



# **Voice After Exit: Diaspora Advocacy**

## **Presentation Transcript**

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*Female:* Wonderful. Thank you very much. Again, really illuminating and from the horse's mouth. So it's – these are very valuable contributions, and we have – thanks to the incredible – for the discipline and focus of our panelists, we actually have time for discussion which is wonderful.

So I'd like to invite your comments, and if there are comments or questions from people online, shall we start with one of our participants from online while you're gathering your thoughts?

*Female:* We have a wonderful bio from Kathia Flemmings who also asks a question. She says she's joining us from the office of the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition at GW and is actively involved with immigrant youth and young adults. She, too, is the first born of – excuse me – of immigrant parents from Haiti. Her dad was a refugee from Haiti escaping from his life for 40 years ago. She – Kathia was born here, American, and they always – her parents always remember Mayor Koch of New York who did a lot for immigrants in New York which permitted many immigrants in the city to actively get involved with business development in the city and their native land.

Her question is, “How can diaspora effectively advocate for those needing assistance in the homeland while engaged in either foreign policy or policy advocacy in the U.S.? What would be the best form of exchange and how can you move quickly on humanitarian efforts when time is of issue?”

*Female:* That's an excellent question, and I would invite any of you to respond to it. And there may be those in the audience who have some comments on that as well.

*Female:* I can start with the – not on the advocacy side but more that most diasporas are already organized, and disasters, like the one that the questioner describes, you often also mobilize groups for the first time. So the early responders, the first responders are those who are already been organized and may already have philanthropic activities' on the ground.

But then there are these newly mobilized people who may be mobilized to raise money, but they have to have a place to target their monies. So the best lesson, I think, here is for the philanthropic sector of diaspora organizations to be well organized and visible to their own constituencies. So that's what I know from the philanthropy side, but perhaps, you guys can speak to that because \_\_\_\_\_.

*Female:* I won't – I'll also add to the philanthropy side only because a lot of the issues I know that a lot of Muslim communities are dealing with, that's been one of the biggest challenges. So I think we're in the same situation.

I think, not only raising the awareness of the need for philanthropy, that's part of it. I think, for a lot of groups right now, they're also struggling with the legal process – procedures and processes of giving abroad especially in the way that we're working. And I think organizations that can actually help communities kind of maneuver through all of that and figure out what are the legal ramifications for giving and how to give and what are you accountable for giving and all of that. I know that that's one of the biggest constraints, but I have not yet seen many organizations within Muslim communities that are having this challenge. Actually, helping them to do that.

And so, similarly, I think helping people – in the Haiti example, helping people kind of walk through step by step, I think there's an assumption of raising the awareness's just enough, but how do you actually help and provide the vehicles to do that is what I think will also help resources mobilize.

*Female:*

Okay. Well, let me just add a couple of thoughts there. I think, in the context whether it's a natural or a made disaster, there are probably the first critical step is disseminating information about it. I wrote my thesis on the Nigerian civil war way back in the '70s where the single most important weapon of Beofra was a fax machine that had an outlet in London. Pre-internet, pre-mobile phones, pre-digital cameras and so on.

But they put out a steady stream of pictures of starving children, you know, wounded civilians and so on, and it had a tremendous mobilizing effect. And I have to say some of it was really quite misleading, but it did have a very – it had the desired effect of mobilizing people.

So getting information and, in this day and age, where it's very easy to check how accurate the information is, getting accurate, good information out through the news media, through social networks and to policymakers is the first critical stage. And then I think, as both Jennifer and Nadia mentioned, building coalitions, building alliances.

We see, on the – in diaspora philanthropy, that there is often a huge bump. People want to give – not just members of the diaspora but others, too, in the aftermath of a disaster of some kind. But in that sort of rush to give, a lot of resources, frankly, get wasted because the channels we're using ineffectively have not been set up.

So think members of the diaspora really need to look to experienced organizations to partner with to make sure that the resources are able to mobilize are being used effectively. And the final step I think, and our questioner alluded to that in her – in sort of introducing the – or in the

question was how you move beyond sort of the philanthropic response to a policy response, and I think that's really important.

