# The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach

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# 1

# A Systems Approach to Displacement

When violence threatens, some people flee. Others remain. How do families decide to leave, where to relocate, and whether to keep moving? What conditions and government policies shape their limited options? Departing from refugee studies based on isolated siloes of knowledge about just one setting, our sociological approach explains the entire refugee system. Changes in one part of the system reverberate elsewhere. Earlier migrations shape later movements. Blocked paths of mobility in one place redirect migration along other paths. Government policies today are shaped by historical legacies, behaviors of other states, and the actions of displaced people. All these processes are forged by deep inequalities of power.

The Salvadoran refugee system is a case in point. El Salvador's economy has long been dependent on the United States, but it did not have a strong tradition of migration to the United States until the onset of its civil war in 1979. The Salvadoran population in the United States increased from 94,000 to 465,000 between 1980 and 1990, during a civil conflict that included a Cold War dimension of a proxy fight between the United States and communist adversaries such as Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. Only 2.6 percent of Salvadoran applicants during this period were granted asylum in the United States, which favored asylum for people from countries led by communist governments rather than rightwing US allies like El Salvador. Many Salvadorans lived in the United States without papers or under a tenuous temporary status. Few voluntarily returned after the war ended in 1992.[1]

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Some Salvadoran youth formed new gangs for protection from established gangs. Deportations of gang members by US authorities inadvertently spread groups such as Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street back to El Salvador, where they prospered in a social fabric weakened by civil war. Criminal violence, forced gang recruitment, extortion, and bloody reprisals by police became new reasons for Salvadorans to flee abroad. With little chance of obtaining visas to travel legally to the United States, most attempted to cross Mexico as irregular migrants. Mexican government crackdowns at the behest of Washington drove Salvadorans to travel through remote areas that left them more vulnerable to violence from gangs, including offshoots of the same organizations that had been transplanted earlier from the United States to El Salvador. Salvadorans who reached the United States to ask for asylum usually had to make their case based on the threat of violence from nonstate actors, such as gangs, if they were returned to El Salvador. Along with other Central Americans, they sometimes traveled north in caravans to achieve safety in numbers. Spectacular images of hundreds of people walking down the highway fed into restrictionist narratives in the United States of a migrant "invasion," which generated further US pressure on the governments of Mexico and Central American countries to stop the caravans.[2]

The Salvadoran experience demonstrates several lessons drawn out by a systems approach to displacement. Intervention by a powerful state in the core of the world system (the United States) in the system's periphery (El Salvador) generates the movement of people in the opposite direction. Forced displacement subsequently channels migration for work and family reunification, as well as coerced movement back to El Salvador in the form of deportations. New push factors then generate migration, as people flee from criminal violence and economic precarity. The core state uses a transit state (Mexico) to try to block further movement. A systems perspective shows this interactivity among states, sequences of migration, and feedback loops in which past outputs of displacement processes become inputs into new iterations.

By contrast, accounts of refugee movements in the news usually tell simple stories about isolated events that cause people to flee their homes for safety wherever they can find it. "Few refugee news stories make the connection between 'there' and 'here'," finds researcher Terence Wright. "Sympathetic coverage of those in far-off lands affected by disaster and war appears in stark contrast to the media

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treatment of those seeking asylum in the West."[3] Photographs of Syrian refugees taken in tented settlements in Lebanon suggest that such dire conditions make them worthy subjects of humanitarian aid, while asylum-seekers in Europe, from the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos to the "Jungle" in the French port of Calais, are characterized as disorderly, defiant, and dangerous. These diverging interpretations of camp settings privilege the perspective of rich host countries, while neglecting the drivers of displacement. An analysis of World Refugee Day coverage in US newspapers found that "the media are overwhelmingly more likely to address refugees as locally situated, often totally divorced from the circumstances and context which led to the refugees' arrival in the United States."[4] The intervening period between flight from the country of origin and arrival in a country of resettlement is also forgotten, even though most resettled refugees were displaced for years in transit countries. People born into a stateless refugee status may have never even seen their country of origin.

International organizations try to avoid the political embroilments of assigning blame for conflicts that produce refugees by glossing over the reasons for displacement. For example, an account published by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in 2019 explains how the "Iraqi refugee crisis" unfolded:

> The Iraqi refugee crisis is the result of decades of conflict and violence in the region. In 2014, an escalation of violence surged when the Islamic State (ISIS) launched attacks in northern Iraq. As a result of the conflict, millions of families were forced to flee their homes and half of the country's infrastructure was destroyed.[5]

The report does not mention state actors involved in displacing Iraqis, such as the Iraqi government or the US-led invasion in 2003, which resulted in the displacement of millions of Iraqis and the emergence of ISIS. Critiques of the United States may jeopardize an important relationship with the top financial supporter of UNHCR operations. Naming the Iraqi state might jeopardize the UNHCR's access to internally displaced people in Iraq. By contrast, holding ISIS rhetorically accountable does not threaten relationships with donors and states of origin.

