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# Flight from the Fight? Civil War and its Effects on Refugees

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## Abstract

Civil war dominates conflict in the modern era. An effect of this is a large number of refugees, who flee from war-torn countries in favor of lands where they can live in safety. This paper examines the extent to which the number of these refugees is affected by the number of civil wars a country has had in a year. Previous literature suggests that civil wars increase destruction in a state and threaten people's lives, which encourages migration out of a warring country. Based on this, this paper hypothesizes that increasing the number of civil wars in a country will likewise increase the number of refugees leaving that country. However, this explanation is not supported by this paper's OLS model, with respect for human rights and type of government being shown as more important factors than the number of civil conflicts. A possible reason for this finding is the destruction of critical transportation infrastructure resulting from civil war. The results of this study warrant further investigation into what exactly motivates refugee behavior, especially during civil wars.

## Keywords

Civil war, refugees, infrastructure

## Disciplines

Defense and Security Studies | International and Area Studies | International Relations | Military and Veterans Studies | Peace and Conflict Studies | Political Science | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Social Policy

## Comments

This paper was written for Professor Caroline Hartzell's course, *POL 351: Political Economy of Armed Conflict*, Fall 2015.

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Pol 351  
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### Abstract

**Civil war dominates conflict in the modern era. An effect of this is a large number of refugees, who flee from war-torn countries in favor of lands where they can live in safety. This paper examines the extent to which the number of these refugees is affected by the number of civil wars a country has had in a year. Previous literature suggests that civil wars increase destruction in a state and threaten people's lives, which encourages migration out of a warring country. Based on this, this paper hypothesizes that increasing the number of civil wars in a country will likewise increase the number of refugees leaving that country. However, this explanation is not supported by this paper's OLS model, with respect for human rights and type of government being shown as more important factors than the number of civil conflicts. A possible reason for this finding is the destruction of critical transportation infrastructure resulting from civil war. The results of this study warrant further investigation into what exactly motivates refugee behavior, especially during civil wars.**

### Introduction

In the post-Cold War international system, most wars are not large, formal struggles that pit international powers against one another. Instead, armed conflict most frequently takes the form of civil war, with international actors increasingly replaced by loosely-organized rebel groups. These civil wars take place in predominantly poor countries, leading to devastating effects such as persistent poverty, loss of infrastructure, and loss of human life. Though it is

tempting to view civil war as a domestic problem, these wars have a global effect, spilling over into neighboring countries and beyond (Collier, Elliot et. al 2003: 2). The most obvious example of this spillover is the civilian displacement that occurs as a result of civil war. War destroys the shelter and livelihood of average citizens, forcing many of them to abandon to their homes and seek safety elsewhere. The stream of refugees creates a labyrinth of problems for the international community and the countries in which people seek asylum, as it is unclear who is responsible for these people and their safety. Additionally, refugees can carry with them diseases unknown to the population they are joining, heightening the risk of epidemic, including diseases such as malaria (Collier, Elliot et. al 2003: 2). More immediately, the plight of refugees fleeing war-torn countries is perilous, often resulting in death and devastation for individuals and their families. Today, debate rages in Europe and other wealthy states over what to do about the mass exodus of refugees from places ravaged by civil war. With the Syrian conflict raging on into its fifth year, Boko Haram gaining power in Nigeria, and ISIS still controlling parts of Iraq, the refugee crisis shows little sign of abating. As a result, the topic of civil war and refugees is one that is very relevant in the modern political world.

This paper investigates the effect that the number of civil wars a country experiences has on the number of refugees that flee a country. The destruction wrought by a civil war can leave many people with few options but to leave the country and start anew in a foreign land. The hypothesis of this paper is that when the number of civil wars in a country increases, more people will choose to leave the country and become refugees. My hypothesis is based on the theory that the ruin caused by multiple civil wars will increase the costs of staying put, making refugee status a more palatable option and thus increasing the number of refugees in the international system. An ordinary least squares regression test does not find support for this

hypothesis. This study shows the opposite, that increasing the number of civil wars in a country actually decreases the number of refugees, though the finding is not statistically significant. A possible explanation for this finding is that war damages critical transportation and communication infrastructure, physically prohibiting people from leaving a country even if they wanted to. A democratic government, respect for human rights, and high levels of ethnic fractionalization were shown to decrease the flow of refugees and were statistically significant. The counterintuitive results of this study merit further future investigation into the factors that link civil war and migration.

