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The Volume and Geography of Forced Migration

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Abstract

This paper studies the long-term evolution of global refugee migration, with a particular emphasis on the post-World War II period. We use the UNHCR Population Statistics Database to explore the intensity as well as the geographical spread and distance of refugee migrations at a global, regional, and country level between 1951 and 2018. The analyses refute the idea that there has been a substantial and linear increase in the intensity of global refugee migration. Moreover, problems with coverage and quality of earlier data give reason to think that levels of past refugee migration were underestimated. Apparent increases in the global number of displaced are mainly driven by the recent inclusion of other populations (such as the internally displaced and people in "refugee-like" situations) and countries that were previously excluded from statistics. Yet the analyses reveal several geographical shifts in refugee migration over the past decades. Refugees tend to come from a shrinking number of origin countries and go to an increasing number of destination countries. This trend reflects an overall long-term global decline in the levels of violent conflict and a concentration of recurrent conflict cycles in a few particular states. The average distance between origin and residence countries has increased over time, although the vast majority of refugees continue to stay near origin countries. Refugee populations continue to be concentrated in countries with low to medium GDP levels, and there has not been a major increase in South-North refugee migration.

Keywords: Refugee migration, global patterns

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1 Introduction

Governments and international organisations often contribute to the perception that the numbers of refugees are increasing fast. In 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated in a press release that the number of refugees, estimated at 22.5 million at the end of 2016, was "the highest ever seen" (UNHCR 2017b). As a result of conflicts in Syria and Libya and continuing insecurities in other parts of the world — such as South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) — UNHCR reported a 65 percent increase in the absolute numbers of refugees between 2011 and 2016 (UNHCR 2016). Partly fueled by such numbers and representations, the issue of refugee migration has gained political salience, with claims about "unprecedented" and "highest ever" refugee flows being used by politicians and international organisations to create a sense of urgency. It is commonly thought that global refugee migration will increase further in the future as a result of conflict, oppression, and environmental havoc. A connected assumption is that, in an increasingly globalised world, more and more refugees will find ways to flee their homelands and will have the resources to reach distant homelands. The question is how valid such claims are.

Several studies have confirmed that political instability in origin countries is the main driver of refugee migration (Moore and Shellman 2007; Neumayer 2005; Schmeidl 1997, 2001). In his statistical study on the determinants of refugee migration for 19 Western destination countries, Hatton (2009) found that although the tightening of asylum policies between 2001 and 2006 reduced the number of asylum applications significantly, such policy restrictions "account for only about a third of the decline in applications since 2001" and that conflict levels were the main determinants of levels of refugee migration (Hatton 2009, 183). Similarly, Moore and Shellman (2007), in a quantitative study on global refugee destinations, found that economic opportunities played only a minor role in destination choices for refugees: "Instead of responding to greater wage opportunities and institutional democracy, people go where others have gone before them, usually crossing a nearby border" (831). These studies refute the idea that economic factors play a large role in the geography of global refugee migration; rather they point to conflict as the main incentive for individuals to seek refuge.

The incidence of violent conflict has undergone clear fluctuations in recent history, which would suggest that the intensity of refugee migration, rather than increasing at a linear pace, has shown variations over time as well. The number of civil wars, for example, increased significantly in the second half of the twentieth century and peaked in the early 1990s (Blattman and Miguel 2010; Fearon and Laitin 2003). Approximately 30 percent of sub-Saharan African countries experienced a civil war in the 1990s. During the 2000s, the number of civil wars decreased but started to rise again after 2010 when conflicts (re-)erupted in countries like Chad, Libya, Iraq, and Syria (Gates et al.

2016).[1] At first sight, fluctuations in the intensity of conflict seem closely related to variations in refugee movements over time (Salehyan 2007), which suggests that global incidences of civil war are highly correlated with the intensity of refugee migration worldwide.

There are also indications that the geography of refugee migrations has shifted. First, civil wars are increasingly concentrated in a limited number of lower-income countries that experience recurrent cycles of war (Blattman and Miguel 2010). Afghanistan, Burundi, and Sudan are notable examples of countries engulfed in this "conflict trap" (Collier and Sambani 2002). This would imply that refugees increasingly originate from a decreasing pool of relatively poorer countries that are involved in protracted conflicts. On the other hand, conflicts in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East exemplify that civil conflicts are not unique to low-income countries. Furthermore, globalisation and particularly innovations in the transport sector and the availability of communication technology may have led to refugees traveling larger distances and reaching a wider variety of destination countries.

For instance, a recent analysis of the evolution of regular (nonrefugee) migration between 1960 and 2000 found that the geographical distance that migrants travelled increased modestly although significantly (Czaika and De Haas 2015). It is unclear whether this also applies to refugee migration. UNHCR reports that 80 percent of refugees worldwide resided in countries neighbouring their origin country and that 85 percent of refugees resided in developing countries in 2017 (UNCHR 2018). This seems to challenge the idea of refugees traveling larger distances, but there is limited evidence of the evolution of these patterns over time.

In this light, and considering the political salience of refugee issues, it is striking that the long-term evolution of global refugee migration has rarely been the subject of detailed empirical scrutiny. Historical, long-term studies on refugee migration are notably absent from the academic literature (Marfleet 2007). The field of refugee studies is relatively new and emerged mostly in the early 1980s, largely in response to policy concerns regarding rising numbers of displaced people worldwide (Chimni 1998). Historians who wrote on refugee migrations or displaced populations mostly did so in relation to specific historical events (Elie 2014), and data and knowledge have remained scattered across academic disciplines. Furthermore, the study of refugee migration is highly policy driven (Bakewell 2008; Black 2001). As a result, most studies focus on pressing issues, such as refugee management and refugee reception and support, and the geographies of current flows in short-term responses to very specific refugee urgencies. Various recent studies have, for example, addressed the 2015-2016 European "refugee crisis" and the policy responses to the increased inflow of asylum seekers (e.g., Carrera et al. 2015; Dustmann et al. 2017; Sigona 2018; Wolf and Ossewaarde 2018).

[1] Intrastate or civil wars are violent conflicts occurring within nation-state borders and involve the state as one of the conflict parties (Sambanis 2004). Also classified as "New Wars" (Kaldor 2012), these wars typically involve violence against civilian populations and consequently lead to many casualties and large numbers of displaced people.

Although this short-term focus is understandable, a bias towards the "present" obstructs the analysis of longer-term trends of refugee migration, as well as the factors explaining structural changes in volumes and patterns of refugee migration. As Marfleet (2007) argued:

> The circumstances of most refugees are determined by politicians and state officials, who rarely show interest in migrations of the past – indeed, denial of refugee histories is part of the process of denying refugee realities today (137).

Another factor complicating such long term and cross-national analysis has long been the limited availability and quality of internationally comparable data.

To fill this gap, we provide a historical, global perspective on refugee migration by studying changes in the intensity and geographical distribution of refugee migration, as well as the average distances travelled by refugees. We start with analysing refugee migration in the pre-1950 period, using secondary sources such as report, books, articles, and secondary statistical data. This is useful for placing post-1950 analyses in a longer historical perspective and for preventing the use of the post–World War II situation in 1950 as a benchmark for analysing trends in refugee migration. Second, the paper analyses the UNHCR Population Statistics Database to study refugee migration in the post-1950s period. This database provides worldwide, macro-level statistics on the numbers of refugees since 1951. The data include refugee *stocks* (populations) and are therefore not suitable for studying short-term refugee migrations or circular flows. Yet "stock" data are useful for assessing long-term refugee trends, which is the purpose of this paper.

Based on methodologies developed by Czaika and De Haas (2015) to analyse global migration trends, we use indices that capture the intensity, spread, and distance of refugee migration to analyse the data and to assess long-term trends and patterns of international refugee migration worldwide. Combining the indices on the intensity, spread, and distance enables us to assess potential changes in the *diversification* of refugee migration over time (De Haas and Czaika 2015). Because there are limited long-term data available on people displaced within nation-states (that is, internally displaced persons or IDPs[2]), the primary focus of this paper is on international refugees. Refugees are defined in the database as "individuals recognized under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees; its 1967 Protocol; the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa; those recognized in accordance with the UNHCR Statute; individuals granted complementary forms of protection; or, those enjoying 'temporary protection'" (UNHCR 2013).

[2] IDPs are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced to leave their home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an international border" (UNHCR 2013).

While in some instances we also use data on IDPs for analytical purposes, IDP statistics are only available in the UNHCR population data from the early 1990s onwards and are therefore unsuitable for studying long-term trends in human displacement.

Our findings challenge the idea that we are experiencing a global "refugee crisis." Absolute numbers of refugees have indeed increased since 1951, but if we express refugee populations as a percentage of the world population, we see no significant increase in refugees over the past decades. From a longer-term historical perspective, the claim of "unprecedented levels" of forced migration seems even more unjustified, especially when we compare current levels to the interwar period as well as the aftermath of World War II. Rather than a general increase in refugee migration over time, we observe fluctuations in refugee migration over time, as well as a geographical shift in the spread and distance of refugee migration.

Refugees originate from a shrinking number of main origin countries and reside in an increasingly diverse pool of destination countries. This is the opposite trend as observed for nonrefugee migration by Czaika and De Haas (2015), who found that migrants from an increasingly diverse array of origin countries concentrate in an increasingly diverse set of destination countries. The average distance that refugees travelled between origin and residence countries has increased as well and at a higher rate than has been the case for nonrefugee migrants. Finally, our analyses expose limitations of the data on which recurrent claims of soaring refugee migration in the media and politics are generally based. The UNHCR Population Statistics Database is currently the only available tool to study the geography of refugee migration from the 1950s onwards, but the data suffer from limitations that warrant caution when using the data to analyse trends in refugee migration.

2 Refugee migration in historical perspective

The post-1951 period is often used as a benchmark for numerical analyses on refugee migration. This was the year that the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was signed. The convention prescribes the rights and obligations of refugees with respect to their residence country and provides a formal definition of a refugee.[3] As such, the 1951 Refugee Convention "created" the concept of refugees and legalised their international recognition by nation-states. As a consequence of these protocols and conventions, data collection on this type of migration was also initiated by UNHCR and systemised over time.

The absence of refugees as a formal, internationally recognized legal category before 1951 also explains the absence of systematic data on refugee data from earlier periods. However, only a

[3] This global treaty was prepared in the aftermath of World War II and initially limited protection to refugees originating from Europe before January 1, 1951. The 1951 Refugee Convention was later amended to the 1967 Protocol to protect refugees globally.

cursory reading of historical sources shows that large-scale refugee movements are certainly not a new phenomenon (see, e.g., Gatrell 2013; Marrus 1985, 2002; Skran 1995; Zolberg 1983; Zolberg et al. 1989 for historical overviews). Aristide Zolberg (1983), for example, describes how processes of early-modern state formation in Western Europe from the late-fifteenth to the late-seventeenth century led to various population displacements, totaling *at least* 1 million people. Notable examples include the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, the expulsion of people of Muslim descent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the Spanish state, and Huguenots fleeing repression in France in the seventeenth century. On the African continent, processes of population exclusion as well as colonisation and slave trades have led to forced displacement since the existence of early agricultural societies and also as part of processes of state formation (Cohen 2019; Swindell 1995).

