From Protection to Persecution: The Determinants of State Violence against Refugees

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Empirical Puzzle

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  - The mastermind of the November 2015 Paris attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, posed as a refugee.
  - In May 2016, the Kenyan government claimed that al-Shabaab terrorists were using the Dadaab refugee camp as a hide-out.
Empirical Puzzle

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  - Recent survey shows that 75% of Calais refugees have experienced police violence.
  - HRW on Somali refugees in Kenya: “Once in the camps, some refugees face *more* police violence.”
Empirical Puzzle

- Not all countries are equally likely to victimize refugees.
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- No recent reports of police violence against refugees in:
  - the United Kingdom (around 120,000 refugees)
  - Sweden (around 150,000 refugees)
  - Malaysia (around 100,000 refugees)
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Research Question

- Why is it that some host states victimize refugees while others do not?
Argument in Brief

- Host states are more likely to victimize refugees in times of security crisis.
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- Security crises create incentives for states to adopt policies that are likely to harm refugees.
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- Security crises loosen the political and legal constraints imposed on host states and their agents’ handling of refugees.
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- States may victimize refugees in times of crisis because
  - they represent an actual threat to national security.
  - they represent a potential threat to national security.
  - they can be an ideal scapegoat.
Refugee flows are associated with an increased risk of civil war, inter-state war, and terrorism. (Salehyan and Gledistch 2006; Salehyan 2008, 2009; Choi and Salehyan 2013)
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Yet, most refugee groups are not militarized (Onoma 2013:10).
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Yet, most refugee groups are not militarized (Onoma 2013:10).

More importantly, there is as much, if not more, violence ‘against’ refugees as there is by ‘refugees’.
Refugee Victimization by States

- **Host states’ agents** are among the main perpetrators of violence against refugees (Onoma 2013).
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- Many states regularly violate refugees’ physical integrity despite their international legal commitments.
Host states are more likely to victimize refugees when they experience a security crisis.
Refugee Victimization by States

- Host states are more likely to victimize refugees when they experience a security crisis.

- Police brutality in Calais has increased since the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks.
Refugee Victimization by States

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  - Police brutality in Calais has increased since the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks.
  - Over the past year, Turkish coastal guards have become increasingly violent towards refugees.
Refugee Victimization by States

- **Political constraints** that limit the ability of states to violate human rights weaken considerably during security crises.
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- States have strong **incentives** to react to security crises with increased violence against refugees.
Refugee Victimization by States

- **Hypothesis 1**: Host states are more likely to violate the physical integrity of refugees when they face a security crisis.
Causal Mechanisms

- What are states’ incentives to victimize refugees in times of crisis?
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- Refugees may pose an **actual threat** to national security and their host states may try to reduce that threat.
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- Davenport’s (2007) ‘**law of coercive responsiveness**’: positive association between political repression and the existence of a threat to the regime.
1. Coercive Responsiveness

- Syrian refugee arrested in Germany with more than three pounds of explosives.
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- Evidence that al-Shabaab is actually recruiting refugees in Kenya.
2. Preemptive Repression

- States may anticipate future refugee inflows to exacerbate an existing security crisis.
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- States may victimize refugees who have *ethnic ties to their enemies* in order to dissuade them from seeking asylum.
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- States may victimize refugees who have **ethnic ties to their enemies** in order to dissuade them from seeking asylum.

- Turkey victimized Kurdish Iraqi refugees during the Gulf War (1990 - 1991) even though they did not pose an actual threat.
3. Scapegoating & Diversion

- States may target refugees in times of security crisis as a diversion strategy.
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- Refugees are an ideal *scapegoat* in times of crisis, when public intolerance of foreign populations is likely to be high.
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- October 2, 2016: Referendum on EU’s migrant quotas.
Alternative Explanations

- **State Capacity**: States with limited bureaucratic capacity may be unable to control their agents’ use of violence against refugees.
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- **Hypothesis 2**: Host states with lower capability levels are more likely to violate the physical integrity of refugee populations.
Alternative Explanations

- **Ethnic & National Identity Threat**: Host states’ constituents may be less likely to object the physical abuse of refugees whom they perceive as a ‘cultural’ threat.
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- **Hypothesis 3**: Host states are more likely to violate the physical integrity of refugee populations that do not share the same ethnic background as their politically dominant groups.
Alternative Explanations

- **Economic Scarcity**: Economic scarcity may encourage native civilians to tolerate the victimization of refugees by their governments.
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- **Hypothesis 4**: Host states are more likely violate the physical integrity of refugees in times of economic scarcity.
Research Design

**Sample**: All states between 1996 and 2015.

**Unit of analysis**: country-year.

**Main Dependent variable**: *Refugee Victimization*, which takes the value of 1 if government agents used at least two forms of violence against refugees, and 0 otherwise.

**9 types of government anti-refugee violence**: killing, sexual violence, torture, beating, shooting, violent removal, extortion, destruction/confiscation of property, and harassment.
Research Design

- **Primary explanatory variables**: Security crisis
  - *Transnational Terrorism*: count variable. Global Terrorism Database.

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■ Control variables:


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Research Design

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  - *Ethnic Ties with Included Group*: Dummy variable. Ethnic ties with at least one of the host country’s dominant, monopoly, senior partner or junior partner group.
  - *Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita*: Continuous variable. World Bank’s World Development Indicators (WDI).
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  - *Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita*: Continuous variable. World Bank’s World Development Indicators (WDI).
  
  - *Refugee Population (Share), Democracy, Ethnic Fractionalization.*
Findings

- Each type of security threat is a **significant and positive** predictor of anti-refugee violence by host states.
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- Countries exposed to a security threat are more likely to victimize refugees.
## Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Security Threat</th>
<th>Increase in Odds of Host State Violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Conflict</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIDs</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

- Among our control variables, the **relative size of the refugee population** is the only significant and positive predictor of state violence.

- **Democracy** is a significant and negative predictor of state violence.
Testing Causal Mechanisms: Coercive Responsiveness

- States exposed to a security crisis may victimize refugees because they pose an **actual threat** to national security.
Testing Causal Mechanisms: Coercive Responsiveness

- States exposed to a security crisis may victimize refugees because they pose an *actual threat* to national security.

- We collect systematic data on the recruitment of refugees by terrorist groups.
Testing Causal Mechanisms: Coercive Responsiveness

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- We collect systematic data on the recruitment of refugees by terrorist groups.

- **Terrorist recruitment is a rare event**: 1% of all country-years.
1. Coercive Responsiveness

- We restrict our sample to country-years that recently experienced transnational terrorism.
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- *Terrorist Recruitment* is not a significant predictor of refugee victimization.
2. Preemptive Repression

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- **Preemptive Repression**: ethnic ties between refugees and a domestic insurgent group should result in higher levels of refugee victimization.

- We restrict our sample to country-years that are involved in a civil conflict.

- *Ethnic Ties with Insurgents* is not a significant predictor of refugee victimization.
Conclusion

- Using a novel global dataset on violence against refugees, we show that countries that are exposed to a security threat are more likely to victimize refugees.
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- In times of crisis, states victimize refugees regardless of whether they pose a threat to national security. This suggests that scapegoating mechanism is likely to be at work.
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- In times of crisis, states victimize refugees regardless of whether they pose a threat to national security. This suggests that scapegoating mechanism is likely to be at work.

- From a policy perspective, our findings stress the need to find equitable burden sharing mechanisms for hosting nations.
Avenues of Research

- **Micro-Level**: Why do individual state agents victimize refugees?
Avenues of Research

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- **Macro-Level**: Do actors other than the host state also have strategic incentives to target refugees?
Thank you