### **Literature Review**

The distinction between refugees and internally displaced persons is imperative to understanding this topic. Both are types of forced migrants, which Moore and Shellman (2006: 560) define as “one who, owing to a reasonable fear of persecution—by which we mean deprivation of life, liberty, or physical being—abandons her or his possessions and/or domicile and relocates either within her or his own country or seeks asylum abroad”. The difference between the two is that a refugee is someone who seeks asylum abroad, whereas an internally displaced person leaves their home but does not cross international borders.

The dominant current in the refugee literature is that civil war is a major, if not the primary, factor motivating refugees to flee their country. Civil war has the ability to threaten the lives of the innocent citizens of a country. When the threat is great enough, mass migration occurs (Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo 1989). As the intensity of a conflict grows, the number of refugees subsequently increases. Frequently, the oppression of minority groups and the ethnic nature of civil war cause the flight of people of particular ethnicities. When people see others ethnically similar to them start to flee, they themselves become more likely to leave as well

(Schmeidl 1997). As a result, the pace of migration generally increases in conjunction with the intensity and duration of a civil conflict. This is also evidenced by the fact that civil wars that experience foreign intervention are much more likely to result in high refugee levels (Schmeidl 1997). The civil wars that attract foreign intervention are typically the most violent and tend to increase in intensity with the addition of foreign troops (Gleditsch 2007). People faced with death, loss of property, and loss of institutional control by the government are likely to feel that migration is their only option. Once a civil war ensues, military spending in both the warring country and its neighbors is ramped up, with the money taken from other social government spending (Phillips 2015). The result typically is the continued escalation of the conflict at the expense of the quality of life of everyday citizens. This mechanism encourages people to become refugees and flee beyond a country's borders in search of safety and economic security.

Though my paper will look at the number of conflicts a country experiences, the destruction caused by multiple civil wars can be said to be analogous to that caused by one intense war, perhaps even worse. The time immediately following a civil war is when a developing state is most vulnerable. Any small spark can cause a fragile, volatile peace settlement to disintegrate and drag a country back into a conflict. Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006) also introduce an element of reverse causality, saying that increasing the number of refugees in a region increases the likelihood of a civil war. They discuss civil war and displaced persons in terms of an inescapable trap, with civil war leading to refugees, and the diffusion of refugees into neighboring countries leading to the spillover of war and violence into these places.

There are a few dissidents to the proposition that civil war drives people to migrate from a country. Some scholars believe that people considered refugees (who by definition are fleeing for their safety) are actually economic migrants (Neumayer 2003). Economic factors have been

shown to be statistically significant in nearly all studies of refugee behavior. According to this perspective, civil war may be a secondary factor pushing people to leave their home countries, but it is not the primary one (Neumayer 2003). Instead, the difference between economic opportunity in potential landing places and a home country is a much more direct predictor of refugee movement. Neumayer (2003) even suggests that if the economic differences are stark enough, people will leave a country irrespective of the presence of a civil war. A conflation of economic, social, and physical opportunity must also exist in order for people to make the decision to flee a country. Adhikari (2012: 602) theorized that “violent conflict is not the only factor affecting displacement”. People will flee only if a threat to life occurs where there are limited physical barriers to leaving, economic conditions to do so, and a lack of a social structure tying people to the land.

There is a growing literature that postulates that environmental concerns play a larger role in the refugee crisis than previously realized. In particular, refugees from sub-Saharan African countries are seen to be greatly influenced by environmental degradation. The connection between the economy and the environment in these countries produces a vicious cycle that forces emigration (Otunnu 1992). To compensate for the lack of a competitive business sector, the governments of these countries rely on natural resource sales for sustenance. This unsustainable survival method sacrifices long-term environmental health in return for short-term economic gain. In an attempt to modernize their economies, these countries also try to recruit multinational corporations to set up operations on their land. To entice them, environmental regulations are often lax or nonexistent, granting companies impunity in polluting the land, air, and water (Akopari 1998: 219). With most ordinary people dependent on the land to feed their families, residents have no choice but to abandon the area.

Refugees themselves often face unique and onerous challenges once they actually settle in a new country. Refugee status is associated with a host of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder and high anxiety levels (Montgomery 2006). This is especially prevalent among children who are suddenly thrust into a foreign culture without fully understanding why. Compounding the problem is the hostility faced from the host country's population. Xenophobic actions are routinely directed at refugees, as foreign populations do not feel responsible for taking care of them. As a result, policies that could limit these harmful health effects are not pursued by the government (Montgomery 2006). These health risks are added on top of the struggles refugees must already face in creating a whole new life for themselves in a completely foreign land.

