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## Revisiting Türkiye's Diaspora Engagement in the USA

Şevval Çoklar Aksu\*  and Damla B. Aksel\*\* 

### Abstract

Over the last decade, diaspora governance has shifted from a niche academic topic to a key issue in migration studies and international relations. As transnational communities influence economic, cultural, and political spheres, states have expanded their diaspora policies with both symbolic and strategic aims. This article explores the evolution of Türkiye's diaspora engagement in the U.S., examining historical trends, institutional reforms, and recent efforts targeting skilled emigrants. Based on fieldwork from 2014 and 2022 and interviews in Ankara, D.C., and New York City, this research assesses Türkiye's shift from cultural diplomacy to using diaspora networks for economic and political leverage. The findings reveal a fragmented approach influenced by ideological divides and institutional disconnections. By situating Türkiye's evolving diaspora strategies within broader migration patterns, the article highlights the gap between state-led policies and emigrant aspirations.

**Keywords :** Transnationalism, Diaspora Governance, Turkish Emigrants, The United States, Turkish-American, Highly Skilled Migration, Emigrants


## Türkiye'nin ABD'deki Diaspora Politikalarını Yeniden Değerlendirmek

### Özet

Son on yılda diaspora yönetişimi, akademik açıdan niş bir konu olmaktan çıkıp göç çalışmaları ve uluslararası ilişkilerde önemli bir mesele haline gelmiştir. Transnasyonal topluluklar ekonomik, kültürel ve politik alanları etkilediğinde, devletler diaspora politikalarını hem sembolik hem de stratejik amaçlarla genişletmiştir. Bu makale, Türkiye'nin ABD'deki diaspora politikalarının evrimini, tarihsel gelişimi, kurumsal reformları ve nitelikli göçmenlere yönelik son girişimleri üzerinden incelemektedir. 2014 ve 2022'de yapılan saha araştırmaları ile Ankara, Washington D.C. ve New York'taki devlet ve sivil toplum temsilcileriyle gerçekleştirilen görüşmelere dayanan çalışma, Türkiye'nin kültürel diplomasiyenin diaspora ağlarını ekonomik ve siyasi bir araç olarak kullanmaya geçişini değerlendirir. Bulgular, ideolojik ayrışmalar ve kurumsal kopukluktan etkilenen parçalı bir yaklaşımı ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye'nin değişen diaspora stratejilerini göç dinamikleriyle birlikte ele alan makale, devlet güdümlü politikalar ile göçmen toplulukların beklentileri arasındaki uyumsuzlukları vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler :** Ulusötesicilik, Diaspora Yönetişimi, Türk Göçmenler, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Türk-Amerikan, Yüksek Nitelikli Göç, Göçmenler

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, diaspora governance has evolved from a niche academic interest to a central subject in migration studies and international relations. As transnational communities increasingly influence economic, cultural, and political spheres; states have expanded their diaspora policies to include, not only symbolic ties, but also strategic objectives (Gamlen, 2014). However, the growing prominence of diaspora governance also reveals critical tensions, particularly in how states manage engagement with their emigrants (Adamson, 2020). Türkiye, with its extensive and diverse emigrant communities, provides a particularly compelling case through which to examine the evolution of such policies. Türkiye's diaspora engagement policies have evolved significantly over the decades, particularly in response to the diverse composition and shifting needs of its emigrant communities (Kaya, 2019; Arkılıç, 2022; Aksel, 2019; Kolbaşı-Muyan, 2023; Yıldız 2019). This article investigates these policies in the context of the United States, a key destination for emigrants that contrasts with European examples, by tracing their historical development, examining major institutional reforms, and evaluating recent initiatives targeting highly skilled emigrants. It analyzes the changing policies of the Turkish state vis-à-vis emigrant populations living in the United States. At the same time, the article underscores the selective and fragmented nature of these efforts, shaped by ideological divides and institutional disconnects.

This analysis is based on fieldwork conducted by the authors in 2014 and 2022, incorporating interviews with representatives from state institutions and civil society organizations in Ankara, Washington, D.C., and New York. The 2014 fieldwork was part of Aksel's PhD research, later published in 2016 and 2019, and involved interviews with state officials and civil society representatives in both Türkiye and the United States. The 2022 fieldwork was conducted as part of Çoklar's MA research, during which the researcher interned at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and spent eight months as participant observer at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, D.C.

During this period, the researcher attended various events, including receptions, holiday celebrations, special occasions, festivals, gaining insights into diplomatic and diaspora-related engagements. Long-term interaction with the Turkish-American community further facilitated the establishment of a communication network, enabling connections with the Diyanet Center of America (DCA) and other U.S. institutions. Snowball sampling was employed to reach active and retired government officials familiar with the research topic, particularly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and Türkiye's diplomatic missions in the United States. By integrating insights from these interviews with a review of the literature, the article critically evaluates how policies aimed at fostering belonging and leveraging diaspora networks often fall short in addressing the broader needs and aspirations of Turkish-American communities, particularly among highly skilled emigrants.