Similarly, when the Bali Process, an international forum led by Australia and Indonesia to combat human trafficking and smuggling,

analyzed the 2015 Andaman Sea emergency in which members of the Muslim Rohingya minority fled ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, its report avoided even using the name Rohingya. The report only noted "the events of May 2015, specifically the movements of mixed populations." In this account, "mixed populations" simply appeared, and the focus of states in the Bali Process was how to manage them.[6] These accounts deliberately ignore why refugees fled in the first place.

The systems approach to displacement breaks not only with popular representations of refugees, but also with scholarly and advocate narratives insisting that "refugees are not migrants."[7] The boundary between refugees and migrants is rooted in legally consequential distinctions, not always sociological realities, as discussed in the following chapter. By avoiding the tendency to separate migration, refugee, and conflict studies, we can examine the interplay among different kinds of immobility, movement, and their governance.[8] By refugees, we mean a subset of migrants who have crossed an international border in large part to escape the threat of violence or persecution, or people who have crossed a border and are afraid to return home because of such a threat. At the same time, our analysis incorporates individuals who fall outside official refugee labels and are on the fringes of studies of forced migration. An approach toward the decision-making of people facing violence and persecution, which we call the new economics of displacement, illuminates linkages between systems of economic and refugee migrations. Moving beyond a narrowly circumscribed definition of refugees makes it possible to draw on highly elaborated theories of international migration that show how movements are shaped by links among places of origin, transit, and host societies within a global system of control.

## The refugee system

This book draws on pathbreaking work on systems approaches to migration to explain the refugee system. We build on foundational studies of rural–urban migration systems by geographer Akin Mabogunje, regional migration systems by demographers Mary Kritz, Hania Zlotnik, and Douglas Massey and colleagues, and theoretical elaboration by demographer James Fawcett and development studies scholar Oliver Bakewell.[9] Our approach is closest to that of *Escape from Violence*, published in 1989 during the waning days of the Cold

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War, by political scientist Aristide Zolberg and colleagues. We assess developments in the more than three decades since its publication, historical evidence of the construction of the refugee regime that went unrecognized in their seminal text, and greater attention to forced immobility and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Their macro approach is integrated with greater theorization of how policies from above interact with refugee decision-making at all stages of immobility, movement, and settlement.[10] We refine and deploy the systems approach with illustrative examples of its elements drawn from a global universe of cases.

The refugee system is an interactive set of processes within, among, and transcending states that produce immobility and movement related to violence and persecution. Ideological, military, economic, and political power shape the system. Its processes include feedback mechanisms linking elements across time and place. Our fundamental orientation toward understanding the system is derived from key thinkers in historical sociology, but eclectic tools from across the social sciences, history, and law illuminate particular contexts.[11]

A systems approach does not require writing a history of the world to understand a given situation. For example, in a pointed essay reviewing Betts and Collier's argument that Syrian refugee migration to Europe in 2015 was determined by the policies of European countries, especially the stance of German chancellor Angela Merkel, historian Benjamin Thomas White showed how refugee movements were shaped by conditions across different kinds of states. Without using the word "system," he deployed a systems approach to demonstrate how, in addition to the policies of Greece, Hungary, and Germany, movement into Europe was also shaped by circumstances outside Europe. These included shifting patterns of external intervention in Syria's civil war; a welcome that was wearing thin in the primary host countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey; and refugees' fading expectations of local integration in neighboring countries or return to Syria.[12] One could extend the analysis to show how mass refugee movements into Europe then fed back into policy-making, namely the EU–Turkey deal, in which the EU, led by Merkel, paid Turkey to contain Syrian refugees. The EU later turned a blind eye to the Turkish government's pushbacks of Syrian refugees and its incursion into northern Syria to set up a so-called safe haven with Russian support. Syrians in different parts of Syria, as well as other Middle Eastern countries and throughout the Global North, decided

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to stay in place or move as they interacted with shifting policies around the globe.

