

Reference Paper for the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention

**Strategic Displacement and the Politics of Wartime Mobility:
Implications for Policymakers and Practitioners**

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Abstract:

Armed conflicts are killing fewer people today, but they are displacing more of them. This paper identifies different types of conflict-related displacement and demonstrates the extent to which civilian flight has been a deliberate strategy, not just an unintentional byproduct, of war. I outline several dilemmas that this poses for policymakers and practitioners in three areas: accountability, humanitarian aid, and post-conflict peacebuilding. Some of the ways in which armed groups use displacement as a strategy illuminates the politics of wartime mobility. The act of moving or staying in conflict zones is often seen as a political act that can have widespread consequences during and after conflict. This has important implications for bolstering humanitarian and human rights protection and ensuring that efforts to resolve displacement do not exacerbate conflict or jeopardize peace.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the number of people displaced by conflict, violence, and persecution worldwide has nearly doubled.¹ This is partly due to a sharp rise in the number of armed conflicts, which grew from 31 in 2010 to 54 in 2019.² A vast majority are civil wars, though many have become internationalized.³ Despite the rise in conflict, however, the number of fatalities from organized violence has actually declined since 2014.⁴ In other words, wars are killing fewer people today – but they are displacing more of them.

This striking trend calls for unpacking the “black box” of wartime displacement and linking it to broader processes of mobility in situations of armed conflict. In this paper, I identify different types of conflict-related displacement and demonstrate the extent to which civilian flight has been a deliberate strategy, not just an unintentional byproduct, of war. I then outline several dilemmas that the orchestration and manipulation of displacement by political and military actors poses for policymakers and practitioners. I focus on three areas: accountability, humanitarian aid, and post-conflict peacebuilding. One of my primary arguments is that some of the ways in which armed groups use displacement as a conflict strategy illuminates the politics of wartime mobility. The act of moving or staying in conflict zones is often seen as a political act that can have widespread consequences during and after conflict. International agencies, governments, and local organizations need to give greater attention to these dynamics in evaluating and modifying responses to forced displacement – by, for example, ensuring that they inform reconciliation, social cohesion, and (re)integration programs. This has important implications for bolstering humanitarian and human rights protection and ensuring that efforts to resolve displacement do not end up exacerbating conflict or jeopardizing peace.

UNPACKING CONFLICT-RELATED DISPLACEMENT

In the context of armed conflict, displacement – civilian migration that is directly or indirectly provoked by armed groups – can be classified as collateral damage, opportunistic, or strategic. These ideal-type categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. Multiple types of displacement often occur in the same conflict, varying by perpetrator, location, and time period.

Collateral displacement describes displacement that is a spontaneous and unintended consequence of military activity or other factors. Civilians elect to flee in anticipation of violence, during battles between warring parties, or in response to economic, environmental, or social stressors associated with the conflict situation.⁵ *Opportunistic displacement* is displacement that is deliberately encouraged or organized by individual combatants – typically as a part of looting – but is not ordered by military commanders. This was a common feature of the

¹ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>

² According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, <https://ucdp.uu.se/>

³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Armed Conflict Survey 2020*. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/05/acs-2020-introduction>

⁴ Therese Pettersson, Stina Högladh & Magnus Öberg, “Organized Violence, 1989-2018 and Peace Agreements,” *Journal of Peace Research*. 56, 4 (2019): 589-603.

⁵ Justin Schon, “Focus on the Forest, not the Trees: A Change-point Model of Forced Displacement,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28, 4 (2015): 437-467; Ana María Ibáñez, and Carlos Eduardo Vélez, “Civil conflict and forced migration: The micro determinants and welfare losses of displacement in Colombia,” *World Development* 36, 4 (2008): 659-676.

civil wars in Liberia and the Kivu conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where rebels and government-affiliated militias routinely pillaged villages to gain supplies and seize property, driving out residents in the process.⁶ Opportunistic displacement is employed to serve private, rather than group-level, objectives, enabling combatants to plunder land and accumulate other private assets.

Strategic displacement is displacement that is ordered or authorized by armed group leadership as part of an organizational policy. These strategies can take one of three forms. The first is *cleansing*, or the permanent expulsion of members of a particular political, ethnic, or social group. The wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s were paradigmatic cases of ethnic cleansing, but these methods have also been used more recently in Cameroon, South Sudan, and against the Rohingya in Myanmar. Political cleansing – which seeks to expel members of opposition political parties, rather than specific identity groups – has been a feature of the civil war in Colombia.⁷

The second form of strategic displacement is *depopulation*, which describes the indiscriminate and temporary evacuation of particular geographic areas. Think of Russia’s “pacification by depopulation” strategy in Grozny during the wars in Chechnya.⁸ More recently, these tactics have been observed during conflicts in Syria and Yemen.⁹

Cleansing and depopulation have a “push” orientation: they focus on removing the population from the perpetrator’s territory or deporting it from the country altogether. In contrast, a third displacement strategy – *forced relocation* – attempts to “pull” people into the perpetrator’s domain by concentrating them within the conflict zone or resettling them in a nearby location, whether a makeshift camp, planned settlement, or urban area. Besides threats and intimidation, relocations are carried out using a wide variety of techniques, from evacuation orders, threats, and intimidation, to beating and shooting at civilians, to lobbing bombs or setting fire to villages. Examples of this strategy include the use of strategic hamlets and so-called “protected villages” during civil wars in Burundi, Indonesia, the Philippines, Peru, Rwanda, Uganda, and Vietnam. More recently, in parts of northeast Nigeria affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, the government has ordered people to evacuate their villages and move to “garrison towns” overseen by the military.