Substantial scholarly work on refugee migrations was written in the twentieth century. Several historical studies have, for example, documented displacement during the two world wars (e.g., Kulischer 1948; Proudfoot 1956). During World War I (1914-1918), an estimated 10 million Europeans were displaced either internally or internationally (Gatrell 2007, 2008, 2013). Combined with the aftermath of the Balkan wars (1912-1913), an estimated 12 million people were displaced after World War I, which constituted less than 1 percent of the world population (Gatrell 2013).

The period between the world wars was all but peaceful, both in Europe and beyond (Frank and Reinisch 2014). The Russian revolution (1917-1920), which set in motion the collapse of the Russian Empire, led to the displacement of 1 million people. The majority became internally displaced, while others fled to Germany, Poland, France, or China. An estimated 360,000 Russians were residing in Germany in 1922 (Gatrell 2013). The Greek-Turkish War (1919-1922) displaced approximately 1.5 million people, and between 1911 and 1926, the Protestant population in southern Ireland reduced significantly due to forced migration, excess mortality, and other, mainly demographic changes that took place during the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War (see, e.g., Hart 1996; Fitzpatrick 2013). During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), an estimated 465,000 Spanish refugees fled to France. The second Sino-Japanese War between China and Japan (1937-1945) created a staggering estimate of 90 million displaced.

World War II left at least 40 million civilians displaced, many of them within their own countries. The majority originated from Belgium, France, Poland, and Soviet Russia. Proudfoot (1956) reports a total of 60 million Europeans who were displaced as a result of World War II. The Holocaust involved the systematic persecution, deportation, and murder of around 6 million Jews by the Nazi regime. The Nazi regime recruited enormous numbers of foreign workers — mainly by force — to replace German workers conscripted for military service. By the end of the war, there were 7.5 million foreign workers in Germany, of whom 1.8 million were prisoners of war (de Haas, Castles, and Miller 2019). Like Germany, Japan also made extensive use of forced labour during World War

II. An estimated 3 to 10 million people were killed as a consequence of Japanese aggression in Asia between 1931 and 1945 (Rummel 1998).

The end of World War II witnessed mass population movements in Europe of Holocaust survivors, displaced persons, and ethnic groups, such as the approximately 12 million ethnic Germans expelled as part of ethnic cleansing policies in Eastern Europe (see Ther 1996). These massive displacements were an important impetus for the establishment of organisations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR in an effort to find more effective international responses to situations of human displacement (de Haas, Castles and Miller 2019).

In the aftermath of World War II, the global population of displaced had risen to 175 million, which was approximately 8 percent of the world population at the time. Gatrell (2013) argues that "The post-war world was full of people who were 'out of place'. 'This was equally true of Europe, Asia and the Middle East" (85). Displacement was therefore at a record high in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in relative terms, compared to the early- and late-twentieth century (Gatrell 2013). Displacement was further reinforced by post-colonial processes of state formation. In 1947, for example, when India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain, between 10 and 15 million Hindus and Muslims crossed the borders of the two new nation-states after partition (Gatrell 2013).

These examples highlight that substantial refugee movements are anything but a recent phenomenon. Yet, the evidence is scattered across sources and academic disciplines and historical data are not systemised. Moreover, the field of refugee studies is still largely dominated by European case studies (Elie 2014). The dispersion of academic sources on refugee migrations and the case-study nature of scholarly work hinder longer-term historical perspectives on the intensities and geographies of refugee migrations, and therefore our understanding of the drivers and consequences. In order to gain insights into the changing geographies of refugee migrations and a better understanding of the factors explaining refugee trends, the remainder of this paper focuses on post-1950 trends in refugee migrations using the UNHCR Population Statistics Database.

3 The intensity, spread, and distance of refugee migration after 1951

3.1 Data and analyses

We use the UNHCR Population Statistics Database to study trends in intensity, spread, and distance of refugee flows after 1951.[4] This database contains macrolevel data on all populations that are of concern to UNHCR, including refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs, stateless persons, returned IDPs, returned refugees, and other people of concern. The data also cover certain characteristics of populations of concern, such as their country of origin and their current country of residence. These

[4] These data are available at http://popstats.unhcr.org.

characteristics make the data particularly suitable for studying geographical trends and patterns in forced displacement. The database draws on various data sources, including survey data, census data, and registration data collected by local governments, UNHCR field offices, and NGOs, with the purpose of establishing a legal record of the population of concern, to oversee entitlements, or to provide assistance.

3.2 Operationalisation of concepts: intensity, spread, and distance

Building on the methodology developed by Czaika and De Haas (2015), we study the *intensity, spread,* and *distance* of refugee migrations since 1951 (see Table 1). First, the *intensity* of refugee migration is defined as the refugee rate, which is measured as the number of refugees as a percentage of the world population. It is important to make a distinction between relative and absolute numbers of refugees. For instance, we can only speak of increasing intensity of refugee migration when refugees constitute a growing share of the world population over a certain period of time. We also calculate the intensity of refugee migration at the regional and country level to study the potential regional- or country-level changes that global trends may conceal. We study the intensity of refugee migration from an origin- as well as destination-country perspective by calculating the number of refugees as a share of origin- or residence-country populations.

Second, the *spread* of refugee migration is defined as "the global spread of migrants across all possible bilateral (country-to-country) migration corridors" (Czaika and De Haas 2015, 296-297). This measurement is based on the Hirschman-Herfindahl index (Hirschman 1964), which is a statistical measure that can be used to capture the concentration of migrants in bilateral country corridors. Following Czaika and De Haas (2015), we subtract the score from 1 to gain a measurement of spread instead of concentration. The index provides a score between 0 and 1, with higher scores indicating a more equal spread of migration across bilateral migration corridors. In addition to the measurement of the global spread of refugees, we calculate the *global refugee emigration spread*, which is an indication of the spread of refugees across origin countries, and the *global refugee immigration spread,* which measures the spread of refugees across destination countries.

Finally, *distance* is measured as the geographical distance (in kilometers) between refugees' origin and residence country in each year. For the distance variable, we use the GeoDist database (Mayer and Zignago 2011), which includes measures of bivariate distances between all countries in the world. We specifically use the measurement of distance calculated with "the great circle formula," which is based on the geographical coordinates of the most populated city within a country. Distances between countries are then calculated based on the bilateral distances between the largest cities within countries. The relevance of absolute geographical distance may seem limited in a globalising world, where cultural or legal barriers may be as important as, or more important than, geographical distance. Yet there are reasons to assume that geographical distance still matters in terms of travel costs and in

terms of the likelihood that migration involves the crossing of significant legal barriers (such as immigration restrictions) or the occurrence of significant cultural and social differences. We therefore use absolute distance as a proxy, also because this will facilitate comparisons across countries. As with the spread measure, we distinguish between the average distances refugees travelled from an origin- and residence-country perspective.

Table 1: Dimensions of refugee migrations

Dimensions	Origin-country perspective	Destination-country perspective
Intensity	Refugee emigration intensity	Refugee immigration intensity
Spread	Refugee emigration spread	Refugee immigration spread
Distance	Refugee emigration distance	Refugee immigration distance

Adapted from Czaika & De Haas (2015).

4 Global patterns: Intensity, spread, and distance

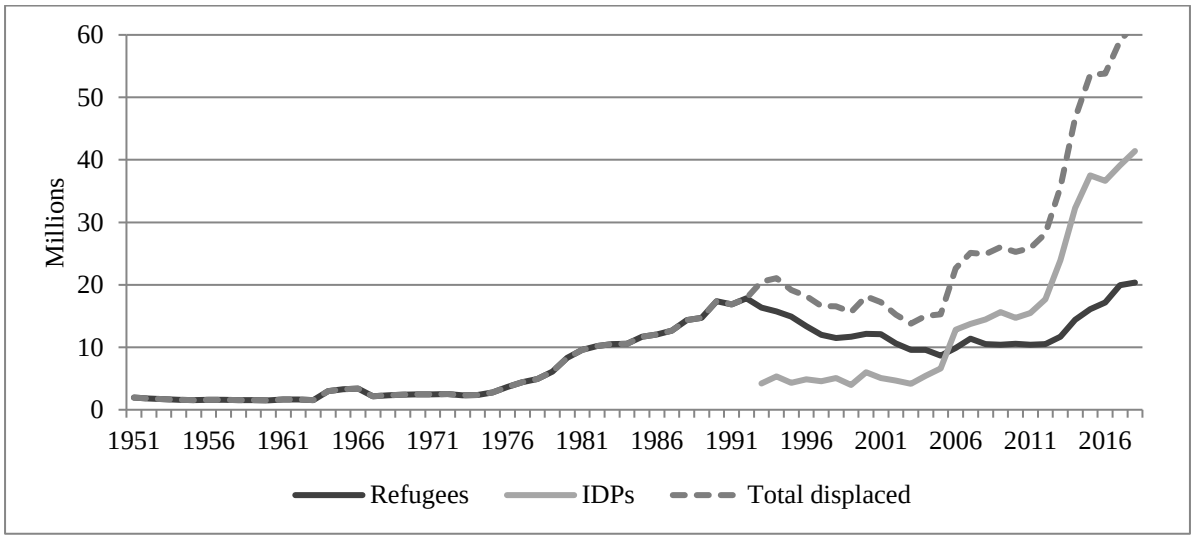
To analyse the evolution of refugee migration over recent years, we calculate global refugee populations ("stocks") in both absolute terms (Figure 1) and relative to the world population (Figure 2) between 1951 and 2016. For comparative purposes, and to show why recent displacement figures are inflated, we also add data on the number (or "stock") of IDPs in these graphs although data for this latter group are only available from 1993 onwards. Throughout this section, we use the term "global displacement" when we refer to both IDPs and refugees.

Figure 1 suggests that global displacement has increased drastically over the past five decades, which seems to corroborate common perceptions of soaring displacement and a "global refugee crisis." Taking a long-term perspective, from the 1950s onwards, the graph reveals a global increase in the number of refugees. Whereas in 1951 approximately 1.8 million displaced persons (refugees and IDPs combined) were reported, this number had risen to 62 million in 2018. However, Figure 1 also suggests that most of the increase since the early 1990s is driven by the *inclusion* as well as *improved measurement* of internal displacement. The number of IDPs included in UNHCR statistics increased sharply from 4.2 million in 1993 to 41.4 million in 2018. A large part of the increase in IDP numbers seem to have been driven by better statistical coverage for this group, as well as a looser definition of who belongs to this category.[5] In that same period, international *refugee* numbers remained fairly stable despite periodical fluctuations. Refugee numbers showed a decrease

[5] For instance, in 2007, individuals in "IDP-like situations" were added to the number of IDPs and removed from the "others of concern" groups, where they used to be classified.

between 1993 and the early 2000s, from roughly 16 million to 9 million. After the early 2000s, refugee populations increased again to 20.4 million in 2018.

