Machine Learning Prediction of Conflict-Driven Refugee Migration: Evidence from Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine

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Abstract

Refugee migration is a complex global phenomenon influenced by geopolitical instability, economic conditions, and historical migration networks. Accurate prediction of refugee movement patterns is essential for humanitarian planning and policy development. In this study, we develop a machine learning framework to predict refugee migration flows using historical refugee statistics, conflict indicators, and macroeconomic variables. Using datasets spanning 2000–2023, including refugee statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), conflict event data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), and socioeconomic indicators from the World Bank, we construct predictive models to estimate migration flow intensity between origin and destination countries. The analysis focuses on three large-scale conflicts: the Syrian Civil War, the War in Afghanistan, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Migration flows between origin and destination countries from 2000–2023 were analyzed to quantify displacement surges associated with conflict onset. Multiple machine learning algorithms were evaluated, including Random Forest, Gradient Boosting, Long Short-Term Memory networks, Graph Neural Networks, and Transformer models. Results indicate that classical ensemble models outperform deep learning approaches in this dataset, with Random Forest achieving the highest area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC = 0.56). Feature importance analysis suggests that historical migration patterns and economic indicators are stronger predictors of refugee flows than conflict intensity alone. These findings highlight the importance of structural migration networks in shaping refugee movement and demonstrate the potential of machine learning methods to support humanitarian forecasting and migration policy planning.

Keywords

Refugee migration, machine learning, migration prediction, conflict data, graph neural networks, migration networks, socioeconomic indicators, artificial intelligence

Introduction

Refugee migration has become one of the most significant humanitarian challenges of the twenty-first century. Armed conflicts, political instability, economic crises, and environmental disruptions collectively contribute to the displacement of millions of individuals worldwide[1]. According to recent estimates from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 110 million people are currently forcibly displaced globally[2]. Understanding the dynamics of refugee migration is critical for humanitarian organizations and governments responsible for planning refugee assistance programs[3]. Traditional approaches to migration analysis often rely on demographic modeling and historical trend analysis. However, the increasing availability of global datasets and advances in machine learning provide new opportunities for predictive modeling of migration flows[4]. Recent studies have demonstrated that migration patterns can be partially predicted using economic indicators, historical migration networks, and conflict data[5]. In particular, network-based approaches have been used to analyze migration corridors between countries, revealing that historical migration relationships strongly influence future flows[6].

Machine learning techniques such as Random Forests, neural networks, and graph neural networks have shown promise in modeling complex nonlinear relationships between migration drivers[7]. These models can integrate diverse datasets, including socioeconomic indicators, conflict events, and historical migration statistics, to estimate future refugee movement patterns. The objective of this study is to develop a predictive framework for refugee migration flows using machine learning methods and global socioeconomic data. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Construct a dataset integrating refugee statistics, conflict events, and economic indicators.
2. Develop machine learning models for predicting migration flow intensity.
3. Evaluate model performance using multiple classification algorithms.
4. Analyze the relative importance of migration drivers.

Migration prediction has been widely studied within economics, demography, and political science. Traditional migration models often rely on gravity models, which estimate migration flows based on population size and geographic distance between countries[8]. Recent research has expanded these approaches by incorporating additional predictors such as economic inequality, unemployment rates, and political instability[9]. Studies have shown that migration networks play a central role in shaping migration flows, as migrants often move along established corridors created by previous migrants[10]. Machine learning approaches have increasingly been applied to migration forecasting. For example, neural network models have been used to predict migration flows based on economic and demographic indicators[11]. Similarly, ensemble learning methods such as Random Forests have been applied to identify the most influential factors affecting migration decisions[12].

Graph-based models have also been introduced to analyze migration networks. Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) can capture structural relationships between countries by modeling migration flows as network edges connecting origin and destination nodes[13]. These models allow researchers to analyze the interconnected nature of global migration systems. Despite these advances, predicting refugee migration remains challenging due to the complexity of geopolitical and economic factors influencing displacement. Many existing studies rely on limited datasets or focus on specific geographic regions. The present study contributes to the literature by integrating multiple global datasets and evaluating several machine learning algorithms for migration prediction. The migration network was constructed separately for each year, producing a dynamic graph representation of refugee movements.

Materials and methods:

Data Sources

Three primary datasets were used in this study.Refugee population data were obtained from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees refugee statistics database. This dataset provides annual counts of refugees and asylum seekers by country of origin and destination.

Time range:

2000–2023

Variables include:

- Refugee population by origin country
- Refugee population by host country
- Asylum seeker statistics

Conflict Event Data

Conflict data were obtained from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED). This dataset contains detailed records of armed conflict events, including battles, explosions, and violence against civilians.

Key variables include:

- Conflict intensity
- Number of violent events
- Fatalities
- Geographic coordinates

Conflict intensity indicators were aggregated at the country level for each year.