Strategic displacement therefore takes different forms and serves different functions in wartime. Since World War II, I find that armed groups have employed one or more of these displacement strategies in nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of all major civil wars – the dominant form of organized violence in the modern period.¹⁰ Two key trends are worth noting (Table 1). First, states are by far the most common perpetrators of strategic displacement. While rebel groups also intentionally uproot civilians, in many instances it is opportunistic rather than

⁶ DRC has also experienced strategic displacement (ethnic cleansing) by different armed groups, particularly in Ituri and Bunia.

⁷ Abbey Steele, *Democracy and Displacement in Colombia’s Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

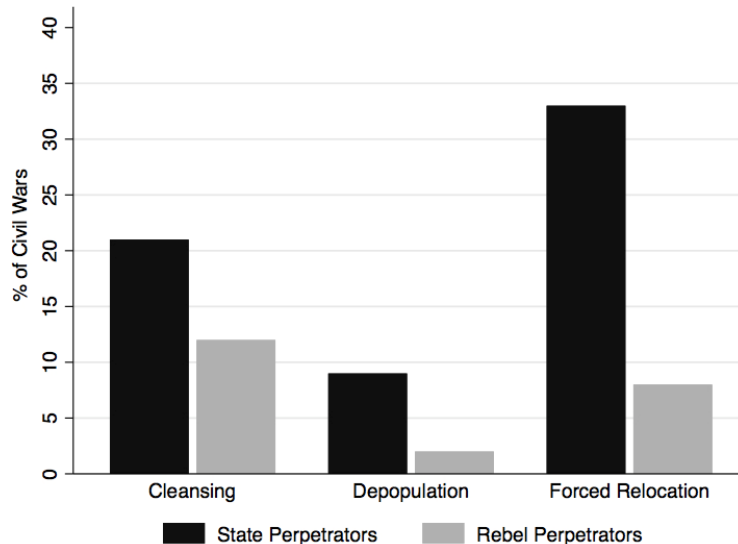
⁸ David Hoffman, “Russian Military Finds War a Shot in the Arm,” *Washington Post*, 5 December 1999.

⁹ Adam G. Lichtenheld, “[Beyond Ethno-Sectarian Cleansing: The Assortative Logic of Forced Displacement in Syria](#),” *Refugee and Migration Movements in the Middle East*. Ed. Marc Lynch. Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Series No. 25 (March 2017): pp. 42-48;

¹⁰ Adam G. Lichtenheld, “Explaining Population Displacement Strategies in Civil War: A Cross-National Analysis,” *International Organization*, 74, 2 (Spring 2020). While initial data only covered the period from 1945 to 2008, an updated version (in progress) covers all major civil wars up to 2017.

strategic. Second, while journalists, policymakers, and scholars tend to focus on the use of ethnic cleansing, forced relocation has been the most prevalent displacement strategy, occurring in 33 percent of civil wars from 1945-2017 (compared to 21 percent for cleansing).

Table 1: Frequency of Strategic Wartime Displacement (1945–2017)



The Sorting Logic of Strategic Displacement

For armed groups, displacing civilians can serve multiple purposes, from interdicting enemy supply lines to facilitating territorial annexation.¹¹ But recent research has linked these strategies to what Stathis Kalyvas calls “the identification problem,” or the inability to distinguish friend from foe.¹² Civil wars entail a high degree of uncertainty. When combatants lack information about opponents’ identities and civilians’ loyalties, they frequently rely on simplifying heuristics, or clues, to infer them. Cleansing is often a consequence of this practice: if combatants use group-level heuristics such as ethnic identity or political party affiliation to identify potential enemies, they will collectively brand members of these groups as disloyal and attempt to expel them from a contested area.¹³

But what if group-level heuristics are unavailable – perhaps because opposing forces lack a distinct ethnic identity – or unhelpful, because the population in a conflict zone is either too homogenous or too heterogeneous for ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation to be a meaningful distinguishing trait? In these contexts, instead of engaging in ethnic or political

¹¹ Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Cornell University Press, 2008).

¹² Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Yuri Zhukov, “Population Resettlement in War: Theory and Evidence from Soviet Archives,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59, 7 (2015): 1155-1185.

¹³ Laia Balcells and Abbey Steele, “Warfare, Political Identities, and Displacement in Spain and Colombia,” *Political Geography* 51 (2016): 15-29; Hanne Fjelde and Lisa Hultman, “Weakening the Enemy: A Disaggregated Study of Violence against Civilians in Africa,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, 7 (2014): 1230-1257; Nils Hägerdal, “Ethnic cleansing and the politics of restraint: Violence and coexistence in the Lebanese Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, 1 (2017): 59-84; Steele 2017.

profiling and pursuing policies of cleansing, information-starved combatants may resort to *spatial* profiling and use forced relocation as a sorting mechanism. Triggering relocation forces people to send costly and visible signals of loyalty and affiliation based on whether, when, and to where they flee. Those who defect by staying behind or moving to areas controlled by the opposing side are often written off, fairly or not, as enemies. Those who comply with orders to move are vetted and registered, making them more “legible” to perpetrators.¹⁴ This enables armed groups to use people’s movements and locations as a continuous indicator of affiliation, while extracting rents and recruits from an idle and vulnerable population. Displacement is therefore used not only to remove the undesirables or the disloyal. It is also used to help identify the undesirables or the disloyal in the first place.

Different displacement strategies therefore constitute different responses to the identification problems that combatants often face in civil wars. Consider the conflict in Burundi (1993-2005) between the Tutsi-dominated government and several Hutu rebel groups. When violence broke out in the capital, Bujumbura, in 1993, both military and rebel forces engaged in campaigns of cleansing, targeting Hutu and Tutsi civilians due to their ethnic affiliation with the opposing side. This prompted a large influx of rural Tutsis into Bujumbura, while Hutus were “chased out of ethnically mixed but predominantly Tutsi neighborhoods.” According to Tomas Van Acker, “the modest but real ethnic diversity that existed in [the city] completely disappeared during the first years of the war, in a process that can only be described as ethnic cleansing.”¹⁵ Lacking information on the individual loyalties of the population, combatants relied on group profiling. Civilians sharing the ethnicity of the opposition were treated as enemy sympathizers who needed to be expelled.