A systems approach shows how *refugeedom* – the relationship between refugees, state, and society – interacts with *refugeehood* – the experience of becoming and being a refugee.[13] In 2015 the world witnessed the death of two-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee boy of Kurdish origin, who drowned in the sea between Turkey and Greece during his family's failed attempt to reach Europe to ask for asylum. Images of Alan's small, lifeless body on the Turkish shore were shared millions of times, but the family's experience is rarely discussed in its entirety. The story of the Kurdi family's tragedy reveals the importance of integrating the study of state policies with the theorization of refugee decision-making.

Alan's parents, Abdullah and Rehanna, met in late 2010 in an olive orchard in Kobani, a Syrian town near the border with Turkey. They married in Damascus and were living there when the war began in March 2011. The family became internally displaced the following year and fled back to Kobani. As the violence in Syria escalated, resources, food, and medicine became increasingly difficult to find. Abdullah decided to cross the border into Turkey to work and send money back home. ISIS soon gained control of Kobani, prompting Rehanna and her two sons, Ghalib and Alan, to join Abdullah in Turkey. Life in Istanbul was challenging. The boys were out of school. Their parents feared the children had no real future. Abdullah reached out to his sister Tima, who had emigrated to Canada decades earlier. As a Canadian citizen, Tima could help sponsor refugees to resettle there. She had already begun the process for another sibling, however, and did not have the financial resources to sponsor Abdullah's family of four. As she tried to raise the money, the family faced an additional obstacle. The Canadian government required the family's Syrian passports, which the Kurdis could not obtain. With Canadian resettlement out of reach and the family's situation worsening in Turkey, Abdullah made the tough decision that the family would travel by boat to Europe to seek asylum. The Greek island of Kos was only five kilometers away. The Kurdis had already braved dangerous terrain in Syria. Abdullah believed they could make the journey. Several of his cousins had recently received asylum in Germany and Sweden.

With passports and visas, the Kurdis would not have needed to put themselves in jeopardy. They could have traveled on one of the many

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ferries across the strait. But as Syrians, for whom visas to European countries were practically impossible to obtain because European governments wanted to keep out likely asylum-seekers, the Kurdis would have to travel clandestinely. Abdullah asked Tima for $5,000 to pay the smugglers. She sent him the money and later recounted his texts as he deliberated which day to try to reach Greece: "The waves were too high. I would not do it," he said on August 21, 2015. "Water so calm today. But the smugglers had a rubber dinghy. I won't take a rubber dinghy," Abdullah texted his sister on August 27.[14] Tima's worst fears came true on September 2. Alan, his older brother Ghalib, and his mother Rehanna drowned at sea. Abdullah was the sole survivor.

Alan Kurdi's story seized the attention of audiences around the world, fueled humanitarian campaigns, and became the subject of numerous academic studies. The response, however, has largely neglected the Kurdi family's broader experience of displacement and insecurity, which began years before that sorrowful day in 2015. System-wide constraints and opportunities shaped how the Kurdis navigated displacement inside Syria, family separation across the Syrian-Turkish border, refugeehood in Turkey, the flickering promise of resettlement in Canada, and the hope of asylum in Europe. Members of the Kurdi family made the best decisions they could about their future, despite many unknowns. State policies throughout their journey and in countries half a world away influenced their decision-making. Alan Kurdi's death, and the hundreds of thousands of people who would traverse the seas for a chance to live in Europe, would in turn shape policies in Europe and beyond.

## Against siloed approaches

The systems approach to displacement differs markedly from siloed knowledge production about refugees. Table 1.1 shows six characteristics of siloed approaches. The first three characteristics include the tendency to be ahistorical (most policy studies), the failure to explain – or purposefully neglect – the causes of displacement beyond generic gestures to "root causes" (UNHCR *Global Trends* reports), and the use of an exclusively legal definition of refugees to define the scope conditions of research and governance (most legal and policy studies). These first three trends are linked to a dual imperative in

Table 1.1: Siloed vs. systems approaches to forced displacement

| *Siloed approaches* | *Systems approach* |
|---|---|
| Ahistorical (most legal and policy studies) | Historical institutionalist attention to complex causal sequences, path dependency, and feedback loops |
| No specific explanation of displacement (UNHCR *Global Trends* reports) | Starting point is the politics of exit, and the new economics of displacement framework to understand decision-making by households and individuals |
| Exclusively legal definition (most legal and policy studies) | Sociological definition of people fleeing the threat of violence or persecution |
| Studies begin with refugees who have already crossed an international border (FitzGerald & Arar 2018) | Attention to factors creating immobility as well as mobility, and IDPs as well as refugees |
| Focus on three "durable solutions" in a single country (humanitarian organizations) | Attention to cross-border ties |
| Single isolated stage of displacement divorced from other stages (most social science studies) | Intersection of conflict/refugee/migration studies shows feedback linking policies and actions at each stage |

which knowledge producers, in addition to publishing reports and datasets, are responsible for providing potentially lifesaving services or conferring protected statuses to displaced people. Policymakers, lawyers, humanitarian professionals, and members of international organizations use "categories of practice" as opposed to "categories of analysis."[15] Categories of practice allow states and international organizations to define, assess, count, and move refugees. A siloed approach serves its purpose in an asylum hearing, for example, but it does not reveal the underlying dynamics of refugeedom.

