> **“If, as we may expect, conflict becomes more common as a result of the current economic crisis . . . diasporas may find themselves increasingly called on to aid their conationals in distress.”**

The Rise of Refugee Diasporas

NICHOLAS VAN HEAR

With the unraveling of capitalism’s neoliberal variant in 2008–09, the global order appears to be undergoing a transformation as profound as the one that started with the fall of the Berlin Wall and continued with the communist bloc’s collapse. After the wall fell in 1989, communist regimes in Eastern Europe toppled like dominoes, and the implosion continued into the early 1990s, as first the Soviet Union and then Yugoslavia disintegrated. In 2008, another type of implosion began. Now almost daily, it seems, a bank or some other financial institution falls apart. The resulting economic crisis is still unfolding.

These two upheavals—the collapse of communist regimes in 1989–91 and the financial and economic crisis of 2008–09—can be understood as bookending a period of about two decades during which major instances of regional turbulence and conflict have generated migration crises of varying magnitude and depth. These crises have involved conflict, uprooting, mass displacement, and refugee flight, and among the consequences have been refugee diasporas. Today these diasporas are having a profound impact on the global order—particularly on relations between the affluent world and conflict-ridden societies around the globe. In some ways, refugee diasporas are reshaping the world’s political economy.

The upheavals and migration crises of the past two decades include, to list just the major episodes: the breakup of the Soviet Union and the eastern communist bloc; wars, and the “unmixing” of ethnically diverse populations, in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union; war and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia; the Gulf crisis of 1990–91 and the associated mass exodus of Asian and Arab migrant workers from Kuwait, Iraq, and elsewhere; the genocide, wars, and mass refugee movements in Central Africa beginning in 1994; ongoing turmoil, protracted conflict, and massive displacement in the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Sri Lanka, and Colombia; the Asian and Russian financial crises of the late 1990s and these crises’ effect on migrant workers; and the conflicts and refugee movements associated with the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The diasporas that have developed as refugees and others have fled these upheavals—what may be called migration crises—are in the process of transforming societies worldwide. Particularly since the end of the cold war, and peaking in the 1990s, mass movements of refugees—largely from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia—have led to the formation or transformation of substantial diasporas that have consolidated themselves in destination countries and engaged in various forms of transnational activity.

The effects of conflict and displacement have been double-edged. On one hand, conflict has destroyed lives and livelihoods and generated mass uprooting of people. On the other hand, displacement has led to the formation of these new or resurgent diasporas—and they hold the potential for either the perpetuation of conflict or its resolution and the recovery of shattered societies.

FLEEING CONFLICTS

A look at the figures for refugee flows in recent years gives an idea of the scale of these new transnational social formations. Between 1982 and

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2002, about 10 million asylum applications were made to the affluent countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Of these, about 8 million were made in the 1990s, making that decade a key period for new diaspora formation. Not included in these numbers are refugees resettled from first asylum countries to Western (and other) states, and family reunions or family formations associated with essentially conflict-induced migrations.

It is difficult to produce a corresponding figure for refugees living in countries that neighbor conflict zones—often low-income or lower–middle-income countries in the global south—but the number of refugees dispersed in such locations is certainly much higher than in the global north. As an indication, the Middle East at the end of 2003 was said to host more than 4.35 million refugees, African countries just under 3.25 million, and South and Central Asia nearly 1.9 million.

After 2002–03—largely because of increasing restrictiveness in the international regime that governs refugees' and migrants' access to Western countries—arrivals of asylum seekers and refugees to affluent countries decreased (though this trend was more pronounced in Europe than in North America). It is likely therefore that more refugees found their way to middle-income countries outside the main affluent blocs in North America, Europe, and Australasia. In any case, major new diasporas have formed from, or been augmented by, the conflict-induced population movements of the past two decades.

Refugee households abroad have to balance the demands of their own livelihoods and futures with those of compatriots left at home.

Recently much has been made of the role that diasporas play in conflict-ridden societies. We have seen a general shift in perception, a shift away from assigning blame to diasporas for fomenting and supporting conflict and instead toward a more nuanced view that recognizes the fact that diasporas can assist with relief, peace building, and post-conflict reconstruction and recovery. At least, the role of diasporas is now more often seen as ambiguous—sometimes negative and sometimes positive. For example, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is frequently characterized as supporting the insurgent Tamil Tigers. But diaspora members also provide substantial relief and support for war-affected families and communities in the embattled homeland.