I think, for many people, philanthropy acts as sort of a portal to a broader engagement. You know, people see there's a problem. They want to respond to it, but it doesn't take much engagement if you go beyond that first or second contribution to say, "Why is this happening? Why is the system so unable to respond to people's needs? What's the problem here?"

So I think, to try to use that energy that gets aroused by something like the earthquake in Haiti, the hurricanes in Haiti is very important to try to translate that into a broader mobilization that really starts to address some of the policy issues.

*Female:*

Can I just add one more quick thing because I was really struck by what Aram – by what you said in your last bullet point about the politics of participation, and it seems to me – and, you know, correct me if I'm wrong. It just seems that the diasporas that are going to be most effective in policy influence aren't going to be the ones who are – that are integrated in all of these different areas.

And this can also overcome the challenge that the Muslim community has in terms of philanthropic giving that a lot of diasporaans are organizing their own 501C3s registered in the United States to do philanthropic work. So donating to U.S. organizations bypasses that problem lends legitimacy and credibility to the advocacy efforts, et cetera.

So being, overall, more organized, diverse and integrated.

*Male:*

Yeah. I 100 percent agree, and I'll just throw out a little bit of an unusual idea just as a thought experiment. Right? I think – let's just say that the folks that – who occupy a high percentage of decision making roles in the U.S. government – did not have roots, let's say, in Europe, \_\_\_\_ roots in South America before they had roots in Asia or Africa, would America foreign policy be different? Of course. Of course it would be different.

There's no like – people bring something to the equation. And does the – then if you accept that as true, then I think you could argue that, well, how would it be different if there were Muslim Americans in government? Well, it would be different, and it would be I think more reflective of the American population because I don't know the numbers, but I'm guessing the numbers are low.

And is that the result of hiring practice? I don't think so. Maybe it is but maybe – or is it that people just aren't applying? I don't know those answers but, certainly –

*[Crosstalk]*

*Male:* Yeah. Very good point but the experience of the people bring to the table obviously shape their views and obviously ethnicity in America is – it's – people think about this as, well, if you recently arrived, your folks \_\_\_ or if you think about the old country, that's ethnic.

Well, guess what? As someone who has been here four generations is also ethnic or 18 generations. They're still ethnic, and they bring their family's experience and their own values to the table in ways that are equal to the guy who arrived yesterday at the port. Right?

There's – and as long as we're citizens and we're full stakeholders again. So I think, yes, the seeing sort of the decision making process be include sort of – or accurately reflect – more accurately reflect the actual population would probably be a healthy thing.

*Female:* Yeah. I'd like to get into sort of the issue of mobilization.

*Male:* Sure.

*Female:* At a later stage if we have time, but first, we have a question. Could you kindly introduce yourself?

*Female:* My name is Filmona, and I'm with Interaction. I just wanted to say thank you, and to Kathleen, I did read your – the chapter.

*Female:* Oh.

*[Crosstalk]*

*Female:* But it was a good chapter. So thank you. And then my question or comment, I think some of you touched on it. One of the – some of the ingredients for effective advocacy is that you have to care. You have to understand the issues and really believe in it, but as our own \_\_\_\_ and at the end, a lot of people don't believe that change is possible because, like you said, you stick your neck out and you're likely to get it chopped off.

So I think one of the ways around that is maybe doing more a collective advocacy with diaspora groups so that – and maybe an example of Syria instead of just Syrian Americans doing direct advocacy, having other Arab

Americans chiming in because they're not going to face the same direct consequences that you would as – if you're directly involved.

So I'm just wondering are there any examples of that kind of collective diaspora advocacy and does that help people get over the challenges and concerns of being too out – too visible, I guess.

*Female:* I think that's a good comment \_\_ that may also be relevant and then we'll come back to the lady next to you.

