Push, Not Peace: Reconsidering the Drivers of Refugee Return

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Abstract

When do refugees return to their countries of origin? A core premise of the international refugee regime is that refugees should remain in asylum while conflict continues at home and repatriate once peace is restored. Drawing on a new global dataset covering 292 origin-asylum dyads from 1980 to 2023, I show that the opposite pattern prevails: most returns occur during ongoing conflict, while many refugees remain in asylum long after war has ended. I argue that return is driven less by peace in origin countries than by push factors in asylum countries, especially host-country conflict and forced return policies. By contrast, peace often fails to produce repatriation because the costs of uprooting established lives are high and expected quality of life in asylum exceeds that in origin countries. Descriptively, more than three-quarters of returns occur in years with a host-country push factor, while asylum countries offer greater economic opportunity in 90 percent of peaceful dyad-years. I test this argument with panel models that exploit within-dyad variation, translate the estimates into predicted return rates at the dyad and global levels, and trace the mechanisms through a qualitative case study. I also document substantial inaccuracies in UN refugee data and introduce corrected annual measures of refugee stocks and returns, along with new indicators of forced return policies, camp settlement, and UN refugee funding. The findings challenge a foundational premise of the refugee regime: although voluntary repatriation is its preferred durable solution, much return appears to be driven by coercion rather than peace.

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1 Introduction

When do refugees return? The conventional view is that refugees return when there is peace at home. This expectation reflects a core premise of the international refugee regime: refugees should be protected in asylum while they face persecution or conflict in their countries of origin, and should return once conditions are safe. UNHCR identifies voluntary repatriation as the preferred "durable solution" to refugee crises, and one of its core mandates is to facilitate return after conflict ends (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004).[1] Existing studies support this account, finding that refugees' intentions to return are shaped primarily by security conditions in the country of origin (e.g., Alrababah et al., 2023; Ghosn et al., 2021; Beaman, Onder and Onder, 2022; Koser, 1997; Adema et al., 2025).

In this paper, I show that observed patterns of return do not align with conventional expectations. I introduce the Global Refugee Return (GRR) dataset, which provides corrected measures of refugee stocks and returns for 292 origin–asylum dyads from 1980 to 2023, hand-coded from qualitative archival records. These global data show that, rather than returning after peace, most refugees return during ongoing conflict, while many remain in asylum long after conflict ends. These patterns contradict both the core assumptions of the refugee regime and the security-based explanations that dominate the literature.

To explain these puzzling patterns, I argue that they reflect two overlooked features of refugees' lives. First, much return during conflict is not voluntary but driven by "push" factors in the asylum country, particularly forced return policies and host-country conflict. Using GRR, I show that three-quarters of all returns occur in years with either a forced return policy or conflict in the asylum country. Second, refugees often remain in asylum after conflict ends when the costs of return are high and conditions in exile exceed those in the country of origin. GRR shows that, in cases where refugees could return peacefully, the asylum country is richer than the origin country in nearly nine out of ten cases. In addition, many refugees have spent decades building livelihoods and raising families in asylum, making return costly even when there is peace at home. Together, these dynamics generate the observed aggregate pattern: return during conflict and persistence after peace.

The cases of South Sudan and Afghanistan illustrate the logic. By 2022, over 2.3 million South Sudanese—more than 20% of the population—were living as refugees. In 2023, a large wave of returns occurred not because of peace in South Sudan but because refugees were forced to flee Sudan, their primary host country, when civil war broke out. Nearly three-quarters of South Sudanese refugees in Sudan returned within two years, while those in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya largely remained. A similar dynamic unfolded in Afghanistan during the 1990s: although conflict continued after the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992, more than 4.5 million Afghans returned, driven by mounting pressure from Iran and Pakistan, which employed coercive measures including mass forced return, non-renewal of residence permits, school closures, and cuts to food aid.

I formalize the argument in a simple model of refugee return and test its implications using the GRR dataset. Using panel methods to examine within-dyad variation, I show that return is driven primarily by forced return policies and asylum-country conflict, rather than conditions in the origin country, and is less likely when transition costs are high and when quality of life in asylum exceeds that at home. Because push factors are common, quality of life in asylum often exceeds that at home, and transition costs are substantial, most global return is driven by host-country shocks during ongoing conflict, while peace alone rarely generates large-scale repatriation. I use the model to generate predicted return rates at both the dyadic and global levels. Counterfactually removing asylum-country conflict and forced return policies would have reduced global returns during 1980–2023 by 38.6% and 36.7%,

[1] The other two "durable solutions" are local integration and third-country resettlement. Local integration refers to incorporation into the economic, social, and legal institutions of the host country, while third-country resettlement transfers refugees to another state, typically under limited quotas.

respectively. By contrast, if all origin-country wars had ended, returns would have risen by only 10.9%, leaving 324.4 million refugee-years still spent in asylum over the period. I complement the analysis with a case study of Ethiopian refugees to illustrate the underlying mechanisms.

This research makes three contributions. First, despite the centrality of return to the international refugee regime, it has been remarkably understudied at the macro level. This is the first study to examine global patterns using improved data, and it challenges both the regime's foundational principles and prevailing security-based accounts. I show that most historical returns were not voluntary decisions but responses to coercive pressures. Existing research has missed this pattern for two reasons: it has focused largely on Syrian return and on settings in which refugees have a meaningful choice to remain, and it has examined return intentions more often than realized return (e.g., Ghosn et al., 2021; Alrababa'h et al., 2021; Adema et al., 2025).

Second, the findings contribute to broader debates on international cooperation by documenting widespread violations of international refugee law. Many host states have adopted forced return policies in direct contravention of *non-refoulement*—the core principle of the 1951 Refugee Convention—underscoring the limited capacity of UNHCR and the broader regime to prevent such practices. Third, the article makes a significant data contribution: it identifies inaccuracies in UNHCR's global stock and return data, and provides corrected annual measures of refugee stocks and returns, multiple new measures of *de facto* refugee conditions (such as forced return policies and camp residence), and new data on UNHCR financing.