The other three characteristics of siloed approaches include ignoring those who do not move, sometimes because they have been killed;[16] a focus on so-called "durable solutions" of return, local settlement, and resettlement that take place in a single country

(humanitarian organizations);[17] and the study of a single isolated stage of displacement, such as asylum-seeking or resettlement, that is divorced from other stages (most social science studies). These siloed tendencies in the academy build on the work of policymakers, lawyers, and humanitarian professionals. In doing so, academic studies often adopt the same scope conditions of analysis and ultimately employ categories of legal and humanitarian practice even though they are not providing services or protection to displaced people. Drawing on UNHCR's annual *Global Trends* reports, for instance, scholars are likely to give attention to refugees and IDPs, but neglect those who are besieged, interned, or otherwise unable to move toward safety.[18] Scholars who turn to policy reports about refugee resettlement will rarely learn about refugees' lives before arriving in the country of resettlement, even when refugees have already been displaced for decades in third, fourth, or fifth countries.

The limitations of siloed approaches become especially clear when we consider how displaced people see the world through interactive connections among places of origin, transit, and destination. Their histories do not begin the day the war started. The experience of displacement does not begin the moment a person crosses an international border. Neither does refugeehood end the day legal status is secured. Refugees often have family members dispersed over long distances and across borders. Their obligations and opportunities are not confined to one particular state.

## Power

Refugee experiences and policies are shaped by different forms of power – the capacity to make social actors do something against their wishes. We draw on sociologist Michael Mann's typology of four sources of social power – economic, military, ideological, and political – to show how each type of power and their interactions shape systems of forced immobility and displacement.[19] Rather than a legal approach asking what states *should* do in matters of displacement according to interpretations of international and domestic law, we first establish *why* states and people act the way they do, which requires analyzing how power works, before offering our own suggestions in the conclusion about how that power might be used more humanely.

Explanations of patterns of international migration begin with economic power. Many influential accounts draw on Immanuel Wallerstein's concept of world systems.[20] Rather than compare discrete nation-state units, world systems theory conceives of a single global system of capital accumulation emerging in the sixteenth century and morphing in various ways since then, as core countries in the system, beginning with Western Europe, penetrated the periphery to extract economic surplus. World systems theory, and related theories of dependency, have been extremely generative in the study of international migration. Labor migration tends to follow paths laid down by interventions such as settler colonialism, state-sponsored recruitment of temporary labor, and postcolonial migrations to former metropoles. European colonial recruitment of Indian and Chinese indentured servants in the nineteenth century, often as a replacement for African slaves in Caribbean colonies, follows this model, as does US recruitment of *braceros* from Mexico in the two world wars and Western European post-World War II recruitments of "guest workers" from countries around the Mediterranean.[21]

Refugees often follow paths created much earlier through the core's economic and military domination of the periphery. For example, 140,000 Cubans sought asylum in the former colonial metropole of Spain between 1961 and 1977.[22] Imperialist as well as colonial ties structure refugee flows.[23] One million Cubans migrated to the United States, which occupied Cuba from 1898 to 1902 and dominated much of the economy until the 1959 revolution. Haitians fleeing government oppression and economic collapse beginning in the 1970s headed for the United States, which had occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and long dominated its economy, and to Quebec, which, along with Haiti, is a centuries-old Francophone legacy of French settler colonialism in the Americas.[24] Refugees often follow earlier labor migration routes between semi-peripheral and core countries. During the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, many Croatian and Bosnian refugees went to Germany along pathways laid by German recruitment of Yugoslav "guest workers" in the 1960s.[25]

The systems approach explains feedback loops between labor and refugee migrations. The causes of a flow can change in response to developments in both origins and destinations. Labor migrations often channel subsequent refugee flows, which in turn can generate family reunification, as among many Bosnians living in Sweden in the 1990s.[26] A movement that began as voluntary may become