*Female:* Hi. I'm Dina Shocker from the State Department. I'm from the Office of Global Partnerships. I think, on your seats, you might have some of the cards that say IDEA on them. I've seen them around.

The Secretary launched the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance last May precisely for that reason, recognizing not only that we need to bring these communities to the table because they are partners in development and diplomacy, but also, that there is a power in collective actions and that these communities have a lot to learn from each other.

Even the example here, of Nadia and Aram learning from each other, imagine that on a much larger scale. We have about 550 leaders from global diaspora communities come to the State Department, and I think there were about 30 panels on a variety of different themes from innovation to entrepreneurship.

And at each panel, there were speakers from different communities, and I think that's the only example that I've seen, and many made the same comment where you had these different communities really who have no competition with each other. It's not the same if you were to put everyone in the same room, and there is that kind of that regionalism – truly learning from each other.

And so I think, not only that these groups need to collectively, within their regions, come together, but, also, to learn laterally across communities. An idea was, again, just launched last May. We're in the process now of being incubated at the Migration Policy Institute, and it will graduate to be its own 501C3. But the U.S. government is really beginning to recognize this. This is a huge departure, I think, as we can – as we probably all agree from earlier policies, but it's something that I see as being very integral to our foreign policy and development efforts in the coming few years.

*Female:* Good and if you could pass the mic just ahead. Yeah and then we'll get –

*Female:* Did you have another question or – sorry.

*Female:* I think that was just a comment from Dina.

*Female:* No, no, no. I'm just saying did you want us to respond to that before you took another question or did you – I just wanted to respond to that basically.

*Female:* Okay. Please do, if you'll be patient for a moment.

*Female:* Okay. Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. So I think there's two things. I think collaboration, without a doubt, will lead to more effective advocacy, and on a domestic level, we're seeing that one of our closets partners that we ended up working with is Jewish Funds for Justice in our work. And we were able to both partner in terms of we identified similar needs in training, but, also, what we're finding is there's also this common policy issues whether it's fair banking or fair – you know.

There's – and it's interesting in the ability to find partners that you didn't expect necessarily to have and then to be able to mobilize on it, but the other thing I was going to say is I also think one of the most powerful things you said was about the – one of the many things. But the one thing that I think really, really affected me is this idea that you have to give people faith that their efforts will have an impact, and I often think that – so going back to what – at least a fact of advocacy – one of the other things that I think is happening within communities where coalitions may not even help that, but I think, before they're getting to that point, is leadership providing really realistic wins or realistic goals because, oftentimes, I think what happens is a lot of leaders set goals that are unattainable and then people feel disillusioned because they're never winning.

And so, when you feel that you're never winning, and then you feel like the system doesn't work, and so if leaders can set those more realistic goals, then engage in these coalitions, I think they work. But if people keep setting these unrealistic goals and still engage in partnerships, then you're still – there's one thing that – there's one step before that one.

*Male:* I would only add that folks, who have a high identity and high devotion but a low capacity, they want to learn typically. And the people, in that situation, typically learn through two things, example and experience. And that, ultimately, builds confidence. The confidence, courage, these are like contagious things. They're social phenomena. They're not things that develop on their own.

And so the trick is to find, in every community, the early adopters, the ones who are kind of like a little bit ahead of the curve and to handhold others through the process. And, you know, the first Congressional

meeting is scary, and the person sits quietly in the corner, and the second one, they ask a question in the end, and the third one, they could run it. You know, there's no shortcut that, but its courage and confidence are vital. And that happens through experience, example and a lot of handholding.

*Female:* I was wondering – I'm Marja Bokana from Interaction as well, and I was hoping you'd speak about the challenging of diaspora advocacy when the country of settlement favors the government at home and may want to keep the status quo, and also, if our organization that are influencing foreign policy for their own good.

*Female:* Yeah.

*Female:* Good question.

*Female:* Really good question. There's no definitive answer to that. It goes back to the whole issue of aligning interests, and so that's what I was trying to kind of outline in my presentation, overall, is the recognition that diaspora advocacy and advocates can be partners to the U.S. government but only if there's a good alignment of U.S. government objectives and those diaspora objectives.

