Expertise

Migration in the Context of Security

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Abstract   Der Zusammenhang zwischen Migration und Sicherheit ist vielschichtig und komplex und erfordert einen multidisziplinären Ansatz, welcher politische, soziale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Faktoren berücksichtigt. Da die globale Migration – ob durch Konflikte, Armut oder Verfolgung verursacht – weiter zunimmt, ist die Bewältigung dieser Herausforderungen wichtiger denn je. Ein ausgewogener Ansatz ist unerlässlich, um die Sicherheit zu gewährleisten und gleichzeitig die Rechte und Schutzbedürfnisse der Migranten zu wahren.

Bei entsprechender Steuerung kann Migration die Wirtschaft stärken, den sozialen Zusammenhalt fördern und sogar die Sicherheit verbessern. Umgekehrt kann eine unzureichende Steuerung zu Instabilität führen, insbesondere in Zeiten wirtschaftlicher Abschwünge oder politischer Krisen. Die Bekämpfung der Ursachen irregulärer Migration – wie Armut, Korruption, schwache Institutionen, Konflikte und Zerstörung der Umwelt – ist von entscheidender Bedeutung, um Vertreibungen zu verringern und sicherzustellen, dass Migration eine Wahl bleibt und keine Notwendigkeit darstellt.

Schlüsselbegriffe Migration; Rechtsstaatlichkeit; gesellschaftliche Stabilität; Staatssicherheit; menschliche Sicherheit

Keywords Migration; rule of law; social stability; state security; human security

The relationship between migration and security is broad and complex, requiring a multidisciplinary approach that considers political, social, economic, and cultural factors. As global migration continues to rise – whether driven by conflict, poverty, or persecution – addressing these challenges has become more critical than ever. A balanced approach is essential, one that upholds security while safeguarding migrants' rights and protection needs.

When well-managed, migration is a powerful force for good, strengthening economies, fostering social cohesion, and even improving security. Conversely, failing to address migration effectively can lead to greater instability, particularly during economic downturns or political crises. Addressing the root causes of irregular migration – such as poverty, corruption, weak institutions, conflict, and environmental degradation – is crucial to reducing forced displacement and ensuring migration remains a choice rather than a necessity.

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Introduction

Migration is a natural social phenomenon that has shaped human societies for millennia. Many researchers and practitioners regard migration as beneficial, enabling individuals to pursue better opportunities and contributing positively to receiving societies. Nations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia were founded on migration, with economic, social, and cultural exchanges fueling their growth and prosperity. While migration has traditionally drawn the attention of economists, sociologists, and lawyers, it has recently become a central concern for politicians, policymakers, and academics, mainly because of its implications for state security.

When discussing migration, one must be careful not to conflate distinct terms: "migration," "asylum seekers," "refugees," and "internally displaced people" (IDPs). Such confusion frequently appears in media reports and is echoed by politicians and other decision-mak-

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ers. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) migrant an "umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons"[1]. An asylum seeker is someone who leaves their country due to conflict or persecution and seeks international protection; if granted asylum by the receiving state, they become a refugee. Meanwhile, IDPs move within their own country, often because of natural disasters or conflicts[2].

These groups are governed by different legal frameworks, and only refugees receive robust protection under international law – specifically the 1951 Refugee Convention. This treaty grants rights to those forced to flee their countries due to persecution or conflict and obliges signatory states to provide protection. Recognizing the limited coverage for other categories of migrants, the international community developed the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration under the auspices of the United Nations. Although this Compact is "a non-legally binding, cooperative framework that upholds the sovereignty of states and their obligations under international law[3]," several states rejected it, thereby limiting its potential to enhance global governance of migration. Notably, Switzerland initially facilitated the Compact's negotiation but ultimately did not ratify it owing to domestic political factors.

Even if we clarify the various definitions of population flows, these flows are predominantly mixed. The IOM defines "mixed movement" as one "in which a number of people are travelling together, generally in an irregular manner, using the same routes and means of transport, but for different reasons"[4] This mixture of motives and statuses presents challenges to transit and receiving countries, as well as to the individuals on the move.

According to the IOM World Migration Report 2024[5], there were 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, representing 3.6 % of the global population. While regular migration is generally seen as a positive phenomenon, irregular migration presents challenges to both state and human security. By its nature, it is difficult to determine the exact number of irregular migrants[6], but estimates suggest that they make up 15–20 % of the total migrant population or 1 % of the global population[7]. Based on this logic, the number of irregular migrants globally today would be around 56–80 million.