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involuntary in subsequent stages, such as when West African labor migrants in Libya became persecuted during the Libyan civil war in 2014 and many fled to Europe.[27] War can reshape pre-existing labor migration streams, by making continued migration more difficult and bottling up labor migrants abroad who are afraid to repatriate for fear of suffering violence or conscription. This dynamic can then change the economic sectors in which labor migrants work in host countries, from temporary to more permanent niches. Such dynamics have emerged in a wide range of countries, including Ethiopia, Haiti, Israel/Palestine, Mexico, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, and Turkey.[28]

Military power also shapes refugee flows in ways that complement the economic understandings of world systems theory. The exercise of military power generates refugee flows as wars, ethnic cleansing, and persecution push refugees out. External powers often apply a carrot-and-stick approach to shape those conflicts to their advantage. The slow dissolution of the Ottoman Empire produced the largest waves of refugees in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an expanding Russian empire and interventions by Britain and France accelerated nation-state formation and ethnic cleansing.[29] The Cold War involved military interventions around the world. External military interventions then drove greater outflows and the perpetuation of armed conflicts.

Refugee destinations are not arbitrary. Military interventions can structure movement *after* a conflict as well. For example, military interventions by the core in the periphery shape postcolonial flows. Postcolonial settler repatriation, such as the movement of European settlers in Algeria to France after Algerian independence in 1962, often falls out of siloed refugee studies, in part because repatriating colonists are not legally protected by the Refugee Convention as they continue to enjoy the protection of their state of nationality. However, their movement was less than voluntary in many cases. A systems approach is attuned to these movements, which are quintessential expressions of world systems theories' emphasis on core interventions in the periphery and feedback loops of migrations in the opposite direction.

Refugee arrivals are often the consequence of other forms of military interventions abroad. The flow of Indochinese refugees to the United States was a direct result of the US war in Indochina. Although rarely recognized legally as refugees, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and

Nicaraguans first came to the United States in large numbers during the 1980s as a consequence of civil wars in their countries in which foreign powers, including the United States, played a major role.[30] The United States has historically had special programs for resettling collaborators in countries where it has militarily intervened, from Laos in the 1970s to Afghanistan from the 2000s to 2020s.[31] Similarly, when France withdrew from Algeria in the 1960s, it accommodated the migration to France of 88,000 Harkis – indigenous North Africans who had fought with France against national liberation forces.[32]

Military power not only produces new refugees and destinations, but also manages them, providing relief, control, deterrence, and forced repatriation. Military intervention, or its threat, has been used to contain potential refugees, such as the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, or efforts to prevent refugees from reaching their destinations by blocking maritime and land routes.[33] During and immediately following World War II, the Displaced Persons Branch of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force exercised jurisdiction over displaced persons (DPs) in Europe and used the basic design and techniques of military camps to control these populations. British and US soldiers carried out forced repatriation to the Soviet Union, their ally, of liberated Soviet prisoners of war (POWs).[34] The fact that displaced person camps in Europe were under Allied military control shaped solutions to the mass displacements. After the war, the United States in particular wanted to withdraw its responsibility for the camps, which prompted the Truman administration to push for more resettlement slots in the United States and other Allied countries and to recognize the state of Israel in 1948 as a destination for displaced Jews.[35] Three decades later, the US military transported and housed more than 100,000 refugees from Vietnam to the United States. The CIA airlifted 2,500 allied Hmong military officials and their families from Laos to Thailand, and then on to the United States.[36] Military power can thus generate and pre-empt flows, shape their destinations, control and protect displaced people, or return them to harm's way.

Ideological power is a critical component of the refugee system. The generation of refugee flows has often been driven by nationalism, the ideology that a homogeneous national people deserves its own nation-state. Responses to refugees are equally ideological. The belief that there is something wrong with a state persecuting groups of its

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subjects is a historically elaborated notion that is not universally held to this day. Humanitarianism and human rights are the central contemporary ideologies used to describe, understand, and advocate for people caught in armed conflict and refugees. These ideas have been inscribed into law. Notions of who constitutes a "social group" deserving of legal protection have changed over time because of deeper shifts in ideologies, for example, about gender and sexuality. The ideology of state sovereignty, which includes the principle that states should have the exclusive authority to control who is admitted and allowed to stay in their territories, collides with the ideologies of humanitarianism and human rights in ways that limit the scope and implementation of the refugee regime.