## Diaspora Governance: From Niche to Mainstream

The study of diaspora governance has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shifting from a niche subject to a mainstream topic of interest among academics and policymakers alike. Starting in the late 1990s and gaining momentum in the early 2000s, research on diaspora governance now spans diverse disciplines, reflecting the growing importance of transnational communities in economic, cultural, and political arenas. From the initial focus on sociological and anthropological approaches to later analyses of state policies and international relations, this section examines the progression of scholarship on diaspora governance, emphasizing its stages of development and its relevance to the Turkish case.

In the early phases, much of the research related to diaspora governance was based on sociological and anthropological explorations of migrants' transnational practices and the role of states. Influenced by foundational works, such as Vertovec's (1999) conceptualization of transnationalism as "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states," scholars emphasized the agency of migrants in creating and sustaining cross-border linkages. Studies such as Faist's (1998) work on transnational communities and Levitt's (2001) analysis of transnational villages underscored the importance of social formations and long-distance networks in shaping diasporic connections. These studies primarily focused on understanding the grassroots dynamics of transnationalism, including cultural hybridity and multi-positional identities, while also hinting at the role of state policies (Schiller et al. 1995).

This was also a period when the concept of diaspora began to gain significant traction in academic discourse. Classical notions of diaspora, often centered on victimized or exiled populations such as Armenians or Jews, gave way to broader definitions encompassing voluntary migrants and their descendants. Safran's (1991) and Cohen's (1997) typologies, as well as Anderson's (1991, 1998) conceptualization of "imagined communities" and "long-distance nationalism," provided critical frameworks for understanding the collective identities and shared memories that characterize diasporic groups. These ideas were further expanded by conceptual studies critically engaging with transnationalism and diaspora, including Waldinger and Fitzgerald's (2004) work and Brubaker's (2005) analysis of the "diaspora." This phase laid the groundwork for later, more policy-oriented analyses of diaspora governance.

The early 2000s marked a critical juncture in the evolution of diaspora governance as a field of study, with an increasing focus on state policies and their implications for transnational communities. The emergence of the "home-state literature" during this period further enriched the scholarship by emphasizing the strategic role of origin states in engaging diasporas. Authors such as Gamlen (2008, 2014), Ragazzi (2009), Varadarajan (2010), and Collyer (2014) demonstrated that emigrants were no longer viewed merely

as sources of remittances, but as key transnational actors contributing to national development, soft power, and global governance. This shift was exemplified by states' increasing reliance on extraterritorial citizenship and voting rights, which scholars like Bauböck (2010) argued challenged traditional notions of sovereignty and citizenship by extending these rights beyond territorial boundaries.

Collyer and Vathi's (2007) observation that by 2007, 80% of countries allowed extraterritorial voting spurred research into the implications of these rights on citizenship and political participation. This development signaled a broader reimagining of political engagement in the global era, with states increasingly recognizing transnational communities as integral to their political and social fabric. Gamlen's (2014) analysis further expanded this discussion by highlighting the rapid proliferation of diaspora institutions as a complementary trend. According to his findings, whereas in 1980 only a handful of diaspora institutions existed, by 2013, over half of the United Nations member states had established such entities. This surge reflected a growing institutionalization of diaspora engagement, epitomized by the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) first "Diaspora Ministerial Conference" in Geneva in 2013, which convened 548 high-level participants from 143 governments and various international organizations to share best practices (Gamlen, 2014).

The increasing attention paid by states of origin, as well as intergovernmental and international organizations such as the IOM, the World Bank, and United Nations institutions, further underscored the potential of diaspora engagement to create bridges across migrant communities and countries of origin. These efforts aimed to facilitate national and regional development processes. This perspective was also reflected in United Nations processes on sustainable development and migration governance. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development included objectives for creating conditions for migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries (UN, 2015).

The mainstreaming of diaspora governance within national and global policy frameworks spurred a proliferation of research, encompassing a diverse range of countries and contexts. Scholars have examined countries with large emigrant populations, such as China (Ho, 2011; Liu and Van Dongen, 2016), India (Varadarajan, 2010), and Mexico (Fitzgerald, 2008; Delano, 2014), alongside more traditional cases renowned for their diasporic communities, including Israel (Sheffer, 2002; Cohen, 2016) and Ireland (Boyle and Kavanagh, 2018). Attention also turned to countries undergoing shifts toward more proactive emigrant engagement, such as Egypt (Zohry and Debnath, 2010; Müller Funk, 2018), Türkiye (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Aksel, 2019; Kaya, 2019; Arkılıç, 2021), and Morocco (Brand, 2010; Hanafi and Hites, 2017). Collectively, these studies highlight the variety of diaspora engagement practices and their increasing relevance in shaping both national priorities and global governance structures.

