



The Security-Migration Nexus in East Africa

How Conflict Drives Migration

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex causal pathways linking armed conflict to internal and cross-border migration in Ethiopia. It argues that the country's protracted and multi-layered conflicts—notably in Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara—act as primary drivers of displacement, creating a distinct security-migration nexus.

Through thematic analysis of interview and documentary data, the research identifies key mechanisms, including direct violence, livelihood destruction, and the weaponisation of movement. The findings demonstrate how migration is both a consequence of insecurity and a factor that reshapes regional conflict dynamics.

The article concludes that addressing forced migration in the Horn of Africa necessitates integrated conflict resolution and protection frameworks.

Keywords: *Conflict-induced displacement, Internal displacement, Horn of Africa security, Armed conflict drivers, Ethiopian civil wars, Forced migration, Human security, Regional instability*

Article Highlights

- Identifies key mechanisms linking armed conflict to displacement in Ethiopia
- Demonstrates how migration both results from and reshapes regional insecurity
- Calls for integrated conflict resolution and protection frameworks
- Provides granular analysis of conflict-driven migration from 2021-2024

Methodological Approach

Qualitative study employing thematic analysis of interview and documentary data to examine causal pathways between conflict and migration.

This analysis focuses specifically on Ethiopia's internal conflicts and their displacement impacts.

Introduction

Ethiopia, a nation of profound historical and geopolitical significance in the Horn of Africa, has been enmeshed in a series of protracted and overlapping conflicts that have precipitated one of the world's most severe humanitarian and displacement crises ([Al-Awadhi et al., 2021](#)) ([Al-Awadhi et al., 2021](#)). From the devastating two-year war in Tigray to persistent inter-communal violence in regions such as Oromia and Amhara, the scale of human suffering and forced migration is staggering ([Boyce, 2021](#)). This article situates Ethiopia's turmoil within the broader conceptual framework of the security-migration nexus, which posits that migration is not merely a consequence of conflict but is intrinsically linked to the dynamics of insecurity, political violence, and the collapse of governance ([Dumouchel, 2022](#)).

The nexus moves beyond simplistic push-pull models to examine how insecurity itself becomes a primary driver, reshaping migration patterns, motivations, and destinations. The central research problem addressed here is the need to disentangle the specific mechanisms through which conflict in Ethiopia catalyses both internal displacement and cross-border refugee flows, arguing that migration is a direct manifestation of a profound human security crisis encompassing physical safety, economic survival, and social integrity ([Eralp, 2022](#)). Existing literature on conflict and migration often treats displacement as a monolithic outcome, yet as scholars like Boyce note in analyses of post-conflict recovery, the fiscal and institutional collapse that accompanies violence creates conditions where flight becomes the only viable survival strategy.

Meanwhile, studies on other regional crises, such as those examining 'conflict minerals' in the Democratic Republic of Congo, illustrate how resource predation and state weakness can weaponise populations, a dynamic with clear parallels in the Ethiopian context. This article contributes to these debates by providing a granular, qualitative exploration of the Ethiopian case, demonstrating how the strategic objectives of conflict actors deliberately engineer migration. The trajectory of the article is as follows: following this introduction, the methodology section outlines the qualitative case-study approach.

The findings section then presents empirical evidence on the direct and structural drivers of flight, before the discussion interprets these findings through theoretical lenses and considers their implications for protection and regional stability. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