Refugee movement and experience are shaped by political power as well. While Mann defines political power more narrowly as the "centralized and territorial regulation of social life" through the state, we adopt a more capacious definition that includes international organizations, such as the UNHCR, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), given the importance of parallel or surrogate states in refugee management, as elaborated in Chapter 6. Since the 1960s, most of the people categorized by the UNHCR as refugees have remained outside the most powerful countries of the West or Global North. Relationships between governments of the Global North and South strongly shape refugee policies. Incentivized by money, aid in kind, trade concessions, the promise of liberalized visas, and other rewards, countries in the Global South contain most refugees in part to prevent them from traveling to the Global North to seek asylum. Countries in the Global South are active participants in these negotiations, as they link the issue of refugee control and relief provision to their other foreign policy interests. States in the Global North and South are not always able to get everything they want in these negotiations given their complex interdependence.[37]

We draw on the observation of sociologist Stephen Castles, that "forced migration is not the result of unconnected emergencies but rather an integral part of North–South relationships."[38] Our amendment is to avoid reducing the cause of all forced migration to the interventions of powerful states. Relationships among states

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Figure 1.1: A billboard at the entrance to the UNHCR's Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, which hosted 80,000 Syrians in 2016, thanks wealthy donor states for their aid. Photo by Rawan Arar.

within the Global South also shape forced migration. Myron Weiner examines combinations of entry and exit policies, such as where one country promotes exit and another restricts entrance, both countries promote flows, both promote restriction, or the country of origin restricts exit while the other promotes entrance. These policies are highly interactive. "Often the entry rules set by one country are shaped by the exit rules set by another," he notes.[39] Policies

controlling mobility and integration in one country affect policies in others through specific mechanisms of diffusion and iterative cycles of adjustment to migration patterns that have been changed by the policies of other countries.[40]

Potential refugees develop their aspirations and make decisions about movement within the constraints and possibilities of configurations of economic, military, political, and ideological power. In the classical formulation of Kritz and Zlotnik, an international migration system is defined as "a network of countries linked by migration interactions whose dynamics are largely shaped by the functioning of a variety of networks linking migration actors at different levels of aggregation."[41] The systems approach helps explain why people move to particular places and how they make those choices. Rather than a simple cause and effect model of refugee decision-making based on push factors in the place of origin and pull factors in the destination that channel refugees in one direction, the systems approach emphasizes interactions of power and ties that shape human flows.[42]

## Beyond "solutions"

Much refugee research is defined by the policy categories of "durable solutions" – voluntary return, local integration, and resettlement, an approach characterized by a methodological nationalism rooted in the assumption that the nation-state is the natural unit of analysis and container for people's lives.[43] By contrast, the systems approach examines the interdependence of "all stages of the refugee displacement cycle."[44]

For example, despite the fact that fewer than 1 percent of the world's refugees are resettled, far more are affected by resettlement policies. The carrot of resettlement is dangled in ways that discipline refugees in countries of mass hosting. Many refugees aspire to return to their countries of origin or to settle locally, but for those who wish to resettle, the dream affects their lives in the first host country. For example, when hundreds of thousands of Chinese from the People's Republic of China (PRC) fled to Hong Kong in the 1950s, the World Council of Churches noted: "Even though the majority of Hong Kong refugees may never get to some other place, it is psychologically very important that a few are able to emigrate. The hope of resettlement abroad helps to reduce the despair and unrest at being

hopelessly blocked in Hong Kong."[45] In the 1970s, Vietnamese who had reached Malaysia, whose government sometimes pushed boats filled with Vietnamese refugees back out to sea, did not publicly protest the grim conditions in Malaysian camps for fear that it would jeopardize their chances of resettlement in a Western state.[46]

Ties among countries structure refugee experiences, and the process of refugee movement and settlement further reshapes those ties through diasporic engagement. The United States granted sanctuary to Vietnamese refugees in the aftermath of the US defeat in Indochina in the 1970s. The second generation of Vietnamese Americans decades later became conduits for commerce and other ties between Vietnam and the United States after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1995.[47]

In another feedback loop, the style of raising funds in the Global North to finance mass hosting in the Global South makes resettlement in the Global North more politically difficult. In 1959, the UNHCR sponsored World Refugee Year to raise funds, including for Chinese from the PRC who had fled to Hong Kong. Historian Laura Madokoro notes that international campaigns that emphasized the material deprivation of Chinese refugees in Hong Kong paradoxically made them seem alien and unsuited for permanent resettlement as new citizens and economic actors in English-speaking settler societies.[48] Contemporary fundraising campaigns pose similar risks. Objects of pity may inspire donations; they do not look like ideal neighbors.