More recently, the study of diaspora governance has increasingly focused on the intersections of international relations, regime type, and transnational power dynamics. This phase is marked by critical analyses of how diaspora engagement strategies align with broader state objectives, including the use of soft power and diaspora diplomacy (Ho and McConnell, 2019; Akçapar and Aksel, 2016; Brinkerhoff, 2019; Arkılıç, 2022). Scholars have examined the ideological foundations of diaspora policies, demonstrating how shifts in a home state's political or ideological orientation shape the selectivity and implementation of engagement strategies (Delano Alonso and Mylonas, 2019; Başer and Öztürk, 2021; Koinova and Tsourapas, 2018). At the same time, recent research has illuminated the more contentious aspects of diaspora governance, particularly in authoritarian contexts, revealing the coercive measures some states use to monitor and suppress dissent within diasporic communities, exposing fragmented and polarizing nature of these policies (Moss, 2016; Adamson, 2020; Tsourapas, 2022).

This body of work highlights how some states leverage diaspora governance to foster engagement between the state of origin and transnational communities, while also revealing underlying inequalities. These approaches often privilege certain groups while marginalizing others based on political or ideological criteria. States' engagement with their emigrant populations, whether economic, political or cultural, is shaped by uneven strategies and priorities, exposing the inherent selectivity in these approaches. Türkiye exemplifies this complexity, with its evolving approach to emigrant engagement reflecting broader trends in global migration governance, as well as the shifting of national priorities. By examining Türkiye's migration history to the United States, we can trace the interplay between global patterns and Türkiye's specific policy adaptations.

### **Migration from Türkiye to the United States: A Historical Perspective**

Migration from Türkiye to the United States has a legacy that dates back to the Ottoman era, shaped by economic opportunities and political turmoil. Over the past century, this movement has evolved into distinct waves of migration influenced by global, domestic, and geopolitical factors. These waves can be broadly categorized into four phases: the first wave during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the second wave in the post-World War II period until the 1980s, the third wave beginning in the 1980s with Türkiye's economic liberalization and globalization, and the fourth wave emerging in the post-2010 period, characterized by political and economic uncertainty. Each phase not only transformed the demographic and occupational profiles of Turkish migrants but also reflected Türkiye's shifting policies and broader global migration trends.

The earliest wave of migration occurred during the late Ottoman Empire, motivated by economic hardship, political instability, and the industrialization of North America (Karpas, 1985). During this period, most migrants were peasants and unskilled laborers

who sought economic opportunities in industrial cities such as Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia (Akçapar, 2009). U.S. government records estimate that approximately 320,000 migrants from Ottoman territories arrived between 1820 and 1920. However, the majority were Christian Arabs, Armenians, and Greeks from regions under Ottoman control, with ethnic Turks constituting a much smaller proportion, estimated at around 15,000 to 20,000 (Karpas, 2008).

The socio-economic profile of these migrants reflected the push-pull dynamics of the time: economic struggles in their homeland pushed young, single men with limited education and English proficiency to migrate, while the promise of industrial employment in the United States pulled them into low-wage labor markets. Social isolation was a defining feature of their experience. These migrants found community and refuge in *kahvehane* (coffeehouses), which served as informal social hubs but limited their engagement with broader American society (Grabovski, 2005). Most saw their stay in the United States as temporary, intending to accumulate wealth before returning to their homelands (Aksel, 2016).

Although the early 20th century was marked by global wars, limited mobility, and the absence of structured transnational networks, grassroots initiatives among Turkish migrants in the United States demonstrated an early form of transnational solidarity. A notable example occurred during the Turkish War of Independence, when Turkish workers in the U.S. raised \$120,000 to support orphaned children. This campaign, organized by the Türk Teavün Cemiyeti (Turkish Mutual Aid Society), highlighted the community's collective effort despite the challenges of the era. However, these initiatives were sporadic and lacked organizational consistency. The first wave of migration ultimately declined sharply after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the introduction of the restrictive U.S. Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed strict quotas on migration (Aksel, 2016).

The second wave of migration occurred between 1945 and 1980, marked by a new pattern of Turkish migration to the U.S. following World War II. Unlike the first wave, this migration primarily consisted of skilled and educated individuals, including professionals. Although the scale of this migration was smaller, its distinctive feature was the higher educational and professional qualifications of the migrants. The political rapprochement between the U.S. and Türkiye, which began with the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and was solidified by Türkiye's membership to The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, further accelerated migration during this period.

A defining aspect of this wave was intellectual migration, supported by programs such as the Fulbright Agreement of 1949, which provided scholarships for Turkish students and academics to study in the United States (Bettie, 2015). This intellectual exchange contributed to the formation of a highly educated Turkish diaspora but also intensified

concerns about “brain drain”—the loss of skilled professionals essential to Türkiye’s modernization efforts (Akçapar, 2009; Kurtuluş, 1999). Those who remained in the U.S. became integral members of the professional Turkish-American community, later playing a key role in building cultural and economic bridges between the two nations (Ahmed, 1986).

