

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v21i.9768>

**“Wherever I May Roam”: Refugees, Grievances, and Social Conflict**

Jeremy R. Backstrom and Michael Widmeier

Widener University

Webster University

[jrbackstrom@widener.edu](mailto:jrbackstrom@widener.edu), [michaelw24@gmail.com](mailto:michaelw24@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

Do refugees affect the outbreak of social conflict in the host country? If so, how do refugees influence the rise of domestic conflict? Prior scholarship demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between refugees in a host country and civil conflict; however, the focus on high battlefield death counts overlooks the potential relationship between the introduction of refugees in a host country and the rise of social conflict. We argue that the migration of refugees can increase the number of social conflict events within the host country by potentially increasing the ethnic-religious composition of the host country, increasing the economic competition by the availability of labor and altering governmental spending, and introducing a new population with complex grievances. Using a negative binomial model to test the relationship on a sample of African and Caribbean countries, we find support for our contention. While refugees are seeking security within a host country, the increase in refugees triggers a negative perception within society concerning them and consequently increases the propensity of social conflict. The development of social conflict can be significantly moderated through the further support and increased funding for refugees and host countries by developed countries.

**Keywords** Social conflict, refugees, political violence, migration, grievances

**Conflicts of Interest**

There are no conflicts of interest for this manuscript.

**Funding Statement**

There was no funding provided for this study.

**Introduction**

What is the relationship between refugees and social conflict? Do refugees affect the outbreak of political violence in the host country? If so, how do the refugees influence the rise of domestic conflict? Current research has found that a variety of negative implications arise from refugee flows into neighboring states. Specifically, refugees have been found to increase the likelihood of civil war, international war, state repression, and terrorism (Böhmelt et al., 2019; Choi & Salehyan, 2013; Fisk, 2018; Fisk, 2019; Gineste & Savun, 2019; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Salehyan, 2008; Savun & Gineste, 2019; Wright & Moorthy, 2018; Zhou & Shaver, 2021). Despite the advances made in this area, extant research overlooks the relationship between forced migration and lower-level social conflict events such as protests, riots, and the like.

Current global attention regarding refugees typically concentrates on the conflict in Ukraine between Ukrainian and Russian forces, which produced current estimates of over 6.8 million refugees since February 2025 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). Globally, current figures of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) by the end of 2024 were reported to be 111.7 million with the largest population from Syria (UNHCR, 2024). During the Syrian civil war, estimates of refugees attempting to escape the violence between the belligerents totaled 6.8 million individuals. 127 countries hosted Syrian refugees; however, the largest populations settled in several neighboring countries, specifically Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (UNHCR Global Trends, 2021).

Reports noted that an increase in social conflict within the host countries of Syrian refugees originating from various issues ranging from social to economic. While some studies argue that there is a positive effect from refugees and their impact on the host country's economy (Alix-Garcia et al., 2018; David et al., 2020; Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016), the countries hosting Syrian refugees suffered varying negative economic slowdowns. While the effects largely stem from the dynamics of the Syrian crisis, the refugees are often targeted by the societies of host



countries for being the catalyst of this negative economic effect. The most significant effect was the societal perception of an increase in job competition from the incoming refugees. In Lebanon, World Bank reports noted that labor force population would increase by 30–50% (Tan, 2015). In Turkey, refugees influenced the country through an increase in labor force competition as well as an increase in unemployment (Bahcekapili & Cetin, 2015; Ceritoglu et al., 2017; Esen & Binalti, 2017; Tumen, 2016). Furthermore, the refugees are commonly viewed as a cause of an increase in demand for goods and services as well as prices (Akgunduz et al., 2015; Tan, 2015). Syrian refugees are also viewed as a potential cause of social conflict through social reasons specifically altering the ethno-religious composition within the country. In Lebanon, the country experiences a delicate balance through the confessional system, which strictly accounts for the religious composition of the country. An increase of Syrian refugees who are likely Sunni Muslims may alter the composition and potentially increase the perception of sectarianism and incite social conflict (Tan, 2015).

This study has a dual objective in its endeavors. First, we build on the seminal literature and examine the relationship between refugee migration and social conflict events such as protests and demonstrations. We posit that refugee migration can increase social conflict through three features: 1) by altering the ethnic composition of host states; 2) by heightening economic competition in host states; and 3) by increasing the supply of political actors in host states. The first two mechanisms point primarily to social conflict that arises within the native population due to the grievances that are provoked by refugee migration (Wright & Moorthy, 2018), while the third mechanism indicates that refugees themselves can exhibit political agency in host states (Rüegger, 2019). Previous scholarship demonstrated the presence of refugees increases the likelihood of civil conflict; however, the causes of civil war often originate in lower-level social conflict prior to escalation. However, many countries experience lower-level social conflict without experiencing an escalation to civil war, and previous work that treats civil conflict onset as the dependent variable (e.g. Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006) fails to capture the relationship between refugees and conflict that falls short of civil war battle death thresholds, but is nonetheless destabilizing. In either case, it is important to study the relationship between refugees and social conflict because such conflict is either a precipitant to civil war or something that may push a country to the brink of war (Young, 2013).

