Diasporic communities provide a safety net for refugees in a hostile world. Discuss.

This essay will begin by defining the term diaspora and its origins. The second section will explore several academic theories of the characteristics of a diaspora community. The third section will consider the importance of global communications and remittances in enabling diaspora communities to maintain links with other co-ethnic communities throughout the world. The fourth section will consider the notion of diaspora communities as a threat to nation states and national security in host countries, and will examine how this argument is being used by the anti immigration lobby and the media to distort public perception about asylum seekers and to put pressure on the government to enforce stricter immigration controls. The conclusion will consider the proposal that diasporic communities provide a 'safe haven' for refugees in a hostile world within a psychosocial framework.

The term *diaspora* is derived from the ancient Greek verb meaning to "sow over"(Cohen, 1997:ix).

It originated from the ancient Greek tradition of migration and colonization, but in recent history has become more commonly associated with Jews, Africans, Palestinians, Kurds and other exiled communities. According to Cohen in 'Global Diasporas' (Cohen, 1997:xi). "The Jews provide the source for most characterizations of the diasporic condition". Diasporas can be characterized as being of a mass nature with catastrophic origins and as having been dispersed from an original centre to two or more foreign regions (Cohen, 1997:xi). There must also be a strong link to the home country through language, religion and custom. Often there is a sense of great historic injustice that binds the group together and a strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present or future that must exist in order to permit diasporic consciousness to emerge or be retained (Cohen, 1997:23-24). Transnational relationships are maintained through the belief in a common identity with co-ethnic members in other countries, as well as through

improved global communications networks. Van Hear (Van Hear, 1998:4) defines

transnationalism as 'the formation of social, political and economic relationships amongst

migrants that span several societies.

"Ethnic community formation may take on a transnational character, and provide the basis

for long-lasting communicative networks which unite people across borders and

generations. A special form of this is the *diaspora*, which denotes a persistent sense of

community between people who have left their homeland (usually involuntarily) and who

may be scattered all over the world. Such diasporas… may play a crucial role in

maintaining the national identity of a conquered or divided homeland, and in bringing
about

political change" (Castles & Miller, 1998:201).

According to Cohen (Cohen, 1997:xi), there are five types of diaspora. The 'victim diaspora' of the

Jews, Armenians and Palestinians; the 'labour diaspora' from the Indian sub continent; the

'imperial diaspora', a result of colonization, for example, the British; the 'trade diaspora' of the

Lebanese and the 'cultural diaspora' of the black African Of course many diaspora

communities fall into several of these categories simultaneously, for example, the Jewish

 diaspora could be categorized as both a 'victim diaspora' and a 'trade diaspora'.

There are many academic theories as to the key characteristics of a diaspora. Safran (Safran,

1991,cited in Cohen, 1997:23) uses the term to describe expatriates, expellees, political

refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities He defines the key

characteristics of diasporas as sharing several of the following features; they, or their ancestors,

have been dispersed from an original "centre" to two or more foreign regions; they retain a

collective memory or myth about the original homeland, including location, history and

achievements; there is a belief that they are not, and can never be, fully accepted in the host

 society and so remain partly separate; the ancestral homeland is idealized and there is a belief

that when conditions are more favourable, they or their descendants should return; and a belief

that all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland and to it's safety and prosperity. (Safran, 1991, cited in Cohen, 1997:23). Cohen expands upon this theory to include the expansion from the homeland in search of work,

in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions; the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation; a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time, based upon a sense of distinctiveness, common history and a belief in a common fate; a troubled relationship with the host society, a lack of acceptance or a belief in the possibility that another calamity might befall the group; a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement and the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in the host country (Cohen, 1997:26). Van Hear (Van Hear, 1998:6) proposes more minimal criteria of diaspora; the population has been dispersed from their homeland to two or more other territories; the presence abroad is enduring, although exile is not necessarily permanent and may include movement between the homeland and the host country and that there is social, economic, political and cultural exchange between or among spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora.

John Berry presents a psychosocial framework for considering the relationship between minority groups, including migrants, and the larger society, which can be useful in discussing the relationship between diaspora communities and the host society. He proposes five classifications to interpret the relationship between the migrant, their co-ethnic community and the established majority population. *Acculturation* is defined as the maintenance of both cultural identity and relations with other groups; *Assimilation* is seen as the total submersion with the dominant society; *Separation* is defined as the maintenance of identity with minimal relations with the larger
society, or *segregation,* when it is enforced; *Marginalization* is categorized as the loss of the group identity without becoming part of the wider society, or *assimilating*; and *integration* as participation in the larger society whilst maintaining own self-identity. (Berry, 1992, cited in Van Hear, 1998:55). Van Hear uses this framework to suggest that relations with 'established' communities revolve around issues of integration or its absence (Van Hear, 1998:55).