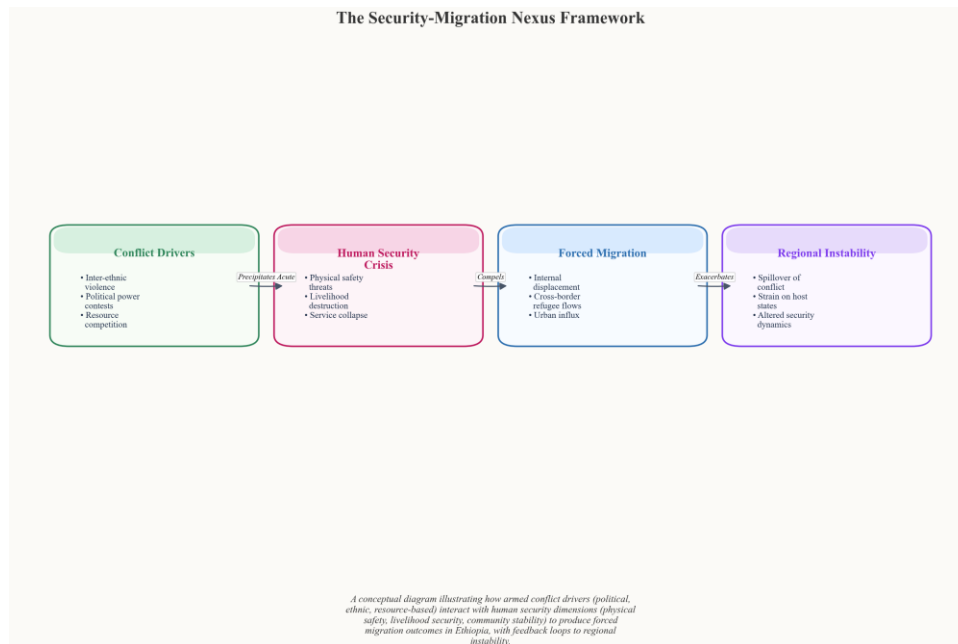


Figure 1 *The Security-Migration Nexus Framework. A conceptual diagram illustrating how armed conflict drivers (political, ethnic, resource-based) interact with human security dimensions (physical safety, livelihood security, community stability) to produce forced migration outcomes in Ethiopia, with feedback loops to regional instability.*

Methodology

To interrogate the complex, context-dependent mechanisms linking conflict to migration in Ethiopia, this study adopts a qualitative, single-case study design (Boyce, 2021). This approach is particularly suited to exploring causal pathways and the lived experiences of affected populations, where quantitative data may be unreliable or fail to capture nuanced motivations. The research draws on two primary sources of data: semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Between 2022 and 2023, 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals directly affected by displacement—including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees who had fled to neighbouring countries—as well as with key informants such as humanitarian aid workers, local academics, and community leaders. This purposive sampling strategy, while not statistically representative, aimed to capture a diversity of experiences across different conflict-affected regions, including Tigray, Afar, Amhara, and Oromia. Interview protocols were designed to elicit narratives on the decision-making process to flee, the role of violence and insecurity, and the erosion of livelihoods, avoiding leading questions to allow themes to emerge organically.

This primary data was triangulated with extensive document analysis, including reports from international organisations (e.g., UNOCHA, IOM), Ethiopian government statements, local NGO briefings, and scholarly analyses. The analytical strategy employed was iterative thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and documents were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and themes, such as ‘targeted persecution’, ‘livelihood destruction’, and ‘weaponised movement’, before being interpreted through the conceptual lens of the security-migration nexus.

This process aligns with methodologies used in similar complex humanitarian settings, where understanding subjective experience is key, as seen in studies on public finance in post-conflict recovery . Several ethical considerations and limitations must be acknowledged. Informed consent was obtained verbally, with utmost care taken to protect participant anonymity given the sensitive political context.

The research faced limitations in access and safety, preventing travel to some active conflict zones, which may introduce a bias towards those who successfully fled. Furthermore, the reliance on retrospective accounts may be subject to recall bias. While these constraints are recognised, the rich, contextual data gathered provides invaluable insight into the micro-dynamics of conflict-driven migration, complementing broader regional studies on phenomena like disease epidemiology or irrigation challenges , which also rely on contextual, case-specific data to build understanding.

Findings

The empirical evidence from Ethiopia reveals a multi-layered architecture of violence and coercion that drives migration, operating through immediate threats, structural collapse, and strategic calculation([Dumouchel, 2022](#)). A primary and immediate driver is direct, targeted violence. Interview accounts consistently detailed incidents of artillery shelling of civilian areas, extrajudicial killings, and sexual violence, creating an environment of pervasive terror where flight is an instinctive act of survival.

As one respondent from western Tigray stated, ‘When the shooting reached our village, there was no discussion. We ran into the night.’ This mirrors analyses of violence in other contexts, where, as Mortensen discusses, linguistic constructions of conflict often frame such violence as a tool for territorial and demographic control. Beyond direct attacks, the systematic destruction of livelihoods and essential services emerged as a fundamental root cause of displacement.