Second, while this study demonstrates a development where the entrance of refugees could incite social conflict in the host country, the answer to this does not lie with an avoidance of refugees but rather greater support and funding for refugees. Refugees are victims of physical violence who are seeking out physical security and experience incredibly poor conditions to find it. Further, like any other country, the regime in host countries already have political questions and domestic issues of their own, which are significantly complicated by the insertion of refugees seeking physical security within their borders with limited support to sustain a new population. While refugees are found in all types of countries, developing countries tend to house a larger number and disproportionate amount of refugees compared to developed countries (UNHCR, 2011). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Bank Global Concessional Finance Facility (GCFF), Refugees International, and other related agencies provide funding and support for refugees themselves or the host countries; however, these agencies and organizations have been seriously underfunded. Moreover, the recent moves the United States have gestured toward regarding severely removing funding for USAID and other support agencies will make matters considerably worse. To avoid the potential of social conflict within host countries specifically developing countries, developed countries need to contribute more to refugee relief agencies and host countries. Furthermore, while the argument for greater funding is certainly a moral issue, a financial and efficiency argument can be made. If funding for refugees and humanitarian concerns continues to decrease, the propensity for social conflict in host countries will likely increase, disrupting the country and potentially the region. With this development, developed countries are likely to find it necessary to respond in a reactive manner and the military may be deemed as a necessary option. The financial and human costs for proactive humanitarian support remains much less compared to a military deployment to resolve a potentially dangerous situation. Moreover, there is an efficiency argument as well. Agencies devoted to humanitarian concerns are comprised of employees who are highly proficient in comprehending the situation and can deliver the necessary support to refugees and their host countries. While militaries are called upon to do numerous tasks, they lack the training and consequently, remain less proficient to handle the situation before it has boiled over into social conflict. Moreover, the two points are related as developed countries will be called upon to devote more money with a military response coupled with a military that is less adept to perform the necessary functions to resolve the situation.

In the next section, we present an overview of the current literature on refugees and immigration as well as social conflict and political violence. We then introduce our theory and corresponding hypothesis regarding how refugee flows influence the rise of social conflict. We next describe our research design, model, and operationalize the variables used in the analysis. We then test the proposed relationships using a negative binomial model on a sample of African and Caribbean countries and present an analysis of the results. Finally, we present our conclusions of the study as well as methods of improving study of this relationship.

## Literature Review

### Refugees and Forced Migration

A good deal of attention has been given to the causes of forced migration and this line of research overwhelmingly finds that the degree of political violence is a major factor driving the decision to flee (Adhikari, 2012, 2013; Moore & Shellman, 2007). However, as Moore and Shellman (2007) find, forcefully migrated populations often seek refuge in states experiencing civil war or in bordering countries that are at war with the origin country. These findings on the causes and destinations of forcefully migrated populations indicate that refugees fleeing political unrest will often escape to other states that are themselves ensconced in political violence.

Aside from refugees fleeing to countries that are themselves entrenched in socio-political unrest, the presence of refugees also increases the likelihood of various forms of political violence in host countries. Indeed, the lines between so-called “intrastate” and “interstate conflict” are often blurred, with civil unrest often being the result of transnational factors such as refugee flows (Gleditsch, 2007). The negative consequences of domestic conflict commonly cannot be contained within the state and consequently, developments in one state often have significant consequences for neighboring countries. In this line of research, refugees have been found to increase the likelihood of civil war in host countries because migrant flows facilitate transnational arms transfers, alter the ethnic composition of receiving states, and heighten economic competition (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Such negative externalities also increase the likelihood of international conflict because refugee-receiving states are more likely to initiate a militarized interstate dispute to prevent further externalities. Likewise, refugee-sending states are more likely to initiate a militarized interstate dispute as they pursue dissidents (Salehyan, 2008). Furthermore, the presence of refugees increases the likelihood of both domestic and transnational terrorism because the presence of aid resources offers militant groups opportunities to loot and attack foreign targets (Choi & Salehyan, 2013).

With this project, we build on the extant migration-conflict research program by examining the relationship between refugee flows and social conflict. While current research has illustrated the relationship between migration and civil conflict, international conflict, and terrorism, extant research has failed to look at the relationship between refugees and social conflict—that is protests, riots, and other unrest.

### Social Conflict and Political Violence

The literature on the dynamics between a regime and dissidents<sup>1</sup> has a wealth of studies demonstrating how regimes and dissidents escalate or de-escalate their activity based on the actions of the opposing belligerent, commonly referred to as the dissent-repression nexus (Carey, 2006, 2010; Moore, 2000). In understanding how protests and social conflict arise, there are two main strands of literature: those examining grievances and those concentrating on opportunity and conditions allowing for conflict to arise.

