

## 1 Weaponizing Displacement in Civil Wars

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In northern Uganda, gentle hills occasionally punctuate a vast savannah teeming with crops of cassava and sorghum. During the 1990s and early 2000s, a rebel group called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) roamed the countryside, raiding villages and ambushing military and police outposts. Local residents became accustomed to fleeing their homes at a moment's notice. They did so spontaneously and fleetingly, hiding in the bush for a day or staying in nearby towns for a week, waiting for the insurgents to move on before they returned home. But then the government began to order people to leave their villages and relocate to designated camps; camps where conditions often bordered on the grotesque. Daniel, who I met in Uganda in 2016, recalls walking to a camp with his mother and brother, carrying a few precious belongings.<sup>1</sup> They arrived to find hundreds of people packed together in small huts made of reed, mud, and grass. "The sanitation was awful, and there was not enough food," Daniel told me.

When many people ignored the order to relocate, the army issued an ultimatum. "They said that civilians should come to the camps. Anybody found in the villages would be presumed to be a rebel collaborator and shot." A few days later, the army began to bomb villages. The displacement camps multiplied and swelled from hundreds to thousands of people, eventually triggering what the United Nations (UN) would call the world's most underreported humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup> It would be years before Daniel returned to his village. "Home became a forgotten place," he said.

I heard similar stories in dozens of communities as I made my way through northern Uganda. What happened to Daniel, his family, and his neighbors was not unique; nor was Uganda an idiosyncratic case. In various countries affected by civil wars, armed actors have routinely engaged

<sup>1</sup> Interviewee 37, Gulu District, October 2016. "Daniel" is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the respondent.

<sup>2</sup> Moorehead and Rone 2005: 4, 18.

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in strategic displacement, intentionally and coercively uprooting civilians in pursuit of political and military objectives. How do we characterize these strategies? What motivates them? And what are the conditions under which combatants are likely to employ them? To shed light on these questions, this book shows how displacement is often used to *sort* and *identify*, rather than expel and eliminate, the local population. This is important for better understanding the motivations behind forced displacement and its consequences.

Such an understanding has become more urgent than ever. Wars today kill thousands but displace millions. Between 2013 and 2023, the number of individuals uprooted by conflict and violence more than doubled, reaching a staggering 117 million – the highest recorded since World War II.<sup>3</sup> Movements of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have important implications for international security due to their potential to spread violence within and across borders, generate humanitarian crises, and undermine prospects for post-conflict peace and development.<sup>4</sup> Refugee and IDP situations typically last years, if not decades, and when people eventually return, it can aggravate political rivalries, increase economic competition, and generate tensions over property rights and access to public goods. Thus in many societies – from the French Huguenots of the sixteenth century to Ukrainians and Syrians today – displacement has been an enduring and transformative force. The political repercussions of displacement are also increasingly evident. Refugees have become a salient domestic issue in many countries; one seized on by populist politicians to help win elections in the US and Europe. And the human toll of displacement is incalculable. “To be rooted,” observed the French philosopher Simone Weil, “is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” To be displaced, then, is to experience the utmost deprivation – of property, of community, of livelihood – that leaves indelible scars on individuals and societies.

The deportation, transfer, and resettlement of populations has been a feature of territorial acquisition, military domination, and colonial settlement since antiquity. In the context of civil wars, migration is sometimes conceived as an inadvertent (and perhaps inevitable) byproduct of violence and instability. Fighting erupts. People flee. But population displacement is a strategy of warfare, not just a consequence of it.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Betts and Loescher 2011; Böhmelt et al. 2019; Bohnet and Fabien Cottier, 2018; Christensen and Harild 2009; Cohen and Deng 2009; Fisk 2018, 2019; Lischer 2005, 2014; Miller and Ritter 2014; Salehyan 2008; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Schwartz 2019; Stedman and Tanner 2004; Zolberg et al. 1992.

Generating civilian flight can be integral, rather than incidental, to the tactics and practices of armed groups.