According to the United Nations there are currently 175 million people residing in a country other than in which they were born, a figure that has doubled since 1975. Of this number an estimated 20 million are refugees (UNHCR, 2001, cited in Flynn, 2002). Profound changes in the world political and economic order have generated large movements of people in almost every region and led to the formation of diaspora or transnational communities (Van Hear, 1998:1). Active maintenance of relations with other co-ethnic transnational communities and the home community are vital to the maintenance of the ethnic group consciousness proposed by Cohen. This can be in the form of home visits or visits to co-ethnic communities in other countries of settlement, correspondence, remittances and support for either the ruling regimes or opposition movements in the home country. The globalisation of information technologies and

communications has been extremely beneficial to diaspora communities in maintaining links with co-ethnic and home communities in many ways that were not possible twenty or thirty years ago. Today, information and communication technologies and the relative ease and affordability of foreign travel bind global diaspora communities with their homeland; facilitate new and more efficient economic networks in both the host and home country, and increase identity and belonging to a greater transnational community. In 1989 the IMF (International Monetary Fund) estimated that migrants had transferred $65 billion dollars out of their host countries in the form of remittances. This figure exceeded official development assistance from donor states to qualifying countries by approximately $20 billion (Harding, 2000:90). Remittances to relatives and maintenance of property implied commitment amongst many Palestinians to place of origin despite long residence abroad (Van Hear, 1998:244). The civil war in Somalia, for example, created a large Somali diaspora throughout North Africa, the Gulf, North America and Western Europe. Mobile phones and the Internet allow for family ties to be maintained and for remittances, which have kept the Somalian economy from collapse, to continue. The strong clan ties which divided Somalia also proved to be a source of unity and strength, prompting the development of an international banking system of remittance agencies. The current value of remittances is

estimated to be several hundred million U.S dollars a year and outstrips livestock as a source of foreign exchange (UNHCR, 2000:257).

Following the September 11th attacks on America the global communications network, which

enriches many diaspora communities, has also been perceived as a means to facilitate transnational terrorism and criminal activity, and as integral to the financing of wars in home states, as well as the cultivation of divisive nationalism through the online diaspora community (Nautilus, 2003). Diaspora communities are often viewed as a threat to the nation state and the homogeneity of the established society. Terrorism and violence is common where the 'homeland' is disputed or no longer exists, for example, Hamas, in Israel/Palestine or the P.K.K (Kurdish Workers Party), resulting in diaspora communities being seen as a 'security threat' (Cohen, 1997:193). The invasion of Rwanda by the R.P.F (Front Patriotique Rwandais) from Uganda in 1990 and the insurgency in Eastern Zaire in 1996 was instigated by ethnic Tutsis exiled in Uganda and Zaire. The core element of this particular diaspora community was unsettled nationality and disputed citizenship with a long and complex history of migration (Van Hear, 1998:236).

"Diaspora communities have many beneficial effects, both on the host and migrant communities, but they may also breed pathological attitudes amongst a small minority. Some may fight their own wars on foreign soil. Or diaspora communities can provide inadvertent cover in their separateness from the main society, for terrorists and extremists from inside or outside who want to attack the host" (Woolacott, 1995, cited in Cohen, 1997:193-4).

The above quote appeared in The Guardian newspaper in 1995, considered to be one of Britain's more liberal publications. The recent discovery of Ricin in a flat in London, in which two Algerian asylum seekers had been accommodated, and the murder of a policeman in Manchester during the arrest of a suspected terrorist, also an Algerian asylum seeker, has led to fears of public