The grievance approach literature focuses on how economic inequalities of a group in a society will stimulate dissatisfaction concerning their current economic standing. In other words, the large amount of economic inequality within the group will produce a greater dissatisfaction. Higher levels of inequality translate into greater dissatisfaction and grievances, which increases the probability of violent social conflict. Gurr's concept of relative deprivation captures the sentiment and economic dissatisfaction of a particular group. Relative deprivation is defined as “...actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities. Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightful entitled. Value capabilities are the goods and conditions they think they are capable of getting and keeping.” (Gurr, 1970, pg. 24). Relative deprivation thus becomes the vehicle that drives a group's grievances to the provocation of social conflict. Therefore, if there is a sizeable difference between what a group expects to receive and what they are able to receive from the state, there is a greater likelihood of mobilization and possibly social conflict. Several studies suggest that grievances in the form of relative deprivation provokes a significant effect on the rise of social conflict and civil war (Gurr, 1970; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008; Regan & Norton, 2005).

While the grievances strand of literature offers a compelling explanation of why social conflict arises, the main criticism against this line of explanation is that inequality (and thus relative deprivation) always exists but social conflict only erupts at certain time periods. On the other hand, the opportunity approach literature concentrates on the dynamics of the political structure itself, the allocation and opportunity for political power, and the prospects (or lack thereof) for political participation. Tarrow (2008) focuses on the political opportunity structure of a country and its effects on political participation (conventional and unconventional). Essentially, political opportunities are aspects

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to dissidents as anyone opposing the regime in an unconventional manner such as social protest or conflict.

of the political structure that enable citizens to engage in unconventional political participation or contentious politics. Thus, the occurrence of political contention is dependent on the existence of political opportunities for the constituency (access to institutions) and the restrictions on society for engagement in political participation (capacity for repression).

Several studies have also demonstrated that when the political environment is ripe for contention from challengers such as a change in the regime or polity type, this may provide an opening for the development of political contention against the regime in power (Hegre et al., 2001). In the same vein, Tarrow (2008) argues that it is the changes in the political structure, (openings and constraints), which will incite people to engage in contentious politics. It is also suggested that the opening in political opportunities may stem from various phenomena such as wars, industrialization, unemployment, and demographic changes.

## **Theory**

### **Why Refugees Increase Social Conflict in Host States**

With these two strands of literature in mind, the incidence of social conflict is inherently tied to both grievances and opportunity. We posit that refugee flows can increase the amount of social conflict in host states through three approaches. First, we claim that refugee flows can alter the ethnic composition of receiving states, which consequently increases social conflict. While refugees from the same ethnic group may be viewed in a sympathetic light by members of host states, significant problems may arise when the members of host states and refugees belong to different ethnic groups (Abdelaaty, 2021; Bansak et al., 2016; Bloom et al., 2016; Hangartner et al., 2019; Krcmaric, 2014; UNHCR, 2011; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015). Traditional animosities may exist between different ethnic groups. Additionally, failures in communication and misunderstandings may arise due to linguistic and cultural differences. As a result, we posit that one avenue through which refugees can increase social conflict in host states is by altering the ethnic composition of host states.

The second mechanism through which refugees can increase social conflict is connected to the economic impact of migration; specifically, we posit that refugees often heighten economic competition in host countries, which may serve as a means of increasing social conflict. In this regard, natives may grow weary of the economic challenge posed by refugees and target them for violence. Refugees can provide a source of cheaper labor compared to native workers, which may produce frustration and resentment within the ranks of the population of the host country as they lose their source of employment and income (Bansak et al., 2016; Buehler et al., 2020; Hangartner et al., 2019; Kreibaum, 2016; Krcmaric, 2014; Loschmann et al., 2019; Maystadt et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2011; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015). With this resentment, the groups in society affected by these changes may mobilize to express their dissatisfaction (Regan & Norton, 2005). For instance, hundreds of Kenyans stormed the Dadaab refugee camp in June 2002 to protest against job discrimination, claiming that Somali refugees were hired by the International Organization for Immigration and that Kenyans were being discriminated against when recruiting clerks to oversee refugee transfers between camps (Human Rights Watch, 2002). This process itself may directly lead to social conflict or develop indirectly if the regime responds to the mobilization with severe repression. In an attempt to suppress the opposition, the regime may actually strengthen the dissidents by either increasing the numbers with the ranks of the dissidents or by escalating the level of unconventional political participation to violence (Carey, 2006; Moore, 2000).