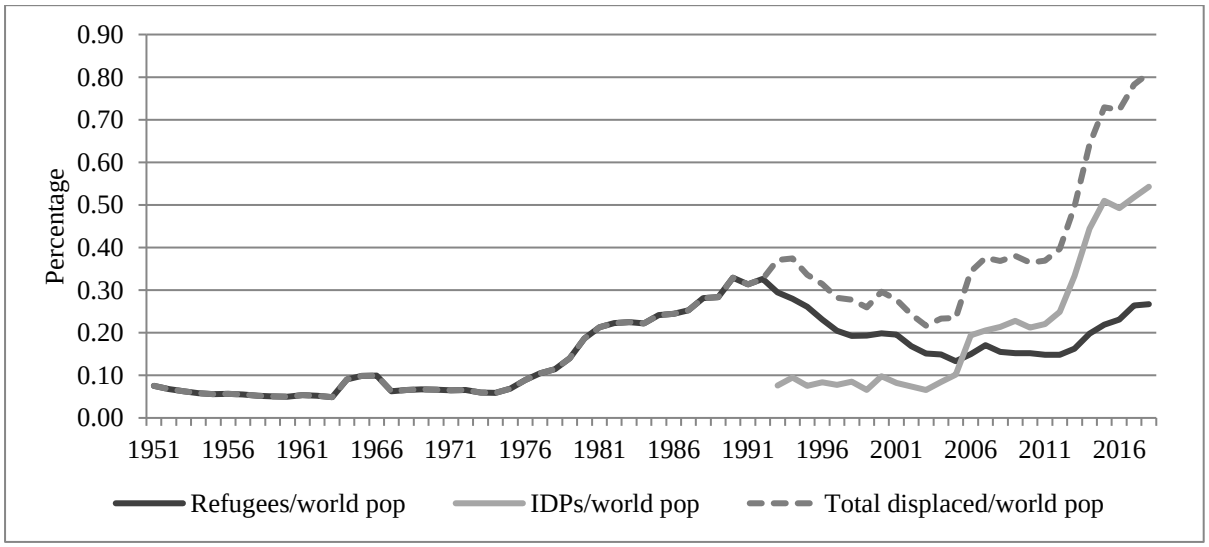
Figure 1: Global displacement in absolute numbers, 1951 to 2018



Note: Data for IDPs cover 1993 to 2018.

Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

Figure 2: Global displacement as a percentage of the world population, 1951 to 2018



Note: Data for IDPs cover 1993 to 2018.

Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

To measure the intensity or relative magnitude of refugee migration, Figure 2 depicts global displacement as a percentage of the world population between 1951 and 2018. The figure suggests

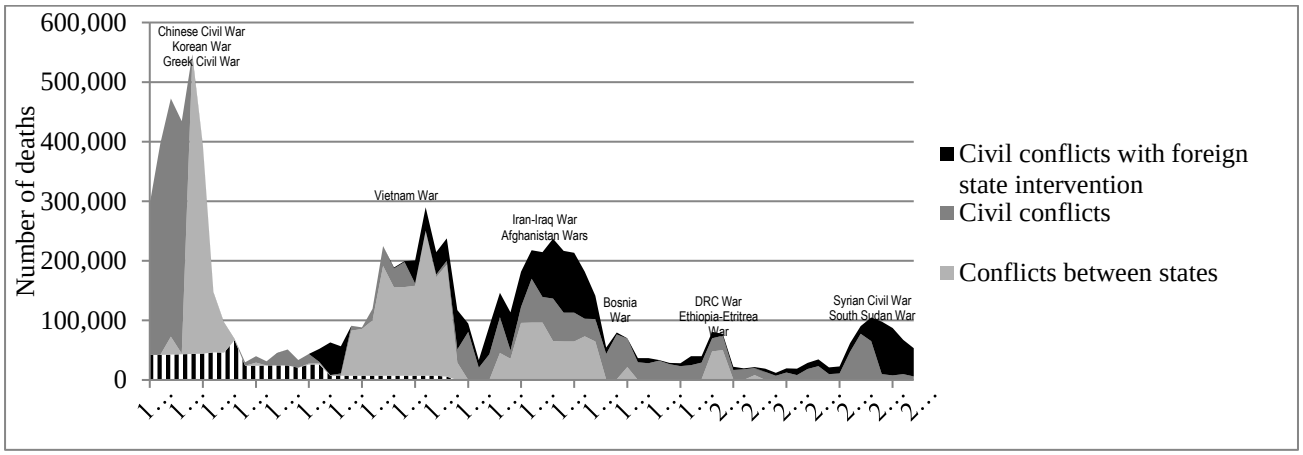
that the intensity of *refugee* migration has gone down over recent decades. Even though the total number of displaced as a share of the world population has increased from 0.08 percent to 0.27 percent, this increase is mainly driven by the inclusion of IDP statistics since 1993. Between the early 1990s and 2018, the number of IDPs as a percentage of the world population increased from 0.08 percent to 0.5 percent. In that same period, the percentage of refugees relative to the world population *decreased* from 0.33 percent in 1992 to 0.27 percent in 2018.

While figures 1 and 2 seem to confirm that the intensity of refugee migration has increased over the past six to seven decades, the findings nuance the idea that numbers have sharply risen in recent decades. For instance, popular claims that we are experiencing the highest numbers of forced displacement since World War II seem misleading (UNHCR 2017), as IDPs were not included in pre-1990 global displacement statistics. When solely looking at refugees, the current *intensity* of refugee migration is indeed higher than in the 1950s but also significantly lower today than in the 1990s, when the intensity of refugee migration peaked at 0.33 percent. If we take an even more long-term perspective, the picture becomes even more nuanced. As described earlier, 175 million people — approximately 8 percent of the world population — were displaced worldwide in the aftermath of World War II (Gatrell 2013). This is significantly more compared to the 62 million people — 0.8 percent of the world population — who were displaced in 2018.

The explanation for the absence of a major increase in the intensity of refugee migration seems straightforward: levels of violent conflict and government oppression have shown a decreasing rather than an increasing trend. As Figure 3 shows, the intensity of conflicts, as measured by the number of battle-related deaths in state-based conflicts, has shown a declining trend, particularly since the late 1980s. And, as Figure 4 shows, the number of people living under democratic regimes has also shown an increasing trend. Although transitions towards democratic regimes can temporarily go along with substantial conflict and refugee movements, this long-term trend is nevertheless striking. Today, over half of the world population live in a democracy; of those who still live in autocracies, four-fifths are Chinese.[6] Such data also give reason to think that earlier UNHCR data severely underrepresent real refugee numbers. In the early 1950s, the number of battle-related deaths in state-based conflicts was at an all-time high, while reported refugee stocks (see Figures 1 and 2) were relatively low. The number of global battle-related deaths also peaked in the 1970s, which is not mirrored in the refugee data, probably because many internally and internationally displaced people went unaccounted for. Comparing the conflict and refugee data in similar periods thus makes us question the extent to which UNHCR data from earlier decades are complete.

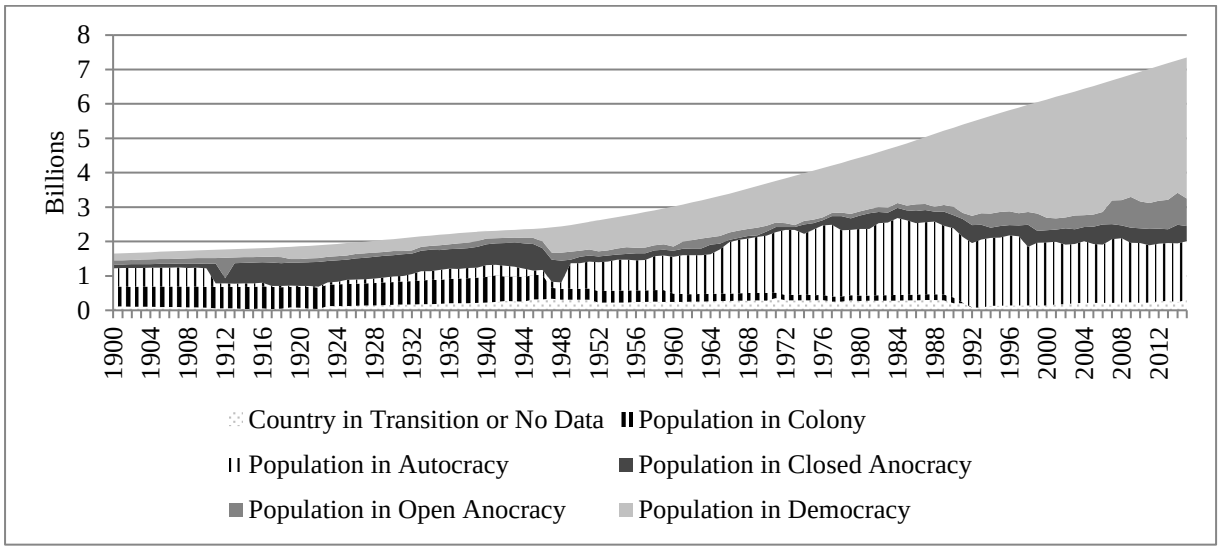
[6] For further data, see https://ourworldindata.org/democracy.

Figure 3: Battle-related deaths in state-based conflicts, 1946 to 2018



Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, compiled by World in Data; authors' calculations of UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (2017-2018).

Figure 4: Number of people living under different political regimes, 1900 to 2014[7]



Source: Our World in Data - based on Polity IV data.

Another reason why we may question the idea that there has been a long-term increase in the intensity of refugee migration is related to the poor geographical coverage of older refugee statistics. Over the years, an increasing number of countries have been included in UNHCR data. A long-term analysis of refugee trends (as in Figures 1 and 2) is therefore potentially misleading because figures are not comparable between years. The collection of refugee statistics has improved significantly over time, particularly after 1990 (Crisp 1999). Crisp argued that, prior to the 1990s, "UNHCR's capacity

[7] Anocracies are countries with political regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic. In this data, countries that score between -5 and 5 on the Polity IV index are considered anocracies.

and commitment in the area of refugee statistics was by any standard weak" (1999, 15). There was little global coordination of data collection efforts, and data collection methods differed across refugee-hosting countries. In some cases, UNHCR depended on host governments to provide statistics, which negatively affected the transparency of the data collection process. The long-term increase in refugee migration, as suggested in Figures 1 and 2, may therefore largely reflect improvements in measurement rather than a real increase. The collection of reliable IDP statistics presents an even larger challenge to governments and humanitarian organisations: IDPs often move unregistered, their cycles of displacement tend to be shorter, and agencies and governments lack a clear definition of what actually constitutes an IDP (see, e.g., Bennett 1998). Even more than is the case for refugees, rising IDP numbers may therefore reflect data improvements rather than changes on the ground.

To show how data coverage has improved over time, Table 2 gives an overview of refugee data provided by the UNCHR Population Statistics Database between 1951 and 2018. The table shows that the database contained information on twenty-one countries in 1951, increasing to seventy-six in 1970, 114 in 1980, 147 in 1990, 194 in 2000, 211 in 2010, and 216 in 2018. For earlier decades, refugee data was unavailable for many countries, particularly outside the Western world. In 1951, the ten countries with the highest numbers of refugees included in the UNHCR database were the United States, France, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Belgium, Sweden, and Hong Kong.[8] This suggests a strong bias towards countries where data collection was most likely better organised. Moreover, in the 1950s, data only contained information on the country or territory of asylum, whereas information on the origin country was missing. The tenfold increase in the number of countries covered between 1970 and 2018 shows that the UNHCR database should be used with caution to measure long-term trends in refugee migration.