Not surprisingly, interest in conflict-induced diasporas has also found its way into the policy arena. Agencies such as the World Bank and other multilateral bodies are exploring possibilities for diaspora engagement in, for example, development and recovery in conflict settings. However, to understand how refugee diasporas can engage in such settings, it is necessary to consider in greater detail how they are formed.

How diasporas develop

A common pattern when people flee conflict is that most seek safety in other parts of their own country, a substantial number looks for refuge in neighboring countries, and a smaller number seeks asylum in countries further afield, perhaps on other continents. Some of those who flee to neighboring countries may later be resettled further away or migrate to new destinations to which others have traveled directly. If exile persists, and people consolidate themselves in their territories of refuge, complex transnational relations develop among the various parts of the refugee diaspora—that is, among those in the home country, those in neighboring territories (the near diaspora), and those further afield (the wider diaspora).

Partly in response to public disquiet over increasing inflows of refugees and migrants, the international migration and refugee regime has become more stringent in the past 10 years, as measures have been introduced that prevent or deter new arrivals. As a consequence, access to desirable, affluent destinations has become more limited, and cost and connections have increasingly determined people's ability to reach the world's more attractive locations. One's capacity to migrate is shaped by class or socioeconomic standing, access to resources, and associated networks.

Thus, a hierarchy of destinations exists, and migrants and asylum seekers can only reach the upper echelons if they have the necessary financial or network-based resources. We can add some empirical substance to this framework by examining the Sri Lankan Tamil, Somali, and Afghan cases.

Tamils from Sri Lanka have been fleeing civil war since 1983. The flight intensified in the 1990s and, after an uneasy and short-lived cease-fire that was agreed to in 2002, it resumed in 2005.

Currently the war seems to have reached a deadly endgame. The displaced include poorer people moving to safety within Sri Lanka—between half a million and 1 million belong to this category at any one time, according to the intensity of the conflict. The displaced also include people with some resources who have fled by boat to southern India. These migrants numbered around 100,000 at their peak in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, about 50,000 remained in camps and cities in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu; their numbers have increased again with the recent resumption of intense conflict.

Also among those displaced from Sri Lanka are migrants who, both as a livelihood strategy and to escape the conflict, traveled to the Middle East as labor migrants. Still others, those with the substantial resources necessary to pay smugglers and brokers, and often with the help of earlier migrants, have been able to travel as asylum seekers to affluent countries—notably Britain, Canada, France, Switzerland, Australia, and the Scandinavian nations. These have contributed to the wider diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamils, which numbers approximately 800,000 today. In addition to the movements listed above, there have also been movements back to Sri Lanka, and movements between and among the various locations. All of these movements vary over time, according to the conditions of the conflict and possibilities for migration.

Somalis have experienced state collapse and civil conflict since the late 1980s. Poorer households often face displacement within what are known as the Somali regions, which include southern Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland in the north. Those with the necessary resources migrate to neighboring countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Yemen. Some migrate to the Middle East as labor migrants, or set up small businesses there, both in pursuit of livelihoods and to escape the conflict and its consequences. Movement to Western or other affluent countries, usually undertaken by those well endowed with resources and network connections, includes movement first to Kenya and then to Europe.

Afghans have experienced large-scale displacement since the late 1970s as the conflict in their country has ebbed and flowed. Patterns of forced migration include internal displacement, and around 2 million people—depending on the state, phase, and nature of the conflict—fit in this category. Large numbers of refugees have also moved to Pakistan and Iran—3 million and 2 million, respectively, at the peak of outflows. (Many have returned when conflict has abated, as in 1992 and 2002.) There has also been labor migration to Iran, as refugee pathways have been transformed into betterment routes. Substantial numbers of Afghan asylum seekers have also traveled to Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the affluent global north, and these people are generally better off than are the refugees in Pakistan and Iran.

Refugee reception

From the perspective of receiving countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Scandinavian nations—the locations of wider diasporas—it is typical to receive a number of waves of migration from conflict-ridden countries like Sri Lanka, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Frequently arriving in the early waves are elite and professional migrants who wish to pursue professional qualifications in law, medicine, or engineering, and/or who anticipate trouble and upheaval in their homelands (political exiles may well be among them).

Diasporas formed as a result of conflict have arguably consolidated themselves into an element integral to the current world order.

