Chapter 6
The Geopolitics of Conflict–Actuated Mass Displacement in the 21st Century

Madiha Batool

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0194-9544

Independent Researcher, UK

ABSTRACT

Human migration and displacement are age-old phenomena that no society has ever been able to evade historically. They are experiences that help societies and peoples mature and grow and are developments that make the world demographically and culturally more fertile. On the downside, however, displacements and migrations—when triggered by conflicts—can lead to the spillover of traumatic memories, criminal behaviours, and radical inclinations from one part of the world to another. The 21st century has witnessed multiple internal and external migrations around the globe prompted by conflicts. Are these conflict-induced migrants prone to becoming unofficial emissaries of intractable conflicts and failed states? The study is interested in analysing the geopolitics of conflict-actuated mass displacement in the 21st century. In doing so, it will also excavate how international power struggles affect local populations, lead to both internal and external displacements, and result in almost perpetual conflict cycles.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since antiquity, human migration and displacement have remained phenomena that have contributed towards not only the cultural but also demographic fertility that is so characteristic of the world that we live in. When undertaken voluntarily, migration gives the world its international nature. However, when triggered by conflicts or conflict-like situations, these same migrations and displacements can play havoc with the international social fabric. This is because the traumatic recollections of conflicts and the resultant responses from individuals' cognitions – mostly expressed via criminal behaviours and radical inclinations – have the proclivity to spillover from one part of the world to another with those displaced.

The twenty-first century has witnessed multiple internal and external migrations around the globe prompted by conflicts. While the number of international migrants increased by more than a million from 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020, the number of internally displaced persons more than doubled from 21 million in 2000 to 55 million in 2020 (International Organization for Migration, 2021). Today, as per the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] data, these migrants originate from different countries around the world, including (but not limited to) Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Sahel region of Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Ukraine, etc. (UNHCR, 2021). Moreover, many of these migrants have been forced to displace more than once. This means that they initially found refuge in a country that itself became engulfed in a conflict a couple of years after sheltering them. An example to this end is of the Iraqis who found refuge in Syria but had to leave the country after its subsequent decline into conflict, too (UNHCR, 2022).

Then again, the conflicts that trigger these displacements come in various forms and varieties. They can be generated by intra-country political conflicts and civil wars. However, today they are increasingly the result of international military interventions by great powers in developing parts of the world. As a policy, international military intervention began garnering support and approval in the 1990s and it was the year 1999 which saw the military intervention of Kosovo by NATO without the United Nations Security Council being in the loop (Batool, 2022a). The US, being the exclusive superpower of the world, not only helmed the policy but also used it on multiple occasions in the name of humanitarian interventions – resultantly making military intervention a recognised international normative custom (Batool, 2022a).

The sheer numbers of individuals displaced as an aftereffect of US military interventions reveal that the twenty-first century is indeed the century of those forcibly displaced due to conflicts. At least 38 million to, at the most, 60 million individuals had to leave their homes to start a new life elsewhere as a direct result of US military expeditions since September 11, 2001. The only political and security turmoil that generated greater displacements than the US military interventions was the Second World War itself – which caused the forced migration of at least 64 million individuals (Vine et al., 2021). However, it should be noted here that the latter was an international phenomenon with various partaking countries. The mere fact that a single country could, and has, spawned displacements to compete with an entire world war, reveals not only the nature of power that the US holds but also exposes the utter ineffectiveness and apathy of the international political and security system.

Building on this background, this chapter will discuss the intricacies of the conflict-actuated mass displacements in the twenty-first century. It will further unveil how international power struggles have amplified mass displacements. Moreover, this chapter will excavate in what ways can those forcibly displaced by conflicts become unofficial emissaries of intractable conflicts themselves. The study itself will be conducted within the parameters of conventional and non-conventional international security and the international refugee regime.

Background

Migration has been an essential part of life ever since the outset of human existence (Hoerder 2002; Manning 2005). As per studies on the origins of migration, the very first migrants came from the continent of Africa and their migration paths and destinations included West Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas (Blakemore, 2019). Although data on this lacks, forced migration might also

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