You have to find that common ground. Of course, this is often a problem when there are major differences between the diaspora interests and the citizens on the ground. And it's an issue that I have raised in every encounter and training that I've done at the U.S. State Department.

And I know that most people are aware of this, but I just think it's important to repeat again and again and again that these people in diaspora are U.S. citizens. So they are our constituents from the U.S. government side. They do bring different perspective and information and maybe expertise. All of those things are potentialities. They're not confirmed, but it doesn't make them legitimate spokespeople for people on the ground. And policies always have implications for people in those countries, and we have to make our decisions responsibly in that case.

I'm reminded that, you know, there's this other side of diaspora advocacy, and you know, you talking about having the faith in making a difference, in the Coptic Christian diaspora from Egypt, which is a community that I've been studying for a long time, there have been major accusations that the advocacy that the Coptic Christians in the U.S. have done, on behalf of Christians in Egypt, has actually harmed their quality of life in Egypt and led to more incidents of violence and discrimination.



There's not a lot of evidence to sour that that I'm aware of, but that's an accusation that has an impact on the community's intention to mobilize and advocate. And so I think these questions are more pertinent to the Armenian diaspora than anything I could say in a general sense. So I would really welcome your views.

*Male:*

I'd love to comment on that. Let me give you an example that isn't Armenian. We talk about aligning the diaspora aligning – diaspora sticking to a line \_\_\_\_ U.S. interest. Let's talk about a U.S. interest.

For many years, U.S. – a stated U.S. interest was to support the government in South Africa. South Africa was an apartheid government that had uranium, had gold, had diamonds, controlled the ceiling and was firmly anticommunist, and as a result, American foreign policy turned a blind eye to the disenfranchisement of millions of South Africans, their torture and torment for decades. People born and raised in that society without any rights. Right? And we turned a blind eye to it for geopolitical reasons.

Who would align with who in that case? I would have felt no obligation, in those years, to align myself with U.S. policy. In fact, I would have felt the moral obligation to align myself with the \_\_\_\_ vestment movement and the grassroots movement that challenged that policy.

So the idea of aligning with U.S. policy, that's sort of a nice idea, when the U.S. policy is a good policy, but I think there's a higher authority, whether it's a moral authority, whether it's faith based or whatever, I would, in the Armenian instance, say that there are those in the State Department would argue that recognizing the Armenian genocide is bad for America. I simply cannot imagine the scenario in which recognizing and speaking honestly about genocide is bad for America. It's good for America. That's good for America.

So the idea of aligning with interests, no. Let's align ourselves with American values and then seek to bring American policy into alignment with the values that we hold not policy – not the reverse.

*Female:*

Yeah. I think that latter point is really the key one which is that, in a situation like the one you described, that it's got to be a key goal of the diaspora to change U.S. policy, and you know, and I think we've seen that in the Arab Spring in the – quite a – well, it started before that, but you know, a realization that it actually serves U.S. interests better to be aligned with the people than to be aligned with an autocratic regime, you know.

That's not a universal conclusion as you know very well. So it's – it's a dilemma, but it's part of the task of advocacy, I think. Yes, please.

*Male:* Meter Kolowsky. I guess it's one. Meter Kolowsky with the United Macedonian diaspora. We're fairly I mean old kind of community, 100 years but the majority of our advocacy has been in the last kind of decade. But early in the '90s, we were very instrumental in the independence movement from Macedonia.

And I believe a lot of similar for – a lot of the Central and Eastern European countries especially those that studied political leaders that are elected in these countries or former students in America or exchange students and things like that.

One point that I wanted touch on on why people want to become more active. I think one of the reasons why I think people are becoming more and more active are these kind of visits back to the homeland. I have noticed like Birthright Israel.

For us, I've had numerous members of our organization that would not get active politically but would on a cultural or other basis and then would visit Macedonia for the first time and then realize what really is the reason why they should get involved and then they start getting involved more and more. So I think like these types of trips back home, I think, have a great help, but also, these student exchanges, alumni.