The evolving demographics and aspirations of the community during this period were reflected in the expansion of association activities. Social clubs and professional networks emerged as important platforms for community building and cultural preservation. For instance, the Turkish-American Cultural Society (TACS), established in the 1960s, provided a space for strengthening ties among Turkish immigrants and preserving Turkish culture. By the 1980s, organizations like the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA) had emerged, advocating for the rights and interests of Turkish Americans while promoting a positive image of Türkiye abroad (Yavuzer, 2009).

These associations marked a departure from the isolation and fragmentation that characterized earlier waves of migration. They served as centers for cultural exchange, professional networking, and collective action (Aksel, 2019). However, Turkish migrations also faced challenges related to political representation and integration into American society. The Cold War political climate and shifting U.S.-Türkiye relations further shaped their experiences. In response, some Turkish organizations actively engaged in advocacy and lobbying efforts to address issues related to Türkiye’s foreign policy efforts and to counter negative perceptions of the country (Aksel, 2016).

By the 1990s, Turkish migration to the U.S. underwent significant transformations, reflecting changes in demographics, migration policies, and societal dynamics. The liberalization measures implemented by Turgut Özal, predicted on the assumption that trade liberalization was essential for integration into a competitive global economy (Öniş, 2004), facilitated Türkiye’s “opening up to the world” policy, leading to a marked increase in migration. New opportunities, such as the U.S. Green Card Lottery, which started in fiscal year 1995, contributed to the emergence of a more heterogeneous migrant profile, including students, professionals, small-business owners, and semi-skilled or unskilled workers (Kaya, 2003; Senouci, 2016). This period brought significant cultural and identity shifts within the Turkish-American community. A member of this community characterized this group as maintaining a strong attachment to their Turkish-Islamic identity, drawing parallels to the Turkish guest workers in Germany (Akıncı, 2002). Many of these migrants originated from provinces such as Çorum, Giresun, Yozgat, and Ankara, relying heavily on kinship and hometown networks to facilitate their migration. Among them were new conservative groups who migrated in response to events such as the military memorandum of February 28, 1997, which led to heightened political and social tensions in Türkiye (Aksel, 2019).



Since the mid-2010s, Türkiye has been experiencing new forms of emigration driven by political, social, and economic challenges. Events such as the Gezi movement in 2013, a large-scale movement sparked by concerns over urban transformation and rising authoritarianism, and the attempted coup of 2016, which led to a widespread political crackdown, played a significant role in shaping this trend. During this period, new patterns of mobility emerged, particularly among highly skilled professionals, in fields such as information technology and healthcare. This shift reignited debates on “brain drain” as a growing number of young, educated Turkish citizens sought opportunities abroad, raising concerns among policy circles about the long-term impact on the country’s workforce.

In 2014, nearly 195,000 Turkish citizens were registered with the Turkish Embassy in the United States, with most concentrated in New York (97,000), Los Angeles (33,000), and Chicago (21,000), although officials estimated the total population, including irregular migrants, to be around 300,000 (Aksel, 2016). According to the American Community Survey, the foreign-born population from Türkiye was approximately 150,000 in 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Recent data from the DHS Office of Homeland Security Statistics highlights increasing trends in Turkish emigration to the United States between 2010 and 2022. The number of Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) grew from 4,483 in 2010 to 7,001 in 2022, with the largest increase occurring in 2022 (+2,536), signaling a sharp rebound following the pandemic-related decline of 2020. New arrivals also showed a recovery, rising to 1,978 in 2022 after fluctuating in previous years. Notably, the 25–34 age group consistently accounted for the largest share of migrants, underscoring the outflow of Türkiye’s young and highly skilled workforce. In terms of occupational distribution, “Management, Professional, and Related Occupations” remained the leading category, reflecting the prominence of skilled professionals within this wave. Meanwhile, Turkish emigrants have continued to settle in familiar regions, with New Jersey (1,052), Texas (895), and New York (755) emerging as the top states of residence in 2022, alongside California and Florida, which have remained consistent destinations throughout the period (U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Homeland Security Statistics, 2024).

Alongside regular migration, irregular migration patterns have also intensified in recent years. United States Customs and Border Protection reported a sharp rise in border encounters involving Turkish nationals, particularly after 2021. This surge reflects broader trends driven by a combination of economic uncertainty and political polarization, illustrating the growing complexity of Turkish migration flows (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). Together, the fourth wave of migration shows the complex nature of Türkiye’s recent emigration, as political and economic challenges intersect with global shifts.

## Türkiye's Changing Emigrant Engagement Policies in the USA

Türkiye's early diaspora policies were strongly informed by bilateral labor migration to Europe starting in the 1960s. These policies were rooted in bilateral labor agreements and focused on regulating workers' mobility, protecting basic labor rights, and especially harnessing remittances for economic development. As discussed in the earlier section, however, migration to the United States took a different form. Rather than large groups of guest workers, the U.S.-bound emigrants were often university students or highly trained professionals—a pattern that came to be known as “brain drain.”