When combatants do uproot civilians, there is a tendency in the media, among policymakers, and even by scholars to characterize these events as “ethnic cleansing.” As such, the expulsion of members of ethnic, religious, and other identity groups has been the subject of considerable research. But should we treat the encampment of civilians in Uganda as a similar phenomenon to the expulsion of ethnic Rohingya from Myanmar or the displacement of Massalit communities by armed militias in Darfur, Sudan? Cleansing is only one type of displacement, and it is not necessarily the most common one. While combatants uprooted civilians in 64 percent of major civil wars between 1945 and 2017, cleansing accounted for just one-third of cases.<sup>5</sup> Strategic displacement can take multiple forms, so there is a need to distinguish different types and compare where they occur to understand why they are used.

This book introduces new data on population displacement strategies in civil wars and identifies variation within and across conflicts in the use of three types: the *cleansing* of political or ethnic groups, the *depopulation* of designated areas, and the *forced relocation* of civilians into new dwellings. Using multiple research methods and sources, including a new cross-national dataset and extensive fieldwork in Uganda, Syria, and Turkey, I propose a new theory of strategic displacement by state actors, who I find are the predominant perpetrators. Observers tend to assume that displacement is intended to remove or punish civilians. I argue that it is often pursued in order to sort, and extract resources from, the targeted population. This is particularly important for understanding the logic behind a frequent yet relatively understudied type of strategic displacement: forced relocation, which is the main focus of this book. The ensuing pages therefore provide new conceptual, theoretical, and empirical insights into a devastating form of political violence – and challenges some common beliefs about its use.

Given the tremendous human and financial costs of population displacement, it is vital to understand its underlying drivers. Doing so, however, requires examining not only why people decide to flee conflict but also why conflict parties want them to flee. This book is therefore critical for advancing our knowledge of wartime displacement, untangling the dynamics of conflict, and improving policy efforts to manage one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity today.

<sup>5</sup> I describe this cross-national data on wartime displacement strategies in Chapter 2.

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**1.1      The Argument**

The preoccupation with ethnic cleansing promotes the perception that the primary function of strategic displacement is to expel “undesirable” groups or to punish troublesome elements of the population. I argue that combatants, particularly state combatants, often use displacement to sort the civilian population, not to get rid of it. Triggering civilian flight can reveal information about the affiliations and allegiances of the population, which combatants need to effectively target enemy fighters and deter support for them. Civil wars entail a high degree of uncertainty, and this information is often lacking. As a result, armed groups frequently rely on simplifying heuristics, or clues, to infer opponents’ identities and civilians’ loyalties. Previous research has shown that cleansing can be a consequence of this practice: If combatants use heuristics such as ethnic identity or political party affiliation to distinguish enemies from allies, they will target members of these groups and seek their expulsion.<sup>6</sup>

But what if such heuristics are unavailable – because, for instance, opposing forces do not claim a distinct ethnic identity – or unhelpful, because a population is either too homogenous or too heterogeneous for ethnicity to be a meaningful distinguishing trait? In these contexts, instead of engaging in ethnic or racial profiling, information-starved and resource-constrained combatants may resort to *spatial* profiling. Civil wars are characterized by a fragmentation of domestic sovereignty, and civilian collaboration with armed actors both shapes, and is shaped by, their control over territory.<sup>7</sup> This often causes political identities to become territorialized, as particular places are associated with a particular side. People’s physical locations and movements can then provide clues regarding their loyalties and affiliations. Armed actors may therefore use human mobility to infer wartime sympathies through what I call *guilt by location*.

This theory is primarily applicable to forced relocation, which I find is the most common displacement strategy. Ordering people to move to a designed area forces them to send signals of association and allegiance based on whether, and to where, they flee. Civilians can comply and relocate, or defect by remaining in contested territory – or by moving to areas controlled by the other side. Because defection is costly and highly visible, it sends a credible and easily observable signal of disloyalty to perpetrators. However, since people can falsify their allegiances, complying with orders to move is necessary, but not sufficient, to cast

<sup>6</sup> Balcells and Steele 2016; Fjelde and Hultman 2014; Hägerdal 2019; Steele 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Kalyvas 2006.

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off suspicions of disloyalty. Relocation allows perpetrators to weed out enemies both through the initial process of flight and by making those who comply more accessible and “legible”; it is easier to “see” the population in a more concentrated and regimented space. This enables armed groups to (1) use people’s movements and locations as a continuous indicator of affiliation; and (2) extract rents and recruits from a larger segment of the population. Thus, while cleansing aims to remove undesirable or disloyal populations, forced relocation – and in some cases, depopulation – seek to identify the undesirables or the disloyal in the first place.