The article proceeds as follows. I first document the empirical puzzle—return during conflict and stasis after peace—then develop the theoretical framework and formalize it in a simple model. I next introduce the GRR dataset, outline the empirical strategy, and present the panel results and predicted return rates. I then provide descriptive evidence on the prevalence of push factors, relative quality of life, and transition costs to explain aggregate patterns, followed by a case study of Ethiopia that traces the mechanisms. The article concludes with implications for durable solutions and directions for future research.

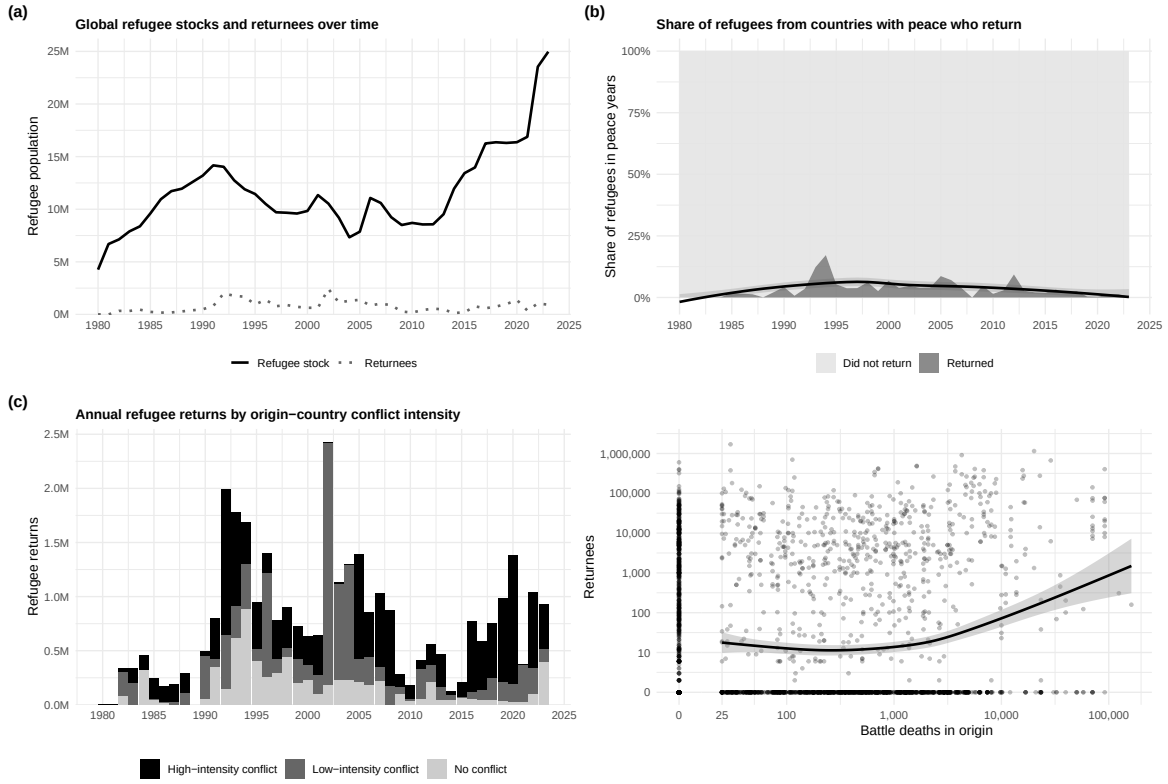
2 Puzzling Patterns of Refugee Return

Prevailing theories of refugee return center on security conditions in the country of origin. This view follows from the core logic of the refugee regime: refugees flee persecution, are protected in asylum under the principle of *non-refoulement*, and return once conditions are safe. On this account, repatriation depends primarily on whether conflict has ended at home.

Micro-level studies of return intentions support this view, consistently finding that safety at home dominates economic considerations in explaining who plans to return (Alrababah et al., 2023; Ghosn et al., 2021; Al Husein and Wagner, 2023; Adema et al., 2025; Beaman, Onder and Onder, 2022; Zakirova and Buzurukov, 2021). For example, the "threshold model" developed by Alrababah et al. (2023) argues that refugees consider return only once a minimum level of safety in the origin country has been achieved. Below this threshold, deteriorating conditions in asylum should not induce return; only after peace is restored do refugees weigh quality-of-life considerations across origin and asylum. This framework yields two clear empirical implications. First, return should increase when there is peace in the origin country. Second, return should be rare during active conflict.

Drawing on the Global Refugee Returns (GRR) dataset, a new dataset described in Section 4.1, Figure 1 shows that observed patterns are inconsistent with both implications. Panel (a) plots global refugee stocks and return flows since 1980, illustrating that return is rare relative to the size of displaced populations. GRR shows that, across dyad-years with more than 1,000 refugees, the median return

