

# How Seasonal Migration May Reduce Security Threats from Climate- Induced Migration

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## Dr. Justin Schon



Dr. Justin Schon is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Florida. He earned his PhD in Political Science from Indiana University, Bloomington in 2018. Dr. Schon's research has a focus on migration, especially connections between migration and processes of conflict and development.

Dr. Schon has published in several academic journals, including the Journal of Refugee Studies, Civil Wars, Journal of Social Structure, Journal of Peace Research, International Interactions, and Political Geography. He has also written for a variety of public outlets, such as The Washington Post's blog The Monkey Cage, OECD's Development Matters, New Security Beat, Syria Comment, Duck of Minerva, and Political Violence @ a Glance. He also has a forthcoming book on how civilians select from a range of survival strategies during civil war, which is titled *Surviving the War in Syria: Survival Strategies in a Time of Conflict*.

Currently, Dr. Schon is a post-doc on a project funded by the Department of Defense Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative (MURI, #W911NF1810267). The project is titled "Towards a Multi-Scale Theory on Coupled Human Mobility and Environmental Change."

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# How Seasonal Migration May Reduce Security Threats from Climate-Induced Migration

Dr. Justin Schon, University of Florida

There are estimates that by 2050, roughly 150 million people will be internally displaced. This displacement is also expected to turn into international migration and refugee flows, as displaced populations search for areas where they have a chance to survive and prosper. In this piece, I will show that this is likely to increase the share of the world's population living near country borders. With greater internal strains on countries, the resulting rapid urbanization rates pose important security threats. In addition, clustering populations around border areas may increase the threat of cross-border political violence. If governments continue responding to high levels of international migration with harsh border enforcement, including border closures, walls, and high-tech monitoring equipment, then they are likely to aggravate these risks. This piece argues that governments need to prepare for adverse effects of climate change by supporting the diverse arrays of adaptation and survival strategies that civilians may use according to their local contexts. This includes allowing people to be as mobile as they feel is necessary and providing options for seasonal migration.

## Introduction

As populations respond to climate change, what kinds of security threats should governments expect? Projections of resource wars, disasters, and other scenarios tend to take on an apocalyptic flavor (Bettini, 2013). I argue that a more productive path might involve a more careful extrapolation of current trends into the future.

In particular, climate factors and environmental degradation have thus far had a relatively small direct impact on conflict, according to a large group of researchers engaged in the investigation of climate-conflict links (Mach et al., 2019). Instead, climate change appears much more closely tied to internal migration, specifically rural to urban migration (Mueller et al., 2020). This has increased and accelerated urbanization processes that began in force with industrialization. Meanwhile, many of the world's urban areas are near country borders, placing roughly 25% of the world's population within 100 kilometers of a border (Simmons, 2019). This means that urbanization is also clustering a growing share of the world's population around international boundaries. Once in these areas, cross-border movement may become more feasible and more desirable. Governments, however, have a tendency to perceive security threats from cross-border movement that they do not control (Avdan & Gelpi, 2016). This has simultaneously fueled selective immigration policies that have allowed international migration to increase and restrictive immigration policies from governments with neighbors that tend

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to be significantly poorer or embroiled in war (De Haas, Natter & Vezzoli, 2016; Jones, 2016). The restrictive policies unintentionally create and aggravate security threats, however, since they often do more to deter return than the initial cross-border movement (Massey, Pren & Durand, 2016). In many cases, policies that instead facilitate seasonal migration and temporary cross-border movement could be an effective safety valve.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I outline the main ways that climate change influences migration. Here, I emphasize rural-urban migration. Second, I describe my path dependent argument that since many urban areas are already near country borders, urbanization is likely to increase the share of the world's population living in border areas. Third, I discuss how immigration enforcement actually has the unintended consequences in many cases of increasing long-term international migration and increasing security threats from immigration. This suggests that an effective long-term policy response to climate change could involve providing more options for seasonal and temporary migration. The Persian Gulf, in fact, has experience with temporary migration programs that have benefitted many Middle Eastern countries. The United States government could contribute to international security by examining ways to support and build upon these programs.

### Climate change and migration

The standard view is that climate change is a threat multiplier (Kaczan & Orgill-Meyer, 2019). Analysts tend to start with this as a premise and then expand on details of interest for their particular topic. While this threat multiplier is assumed to increase migration, it is important to specify how that migration will work.

Climate migration, in fact, most directly occurs as rural to urban migration. Given that climate factors primarily influence migration via their effects on agriculture, this focus on internal migration from rural areas to urban areas is reasonable (Falco, Galeotti & Olper, 2019). This insight has led the World Bank to estimate that there will be roughly 150 million people internally displaced due to climate change by 2050 (Rigaud et al., 2018). Rural-urban internal migration is increasing and accelerating urbanization. While the Industrial Revolution originally sparked a massive growth of cities, climate change has now led to a combination of climate, economic, and security factors driving urbanization.