And I can tell you that, you know, once Macedonia elected a government that was primarily educated abroad, they started bringing a lot of people back home to become ministers of government, to attract foreign, direct investment and other ways of engagement, and I have to say, like the majority today, our former USAID kind of employees or contractors that are now the president and prime minister of these countries which then act as very pro American and build those bilateral relations. So those are just some comments that I wanted to bring to the table. So, thank you.

*Female:* Fascinating case study. I would love to know more about it, but it's one of the groups we worked with in putting together the last – the first global diaspora for them last May was with the American Ireland Funds, and they've done a terrific sort of toolkit which some of you may have seen on diaspora engagement. Susannah, do you remember their URL?

*Female:* Diaspora Matters.

*Female:* DiasporaMatters.org. The whole toolkit is online there, and they – it's from really mainly from the American Ireland Funds that I took away this point of philanthropy often being a portal to broader mobilization, and another point that they would agree with on very strongly is that the diaspora tourism is often a portal to broader engagement. And, indeed, we have a chapter in the book on diaspora tourism.

So there are lots of roots in and they are interesting to MPI and to IDEA. We'll hope that you'll stay tuned at [DiasporaAlliance.org](http://DiasporaAlliance.org). And this – for those of you who haven't had a chance to read the chapter on diaspora advocacy from this book, if you're interested, it is online both at [MigrationPolicy.org](http://MigrationPolicy.org) and [MicroLinks](http://MicroLinks).

I'm sorry? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see your hand. Please. We do have one more question, and I think we just about have time for it. So, please.

*Female:* Sorry. The mic is here. Can you hear me?

*Female:* Oh, we have two more questions. So \_\_\_ kindly be brief.

*Female:* Okay. So the question - I don't know if this is brief but as brief as you can answer. So I'm involved in Shea International. My name is Izara, and we try to source fair trade shea butter from West Africa. And so the question is really about more of just diaspora movements and helping because I've met a lot of –

I'm originally from Nigeria, and I met a lot of people who are doing some kind of side business. Many people and I think this is universal. But there are many different ways in which we do the work that we do, and so, for us, we find that we're trying to do a fair trade type of situation. But there's a lot of people who don't necessarily think about those issues. They just kind of want to bring the stuff to market, and there's a lot of sort of economic movements that help a lot of middle class people in developing countries and not necessarily the poor.

So I'm just wondering if you guys have seen any sort of movement with the diaspora working on these kinds of issues and really working more with sort of the poor rather than the middle class and just making them richer.

*Female:* I'm familiar with the shea butter fair trade, and it's a great effort. There are some, you know, and I know there are fair trade coffee organizations that have been working through the diaspora and so on. I think it's a great entry point which is not to denigrate sort of more traditional kinds of entrepreneurship which I think, also, plays a part in integrating countries of origin into the marketplace often in a good way.

But, you know, we have a few examples in the book, but I'm very interested in knowing more about more of them because I do think it's an important kind of people to people effort that can really start small and grow. Final question.

*Male:*

Yes. I'm \_\_\_\_\_. I came to here to this event, a wonderful event from New York where I represent the organization called Russian Speaking Community Council of Manhattan and the Bronx. I have a couple of questions.

Mostly, I think tonight's \_\_\_ have kind of firsthand experience with their diaspora. One thing is some of the diasporas are focused on one country, one culture. Whereas, you have this other broad gatherings based on religion or language that embrace many, many countries, and obviously, that helps create the number of the constituency and the voting power but what extent there is.

There are kind of sort of tradeoffs between that, and you will try to build something on a very broad base that really encompasses 80 or more countries which are in difficult relations \_\_\_\_\_ themselves. And one other question is some diasporas where the main role – the leading role is played by people in the second or third generation who really are fully integrated Americans in many ways.