Figure 1: Return during conflict and non-return during peace



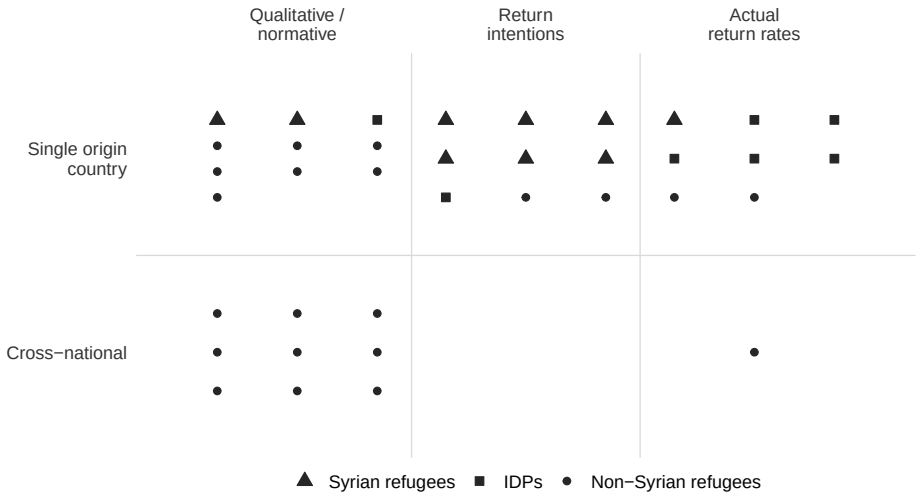
Note: Panel (a) plots the global refugee stock (solid line) and total recorded returns (dotted line) for each year from the Global Refugee Return dataset. Panel (b) subsets the sample to refugees who originally fled war rather than non-conflict forms of persecution and restricts the sample to dyad-years in which the country of origin (COO) is at peace, showing the share of refugees who returned versus did not return in each year; the black line is a LOESS smoother of the return share. Panel (c) decomposes total annual returns by the conflict status of the COO, distinguishing no conflict, low-intensity conflict ($\geq$ 25 battle deaths), and high-intensity conflict ($\geq$ 1,000 battle deaths) using UCDP thresholds. Panel (d) plots the relationship between conflict severity in the COO and refugee return by showing dyad-year observations of log battle deaths in the origin country and log returnees; the black line is a LOESS smoother. The year 1989 is omitted across all panels due to missing return data. *Source*: Refugee data from the Global Refugee Return dataset; conflict data from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset.

rate is zero and the mean is 3.22 percent; in 88.3 percent of dyad-years, fewer than 5 percent of refugees return. One interpretation is that low return reflects the persistence of conflict. This is indeed part of the explanation: nearly half of the world's refugees originate from countries experiencing high-intensity conflict (44.4 percent). Yet this explanation is incomplete. Almost one in four refugees are from countries now at peace, and Panel (b) reflects that, even when there is no conflict in the origin country, the average return rate is only 3.37 percent.[2] Extending the window to the first three post-conflict years yields a cumulative return share of just 6.8 percent. In general, peace alone does not produce large-scale repatriation.

On the contrary, Panel (c) shows that most returns occur during war, not after it. Decomposing annual returns by origin-country conflict status shows that most return occurs during conflict. Between 1980 and 2023, more than three-quarters of all recorded returns took place while conflict was ongoing. Roughly four-tenths occurred during high-intensity conflict, three-tenths during low-intensity conflict, and only two-tenths during peace. Panel (d) reinforces this pattern at the dyad-year level. Plotting conflict severity against returnees reveals a positive relationship: higher battle deaths are associated

[2]Restricted to origin-year dyads where refugees generally fled war rather than broader non-conflict persecution.

Figure 2: Geographic and methodological concentration in the refugee return literature



Note: Each point represents a study identified through a systematic journal search (2006–2026) of: (1) 12 leading political science journals (APSR, AJPS, JOP, CPS, BJPS, WP, IO, ISQ, JPR, JCR, PSRM, PNAS); (2) 5 leading migration and refugee studies journals (Journal of Refugee Studies, IMR, JEMS, International Migration, Comparative Migration Studies); (3) 2 leading development economics journals (World Development, Journal of Development Economics); and (4) the leading area studies journal for each of four principal refugee-producing regions (African Affairs, IJMES, Journal of Asian Studies, Latin American Research Review). Supplemented with citation tracing from key articles and books, and recent working papers on contemporary cases. Triangles denote studies of Syrian refugees; squares denote studies of IDPs; circles denote other populations. List of studies detailed in Appendix Table 15.

with more, not fewer, returns.

These patterns are difficult to reconcile with security-based theories. If improved safety at home were the dominant driver, we would observe concentrated return after conflict termination and minimal return during war. Instead, most returns occur during conflict, and most post-conflict settings do not produce large-scale repatriation. This yields two central puzzles: why do refugees return during conflict, and why do they not return when conflict ends?

Existing studies have missed this puzzle because the literature is dominated by micro-level, single-country analyses of return intentions—particularly of Syrian refugees—rather than cross-national studies of realized return (Figure 2).[3] This focus has produced three limitations. First, it emphasizes within-group variation—what distinguishes individuals who intend to return from those who do not—while most variation in return occurs at the group level. Return episodes are concentrated and episodic, with the top 5% of dyad-years accounting for 88.1% of all returns (GRR). Second, because existing research has focused on specific cases, it overlooks common factors among host countries in unexamined contexts. Third, it analyzes intentions rather than realized behavior; when return is observed, it often diverges from these expectations.[4]

3 Theory

Why do refugees return during ongoing conflict, yet often remain in asylum even after peace? I argue that both patterns reflect the same underlying mechanism: refugees often prefer to remain in asylum in both war and peacetime, and large-scale return most often occurs not because conditions at home

[3]The exception is Zakirova and Buzurukov (2021). See Appendix Table 15 for a full list of studies.

[4]For example, in the case studied by Alrababah et al. (2023) (Syrian return from Lebanon in 2020), GRR shows that roughly 21,000 Syrians returned despite ongoing conflict, driven in large part by coercive policies and facilitated repatriation. This contradicts the threshold model's prediction that refugees return only when conditions are safe.

improve, but because conditions in the asylum country deteriorate. The ideal case is one in which war ends, refugees wish to return, and they have the resources to do so. In practice, however, this scenario represents a minority of cases.

