

Refugee Flows and Transnational Ethnic Linkages

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Executive Summary

One of the most significant external effects of civil war is massive population dislocations and refugee flows across national boundaries. Those fleeing conflict and instability are rightly viewed as victims of persecution and war, requiring humanitarian aid, relief supplies and host-country protection. Yet, it would be incorrect to simply depict refugees as passive victims—rather than important actors—in the conflict dynamic. Several scholars have noted that refugee communities are often associated with security risks for the host and home countries, particularly if they are mobilized by militant groups. Others have found that refugee flows are one mechanism by which conflicts spread across regions. These effects remain poorly understood, however. One of the most plausible links between cross-border refugee flows and the spread of conflict has to do with the impact of migration flows on the ethnic balance of host countries. Cultural similarity may facilitate refugee integration, but refugee flows can also foster tensions among ethnic groups. However, there is a lack of systematic data on the ethnic composition of refugee flows, making it difficult to test these claims. Existing datasets, available from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), list refugee host and asylum countries, along with aggregate refugee counts. However, information on refugee ethnicity, religion, language use, etc, is not currently available.

We propose the creation of two datasets, which will help improve research on the migration-conflict connection. The first is a global dataset which contains information on the primary ethnic group(s) of refugee flows between states, at the aggregate country-dyad level. The second dataset will offer a geographically disaggregated view of these flows, listing refugee point of origin in the sending country and point of settlement in the receiving country. These projects will require extensive data collection efforts in conjunction with the UNHCR, which collects census data on refugee camps. These projects will be based in Zürich and Geneva, with input from international collaborators. The Zürich team will collect the global refugee data using secondary materials, NGO documents, and news reports. The Geneva team will work closely with relevant UNHCR offices to collect the geographically disaggregated data. The project will result in at least two research papers, dissertation projects, and publically-available data for the academic and policy communities.