Table 2 also shows that the number of net refugee-origin countries increased between 1990 and 2018, which seems to reflect an increase in civil wars in the 1990s (Blattman and Miguel 2010) after the end of the Cold War. The 1990s was a particularly volatile decade with insurgencies arising in various countries, such as Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, Algeria, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and the former Yugoslavia. This also confirms that fluctuations in recent global refugee population ("stock") data — which is available for most countries — reflect fluctuations in the incidence of conflicts for later periods. Because of the better coverage and reliability of recent data, subsequent analyses will focus on the 1980-2018 period.

[8] The other refugee-hosting countries included in the 1951 statistics are Luxembourg, Denmark, Tunisia, Spain, Norway, Turkey, Morocco, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Greece, and Italy.

Table 2: Number of net refugee-hosting countries and net refugee-origin countries, 1951 to 2018

	1951	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018
Net refugee-hosting countries	21	19	50	76	88	99	95	106
Net refugee-origin countries	-	1	25	38	59	92	104	86
Countries with equal numbers of refugees who left and who are hosted	-	-	1	-	-	3	12	24
Total number of countries	**21**	**20**	**76**	**114**	**147**	**194**	**211**	**216**

Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database; authors' calculations.

4.1 Emigration and immigration intensity of refugee migration at the global level

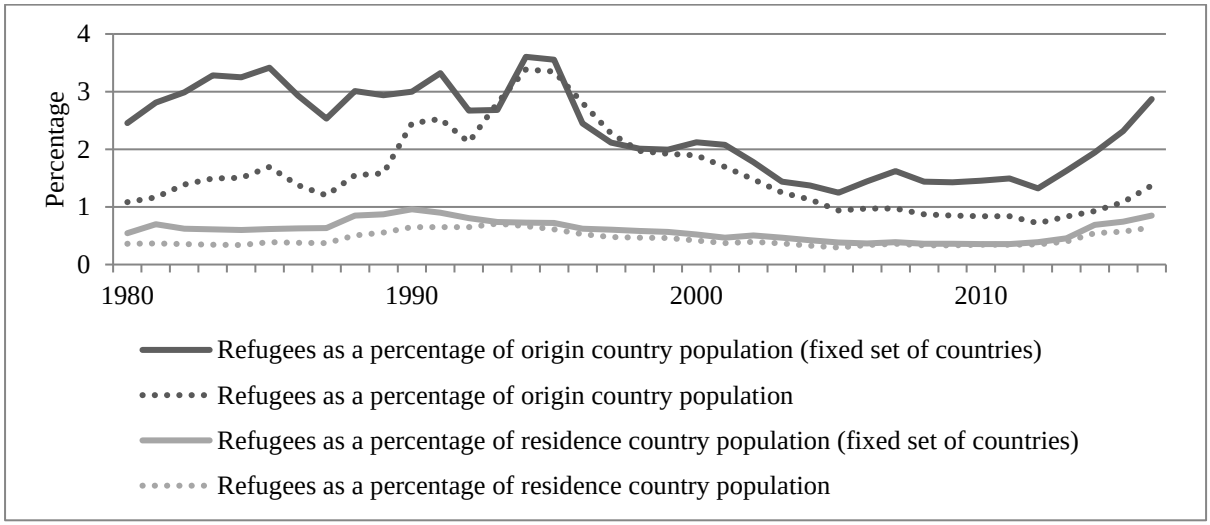
In Figure 5 we make a distinction between the intensity of refugee migration from an origin- and residence- (or destination-) country perspective. The *emigration intensity* is calculated as the average percentage of refugees relative to origin-country populations, whereas the *immigration intensity* is calculated as the average percentage of refugees relative to residence-country populations. We look at the data for each year and for a fixed set of countries (sixty-nine destination countries and fifty-one origin countries) for which we have data in each year since 1980, in order to facilitate the analysis of long-term trends. To address the data limitations discussed above, Figure 3 analyses refugee data from the 1980s onwards (because of better data coverage in this period) for all countries included in the database.

Figure 5 shows a relatively stable trend in refugee immigration intensity over time. Between 1980 and 2018, refugees constitute on average between 0.3 percent and 1 percent of the included residence-country populations. The highest peaks in immigration intensity occurred in the 1990s — which saw a rise in civil conflict around the world, such as in the Balkans, in the Horn of Africa, and the African Great Lakes region — and after 2010, when conflict broke out or intensified in countries like Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, alongside continuing conflict in countries such as Sudan and Somalia. In 2018, the top-five countries hosting the largest percentages of refugees relative to their total populations included Lebanon, Jordan, Nauru, Turkey, and Chad.

Taking an origin-country perspective, refugee emigration appears to shows a higher intensity over time. What we observe in terms of trends depends on whether we use all countries included in the database or the fixed set of countries for which we have data over the entire 1980-2018 period. Using the latter set, between 1980 and the mid 1990s, the intensity of refugee emigration varied between 2.5 and 3.5 percent of origin-country populations. Between 2000 and 2010, these levels dropped to levels of around 1.5 percent of origin-country populations. After 2012, the emigration

intensity went up again. In 2018, the countries with the highest refugee emigration intensity were Syria, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Burundi. However, the most important finding is that the post-1980 increase in refugee migration suggested by Figures 1 and 2 is not reproduced in this analysis. If we use a time-invariant set of countries, the pattern is one of (conflict-related) fluctuation rather than an overall increase. This confirms that what appeared to be an increase in refugee migration in Figure 1 reflects the growing number of countries included in UNHCR data rather than a real increase in refugee migration.

Figure 5: Refugees as a percentage of origin- and residence-country populations, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

4.2 The global spread of refugee migration

To gain insights into the global distribution and "spread" of refugee migration, Table 3 shows the fifteen most important refugee-hosting and refugee-sending countries in 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2018. As a first measure of the geographical spread of refugees in terms of origin and destination countries, the table also shows the total number of refugees residing in the top-fifteen refugee-hosting countries and top-fifteen origin countries, both in absolute numbers (in millions) and their share of global refugee numbers. The percentage of global refugees residing in the top-fifteen refugee-hosting countries decreased from 84 percent to 72 percent between 1980 and 2010, after which it increased slightly again between 2010 and 2018. In 2018, the top-fifteen refugee-hosting countries hosted 75 percent of the global refugee population. Notwithstanding this relatively small peak in 2018, the percentage of global refugees residing in the top-fifteen refugee-hosting countries decreased by ten percentage points between the 1980s and 2018. This is the first indication that the number of refugee-hosting countries is growing, suggesting an increasing global spread or diversification of refugee migration in terms of destination countries.

Table 3: Top-fifteen refugee-hosting and refugee-sending countries, 1980 to 2018

	1980		1990			2000			2010			2018	
Country	Net refugee stock (millions)	% of total refugee pop.	Country	Net refugee stock (millions)	% of total refugee pop.	Country	Net refugee stock (millions)	% of total refugee pop.	Country	Net refugee stock (millions)	% of total refugee pop.	Country	Net refugee stock (millions)	% of total refugee pop.
Countries of residence														
Somalia	2.00	24.13	Iran	4.17	24.00	Ethiopia	0.20	1.63	Pakistan	1.90	18.02	Turkey	2.87	18.46
Pakistan	1.43	17.23	Pakistan	3.26	18.72	Kenya	0.21	1.70	Iran	1.07	10.17	Pakistan	1.35	7.04
DRC	0.61	7.37	Sudan	1.03	5.93	Uganda	0.24	1.95	Syria	1.01	9.53	Uganda	1.01	5.85
Sudan	0.49	5.95	Malawi	0.93	5.33	Zambia	0.25	2.07	Germany	0.59	5.63	Sudan	0.98	5.41
United States	0.40	4.87	Germany	0.82	4.69	Armenia	0.28	2.31	Jordan	0.45	4.27	Germany	0.94	5.33
Iran	0.33	3.98	Ethiopia	0.77	4.45	China	0.29	2.42	Kenya	0.40	3.82	Iran	0.79	4.91
Australia	0.30	3.67	United States	0.46	2.67	DRC	0.33	2.74	Chad	0.35	3.30	Lebanon	0.69	4.76
China	0.26	3.17	Somalia	0.46	2.65	Sudan	0.41	3.42	China	0.30	2.85	Bangladesh	0.67	4.55
Thailand	0.26	3.15	DRC	0.42	2.39	Guinea	0.43	3.52	United States	0.26	2.51	Ethiopia	0.45	4.53
Burundi	0.23	2.83	Mexico	0.36	2.05	Serbia & Kos.	0.48	3.99	United Kingdom	0.24	2.26	Jordan	0.45	3.59
Tanzania	0.16	1.93	Guinea	0.33	1.87	United States	0.51	4.19	Bangladesh	0.23	2.17	DRC	0.42	2.65
United Kingdom	0.15	1.79	China	0.29	1.65	Tanzania	0.68	5.61	Venezuela	0.20	1.91	Chad	0.39	2.26
Cameroon	0.13	1.54	Costa Rica	0.28	1.59	Germany	0.91	7.47	France	0.20	1.90	Kenya	0.38	2.11
France	0.12	1.47	Cote d'Ivoire	0.27	1.57	Iran	1.87	15.40	Yemen	0.19	1.80	Cameroon	0.32	1.91
Uganda	0.11	1.36	Burundi	0.27	1.54	Pakistan	2.00	16.50	India	0.18	1.75	France	0.30	1.85
Total/Cum. %	**7.00**	**84.43**		**14.10**	**81.11**		**9.09**	**74.94**		**7.59**	**71.90**		**15.00**	**75.21**
Countries of origin														
Ethiopia	2.57	30.98	Afghanistan	6.34	36.45	Afghanistan	3.59	29.57	Afghanistan	3.05	28.95	Syria	6.65	33.37
Afghanistan	1.73	20.93	Ethiopia	1.35	7.74	Var./Unkn.	1.12	9.23	Iraq	1.68	15.96	Afghanistan	2.68	13.45
Var./Unkn.	1.42	17.18	Mozambique	1.25	7.18	Burundi	0.57	4.68	Somalia	0.77	7.30	South Sudan	2.29	11.46
Angola	0.45	5.42	Iraq	1.13	6.52	Iraq	0.53	4.34	DRC	0.48	4.52	Burma	1.15	5.74
Vietnam	0.34	4.15	Liberia	0.74	4.23	Bosn. & Herz.	0.50	4.16	Burma	0.42	3.94	Somalia	0.95	4.76
Rwanda	0.29	3.46	Sudan	0.52	3.01	Sudan	0.49	4.08	Colombia	0.40	3.75	Sudan	0.72	3.63
Uganda	0.22	2.71	Vietnam	0.50	2.85	Somalia	0.48	3.92	Sudan	0.39	3.67	DRC	0.72	3.61
Chad	0.22	2.67	Somalia	0.47	2.70	Angola	0.43	3.58	Vietnam	0.34	3.21	CAR	0.59	2.96
Cambodia	0.19	2.33	Angola	0.41	2.34	Sierra Leone	0.40	3.32	Eritrea	0.22	2.11	Eritrea	0.51	2.54
Burundi	0.17	2.05	Rwanda	0.36	2.08	Eritrea	0.38	3.11	China	0.18	1.75	Burundi	0.39	1.94
DRC	0.12	1.41	Sri Lanka	0.21	1.20	DRC	0.37	3.06	Serbia & Kos.	0.18	1.74	Iraq	0.37	1.87
Laos	0.11	1.27	Burundi	0.19	1.10	Vietnam	0.37	3.06	Var./Unkn.	0.17	1.58	Vietnam	0.33	1.68
El Salvador	0.09	1.11	Chad	0.18	1.06	Croatia	0.34	2.76	CAR	0.16	1.56	Nigeria	0.28	1.39
Philippines	0.09	1.09	Western Sahara	0.17	0.95	Azerbaijan	0.28	2.34	Turkey	0.15	1.39	Rwanda	0.25	1.24
Namibia	0.06	0.67	Laos	0.14	0.78	Liberia	0.27	2.20	Sri Lanka	0.14	1.34	Var./Unkn.	0.22	1.09
Total/Cum. %	**8.07**	**97.40**		**13.95**	**80.20**		**10.12**	**83.42**		**8.73**	**82.77**		**18.09**	**90.74**