Just as earlier migrations shape later refugee movements, so too do earlier refugee reception policies shape later receptions. Lebanon hosted an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees after the Syrian conflict began in 2011. Syrian refugees constituted more than a fifth of the population living in Lebanon, making it among the leading refugee host countries in the world on a per capita basis.[49] Yet the Lebanese government refused to establish formal refugee camps for Syrian refugees, in part to avoid repeating the experience of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Palestinian refugees arrived in 1948, but, except for a small minority of Christians allowed to become Lebanese citizens as part of a project of religious demographic engineering, the Muslim majority remained stateless and were required to live in camps. After the Palestine Liberation Organization was expelled from Jordan and established its major base in Lebanon in the 1970s, becoming a kind of state within a state, Lebanon became a major

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target of Israeli bombing. Palestinian refugees were caught up in the ethnic and religious conflicts within Lebanon, in which foreign powers from the United States to Syria and Iran intervened, culminating in the 1975–90 civil war, Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982, and other conflicts. As a consequence, Lebanese political leaders have been reticent to permit geographic concentrations of recognized refugees that might become permanent.[50] Refugee policies are not just shaped by the past in a given country. They diffuse across countries and time, as governments copy each other, and international organizations, NGOs, think-tanks, and academics spread knowledge of practices.

Breaking away from an analytic overreliance on policy categories allows for a critique of the "sedentarist bias" of the international refugee regime. All three permanent solutions are predicated on a goal of ending movement.[51] Analyzing possibilities beyond the durable solutions framework of three static endpoints, to accommodate refugees' ongoing mobility and ties among hosts as well as countries of origin, suggests a wider array of policy solutions. "Migration and mobility may not only enhance existing solutions: they offer a means of connecting them," notes Katy Long.[52] Experts have urged freedom of secondary movement and a choice of residence for refugees at least since jurist Jacques Rubinstein's call in 1936.[53] Assessing the viability of such proposals requires widening the field of analysis to include myriad actors, interests, and types of power.

## Limits of the systems approach

Concepts that are too broad lose analytical leverage. The international migration systems framework elaborated by Kritz and others includes the political, demographic, and economic context; migration flows between at least two countries or group of countries; and historical, cultural, colonial, and technological links among those countries. Akin Mabogunje's scheme is even more capacious, as it includes numerous subsystems and adjustment mechanisms. Anthony Richmond's typology of "reactive migration" includes twenty-five basic types.[54] At worst, the systems perspective would be a "kitchen-sink" approach, which, in trying to explain everything, explains nothing. Readers enamored of parsimony will be dissatisfied. But it should not be surprising that many factors shape a phenomenon

as complex as the relationship between violence and mobility. The challenge remains to elaborate for the study of refugeedom what other work has been done to explain the international labor migration system.[55]

We distinguish our approach from some uses of systems theory in the study of international migration, in that we do not see a system as a quasi-organic entity or machine that inherently seeks equilibrium.[56] Attention to processes that transcend nation-state borders, analysis that moves beyond the three "durable solutions" framework, and a focus on power are elements shared with a "transnational" approach to displacement.[57] However, the systems approach focuses not just on the links of displaced people across borders; it pays equal attention to the interactions of states and other actors. Rather than a "people-centered perspective," we examine the interplay among individuals and much larger institutions and historical forces.

Our approach is to focus on the links across countries rather than the purely internal dynamics in each case. Of course, processes within a country's borders are also critical in shaping every stage of displacement, and these internal and external processes interact. Once policies are established at the national level, their implementation is still subject to all kinds of micro-institutional and personal dynamics. A vast body of case studies establishes the importance of these domestic processes.[58] We neither dismiss their importance nor attempt to adjudicate how consequential they are vis-à-vis the system level. Such a judgment would be highly contextual and could only be accomplished with much narrower scope conditions than those of this book. Our goal, rather, is to reveal dynamics that would remain obscured in siloed studies of a given country, group, or stage of displacement. The utility of any theoretical perspective is whether it shows something important that other perspectives miss.

## The road ahead

The following chapters lay out the benefits of a sociological approach to understanding decision-making of people threatened by violence; policies in countries of origin, hosting, and transit; and the linkages among them. Chapter 2 summarizes debates among different approaches toward defining refugees. Constructivists argue that refugees are not a reality outside the act of naming them and the

consequences of acquiring that label. Realists object, and assert that refugees have distinctive characteristics. Sociological realists define refugees as a subtype of migrant who has been displaced across an international border by the threat of violence. Within the realist camp, there are disputes about how far to push the boundaries of who should be legally recognized as a refugee. A focus on subjective self-identities brackets all the questions of realist definitions to center on how individuals define themselves to make sense of their experience. We then show how a systems approach reveals a matrix of movement and coercion, ranging from those who cannot move because they have been killed, to those who come and go freely as voluntary migrants. A visual representation of the "(im)mobility chessboard" (see Figure 2.4) brings together experiences that are usually discussed in siloed bodies of literature about armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, refugee studies, and international migration studies. We highlight the connections among categories and how the same individuals can move among them.