The destructive effects of civil war are well-documented in a number of studies. Most prominently, a civil war takes human lives, many of them innocent. But the consequences go beyond this. Intrastate conflict frequently leads to a marked decline in capital investment in a country (Collier 1999). Out of fear of irrecoverable losses, many businesses will flee a warring country as well. The infrastructure of a country is especially vulnerable during a civil war (Blattman and Miguel 2010: 4). Rebel groups (and occasionally the government) target critical support structures that the opposition relies on as part of their strategy. The loss of telecommunication lines, roads, bridges, airports, and ports has huge adverse effects on a society. In addition to disrupting the movement of tools of war, the demolition of these also prevents the flow of economic activity. These losses do not even factor in the opportunity cost of engaging in warfare as opposed to productive activity (Collier, Elliot, et. al 2003). In conjunction with economic hardship, the standard of public health in countries involved in a civil war falls as well. The destruction of hospitals and diversion of funds towards the warfront no doubt plays a role in



this. As the government struggles to maintain its grip on power, the incidence of epidemic disease, such as malaria, skyrockets (Ghobarah, Huth, and Russet 2004). The most vulnerable populations, the elderly and children, are disproportionately affected by these diseases.

### **Hypothesis**

This paper tests the hypothesis that as the number of civil wars in a country increases, the number of refugees leaving that country will increase as well. The theoretical basis for this is the idea that civil war creates destruction in a country, giving people little option but to uproot their lives in search of safety and opportunity for them and their family. This decision has traditionally been conceptualized as a strict cost-benefit analysis: when the costs of staying put are outweighed by the benefits of leaving, then a given rational person will make the choice to leave their country (Neumayer 2005: 391). Becoming a refugee is a dangerous course of action for a person to take. With few funds or means of transportation, some refugees resort to paying smugglers to help them reach a safe haven. These smugglers offer a treacherous journey. Since the beginning of 2010, there have been as many as 1300 deaths per month among migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea alone (UNHCR 2015: 8). In addition, the costs of migration are normally high given that one leaves familiar surroundings and culture. Refugees then need to adapt to new living conditions, possibly a new language, and a different culture in the country of destination, where the existing population might view immigrants with suspicion and hostility. Because of the danger and costs inherent in migration, the situation for a potential refugee must be incredibly dire at home for them to make a rational choice to leave. Only a truly destructive force, such as a war, could bring about the sustained desolation necessary to encourage mass migration abroad.

Countries that experience one civil war face economic instability, high levels of corruption, and the likelihood of falling back into armed conflict even after peace has been reached (Collier, Elliot et al. 2003). If one civil war can cause staggering levels of destruction within a country, then it logically follows that successive or concurrent internal armed conflicts will compound these problems. When a country is plagued by wars, the government has lowered legitimacy and limited capacity. This means that safety for citizens is not guaranteed, the economy struggles, and health concerns are abound. These conditions are all internalized by individuals who are potential refugees. My hypothesis is based on the theory that the ruin caused by multiple civil wars will increase the costs of staying put, making refugee status a more palatable option, thus increasing the number of refugees in the international system.

### **Methodology**

This paper examines the effect that the number of civil wars a country experiences has on the number of refugees that flee a country. In this scenario, the independent variable is the number of civil wars a country experiences and the dependent variable is the number of refugees that leave a country in a given year. This paper hypothesizes that an increase in the number of civil wars a country experiences increases the amount of people who abandon a country. To test this, I employ the Quality of Government Data Set from the University of Gothenburg. This dataset includes a variable, `ucdp_type3`, which details the number of internal armed conflicts that a country has had in a given year, dating back to 1946. An internal armed conflict is defined as one that occurs “between the government of a state and one or more internal groups without intervention from other states” (QOG Codebook 2015: 502). This study includes 924 observations, a sufficient number for statistical interpretation.

To measure the number of refugees leaving a country, the wdi\_reforigin variable from the QOG data set will be used. This variable denotes the number of refugees that have left their country each year dating back to 1990. This paper seeks to establish the influence the number of civil wars has had on the flow of refugees from sending countries. Though the data set also includes a variable for the number of refugees based on the country of asylum, the variable based on country of origin is more useful because the paper wants examine why people leave, not necessarily where they settle afterwards.