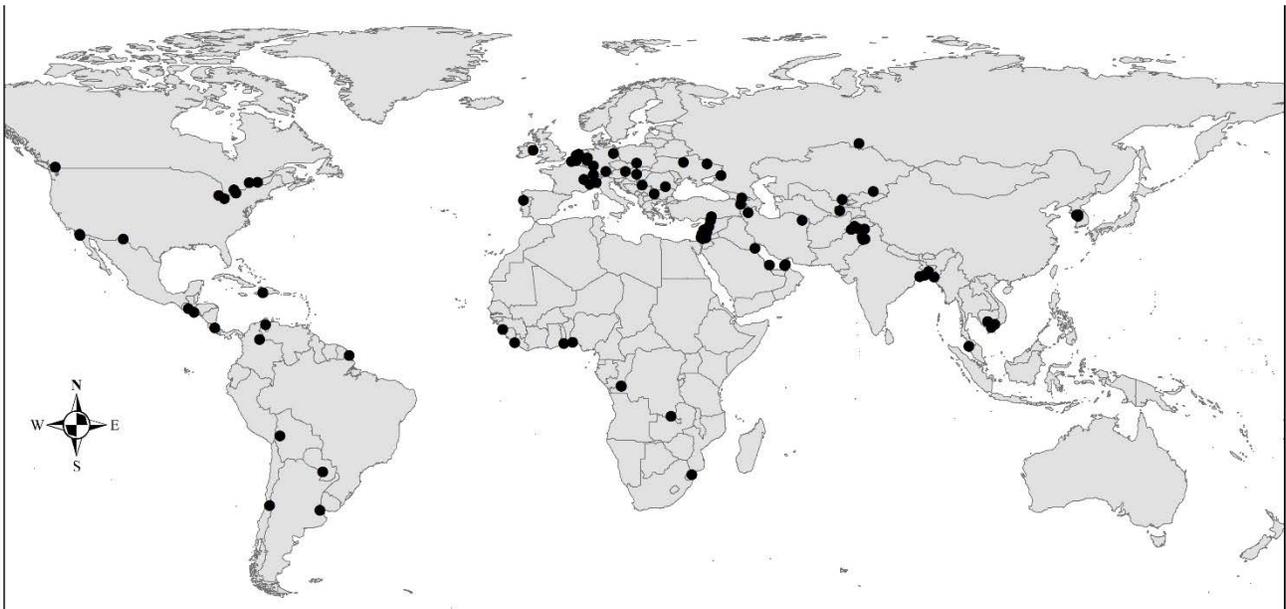
*While the Industrial Revolution originally sparked a massive growth of cities, climate change has now led to a combination of climate, economic, and security factors driving urbanization.*

The following Syrian case illustrates how rural to urban migration in response to climate change may create its own security threats (Ash & Obradovich, 2019). From 2006-2010, Syria experienced a drought that motivated thousands of people to move to cities. Cities, however, were not prepared to absorb the sudden arrival of so many people. Large clusters of unemployed and disaffected people formed, and their rising grievances may have combined with high mobilization potential from close spatial proximity to increase the potential for mass protests to emerge in 2011. The Arab Spring was of course a critical spark, but Syria's climate migration may have laid a foundation that allowed the Syrian people to respond to the Middle East's revolutionary moment.

## Borders

This climate-induced urbanization prompts consideration of another spatial factor: many of the world's existing urban areas are near international boundaries between countries. Rural to urban migration should therefore lead to even more people living near borders. That number will most likely increase. As people cluster around borders, cross-border mobility may become increasingly common. This may create a variety of economic and security concerns for states.

Currently, roughly 25% of the world's population lives within 100 kilometers of a border (Simmons, 2019). As the map below from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) shows, there are many large cities near borders. Highly populated cities exist near borders ranging from the United States borders with Canada (e.g., Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver) and Mexico (e.g., San Diego) to Nigerian borders with Benin (e.g., Lagos). These locations all appear poised for continued growth. With a growing share of the world's population clustering around borders, there is a possibility that cross-border mobility strategies for economic, climate, and physical security will become more common.



**Figure 1: World Cities with over 1 million people within 100 km of a land border**

With increasing cross-border mobility, governments have a tendency to become more concerned about perceived economic and security threats. The United States has talked about economic and security threats from immigration across the Mexican border (Massey, Pren & Durand, 2016). Nigeria, on the other hand, recognizes the economic benefits of cross-border mobility with Niger, but it perceives a sufficient security threat to close the border until at least 2020 (Radio France International, 2019). These perceived threats lack empirical support, but the perception itself motivates many governments to increase immigration enforcement.