Refugees may also be targeted by the population in a host country because they can be perceived as taking aid resources out of the hands of natives who are in dire economic straits themselves (Bansak et al., 2016; Buehler et al., 2020; Hangartner et al., 2019; Kreibaum, 2016; Krcmaric, 2014; Loschmann et al., 2019; Maystadt et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2011; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015). According to the Executive Committee of the UNHCR Standing Committee (1997), "a common source of discontent for a local population, especially one that is poor is to see refugees receiving services or entitlements which are not available to them" (p. 15). Host countries incur a significant increase in costs in hosting refugees and may incur negative effects indirectly related to refugees such as paying for refugee officials and security members, additional infrastructure spending as well as economic and environmental costs. Further market prices may be impacted by the insertion of refugees and local wages may be negatively influenced. Resources typically used for the domestic population are now divided to divert funding for refugees (UNHCR, 2011). In May 2005, Chadian citizens clashed with Sudanese refugees because United Nations aid elevated the living conditions of the refugees above the local population. In other words, despite the squalor conditions in refugee camps, the refugees themselves posed a significant economic burden to the host country even with economic assistance from a regional or international organization (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] Annual Report, 2005). This placed the regime at a disadvantage in providing the necessary goods and services to its own population, which produces widespread grievances as public goods are now affected. On the other hand, the aid from a regional or international organization may create a situation whereby the refugees may enjoy a living condition that is perceived at a higher level than the actual population of the host country (Bansak et al., 2016; Buehler et al., 2020; Hangartner et al., 2019; Kreibaum, 2016; Krcmaric, 2014; Loschmann et al., 2019; Maystadt et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2011; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015). In both situations, the aggrieved population of the

host country may become restive and mobilize against the current conditions, evolving into social conflict.

The third means through which refugees could increase social conflict is because refugees can display political agency in the countries to which they have fled. In this regard, a segment of refugees could participate in various sorts of dissident activities including protest in host countries (UNHCR, 2011). While nonviolent dissent may involve refugees, Masterson and Lehmann (2020) note that refugee recruitment for armed groups occurs minimally. One major issue that is a cause of contention among migrant populations is the living conditions in host states. Specifically, refugees often live without sufficient access to resources such as food and clean drinking water and may participate in social conflict as a means of objecting to their living conditions in host states. Indeed, from Rwandan refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo stoning World Food Program workers to protesting a reduction in food rations in 1995, to the staging of a hunger strike by Congolese refugees in Uganda in 1998 to protest against a new U.N. rations distribution system, to refugees holding Red Cross workers hostage over changes in the location of food distribution centers in 1993 in Rwanda, refugees have participated in social conflict in host countries over their living conditions.

Furthermore, the introduction of the refugees presents a considerable change in demographics within the country and may impact more than just the employment and the economic conditions for the population of the host country (Tarrow, 2008). As argued in previous studies, the eruption of civil war in a neighboring country presents a challenge to the regime in the host country. Civil war cannot be contained at the borders of the conflicted country as it commonly spills over to the neighboring territories through various means to include refugees. Through the introduction of the refugees, civil conflict can be expanded into the host country by offering a safe haven for rebel forces (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Salehyan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009).

Through these noted channels, the political shock to the host government presents an opportunity to dissidents within a country, providing them an opening to challenge the regime through an expression of their discontent and possibly evolving into violent social conflict. Thus, the spark that ignites the flames of political contention is the actual opening in the political structure, where dissatisfaction with the regime and refugees as well as their grievances can be expressed. Prior to these political shocks, the political structure did not permit an opening in the political structure that would lower the opportunity costs for political contention to ignite and flourish; however, the introduction of refugees can provide the motivation for grievances as well as the opportunity and opening in political structure for the mobilization of the dissidents to express their grievances and dissatisfaction.

To recap, we argue that refugees can increase the amount of social conflict among the native population in host states by altering the ethnic composition of host states and by increasing economic competition. In addition, refugees can increase social conflict because refugees themselves often exhibit political agency in host states. These three pathways illustrate the fact that both natives and refugees can play an active role in the relationship between refugees and social conflict. Ultimately, we hypothesize that an increase in the number of refugees in a host state will impact the probability the occurrence of social conflict within its borders.

**Hypothesis:** As the number of refugees in a host state increase, the number of social conflict events will increase.

## **Materials and Methods**

The temporal domain for the dataset employed in this study runs from 2000–2017. This particular time period was chosen largely due to the availability of data – the most reliable data on the movement of refugees (UNHCR) dates back to 2000, while the data for social conflict is not available later than 2017. The spatial domain of this study consists of 61 total countries, drawn from Africa, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. This pool of countries was determined by the availability of data regarding social conflict events. Forty-nine of the sixty-one countries in the sample are in Africa, seven from Central America/Mexico, and five from the Caribbean. The rationale behind the inclusion of the non-African countries is that the utilization of data outside of Africa allows us to determine whether the statistical relationships we uncover hold outside of the African continent. It is possible that the relationship between refugee inflows and social conflict may be particular to given regions, so incorporating cases outside of Africa allow us to subject our hypothesis to a more stringent test. The unit of analysis in this study is the country-year, as we intend to capture the impact of annual refugee flows upon the incidence of social conflict for each country in each year in the sample.