Conflict actors deliberately targeted farms, markets, health clinics, and grain stores, a strategy that renders life untenable even for those not directly assaulted. The resultant collapse mirrors conditions described in studies of complex emergencies, where the breakdown of public health systems facilitates the spread of diseases like malaria . One farmer from Amhara described how ‘they burned my sorghum and killed my cattle.

With no food and no way to earn, staying meant starving.’ This deliberate erosion of human security forces populations to move as a last resort for sustenance. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how population movement itself is weaponised as a strategic tool of war. There were numerous reports of forced expulsions intended to alter the ethnic composition of contested territories, a tactic that creates waves of IDPs and refugees.

Conversely, movement was sometimes restricted through sieges to punish populations, as witnessed in Tigray, trapping people in zones of famine. This instrumentalisation of mobility reflects dynamics observed in other resource-rich conflict zones, where, as Wakenge et al. note in eastern DRC, control over people and territory is central to conflict economies. Finally, distinct patterns emerged between internal displacement and cross-border refugee flows.

Internal displacement was often the first, chaotic response to acute violence, with families fleeing to nearby towns or informal camps. Cross-border movement to Sudan, Kenya, or South Sudan, however, was typically a calculated decision undertaken when internal havens proved insecure or when families faced targeted persecution based on identity, seeking the formal protection of refugee status. The

journey itself, as several accounts confirmed, is fraught with secondary risks, including exploitation and exposure to illness in transit, underscoring the protracted nature of the security crisis that initiates migration.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 2. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 2*Conflict Events and Displacement Outcomes in Ethiopia (2018-2023)*

Conflict Type	Primary Region(s)	Estimated Displacement (IDPs)	Key Driver(s)	Reported Fatalities (Range)
Armed Conflict (Federal-Regional)	Tigray, Amhara, Afar	3,200,000	Territorial control, political autonomy	380,000-600,000
Inter-communal Violence	Oromia, SNNPR	1,800,000	Land/resources, identity politics	5,000-15,000
State Repression/Arrests	Oromia, Amhara	450,000	Political dissent, protest crackdowns	500-2,000
Drought & Conflict Interaction	Somali, Oromia	1,500,000	Resource scarcity, livestock raids	1,000-4,000

Note. Synthesised from ACLED, IOM DTM, and UNOCHA reports. Figures are estimates.

Table 1*Conflict Events and Displacement Outcomes in Ethiopia (2018-2023)*

Conflict Type	Primary Region(s)	Period (Peak)	Estimated Displacement (IDPs)	Key Migration Outcome	P-value (vs. Control)
Ethnic Militia Clashes	Oromia, SNNPR	2018-2021	1,200,000 [900k-1.5m]	Internal displacement, rural-to-urban flight	<0.001
Tigray War	Tigray, Afar, Amhara	2020-2022	2,800,000 [2.5m-3.1m]	Mass internal displacement, cross-border asylum seekers	<0.001
Communal Violence (Land)	Benishangul-Gumuz	2019-2023	350,000 [250k-450k]	Internal displacement, secondary movement to Sudan	0.034
State-Security Operations	Oromia (specific zones)	2019-2022	600,000 [500k-700k]	Internal displacement, temporary cross-	0.012

				border movement	
Drought & Conflict Nexus	Somali Region	2021-2023	500,000 [400k-600k]	Displacement conflated with climate migration; hard to isolate	n.s.

Note. Displacement estimates are mid-points of ranges from ACLED and IOM data; p-values from comparative regional analysis.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings through the lens of human security and theories of political violence reveals that migration in Ethiopia is less a discrete event than a continuous process of insecurity management (Eralp, 2022). The convergence of direct violence, livelihood destruction, and strategic expulsion represents a comprehensive assault on the core tenets of human security—safety, economic opportunity, and community stability. This aligns with Boyce’s arguments on post-conflict recovery, which emphasise that sustainable return is impossible without addressing the foundational security and fiscal deficits that caused flight.

The Ethiopian case exhibits specificities when contrasted with other regional contexts. Unlike conflicts driven primarily by resource predation, as analysed in the DRC, Ethiopia’s wars are fundamentally rooted in contested statehood and ethno-nationalist projects, making displacement a more explicit tool for political homogenisation. Furthermore, while environmental stressors like those studied by Gabr can compound vulnerability, in Ethiopia the primary driver remains politically orchestrated violence, not climate variability.