As a result of ethnic cleansing, by 1996 Burundi had become “balkanized,” with Tutsi concentrated in urban areas and Hutu – including rebel fighters and collaborators – residing in rural areas.¹⁶ Yet because the countryside had become so ethnically homogeneous, when the military launched counterinsurgency operations in the provinces, it could not rely on ethnicity to distinguish allies from enemies. The government therefore adopted a strategy of forced relocation. Hundreds of thousands of people residing in rebel-affected areas were ordered to “regroup” in designated camps.¹⁷ This was meant to help the army identify the insurgents, who practiced guerrilla tactics and tended to evade military patrols. As soldiers explained to human rights groups, “before [regroupment], it was hard to tell the civilians from the rebels. The rebels would just throw down their arms. Then they looked like any civilian.” In response, the government “said that people who believed themselves innocent should assemble themselves” in camps. Those who failed to move within a specified time period were “considered a [rebel] agent and therefore treated as a legitimate military target.”¹⁸

¹⁴ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Tomas Van Acker, “From rural rebellion to urban uprising? A socio-spatial perspective on Bujumbura’s conflict history,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12, 2 (2018): 315-16.

¹⁶ U.S. Committee for Refugees, “Burundi: A Patchwork of Displacement,” in Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng (eds), *The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998): 36.

¹⁷ Most of those targeted for regroupment were Hutu, but some were Tutsi (Timothy Paul Longman, *Proxy Targets: Civilians in the War in Burundi* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1998): 80).

¹⁸ Longman: 40-41, 80.

Regroupment was used as a crude method of sorting the population through *guilt by location*: where one was purportedly indicated what side (s)he was on. Beyond creating a spatial marker delineating potentially “good” civilians from ostensibly “bad” ones, the camps in which people were regrouped served as instruments of identification. Occupants were screened and their whereabouts tracked such that any unauthorized movements signaled treachery: “those who are found in the hills without a camp pass are considered to be rebels and often are shot by government soldiers.”¹⁹ In addition to helping weed out the disloyal, the camps provided a ready supply of recruits and labor. The military enlisted *regroupés* to serve as spies and porters and ordered them to form militias charged with defending the camps and accompanying soldiers on patrol.²⁰ Regroupment was therefore a vehicle through which the government mobilized civilians for the war effort, rather than simply demobilizing or incapacitating them.²¹

DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES

As the Burundi case illustrates, combatants displace civilians in order to *sort* the targeted population, not just to get rid of it. This – along with the frequent and multi-faceted nature of strategic displacement more generally – has implications for better understanding the politics of wartime displacement and raises several dilemmas and challenges for policymakers and practitioners, which I discuss below.

Accountability and Access

Population displacement is generally recognized as a violation of international humanitarian and human rights law.²² The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine also names ethnic cleansing as one of four “atrocities crimes” (along with war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide). A range of enforcement mechanisms exist for prosecuting perpetrators of displacement, though due to a lack of political will they have been rarely used.²³ Some scholars have gone so far as to propose establishing all forms of “mass forced displacement” as a separate international crime.²⁴

Regardless of the mechanisms used, prosecuting perpetrators depends on careful documentation and evidence demonstrating the culpability of armed groups in displacement. These efforts are also critical to the work of truth and reconciliation commissions, museums, and other activities aimed at memorializing human rights abuses and pushing for victim restitution and compensation. But determining culpability is not always easy. And these efforts can complicate or even undermine international responses to situations of armed conflict. There is a clear distinction between human rights organizations that are charged with documenting human rights violations (e.g., Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) and humanitarian

¹⁹ U.S. State Department, *Human Rights Report for Burundi, 1997* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, 1998).

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Emptying the Hills: Regroupment in Burundi*, New York: Human Rights Watch (2000).

²¹ Longman 1998: 177.

²² Under the Geneva Conventions (Article 49, Fourth Convention, and Article 17 of the 1977 Additional Protocol) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Article 7).

²³ For details on these enforcement mechanisms, see Phil Orchard, “Making States Accountable for Deliberate Forced Displacement,” World Refugee Council Research Paper No. 17 (June 2019).

²⁴ James C. Simeon, “Enhancing Refugee Protection Through the Criminalization of ‘Mass Forced Displacement,’” Refugee Law Initiative Third Annual Conference, London, United Kingdom (3 June 2018).

agencies tasked with neutrally and impartially providing life-saving relief. Yet civilian protection has become increasingly central to humanitarian action (and to other international efforts such as peacekeeping and conflict mediation). This suggests that human rights violations are often of concern to humanitarians – and that they can play a role in bearing witness to them.²⁵

This evokes a longstanding debate regarding the ethical obligations of humanitarian organizations.²⁶ Should they prioritize maintaining access to vulnerable civilians in war zones to ensure the provision of much-needed assistance? Or should they risk losing access or being cut off by vindictive authorities in order to help expose atrocities? This is a dilemma for the international community more broadly. In Darfur, for example, after the ICC indicted then-Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity, a dozen of the largest aid organizations operating in the region were accused of “bearing witness for the ICC” and were either expelled or had their operations suspended.²⁷ Speaking out against displacement atrocities – or even working to credibly document them – might jeopardize international actors’ access to the very populations they are charged with protecting and assisting.

