories where diaspora brethren live show that analyzing triangular relationships alone is not adequate; a positional analysis is necessary to factor in contexts and linkages. Diaspora political agents are not evenly embedded in the different global contexts and have more links to certain contexts than to others, even if physically present in all of them. The Armenian diaspora in Germany is more numerous than in the United Kingdom, but diaspora political agents experience their positionality as relatively weak. They considered themselves impeded by the unresolved historical legacy of Germany's role in the Armenian genocide before its recent recognition in 2016 and by strong public claims against genocide recognition by powerful Turkish groups. These political agents have been in a much stronger position in the United States, where well-integrated diaspora activists have built a powerful lobby, little impeded by other counter-claims or historical legacies, but empowered by their embeddedness in a state that is a global power. Palestinian diaspora activists too have experienced weak positionality in Germany, and stronger in Sweden or the United Kingdom, where they have been better integrated and have developed stronger institutional linkages.

The systemic effects of sustained ties among diasporas in a transnational social field also become visible as diaspora political agents in peripheral contexts seek collaborations with those embedded in hubs. Armenian diaspora activists in Germany and the Netherlands identified the United States and France as important hubs for Armenian mobilization. Palestinian diaspora agents in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden identified the United Kingdom as an important hub for Palestinian mobilization.

Diaspora positionality becomes quite visible when conflict-generated diasporas and weak states are concerned, not least because the latter have few resources and they can creatively use the positional power of diaspora political agents in different contexts to enhance the likelihood for success of homeland-oriented goals. Such contextual empowerment has been observed in the mobilization of other conflict-generated diasporas. In the aftermath of Kosovo's 2008 independence, Kosovar political agents have considered the United States a less conducive context for global advocacy for state independence, but more conducive for financial investment. With its business entrepreneurial culture, the United States has attracted diasporas that have accumulated wealth in a relatively short period of time since the end of the Cold War (Koinova 2016). Bosnian diaspora political agents have benefited from the Dutch political context to make transnational

activist claims. Not on the radar screen of scholars and policy makers, the Dutch context became a hub for contentious politics because of unresolved issues related to the questionable implications of Dutch peace-keeping forces in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. The Dutch hub has empowered diaspora political agents to make transnational activist claims not only regarding Srebrenica, but also concerning other war atrocities. By contrast, Bosnian diaspora embeddedness in the United Kingdom has been less conducive to transnational activism (Koinova and Karabegovic 2016).

Additional research is needed among diasporas that originate in voluntary migration, or are conflict-generated but connected to strong states. It is likely that diaspora positionality will remain analytically important when diasporas are in sustained interactions with their original home states and other diasporas, as their behaviors will be shaped by such ties. To this end, this theoretical framework will be also important to apply when analyzing diasporas who seek to enhance economic development and knowledge transfer to their countries of origin.

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