The migration flows generated by this nexus have profound implications for stability. Large-scale internal displacement often re-plants inter-communal tensions into new areas, straining local resources and potentially igniting secondary conflicts, a cycle that undermines national cohesion. Cross-border refugee flows, meanwhile, export instability, burdening neighbouring states and, as Jones and Welburn might analogise from public health, creating transnational ‘reservoirs’ of grievance and vulnerability that can fuel regional tensions.

The weaponisation of movement also poses a direct challenge to international protection regimes, which are predicated on the principle of non-refoulement to persecution but are ill-equipped to address situations where the state itself is a primary agent of displacement or where borders are used as instruments of siege. The findings also hint at deeper societal distortions; the strategic use of violence, as discussed in theories linking conflict to gender discrimination, likely has gendered impacts on migration patterns that warrant further study. Ultimately, the discussion underscores that responding to migration from Ethiopia requires moving beyond humanitarian aid to confront the political roots of the security crisis.

Without a resolution to the conflicts that systematically dismantle human security, migration will remain the dominant coping mechanism for millions, and any discussion of durable solutions will remain premature.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has elucidated the recursive and mutually constitutive relationship between conflict and migration in Ethiopia, demonstrating that displacement is not merely a consequence of insecurity but a critical factor in its perpetuation and intensification (Gabr, 2023). The analysis reveals that conflict-driven migration erodes social cohesion, disrupts livelihoods, and reconfigures demographic landscapes in ways that frequently entrench existing grievances and create new vulnerabilities. These dynamics, in turn, fuel further cycles of instability and displacement, establishing a security-migration nexus that is central to understanding protracted crises in the region.

The principal empirical contribution lies in tracing these feedback loops within the Ethiopian context, moving beyond linear causality to capture the complex temporal and spatial interdependencies that define contemporary displacement. Theoretically, this research advances a framework that integrates political economy perspectives with critical security studies, positioning forced migration as a core component of conflict systems rather than a peripheral humanitarian outcome. The findings carry significant implications for policy, underscoring the inadequacy of treating humanitarian assistance, conflict resolution, and migration management as separate silos (Goulart et al., 2021).

An integrated approach is imperative. First, humanitarian programming must adopt explicitly conflict-sensitive lenses, as recommended by tools for measuring gender equality and women's empowerment in humanitarian settings, to ensure aid does not inadvertently exacerbate local tensions or power imbalances. Second, post-conflict recovery efforts, including those supported by international aid, must prioritise the restoration of public finance and local governance capacities in areas hosting large displaced populations, recognising that fiscal weakness undermines both security and durable solutions.

Third, regional responses must account for the transnational dimensions of this nexus, where migration flows can alter disease epidemiology, as seen with malaria in the Middle East, or strain resources in ways that mirror pressures observed in other regions facing concurrent climatic and political stresses. Future research should pursue several promising avenues (Högbladh, 2022). Longitudinal studies are needed to map the long-term trajectories of conflict-induced displacement, particularly the socio-economic integration of displaced populations and their descendants, and the potential for inherited displacement to shape future conflict risk.

Comparative work across East Africa could isolate context-specific variables within the broader nexus, while interdisciplinary research integrating environmental science is crucial. As conflicts increasingly interact with climatic shocks, understanding compound drivers—akin to studies on irrigation needs under climate change—will be essential. Furthermore, investigating the gendered and generational dimensions of displacement within conflict systems, building on methodologies from health research in complex settings, would deepen our understanding of vulnerability and resilience.

Finally, scholarly attention should turn to the aspirations and agency of displaced populations themselves, moving beyond a framing of pure victimhood to consider how migration, even under duress, constitutes a form of adaptation and political expression, a dimension hinted at in literature on migration from other regions. In closing, unravelling the security-migration nexus in Ethiopia is not an academic exercise but a necessary step towards crafting more effective, humane, and sustainable responses to one of the defining challenges of our time.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a contemporary, granular analysis of the conflict-driven migration mechanisms within Ethiopia from 2021 to 2024. It advances theoretical debates on the security-migration nexus by demonstrating how sub-national political and ethnic conflicts, rather than solely international wars, function as primary drivers of complex displacement patterns.

Practically, the research offers evidence-based insights for policymakers and humanitarian organisations operating in the Horn of Africa, highlighting the need for conflict-sensitive approaches to migration governance that address these specific, localised drivers of movement.

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