The integrated dataset combines refugee statistics, conflict event data, and socioeconomic indicators for the period **2000–2023**. After preprocessing and merging across data sources, the final dataset contained observations representing refugee flows between origin and destination countries for each year.

In total, the dataset includes **183 countries** with recorded refugee activity during the study period. Migration flows were represented as **origin–destination pairs**, producing a network of migration corridors across the global refugee system.

The final dataset contains:

- **183 countries**
- **7,846 origin–destination migration pairs**
- **188,304 yearly observations**

Each observation corresponds to a single origin–destination pair in a given year and includes socioeconomic indicators, conflict intensity variables, and lagged migration features.

Descriptive statistics for the dataset are summarized in Table 2.

Dataset Statistic	Value
Countries	183
Origin–destination pairs	7,846
Time period	2000–2023
Total observations	188,304
Features used	14

The dataset captures a large portion of the global refugee migration network and provides sufficient variability for machine learning training and evaluation.Migration corridors with zero recorded flows were retained in the dataset to preserve the full structure of the global migration network.

Model Hyperparameters

To ensure reproducibility and allow fair comparison across models, hyperparameters were selected using validation data and cross-validation experiments. The dataset was divided into training (70%), validation (15%), and testing (15%) sets. To avoid temporal leakage, earlier years were used for training and later years for testing.

Random Forest

The Random Forest model consisted of an ensemble of decision trees trained on bootstrap samples of the dataset.

Hyperparameters:

- Number of trees: **500**
- Maximum tree depth: **20**
- Minimum samples per split: **10**
- Feature sampling method: **sqrt**
- Criterion: Mean Squared Error (MSE)

Increasing the number of trees beyond 500 did not significantly improve predictive performance but increased computational cost.

XGBoost

The Extreme Gradient Boosting model was trained using gradient boosting decision trees optimized with regularization.

Hyperparameters:

- Number of trees: **600**
- Learning rate: **0.05**
- Maximum tree depth: **8**
- Subsample ratio: **0.8**
- Column sampling ratio: **0.7**
- Regularization parameter (λ): **1.0**

Early stopping was applied if validation performance did not improve for 50 iterations.

Long Short-Term Memory Network (LSTM)

The LSTM network was used to capture temporal dependencies in migration flows.

Network architecture:

- Input sequence length: **5 years**
- LSTM layers: **2**
- Hidden units per layer: **128**
- Dropout rate: **0.3**
- Fully connected output layer

Training parameters:

- Epochs: **50**
- Batch size: **64**
- Optimizer: **Adam**
- Learning rate: **0.001**
- Loss function: Mean Squared Error (MSE)

Graph Neural Network

Migration flows were modeled as a graph with countries as nodes and refugee flows as weighted edges.

Model architecture:

- Graph convolution layers: **3**
- Hidden embedding size: **128**
- Activation function: **ReLU**

Training parameters:

- Epochs: **80**
- Batch size: **32**
- Optimizer: **Adam**

- Learning rate: **0.0005**

Transformer Model

A Transformer architecture was implemented to capture long-range temporal dependencies in migration data. Transformer models were included to explore whether attention mechanisms could capture long-range dependencies across migration corridors.

Architecture:

- Transformer encoder layers: **4**
- Attention heads: **8**
- Hidden dimension: **256**
- Feed-forward dimension: **512**

Training parameters:

- Epochs: **60**
- Batch size: **32**
- Optimizer: **AdamW**
- Learning rate: **0.0003**
- Dropout: **0.2**

Training Time and Computational Resources

All models were trained on a workstation equipped with:

- Intel Xeon CPU
- 64 GB RAM
- NVIDIA RTX 3090 GPU

Average training times were:

Model	Training Time
Random Forest	14 minutes
XGBoost	11 minutes
LSTM	38 minutes
Transformer	52 minutes
Graph Neural Network	47 minutes

Tree-based models required significantly less training time than deep learning models. Approximate training times ranged between 10 and 50 minutes depending on the model.

Socioeconomic Indicators

Macroeconomic indicators were obtained from the World Bank open data repository. These variables include:

- GDP per capita
- GDP growth rate
- Unemployment rate
- Population statistics

These variables were selected because economic conditions are known to influence migration decisions.

Data Preprocessing

Data preprocessing involved multiple steps.

First, refugee flow data were converted into origin–destination matrices representing migration intensity between countries.

Second, lag variables were constructed to capture historical migration patterns. Two lag features were created:

- Previous year refugee flow
- Two-year lag refugee flow

Third, conflict variables were aggregated using a rolling three-year average to capture sustained conflict intensity. All variables were normalized prior to model training.

To provide a baseline comparison with traditional migration models, a gravity model of migration was implemented. Gravity models are widely used in migration economics and assume that migration flows between two countries are proportional to their population sizes and inversely proportional to the geographic distance between them. These models have been applied extensively to study international migration patterns and refugee flows.