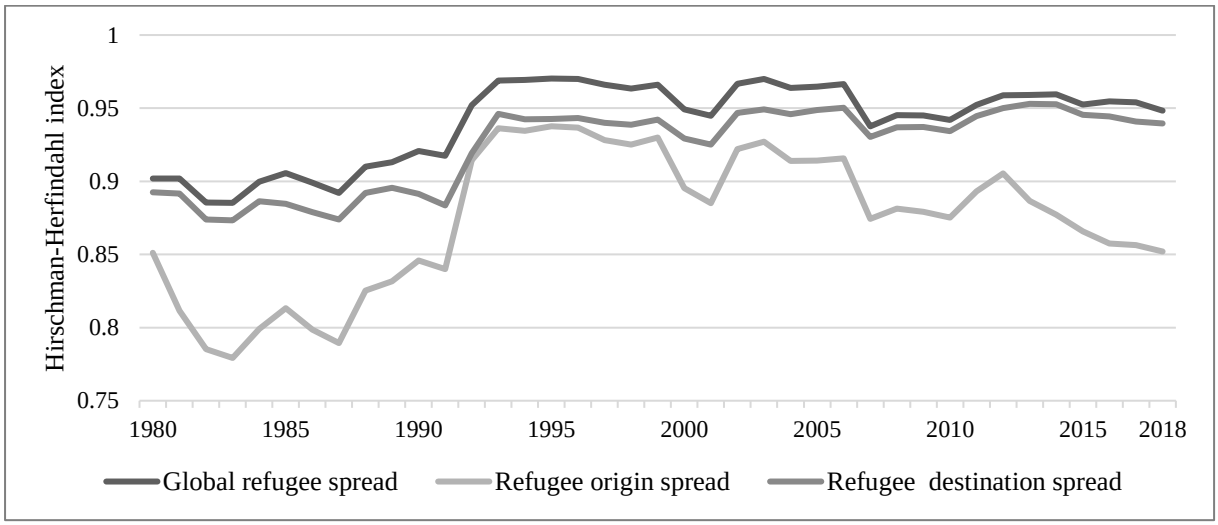
Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

From an origin-country perspective, trends show more variation over time. In 1980, the top-fifteen refugee-sending countries represented the vast majority of refugees (97 percent) of all refugees included in the UNHCR database in that year. Between 1980 and 1990, this percentage decreased to around 80 percent, after which it increased again to 83 percent in 2000 and 2010, and peaked in 2018, when 91 percent of the global refugee population originated from the top-fifteen refugee-origin countries. Overall, the data show there is more diversification in terms of residence countries and less diversification in terms of origin countries over the past four decades. While the bulk of the global refugee population increasingly comes from a relatively small number of origin countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, Venezuela, and Somalia in 2018, the number of destination countries has diversified to a certain extent. Over time, it is also apparent that more low- and middle-income countries entered the top-fifteen of refugee-hosting countries.

To further study the geographical distribution of refugee migration both in terms of origin and destination countries, we use the (inversed) Hirschman-Herfindahl index. Figure 6 shows the global spread of refugee migration between 1980 and 2018, as well as the spread of refugees both in terms of origin and destination countries. The analyses are based on the same number of all possible 53,130 corridors each year. The *global spread of refugees* indicates the extent to which refugees are equally distributed across bilateral country corridors. The two other measures differentiate between origin- and destination-country perspectives. The *refugee-origin spread* measures the average geographical spread of refugees over origin countries, whereas the *refugee-destination spread* measures the average geographical spread of refugees across destination countries. As described in the methods section, higher scores indicate a more equal spread of refugee migration across origin and destination countries, respectively.

Figure 6 shows that the global spread of refugees has increased, particularly in the 1986-1991 period, indicating that the global refugee population has spread more equally across bilateral corridors over time, stabilizing at values of around 0.95 since the early 1990s. The global spread or distribution of refugees is lower than that of nonrefugee migrants, which, as reported by Czaika and de Haas (2014, 296), hovered around 0.99 between 1980 and 2000. This corroborates the idea that, in general, refugees are more concentrated in particular countries of origin and destination. The increasing global spread of refugees seems to be particularly driven by a growing spread of refugees across destination countries since 1980. Trends for the spread of refugees in term of their origin countries are somehow different and less linear. The global refugee spread rose significantly between 1980 and mid-1990s. The strong increase in the early 1990s coincided with the outbreak of new conflicts in the post-Cold War era – particularly in the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, and the African Great Lakes region. However, after 1995, the refugee-origin spread decreases again, indicating that, over the past two decades, origin-country diversity has decreased, with refugees originating from a decreasing number of prime-origin countries. The refugee-destination country spread is consistently higher than the emigrant spread, and the gap seems to have widened between the early 1990s and 2000.

Figure 6: Global spread of refugees, 1980 to 2018



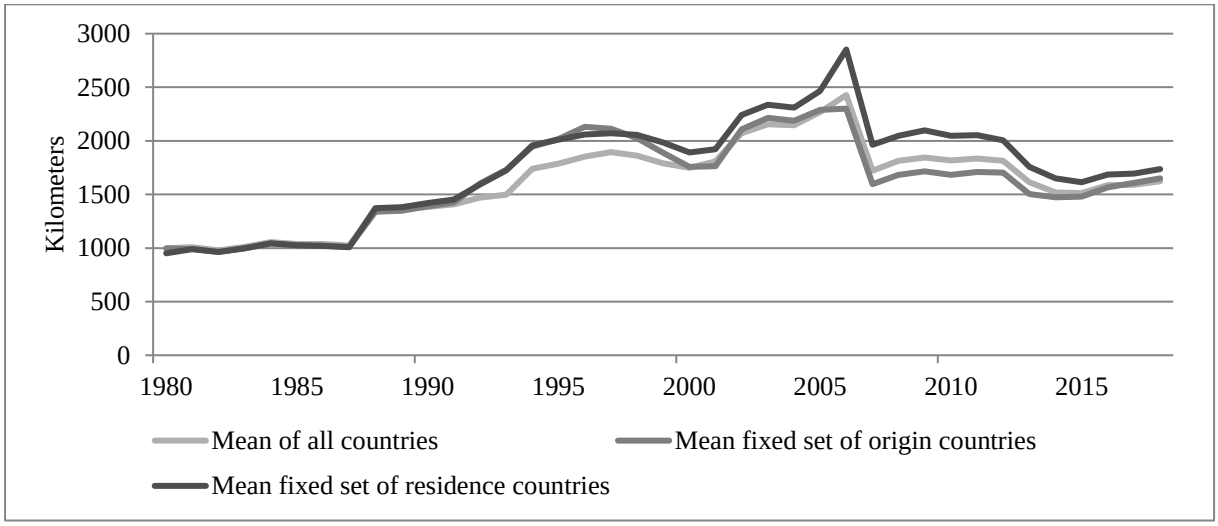
Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

4.3 Global geographical distances travelled by refugees

Figure 7 shows the average geographical distance between refugees' country of residence and country of origin (in km) based on all bilateral corridors containing refugees for each year since 1980. These calculations have been weighted by the number of refugees within each corridor. To cross-check the validity of these findings, we also include this measurement for a fixed set of 51 origin countries from 1980 to 2018 for which we have yearly data. The results show that the average geographical distance between origin and residence country has increased over time but that trends have not been linear. This trend is visible using both measurements of all countries and the fixed set of origin countries. Between 1980 and 2018, the average distance that refugees travelled increased 40 percent, from approximately 1,000 km to around 1,500 km. These increases are most apparent in the 1990s and 2000s. The sharp drop after 2006 seems to be largely driven by the inclusion of people in "refugee-like" situations in UNHCR refugee numbers since 2007[9], among which are many Colombians and Haitians in the Americas. The change in definition may have artificially caused this decrease in average distance travelled by refugees. This provides a typical example of the significant extent to which such definition changes can influence aggregated figures.

[9] According to UNHCR, people in a refugee-like situations "includes groups of persons who are outside their country or territory of origin and who face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained" (2008, 4).

Figure 7: Average geographical distance between refugees' country of residence and country of origin (in kilometers, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

On average, refugees travel shorter distances on average than "regular" migrants. Czaika and De Haas (2015) found that regular migrants travelled, on average, 3,657 km in 2000. This was a 16 percent increase compared to 1980, when the average distance was 3,128 km. The difference in travelled distances between refugees and regular migrants may reflect the fact that refugees prefer to stay close to home, lack the resources to travel large distances, or lack the capacity to acquire essential paperwork, such as passports and visas. Although refugees travel shorter distances than regular migrants, the rate at which the average distance increased over time is significantly higher. This might indicate decreasing costs of communication and transport or the fact that more refugees have the resources to overcome the obstacles of migrating over longer distances. It may also reflect changes in the geographical locations of main conflict zones. For instance, Bosnian refugees in the early 1990s generally migrated over relatively short distances to find safe havens, while Afghans and Iraqis generally migrate over longer distances.

5 Regional patterns: Intensity, spread, and distance

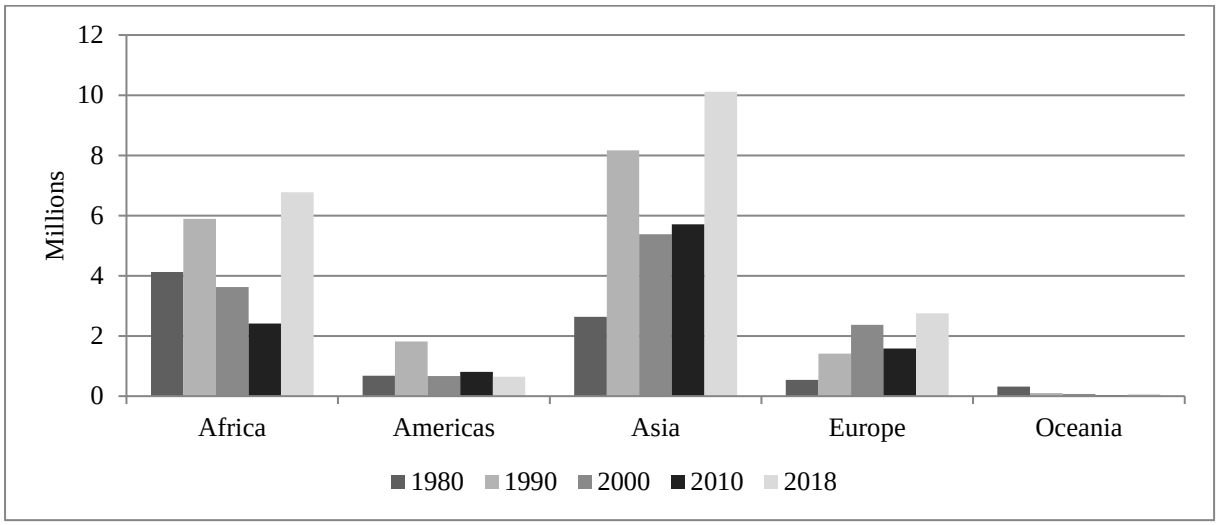
After the preceding global analysis of refugee trends, we now turn our attention to regional patterns to uncover underlying regional patterns and variations in the intensity, spread, and distance of refugee migrations over time.