To be clear: Civilians’ movement decisions may not always reflect their actual loyalties, just as ethnic or religious identity may be poor indicators of people’s allegiances. But combatants typically perceive the actions of civilians to be political in wartime, even when they are not intended to be. This argument draws on a core insight from the study of conflict – that violence is often shaped by the level of information available to armed actors – to deepen our understanding of the logic of forced displacement, one of the most consequential features of modern warfare. While I concur with prior research claiming that information problems drive combatants to displace, I show that different types of strategic displacement reflect different responses to these problems, serve different functions, and are employed in different contexts. Cleansing is an outcome of state combatants identifying potential enemies *ex ante*, and is more likely where counterinsurgents seek territory and have access to group-level identifiers that link civilians to rebel groups. Forced relocation, however, is a process that combatants use to identify their opponents *ex post*, and is more likely when counterinsurgents seek information but lack group-level identifiers. Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom, I show that strategies of forced relocation are used not just to demobilize or immobilize noncombatants. They are also used to *mobilize* them for military purposes.

Unlike existing work, this book stresses the role of displacement not as a means of eliminating or punishing the population but rather as a method of gathering information about, and extorting resources from, its members. The assortative aspect of displacement has been largely overlooked in previous research. These logics do not account for every case, and they are not the only factors that motivate these strategies. There is no single explanation for why armed groups displace people. But this book uses multiple social science methods, from statistical analysis to interviews and case studies, to provide direct and indirect evidence for these logics and demonstrate that they can (1) help explain the use of particular displacement strategies, namely forced relocation, and (2) help account for variation in

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strategic displacement across cases. The results challenge common explanations by showing that different types of conflicts exhibit different strategies of displacement, and that combatants often uproot the population not just to “drain the sea” – a popular counterinsurgency metaphor for depriving rebels of civilian support – but also to *divide* and *map* the sea. Moreover, the analysis underscores the extent to which displacement can be an expressive act. This has important academic and policy implications. Scholars and practitioners need to give greater attention to the politics of civilian flight in order to explain wartime displacement and develop effective interventions to address its myriad consequences.

## 1.2 Clarifying Terms and Scope

### 1.2.1 *The Context: Civil Wars*

Population displacement occurs in a wide range of contexts and can be driven by a variety of factors, including war and colonization, state repression and intercommunal violence, and natural disasters, economic development, and climate change. Yet armed conflict has been the greatest generator of displaced people in the modern era.<sup>8</sup> This includes refugees, who cross an international border to seek sanctuary in another state, and internally displaced persons, who remain within their countries.

This book focuses exclusively on a particular form of conflict: civil wars, in which fighting between state actors and nonstate groups kills at least 1,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Since World War II, wars waged within states have become the principal mode of large-scale conflict across the globe. Forty percent of all UN member countries experienced a civil war during this period, and 20 percent suffered from multiple ones. Civil wars have generated far more deaths and displacement than wars between countries. In fact, scholars tend to attribute the rise in displacement since the 1960s to the shift in global conflict from interstate to intrastate, as the latter are typically waged within civilian population centers and are therefore prone to provoking mass flight.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Moore and Shellman 2004; Schmeidl 1997; Weiner 1996.

<sup>9</sup> I use a standard definition of civil war drawn from Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) in which four criteria must be met: (1) fighting within a state between agents of (or claimants to) that state and nonstate groups who seek to take control of a government, take power in a region, or use violence to change government policies; (2) 1,000 or more war-related deaths in at least one year of the war; (3) 100 or more are killed on each side; and (4) the rebels (nonstate groups) are able to mount an organized military opposition to the state.

<sup>10</sup> Weiner 1996.

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Thus, while the arguments developed in this volume could possibly help explain population displacement strategies in wars between states, I do not include these cases in my analysis. My focus on civil war displacement also excludes organized population movements in response to natural disasters or economic development projects, or as part of settler colonialism or state-building.<sup>11</sup> It also distinguishes this book from research on mass deportation and ethnic cleansing during interstate wars and foreign policy disputes.<sup>12</sup> This distinction is important because global trends in forced displacement suggests that the deliberate expulsion of people *outside* state borders has become less prevalent than the uprooting of civilians *within* their countries, as IDPs now make up roughly two-thirds of the globally displaced population. In 2023 the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported 27.2 million new displacements due to conflict and violence, three-quarters of them were uprooted within their countries as IDPs.<sup>13</sup> As such, understanding why combatants would attempt to displace people internally rather than externally is of particular relevance.