## **Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable in this analysis is the number of social conflict events that occurred per country between 2000–2017 and is gathered from the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD hereafter). SCAD captures social conflict events including protests, riots, strikes, inter-communal conflict, government violence against civilians, and other instances of low-level political conflict (Salehyan et al., 2012). SCAD researchers coded social conflict events using media reports produced by the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse. In this study, we utilize SCAD data to create a count of social conflict events for every country-year in the temporal and spatial domains. Thus, our



dependent variable consists of all variants of social conflict events present in the SCAD sample. This approach is implemented to capture the broad societal impact of refugee inflows on host states. We argue that limiting our sample to a limited range of social conflict types would not capture the full complexity of the phenomenon in question, so the aggregate total of social conflicts per country-year is utilized.

### **Primary Independent Variable**

The primary independent variable of interest in this study is the number of refugees present in a given country and year. This data is gathered from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Statistical Online Database. The UNHCR online database provides access to data regarding a range of “population types” including Refugees, Asylum seekers, Returned refugees, Internally displaced persons, Returned IDPs, Stateless persons, and Others of concern. In this study, our independent variable consists of the UNHCR refugees population type only. This population type best captures our conceptualization of refugees who migrate across international borders, driven by the factors outlined in earlier sections of this paper. Our theoretical expectation (as described above) is that refugees will exhibit a positive relationship with social conflict.

### **Control Variables**

A range of control variables is included in the statistical analysis to effectively isolate the relationship between refugees and social conflict and to minimize omitted variable bias. These controls include gross domestic product per capita, the number of excluded ethnic groups, level of democracy, freedom of association, media freedom, the presence of civil war, unemployment, income level, and government effectiveness. In addition, we have created a binary variable to account for whether a country is in Africa. It is possible that any statistical patterns uncovered by the analysis can be unique to Africa, due to either the large proportion of African cases in the sample or characteristics common to African countries – this variable will control for these issues. The characteristics and sources of each of these control variables will be described in turn below.

First, we include a control variable for the real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita to account for the influence of the wealth of the country on social conflict. The data is gathered from the World Bank GDP (in current US \$) dataset (World Bank, 2025) and we logged the variable to avoid skewness between the GDP of the countries in our sample.

Second, to capture the influence of ethnic groups, a count variable that represents the number of ethnic groups excluded from power in a given country is used. This variable is gathered from the Ethnic Power Relations Core Dataset 2021 version (Vogt et al., 2015).

Third, as democracy is commonly controlled for in cross-national studies, a country-level measure is incorporated into our dataset. The variable *polity2* from the Center for Systemic Peace’s Polity IV Annual Time-Series dataset is utilized here to capture the effect of democracy on social conflict (Marshall et al., 2019).

Fourth, a measure for freedom of association and assembly is used to account for the degree of latitude granted to citizens concerning nonconventional political behavior. This variable allows us to control for the environment in which social conflict actors operate. We gained this variable from the Cingranelli and Richards Human Rights Data Project (CIRI) (Cingranelli et al., 2021).

Fifth, as the SCAD events were collected using media sources, we have also included a variable to control for media freedom across the countries in the dataset. We thus incorporate the Freedom House Freedom of the Press score to account for the variance in media freedom across the data sample (Freedom House, 2025).

Sixth, a binary variable representing the presence (or lack thereof) of civil war in a given country-year is included and is gathered from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Onset of Intrastate Armed Conflict dataset (Gleditsch et al., 2002). Given the large influence that civil wars often exert on civilian political behavior, this factor is controlled for here in the context of social conflict.

Seventh, we include a variable representing government state capacity and effectiveness. It is expected that a government with greater capacity and effectiveness should have a lower number of social conflicts based on the willingness of the population of a host country to engage in dissent. The Quality of Government Index is obtained through the International Country Risk Guide. It ranges from 0 to 1 where higher values of the variable indicate a higher quality of government based on values of corruption, law and order, and bureaucratic quality (PRS Group, 2023; Teorell et al., 2023).

Eighth, we incorporate a variable measuring the average income level of the host country’s population, which represents a potential grievance and trigger for social conflict. This information is gained from the World Bank and represents the adjusted net national income per capita in constant 2015 US dollars (World Bank, 2021).

Ninth, we use a variable representing unemployment level within a country. Like income level, this variable

represents a potential grievance and provoking stimulus for social conflict by the population of the host country. We gain the information from the International Labour Organization and it represents the total level of unemployment within a country as a percentage of the total labor force (International Labour Organization, 2022).