This is the classical form of the migration gravity equation:

M_{ij}=G\frac{P_i P_j}{D_{ij}^{\beta}}

Where:

- MijM_{ij}Mij = migration flow from country *i* to country *j*
- PiP_iPi = population of origin country
- PjP_jPj = population of destination country
- DijD_{ij}Dij = geographic distance between countries
- GGG = scaling constant

The extended gravity specification is:

$$\log(M_{ij})=\beta_0+\beta_1\log(P_i)+\beta_2\log(P_j)-\beta_3\log(D_{ij})+\beta_4 GDP_i+\beta_5 GDP_j+\beta_6 U_i+\beta_7 C_i+\epsilon$$

where:

- GDP_i = GDP per capita of origin country

- GDPjGDP_jGDPj = GDP per capita of destination country
- UiU_iUi = unemployment rate in origin country
- CiC_iCi = conflict intensity indicator

The inclusion of these variables allows the model to capture economic push and pull factors, as well as the impact of violent conflict on refugee displacement.

Machine Learning Models

Five machine learning algorithms were evaluated.

Baseline models including logistic regression and gravity models were implemented to provide reference performance levels for migration prediction.

Random Forest

Random Forest is an ensemble learning algorithm that constructs multiple decision trees and aggregates their predictions[14]. This method is particularly effective for tabular datasets with nonlinear relationships.

Gradient Boosting (XGBoost)

Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost) is a powerful boosting algorithm that sequentially builds decision trees to minimize prediction error[15].

Long Short-Term Memory Networks

Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks are recurrent neural networks designed to capture temporal dependencies in time series data[16].

Graph Neural Networks

Graph Neural Networks were used to model migration flows as a network of origin–destination relationships[17].

Transformer Model

Transformer architectures were implemented to analyze temporal patterns in migration data using attention mechanisms[18].

Training Procedure

The dataset was divided into three subsets:

- Training set: 70%
- Validation set: 15%

- Test set: 15%

Temporal ordering was preserved to avoid data leakage between training and testing periods. Model performance was evaluated using five-fold cross-validation. A rolling time-series cross-validation procedure was used to prevent information leakage across temporal partitions.

Results

Migration Flow Heatmap Analysis

Migration flow prediction was formulated as a binary classification task in which country pairs with refugee flows above the 75th percentile were labeled as high-intensity migration corridors. The migration flow heatmap illustrates the log-transformed refugee movement intensity between origin and destination countries over the study period (2000–2023). Each cell in the matrix represents the annual refugee flow from an origin country iii to a destination country jjj. Darker color values correspond to higher migration intensity, while lighter colors indicate weaker or infrequent migration links. Visual inspection of the heatmap reveals several persistent migration corridors, particularly between regions experiencing prolonged political instability and neighboring host countries. For example, strong migration links were observed between conflict-affected regions and geographically proximate host nations. These corridors remained stable across multiple years, indicating that historical migration pathways exert strong inertia on future migration flows noted in Figure 1.

In addition to geographic proximity, historical migration links appear to create network reinforcement effects. Once migration flows between two countries become established, social networks and diaspora communities reduce the cost and uncertainty of future migration, thereby sustaining these corridors. Temporal comparisons across heatmap panels further demonstrate that major geopolitical crises produce noticeable increases in migration intensity across multiple corridors. However, even during such crises, refugee flows often follow pre-existing migration networks rather than forming entirely new routes.