There are some diasporas like, for example, the Russian speaking diaspora where almost only people who are really active are the ones who came here in their adult age, and I wonder whether any of you could reflect a little bit on whether there is – there are any differences in perspective or \_\_\_ or collaborations among those different generations of diaspora leaders in your community. Thank you.

*Female:*

Two very interesting question. I wish we had another \_\_\_ to go into them, but we'll have to be very brief. Rahm, do you want to –

*Male:*

Typically, you're right. The people, who have been here longer, tend to have a little more expertise and a little more knowledge and more capacity, and folks, who more recently arrived, tend to have a little more energy. So it's a question of balancing those interests.

I'll speak to the Russian community. I'm familiar with the Russian community. It is true that the most active are the most recently arrived, but that's not to say there's not a very large number of Americans with Russian heritage in American. Just it was very difficult, over the course of the last century, to kind of articulate that identity because of the geopolitics of U.S. Russian relations.

The same can be said of German Americans. My god, there's so many Americans of German heritage. It's just simply not –

*Female:*

It's the largest ethnic group.

*[Crosstalk]*

*Male:* There's very little Germany advocacy for reasons that deal with the two World Wars, of course, and many other issues. So that's – the Russian community, that's a special challenge, but also, a lot of opportunities.

*Female:* The community which is how people \_\_\_\_\_.

*Male:* Really?

*Female:* I second that. I think there are two really important issues. I think the intergenerational issue is really important. I – but oftentimes, what you start to see is those communities organizing separately. So you have complete generational divides where you have the older community kind of coming together and then the younger, where they're an American born community organizing, and what's not happening is that they're not talking to each other.

And so, in some ways, at least that's what we're seeing a lot is there needs to be a lot of facilitated conversations between the two because, oftentimes, the language they're using is not the same. The references are not the same. So you actually need to facilitate those conversations, and then, amongst communities where there's a huge range of diversity, I think what usually happens is there's two dynamics.

One is there's a zero sum game where people are so determined to focus on their issue that they're worried that, if they focus on something – another issue, then their issue doesn't make. And so trying to – but and that usually happens at a point of crisis, and that's when people wait to build relationships. And you can't build relationships when they're actually – there's a moment where you have to make a decision.

You have to build the relationships up until that point. And so, in a way, there needs to be a space which is, again, why we set up this institute is there needs to be a space where you're having those conversations, not focused on that policy decision or that discussion and in order for people to actually just begin – have a conversation about what's important to each group and then so that everybody can kind of go on their way and find the points of collaboration.

But those spaces are not very common, and finding, most importantly, a neutral convener that can bring those people together because, oftentimes, people are so hesitant to come because there is no neutral convener. And that's what you need to find is who had street cred within both – within all these communities that can bring those communities to the same table and have these kind of facilitated conversations because, otherwise, the

conversations never happen except when they're negotiating. And then, in that case, it's transactional. So.

*Female:*

That's a very important point. I think there's also often these generational divides arise where you have the first generation, the immigrant generation that has come under pressure, either as a refugee population or political exiles and who arrive here with a very considerable amount of antipathy toward the government of the country of origin which may not be foremost in the mind of second and subsequent generations sometimes because the situation changes in the country of heritage or sometimes because the attitudes here change.

I meant the Vietnamese diaspora is a very good example of that where you still have a real diehard first generation that things it's just terrible to have anything positive to do with Vietnam with second and third generations who are really interested in the emergence of that country and the opportunities there and in discovering their own heritage.

So I think Nadia has put her finger on it that what's really important is trying to set up these intergenerational dialogues which happens within some diaspora organizations very comfortably, but this is, by no means, the rule.

And I'm afraid we have to bring an end to it there. Thank you. It's been a fascinating discussion and please join me in thanking our wonderful panel.

*Male:*

Thank you. This concludes our last seminar. We will send you an email with a link to both the screencast of these and all the other previous seminars. If I can also ask, it's very important for us to get your feedback, if you can fill out the survey that's on your seat.

And I want to thank Kathleen, again, for moderating, and once again, if you can join me in giving them a big hand.

*[End of Audio]*