Despite these differences, the Turkish state was preoccupied with overseas workers in Germany and other parts of Europe and tended to treat emigrants in the U.S. through a similar lens, at least initially. As parliamentary debates from the 1970s attest, policy-makers in Ankara worried that high-skilled individuals were “using the resources and know-how they obtained in Türkiye for the development of other countries.” The state's instruments were therefore geared toward discouraging permanent settlement abroad and incentivizing “return” to recoup the social and economic capital that emigrants had accumulated (TBMM, 1972). Yet, because the U.S. context was never as large or visible in public discourse as Europe, diaspora policy frameworks both legal and institutional, remained largely Eurocentric. Minimal attention was paid to the scattered but growing communities of Turkish-origin individuals in the United States until the 1980s (Aksel, 2019).

### Evolution of Policies in the 1980s

Beginning in the 1980s, the Turkish state started to incorporate more symbolic and cultural dimensions into its diaspora engagement, gradually acknowledging that emigrants might settle abroad permanently. In Europe, this shift intersected with new dilemmas: tensions stemming from the 1980 coup, ideologically fragmented communities, and a deepening divide between the Turkish state's Kemalist identity and the various leftist or Islamist currents among diasporic populations.

In contrast, in the United States, two unique dynamics shaped the 1980s. The first dynamic was around ethnic lobbying facilitated by the American political system. The powerful Greek-American lobby and Armenian-American groups became exemplars of how ethnic communities could influence U.S. foreign policy. Turkish diplomats, notably Ambassador Şükrü Elekdağ, recognized that an organized Turkish-American community could counterbalance these rival lobbies and serve as a “symbolic ambassador” of Türkiye (Interview with former diplomat, 2014). This awareness ushered in concerted efforts by the Turkish state to support Turkish-American umbrella organizations (notably the Assembly of Turkish American Associations [ATAA], established in 1979) and the

Federation of Turkish American Associations [FTAA], founded in 1956 but greatly expanded in the 1980s). State backing took the form of cultural events, moral support, and financial grants through the Turkish Promotion Fund (Aksel, 2019).

The second dynamic was elite-communitarian fragmentation. Many early Turkish emigrants to the U.S. were professionals and academics attuned to the secular, republican values of Kemalism. Their individualism and relative economic comfort often distinguished them from the “guest worker” patterns typical of Europe. By the mid-1980s, however, new waves of less-skilled migrants arrived, sometimes echoing labor migration patterns in Germany, and formed communitarian networks anchored by local or religious ties. As Erman (2013) and Kaya (2003) note, these lower-class, conservative groups, such as tailors in Massachusetts or Giresun-origin families in Connecticut, received little direct attention or tailored services from consular offices. They often found themselves alienated from elite Turkish-American associations that more closely mirrored state secularism. The result was a fragmented diaspora in the U.S.: on one side, more highly skilled and state-aligned networks (e.g., ATAA, FTAA leadership) and, on the other, religiously conservative or working-class populations, who formed their own mosques and associations, sometimes preferring to connect with U.S.-based Islamic organizations (Aksel, 2019).

Nonetheless, as the Turkish state solidified its approach to the diaspora in the 1980s, it emphasized cultural diplomacy, such as funding exhibitions like “Süleyman the Great,” supporting Turkish Day Parades in New York, and inviting emigrants to participate in “long-distance nationalism” that showcased Türkiye’s cultural heritage to American audiences (Aksel, 2016). Much like in Europe, these events were “spectacles” (Şanlıer Yüksel, 2008) that primarily served the Turkish community itself rather than fostering deeper engagement with wider American society.

The establishment of the Advisory Committee on Citizens Living Abroad in 1998 marked another step in Türkiye’s diaspora policy. With its members drawn largely from networks associated with ATAA and FTAA, the committee underscored the state’s reliance on established diaspora organizations to mediate its engagement with non-resident citizens. In practice, however, representatives from the U.S. often felt overshadowed by the committee’s heavy emphasis on Germany (and other large European receiving countries). This Eurocentric bias meant that issues unique to U.S.-based Turkish communities were rarely addressed in depth. Most official diaspora channels, including the Advisory Committee, continued to stress lobbying on homeland-related questions, rather than everyday integration concerns or class/religious tensions among Turkish-Americans (Aksel, 2016).

Many U.S.-based organizations were supported or at least encouraged by Turkish consulates, thereby reinforcing a top-down approach. Those who conformed to

state-sanctioned Kemalist and nationalist narratives were considered “desired citizens”; more religious or lower-class enclaves perceived a “cold face of the government offices” (Kaya, 2003; Erman, 2013). Some diaspora organizations (e.g., ATAA, FTAA) developed endowment funds or membership dues to reduce financial reliance on Ankara. Others collaborated with state institutions on symbolic events (like the Turkish Day Parade) but sought autonomy regarding their advocacy efforts. The *Diyanet* also began to formalize outreach to U.S. mosques, although, unlike in Europe, this was much slower and far less coordinated before the early 2000s (Aksel, 2016).

