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Abstract

Of the consequences of war, the movements of large numbers of displaced peoples across international borders is among the most significant. Here, we examine the determinants of international refugee flows in continental Africa during the period from 1992 to 2001. Africa represents an excellent natural laboratory for the study of refugee flows; the continent manifests wide variation in levels of such flows, as well as on key determinants of those flows, such as the presence of international and domestic conflict, regime type, and so forth. Moreover, Africa is a “closed system”: of those refugees who fled African countries during the period under study, nearly 99 percent remained on the continent.

Following previous work (e.g. Karemera et al. 2000; Moore et al. 2004), we begin with a gravity model of refugee flows, which posits that levels of such flows will vary as a function of the (logged) population of the two states in question and the distance between the two. To this, we add consideration of two key factors theorized to generate refugee populations: the presence of armed conflict, and the regime type of both the source and target nations. Our expectations vis–a–vis conflict are straightforward: we expect that the presence and/or intensity of such conflict in the source country will increase the flows of refugees from that nation, while conflict in the host country will decrease such flows. With respect to regime type, we again consider the level of authoritarianism in both the source and target nations, entertaining a range of expectations. In particular, we outline varying sets of hypotheses consistent with autocratic exit, political similarity, and political dissimilarity theories related to regime type.

Our data take the form of all directed dyads in continental Africa during the period 1992–2001, with the response variable drawn from the UNHCR Statistical Yearbook (2001). In addition to controls for spatial dependence in the form of distance measures, we also address the issue of temporal correlation through a system of ten seemingly–unrelated equations, one for each year in our data. In this way, the model allows for the possibility of both autoregressive and feed–forward effects, the latter due to anticipatory behavior on the part of the populations in question.

Our findings confirm the strong influence of both population and distance on the levels of refugee flows. Similarly, we find strong effects for the presence of conflict, with war in the source country substantially increasing refugee outflows and war in the host country decreasing it. Interestingly, however, we estimate the former effect to be roughly three times that of the latter, suggesting that present conditions weigh more heavily in refugee populations’ calculi than prospective ones. With respect to conflict, our models generally support the political dissimilarity thesis: all else equal, refugees tend to flee to countries whose regime types are different from those of their source country. However, these latter effects vary importantly over the time period studied, suggesting that further work on this aspect of the issue is especially warranted. More generally, we believe our study holds important implications for the study of refugee populations.