The goal of this study is to examine the relationship between civil wars and forced migration. The reason this study is important is because of the widespread effects refugees have on the international system. Because of this, it is more pertinent to use the number of refugees as a variable rather than the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or a combination of the two measures. Though the plight of IDPs can be similarly perilous, the effects are more confined within that country's borders, so the implications are not as far-reaching. Given the time and budgetary constraints of this study, it is prudent to examine only refugees and their relationship to the number of civil wars.

To control for omitted variables influencing the results of this study, five explanatory variables from the QOG data set (2015) are used. Pwt\_rgdp is used to measure real GDP per capita in a country, and is included because wealth is generally seen as a way to prevent events such as civil war and migration from happening (Collier, Elliot, et. al 2003). The variable p\_polity2 measures the regime type of a nation, ranging from 1 (strongly autocratic) to 8 (strongly democratic). Regime type is included because perhaps people migrate to escape a particular political system, seeking greater political and economic freedom, as Neumayer (2003) theorizes. Along the same vein, human rights abuses have been viewed as a stimulus for refugee

flight, though not necessarily civil war (Apodaca 1998). To account for this, the variable `ciri_physint` is used. Coded from 1 through 4, this categorical variable measures the amount and types of known human rights abuses that occur in a country. The final variable this paper controls for is `al_ethnic`, a measure of ethnic fractionalization. Schmeidl (1997) suggested ethnicity plays a large role in migration, motivating this variables inclusion in the model.

To test the hypothesis, these variables were tested using an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Using STATA 14, the ‘`regress wdi_reforigin ucdp_type3 pwt_rgd p_polity2 ciri_physint al_ethnic`’ code was entered to run the model. The continuous nature of refugee counts enables the use of the OLS method in this model.

### **Results and Analysis**

The results of this are both intuitive and surprising. As shown by table 1, `p_polity` (measuring how democratic a government is) and `ciri_physint` (measuring human rights) were both shown to statistically significantly decrease the number of refugees at the .001 level. The more democratic a country is the more likely it is to treat its people well, thus reducing the number of refugees. Similarly, as countries have more respect for human rights, there is less oppression, removing one of the main factors motivating migration. Both democracy and human rights give people more control and representation in the government, improving the likelihood they will refrain from leaving. The effects of these variables are substantial, with a one unit movement towards democracy decreasing refugees by over 8000, and a one unit movement toward greater human rights reducing refugees by over 19,000 (Table 1). This finding is consistent with past literature (Collier, Elliot et. al 2003; Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo 1989).

The case of ethnic fractionalization decreasing refugee numbers is a more unanticipated finding. The effect is incredibly strong, with a one unit increase in fractionalization leading to a

whopping 88,000 person decrease in refugees, and is significant at the .01 level (Table 1). This contradicts existing literature, such as Schmeidl (1997), which theorizes that the presence of ethnic groups increases the intensity of grievances and can cause people to flee. A possible explanation for this is that as the number of ethnic groups increase, they naturally become smaller and therefore closer-knit. Close community ties can make people more willing to stay put in a country in the face of a crisis. People may view themselves as leaving behind a more important part of their identity in these cases, making them less likely to make the decision to migrate.

The most compelling and unforeseen discovery of this paper is the lack of support for its hypothesis. Contrary to nearly all the literature examined, the model showed that each additional civil war a country has experienced actually decreased the amount of refugees by over 8000 people (Table 1). Though this finding is not statistically significant at any level, the magnitude of the negative coefficient warrants further investigation into this relationship. One possible explanation for this is based on the devastation caused by civil war. When a civil war occurs, a common side effect is damaged or ruined roads, bridges, and other means of transportation (Blattman and Miguel 2010). It is plausible that without this critical infrastructure, individuals are simply unable to leave a country even if they desire to. The loss of these basic public properties can keep people confined to local areas, as a journey across borders is simply not feasible. As more civil wars occur in a country, the damage expands and spreads to new regions, impeding more and more people from fleeing.

Another possibility for the lack of support for the hypothesis is that additional civil wars do not change the cost-benefit analysis for potential migrates. An internal armed conflict by its nature is calamitous, resulting in huge costs to society and individuals. People very well may

migrate in response to this if they feel threatened enough. However, there will be people who choose to stay. If they survived the first war, it is not unreasonable of them to stay again in the event a second war erupts. They may feel that the situation cannot get worse than before, so they opt to remain put. Anyone for whom being a refugee is a realistic option would have left after the first war. This could explain why as the number of wars increases, the number of refugees falls.

