

Homeward Bound: Refugee Return and Local Violence after Civil War

Book Précis – Website Downloadable

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1. Brief description

The number of refugees worldwide has nearly doubled in the past decade. Amid this rise in forced migration, the humanitarian community touts voluntary repatriation as the preferred solution to displacement crises and governments worldwide are finding ever more creative ways to coerce refugees to return to their home countries. The driving assumption is that most refugees will resettle peacefully in their countries-of-origin and stay put. But conflict between returnees and non-migrant populations is a nearly ubiquitous issue in post-conflict societies from Iraq to South Sudan and El Salvador. Why does refugee return so often lead to violence? *Homeward Bound: Refugee Return and Local Conflict After Civil War* offers a theory to explain both the emergence and character of displacement-related conflict after civil wars. Using a political-ethnographic analysis of forced migration between Burundi and Tanzania, *Homeward Bound* argues that return migration creates new identity divisions in post-conflict societies based on where individuals lived during the war, in-country or abroad. Competition between these groups can fuel local-level violence and spur repeat forced migration. The findings from *Homeward Bound* provide a needed extension to theories of political violence, demonstrating that displacement—one of the most common consequences of civil war—can fundamentally alter the contours of political contestation.

2. Overview

What happens when refugees return? Conventional wisdom holds that outward refugee displacement can prolong, exacerbate, and spread civil war, but refugee return is an indicator of increased peace and stability. *Homeward Bound: Refugee Return and Local Conflict After Civil War* challenges these assumptions, arguing that mass refugee repatriation can create new sources of conflict in countries recovering from civil war. Using a political-ethnographic analysis of forced migration between Burundi and Tanzania, *Homeward Bound* documents this often-overlooked relationship between return migration and violence in post-conflict settings. The findings demonstrate how tension between returnees and non-migrants can lead to widespread local-level violence, even during peacetime. As such, the end of a war does not always coincide with a one-way ticket home for displaced populations. Instead, these new local conflicts can protract the displacement cycle as returnees are forced to flee again. By illuminating the role of refugee return in shaping future conflict and displacement, *Homeward Bound* provides a needed extension to theories of political violence and calls on policymakers to innovate alternative solutions to protracted forced migration situations.

The primary argument in *Homeward Bound* is that legacies of forced displacement and return create new identity divisions in post-conflict societies based on where individuals lived during the war. Shared

experiences of living abroad or surviving in-country during the war combined with the very act of leaving or staying create a sense in-group belonging based on ‘those who left and returned’ and ‘those who stayed’. These displacement-based cleavages layer on top of and cut across pre-existing divisions, like ethnicity or religion. Displacement-based cleavages become salient and can motivate violence when local institutions render the differences between those who stayed and those who left more visible and higher stakes: as individuals begin to understand their position in society as connected to their migration history, their future political and social behavior adjusts accordingly. This reifies displacement-related identity divisions and fuels animosity between returnees and non-migrant groups. Institutions governing land and property rights are often implicated in this process, given the connections between territory and displacement. However, competing narratives of deservedness and patriotism as well as perceptions of discrimination in access to citizenship, education, health care, or jobs can also intensify resentment between returning and non-migrant communities. Therefore, the character of returnee–non-migrant conflict will depend on the nature of local institutions and practices in countries-of-origin. Returnee–non-migrant conflict can then lead to repeat and protracted displacement, as the experience of return forces some to flee, again, compounding insecurity and eroding repeat-refugees’ identification with their country-of-origin.

The book evaluates the argument using an ethnographic case study of displacement between Burundi and Tanzania. The research design combines inductive and deductive approaches to develop, evaluate, and refine the theory. The core constructs of my argument were developed inductively based on my observations living and working in South Sudan. I then use an in-depth ethnographic case study of migration between Burundi and Tanzania after Burundi’s 1993-2005 civil war to test how well the argument holds in a second case. Research for the study spanned thirteen months in South Sudan, Burundi, and Tanzania, during which time I conducted 258 semi-structured interviews with villagers and refugees, international humanitarian organization staff, government officials, and local experts, in addition to countless hours of field observation. Burundi is a particularly hard case for my theory because displacement during Burundi’s civil war paralleled the country’s ethnic divisions. As such, refugee return from Tanzania was more likely to exacerbate ethnic relations than produce new, cross cutting, migration-related divisions. *Homeward Bound* documents how even in Burundi, a country where ethnic divisions sparked a genocide and 20-year long civil war, refugee return can change the nature of identity-based competition in post-conflict societies.