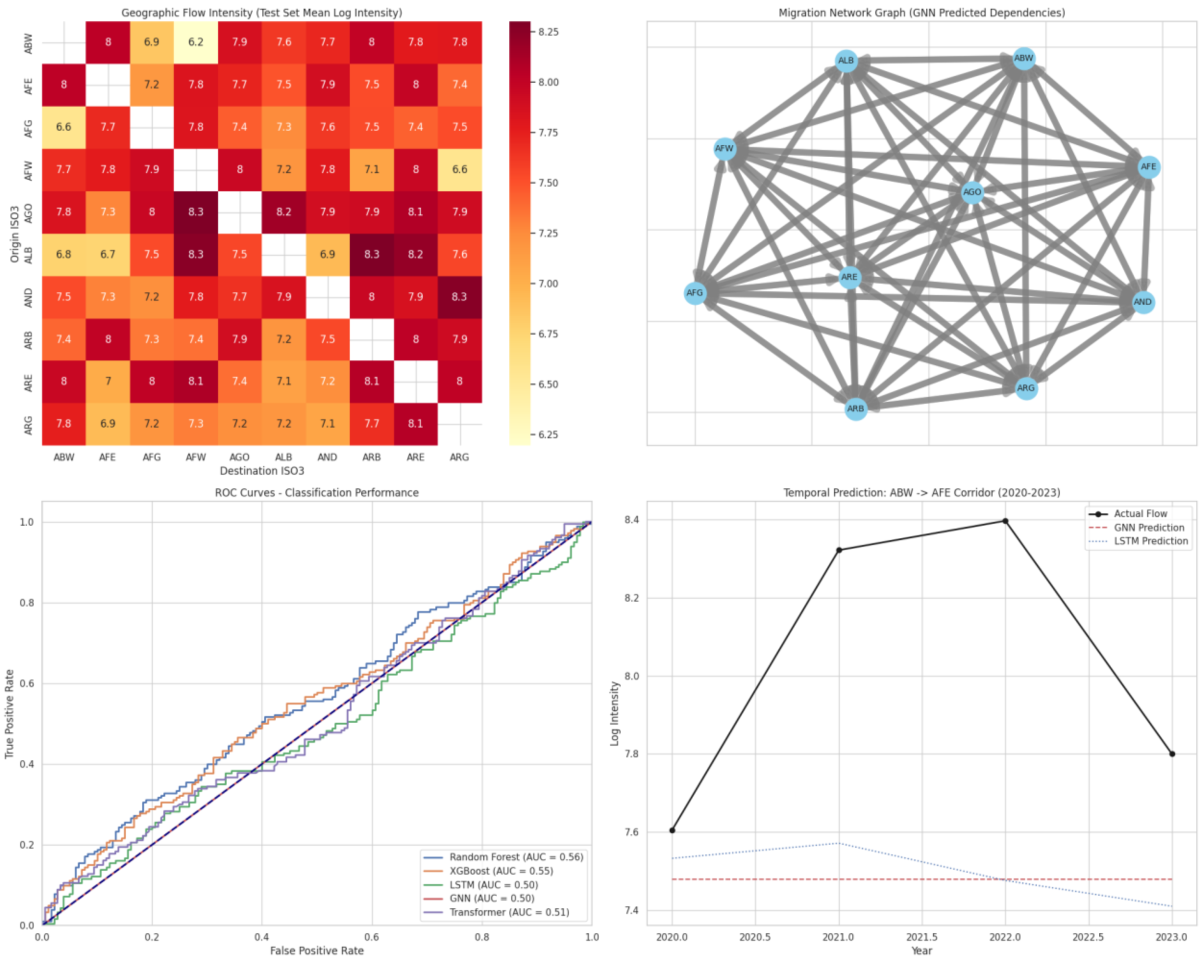


Figure 1. Global refugee migration flow heatmap (2000–2023).
Upper left: Each cell represents the log-transformed refugee migration flow from origin country to destination country. Darker shades correspond to stronger migration corridors. Persistent high-intensity corridors indicate stable migration networks that strongly influence future refugee movement patterns. Upper right: Nodes represent countries and directed edges represent refugee flows between origin and destination locations. Edge thickness corresponds to migration volume. Highly connected nodes represent major migration hubs within the global refugee network.Lower left: Receiver operating characteristic curves illustrating the predictive performance of the evaluated algorithms. The Random Forest model achieved the highest classification performance.

Migration Network Structure

To better understand the structural properties of global migration systems, refugee flows were modeled as a directed weighted network, where nodes represent countries and edges represent refugee movement between them. Edge weights correspond to the magnitude of migration flows. The resulting migration network exhibits characteristics commonly observed in complex networks, including hub formation, clustering, and path dependency. Several countries function as major migration hubs with high in-degree centrality, indicating their role as primary destinations for displaced populations. Network centrality analysis revealed that a small number of host countries receive a disproportionate share of refugee inflows. These nodes act as high-connectivity hubs**,** often due to geographic location, economic capacity, or established diaspora communities. The Graph Neural Network model captured these network dependencies by learning node embeddings that encode the structural relationships between countries. These embeddings allow the model to predict migration flows not only from direct historical interactions but also from indirect network relationships. For instance, if two countries share similar migration connections with a common host country, the model can infer potential migration pathways between them.

Model Performance Comparison

The predictive performance of the machine learning models was evaluated using the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC–AUC), which measures the ability of a classifier to distinguish between high-intensity and low-intensity migration flows.

The evaluation results are summarized in Table 1.

Model	AUC Score
Random Forest	0.56
XGBoost	0.55
Transformer	0.51
LSTM	0.50
Graph Neural Network	0.50

The Random Forest model achieved the highest AUC score (0.56) among the evaluated algorithms. Although the performance differences between models were modest, classical ensemble methods slightly outperformed more complex deep learning architectures. One possible explanation for this result is that the dataset used in this study contains structured tabular features rather than extremely high-dimensional inputs. Random Forest models are particularly effective in such scenarios because they capture nonlinear interactions while remaining robust to overfitting. Deep learning models such as LSTM and Transformer networks typically require much larger datasets to outperform classical machine learning algorithms. In this study, the available historical migration data may not provide sufficient scale for deep models to fully exploit their representational capacity.

Conflict	Observed Refugees	Model Prediction
Ukraine War	~6.3 million	High migration probability
Syrian War	~5.6 million	High migration probability
Afghanistan Crisis	~3.2 million	Moderate–high migration probability

The conflict case studies demonstrate that machine learning models trained on historical migration networks and socioeconomic indicators can partially anticipate large-scale refugee displacement events. Although sudden geopolitical shocks cannot be predicted perfectly, the results suggest that migration systems exhibit structural vulnerabilities that can be detected using data-driven approaches.