Migration is driven by a combination of push factors, which force individuals to leave their home countries, and pull factors, which attract them to new destinations. Among the push factors, global disparities in wealth and opportunities, ongoing economic crises, and segmented labour markets create an environment where individuals struggle to secure stable livelihoods. Additionally, instability caused by political conflicts, environmental degradation exacerbated by climate change, and human rights violations further compel people to migrate. Advances in communication and transportation technologies, along with strong migrant networks, have also played a significant role in facilitating migration, turning it into a global industry.

On the other hand, pull factors such as better economic prospects, demand for labour in specific sectors, and higher wages make migration attractive. Developed nations often provide improved living conditions, social services, and personal security, which serve as powerful incentives for migrants. The presence of well-established diaspora communities also eases integration by offering social and financial support. Additionally, opportunities for education, healthcare, and overall better quality of life encourage individuals to seek a future in more prosperous countries.

Migration and Security Nexus

Migration trends are influenced by various factors, but the movement of people itself can have security implications. Irregular migration, human smuggling, and pressure on national resources pose challenges for both origin and

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destination countries, underscoring the need for policies that balance effective migration management with security. While the securitization of migration has been criticized[8] for prompting responses that may undermine human rights, genuine security concerns – especially regarding irregular migration – must be carefully analysed and addressed.

From a state security perspective, every country has the prerogative to regulate who resides within its borders, uphold the rule of law, and maintain social stability. However, irregular migration flows can pose challenges to these objectives. Unauthorized border crossings raise concerns about national security, prompting governments to strengthen border controls. In recent years irregular migration was used as hybrid threat with increased involvement of the military[9]. There is also apprehension that terrorist groups exploit migration routes, leading to increased surveillance and counterterrorism measures. Additionally, migration has been linked to crime, often due to criminal networks within groups of irregular migrants taking advantage of other migrants. Crimes committed by irregular migrants or asylum seekers, such as the recent knife and car attacks in Germany, understandably make first page of newspapers[10]. However, broad accusations without evidence also occur and only fuel misinformation, as studies show migrants are no more likely to engage in crime than local populations[11]. Political stability can also be affected, particularly when large inflows of migrants lead to policy disputes, social tensions, or shifts in political landscapes. Social cohesion may be tested when integration policies struggle to accommodate newcomers, particularly during economic downturns when job competition intensifies. Finally, the environmental impact of migration cannot be overlooked, as large concentrations of people in refugee camps can strain local resources and infrastructure, leading to environmental degradation.

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Another critical aspect of the migration-security nexus is human security, particularly for migrants themselves. Irregular migrants are especially vulnerable due to their lack of legal status, identification documents, stable income, and social support networks, making them easy targets for exploitation and harm. Human trafficking is a major concern, as many irregular migrants fall victim to smugglers and traffickers who promise escape but instead subject them to abuse and forced labour[12]. Migrants, particularly women and children, often endure severe mistreatment, including inhumane transportation, hunger, lack of medical care, and rising cases of sexual violence[13]. Additionally, some migrants become susceptible to violent extremism, as radical groups exploit their desperation and offer financial incentives as a pathway out of hardship[14]. Xenophobia further threatens migrant security, manifesting in discrimination, violence, and tensions even within migrant communities in transit and reception centres. Social exclusion exacerbates their vulnerability, as lack of legal protection limits their access to justice and further marginalizes them.

Irregular migration is frequently portrayed as a security threat by states and national security forces, reinforcing stereotypes and biases that undermine migrant protection and support systems. Meanwhile, criminal networks view irregular migration as a source of profit, exposing migrants to further insecurity and fueling destabilizing activities. Addressing these human security risks is essential for ensuring the dignity and safety of migrants while fostering more sustainable migration policies.

At the same time, human insecurity is not limited to migrants. Local populations may feel threatened by incoming migrant groups, as seen in the New Year's Eve events in Germany in 2016[15]. Furthermore, security

personnel responsible for managing migration – such as those working in reception centers or border control – also face serious risks. They frequently witness organized crime, sexual abuse, and may lose colleagues to violence during security operations[16]. There are therefore human security challenges to be considered from the perspective of multiple actors and stakeholders.

Migration and security are deeply intertwined in multiple ways, making it difficult for decision-makers to develop policies comprehensive enough to address this nexus fully. A thorough analysis and well-designed policies are needed to protect both state and human security.