**Statistical Model** We use a negative binomial regression model to test the above hypothesis and determine the statistical relationships between the independent variables and the incidence of social conflict events. This model was chosen as it is the appropriate statistical technique when working with a dependent variable that represents a numerical “count” of a phenomenon in question. As we aim to examine the relationship between our independent variables and the number of social conflict events in a given year, a negative binomial regression model is utilized to carry out the statistical analysis in this study.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1: The Effect of Refugees on the Number of Social Conflict Events**

VARIABLES	Event count	Ln alpha
Refugees	0.0787*** (0.026)	
Freedom of Assoc.	-0.2988*** (0.082)	
Freedom of Press	0.0105** (0.005)	
Africa	-0.1916 (0.216)	
GDP per capita (log)	0.2909*** (0.085)	
Polity2	0.0441*** (0.017)	
Excluded ethnic groups	0.0295 (0.032)	
Civil War	0.0255 (0.149)	
Unemployment (lag)	-0.2773 (0.129)	
Income level (lag)	0.0002*** (0.00005)	
ICRG (Quality of Government)	-3.218*** (0.537)	
Constant	0.2857 (0.747)	-0.1528 (0.0714)
Observations	424	424

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05, \* p&lt;0.1

**Table 2: Incidence Rate Ratios for Effect of Refugees on the Number of Social Conflict Events**

VARIABLES	Event count	lnalpha
Refugees	1.082*** (0.028)	
Freedom of Assoc.	0.742*** (0.061)	
Freedom of Press	1.011** (0.005)	
Africa	0.826 (0.178)	
GDP per capita (log)	1.338*** (0.114)	
Polity2	1.045*** (0.018)	
Excluded ethnic groups	1.030 (0.033)	
Civil War	1.026 (0.153)	
Unemployment (lag)	0.973*** (0.009)	
Income level (lag)	1.0002*** (0.00005)	
ICRG (Quality of Government)	0.0400*** (0.022)	
Constant	1.331 (0.994)	-0.153 (0.071)
Observations	424	424

We present our results from the negative binomial model in Table 1 and further, provide greater explanation in Table 2 with the incidence rate ratios of the coefficients. As demonstrated from the results in Table 2, our results are highly significant and operate in the hypothesized direction. As we expected, the variable for refugees is positively associated with the number of the social conflict events and highly significant. In other words, the presence of refugees in a country increases the number of social conflict events erupting within the host country. Specifically, a one-unit increase in refugees within a host country increases the number of social conflict events within the country



per year by 8.2 percent. This finding falls in line with our theory that the refugees can have a significant impact on the occurrence as well as the increase of the number of social conflict events within a country.

Furthermore, many of our control variables perform in the expected manner. Freedom of association is negatively related to the dependent variable and highly significant, while press freedom is positively related to the number of social conflict events and likewise significant. On one hand, the variable for freedom of association suggests that the ability of citizens to freely associate without government interference decreases the number of social conflict events within the country by 25.8%. On the other hand, the results imply that the ability of the press and news media to report freely increases the number of social conflict events within a country by 1.1%.

The variables representing the political attributes of the country suggest that the institutional features of a host country have a strong impact on the number of social conflict events within the country. First, the results in Table 2 suggest that a one-unit increase in the level of democracy through the Polity 2 variable increases the number of social conflict events by 4.5%. This may seem alarming and potentially, a critical analysis of an increase in democratization but we also need to consider three factors. First, the dependent variable of social conflict events concentrates on several types of social conflict short of civil war, which include violent and nonviolent approaches that a democratic government may choose to not suppress because the tolerance of certain forms of dissent. Second, there is no selection bias for countries hosting refugees where more democratic countries receive more refugees compared to less democratic countries. Refugees typically do not enjoy a wide selection of countries based on preference of future living conditions. Instead, they commonly opt for what is available to them in the immediate aftermath of what they are trying to avoid in their home country. In other words, geography plays a role in this selection and they typically move to a neighboring country, which does not guarantee an overwhelming increase in the level of democracy. Third, the selection of countries within our sample are located in the Caribbean and Africa, where there are a greater proportion of authoritarian countries and a one unit increase in the level of democracy is unlikely to elevate the regime to a liberal democracy. The mean score for the polity2 variable is a score of 2 and the mean score for polity2 variable for African countries in the sample is a score of 1<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, while the effect of Polity 2 variable is significant and suggests an increase in the number of social conflict events, the previous polity score of the country may not signify a democratic country is hosting the refugees. Thus, this result does not suggest a critique of democracy in its effect on suppressing social conflict.