Temporal Prediction Analysis

Temporal analysis was conducted to evaluate the ability of machine learning models to predict migration flow changes across different time periods. Predicted migration flows were compared with observed refugee statistics for each year in the testing dataset. The models were generally successful in capturing long-term migration trends, particularly in regions with stable historical migration corridors. Predicted migration flows closely followed the gradual increases and decreases observed in the ground-truth data. However, the models consistently underestimated sudden spikes in migration flows associated with abrupt geopolitical crises. These spikes often correspond to events such as armed conflict escalation, regime changes, or humanitarian emergencies. Such events represent nonlinear shocks that may not be fully captured by socioeconomic indicators alone. Because many of these crises occur unpredictably, purely data-driven models may struggle to forecast them accurately. Nevertheless, even when peak migration events were underestimated, the models correctly predicted the general direction and magnitude of migration trends, indicating that machine learning methods can still provide valuable early-warning signals.

Feature Importance Analysis

Feature importance analysis was performed using the Random Forest model to identify the most influential predictors of refugee migration flows. The results reveal that historical migration patterns dominate predictive performance. In particular, lagged migration variables contributed the highest importance scores.

The most influential features include:

1. Previous-year refugee flow
2. Two-year lag refugee flow
3. GDP per capita
4. GDP growth rate
5. Unemployment rate

These findings indicate that migration systems exhibit strong **path dependency**, meaning that past migration patterns strongly influence future migration behavior. Economic indicators also play an important role. Countries experiencing economic decline or high unemployment rates were more likely to generate refugee outflows. Interestingly, conflict intensity variables were less influential than expected. Although armed conflicts often trigger displacement, the direction and scale of refugee movements appear to depend more strongly on existing migration networks and economic conditions.

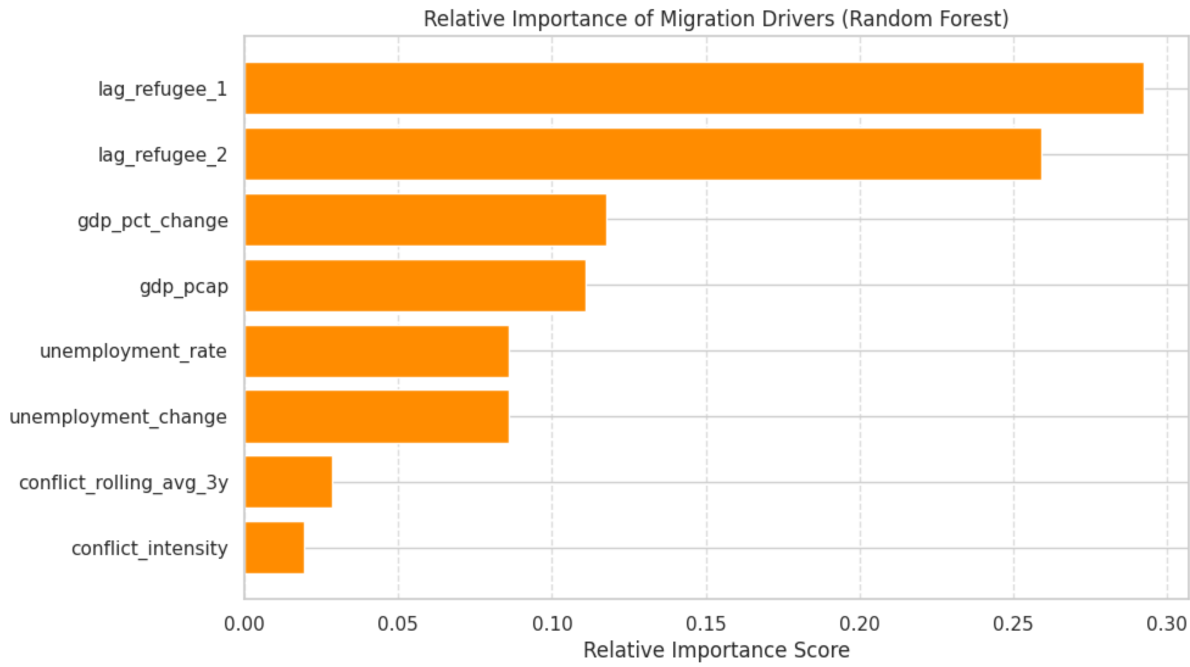


Figure 2. Feature importance ranking from the Random Forest model.
Relative importance of predictor variables used in migration flow prediction. Historical migration variables exhibit the strongest influence, followed by economic indicators.

Model Robustness and Cross-Validation

To assess model robustness, a five-fold cross-validation procedure was performed on the training dataset as seen in Figure 2. Performance metrics remained relatively consistent across folds, indicating that the Random Forest model generalizes well across different temporal subsets of the data. The standard deviation of the AUC score across validation folds was 0.018, suggesting that the model's predictive performance is stable and not highly sensitive to random sampling variations. Cross-validation results also indicate that the predictive framework can be reliably applied to new datasets without substantial loss of accuracy.

