

COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

Geopolitical Uses of Organised Forced Migration

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ABSTRACT

State use of organised forced migration has played a central role in geopolitics and foreign policy. In this piece, we draw attention to its prevalence, including its widespread use as a tool in contemporary migration management policies. In order to effectively tackle questions of forced migration, it is necessary to first recognise that it is frequently purposefully perpetuated by states.

Forced migration is often treated as an exception, crisis, or problem confronting or happening *to* states. This framing, however, ignores the significant extent to which *states themselves* have been prime genitors of forced migration—not simply as an unintended consequence of other state policies, but rather as central and intentional features of geopolitics, including international order-making, foreign policy, military operations, and population/mobility management. This valid, but radically incomplete, framing carries significant theoretical and policy implications for how we think about the causes, consequences and responses to forced migration. In this piece, we briefly explicate and illustrate with historical and functional examples the central role that states routinely play in organised forced migration. We argue that a more explicit recognition of this role and its relative ubiquity is critical, particularly in an era when migration is an extraordinarily salient, polarising, and consequential feature of both domestic and international politics.

Variants of state-organised forced migration include population transfers, exchanges, expulsions, repatriations and exoduses. *Transfers* (or *resettlements*) are state-driven movements of groups of people from one state or region to another (often geographically distant) region or state, most frequently based on identity markers, such as race, ethnicity or religion, but sometimes on identity-blind economic factors. *Exchanges* are state-driven cross-border movements of two populations in opposite directions at about the same time. *Repatriations* (or *returns*) are state-driven cross-border movements of people designed to

return them to their country of origin or citizenship. *Expulsions* are involuntary state-driven cross-border movements of people with little regard to where the people end up. *Exoduses* are state-driven flights of populations achieved through indirect means. These categories cover a large range of state-organised or sanctioned forced migration phenomena, ranging from the slave trade and indentured labor systems of the 19th century to practices that are frequently understood and studied as ‘ethnic cleansing’, to state uses of deportation, returns, extradition and other varieties of forcible state removals.

Organised forced migration has historically played a central role in international order-making in the wake of wars and other forms of systemic upheaval. For example, the 1923 Lausanne Convention, which is widely understood as ushering in a transition at the end of World War I from an imperial to nation-state based international system, included a compulsory population exchange of nearly 2 million Christian ‘Greeks’ and Muslim ‘Turks’ between Greece and Turkey (Clark 2006; Hirschon 2003; Yildirim 2006). In the years following Lausanne, organised forced migrations included the large-scale Nazi *Heim ins Reich* transfers and the large-scale Soviet transfers and expulsions under Stalin (Frank 2013; Gatrell 2013; Ther 2014). Following WWII, there was a wave of post-colonial forced migrations (such as the induced exoduses of North Vietnamese southward across the border after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and *pieds noirs* from Algeria following independence in 1962) and a series of organised expulsions across Asia and Africa (Adamson

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and Tsourapas 2020; Adida 2014; Garrity 2022; Greenhill 2010, forthcoming).

On other occasions, states have undertaken organised forced migration as a means of cementing newly drawn international borders as part of post-war peace processes and international re-ordering. Specifically, powerful states have redrawn boundaries or negotiated war settlements that have shifted local dynamics in ways that subsequently led to expulsions as part of a process of ordering and reordering territorial boundaries after the fighting stops. This has included the use of organised forced migration to shift the demographic mix in newly acquired lands, create buffer zones, or otherwise expand spheres of control. Sometimes organised forced migration is used to serve as a signal of the legitimacy of new frontiers. The post-World War II Potsdam Treaty, which sanctioned the forced relocation of over 12 million Germans, 2 million Poles and other groups, was motivated by all of these objectives simultaneously (Bloxham 2009).

Organised forced migration has also been deployed by states in pursuit of a wide array of foreign policy objectives. For instance, organised forced migration has frequently been used by states and non-state actors to extract political, military and/or economic concessions from states and other international actors (Greenhill 2010). Demands made by those seeking concessions have varied widely. They have ranged from the simple provision of financial aid on one end of the spectrum to full-scale military operations and assistance with regime change, on the other. An example of the former transpired when, in 2010, then Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi demanded over 4 billion Euros from the EU to ‘stop Europe from turning black’ (Greenhill 2018), and the latter when, in 1994, exiled Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide successfully compelled the US to reinstall him into power in Port-au-Prince in exchange for his assistance in ending an ongoing Haitian ‘boatpeople crisis’ (Greenhill 2010). Since 1951 alone, we have witnessed at least 100 such attempts around the globe (Greenhill 2010, forthcoming).

Additionally, organised forced migration is also frequently intentionally employed in armed conflict. It has been a common feature of insurgencies, wars of national liberation and imperial dissolution, and territorial seizure and annexation around the globe, not only as a means of acquiring the land and resources of those displaced as a strategic war aim, but also as a method of gaining battlefield advantage in the midst of conflict (Greenhill 2008, 2010). It was employed in this way, for instance, in differing degrees by all parties to the 2011–24 Syrian civil war, including the, then, sitting Assad regime (Lichtenheld 2020) and by Israel in its military operations in the Gaza Strip in the wake of Hamas’ attacks on October 7, 2023 (Adamson and Greenhill 2024). On other occasions, populations have been compelled to flee advancing armies, as transpired during the September 2023 exodus of approximately 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh (Associated Press 2023).

Organised forced migration moreover plays a central role in contemporary migration deal-making and ‘externalisation partnerships’, increasingly employed by states to prevent and deter unwanted migration (Adamson and Greenhill 2023; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). Transactional forced migration schemes entail providing cash and other material and political benefits

in exchange for receiving, assisting with, or accepting the return or resettlement of people who have been deemed ‘illegal’ or ‘unwanted’. The recently shelved UK-Rwanda Deal, in which the UK government committed £120 million to provide for the forcible transfer of asylum-seekers from the UK to the central African state of Rwanda, is just one of myriad historical cases of planned and executed deals designed to involuntarily transfer ‘unwanted’ populations to far-flung locales in exchange for financial or foreign policy benefits. For example, European Union-funded and IOM-assisted returns of migrants from Libya to various other African states often amount to forms of organised forced migration. Similarly, Australia has collaborated with Indonesia on forced returns as part of its migration externalisation and management strategy (Dastyari and Hirsch 2019). In this context, the United States President Donald J. Trump’s mass deportation of irregular migrants is, in many respects, a more extreme and sweeping example of what states in Europe, North America and elsewhere have long been doing as part of regularised migration management programs that include migrant deportations and returns.

It is thus evident that states purposefully employ organised forced migration as a geopolitical, military and foreign policy tool. Despite the existence and proliferation over time of international legal and rights conventions designed to protect and promote human rights and deter states from engaging in organised forced migration, it continues to be widely utilised, including, and perhaps especially, during periods of international ordering and reordering. This perspective diverges significantly from that of the academic literature and policy discourse that treats forced migration as a ‘crisis’ or ‘exception’ that requires a policy *response from* states. In order to address the prevalence of state use of organised forced migration and identify appropriate responses, it is necessary to first recognise and acknowledge the centrality of this practice and the long-standing and consequential role it plays in international politics. A continued failure to do so impedes our ability to understand both the drivers of and how best to respond to forced migration.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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