5.1 Absolute and relative regional intensities of refugee migration

Figures 8 and 9 show the distribution of refugees by region of origin and residence, respectively, in the 1980 to 2018 period. Most refugees originated from Asia and Africa (Figure 8), while significantly fewer refugees originated from Europe, the Americas, and Oceania. Particularly in 1990 and 2018, many refugees originated from Asia and Africa. As shown in Table 3, nine of the top-fifteen origin countries in the 1990s were African countries (Ethiopia, Mozambique, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, and Chad), while the peak in Asia mainly reflects enduring conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam. Taken together, these three countries together accounted for 46 percent of the global refugee population in 1990. In 2018, approximately 10 and 7 million refugees originated from Asia and Africa, respectively. In the Asian region, Syria has overtaken Afghanistan as the major origin country for refugees. Thirty-two percent of the world refugee population in 2018 originated from Syria, followed by 15 percent originating from Afghanistan. In 2018, the third-most important origin country in Asia was Burma, which mirrors increasing outflows of Rohingya refugees. In Africa, South Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo had the highest refugee emigration intensities. Recent increases in refugee numbers from Africa largely reflect increasing refugee outflows from South Sudan, Eritrea, and the Central African Republic.

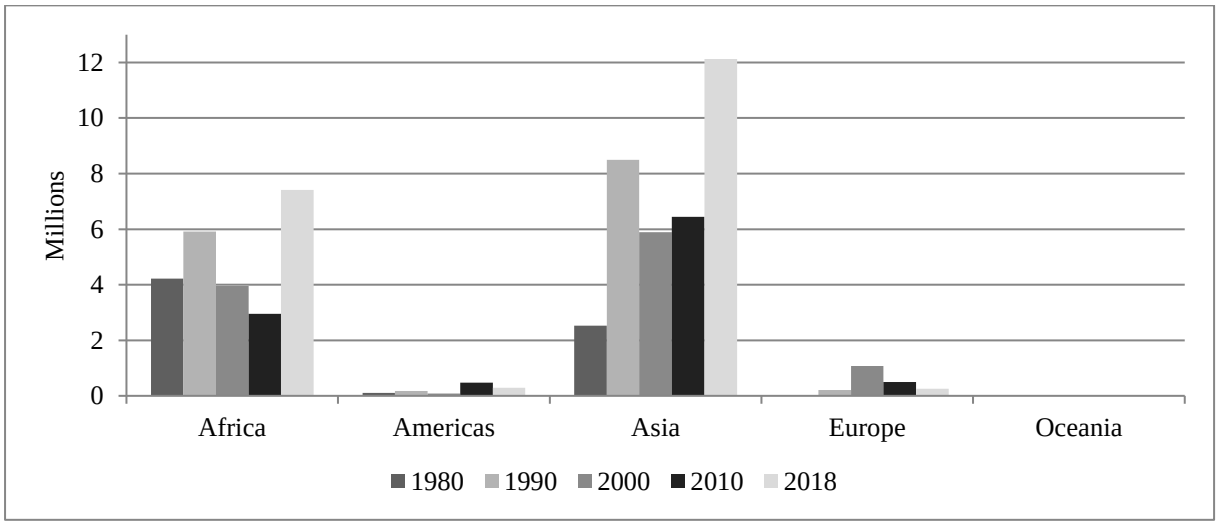
Combining these results with those presented in Figure 9 reveals that the regions with relatively high refugee outmigration (Asia and Africa) also tend to host relatively large refugee populations. This indicates that most refugees reside within their region of origin. For example, 6 million refugees originated from Africa in 2018, while the continent also hosted 5.5 million refugees in that same year. The main refugee-hosting countries in Africa in 2018 were Uganda and Ethiopia, which neighbour refugee "producing" countries, such as South Sudan, Somalia, and the DRC. The same pattern can be observed for Asia: 10 million refugees originated from the region, while the region hosted 8.6 million refugees. Background analyses of country-level statistics confirm that most Asian refugees are hosted in the region: Syrian refugees mainly reside in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey; many Afghan refugees are in "protracted" situations in Iran and Pakistan; and many Vietnamese refugees are in a protracted situation in China. Europe and the Americas, on the other hand, tend to host more refugees than they "produce."

Figure 8: Size of refugee emigrant populations by origin region, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

Figure 9: Size of refugee immigrant populations by residence region, 1980 to 2018



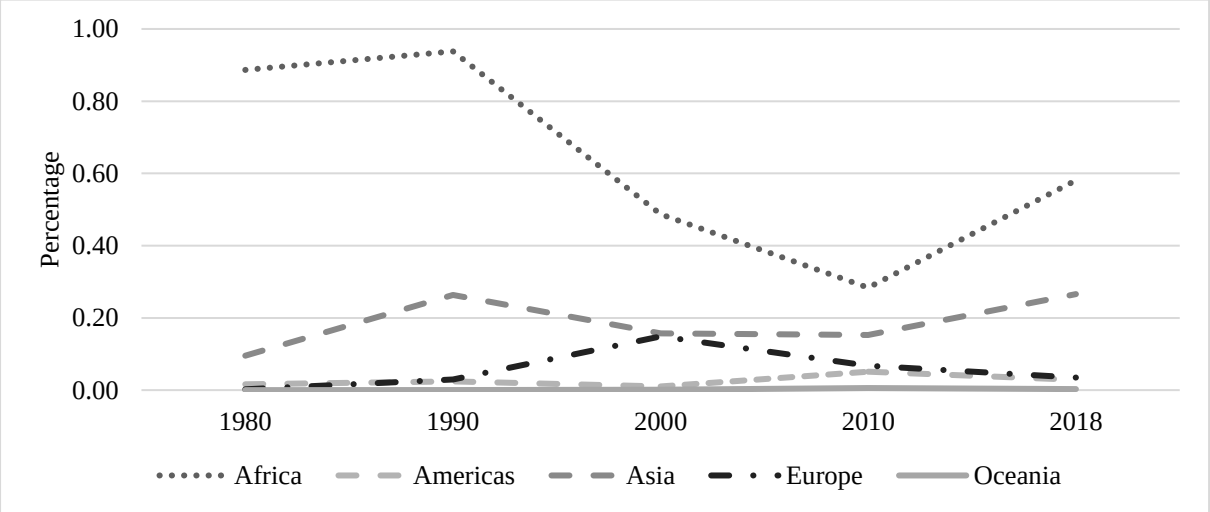
Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

After exploring regional variations in absolute statistics on refugee emigration and immigration, we now focus on the relative regional *refugee-emigration intensity* – i.e., the average share of refugees that originate from each region relative to the regions' total populations (Figures 10 and 11). Figure 10 reveals that Asia and Africa also have the highest refugee emigration intensities, which means that, on average, those regions "produce" more refugees than other regions relative to the regions' local populations. In the 1990s, refugee-emigration intensities in Africa and Asia peaked, reaching between 0.94 and 0.26 percent, respectively. However, refugee-emigration intensities declined significantly in later years, nearly reaching the emigration intensities of Europe, Oceania,

and the Americas in 2010. In these years, refugee emigration intensities in Africa reached levels of 0.28 percent. Between 2010 and 2018, refugee migration from Asia and Africa increased again, mainly due to the conflicts in Syria, South Sudan, and Somalia. Refugee-emigration intensity in Europe peaked in the 2000s, a reflection of the aftermath of the war in the former Yugoslavia and conflicts and tensions in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it has since dropped. The refugee emigration intensities in the Americas and Oceania are low and stable over time. The stable pattern of refugee emigration intensity for the Americas is surprising, given resurging instabilities in the region over the past decades, particularly in countries such as Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador, Colombia, and more recently Venezuela, Guatemala and Honduras. As such, the data for the Americas seems incomplete.

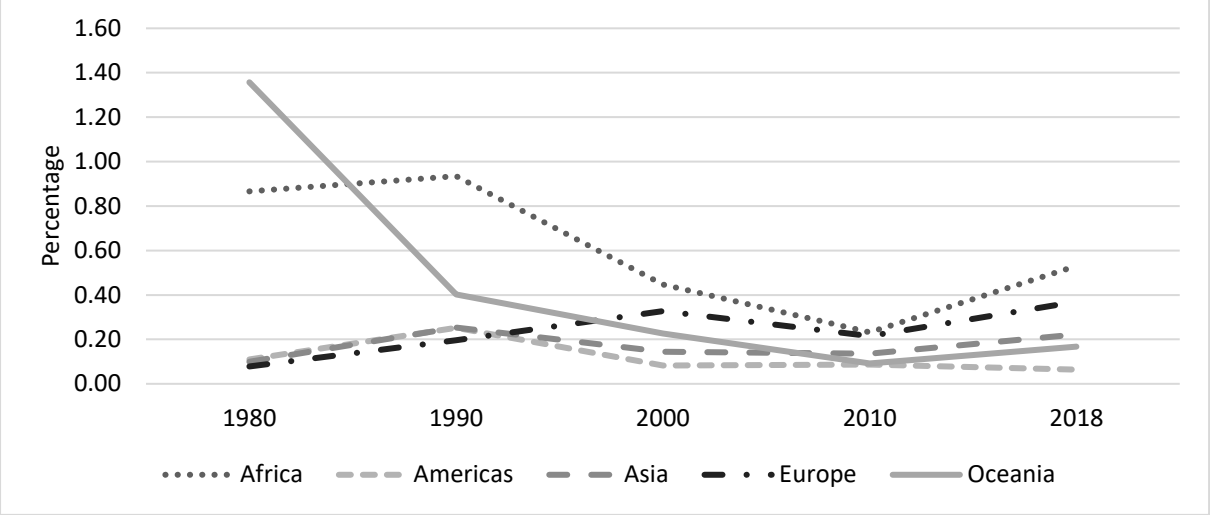
Figure 11 shows the relative *refugee-immigration intensity* for each region. From the mid-1980s onwards, Africa has consistently had the highest refugee-immigration intensity. Europe is the second-most important region in terms of the number of refugees relative to its population. Particularly in the mid-1990s and after 2015, relative refugee-immigration intensities have gone up in Europe. After the Syrian crisis began in 2011, refugees as a percentage of Europe's population increased from 0.22 in 2010 to 0.37 in 2018, reaching similar levels as in the early 2000s. Although Asia hosts the most refugees in absolute terms (see Figure 9), in relative terms refugee-immigration intensities are less significant despite the outbreak of conflict in Syria, after which many refugees settled in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (included in the "Asian" region). The Americas and Oceania consistently have the lowest refugee-immigration intensities.