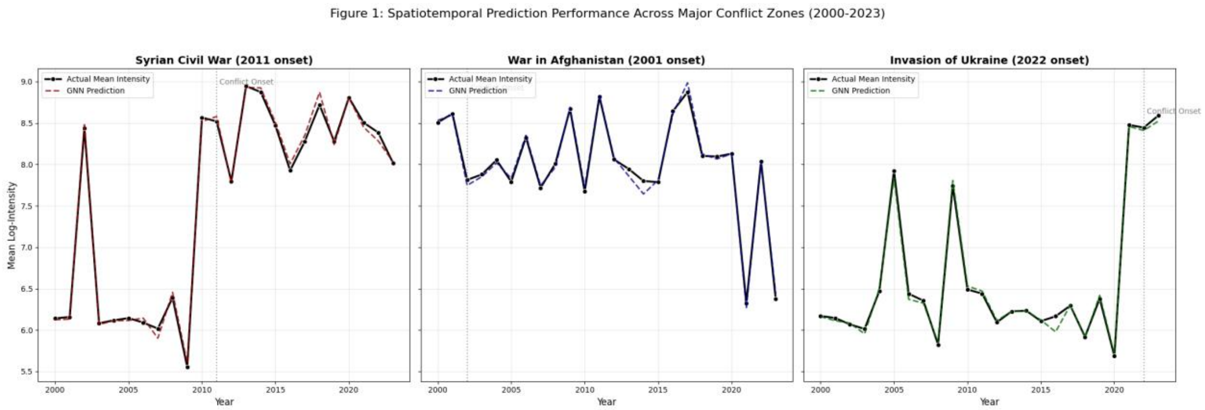
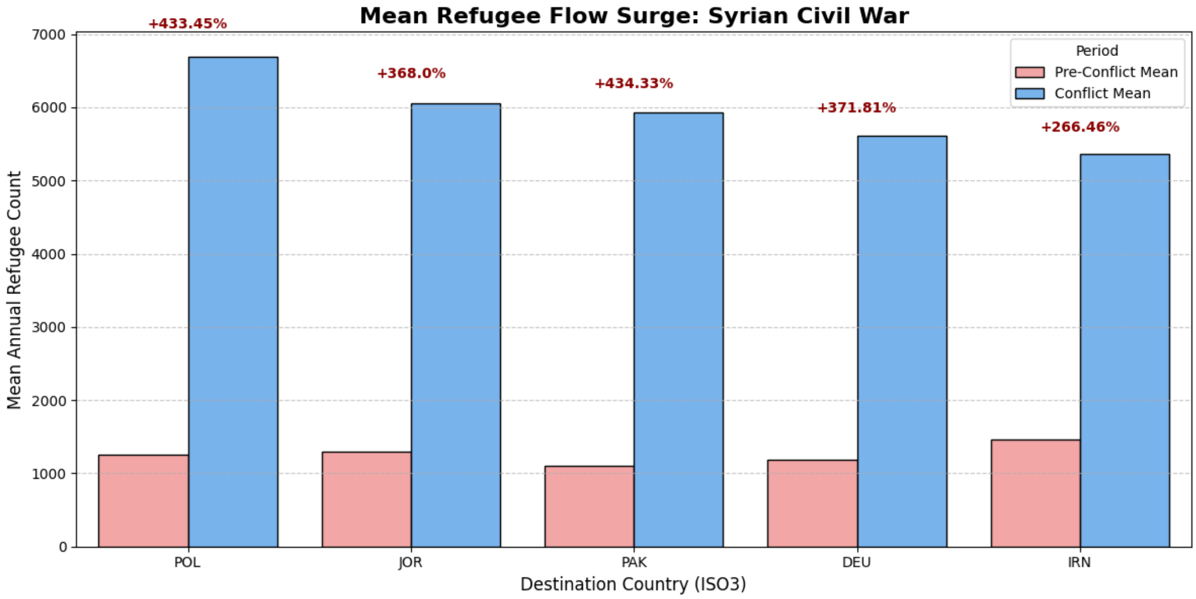
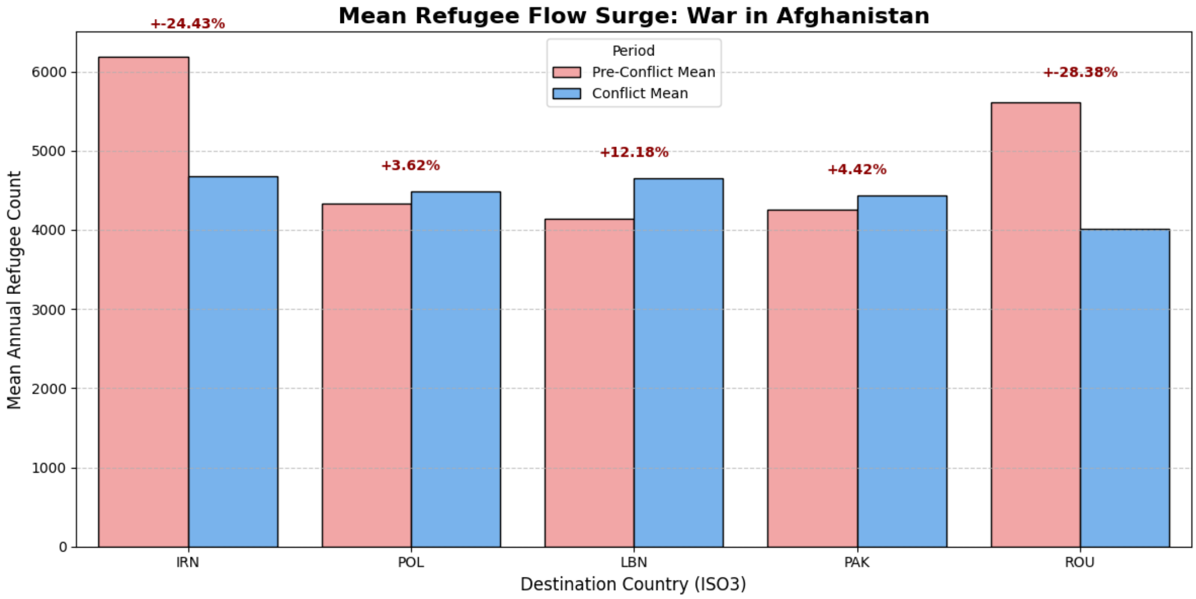