Different organizations have adopted different approaches to this dilemma, but it remains a fraught issue.²⁸ At the same time, there is a risk that punishing perpetrators for displacement could discourage political and military actors from proactively evacuating conflict zones. Fleeing is often a coping measure that civilians undertake to reduce their vulnerability to violence, so aiming to prevent displacement can be problematic.²⁹ Pressuring people to leave their homes may be necessary to help facilitate the delivery of aid and to ensure protection.³⁰

Displacement may be desirable in some cases because armed groups also use the forced *emplacement* of civilians as a war tactic.³¹ This typically occurs during military sieges, a primitive strategy that has made a resurgence in recent years as most countries – and the wars

²⁵ Conor Foley, “What Do We Mean by Protection?” *Michigan State International Law Review*, 23 (2014).

²⁶ Michael N. Barnett, “Humanitarian Governance,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 379-398; Esther Meininghaus, “Humanitarianism in intra-state conflict: aid inequality and local governance in government-and opposition-controlled areas in the Syrian war,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, 8 (2016): 1456; Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Phoebe Wynn-Pope, “Humanitarian access in international humanitarian law: the case of Syria and Security Council Resolution 2139 (2014),” in Jadranka Petrovic (ed.), *Accountability for Violations of International Humanitarian Law* (London: Routledge, 2016).

²⁸ Miriam Bradley, *Protecting Civilians in War: the ICRC, UNHCR, and their Limitations in Internal Armed Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, 2016). For more details on the arguments behind different approaches, see Jakob Kellenberger, “Speaking out or remaining silent in humanitarian work,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 86, 855 (2004): 593–609; and Rony Brauman, “Médecins Sans Frontières and the ICRC: matters of principle,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 94 (2012): 1523.

²⁹ Josep Zapater, “Prevention of Forced Displacement: the Inconsistencies of a Concept,” *New Issues in Refugee Research* 186 (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010); Bradley 2016.

³⁰ The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Article 8.2) indicates that displacement is permissible under international law where “the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand.” Organizations like ICRC have developed guidance on what constitutes “imperative military reasons” (see <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/internally-displaced-persons-and-international-humanitarian-law>)

³¹ This is part of a broader phenomenon that Stephen C. Lubkemann calls “involuntary immobility.” Lubkemann, “Involuntary Immobility: on a Theoretical Invisibility in Forced Migration Studies,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, 4 (2008): 454-475.

waged within them – become increasingly urbanized.³² Besieging forces surround a town or city and prevent anything from getting in (including food and other aid) or out (including civilians). Starving the population puts pressure on political or military leaders to surrender, but often not before famine takes hold, as we have seen recently in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and South Sudan.³³ The impulse, then, is to help evacuate civilians from besieged communities so they can receive much-needed relief. But herein lies the conundrum. By supporting such evacuations, international organizations risk being accused of facilitating efforts by perpetrators to forcibly transfer civilians from areas controlled by the opposing side.³⁴

Yet failing to evacuate the population can be equally problematic. Armed groups on the receiving end of a siege may also emplace civilians to use them as human shields. In Iraq, the Islamic State (ISIS) embraced these tactics during the twilight of its caliphate, forcing residents of Mosul to hole up with its fighters to deter attacks by Iraqi and U.S.-led coalition forces. Iraqi soldiers reported that their greatest challenge was “identifying ISIS fighters embedded with civilians and moving civilians safely from active areas of fighting,” and officials sent mixed signals about whether residents should try to flee the city.³⁵ Many did not or could not. Consequently, thousands were killed by Iraqi and coalition airstrikes. Amnesty International criticized the Iraqi government and coalition forces for not adapting to ISIS’s use of human shields, claiming that they “failed to take effective precautions to protect civilians.”³⁶

Humanitarian Aid

The examples above indicate that civilian mobility can enable or hinder humanitarian access in conflict zones. But the fact that strategic displacement has been more frequently used to trigger internal, rather than cross-border, population movements has implications for the instrumentalization of aid by conflict actors. Indeed, over the past two decades, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has far eclipsed the number of refugees and asylum-seekers, meaning that many of the displaced remain within dangerous range of the violence that prompted them to flee.³⁷ This has led to the development of what Phil Orchard calls an “international IDP

³² Lionel M. Beehner, Benedetta Berti, and Michael T. Jackson, “The strategic logic of sieges in counterinsurgencies,” *Parameters* 47, 2 (2017); Nils Hägerdal, “Starvation as Siege Tactics: Urban Warfare in Syria,” Working Paper, Tufts University (2019).

³³ Hägerdal 2019; Akshaya Kumar, “Aid as a Weapon of War in Sudan,” The Enough Project (10 October 2012). Available at: <https://enoughproject.org/reports/aid-weapon-war-sudan>; World Peace Foundation, “The Crime of Starvation and Methods of Prosecution and Accountability,” WPF Policy Paper #1 (18 June 2019).

³⁴ See, for example, Hosam al-Jablawi, “Increasing Tactics of Forced Displacement in Syria” (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council, 2016). Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/increasing-tactics-of-forced-displacement-in-syria/>

³⁵ Center for Civilians in Conflict, “Policy Brief on Civilian Protection in the Current Mosul Campaign,” (2017). Available at: <https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/policy/policy-brief-civilian-protection-current-mosul-campaign/>

³⁶ Amnesty International, *At Any Cost: The Civilian Catastrophe in West Mosul, Iraq* (London: Amnesty International (2017): 25. Even for those civilians who were able to escape the city, there were reports of the Iraqi military committing torture, arbitrary arrests, and other violations while screening them for ties to ISIS.