### Institutional Reforms and Challenges in the 2000s

At the start of the 2000s, the Turkish state gradually moved away from a fragmented perception of its emigrants, where those in Europe were narrowly labeled *gurbetçi* (guest workers) and those in the United States were seen either as isolated “professionals” or “symbolic ambassadors,” toward a more unified notion of “diaspora.” This change built on the broader policy effort to harmonize the diverse experiences of Turkish communities abroad under a single framework (Aksel, 2022). Repeatedly emphasized by officials from Türkiye and host countries, the concept of “integration without assimilation” encouraged full participation in local socio-political life, while preserving strong cultural and emotional attachments to Türkiye. In doing so, it served two complementary purposes: (1) fostering loyalty among emigrants, including second- and third-generation youth, and (2) projecting a positive, cohesive image of Türkiye worldwide.

In 2022, this view was encapsulated in a message from Türkiye’s Ambassador to the United States, who addressed emigrants with the following statement:

“You are the bond of friendship between our country and the United States. The achievements of the Turkish-American society in the U.S. contribute to bilateral relations. We will always support the work of the Turkish-American society in the United States. In the meantime, the protection of our country and our culture is our greatest goal. As long as our society acts together, it will do successful work in the U.S. The doors of our Embassy and Consulates General in the U.S. are always open to our citizens and our services and support will continue.” (Republic of Türkiye Turkish Embassy in Washington, 2022)

Echoing earlier statements by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other state representatives, the Ambassador’s remarks positioned emigrants as the “bond of friendship” between Türkiye and the U.S. Rather than viewing Turkish-Americans merely as citizens, the state came to see them as strategic partners, who can both advance Türkiye’s foreign-policy interests and promote its cultural heritage.

Institutional reforms supported the symbolic reorientation of the 2000s, establishing a new framework for diaspora engagement. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduced structural changes aimed at improving services for overseas citizens. Between 2002 and January 2025, Türkiye's diplomatic missions expanded from 163 to 257 (146 embassies, 13 permanent representations, 95 consulates general, additional permanent missions, and trade offices). Consular modernization, ranging from the "e-consulate" system to mobile consulate programs, reduced bureaucratic hurdles and made it easier for citizens to renew passports, address power-of-attorney issues, and complete military service registrations (Interview with Consular Official, Washington D.C., U.S., 2022.). In the United States, Turkish embassies and consulates have increasingly embraced a more direct, community-oriented approach, holding frequent events with diasporic associations, such as National Day celebrations, Turkish Day Parades, and *iftar* (fast-breaking during Ramadan) gatherings, and underscoring a "doors always open" policy:

"Relations with citizens have improved. Citizens know the person who knows/does his job. Consul General, for example, is seen as a high rank. In the past, citizens were afraid of consulates and embassies. Now embassies and consulates are more in touch with the public. Complaints are not wanted, so the work is based on solving the citizens' problems as much as possible." (Interview with the Consulate Official, Washington D.C., U.S., 2023).

Through these public outreach efforts, Turkish missions have recast themselves as approachable service hubs rather than distant or purely bureaucratic outposts. Over the past decade, Türkiye's foreign mission in the United States has increasingly focused on cultivating economic ties to promote investments. This shift reflects the growing recognition among Turkish government officials and business leaders that the transnational community can serve as valuable partners for development and growth (Ataselim, 2014). The Ministry of Trade, through its Trade Counsellors stationed in foreign missions, provides services on investment consultancy and market analysis. As part of efforts to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), multinational companies, including those established by emigrants from Türkiye, are encouraged to invest in Türkiye, with Trade Counsellors offering guidance on navigating these opportunities. Trade is widely recognized as a key driver in strengthening bilateral relations and enhancing Türkiye's global brand reputation. The assertion that "if the investor is strong, the diaspora can exert pressure in the U.S." (Interview with the Turkish Diplomat, Washington D.C., U.S., 2023) underscores the strategic importance of economic empowerment within diaspora engagement efforts.

In addition to supporting Turkish investors with market research and international reports, Trade Counsellors provide insights into customs services. Highlighting the tangible impact of these initiatives, one official noted:

“Investments were made in West Virginia. The employment generated there increased Türkiye’s recognition in commercial, cultural, and educational fields. On the other hand, we also sign trade agreements. Determining Türkiye’s position here is of great importance.” (Interview with Trade Consular, Washington D.C., U.S. 2023).

Through these consultancy services and investment facilitation efforts, the Turkish state aims to support emigrants and diasporic populations who wish to invest in the U.S., focusing not only on individual gains but also on Türkiye’s prestige on the global stage (Çoklar, 2024).