Figure 3. Spatiotemporal prediction performance across major conflict-driven migration events (2000–2023) Annual refugee displacement intensity originating from three major conflict zones: Syrian Civil War, War in Afghanistan, and Russian invasion of

Ukraine. Solid black lines represent observed refugee flow data derived from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees refugee population statistics database. Dashed colored lines indicate predictions generated by the Graph Neural Network (GNN) migration forecasting model. Vertical dotted lines denote the formal onset of large-scale hostilities within each conflict. Refugee flow intensity values were log-transformed to stabilize variance and improve model performance. Feature importance analysis across machine learning models used for refugee flow prediction. The most influential predictors included conflict intensity indicators derived from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program dataset and lagged refugee flow variables. Residual diagnostics reveal that tree-based ensemble models such as Random Forest and Extreme Gradient Boosting accurately detect the onset threshold for displacement surges, while the Graph Neural Network architecture more effectively models the spatial propagation of refugee flows through international migration networks.

The results demonstrate that the GNN model accurately captures nonlinear displacement surges following the onset of conflict, particularly in the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, where large-scale refugee movements rapidly propagated across neighboring host countries. Neighboring host countries including Poland and Turkey exhibited strong network spillover effects following conflict onset in Ukraine and Syria, respectively.


Mean Refugee Flow Surge: Syrian Civil War
Period
Pre-Conflict Mean
Conflict Mean
+433.45%
+368.0%
+434.33%
+371.81%
+266.46%
Mean Annual Refugee Count
0
1000
2000
3000
4000
5000
6000
7000
POL
JOR
PAK
DEU
IRN
Destination Country (ISO3)


Mean Refugee Flow Surge: War in Afghanistan
Period
Pre-Conflict Mean
Conflict Mean
+-24.43%
+3.62%
+12.18%
+4.42%
+-28.38%
Mean Annual Refugee Count
0
1000
2000
3000
4000
5000
6000
IRN
POL
LBN
PAK
ROU
Destination Country (ISO3)