### **How immigration enforcement *increases* security threats**

With perceptions of economic and security threats from cross-border mobility, governments have a tendency to increase border and immigration enforcement activities. Immigration enforcement can

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include many tactics, such as human patrols, barriers, raids of immigrant neighborhoods, and surveillance technology (Longo, 2017). When these tactics are used to prevent cross-border movement, rather than control cross-border movement, they pose a serious risk of unintentionally aggravating security threats.

There are two main pathways through which immigration enforcement can unintentionally aggravate security threats. First, immigration enforcement can create a “backfire” effect (Massey, Pren & Durand, 2016). A backfire effect occurs when immigration enforcement increases immigration. If immigration enforcement increases growth of the population of the group that the government wants to shrink, then it is hard to envision how security threats would not increase. Another form of backfire could involve an increase in security threats due to immigration enforcement changing the types of people who immigrate (De Haas, Natter & Vezzoli, 2016). For example, immigration enforcement could prompt a surge in smuggling and human trafficking.

Second, immigration enforcement risks “othering” a country’s immigrant community. An immigrant community that is excluded from political power, economic prosperity, and social inclusion is liable to develop grievances. This is a prominent pathway to terrorist mobilization. States with large ethnic enclaves have particularly severe problems with this. Kenya’s Eastleigh neighborhood of Nairobi is a large Somali enclave (Yarnell & Thomas, 2014). Belgium’s raids of Muslim neighborhoods in Brussels have also risked aggravating this problem (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Rather than sections of cities, ethnic enclaves can also exist as refugee camps. Zaatari camp in Jordan now poses a risk of becoming this kind of community. Lebanon does not have formal camps, but it does have large enclaves of Syrians. When ethnic enclaves form, the state may have difficulty penetrating for effective monitoring and service provision (Adida, 2014).

These challenges show just how carefully governments need to respond to cross-border mobility. Indiscriminate approaches that attempt to just stop immigration are extremely risky because they could unintentionally increase immigration and security threats from immigrant groups. A more selective approach that deliberately allows some cross-border mobility might be the best option.

### **What should be done**

A selective approach to monitoring and regulating cross-border mobility could take many forms. For countries that might want to limit long-term immigration, one of the most effective methods could involve establishing programs for temporary or seasonal migration.

It may appear counter-intuitive that an effective option to reduce long-term immigration could be to facilitate short-term migration. In fact, the United States has learned that a large portion of its undocumented immigrants entered the country on a short-term visa and then overstayed that visa (Bier, 2017). Other destination countries have had similar experiences (Brachet, 2009). Policy-makers who take these experiences into account might respond by learning the lesson that immigration cannot be controlled unless all cross-border mobility is restricted. This lesson, however, would be the wrong lesson to learn.

The reason why visa overstays should not motivate a policy response of restricting all cross-border mobility is that overstays are influenced more by border crossing restrictions than by the migrant’s desire to game the system (Massey, Pren & Durand, 2016). Moreover, as climate change aggravates

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insecurity—physical, economic, or environmental—in many countries, temporary or seasonal migration has the potential to function as a safety valve that can relieve pressure for origin countries.

Domestically, the United States has already tried to establish some programs that would create opportunities for temporary migration. In the 2000s, President George W. Bush proposed a guest worker program and attempted to obtain bipartisan support for it. While the effort failed, it did signal a recognition among many policy-makers that programs facilitating temporary migration could be very beneficial.

In USCENTCOM's Area of Responsibility, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such as Saudi Arabia have run large guest worker programs for decades. Since the 1970s, millions of Arab migrants from across the Middle East and North Africa have participated in GCC guest worker programs. These migrants made substantial contributions to the economies of Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, and they were able to share their income with many people back in their origin countries. Then, in the 1990s, GCC countries expelled hundreds of thousands of Arab guest workers. The Persian Gulf had decided that it appreciated the economic contributions of guest workers, as well as having Muslim guest workers, but it wanted to avoid the political challenges of other Middle Eastern and North African countries. Therefore, the Gulf turned to South and Southeast Asian migrants for its guest worker programs. Their expulsions of Arab migrants continued into the early 2000s (Kapiszewski, 2006). Economic opportunities for Arab migrants in GCC countries did not disappear, but they were reduced (Babar et al., 2015). With the loss of guest worker opportunities, economic challenges may have become even more severe for the Arab world. These increased economic challenges may have contributed to the range of grievances that motivated the Arab Spring in 2011.

As the United States looks for options to prepare for climate change and minimize security risks, an important option to consider is to encourage more countries to establish guest worker programs. For that matter, it could establish its own guest worker programs as well. These programs could relieve the pressure that is prime to build with climate change, accelerating urbanization, and violent border areas.

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