Chapter 3 describes the development of the legal regime around refugees from overlapping policies aimed at managing different forms of mobility. Rather than taking a narrow approach that focuses on the origins of refugee law in the interwar period or the 1951 Refugee Convention, we take a systemic view that illuminates how different strands of law and norms came together to influence the contemporary refugee regime. Refugee law is rooted in the realist notion that certain classes of individuals deserve exceptional protections related to punishment, slavery, extradition, and migration control. Over time, the regime has become secularized, formalized in multilateral agreements, and applies increasingly universalistic criteria to the refugee definition. The construction of the refugee regime and its use have been shaped by power relations among states more than the objective characteristics of displaced individuals. The chapter also provides a narrative historical scaffolding for many of the examples in the subsequent analytical chapters, which refer to cases that may not be uniformly familiar. Readers interested in learning more about particular episodes and historiographic debates will find detailed sources in the endnotes.

Chapter 4 examines how people who face violence and persecution calculate the costs of migration and weigh the risks of staying. We consider the degree and character of violence that refugees face, which can be generalized or targeted against an individual or ethnic

group in the case of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Economic factors also play a role in decision-making, especially when the escalation of war leads to currency devaluation, the breakdown of work and business, and the scarcity of basic goods. After refugees leave their home country, they face the question of whether to attempt to migrate further. The prospect of return looms at every stage of migration. We introduce a model for refugee household decision-making called the "new economics of displacement," which takes into consideration how families manage multiple risks and goals. Through a longitudinal case study of the Asfour family from Syria, we show how members of one family attempted to manage the risks of the armed conflict from its outbreak in 2011 through the next decade.

Chapters 5–8 are organized by analytical categories of the type of displacement at moments of exit, hosting, and cross-border engagement. Rather than a chronologically organized case study of a country, region, or group of refugees, we examine what motivates states and other actors to try to manage different types of displacement. We show how military, economic, political, and ideological power operates in systems of immobility and mobility. The strategies and practices of these actors are influenced by historical sequences and links to other parts of the system. A dialectical process then reshapes the system itself.

Chapter 5 details how the ability of people to flee violence and persecution is shaped by exit policies of states and nonstate combatants. Many states have historically restricted the exit of their citizens and subjects. Others tolerate or even deliberately try to expel targeted groups. These policies are developed interactively with policies of potential host states. Particular types of conflict are more likely to produce refugees, including nation-state building from multiethnic empires and civil wars with foreign interventions.

In Chapter 6, we demonstrate that the global system of refugee management is dependent upon states that are not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and states in the Global South more broadly. States in the Global South not only host most of the world's refugees, they also facilitate highly controlled refugee movement to the Global North through resettlement, and restrict the onward movement of asylum-seekers through containment measures pushed by powerful Northern states. We identify variation across Southern host states by breaking away from the refugee/migrant binary, in

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which only UN-recognized refugees are counted, and invite readers to consider the many Global Souths.

Chapter 7 examines host country interests from the perspective of powerful countries such as the United States, Germany, Britain, Australia, and Canada. Attempts to control and select refugees for admission reflect their foreign policy interests interacting with economic and demographic goals and ideologies of ethnocentrism, humanitarianism, and nationalism. A systems approach highlights how even some lobbying groups that appear to be "domestic" in fact have interests shaped by earlier migrations and transnational experiences and goals. One of the ways that powerful states try to limit refugee flows is by pushing control out from their borders into the territories of countries of origin and weaker states in the Global South.

Refugees often maintain and forge new ties to their places of origin, from long-distance engagements to repatriation. Chapter 8 identifies the remittances, visits, communications, and political organizing that constitute these ties. We then turn to the conditions that favor or inhibit cross-border connections. Conditions in countries of origin, as well as host country politics, international organizations, and migration patterns, affect homeland engagements.

The Conclusion recaps the main arguments about the merits of a systems approach revealed in the empirical chapters. We then establish the similarities and differences between policies in powerful and weaker host states. Finally, we make a set of recommendations to policymakers, journalists, and researchers working on displacement issues.