### 1.2.2 *The Weapon: Displacement*

Scholars and human rights practitioners have demonstrated that displacement can be a distinctive strategy employed by armed groups – not just an auxiliary outcome of other conflict dynamics – and therefore requires an explanation within itself. While research on armed conflict and political violence has been dominated by the study of homicides, scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of analyzing nonlethal forms of violence in order to better understand the dynamics and consequences of war. No form of violence affects more people than displacement. Between 1989 and 2017 alone, more than ninety million people were uprooted by civil wars, dwarfing the number of people killed in them (1.62 million).<sup>14</sup> Given these trends, examining wartime displacement in isolation is essential.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Forth 2017; Frymer 2014; Havik et al. 2019; Mylonas 2013. In some of these cases, displacement is part of a broader campaign of demographic engineering (e.g., Israel/Palestine). See Bookman 2013; McGarry 1998; Morland 2016; McNamee 2023.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bulutgil 2016; Greenhill 2010; McNamee and Zhang 2019; Garrity 2022, 2023a.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Calculations based on the maximum stock of displaced people recorded for each conflict from UNHCR Population Data, along with total battle fatalities according to UCDP (Pettersson et al. 2019). This only includes major wars (1,000 or more fatalities). Fatalities include combatants and civilian deaths caused by activities directly related to combat (e.g., battlefield fighting, rebel ambushes, military bombardment).



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Of course, not all displacement in wartime is deliberately induced by combatants. Civilians residing in conflict zones often decide to spontaneously leave their homes due to fear of violence or economic hardship caused by the war, or because they live in close proximity to military front lines. The distinction between intentional and unintentional displacement has often been noted by conflict analysts:

In contexts where civilians are suffering from generalized violence triggered by conflict, rather than displacement being a planned strategy by the belligerents, populations may spontaneously flee.<sup>15</sup>

In Turkey and Burma, governments have deliberately uprooted people in order to destroy their possible links to insurgency movements. In Algeria, displacement is a byproduct of conflict, primarily between the government and Islamist insurgent groups.<sup>16</sup>

Strategic displacement refers to deliberate, systematic displacement that is carried out through physical coercive actions under the direction or encouragement of armed group leadership. This is based on the criminal definition of displacement promulgated by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which includes “the forced removal of people from one country” or “from one area to another within the same state,” typically as part of a “widespread or systematic attack” against a civilian population.<sup>17</sup> Such measures are explicitly prohibited by international law, under both the 1977 Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions (Article 17) and the Rome Statute (Article 7).<sup>18</sup> Verdicts delivered by international tribunals have further established that forced displacement can be a war crime.<sup>19</sup>

Just as wartime displacement is not necessarily intentional, intentional displacement is not necessarily strategic. Combatants may also uproot civilians for private reasons – to loot or expropriate their property – without receiving direct orders.<sup>20</sup> I consider such instances opportunistic

<sup>15</sup> Stepputat 1999: 12.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen 1999: 6.

<sup>17</sup> Bassiouni 1999: 312. This definition of strategic displacement is broader than the one proposed by Steele (2011), which is limited to expulsion. Since the ICC stipulates that victims must have been “lawfully present” in the area where they were uprooted, my definition excludes the eviction or movement of squatters or illegal immigrants.

<sup>18</sup> According to Article 8 of the Rome Statute, displacement can be lawful where “the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand.” In such cases, all possible measures are supposed to be taken to provide civilians with satisfactory shelter, hygiene, health, safety, and nutrition. This is rarely done in practice.

<sup>19</sup> For example, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia concluded that the way in which Serbian military forces displaced Muslim communities in Bosnia “proves ... that the transfer was carried out in furtherance of a well-organized policy whose purpose was to expel the Bosnian Muslim population from the enclave. The evacuation itself was the goal” (quoted in Buck 2017). See also Nahlawi 2018: 194.

<sup>20</sup> Tellez 2022.