It is also plausible that the lack of statistical significance indicates that refugees simply do not respond to civil wars. This would lend credence to the theories of Neumayer (2003) and Adhikari (2012), who discovered evidence that economic and social circumstances have a greater influence on refugee flows than the presence of war. These papers suggest that economic inequality and political repression are the true motivations for migration. However, these variables are also grievances correlated with civil war, so the connection with migration is inadvertently correlated with armed conflict. The statistical significance of this study's measure of human rights supports this theory with regard to social factors. This model indicates that economic status plays less of a role than these social issues. Increasing GDP per capita led to a minuscule, statistically insignificant decrease in refugee numbers (Table 1). This is somewhat surprising, as one would generally expect a desire for better economic conditions to facilitate and motivate migration. It is still possible despite this finding that economic opportunity and not civil war can encourage people to become refugees. This would be the case if people of all income classes feel they can improve their situation by becoming a refugee, not only the poor.

### **Limitations**

One must be careful not to interpret these results too broadly. One reason is that there is evidence that the factors motivating refugees and internally displaced persons differs (Moore and

Shelling 2006), so it is important not to generalize these results to other types of migrants besides refugees. Whereas IDPs generally hope to return to their place of origin following a war, this is not as common among refugees. The data set that was used also lacked a variable with a large enough sample to properly assess the effect of environmental degradation on refugee flows, which has been cited by Otunnu (1992) and Akokpari (1998) as reasons for migration. Adding such a variable could allow a greater understanding of more of the variation in the model, changing the interpretation of the results.

Perhaps the most glaring issue with these results is that this paper's central explanatory variable may not be the best way to understand the motivations of refugee behavior. The variable `ucdp_type3` measures the number of civil wars a country has experienced in a year. Most countries in this data set experienced either zero or one civil wars in any given year. Only 10% of cases coded in this data set (243 out of 2379) had more than one civil war in a year (QOG 2015). This small sample after one war limits the applicability of any conclusions that can be drawn about refugee behavior after two or more conflicts. This could contribute to the surprising findings this model found concerning the negative relationship between number of wars and refugees. A better measure may be one that captures the intensity of conflict, as opposed to simply the number of conflicts. Conflict intensity could provide more varied data than the number of wars. The dataset used in this study unfortunately does not contain a reliable, comprehensive measure of civil war intensity, preventing this model from being run.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows that there is a serious gap in existing refugee literature. There are no readily available scholarly investigations into the role that a country's infrastructure plays in facilitating refugee movement. Most literature discusses the effects refugees can have on the

country they flee to and from. Studies concerning civil war effects and refugees largely deal with how the destruction wrought by a war creates the conditions encouraging refugee movement, or how civil war can stunt development by ruining infrastructure and economic foundations. A useful future study would connect these conclusions, examining how the loss of infrastructure actually physically prevents refugees from leaving rather than examining how it encourages them to leave psychologically.

Based on my own prior knowledge of refugee situations and existing literature on forced migration, my paper's hypothesis was that an increase in the number of civil wars a country experiences will lead to an increase in the number of refugees leaving that country. However, this paper did not find evidence supporting this theory. Instead, type of government, level of human rights, and ethnic fractionalization were shown to be much better predictors of refugee numbers than the number of civil wars. The lack of connection between civil war and migrant levels is striking. This paper shows that perhaps the decision to migrate out of a country is not a simple cost-benefit analysis as Neumayer (2005) suggests. More complex factors seem to be in play, and migration should not be conceptualized as decision quantifiable based solely on threat levels. Logistical hurdles such as transportation and infrastructure also likely have an impact on migration numbers as well.

Of all the effects of civil war, refugee displacement has the potential to have the most long-term consequences. When people flee a country, they uproot their entire lives, leaving behind family, friends, and the only way of life they have ever known. When arriving in a host country, they must adapt and be accepted into a foreign society; and this is a process that often far outlasts the armed conflict from which the refugees fled. European countries are currently dealing with these issues, and there is no clear solution on the horizon. Understanding how civil



conflicts impact refugee numbers is critical to recognizing how to best solve the issues associated with them.

Table 1: The Effect of Civil War on Refugees

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Model</b>
Number of Civil Wars	-8448.800 (7403.505)
Democratic Government	-8979.396*** (1219.125)
Ethnic Fractionalization	-88919.42** (26849.090)
GDP per Capita	-0.003 (0.004)
Respect for Human Rights	-19270.840*** (3406.892)
N	924
R <sup>2</sup>	0.182
Prob > F	0.000

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

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