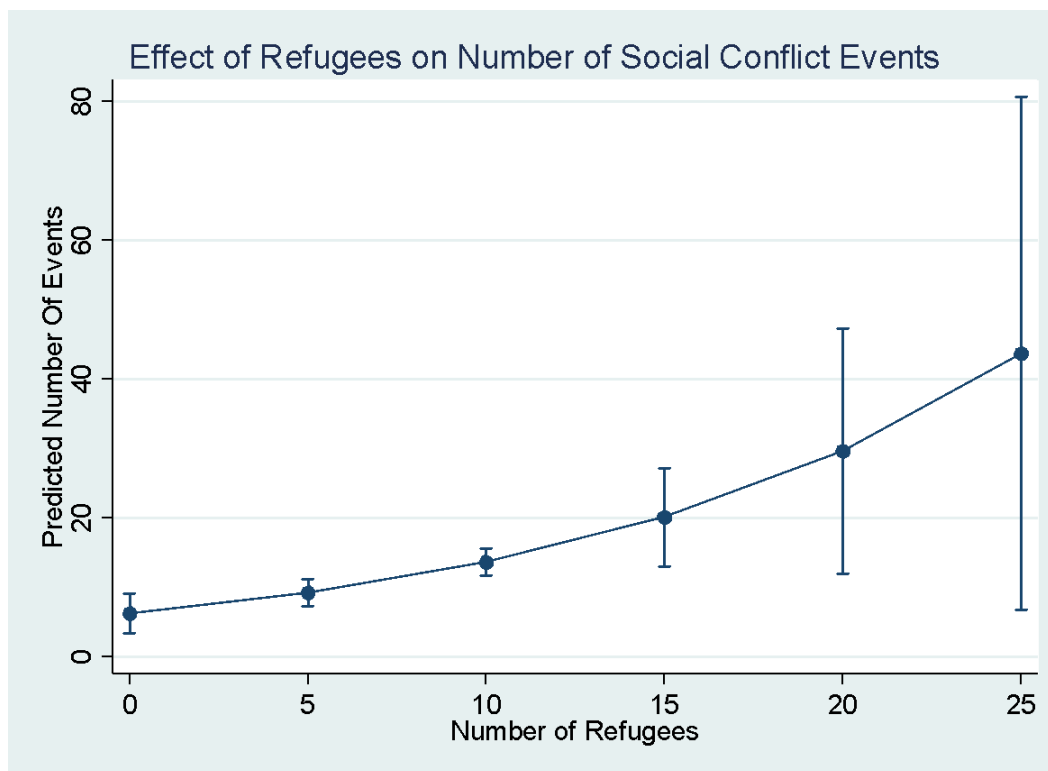
We also control for the state capacity and effectiveness of the host country, which we proposed higher levels of this feature would stifle the number of social conflict events. Based on Table 2, this suggests that a one-unit increase in the quality of government scores (ICRG) decreases the number of social conflict events by 96%. This correlates with our expectations that an increase in the effectiveness and capacity of a government would severely decrease the number of social conflict events.

We also controlled for several socioeconomic variables regarding the host country to isolate whether an increase in social conflict events is driven by the existence of refugees or if the economic contextual environment is impacting the overall results within the country. First, the GDP per capita of a host country plays a strong and significant role. A one-unit increase in GDP per capita suggests that social conflict events increase by 33.8%. Again, this is not a critical analysis of countries with higher levels of economic development but rather suggests that higher levels of economic development within the host country does not alleviate the rise of social conflict and the regime does not remain immune from conflict. Second, the lagged variable of unemployment is significant and operates in a negative direction. This suggests that a one-unit increase in unemployment decreases social conflict events within the country by 2.7%. Third, the lagged variable for income level within the country is also significant and operates in a positive manner. While the variable is significant, its effects are minimal, suggesting a one-unit increase in income level has a .002% increase in social conflict events. In other words, income level, while significant, has a limited influence on whether social conflict actually increases.

Finally, there were three variables that remained insignificant in this study. Surprisingly, the African dichotomous variable, excluded ethnic groups, and the civil conflict variables were not significant.

To offer a more substantive evaluation of our results, the graph below shows the predicted number of social conflict events as the log of refugees increase. As illustrated in Fig. 1, while a given country with a log of approximately 5 refugees has 10 predicted conflict events in a given year, a country with a log of 20 refugees has 30 predicted conflict events a year. This provides substantive support that as the number of refugees in a given state increases, the number of social conflict events increase. Thus, refugees play a significant role, despite being transnational, in domestic unrest in host countries aside from their possible role in spreading civil conflict (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Salehyan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Polity IV* Dataset, a score of 6-10 is viewed as a liberal democracy.



**Figure 1: The Effect of Refugees on the Number of Social Conflict Events**

## Conclusions

Recent studies demonstrated the role refugees often play during contentious politics and violence to include civil war and terrorism (Choi & Salehyan, 2013; Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Salehyan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). Currently, there has been limited scholarly work on the relationship between refugees and the rise of social conflict within the host country. We attempt to fill in this gap in the literature by proposing that the introduction of refugees within a host country can incite and increase the number of social conflict events. Furthermore, we identified three potential pathways for this relationship.