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displacement and therefore distinct from displacement that is ordered as part of a strategy and displacement that is unintentional (or collateral damage). Displacement becomes strategic when it is purposefully adopted by an armed group as a matter of organizational policy in pursuit of military objectives. Perpetrators may use a variety of tactics to induce displacement, from direct orders, threats, and intimidation; to massacres and physical abuse; to arbitrary bombing, shelling, and property destruction. Victims usually flee on foot and sometimes by vehicle. In some instances, perpetrators transport people en masse using buses or trains, but this tends to be relatively rare.

There are three primary types of strategic displacement, which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. *Cleansing* describes the permanent expulsion of individuals who belong to a particular political, ethnic, religious, or other identity group. These methods obtained notoriety in the 1990s during the war in Bosnia, but they have been used more recently in Cameroon and South Sudan, and against the Rohingya in Myanmar. *Depopulation*, which the Russian military used in Grozny during the wars in Chechnya, is the indiscriminate and temporary evacuation of particular geographic areas. *Forced relocation* refers to the concentration or resettlement of civilians in makeshift camps or proximate urban centers. The use of strategic hamlets in Vietnam and model villages during the Guatemalan civil war are two well-known examples. While cleansing and depopulation focus on trying to get people to leave – through either group-selective targeting (cleansing) or indiscriminate violence (depopulation) – relocation dictates where they should go. Although some scholars have drawn distinctions between displacement that seeks to cleanse a population and displacement aimed at controlling it, they have yet to systematically capture and compare the use of these different strategies across civil wars.<sup>21</sup> This is crucial for testing and refining different arguments for why combatants displace people.

To be clear: The arguments in this book are meant to help explain displacement strategies *other than cleansing*. I therefore focus on strategies of forced relocation – which, as I show in Chapter 2, has been the most prevalent type of strategic displacement in the modern period. However, I also explore potential extensions of my argument to strategies of depopulation through a case study of the civil war in Syria.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Bulutgil 2016; Greenhill 2008; Kalyvas 2006; Valentino et al. 2004.

<sup>22</sup> As I noted earlier, most research tends to focus on cleansing. While there are some excellent studies of forced relocation in specific cases – for example, Catton 1999; Downes 2007; Garlock 1991; Markel 2006; Sepp 1992; Sutton 1977; Whittaker 2014 – little systematic, comparative research on this type of displacement exists.

1.2.3 *The Perpetrators: State Actors*

My definition of strategic wartime displacement covers displacement by armed groups, including state agents (military, police, and paramilitary organizations) and nonstate actors (rebel groups or independent militias). However, this study focuses on displacement by state agents (i.e., counterinsurgents) for several reasons. First, civil war incumbents are much more likely to employ these methods than insurgents. According to the cross-national data I collected for this book – which I introduce in detail in Chapter 2 – state actors have employed strategic displacement in 60 percent of civil wars, while rebels have only displaced in 20 percent of conflicts. This is likely because states tend to possess the firepower, organizational capabilities, and logistical resources needed to facilitate mass population movements. Nonstate actors typically have fewer resources and are therefore less likely to engage in these practices. Moreover, the use of some displacement strategies, namely forced relocation – in which civilians are moved to a designated area – presupposes that the perpetrator controls some territory. State actors meet this criterion by definition. Insurgents, however, often do not: According to data on the military capabilities of 569 rebel groups active between 1946 and 2010, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) did not effectively control any territory.<sup>23</sup>

Second, most of the theories tested in this book stem from research on state-induced displacement and may apply mainly, if not exclusively, to government combatants. For example, some arguments – including my own – claim that strategic displacement is motivated by identification problems. This would make these strategies more appealing to counterinsurgents. Most states field uniformed militaries that broadcast their presence and clearly distinguish themselves from noncombatants. Insurgents, consequently, know who they are fighting. In contrast, rebels usually try to blend in with the population; their very survival depends on blurring the combatant–civilian distinction. In fact, to maintain their cover, rebel groups – from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, to the Taliban in Afghanistan, to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – often engage in the forced *emplacement* of civilians, preventing people from fleeing their communities so they can serve as human shields. Although rebels can face identification problems in wartime, they tend to be less acute than those encountered by state combatants. It is because of the fact that governments tend to suffer disproportionately from these problems that my arguments, and the analysis in this book, focus on state actors.

<sup>23</sup> Cunningham et al. 2013.