³⁷ In a report on Syria, for example, the World Bank found that “most IDPs remained near their place of origin. Among those who have fled within Syria, an average of 56 percent has chosen to remain within their governorate of origin. As a rule, this is typical of internally displaced populations—especially those with fewer resources and among IDPs who believe their displacement will be short-lived.” World Bank, *The Toll of War: The Economic and*

protection regime.”³⁸ The U.N. and other international organizations now play a central role in addressing the humanitarian needs of populations uprooted within their own countries.

The increased willingness of international agencies to intervene on behalf of IDPs has undoubtedly saved countless lives and brought much-needed attention to the issue of internal displacement. But it has also intensified concerns over aid manipulation and the “moral hazard” of humanitarian intervention.³⁹ While these concerns are not new,⁴⁰ there is some evidence that aid for displaced and other war-affected populations can, under certain conditions, prolong conflicts or exacerbate wartime violence. Aid can directly or indirectly supply material resources to combatants, insulate them from the political costs of fighting by delivering public goods to their constituents, and create new economic interests linked to the conflict’s continuation.⁴¹ It can also encourage violence against civilians by providing opportunities for looting, threatening the authority of rebel groups, and incentivizing these groups to seek control over areas receiving aid.⁴²

The nature of conflict and displacement today has made humanitarian action potentially more consequential. Humanitarianism has grown in scope, scale, and level of institutionalization.⁴³ And rather than responding to short-term refugee emergencies produced by one-off conflicts, aid agencies are increasingly operating in situations of protracted displacement resulting from ongoing and repetitive cycles of violence and instability.⁴⁴ Over the past two decades, many organizations have adapted by moving beyond the provision of food aid to deliver more complex, sustained interventions that seek to counter violent extremism, improve governance, and develop livelihoods opportunities. These activities further embed humanitarian

Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group, 2017): 50.

³⁸ Phil Orchard, *Protecting the Internally Displaced: Rhetoric and Reality* (Routledge, 2018).

³⁹ Alan J. Kuperman, “The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52 (2008): 49–80.

⁴⁰ Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid can Support Peace—or War*, New York: Lynne Rienner (1999); Ben Barber, “Feeding Refugees, or War? The Dilemma of Humanitarian Aid.” *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 4 (July-August 1997): 8-14.

⁴¹ As summarized by Neil Narang, “Assisting Uncertainty: How Humanitarian Aid can Inadvertently Prolong Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 59,1 (2015): 184–95. See also Mary B. Anderson and Mark Duffield, “Doing the Right Thing?” *New Routes*, 3, 3 (1998): 11–15; Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, “US Food Aid and Civil Conflict,” *American Economic Review* 104, 6 (2014): 1630-66; Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What’s Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); Sarah Kenyon Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁴² Benjamin Crost, Joseph Felter, and Patrick Johnston, “Aid under fire: Development projects and civil conflict,” *American Economic Review* 104, 6 (2014): 1833-56; Michael Weintraub, “Do all good things go together? Development assistance and insurgent violence in civil war,” *The Journal of Politics* 78, 4 (2016): 989-1002; Reed M. Wood and Christopher Sullivan, “Doing harm by doing good? The negative externalities of humanitarian aid provision during civil conflict,” *The Journal of Politics* 77, 3 (2015): 736-48. Reed M. Wood and Emily Molfino, “Aiding Victims, Abetting Violence: the Influence of Humanitarian Aid on Violence Patterns During Civil Conflict,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, 3 (2016): 186-203;

⁴³ International aid reached record levels in 2019, though it continues to be outpaced by high levels of humanitarian need. See The New Humanitarianism, “International aid reached record levels in 2019” (17 April 2020). Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/17/international-aid-record-level-2019>

⁴⁴ The World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2011). Available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/>

systems, resources, and personnel in the political, economic, and social fabric of conflict-affected environments.⁴⁵

This means that, where combatants find displacement to be an attractive strategy, international aid could enable these measures or provide perverse incentives to adopt them. It is one thing for the international community to assist those who flee to another country in order to alleviate the strain on refugee-hosting governments. It is quite another for it to shoulder the burden of displacement *within* a country on behalf of a government that may be directly responsible for the displacement in the first place. While refugee assistance can also have negative consequences on conflict dynamics,⁴⁶ aid for IDPs can be uniquely exploited in two ways.

First, it can be used to lure the displaced to armed groups' territories. Research has shown that the availability of basic services, including humanitarian relief, is an important pull factor for civilians in conflict settings.⁴⁷ According to Esther Meninghaus, this means that "access to aid can be instrumentalised for manipulating internal relocation."⁴⁸ Since armed groups use symbolic processes to bolster their sovereign claims,⁴⁹ they can then use the appearance of the population abandoning a rival and seeking shelter in their territories as evidence of their legitimacy. In Syria, for instance, there have been accusations that international aid has helped the government manipulate displacement.⁵⁰ Similarly, during the civil war between the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), humanitarian assistance "was conditionally provided to lure people from the SPLA" and "tended to facilitate government attempts to depopulate" rebel areas.⁵¹

Second, aid can be exploited to fund strategic hamlets or similar methods of forced relocation, making these strategies less costly and more viable for perpetrators. Maintaining thousands of uprooted civilians in concentrated settlements is expensive and cumbersome. If humanitarian agencies signal a willingness to ease the burden of population relocation by helping armed groups feed, shelter, and manage IDPs, they can encourage the very outcomes they seek to prevent. In addition to covering the costs and containing the consequences of relocation, aid organizations may unwittingly help combatants track and sort civilians by registering them and sharing their information as part of relief distribution. During field research in northern Uganda,

⁴⁵ Michael Barnett, "Humanitarianism Transformed," *Perspectives on Politics* 3, 4 (2005): 723-740; Barnett 2013.