First, migration of refugees can increase social conflict in the host country by influencing the ethnic composition of the nation-state. The introduction of ethnic minorities to the host state creates more ethnic heterogeneity within the country and this may incite more conflict as traditional animosities or ethnic power struggles may likely exist. The change in the ethnic composition of the country may push members of the other ethnic group into contentious activity. Second, refugees can create economic competition in the state and consequently, escalate the number of social conflict events. They can offer a source of cheaper labor than native workers of the host country. This in turn can cause frustration and over time, the rise of social conflict. Furthermore, native workers may see the refugees as taking aid resources out the hands of those who need it. As funding within the host country is reallocated to assist the refugees, those native individuals and groups who are in need of assistance become aggrieved and express their frustration through group mobilization and conflict. Third, the introduction of refugees may increase social conflict events in a more direct manner. The refugees themselves may engage in contentious activities as they are displeased with their living conditions. Since refugees often live in squalor conditions devoid of clean drinking water and food, they could express their frustration and grievances through unconventional manners such as protest and riots.

The results of this analysis demonstrate significant support for the main elements of our proposed theory. By employing a negative binomial model, we were able to determine the effects within a country that influence an increase or decrease of the number of social conflict events. As hypothesized, we found that there is a parallel relationship between refugees and social conflict where the number of social conflict events increase as the number of refugees also increase: Specifically, with a one-unit increase in the number of refugees, there is an 8.2% increase in the number of social conflict events.

As mentioned above, there is a dual objective to this study. While we provide support for the contention that as the number of refugees increase, the number of social conflict events increase, this outcome does not and should not have to be the ultimate result. This study provides a snapshot of this relationship during a time period where support

agencies for refugees and host countries were underfunded, which certainly had an impact on the results. Developing countries or states with lower GDP per capita tend to take on a greater and disproportionate number of refugees compared to states with higher levels of GDP per capita (UNHCR, 2011). At this moment in time, developed countries specifically the United States are severely reducing funding or ending funding and support various institutions that support refugees or host countries such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and UNRWA. This drastic change in policy will have serious negative effects that will not only damage refugees and host countries but will likely lead to an increase in social conflict events. Through the findings made in this study, we highly recommend that the Trump administration not only reverse their decision on providing funding and support to refugees and host countries but actually increase the funding even more than previous administrations. As mentioned above, a financial and efficiency argument supports this policy recommendation. First, the proactive increase in funding and support for these issues will likely have a positive effect on refugees directly as well as supporting the host countries to support the refugees within their borders and avoid potential social conflict developments (David et al., 2020; Lehmann & Masterson, 2020; Manthei, 2021; Masterson & Lehmann, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). Further, it is significantly cheaper than responding in a reactive manner through the U.S. military or supporting a regional military force. Second, the agencies that the funding and support will go to have employees who are already proficient in administering the necessary support instead of resorting to the military response whose members are not adept in the providing solution to these developments. In the end, refugees need physical security and if certain members of the international community are unwilling or unable to take on providing direct services to them, they need to provide further funding and support to the refugees and the developing countries who do take them into their borders. Without this assistance, a substantial amount of the unforeseen costs of caring for the refugees falls on the shoulders of the host countries, which may provoke the native population of the host country to perceive refugees as the source of current and future domestic issues- economic, social, and political. Despite the perception that refugees serve as the stimulus of socioeconomic problems, the development is a complex, multifaceted issue and it is not specifically that the refugees have an intentional negative socioeconomic effect.

While we demonstrated that there are significant results in our study, we recognize several areas of improvement. While we hypothesized three pathways on how refugees can influence the number of social conflict events within a country, we did not expressly test the specific, proposed relationships. In this iteration of our work, we explicitly tested the relationship between the existence of refugees within a country and whether the number of social conflict events increase or decrease. This work serves as a springboard for future research. In future iterations, we wish to further empirically explore the identified pathways through three separate tests: a further in-depth focus on social conflict as a result of ethnic grievances, economic grievances, and refugees serving as political agents themselves in their expression of discontent. Furthermore, another important yet unexplored question is the element of timing of the social conflict in comparison to the introduction of new refugees. If the timing of the conflict arrives earlier, one would expect that the conflict could be incited by native populations whereas if the timing of the social conflict occurs at later periods of time from the introduction of refugees, the occurrence of social conflict may be driven by refugees expressing their grievances with the conditions they face. The potential for other new research opportunities is quite fruitful as this relationship has been largely unexplored.

While much progress has been made in the field of migration and conflict, there is a significant gap in our study of conflict as prior studies emphasized the study of civil war, international war, and terrorism. Our contribution to this strand of the literature concentrates on lower-level social conflict as an effect of the introduction of refugees within a country. In doing so, we propose significant causal mechanisms that explain why social conflict develops in a host country and how refugees impact the rise of this conflict.

### Data Availability

Replication data for this study is available upon request at Harvard Dataverse.

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