A critical moment in Türkiye’s diaspora engagement policies was the establishment of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Toplulukları Başkanlığı, YTB) in 2010 through Law No. 5978. The YTB was the culmination of decades-long discussions, dating back to the 1970s, about creating a specialized agency to handle diaspora affairs. It was envisioned as a coordinating institution that would act as a bridge across various Turkish ministries (e.g., Foreign Affairs, Culture and Tourism, Labor), as well as civil society organizations and diaspora communities (Ünver, 2013; Aksel, 2019). Since its establishment, YTB has launched projects in multiple domains including education, culture, scholarships, Turkish language instruction, as well as sought partnerships with diaspora associations that do “not contradict the policies of the Republic of Türkiye and do not support terrorism” (Interview with YTB official, 2022). Additional organizations to support networking, such as the World Turkish Business Council (DTİK) and the Advisory Committee on Turkish Citizens Abroad, were also established in the early 2010s (Ünver, 2013; Aksel, 2019). However, these initiatives ultimately struggled to endure and were discontinued after a few years, partly due to the involvement of members affiliated with Gülenist organizations, classified since 2016 as terrorist entities.

A YTB official remarked on programs planned specifically for the United States:

“We have two important programs that will establish a bond between Türkiye and our citizens abroad. These are leadership and media academy... Of course, we revise the participation and application conditions according to the content of the program and the country. But speaking from the perspective of the U.S., this country is easier and more comfortable in terms of implementing some programs. Because the environment is very free.” (Interview with the YTB Official, Ankara, Türkiye, 2022).

In the U.S., YTB focused on fostering a sense of belonging among younger generations, (Interview with YTB official, Ankara, Türkiye, 2022). consistent with its activities in other countries, as argued by Şenay and Arkılıç (2024), as well as Bücü and Başer

(2024). Meanwhile, the activities of Gülenist-affiliated movements, currently blacklisted by the Turkish government, have been systematically discredited. To counter the influence of such associations, Turkish state institutions have, established or supported alternative organizations to assume similar functions. For instance, the Yunus Emre Institute oversees cultural affairs, while Türkiye Maarif Foundation, has taken on responsibility for educational initiatives (Aksel, 2016).

During the 2010s, the Turkish state intensified its focus on citizen relations, reflecting a broader policy shift toward leveraging political influence through diaspora engagement. A key element of this strategy was the extension of voting rights to Turkish citizens abroad, which became fully operational in 2012, after lengthy negotiations involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, YTB, and the Supreme Election Council (YSK). While foreign missions initially expressed concerns about security, staffing limitations, and legal complexities, eventually cooperation among these institutions ultimately paved the way for ballot boxes to be placed at embassies and consulates (Köse, 2023). Consequently, the number of Turkish voters in the United States steadily increased from around 35,000 in 2018 to over 51,000 in the 2023 presidential elections (Interview with a Consulate Official, Washington D.C., U.S, 2023.).

Proponents of extra-territorial voting assert that it fosters stronger homeland–diaspora ties, facilitates more accurate demographic data, and encourages political parties, such as CHP, AKP, and HDP, to organize abroad and engage directly with their constituents (Köse, 2023). Building on this momentum, Turkish embassies and consulates in the U.S. expanded their lobbying and outreach efforts during this period. Citizens were encouraged not only to participate in elections but also to engage in political advocacy, such as making appointments with Senate members and governors. This approach blended traditional voter mobilization with American-style lobbying (Interview with a Turkish Diplomat, Washington D.C., U.S., 2023.).

These developments underscore the importance of an expanded consular network. However, despite being hailed as a milestone in diaspora empowerment, skeptics highlight structural issues, such as the centralized counting of ballots in Ankara, which continues to limit the potential for full diaspora participation (Çoklar, 2024). Nonetheless, extra-territorial voting remains a cornerstone of Türkiye’s evolving diaspora strategy, exemplifying the state’s commitment to fostering transnational political ties with emigrants.

Another significant aspect of Türkiye’s new diaspora engagement strategy in the United States involves the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) and its affiliated Turkish Diyanet Foundation. One of its prominent projects is the Diyanet Center of America (DCA), inaugurated in 2016 in Maryland under the auspices of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The DCA’s stated aim is to serve the religious, cultural, and social needs of both the Turkish diaspora and the broader Muslim community in the United States. With its



expansive complex, including a mosque, cultural center, guest house, library, and educational facilities, the DCA hosts diverse activities, such as daily prayers, cultural events, summer programs, and exhibitions promoting Turkish-Islamic heritage (Çoklar, 2024). The DCA's leaders have positioned the center as a "civilizational showcase" of Turkish Islam, emphasizing its role as a bridge between Anatolian traditions and American society ("Amerika Diyanet Merkezi", 2019, October 25).

Despite these ambitions, the DCA has struggled to attract significant participation from Turkish-Americans, many of whom identify with a secular-Kemalist worldview. As one DCA official acknowledged: "We want to organize different events, but first we need to find a way to get Turks accustomed to here." (Interview with DCA Official, Maryland, U.S., 2023). According to the same official, roughly 85% of the DCA's visitors are non-Turkish Muslims. From the perspective of DCA officials, several factors contribute to this limited engagement: the "Diyanet" label, perceived by parts of the diaspora as closely tied to the ruling government; the center's geographic distance from major Turkish communities; and fragmentation within the diaspora, exacerbated by mistrust following the 2016 coup attempt. This ambivalence highlights the broader disconnection between Türkiye's religiously oriented outreach and the predominantly secular composition of the earlier Turkish-American emigrant population (Çoklar, 2024). The strategy of engaging through supporting state Islam to mobilize citizens abroad has had limited appeal among U.S.-based Turkish communities, particularly in the aftermath of the FETÖ controversy.