3.1 When Refugees Return

A key assumption of security-based accounts is that once refugees reach asylum, they remain protected until conflict ends in their country of origin. In practice, this assumption often fails. Most refugees (67 percent) reside in neighboring countries, which means they remain in conflict-prone regions even after fleeing immediate violence (UNHCR, 2025). States bordering conflict zones face elevated risks of war, both because neighboring countries become involved in fighting and because structural risk factors for conflict cluster geographically (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Gleditsch, 2007). Refugees thus face a substantial risk that conflict will emerge in their country of asylum (Lischer, 2005). Living close to the border and absent resources for onward migration, many refugees return to their country. Take, for example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1996–1997:

> "In October, an outbreak of civil war in Zaire, which engulfed Rwandan refugee camps there, produced what UNHCR described as the 'largest and swiftest' repatriation in memory. About a half-million Rwandan refugees returned home during a four-day period in mid-November. Most returnees repatriated on foot, jamming the main Rwandan highway from the border. The sea of humanity stretched nearly 100 miles during the height of the return." *(WRS, Zaire, 1997)*

Even absent conflict, asylum-country governments may force refugees to leave before peace has been achieved at home. Despite the prohibition on forced return under the 1951 Refugee Convention, many states circumvent or ignore *non-refoulement* (Schwartz, 2025).[5] Governments that have not ratified the Convention face no formal legal constraint, while signatories often rely on indirect coercion, including withdrawal of residence permits, closure of schools and markets, and termination of food aid, to induce ostensibly "voluntary" repatriation. This echoes scholarship documenting how repatriation has been facilitated under conditions of coercion, shaped by political pressures from asylum states and donor governments (Chimni, 2004; Harrell-Bond, 1989; Long, 2013; Stein and Cuny, 1994). Michael Barnett's work, in particular, documents how UNHCR has aided repatriation programs that fall short of the voluntariness standard it formally upholds (Barnett, 2001*a*,*b*; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004).

Iran's treatment of Afghan refugees during the 1990s illustrates this pattern. Despite ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, Iranian authorities pursued a series of measures designed to induce return without formally violating *non-refoulement*. Afghans who had arrived in 1992 were reclassified as "illegal immigrants," new registrations were curtailed, and refugee status was replaced with six-month temporary permits. Work-permit renewals were refused, worksite raids were conducted, and those without valid papers were deported. In March 1995, Iran announced that all refugees would be required to leave by March 1997. A 1999 law mandated the deportation of foreign workers without authorization, a category that encompassed the vast majority of Afghans in the country. Though framed as voluntary, these measures made continued residence in Iran untenable for many refugees and generated substantial return flows during periods when conditions in Afghanistan remained unsafe.

At the same time, the end of conflict does not automatically generate return. Most refugees spend at least a decade in asylum.[6] Over time, they build new lives: they find work, start businesses, learn the local language, raise children who have never been "home," and develop social and economic networks in their host communities. In this sense, they become long-term migrants, and, as with migrants more broadly, the longer they remain abroad, the less likely they are to return (Borjas and Bratsberg, 1996;

[5] This echoes a broader pattern of mass immigrant expulsions in Africa documented in Adida (2014).

[6] Approximately three-quarters of the world's refugees live in protracted displacement, defined as exile lasting more than five years without a durable solution (UNHCR, 2021).

Van Hook and Zhang, 2011). Asylum countries are also typically wealthier than origin countries: most refugees are hosted in the safer and more prosperous countries within low- and middle-income regions. When war ends, return requires uprooting these established lives and moving back to a country with a damaged post-conflict economy and potential future insecurity. Peace removes the immediate security barrier, but it does not eliminate the economic, social, and psychological costs of relocation. In the absence of strong push factors from the asylum country, refugees may choose to stay.

Even when refugees would prefer to return, they may lack the means to do so. Relocating, rebuilding housing, and re-establishing livelihoods in a post-conflict economy carries substantial costs, which refugees who have spent years in asylum may lack the resources to cover. International assistance can offset these costs: UNHCR sometimes provides cash grants, transport, and reintegration packages to returnees. The repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees from Guinea in the early 2000s illustrates the scale of support involved:

> "About half of the returning refugees received assistance from UNHCR and other agencies in the form of transportation, cooked meals, and medical care during the journey home... Returnees received blankets, cooking utensils, shelter materials, and a two-month food supply. UNHCR appealed for a nine-fold increase in its budget, to $18 million, to support reintegration programs including schools, health clinics, and livelihood programs." *(Guinea & Sierra Leone, WRS, 2002–2004)*

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that refugee return should be modeled not as an automatic response to peace at home, but as a choice shaped by relative security and economic conditions in origin and asylum, coercive pressure from the host country, and the costs of relocation.

3.2 Formalization

I formalize the argument using a simple utility framework in which refugees choose between remaining in the asylum country (a) or returning to their country of origin (o). Expected welfare in each location depends on quality of life, which itself is a function of security and economic conditions, and on any coercive push factors imposed by the host country. Return additionally requires the refugee to pay a one-time transition cost.

Expected welfare from remaining in asylum is:

$$W_a = v_a(s_a, e_a) - \phi(p)$$

where s_a indexes security conditions in the asylum country, e_a indexes economic conditions (labor market access, wages, right to work, access to services), and v_a is strictly increasing in both arguments, capturing baseline quality of life in asylum. The term $\phi(p) \geq 0$ represents the additional welfare loss imposed by coercive host-country policies p aimed at inducing return, such as forced relocation, revocation of residence permits, closure of schools, or withdrawal of food aid. I treat ϕ as conceptually distinct from v_a because these policies are deliberate state actions targeting refugees for removal, rather than general conditions in the host country.

Expected welfare from returning to the origin country is:

$$W_o = v_o(s_o, e_o) - \tau$$

where s_o and e_o index security and economic conditions in the origin country, v_o is strictly increasing in both, and $\tau \geq 0$ is the one-time transition cost of returning, capturing lost livelihoods, severed networks, disrupted schooling, and the psychological cost of uprooting.

A refugee returns if and only if two conditions hold. First, return is welfare-improving:

$$W_o > W_a \iff v_o(s_o, e_o) - v_a(s_a, e_a) + \phi(p) > \tau.$$

Second, the refugee can afford the transition cost:

$$r \geq \tau.$$

Refugees for whom the first holds but not the second are stranded: they would prefer to return but cannot afford to do so.