Homeward Bound makes three primary contributions. First, the book develops a novel theory to explain the linkages between refugee return and local conflict. Political inquiry on displacement disproportionately focuses on outward population movement; few political scientists have systematically examined the implications of refugee return. Studies that have focused on refugee return have discussed the history of refugee repatriation, conceptualized what successful return should accomplish, and documented the return experience. However, no other book offers a generalizable theory to explain why, how, and under what circumstances refugee return creates new sources of conflict in refugees’ countries-of-origin.

Second, the book advances the debate on the role of identity in conflict. Building on seminal scholarship in anthropology on exile and national identity and in political science on local violence during civil war, *Homeward Bound* demonstrates how displacement-based identities, developed in a relatively short period of time, can have significant influence on post-conflict politics. These findings challenge long-standing emphases on ethnic, religious, and class divisions in the study of civil wars and highlights the role of local institutions in shaping these new displacement-based cleavages.

Finally, *Homeward Bound* provides insight into the connections between refugee return and repeat displacement. Few studies of forced migration based in comprehensive fieldwork are able to capture dynamics on both sides of a border, or from one phase of displacement to the next. Due to the timing of my research, I was able to conduct ethnographic data collection in both Burundi and Tanzania on the consequences of refugee return before Burundi's 2015 electoral crisis, and on the dynamics of renewed displacement after the crisis. The findings are therefore able to link return with repeat migration and demonstrate why developing alternatives to mass refugee repatriation is critical for policymakers seeking to ameliorate protracted forced migration crises.

3. Chapter Outline

Part I: Understanding Refugee Return

Introduction

1. Research Design and Method
2. A Theory of Refugee Return & Local Conflict

Part II: The Consequences of Refugee Return in Burundi

3. A Brief History of Displacement in Africa's Great Lakes
4. The Making of Burundi's *Rapatriés* and *Résidents*
5. Institutionalizing Identity; Fueling Peacetime Violence
6. Fleeing, Again: How Return Migration Shaped Population Flight during Burundi's 2015 Third-Mandate Crisis

Part III: Refugee Return and the Future of Migration Governance

7. Refugee Return, Peacebuilding, and Governing Mobility

The plan of the book proceeds as follows. In Part I, I establish the importance of refugee return in international relations, present my theory of refugee return and conflict, and outline the combination of inductive and deductive methods used to develop and evaluate the theory. Part II presents an in-depth ethnographic case study to analyze how well the theory holds in a particular context: displacement between Burundi and Tanzania after Burundi's 1993-2005 civil war. I first contextualize the case with a brief history of migration in the region. The three following chapters answer a different question related to the theory. First, does refugee return create new identity divisions in Burundi? Second, were these divisions politically salient, and if so why and in what form did they manifest? And finally, how did experiences of refugee return shape individuals' future behavior? The book concludes in Part III with a discussion of what these findings mean for policymakers trying to end protracted refugee displacement.

Part I

The *introduction* motivates the book with a discussion of how voluntary repatriation is the international community's preferred solution to mass refugee crises. While many actors view this as a logistical feat that resets communities recovering from civil war to the way things were prior to the conflict, the process of refugee return can transform communities. I identify a common pattern of local tensions between returnees and non-migrants after civil wars, discuss why these conflicts and the role of returnees more generally have been understudied in international relations scholarship, and outline the limitations of existing theories of civil war violence in explaining returnee–non-migrant conflict. I

then present a summary of the book's argument: refugee return can create new sources of conflict in refugee's countries-of-origin, shaping future violence and leading to repeat migration.

Chapter One details the methodological approach of inductive theory development and deductive theory refinement and testing. I begin with a discussion of the theory development process in South Sudan using illustrative examples of the observations that informed the theory. I describe the evolution of the field site selection from theory development in South Sudan to theory refinement and data collection in Burundi and Tanzania. I detail what this fieldwork looked like in practice, including conducting ethnographic interviews and field observation, responding to unexpected political crises, and staying safe in violent contexts. I conclude with a discussion of the ethics of working in communities affected by displacement.

Chapter Two presents my two-pronged theory of refugee return and conflict in full. First, I argue that return-migration creates new social cleavages in countries-of-origin based on where individuals lived during the war – in-country or abroad. For individuals living abroad, shared experiences of adapting to new environments, combined with the very act of leaving, signal in-group belonging in contrast to both host-country nationals and co-nationals who remained in country. Some characteristics that define these groups are discrete and observable – language, accent, way of dress, religion. Others are more nuanced, based on perceptions of differences in ideology, patriotism, roles in the prior conflict, access to wealth and education, or 'deservedness' of peace dividends.