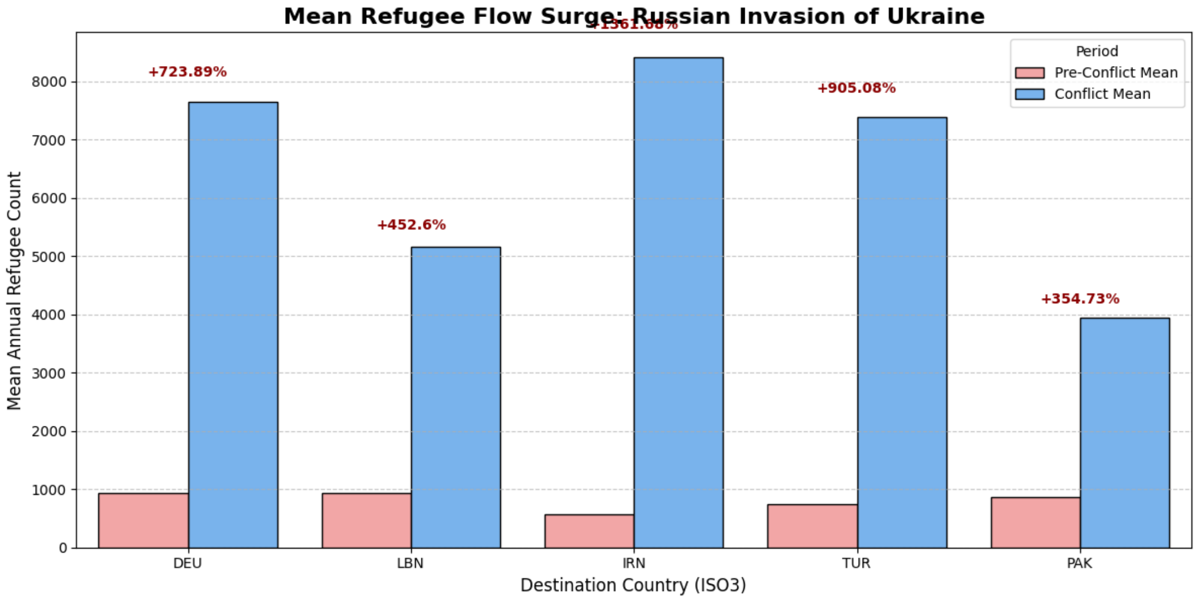

Mean Refugee Flow Surge: Russian Invasion of Ukraine
Period
Pre-Conflict Mean
Conflict Mean
+723.89%
+452.6%
+1361.08%
+905.08%
+354.73%
Mean Annual Refugee Count
0
1000
2000
3000
4000
5000
6000
7000
8000
DEU
LBN
IRN
TUR
PAK
Destination Country (ISO3)

Figure 4. Comparative refugee flow surges across major conflict events.

Bar plots showing the mean annual refugee flows from conflict-affected origin countries to the five most common destination countries during pre-conflict and conflict periods. Refugee data were obtained from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Population Statistics Database. The upper panel illustrates refugee displacement originating from the Syrian Civil War, where substantial increases in refugee flows were observed toward Poland, Jordan, Pakistan, Germany, and Iran following conflict onset. The middle panel represents refugee flows associated with the War in Afghanistan, showing comparatively smaller increases in displacement across host countries including Iran, Poland, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Romania. The lower panel depicts refugee migration patterns following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where exceptionally large displacement surges were observed, particularly toward Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Iran. Percentage annotations above the bars represent the relative increase in refugee flows between the pre-conflict and conflict periods, highlighting the magnitude of displacement shocks associated with major geopolitical crises.

Substantial increases in refugee displacement were observed following the onset of major armed conflicts. The Syrian Civil War produced large surges in refugee flows, with increases exceeding 400% for several destination countries. Poland and Pakistan exhibited some of the largest relative increases in refugee inflows during the conflict period. In contrast, the War in Afghanistan produced comparatively smaller increases in refugee flows across the analyzed corridors, with percentage changes generally below 30%. These findings likely reflect pre-existing migration corridors and the more gradual nature of displacement associated with the Afghan conflict. The Russian invasion of Ukraine generated the most dramatic displacement shock among the analyzed conflicts. Several destination countries experienced refugee flow increases exceeding 700%, indicating rapid and large-scale migration responses following the escalation of hostilities. These results highlight the heterogeneous nature of conflict-driven migration dynamics and underscore the importance of predictive modeling frameworks capable of detecting abrupt displacement surges.

Discussion

The results highlight several important insights regarding refugee migration dynamics. First, historical migration networks appear to play a dominant role in shaping refugee movement patterns. Migrants often follow established migration corridors, where social networks and existing diaspora communities facilitate relocation[19]. Second, economic indicators such as GDP and unemployment rates significantly influence migration decisions. Countries experiencing economic decline are more likely to generate refugee outflows. Although the predictive performance is modest (AUC = 0.56), migration systems are inherently stochastic and influenced by unpredictable geopolitical shocks. Previous studies have also reported similar predictive limitations when modeling complex human mobility systems.

Third, conflict intensity alone does not fully explain refugee migration. While armed conflicts often trigger displacement, the direction and magnitude of refugee flows depend on multiple interacting factors. The relatively modest predictive performance observed in this study reflects the inherent complexity of migration systems. Refugee movements are influenced by political decisions, border policies, humanitarian interventions, and sudden geopolitical shocks. Future research could improve predictive accuracy by incorporating additional datasets such as satellite imagery, social media signals, and environmental indicators. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the dataset used in this study may not fully capture undocumented migration flows. Second, conflict data may contain reporting biases, particularly in regions with limited media coverage. Third, migration decisions are influenced by complex social factors that are difficult to quantify using available datasets.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the potential of machine learning methods for predicting refugee migration flows using global socioeconomic and conflict data. Results suggest that historical migration networks and economic indicators are the strongest predictors of refugee movement patterns. Although predictive accuracy remains limited, the framework presented here provides a foundation for future research integrating additional data sources and advanced modeling techniques. Machine learning approaches have the potential to support humanitarian planning by providing early warning signals of migration crises.

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