⁴⁶ See Barber 1997; Lischer 2006; Stephan John Stedman and Fred Tanner (eds), *Refugee manipulation: war, politics, and the abuse of human suffering* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Prakash Adhikari, "Conflict-Induced Displacement, Understanding the Causes of Flight." *American Journal of Political Science* 57, 1 (2013): 82-89; Adhikari, "The Plight of the Forgotten Ones: Civil War and Forced Migration." *International Studies Quarterly* 56, 3 (2012): 590-606; Stefanie Engel and Ana María Ibáñez, "Displacement due to violence in Colombia: A household-level analysis," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 55, 2 (2007): 335-365; Ibáñez and Vélez 2008.

⁴⁸ Meninghaus 2016: 1459.

⁴⁹ Zachariah Mampilly, "Performing the nation-state: rebel governance and symbolic processes," in *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Ed. by Ana Arjona, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵⁰ Annie Sparrow, "How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped Up Assad," *Foreign Affairs* (20 September 2018). Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-09-20/how-un-humanitarian-aid-has-propped-up-assad>; José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, "The Unintended Consequences of Emergency Food Aid: Neutrality, Sovereignty and Politics in the Syrian Civil War, 2012–15," *International Affairs* 92, 1 (2016): 158; 168.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, *Sudan: Human Rights Watch Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1998); David Keen and Ken Wilson, *Engaging with Violence: A Reassessment of Relief in Wartime* (Zed Books in association with Save the Children Fund UK, 1994).

for example, I found that local authorities used IDP camp registration lists to track people's movements and locations (through roll calls and spot checks) and help identify suspected members and collaborators of the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency.

There are a number of instances where foreign aid has enabled governments to sustain or expand policies of forced relocation. This includes U.S. funding for strategic hamlets in Vietnam (1960-1964) and "model villages" in Guatemala (1982-1994). During civil wars in Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Uganda, aid agencies were even accused of humanitarian complicity. By meeting these governments' requests to provide millions in food, medicine, and shelter for IDPs, the agencies helped them enact policies of forced relocation for counterinsurgency purposes.⁵² Without aid, it would have been difficult for authorities to maintain the relocation camps. Although there is little evidence that external aid has been a primary factor motivating the use of strategic displacement in war, it has sometimes made these measures possible.

This complicates the *raison d'être* of humanitarian action, especially the principles of humanity, impartiality, and neutrality. Humanitarians have long debated whether they should focus only on helping people at risk, or also seek to address the causes of their suffering.⁵³ But when governments or rebel groups use displacement as a military strategy, this debate becomes a pressing dilemma. Does the imperative to save lives mean coming to the immediate need of displaced victims, even if it has perverse consequences? Or does it mean avoiding being co-opted into policies that could intensify and prolong displacement over time?

Peacebuilding and The Politics of Mobility

The insight that forced displacement may be used as a sorting mechanism demonstrates that wartime mobility is a political process that often has political consequences: it can bolster or undermine political legitimacy, alter social relations, and create new identities or activate old ones. This can affect the conduct of belligerents and how they treat civilians. In Iraq, for example, many security officials have assumed that residents who did not flee areas under ISIS control are sympathetic to the group.⁵⁴ As a result, these individuals have been stigmatized, harassed, and imprisoned after Iraqi forces retook their towns and villages.⁵⁵

Combatants are not the only ones who indulge in "guilt by location." Civilians may also ascribe political significance to people's movements. A common refrain I heard during field research in Syria and neighboring countries, directed at residents who fled rebel-held communities but hoped to return, was one of bitterness and even distrust: why did you abandon the revolution? Where were you when we were being besieged? Or as explained by one civilian

⁵² Africa Watch, *Conspicuous Destruction: War, Famine, and the Reform Process in Mozambique* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992): 72, 116; Adam Branch, *Displacing human rights: war and intervention in northern Uganda* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Alex De Waal, *Evil days: Thirty years of war and famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991); Keen and Wilson 1994.

⁵³ Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarianism Contested: Where Angels Fear to Tread* (Routledge, 2013) 106-107.

⁵⁴ CIVIC 2017; Ben Taub, "Iraq's Post-ISIS Campaign of Revenge," *The New Yorker* (24 December 2018).

Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/iraqs-post-isis-campaign-of-revenge>

⁵⁵ Taub 2018.

who decided to return to government areas from a rebel-held town in 2017: “Some people now accuse me of being some sort of traitor for returning to the Syrian regime.”⁵⁶

The grievances generated by the politics of mobility – and the cleavages that develop between “leavers” and “stayers” – can influence wartime dynamics and linger long after a conflict ends. In El Salvador, residents of conflict-affected areas who stayed behind “were critical of those who abandoned the rural zones...those who remained...often labeled families that had abandoned the rural zones...as *orejas* (‘ears’ or spies) for their known or presumed collaboration with Salvadoran government forces.”⁵⁷ Similarly, in Guatemala, “social and psychological rifts” developed between refugees and those who refused to flee, some of whom “spoke of bitterness because ‘we stayed and suffered, while they left’ or claimed that “the refugees are probably all Communists and if they come back, they will have to be watched carefully.”⁵⁸ After civil wars in Rwanda and Burundi, new identity divisions emerged based in part on people’s histories of mobility and displacement.⁵⁹ And in Iraq, as millions of residents return to former ISIS areas, tensions have emerged between those who fled early on and those who continued to live under ISIS.⁶⁰

These cases exemplify the political and social divisions that manifest as a direct result of mobility in wartime. As Stephanie Schwartz argues, “hostility between people who stay home during a civil war and those who leave and later return is common in many post-conflict societies.”⁶¹ This raises a dilemma for organizations like UNHCR. It has come under increased pressure to promote and facilitate return, as more host and resettlement countries try to reduce their refugee populations and adopt more restrictive asylum policies.⁶² But even after a conflict ends, sending people back can stoke tensions between leavers and stayers, deepen social rifts, and potentially contribute to a resumption of hostilities.⁶³ It is for this reason that addressing issues related to land, property rights, social cohesion, and reconciliation have become central to programs run by UNHCR and other organizations. Yet tackling these issues is difficult and takes time – and may not allow for a quick, efficient, or durable return.