This formulation differs from the security-based accounts, such as the Alrababah et al. (2023) threshold model, in three ways. First, I remove the assumption that refugees consider return only once insecurity in the origin country falls below a safety threshold. Instead, return depends on a comparison of welfare across origin and asylum, allowing return to occur during ongoing origin-country conflict if remaining in asylum becomes sufficiently worse. Second, I allow quality of life in each location to depend not only on economic conditions but also on insecurity, reflecting that refugees' return decisions are shaped by safety as well as economic opportunity. Third, I introduce a transition cost and a feasibility constraint, which together explain why peace does not automatically generate large-scale repatriation and why repatriation assistance can meaningfully shift return behavior.

3.3 Hypotheses

The model yields four predictions. The first follows from $\phi(p)$ and the dependence of v_a on s_a. Both coercive host-country policies and armed conflict in the asylum country reduce W_a, narrowing the gap that justifies remaining.

> *H1 (Host-Country Push).* The probability of return increases when the host country imposes coercive return policies or experiences armed conflict.

The second follows from v_a. Higher security and economic conditions in asylum raise the welfare cost of leaving.

> *H2 (Asylum Quality of Life).* The probability of return decreases as quality of life in asylum rises relative to the origin country.

The third follows from v_o. Improvements in origin-country security raise the welfare value of return, though, as discussed below, the magnitude of this effect is bounded by the size of τ and the asylum–origin gap in economic conditions.

> *H3 (Origin-Country Security).* The probability of return increases when security in the origin country improves.

The fourth follows from τ and the feasibility constraint $r \geq \tau$. Long displacement and urban integration raise transition costs, while repatriation assistance relaxes the feasibility constraint by transferring resources to refugees.

> *H4 (Transition Costs).* The probability of return decreases with transition costs and increases with repatriation assistance.

Table 1 summarizes the expected patterns across combinations of host-country push and origin-country conflict. Return is most likely when push factors coincide with peace at home and remains likely when push factors are present during ongoing conflict. Absent push factors, refugees return only if origin-country conditions become substantially better than those in asylum, net of transition costs.

The model also generates a prediction about aggregate patterns. Because push factors are widespread, $v_a > v_o$ typically holds given weak post-conflict economies, and transition costs are generally high,

Table 1: Expected Patterns of Refugee Return

		Host-country push	
		Yes ($p > 0$ or s_a low)	*No ($p = 0$ and s_a high)*
Conflict ends	*Yes (s_o high)*	Return most likely (push + peace)	$v_a > v_o - \tau$ or $r < \tau \Rightarrow$ Stay $v_a < v_o - \tau$ and $r \geq \tau \Rightarrow$ Return
	No (s_o low)	Return likely (push only)	Stay

most global return should occur during ongoing conflict rather than after its termination. I provide descriptive evidence for these conditions in Section 5.5.

4 Data and Empirical Strategy

4.1 The Global Refugee Return (GRR) Dataset

To test the theory, I introduce the Global Refugee Return (GRR) dataset, which covers all protracted refugee situations at the origin–asylum dyad–year level from 1980 to 2023. The dataset includes origin countries with at least 25,000 refugees in exile in any year, consistent with UNHCR's definition of a protracted refugee situation. For each origin country, I include all asylum countries accounting for at least 75% of the total refugee population.[7] The resulting sample comprises 292 dyads across 89 origin and 97 asylum countries.

GRR makes two contributions. First, it corrects systematic measurement error in UNHCR data on refugee stocks and returns. UNHCR records only voluntary repatriations, excluding forced returns,[8] and captures spontaneous returns incompletely, since refugees who return without UNHCR assistance may not be recorded. Stock figures often reflect "planning estimates" negotiated with host governments rather than actual counts, omit large unregistered populations, and are not revised retroactively when more accurate censuses become available. These problems are compounded by political incentives: host governments may overstate stocks to sustain aid flows, while origin governments may overstate returns to signal post-conflict stability. UNHCR, which depends on the cooperation of these governments, may adopt government figures rather than risk losing access.

Rather than relying on official statistics, GRR reconstructs stocks and returns using qualitative assessments from experts in each context. The primary source is the *World Refugee Survey* (WRS), published annually from 1980 to 2008, which reports on stocks, forced and spontaneous returns, and unregistered populations, as well as providing a qualitative assessment of the reliability of official data. The WRS draws on consultations with governments, international organizations, and field-based sources, and is widely regarded as an authoritative account of refugee conditions (USCRI, 2008). Since reports are organized by host country rather than by return event, they capture smaller return movements as well as large or highly salient episodes. For 2009–2023, I draw on the U.S. Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*. Because these reports less frequently include stock and return statistics, for these years I use UNHCR data as a baseline and supplement with information on unregistered populations and forced returns.

Second, GRR complements existing *de jure* datasets such as DWRAP by introducing two measures of refugees' *de facto* conditions in asylum: forced return practices and the share of each refugee

[7] The 75% threshold is calculated using UNHCR data, supplemented with Palestinian refugees under UNRWA and Mozambican refugees in South Africa, listed as "Unknown" in UNHCR data.

[8] Note that such repatriations often include returns that are coerced in practice but classified as voluntary.

population living in camps (Blair, Grossman and Weinstein, 2022).[9] Additionally, GRR includes new data on UNHCR financing, measuring both overall funding per refugee within each asylum country and funding per refugee allocated specifically to repatriation.

The dataset was constructed through detailed coding of archival reports. I hand-coded the 25 largest refugee-producing countries and their primary asylum destinations; smaller cases were coded by trained research assistants using a standardized protocol and subsequently reviewed. I cross-validated major discrepancies between GRR and UNHCR figures and assessed internal consistency through desk research. Additional details, including dyad-level plots comparing GRR and UNHCR data, are provided in the Appendix.