Figure 10: Average refugee-emigration intensity by region, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

Figure 11: Average refugee-immigration intensity by region, 1980 to 2018

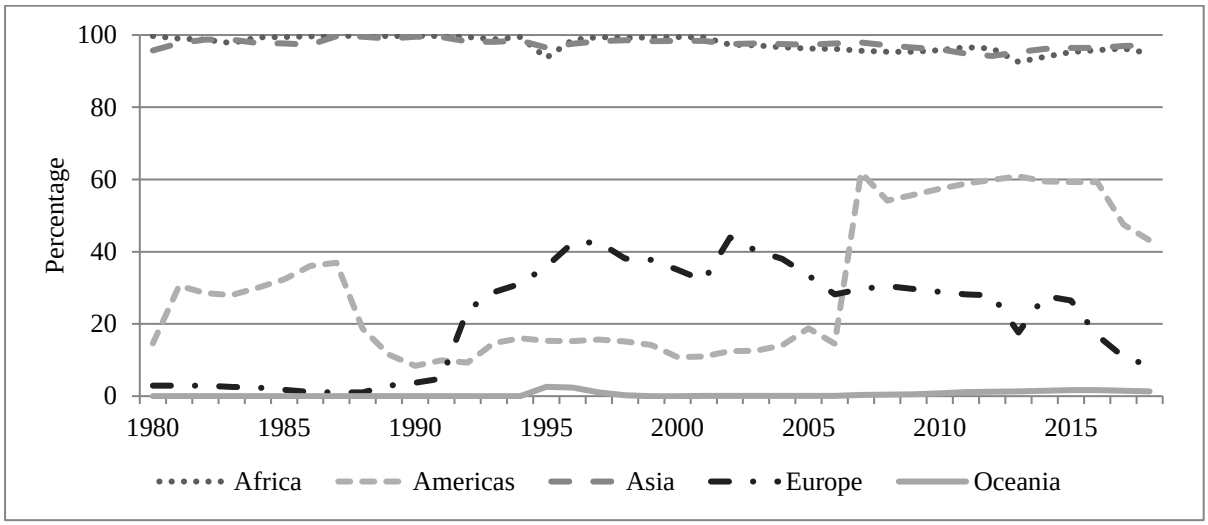


Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

5.2 Regional patterns of settlement

The previous figures reveal that regions with high refugee outmigration also tend to host significant refugee populations. In other words, most refugees stay within their own region. To further investigate refugee-settlement patterns, Figure 12 shows, for each region, the percentage of refugees who also originated from the same region. This figure only uses data on refugees whose origins were recorded in the UNHCR database. The findings suggest large variations across regions. The vast majority of refugees residing in Africa and Asia also originate from these regions, with percentages consistently ranging from 94 to 100 percent. The situation is different in other world regions. Approximately 83 percent of refugees residing in Europe in 2018 came from other continents. In that same year, only 2 percent of refugees residing in Oceania originated from Oceania. Our analyses reveal that the stark increase in the number of refugees in the Americas originating from the region, from 14 percent to 59 percent between 2006 and 2007, is a statistical artefact reflecting the aforementioned inclusion of intraregional migrants in "refugee-like" situations that were previously excluded from refugee statistics.

Figure 12: Refugees who originate from the region in which they reside, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

To gain further insights into the origins of refugees residing in each region, we explore the regional origins of refugees by their region of residence between 1980 and 2018 (Table 4). This analysis confirms that the vast majority of refugees residing in Africa and Asia originate from those regions. In 2018, Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia were the main refugee-hosting countries in Africa; refugees mostly originated from South Sudan. In Asia, the top-three refugee-hosting countries were Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran, and they host mainly refugees from Syria and Afghanistan.

Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, the regional origins of refugees residing in Europe, the Americas, and Oceania were often categorized as "Various/Unknown" in the UNHCR data. In 2000, the Americas still hosted a large number of refugees from Europe, which is a reflection of the aftermath of the war in the former Yugoslavia. After 2000, the largest group of refugees in the Americas, however, came from the Americas, including the Caribbean, and particularly from Colombia, Venezuela, Haiti, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Asian refugees residing in the Americas were mostly from China. Oceania, particularly Australia, mainly hosts refugees from Asia. In 2018, the top-five origin countries of refugees living in Australia, for example, included Afghanistan, Iran, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Iraq. The largest refugee population in Oceania in 2018, however, consisted of Indonesians in Papua New Guinea. In Europe, we see a clear shift in the regional origins of refugees. In 2000, Europe mainly hosted refugees from other European countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo, and Croatia, but over time, the shares of refugees originating from Asia (Afghanistan and later Syria) and Africa increased.

Table 4: Regional origins of refugees by residence region, 1980 to 2018

Residence region	Origin region	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018
Africa	Africa	99.74	99.79	99.47	95.86	94.96
	Americas	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	Asia	0.00	0.07	0.41	3.63	5.02
	Europe	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
	Oceania	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	Various/Unknown	0.26	0.13	0.11	0.51	0.02
	Stateless	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
Americas	Africa	0.00	0.71	17.00	12.76	15.23
	Americas	14.59	8.39	10.77	57.43	43.20
	Asia	0.00	14.41	26.87	23.74	28.67
	Europe	0.00	8.80	29.86	4.36	4.00
	Oceania	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.22	0.04
	Various/Unknown	85.41	67.69	15.31	1.12	8.74
	Stateless	0.00	0.00	0.14	0.38	0.12
Asia	Africa	4.14	0.04	1.20	3.84	2.87
	Americas	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	Asia	95.75	99.56	98.40	96.06	97.11
	Europe	0.00	0.00	0.40	0.10	0.02
	Oceania	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	Various/Unknown	0.11	0.39	0.01	0.00	0.00
	Stateless	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00
Europe	Africa	0.12	1.28	6.55	19.81	21.04
	Americas	0.38	1.30	0.44	0.75	0.48
	Asia	0.56	6.64	15.25	40.54	62.52
	Europe	2.92	3.71	35.03	28.91	8.43
	Oceania	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00
	Various/Unknown	96.03	84.47	42.52	9.15	5.70
	Stateless	0.00	2.60	0.21	0.84	1.82
Oceania	Africa	0.00	0.00	12.69	7.14	8.66
	Americas	0.00	0.00	1.09	0.73	0.30
	Asia	0.32	6.46	48.25	87.88	81.69
	Europe	0.00	0.00	34.57	1.39	0.30
	Oceania	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.82	1.34
	Various/Unknown	99.68	93.54	3.16	1.00	1.27
	Stateless	0.00	0.00	0.20	1.04	6.45

Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

5.3 Region-specific distance covered by refugees

One of our hypotheses was that refugees travel larger distances because of falling costs of travel and communication, and perhaps also because refugees, on average, have more means and capabilities to migrate over larger distances. This expectation was confirmed on a global scale (Figure 7), but what

are the differences across regions? In order to find out, Table 5 examines average distances travelled from origin regions. The analyses show that, on average, refugees originating from Oceania travel the largest distances, although these fluctuate substantially over time.

Refugees from Europe travelled the second-largest distances in the 1990s, which mainly reflects refugees from the former Yugoslavia who moved to the United States. After the 1990s, the average distance that refugees travelled from European countries decreased and remained stable at around 2,000 km, which is comparable to the average distances that refugees travelled from countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas in later years. These regional patterns reveal that, although on a global scale the average distances between origin and residence countries increased, regional patterns showed similar increases between the 1980s and 2000s, and a slight decrease after 2010.

Refugees travelling *to* Oceania and the Americas crossed the largest distances by far. The average distance that refugees travel from their origin countries to Europe ranges from 3,700 in the 1980s to nearly 4,400 in the 1990s and then down to 3,300 and up to nearly 3,900 in 2018. This finding corresponds with the earlier finding that the vast majority of refugees residing in Europe originate from other continents, and particularly Asia, in later years. Refugees residing in Africa and Asia travel the shortest distances, approximately between 1,000 and 1,200 km, and the pattern is stable over time. This result aligns with the finding that most refugees originating from these regions reside in neighbouring countries in the same region.

Table 5: Average distance refugees travelled from and to different regions, 1980 to 2018

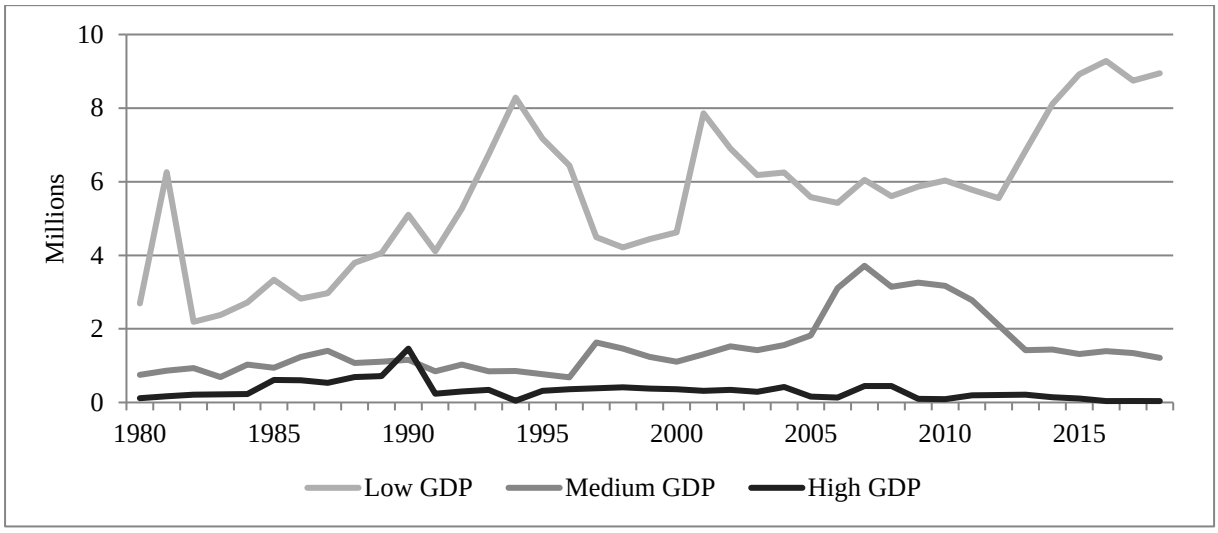
	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018
From origin region					
Africa	1059.08	1111.65	1691.51	2265.91	1649.81
Americas	1007.71	2362.75	3227.97	1744.94	2459.53
Asia	889.80	1429.27	1676.21	1697.97	1558.19
Europe	1866.62	5809.78	2239.14	1830.83	1897.99
Oceania	-	12785.54	12487.87	11510.51	5369.61
To residence region					
Africa	1029.29	1069.86	1103.55	1322.08	1144.26
Americas	788.81	8270.37	9012.60	5234.82	6389.05
Asia	925.08	1026.89	1029.93	1006.87	958.96
Europe	3707.18	4380.64	3303.72	3893.61	3915.28
Oceania	4464.31	4464.31	12548.86	9471.34	10580.99

Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations.