⁵⁶ Syria Direct, “Rebels, residents board buses to evacuate east Damascus neighborhood,” (8 May 2017). Available at: <https://syriadirect.org/news/rebels-residents-board-buses-to-evacuate-east-damascus-neighborhood-it%E2%80%99s-indescribable/>

⁵⁷ Molly Todd, *Beyond displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010): 66.

⁵⁸ Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala*. (SUNY Press, 1988): 59, 94.

⁵⁹ Simon Turner, “Victims, Saviors, and Suspects: Channeling Mobility in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” in *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa*, Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (eds) (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015): 79–103; Schwartz 2019.

⁶⁰ International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Managing Return in Anbar: Community Responses to the Return of IDPs with Perceived Affiliation,” Geneva: International Organization for Migration (2020). Available at: <https://iraq.iom.int/publications/managing-return-anbar-community-responses-return-idps-perceived-affiliation>

⁶¹ Stephanie Schwartz, “Sending Refugees Back Makes the World More Dangerous,” *Foreign Policy* (27 November 2013). Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/27/sending-refugees-back-makes-the-world-more-dangerous/>

⁶² Tania Karas and Charlotte Alfred, “Briefing: The increasing squeeze on refugees to go home,” *The New Humanitarianism* (19 December 2019), <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/12/17/Refugees-increasing-pressure-return-global-forum-compact>

⁶³ Schwartz 2019.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are no easy answers to the dilemmas outlined above, and addressing them will inevitably require trade-offs. I provide some suggestions below for policymakers and practitioners to consider, and discuss some of the risks and potential benefits involved.

Document displacement atrocities: To provide evidence for displacement-related crimes, both human rights organizations (including the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights) and organizations that monitor wartime displacement (including the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the International Organization for Migration) should more clearly specify the role of political and military actors in triggering refugee and IDP movements. Other organizations, such as UNHCR and humanitarian agencies, should also consider their role, if any, when documenting and speaking out about potential violations related to displacement, given their proximity to victims.

Tracking displacement has become easier and the data more fine-grained, thanks to technology and investments in platforms like IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix. Yet most reports provide only vague references to displacement "due to armed groups" or "as a result of military operations." Determining the culpability of combatants will not always be possible. But these organizations should try, by working with human rights groups, researchers, legal experts, and – where possible and appropriate – humanitarian agencies. For example, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative has developed guidance for identifying the intentional destruction of civilian dwellings using satellite imagery.⁶⁴ Human rights NGOs have developed global codes of conduct for investigating specific types of violations, such as sexual violence, that could be adopted for displacement.⁶⁵ Such tools can be used to document and credibly broadcast displacement-related atrocities, promoting accountability and deterrence by encouraging referrals to the ICC, advocating for action under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, and – at the very least – placing political pressure on violators. There is significant evidence that "naming and shaming" governments that violate human rights can reduce their propensity to engage in further abuses.⁶⁶

These efforts are not without risks, however. Some studies indicate that naming and shaming can backfire, as recipients may frame international criticism as neocolonial meddling or make concessions in some areas only to violate other rights.⁶⁷ Prosecuting forced displacement

⁶⁴ Isaac Baker, Brittany Card, and Ziad Al Achkar, *Satellite Imagery Interpretation Guide: Intentional Burning of Tukul's* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, September 2015). Available at: <https://hhi.harvard.edu/publications/satellite-imagery-interpretation-guide-intentional-burning-tukuls>

⁶⁵ See the Draft Global Code of Conduct for Investigating and Documenting Conflict-related Sexual Violence developed by the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (<https://iici.global/2020/06/19/35581/>).

⁶⁶ Colin M. Berry, K. Chad Clay and Michael E. Flynn, "Avoiding the Spotlight: Human Rights Shaming and Foreign Direct Investment," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, 3 (2013): 532-44; James C. Franklin, "Shame on You: The Impact of Human Rights Criticism on Political Repression in Latin America," *International Studies Quarterly* 52(1): 187-211; Cullen S. Hendrix and Wendy H. Wong, "When is the pen truly mighty? Regime type and the efficacy of naming and shaming in curbing human rights abuses," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, 3 (2013): 651-672; Matthew Krain, "J'accuse! Does naming and shaming perpetrators reduce the severity of genocides or politicides?" *International Studies Quarterly* 56, 3 (2013): 574-589.

⁶⁷ Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, "Sticks and stones: Naming and shaming the human rights enforcement problem," *International Organization* 62, 4 (2008): 689-716; Rochelle Layla Terman, *Backlash: Defiance, Human Rights, and the Politics of Shame* (in-progress).

could encourage armed groups to clamp down on human rights groups, journalists, and other observers that typically report from war zones. States may cut off access to displaced populations, depriving them of life-saving assistance, or retaliate against victims who testify.⁶⁸ And for humanitarian organizations, these efforts could undermine the non-political nature of their work and the humanitarian principle of neutrality.