The value of these corrections is illustrated by the example of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in the Horn of Africa. UNHCR data record 2 million Ethiopian refugees in Somalia in 1980, falling to 700,000 in 1981 and remaining around that figure until 1988; GRR records 700,000 throughout the early 1980s, declining to 350,000 by 1988. The WRS indicates that the decline in official statistics reflected "more accurate counting" rather than large-scale return (Somalia, 1982), and that the Somali government's later figure of 840,000 was "arbitrarily agreed upon by the government and UNHCR" and "always considered far too high" by others (WRS, Somalia, 1989). UNHCR data also miss the pushed return that followed: as the Somali civil war engulfed refugee-hosting areas in 1990–1991, large numbers of Ethiopian refugees fled back to Ethiopia, yet UNHCR records no repatriations because its personnel had been evacuated. The reverse problem appears in Sudan, where UNHCR data show a sharp drop in the Eritrean refugee stock after the fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991, but GRR records no comparable decline because large-scale repatriation was delayed by funding disputes; only "some 10,000 Eritreans returned by their own means" in the year of independence (WRS, Sudan, 1992). This case is discussed in more detail in Section 7.

GRR has several limitations. Because the WRS reports only on countries hosting large refugee populations, the sample is biased toward major cases and excludes smaller dyads. This focus is defensible, as most refugee stocks and returns are concentrated in the settings where reporting is richest. Stock and return figures rely on expert assessments and may be imprecise, particularly where governments restrict access, though triangulation across multiple in-country sources likely improves on UNHCR statistics that often depend on operational presence. The forced return measure requires subjective coding of severity, but underlying quotations are provided to allow independent evaluation. The transition from WRS to U.S. State Department reports in 2009 may introduce measurement discontinuities, and both sources reflect a U.S. perspective. I therefore conduct robustness checks using alternative samples, which show that the results hold (Appendix Table 11). While GRR is not free from measurement error, it provides a more internally consistent account of refugee stocks and returns than existing alternatives.

4.2 Specification

To understand which factors predict return within dyads, I estimate Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood (PPML) models with dyad and year fixed effects.[10] The unit of analysis is the directed dyad-year. The dependent variable is the count of refugees in dyad i (from origin o hosted in asylum a) who returned in year t. I include the log of the previous year's refugee stock so that estimated coefficients

[9] Existing data on camp residence are insufficient for this purpose: UNHCR accommodation data tend to undercount camp populations, while Zhou and Shaver's (2021) refugee site data do not identify which refugee groups occupy each site or what share of each group lives in camps, limiting their use for studying variation across groups facing different conditions within the same country.

[10] The PPML estimator is well suited to this setting: the dependent variable (refugee return counts) is non-negative and highly right-skewed with a mass of observations at or near zero. PPML handles this distributional feature while remaining consistent under heteroskedasticity, unlike log-linearized OLS which requires dropping zero-valued observations.

describe proportional changes in the return rate rather than in the absolute level of returns. I restrict the estimation sample to dyad-years with more than 1,000 refugees in the previous year, which reduces the risk of small-denominator observations producing unstable return rate estimates. Identification comes from within-dyad variation over time; dyad fixed effects absorb all time-invariant dyad characteristics and year fixed effects account for common temporal shocks. Standard errors are clustered at the dyad level.

The baseline specification takes the following form:

$$E[Y_{it} \mid \mathbf{X}_{it}] = \exp\big(\boldsymbol{\beta}'\mathbf{X}_{it} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \ln S_{it-1}\big) \tag{1}$$

where Y_{it} is the count of returnees from dyad i in year t; $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ is a vector of covariates; α_i and γ_t denote dyad and year fixed effects; and $\ln S_{it-1}$ is the log of the lagged refugee stock. Continuous covariates are standardized to facilitate comparison of effect sizes.

To interpret the substantive magnitude of the estimated effects, I compute predicted return rates under theoretically motivated scenarios using the main PPML model. For each scenario, I set the variables of interest to specified values while holding all other covariates at their observed levels, then average predicted return rates across all dyad-years in the estimation sample. I use these predictions in three ways: to examine the interaction between origin-country conflict and asylum-country push factors, to isolate the role of relative quality of life and transition costs in the absence of push factors, and to conduct a counterfactual simulation that quantifies each factor's contribution to the aggregate returns observed in the data.

4.3 Independent Variables

The theory highlights three sets of determinants: origin-country conditions, asylum-country push factors, and relative welfare and transition costs. For origin-country conditions, *Conflict in COO* is coded using UCDP data as 0 (no conflict), 1 (low-intensity, 25–999 battle deaths), or 2 (high-intensity, 1,000+ battle deaths) (UCDP, 2024), and entered as indicator variables with no conflict as the reference category.

For asylum-country push factors, *Conflict in COA* is coded analogously using UCDP data. *Forced Return* is an ordinal measure of coercive return policies at the asylum–origin dyad level, coded 0 (none), 1 (moderate), and 2 (severe), and entered as indicator variables with no forced return policy as the reference category. *Moderate* captures threats, encouragement, or attempts to induce return without policy implementation, as well as implemented policies targeting fewer than 10% of the refugee stock. *Severe* captures implemented policies intended or expected to affect at least 10% of the refugee stock. Coding reflects the policy itself, not realized return. Table 6 in the Appendix provides examples.

For relative welfare and transition costs, *GDP Ratio* is the ratio of GDP per capita in the asylum country to that in the origin country (World Bank), capturing relative economic conditions. *Conflict Duration* is the log of cumulative years of conflict in the origin country, capturing the persistence of displacement and associated transition costs. *Urban* is an ordinal measure of settlement type, coded 3 if the vast majority of refugees reside in urban or rural (non-camp) settings, 2 if most do, and 1 if most reside in camps, proxying for integration and the costs of return. *Repatriation Assistance* is the log of UNHCR repatriation funding allocated to a given origin country per member of that origin country's global refugee population, standardized across the sample.