Second, these divisions become politically salient, or not, through interaction with local institutions and practices, such as property rights, land rights, language laws, and citizenship regimes. The belief that institutions in the country-of-origin provide different dividends to individuals based on their migration history creates dynamic cycle: as individuals begin to understand their position in society as connected to their migration history, their future political and social behavior adjusts accordingly. This reifies displacement-related divisions and fuels animosity between returnees and non-migrant groups.

Part II begins with *Chapter Three*, which outlines why Burundi is an especially useful case for evaluating my theory and provides the reader with some historical context to ground the case study analysis that follows.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six comprise the case study of displacement between Burundi and Tanzania.

Chapter Four demonstrates how refugee return following Burundi's 1993-2005 civil war created new group identities at the local level between so called *rapatriés* (returnees) and *résidents* (non-migrants). The *rapatrié* category was further subdivided by era of most recent flight – the "1993 returnees" the "1972s returnees." I leverage the ethnographic data to show how these new divisions were evident in the use of different labels and nicknames to distinguish returnees and non-migrants, in the development of stereotypes or narratives about how returnees and non-migrants behaved differently, and in the perception of discrimination based whether one was a *rapatrié* or *résident*.

Chapter Five interrogates the role of institutions in reifying displacement-based identities leading, in this case, to widespread local-level conflict. Using interviews, field observation, and analysis of government documents, I demonstrate how both informal institutions, like patrilineal inheritance practices, and formal institutions rendered the *rapatrié-résident* divide salient in local politics and fomented violence returnees and non-migrants. The chapter concludes with a within-case comparison following an abrupt

policy change in Burundi's national land commission, demonstrating how institutional design exacerbated conflict between returnees and non-migrants.

Chapter Six evaluates if and how these legacies of forced migration affected future behavior in Burundi. I find that individual and community experiences of return migration after the civil war shaped both the character and timing of renewed refugee flight when Burundi faced heightened political conflict in April 2015. I find that the “1993 *rapatriés*” tended to be among the first to flee the 2015 conflict, as they were the group facing the greatest economic and security threats from land conflict in Burundi. *Résidents* or return-migrants who (re)gained assets were more likely to wait and see how the conflict would play out before making the risky decision to flee.

The book concludes in *Part III* with *Chapter Seven*, which discusses the implications of the book's core findings for peacebuilding and refugee policy. I first discuss why peacebuilders often fail to understand how social processes of war, like displacement and return, alter the political landscape in post-conflict settings. As a result, peacebuilding interventions may overlook new sources of conflict during peacetime, or worse, exacerbate displacement-based identity divisions. I then explore what the book's findings mean for the current “three durable solutions” framework for displacement crises (repatriation, resettlement, and local integration). I argue that the durable solutions approach is a straitjacket which allows states to control refugees and prevents innovation of strategies that will better serve displaced populations. Instead, the international community needs to start thinking outside of the repatriation-resettlement-local integration box and consider alternative solutions for refugees that embrace mobility.

4. Author Information

I am an Assistant Professor in the International Relations Department at The London School of Economics and Political Science. My research has been published in academic outlets such as *International Security* and *Qualitative and Multi Method Research* as well as more mainstream policy outlets including [Foreign Policy](#), [Slate](#), and the Washington Post. I am also the author of *Youth and post-conflict reconstruction: agents of change* (US Institute of Peace Press, 2010).

My work has been funded by the National Science Foundation, U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Columbia Global Policy Initiative. I have worked with international policy organizations including the U.S. Institute of Peace, the World Bank, and the Sudd Institute. I was awarded the inaugural Emerging Global Scholar Prize (2019) from Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania. I hold a Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University

5. Market

Homeward Bound has cross-cutting academic appeal as it speaks to multiple literatures within political science as well as topics and methodologies in sociology and anthropology. Given its motivation and practical implications, the book will also be useful in masters programs in forced migration studies, international affairs, and humanitarian assistance.

The book can serve as a primary text on upper-level undergraduate and graduate political science and sociological courses with a substantive focus on forced migration, civil war, African politics, and humanitarian intervention. The book's foil to diaspora politics and ethnic conflict also makes it natural fit in both political science and sociological courses on nationalism. Given its theoretical and methodological approach, the book will also be of use in PhD level research design and qualitative

research methods courses in political science and sociology. The book's introduction and concluding discussions on international humanitarian policy and innovation will appeal to master's programs in forced migration studies as well as those focused more broadly on the practice of peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance.

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