Alternatively, earlier labor migration pathways (in the case of Somalis, seafarers) may have paved the way for later refugee arrivals. Often arriving as tensions rise, but before conflict breaks out, are students, especially if their studies are blocked at home, as was the case for Tamils in post-independence Sri Lanka, as their access to higher education was stymied by discrimination. As conflict escalates and violence erupts, refugees and asylum seekers arrive, often in waves, depending on the intensity of the fighting. Associated with each of these waves of "primary" arrivals are migrants who come for marriage, family reunions, or family formation, and such arrivals may continue long after the conflict ends.

As refugee diasporas become established and people gain the right and ability to move on from their new locations, onward or secondary migration may increase, as families split by forced

migration are able to regroup. This has been the case among Somalis, Tamils, Afghans, and others who have gained citizenship in the European Union after many years in the asylum determination process. (In recent years, many such people have moved from continental Europe to the United Kingdom.)

Not clear-cut

As can be seen from these examples, by no means are all people who leave conflict-ridden countries refugees. Indeed, people who move do so for a variety of reasons, including varying degrees of force and choice. In the study of migration, a basic distinction is often made between those who choose to move and those who are forced to move. This distinction is maintained in the policy world, where the governance of international migration is shaped by a widespread view that "voluntary" and "forced" migration are mutually exclusive categories.

In reality, of course, the distinction is far from clear-cut. Many people classified as voluntary migrants—especially those toward the lower levels of the socioeconomic scale, such as labor migrants from low-income backgrounds—may face very limited choices. On the other hand, those classified as refugees or asylum seekers—that is, those known as forced migrants—may have more choices than are immediately apparent. For example, once they have reached a place of relative safety, these migrants typically look to develop their livelihoods and expand their life chances; in this way, they may transmute from refugees into economic or betterment migrants.

The fact that poverty, inequality, lack of income opportunities, and conflict-induced displacement often coexist means that much migration in many parts of the world is mixed in nature, in terms of both migrants' motivations and the character of the migration flows. Those who flee a country where violence, persecution, discrimination, and human rights abuses are rife may also be fleeing dire economic circumstances—which themselves contribute to the violence, persecution, discrimination, and human rights abuses. Moreover, refugees and other migrants often follow the same routes, make use of the same smugglers and agents, and end up in the same host communities.

Mixed migration has therefore been salient in recent diaspora formation. And with the dispersal of people who move for a variety of reasons comes the establishment of transnational relations and networks among the dispersed groups. It is through these networks and relationships that diasporas can exert influence on their countries of origin.

In Transit
Refugees flee fighting in Basra, Iraq, in 2003.

MRP Photos

Diasporas produced by conflict-induced migration are of course shaped by the societies from which they have come, the new societies in which they find themselves, and their experience of conflict and flight. The migrants carry with them the values of their homeland and absorb to a greater or lesser degree the values of their host societies. These values, together with the socioeconomic character of the diaspora (differentiated along lines of class, ethnicity, and generation) will help shape the diaspora's disposition—both its capacity and its inclination—to influence the homeland during and after conflict.

Diaspora members' capacity to influence their homelands depends on, among other factors, having a secure status in their host societies, earning an income above subsistence level, and developing social competence and political literacy—that is, knowing how to lobby, campaign, speak in public, write leaflets, fund proposals, and so on. Their inclination to engage may be

shaped by personal or private motivations, such as the imperative to protect one's family, kin, or friends; by wider humanitarian concerns for the community, society, or nation; or by harder political motivations that may involve religious fundamentalism or ethnonationalism.

WHO HELPS WHOM

Whatever their influence—positive, negative, or ambiguous—diasporas can affect their homelands in two main ways. The first is from abroad, while the diaspora is in exile. This takes place through lobbying, sending remittances, and making other transfers of resources, ideas, and values. The second is by returning, on visits or permanently, and investing economic and human capital in the homeland.

Recently much attention has been paid to the financial dimensions of diaspora transfers and exchanges between the host country and the homeland. However, such transfers are not simply bald economic transactions. Like other transnational activities they are embedded in social relations—which are all the more significant in conflict settings, since the repair and enlargement of social relations are very much part of the reconstruction of conflict-ridden societies.

We have seen a general shift away from assigning blame to diasporas for fomenting and supporting conflict.

The generic term "transnational transfers" can describe a range of transactions, including remittances, gifts in kind, donations, some kinds of investment, and so forth. The most common and most significant form of transfer is a private transfer between individuals, or between individuals and households, of money or goods. The term "remittance" can be reserved for this type of transaction, which is usually undertaken between a refugee or migrant in a host country and an individual or household in a country of origin.