I include the following controls. *Refugee Rights* measures the legal rights of refugees in the asylum country using the DWRAP index (Blair, Grossman and Weinstein, 2022). *Excluded Ethnic Group* indicates whether the refugee group's associated ethnic group is politically excluded in the origin country, using the Ethnic Power Relations dataset. Section 6 assesses whether the results are robust

to a wide range of alternative measures of conflict, broader persecution, welfare, and transition costs.

5 Results

Table 2 presents the main PPML results on refugee return. Model 1 includes only the core independent variables, Model 2 adds the remaining explanatory variables, Model 3 adds controls, and Model 4 adds repatriation assistance, which I test separately because it is available for only a subset of observations. I focus on Model 3 below. For each hypothesis, I report coefficient estimates and predicted return rates. Section 5.5 then turns to the aggregate pattern (H5).

Table 2: Poisson Pseudo-Maximum Likelihood Estimates of Refugee Return

Dependent Variable:	Total Repatriation			
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Conflict in COA: High	0.5786†	0.6315†	0.6729†	0.8788*
	(0.3093)	(0.3328)	(0.3734)	(0.4071)
Conflict in COA: Low	0.4033**	0.7298***	0.9160***	0.8723*
	(0.1374)	(0.2134)	(0.2279)	(0.3392)
Conflict in COO: High	-0.4363	-0.4066	-0.3471	-0.0841
	(0.2872)	(0.2831)	(0.2684)	(0.3463)
Conflict in COO: Low	-0.2019	-0.0998	0.1420	-0.0853
	(0.2499)	(0.2159)	(0.2356)	(0.2262)
Forced Return: Severe	0.8229***	0.9033***	1.152***	1.183***
	(0.2373)	(0.2340)	(0.2616)	(0.2909)
Forced Return: Moderate	0.8018**	0.6624***	0.7746***	0.3830
	(0.2703)	(0.1975)	(0.2088)	(0.3215)
GDP Ratio		-1.411*	-1.612*	-2.541**
		(0.6298)	(0.6898)	(0.9102)
Urban		-0.2271	-0.5231***	0.0792
		(0.1398)	(0.1010)	(0.2031)
Conflict Duration		-0.0295	-0.1640†	-0.0305
		(0.0997)	(0.0955)	(0.1213)
Repatriation Funding (COO)				0.3884***
				(0.1087)
Controls	No	No	Yes	No
Fixed-effects				
Dyad	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	2,577	2,341	1,724	1,364
Squared Correlation	0.66529	0.75635	0.80710	0.81377
Pseudo R^2	0.74552	0.75492	0.78638	0.74540

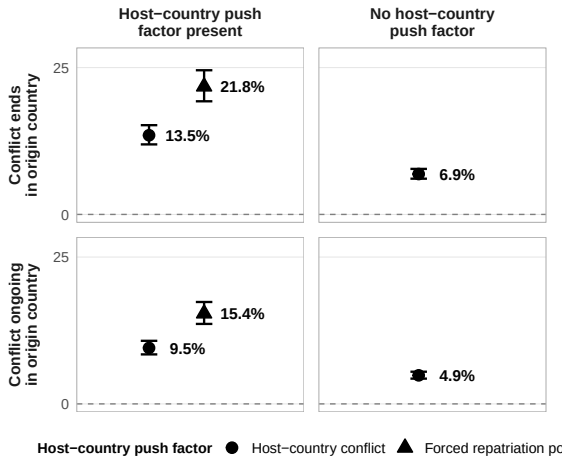
Notes: COO = country of origin; COA = country of asylum. Model 1 includes the three core predictors. Model 2 adds covariates capturing relative welfare and transition costs. Model 3 adds the remaining controls (refugee rights, violence against refugees, ethnic exclusion). Model 4 adds UNHCR repatriation funding per refugee, available for a smaller subset of dyad-years. All models are Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood with dyad and year fixed effects and the log of the lagged refugee stock included as an offset. Standard errors are clustered at the dyad level and shown in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.10$.

5.1 Hypothesis 1: Host-Country Push Factors Drive Return

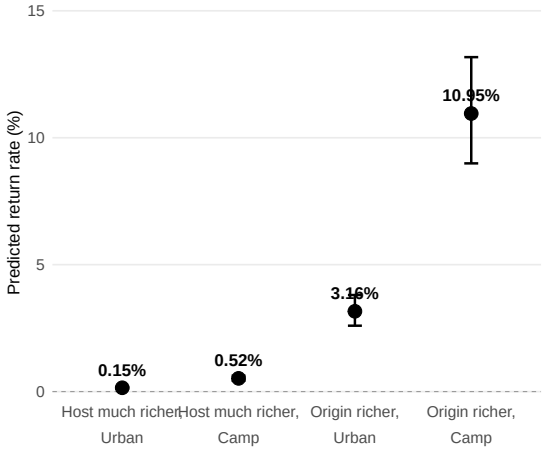
H1 predicts that return rises when the host country imposes coercive policies or when security conditions in the asylum country deteriorate. The results strongly support this prediction. Severe forced return policy produces the largest positive coefficient in the model (1.152, $p < 0.001$), corresponding

Figure 3: Predicted Repatriation Rates

(a) By origin-country conflict and asylum-country push



(b) By relative quality of life and transition costs



Note: Panel (a) shows predicted repatriation rates (as a percentage of the displaced population) computed by setting the relevant indicators and averaging predicted values over all dyad-years in the estimation sample. The left column varies origin-country conflict, holding asylum-country push factors (either conflict or forced return policies) at one; the right column varies origin-country conflict, holding host-country push factors at zero. Panel (b) shows predicted repatriation rates under no host-country push factor and peace in the origin country; relative quality of life is set to the 10th and 90th percentiles of the GDP ratio, and transition costs are proxied by urban versus camp settlement. Using Model 3 in Table 2. Error bars are bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (500 replications).

to a roughly threefold increase in the return rate relative to a context without forced return. Moderate forced return produces a coefficient of 0.775 ($p < 0.001$), a more than twofold increase. Asylum-country conflict also strongly predicts return: low-intensity asylum-country conflict produces a coefficient of 0.916 ($p < 0.001$), a 2.5-fold increase in the return rate, while high-intensity asylum-country conflict has a coefficient of 0.673, close to a twofold increase, though significant only at $p < 0.1$.