While the establishment of YTB after 2010 initially signaled a more systematic approach to diaspora outreach, its capacity to engage the Turkish-American community has remained limited. Turkish foreign missions under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continue to play the most dominant role in sustaining the state-citizen relationship in the United States. This prominence is partly due to the YTB's limited accessibility in the U.S., a challenge further exacerbated by its transfer from the Prime Ministry to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2018. Additionally, the YTB's communitarian approach, developed primarily for European contexts, focuses on grassroots engagement through cultural and associative activities, which aligns less closely with the diverse and often individualistic composition of the Turkish-American diaspora.

Another key limitation lies in the perception among many emigrants that the government's outreach through the YTB is selective and politically oriented (Mencütek and Başer, 2018; Yanaşmayan and Kaşlı, 2019; Arkılıç, 2022). Compared to the broader, citizenship-based framework adopted by Turkish diplomatic missions, the YTB's activities are seen as narrower in scope and less inclusive. As a result, the YTB and other recently established institutions have attracted less support in the United States than the more established foreign missions.



Building on its evolving diaspora engagement policies, Türkiye has recently intensified efforts to foster new forms of diaspora networking, particularly in the United States. One initiative by the YTB has been its efforts to develop a “scientific diaspora,” particularly targeting Turkish engineers concentrated in the San Francisco Bay Area. A YTB representative explained:

“There is a significant migration of Turkish engineers in San Francisco. We aim to support new studies in engineering and other scientific fields and promote interaction between Turkish scientists abroad and those in Türkiye. We organized the Congress of Scientists Abroad, which we last held in 2019, but our goal is to institutionalize this framework.” (Interview with the YTB Official, Ankara, Türkiye, 2022).

Such initiatives reflect the Turkish state’s dual recognition of the existing highly skilled Turkish population in the United States and the more recent wave of brain drain, characterized by professionals leaving Türkiye for advanced education or opportunities in the technology sector. Rather than addressing the root causes of this emigration, these efforts focus on forging transnational connections, aiming to integrate these individuals into Türkiye’s global economic strategy. The state seeks to leverage their expertise, investment capacity, and lobbying potential as valuable assets for Türkiye’s broader ambitions, underscoring the strategic importance of this demographic in diaspora engagement policies.

However, these initiatives also underscore significant shortcomings in the state’s approach to embracing and empowering these groups. Instead of fostering transnational connections grounded in shared professional and economic interests, the efforts primarily rely on invoking national sentiments, leaving substantial gaps in addressing the broader needs and aspirations of these individuals. This limited framework reflects a broader institutional disconnect, evident in the lack of coordination between key actors such as YTB and DCA, as well as selective engagement strategies that contrast with the more citizenship-based stance purportedly promoted by representatives of the diplomatic missions. These examples highlight the fragmented nature of Türkiye’s diaspora engagement strategy, particularly in addressing the needs of the highly skilled emigrants from Türkiye living in the United States.

## Conclusion

Diaspora governance has become an increasingly significant dimension of statecraft, reflecting the growing recognition of transnational communities as important actors in economic, cultural, and political arenas. States have established new institutions and policies to engage their diasporas, aiming to foster cultural ties, mobilize political influence, and leverage economic contributions. However, the institutional frameworks of diaspora

governance often reveal a tension between state-centric strategies and the diverse needs and aspirations of emigrant communities. These dynamics are particularly evident in contexts where newly established institutions are created to coexist with more entrenched structures, often leading to fragmented approaches to diaspora engagement.


The Turkish case exemplifies these broader dynamics. Over the 2010s, Türkiye established new institutions as part of a proactive diaspora governance model, reflecting its aim to engage emigrant communities more systematically, while aligning these efforts with broader political objectives. In the United States, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, Yunus Emre Institutes and the Diyanet Center of America emerged as new actors in these developments. Following the 2016 coup attempt, these institutions also became integral to the Turkish state's strategy to counter the Gülen movement abroad, further shaping their activities and outreach.

Nevertheless, the YTB's communitarian approach, designed primarily for European contexts, struggles to resonate with the more diverse and individualistic composition of Turkish-Americans. This demographic includes highly skilled professionals and second- and third-generation emigrants who often operate outside the community-based networks that the YTB targets. Similarly, the DCA's religiously oriented outreach has faced significant challenges in appealing to the predominantly secular Turkish-American population, underscoring the disconnect between state strategies and diaspora characteristics.

In light of these discrepancies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to dominate Türkiye's diaspora governance in the United States. Turkish embassies and consulates remain the primary actors in facilitating political engagement and maintaining ties with emigrant communities. Türkiye's experience highlights the persistent challenge of integrating newly created institutions with pre-existing structures, illustrating the complexities inherent in the evolution of diaspora governance.

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