Analysts have noted that remittances to family and friends, when they take place in relatively stable settings, are private, rather intimate transactions. In aggregate, however, they can make a substantial collective and public impact on the welfare of the societies from which migrants come. These observations hold in conflict settings too, but the trajectories of transfer may be more complex. Transfers may take place between a host country and a country of first asylum; between a country of first asylum and the country of origin; or among all three sites of the refugee diaspora.

The uses to which individuals and households put refugee remittances in conflict settings are also somewhat similar to those seen in more stable conditions—to cover basic needs, to help with construction or reconstruction of housing, to help with education or health care, or (rather infrequently) to invest in a business. But some other uses, such as to pay debts that refugees incurred in their flight, or to help relatives get out of conflict zones, are of greater significance in conflict settings than in more stable contexts.

In addition to private transfers between individuals or households, transfers to wider collectivities also occur. The individual who donates at a temple, church, or mosque for relief of conflict-related distress in his home country, as to an orphanage or clinic; the hometown association or old-school organization that collects funds to rebuild a school, equip a hospital, or refurbish a library; collections by welfare organizations to provide relief for the victims of conflict; or, more darkly, the collections by supporters of rebel groups to pay for weapons or otherwise support insurgency—all these represent transfers, for public or collective purposes, that are somewhat different in nature from private remittances.

In aggregate, organizational or collective transfers are also probably smaller in scale than are private remittances. In conflict settings, however, their significance may extend beyond their immediate economic and material effects, since they can help repair a social fabric shredded by years of conflict.

Taken together, these two types of transfer can be seen as part of a transnational relief and social welfare system through which substantial resources flow from diasporas in affluent states to conflict-ridden societies. Households and communities in conflict and post-conflict communities build these transfers into their strategies for surviving and coping.

Meanwhile, refugee households abroad have to balance the demands of their own livelihoods and futures with those of compatriots left at home, in neighboring countries of first refuge, and in other destination and transit countries. Refugees thereby are pressured to meet a portfo-

lio of obligations, which corresponds to a portfolio of resources that those remaining in conflict settings can call upon.

This portfolio of obligations may become unsustainable and debilitating. For example, migrants may have to choose between supporting those back home and developing their own skills or educating their children. The level of support that can be offered—and thus the circulation of resources between the diaspora and the homeland—is shaped by differences of wealth, resources, social capital, and class.

NEWCOMERS' WORLD ORDER

Since the end of the cold war, various conflicts around the world have created upheaval and mass displacement—an unambiguously negative outcome. However, through the diasporas created by forcible uprooting, conflict and displacement have also generated the means or potential for interventions in conflict settings. Such diaspora interventions may help to alleviate or resolve conflict, or support reconstruction and aid recovery. On the other hand, such engagement may foster the continuation or escalation of conflict.

As we have seen, at the household or family level, largely private transfers take place within and among transnational households; these involve individuals or small groupings of kin and friends. In conflict settings these transfers are largely palliative, enabling those back home in conflict zones to survive or cope. They essentially sustain individuals, families, and communities during and after conflict and displacement; they do not transform their situation. These individual transfers usually involve modest sums, but in aggregate they amount to a substantial shift of resources from diaspora members in affluent countries to poorer, conflict-ridden parts of the world.

Public and collective transfers at the community level, on the other hand, sometimes support insurgents. But they also sometimes support philanthropic community-level interventions such as rebuilding or reequipping schools, hospitals, clinics, and orphanages through hometown associations, alumni organizations, churches, mosques, or temples. Each transfer of this kind is likely to be larger than a typical private remittance to an individual or household, but in aggregate terms they are much smaller than remittances collectively.

While collective and public interventions do make a difference to local communities trying to recover from conflict, their impact is likely to be more symbolic than material. Moreover, while these efforts may deploy local knowledge superior to that which characterizes outside relief and development agencies, questions may well surround the appropriateness, impact, sustainability, and other dimensions of diaspora interventions.

Nevertheless, the combination of individual and collective transfers from diaspora members now, in aggregate, plays an important role in helping individuals, families, and communities survive and cope in conflict conditions. In this and other ways, diasporas formed as a result of conflict have arguably consolidated themselves into an element integral to the current world order.

While at times they contribute to the prolongation of conflicts, they often also help to ameliorate the effects of conflict through the provision of transnational social security systems—that is, through remittances and other transfers. If, as we may expect, conflict becomes more common as a result of the current economic crisis, and in the longer term as climate change puts growing pressure on local resources, diasporas may find themselves increasingly called on to aid their conationals in distress. ■