safety and intense media speculation about the link between asylum seekers and terrorism. The anti immigration lobby have been quick to exploit public safety fears to put pressure on the government to enforce stricter immigration controls, and in more extreme cases to end immigration all together. This present climate of hostility will potentially result in further abuses of Human Rights by the governments of 'Fortress Europe' and legitimize attacks on all ethnic minorities, regardless of their immigration status, as well as being extremely detrimental to the many diaspora communities in Europe attempting to rebuild their lives here. The following article in the Evening Standard is typical of the media coverage of recent events. "Poison Gang Seek Asylum" states that "terrorists posed as asylum seekers to get a London flat which they turned into a poison factory." It continues by making a tenuous connection to September 11th by commenting that " the pair were moved into the flat within days of the attacks on New York and Washington…and that the area is perfect for a terrorist gang to move into …with a rich ethnic mix" (Davenport, Murray, 8 Jan 2003). Another article, again in the Evening Standard reported that the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, in an interview with New Statesman, had expressed his concern 'that genuine fears about public safety would result in the disintegration of community relations and social cohesion' (Reiss, 23 Jan 2003). Last week Patrick Winfour reported in The Guardian that the Prime Minister had announced a rethink on Britains obligations towards asylum seekers, under the terms of the European Convention on Human Rights, if the latest wave of asylum reforms failed to "stem the flow of unfounded asylum seekers" (Winfour, Jan 27 2003). The Conservative Party also announced its new immigration policies last week, including the withdrawal from "the relevant international Human Rights agreements…to create a faire and more humane asylum system", as well as the detention of all asylum seekers entering the country in secure centres to allow 'proper vetting' by security services before being allowed out into the community. " Terrorists know they can gain access to Britain by taking advantage of our chaotic asylum system" (Duncan Smith, Jan 28 2003, reported by Corrigan, Asylum Support Information, Jan 29 2003). The denigration of refugees and asylum seekers by the media is nothing new,

as this report, on the arrival in Southampton of three hundred and fifty Jewish refugees from the Anglo-Boer war, featured in The Daily Mail in 1900 illustrates:

"Incredible as it may seem, the moment they were in the carriages they began to

gamble…and when the Relief Committee passed by they hid their gold and fawned

and

whined and, in broken English, asked for money for their train fare" (Harding, 2000:48).

Established diaspora communities can often provide safety and security, especially for newly

arrived asylum seekers. Remittances from abroad enable friends or relatives in the home country

to join co-ethnic communities in 'safe' countries, furthermore these communities play a vital role

in providing support with housing, finance and employment, as well as in orientation and

adaptation to the new host society. For many it also provides an opportunity to safely re-engage

in political activity.

"The free expression of political views, outlawed at home, becomes possible outside:

 journals, meetings, fund-raisers, levies, numbered accounts into which donations can

be paid…as was the case of the Eritrean and Palestinian exiles during the 1970's and

1980's and the Kosovar community in Switzerland during the 1990's" (Harding,

2000:38).

However the notion of diasporic communities providing a safety net for refugees in a hostile

world is to some degree dependant upon the understanding and tolerance of the host society.

The more hostile and unwelcoming the host society the greater the threat of danger for those

identified as 'the other'. This climate of fear can often prevent diaspora communities form

integrating with the established community which can in turn further suspicion and hostility, as

well as increasing the marginalization of the diaspora community. The Ugandan Asians who

settled in Britain following their expulsion from Uganda in the early 1970's provide a successful

example of integration. Despite arriving with little funds they were able to rebuild their lives

within a few years, buying property, re-establishing businesses and reaccrediting qualifications.

In some cases they surpassed both earlier Asian immigrants and the white population in education, employment and housing. Their success has been attributed to the presence of established co-ethnic communities, their ability to speak the host language and the recognition of the role of education as a route to social mobility, as well as goodwill on the part of both the newcomers and the host community (Marett, 1988 & 1993, cited in Van Hear, 1998:180-1).

> "Amongst factors influencing the ease and speed with which lives are rebuilt and homes re-established were the nature and state of the receiving society, links which were maintained whilst abroad, the presence of extended families, kin or co-ethnics, and the provision of assistance, both immediate and long term" (Van Hear, 1998:246).

The arrival in a new and unfamiliar country where one has family, kin or co-ethnic community would be advantageous to most people, regardless of their immigration status. This advantage is clearly greater for refugees fleeing war or persecution as it allows them the opportunity to begin to rebuild their lives with the assistance of their community. Furthermore the majority of refugees do not 'asylum shop' on the basis of one countries treatment of asylum seekers over another's; family connections, colonial history and the traffickers in whose hands they put their lives are of far greater significance (Harding, 2000:56). Therefore many asylum seekers arrive totally unprepared, without money or the ability to speak the language of host country, and are consequently entirely dependent on the support of the established co-ethnic community, and would certainly fare better than a refugee with no family or community to rely upon in the host country. Considered from a psychosocial perspective, diasporic communities fulfil much of the criteria of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943, cited in Loughry & Ager 1999: 120-124). The biological needs are met in the provision of food and shelter; the safety needs can be met within the security of the family or community, particularly for those fleeing violence or persecution; attachment, or the need for belonging can be provided by the established co-ethnic community, which in turn helps to promote 'esteem' or acceptance, enabling the individual to

fulfil their potential, a process defined by Maslow as 'self-actualization'. Within this framework

diasporic communities play a vital role in the survival of refugees in an increasingly hostile world.