Mitigate moral hazard: The potential moral hazard of aid for displaced populations does not mean that the international community should never assist victims of strategic displacement. But in situations of internal displacement, if there is evidence that civilian flight has been orchestrated by armed groups, donors and NGOs should consider threatening to withdraw or scale down their assistance – unless combatants are operating out of military necessity and taking all necessary measures to provide satisfactory shelter, hygiene, safety, and nutrition.⁶⁹

Making such ultimatums has worked in the past. Consider the case of Burundi described above. Upon initiating regroupment in 1996, the Burundian government told international donors that it needed assistance building the camps and supplying them with food, water, sanitation facilities, and other services. U.N. agencies and NGOs responded and ensured that “the most urgent, life-sustaining needs of the affected populations were covered.”⁷⁰ The government attempted to shift the burden of caring for the *regroupés* onto the international community, and then tried to blame it for the dire humanitarian conditions of the regroupment camps.⁷¹ Some organizations began refusing to provide assistance; *Médecins Sans Frontière* (MSF), for example, suspended its activities in camps in several provinces. Foreign governments also withheld or withdrew support, claiming “that forced regroupment was a violation of humanitarian law and that the creation of camps was a military strategy which the international community had no business supporting.”⁷² Multiple observers partly attribute the government’s decision to begin dismantling camps in 1998 – and its eventual termination of the program in 2002 – to international pressure.⁷³ Without financial support from external actors, regroupment became increasingly untenable.

This case illustrates the influence that international actors can have in pressuring governments to abandon campaigns of forced displacement. Most aid organizations already condition their assistance to some degree, usually on the requirement that they are granted safe and unimpeded access to the civilian population. But in situations of forced displacement, the eagerness of perpetrators to give humanitarians access to victims can actually be part of the problem, by insulating perpetrators from the consequences of uprooting people. For organizations dedicated to saving lives, the choice to withdraw assistance can be an excruciating one. This is in no way meant to discourage aid for war-affected populations or to minimize their plight. But humanitarian agencies must be willing to make tough choices in order to adhere to the principle of “do no harm” by recognizing that in some situations, aid has the potential to do

⁶⁸ Eric Dachs, “Justice and Humanitarian Action: A Conflict of Interest,” in Fabrice Weissman and Fiona Terry (eds), *In the Shadow of Just Wars: Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004): 314-324

⁶⁹ As mandated by the Geneva Conventions.

⁷⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Burundi: Still no end to displacement, despite political progress*, Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2006): 26.

⁷¹ Longman 1998: 62.

⁷² *Ibid*: 62.

⁷³ IDMC 2006; Longman 1998; Human Rights Watch 2000.

more harm than good.⁷⁴ Ending all support may not be necessary, as carefully calibrated assistance could still reduce suffering without bankrolling dubious military tactics. Just as donors and NGOs have established clear engagement criteria for entering a humanitarian situation, they should also develop clear *disengagement* criteria outlining the conditions that would cause them to consider pulling back. There should be general standards, but they can be tailored to different contexts depending on the nature and dynamics of displacement and conflict, along with the characteristics of the state (e.g., whether it is more or less aid dependent).

An obvious risk of reducing or withdrawing assistance is that people will suffer and die, at least in the short term. It may also have no effect on combatants' actions – they could continue to drive people from their homes no matter what international actors do. Even if it changes behavior, pulling back may cause aid to be perceived as political, conflicting with the commitment of humanitarian organizations to remain neutral and impartial. Yet tying assistance to human rights practices is very different than linking it to explicitly political objectives, such as regime change (as the U.S. has done in Venezuela)⁷⁵ or the enactment of certain governance and economic reforms (as in the case of democracy promotion and structural adjustment programs). For years, scholars have demonstrated that even if humanitarian assistance lacks political intentions, it often has a political impact.⁷⁶ If ensuring humanitarian access means acquiescing to human rights abuses by conflict parties, then it is certainly not a neutral action. International actors can face reputational consequences as a result.⁷⁷ It is for this reason that some organizations, such as ICRC, have explicit policies dictating when they should speak out about human rights violations.⁷⁸

Humanitarian agencies seek to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable and neglected populations. They also aim to protect people from violence and serve them in a way that respects their human rights. In situations of strategic displacement, it may not always be possible to achieve both goals at once.

Recognize displacement-related cleavages as a barrier to return and (re)integration: The politics of wartime mobility suggest that issues surrounding the repatriation and return of displaced people after conflict cannot be decoupled from broader reconciliation and peacebuilding processes. Conflict resolution efforts need to treat displacement and return as a political phenomenon, not just a humanitarian one. To be effective, these initiatives must address displacement-related cleavages when seeking to strengthen social relations and foster meaningful reconciliation. Such cleavages go beyond issues of land tenure and property rights. They are often rooted in assumptions and prejudices about people's movements during the conflict and

⁷⁴ Such arguments have been made for decades by various scholars, practitioners, and journalists: see, for example, Anderson 1999; Branch 2011; De Waal 1997; Duffield 2007; Lischer 2006; Terry 2002.

⁷⁵ See National Public Radio, "The Politics Of Humanitarian Aid," 23 February 2019. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/23/697401662/the-politics-of-humanitarian-aid>

⁷⁶ De Waal 1997; Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Michael Barnett draws a useful distinction between "emergency" and "alchemical" variants of humanitarianism: the former concerns relief to those in immediate peril and has a hands-off approach to politics, while the latter involves addressing the root causes of suffering and treats politics as a necessary and even welcome aspect of humanitarianism (*Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 36-38).

⁷⁷ As we have witnessed in Syria: see Human Rights Watch, *Rigging the System Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019): 2.

⁷⁸ Bradley 2016.

can reflect the formation of new identities based on wartime mobility. To mend these cleavages, programs that attempt to facilitate or improve social cohesion in places of IDP and refugee return should seek to counter the stigmatization of those who fled and/or those who remained during the conflict. This means that displacement-related issues should be prioritized in political transition and stabilization initiatives – such as those run by USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives, the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, and the U.K.’s Stabilisation Unit. These programs provide the crucial peacebuilding link between humanitarian response and conventional development assistance in conflict-affected contexts. They can therefore help strategically determine how displacement should be addressed at different stages and fuse short- and long-term approaches to assisting the displaced.