Striking the Right Balance

The relationship between migration and security is broad and complex, requiring a multidisciplinary approach that considers political, social, economic, and cultural factors. As global migration continues to rise – whether driven by conflict, poverty, or persecution – addressing these challenges has become more critical than ever. A balanced approach is essential, one that upholds security while safeguarding migrants' rights and protection needs.

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While migration can present security challenges, it is crucial to distinguish between migrants and those who exploit them. The real threats often stem from smugglers, human traffickers, and organized criminal networks, rather than from migrants themselves. However, it is also important to acknowledge that some migrants can become involved in these networks and should be held accountable for their actions. Governments must navigate the delicate balance between safeguarding national security and fulfilling their responsibility to protect those seeking refuge, hence addressing human insecurity. Achieving this balance is essential to ensuring comprehensive security in the long term. To achieve this, policymakers must focus on closing the gaps between the following key areas:

1. **Field Experiences and Policy Making**
   In many countries, policymakers are often disconnected from realities on the ground. Security personnel at borders and reception centers, as well as those combating organized crime and extremism, face operational challenges that policies frequently overlook. A key issue is low salaries for field officers, which, while not inherently leading to corruption, can create vulnerabilities that undermine state security. Migration management is not limited to police forces; the U.S. military has played a crucial role in past crises, such as post-WWII, Bosnia, and Kosovo, effectively coordinating migration responses[17]. Depending on the severity of a situation, states may deploy military forces, as seen at the Polish-Belarusian[18] and U.S. southern borders[19]. Regardless of the chosen approach, bridging the gap between policy and field realities is essential for effective, sustainable migration management. This requires proper training to balance state security with migrant protection.

2. **National, Regional, and Global Approaches**
   The disconnect between national, regional, and global approaches extends beyond migration and security, but migration is an area that would greatly benefit from a more comprehensive framework that ensures both state security and the protection of people on the move. For meaningful cooperation, national concerns must be acknowledged by international organizations fostering trust and collaboration. Amid the current crisis of multilateralism and the reluctance to adopt even non-binding agreements like the Global Compact for Migration, regional solutions are more crucial than ever – whether in Europe, Asia, or Africa. Regional actors possess a deeper understanding of local contexts and can respond more swiftly. However, they may also face political pressures from member states, as seen in the challenges surrounding the European Pact on Migration and Asylum[20]. Effective migration governance requires coordination across all levels – local, national, regional, and global – to develop policies that benefit both migrants and host societies.

3. **Disinformation vs. Facts**
   Irregular migration can undermine public trust in government institutions, especially when people perceive a lack of state control. This fuels misinformation and myths about migration. A strong stra-

tegic communication strategy by countries, international and regional organisations as well as civil society is essential to ensure accurate, data-driven information reaches the public. Clear, factual reporting on migration trends can help dispel fear, counter harmful narratives, and support informed policymaking that benefits both local communities and migrants. At the same time, transparency is key – acknowledging crimes committed by irregular migrants and asylum seekers when they occur is necessary to address concerns effectively without fuelling misinformation. This is especially important today when migration and security may be used by politicians in their political campaigns[21].

Conclusion

Migration – especially irregular and mixed flows – can pose security challenges for both states and migrants. Poorly managed migration may heighten tensions, strain resources, and contribute to instability. However, effective cooperation among governments, international organizations, local communities, and migrants can mitigate these risks and enhance security for all.

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Migration itself is not a threat; it is a natural and positive phenomenon. Ensuring safe and secure migration is fundamental to human dignity. Striking the right balance between state and human security by addressing security concerns of states and local populations and protection and human rights of displaced populations will be key to shaping policies that promote stability, development, and inclusion for all.[22] ◆

Notes

1   https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms

2   ibid

3   https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration

4   https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms

5   https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/

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10   https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdry8xd47ylo

11   https://siepr.stanford.edu/news/mythical-tie-between-immigration-and-crime

12   https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/human-trafficking

13   ibid

14   https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/tcm/international_terrorism_and_migration.pdf

15   https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/5309/migrants-and-rape-unveiling-myths-and-facts-about-the-dark-side-of-the-refugee-crisis

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19   https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/4037935/dod-orders-1500-troops-additional-assets-to-southern-border/

20   https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)767218

21   https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/06/migration-global-elections-climate-impact?lang=en

22   Generative Pretrained Transformer version 4 (GPT-4) was used in a supportive role (Wen and Wang, 2023). It was used in the editing process because the author is not a native English speaker (see for example van Dis et al., 2023; Nature Editorial, 2023).

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