6 Country-level trends in refugee migration

We now turn to country-level analyses to test the hypothesis that most refugees come from low-income countries and that this is increasingly the case because recurrent cycles of conflict tend to concentrate in a limited number of low-income countries. To test this, we grouped the countries in our data into three equally sized groups based on their GDP (Figures 13 and 14). GDP figures were derived from the World Bank development indicators database.[10] The findings from Figure 13 confirm that most refugees originate from low-income countries and that this proportion increases over time. Countries in the low-GDP group also have the largest average numbers of refugees residing abroad relative to their populations (Figure 14), although the pattern fluctuates over time.

Figure 13: Number of refugees by origin-country GDP per capita, 1980 to 2018

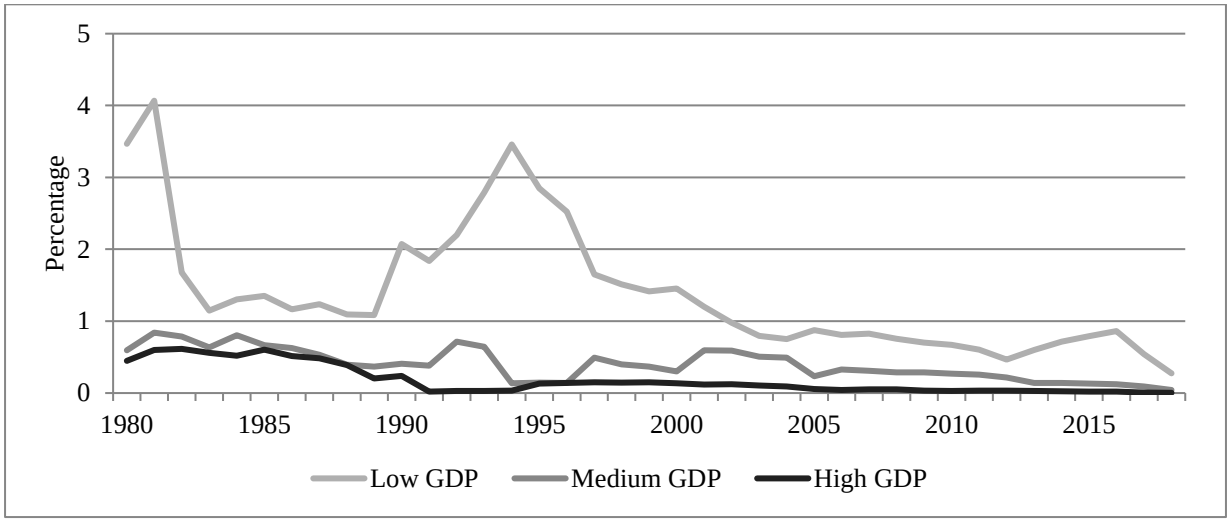


Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations. GDP statistics were derived from the World Bank development indicators database.

Figures 15 and 16 show a similar type of analysis but from a destination-country perspective. Figure 15 shows the majority of the world's refugees are also hosted by low-income countries. This was particularly the case in the 1990s, when approximately half of the world's refugees resided in the bottom 30 percent of countries by GDP. Relative to their populations, countries in the low- and medium-GDP group hosted the most refugees. Particularly in the 1990s and after 2010, medium-GDP countries hosted significant shares of refugees. Both figures 15 and 16, however, clearly show that high-income countries have the lowest "burden" in terms of hosting the world's refugee populations, although differences across income groups have decreased since the early 1990s.

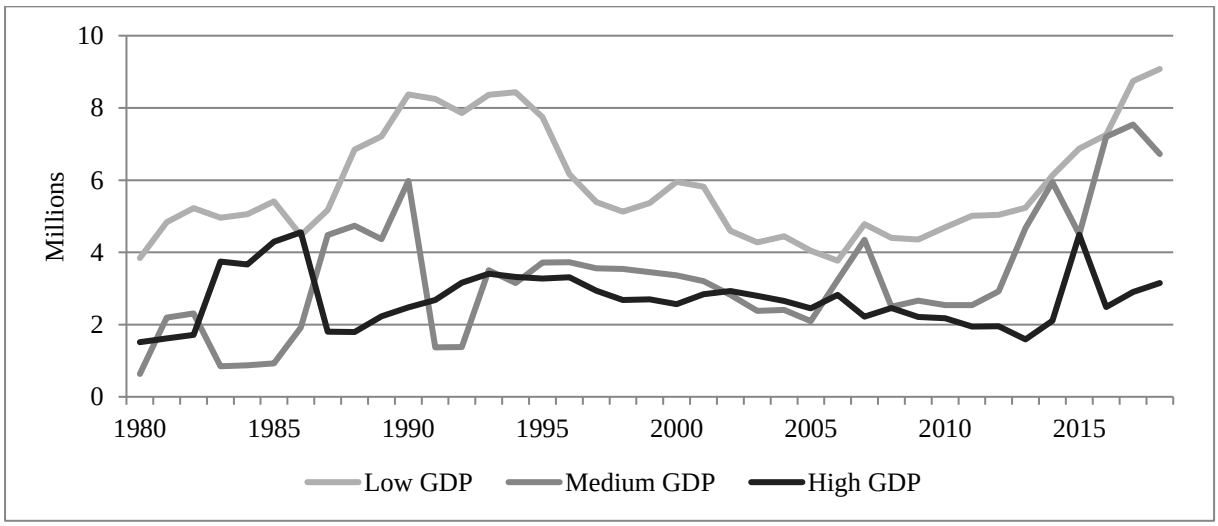
[10] For more information: https://databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx

Figure 14: Refugees as a share of origin-country population by origin-country GDP per capita, 1980 to 2018



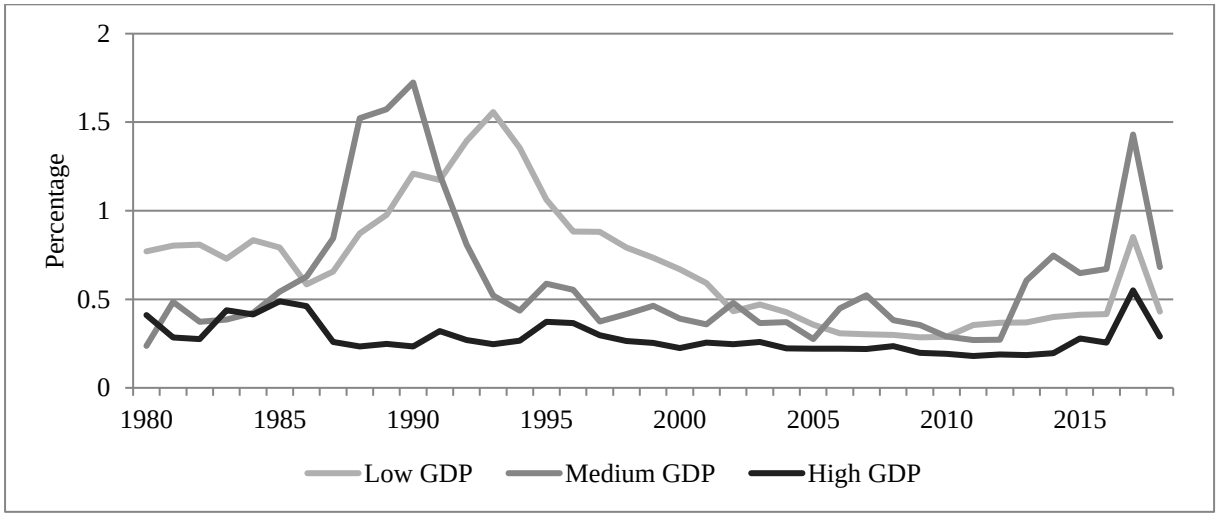
Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations. GDP statistics were derived from the World Bank development indicators database.

Figure 15: Number of refugees by destination country based on country's GDP per capita level, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations. GDP statistics were derived from the World Bank development indicators database.

Figure 16: Refugees as a share of population by destination country based on country's GDP per capita level, 1980 to 2018



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics Database, authors' calculations. GDP statistics were derived from the World Bank development indicators database.

7 Conclusion

Our analyses refute the idea that there has been a substantial increase in the intensity of global refugee migration. First, the occurrence of several large refugee migrations over the course of the past centuries highlights that large-scale refugee movements are anything but a recent phenomenon. In the years after World War II, for example, an estimated 175 million individuals — approximately 8 percent of the world population — were displaced (Gatrell 2013). These estimated numbers do not differentiate between the internally displaced and refugees, but the difference with current estimates of displaced populations (54 million in 2018, 0.7 percent of the world population) is nonetheless striking. Second, our analysis of global trends in the post-1950 period, based on the UNHCR Population Statistics Database, do not detect a clear linear trend. They rather suggest that fluctuations in relative intensities of global refugee migrations closely mirror the incidences and intensity of conflict around the world.

The analyses of underlying patterns show geographical shifts in refugee migration. In recent decades, refugees tended to come from a shrinking pool of prime-origin countries, and tended to live in an increasingly diverse set of destination countries. This seems to reflect a global decline in the number of interstate conflicts and the fact that civil conflicts tend to recur in a deceasing number of countries. Refugees primarily came from low-income countries. A small number of low-income countries in Asia and Africa, and to some extent also some middle-income countries in Asia, show the largest refugee outmigrations. The vast majority of refugees continued to stay near origin countries. Refugee populations continued to be concentrated in countries with low- to medium-GDP levels, and

the analyses therefore refute the idea that there has been a major increase in South-North refugee migration.

On a global level, average distances between origin and residence countries increased from 1,000 to 1,500 km between 1980 and 2018. The distances that refugees travel fluctuate over time, most likely in response to specific conflicts, but there seems to be a general upward trend. At first sight, this might reflect decreasing travel costs and increasing connectedness due to processes of globalisation. However, trends are not consistent across world regions. Refugees originating from Africa and Asia travel the shortest distances; the average distance between origin and destination country was approximately 1,000 km in Asia and 1,700 km in Africa. The vast majority of refugees originating from these regions, between 95 and 100 percent over the different years, resided in their region of origin. Refugees residing in the Americas and Oceania travelled the largest distances to their destinations, reflecting the rather remote geographical locations of destination countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States; these countries allow refugees to immigrate through relatively extensive resettlement programs. The average distances that refugees travelled to reach a European destination has fluctuated over time.

The absolute number of refugees has increased again since 2010, to a level comparable to the early 1990s. This recent surge in refugee migration has created a sense of urgency among policymakers and international organisations to address this "crisis." While acknowledging the severity of humanitarian emergencies and the need for proper institutional responses, we argue that the current bias towards the "present" in academic and political discourse hinders our understanding of the *long-term* trends and patterns of refugee migration, which are essential for analysing, theorising and explaining the fundamentals of global refugee migrations. With this paper, we therefore aim to provide a long-term view on trends and patterns in refugee migration that will serve as a starting point for future analyses.

Our study also highlights the limitations of UNHCR data. Problems with coverage and quality of data, particularly in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, cast further doubt on the idea that we live in times of an unprecedented "global refugee crisis." Besides a sharp increase in the number of countries included in the UNHCR database over the last half century (from seventy-six in 1970 to 214 in 2018), recent refugee figures have been artificially inflated through the inclusion of previously unregistered internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as people in "refugee-like" situations. This indicates that such data should be used and interpreted with extreme caution, particularly because the increase in the number of countries and internally displaced can bring about the misleading conclusion that there has been a huge increase in forced migration in recent times.

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