Figure 3a translates these coefficients into predicted return rates, mirroring the 2×2 typology in Table 1. When there is no host-country push and conflict is ongoing at home, the predicted return rate is 4.9 percent, close to the sample mean. In contrast, when a push factor is present, predicted return rates increase substantially. Host-country conflict produces a predicted return rate of 13.5 percent when the origin country is at peace and 9.5 percent when origin-country conflict is ongoing. Forced return policy generates a larger effect, with predicted return rates of 21.8 percent under peace and 15.4 percent during conflict. Crucially, push factors generate substantial return even when conflict is ongoing at home, consistent with the key prediction of H1 that return may occur during origin-country conflict when asylum conditions deteriorate sufficiently.

5.2 Hypothesis 2: Asylum Quality of Life Reduces Return

H2 predicts that return becomes less likely as quality of life in asylum improves. The GDP ratio, capturing the relative economic standing of asylum to origin country, enters with a coefficient of −1.612 ($p < 0.05$). A one-standard-deviation increase in the host-to-origin GDP ratio is associated with an approximately 80 percent reduction in the return rate, indicating that economic conditions in asylum are a key determinant of whether refugees return.

Figure 3b isolates the role of relative quality of life in the absence of both conflict and push factors, corresponding to the top-right cell of Table 1. I set all conflict and push-factor variables to zero and compare scenarios at the 10th and 90th percentiles of the observed GDP ratio distribution, which

proxy for $v_a < v_o$ (origin richer) and $v_a > v_o$ (host much richer), respectively. When host is much richer, predicted return is near zero: 0.15 percent under urban settlement and 0.52 percent under camp settlement. When the origin country is richer, predicted return rises to 3.16 percent under urban settlement and 10.95 percent under camp settlement.

5.3 Hypothesis 3: Limited Evidence That Origin-Country Conditions Drive Return

H3 anticipated that improvements in origin-country conditions would raise return, though more weakly than the push factors in H1. The results are mixed. High-intensity origin-country conflict enters with a negative coefficient (-0.347), in the direction H3 anticipated, but the estimate is not statistically distinguishable from zero ($p > 0.1$). Low-intensity origin-country conflict is also insignificant. On the basis of the PPML estimates alone, we are unable to reject the null that origin-country conflict has no effect on return.

The predicted probabilities in Figure 3a qualify this reading somewhat (see also Section 6). Within each column of the figure, moving from ongoing conflict to peace in the origin country produces modest but consistent shifts in the predicted return rate: from 4.9 to 6.9 percent in the no-push baseline, from 9.5 to 13.5 percent when host-country conflict is present, and from 15.4 to 21.8 percent under forced return. The direction of these shifts is in line with H3. They are, however, smaller than the horizontal shifts across columns, which reflect the presence or absence of a host-country push factor and rest on more precisely estimated coefficients. The overall pattern is suggestive of an asymmetry in which push factors play a larger role than pull factors.

5.4 Hypothesis 4: Transition Costs Reduce Return

H4 predicts that return falls as the cost of moving increases and rises when resources to cover repatriation are available. Three variables capture transition costs: urban integration, which proxies for settlement outside camps and integration into host communities; conflict duration, which proxies for accumulated ties in asylum; and repatriation assistance, which relaxes the resource constraint on return. A one-standard-deviation increase in urban integration is associated with an approximately 41 percent reduction in the return rate (-0.523, $p < 0.001$); a one-standard-deviation increase in conflict duration is associated with an approximately 15 percent reduction (-0.164, $p < 0.1$). In Figure 3b, when the origin country is richer, moving from urban settlement to camp settlement raises the predicted return rate from 3.15 percent to 10.95 percent, nearly a fourfold increase.

Repatriation assistance, tested in Model 4, is strongly associated with higher return. A one-standard-deviation increase in UNHCR repatriation funding per capita (at the origin-country level) is associated with an approximately 47 percent increase in the return rate (0.388, $p < 0.001$). This is consistent with the theoretical prediction that external resources relax the cost constraint on return.

5.5 Aggregate Patterns

The regression estimates show which factors drive return *within* dyads. To explain why most return occurs during conflict *globally*, I use a counterfactual simulation to assess the aggregate magnitude of each factor's contribution. For each counterfactual, I set the relevant predictor to zero (or, for the GDP ratio, to the value corresponding to equal GDP per capita across host and origin), recompute predicted returns for every dyad-year in the estimation sample, and sum across the full panel.[11]

[11] Summing baseline predictions across all dyad-years recovers a total of 22.5 million returns over 1980–2023, against a total at-risk stock of 326.9 million refugee-years.

The largest counterfactual effect comes from closing the economic gap between host and origin: setting the GDP ratio to parity would have increased predicted returns by 83.1% (18.7 million additional returns). Asylum-country conflict and forced repatriation emerge as the next two largest drivers. Eliminating asylum-country conflict counterfactually reduces predicted returns by 38.6% (8.7 million fewer returns); removing forced repatriation policies produces a reduction of comparable magnitude, 36.7% (8.3 million fewer returns). By contrast, removing origin-country conflict produces only a modest 10.9% increase in predicted returns (2.5 million additional returns). Even under the counterfactual in which all origin-country wars had ended, 324.4 million refugee-years would have remained in asylum over the period.

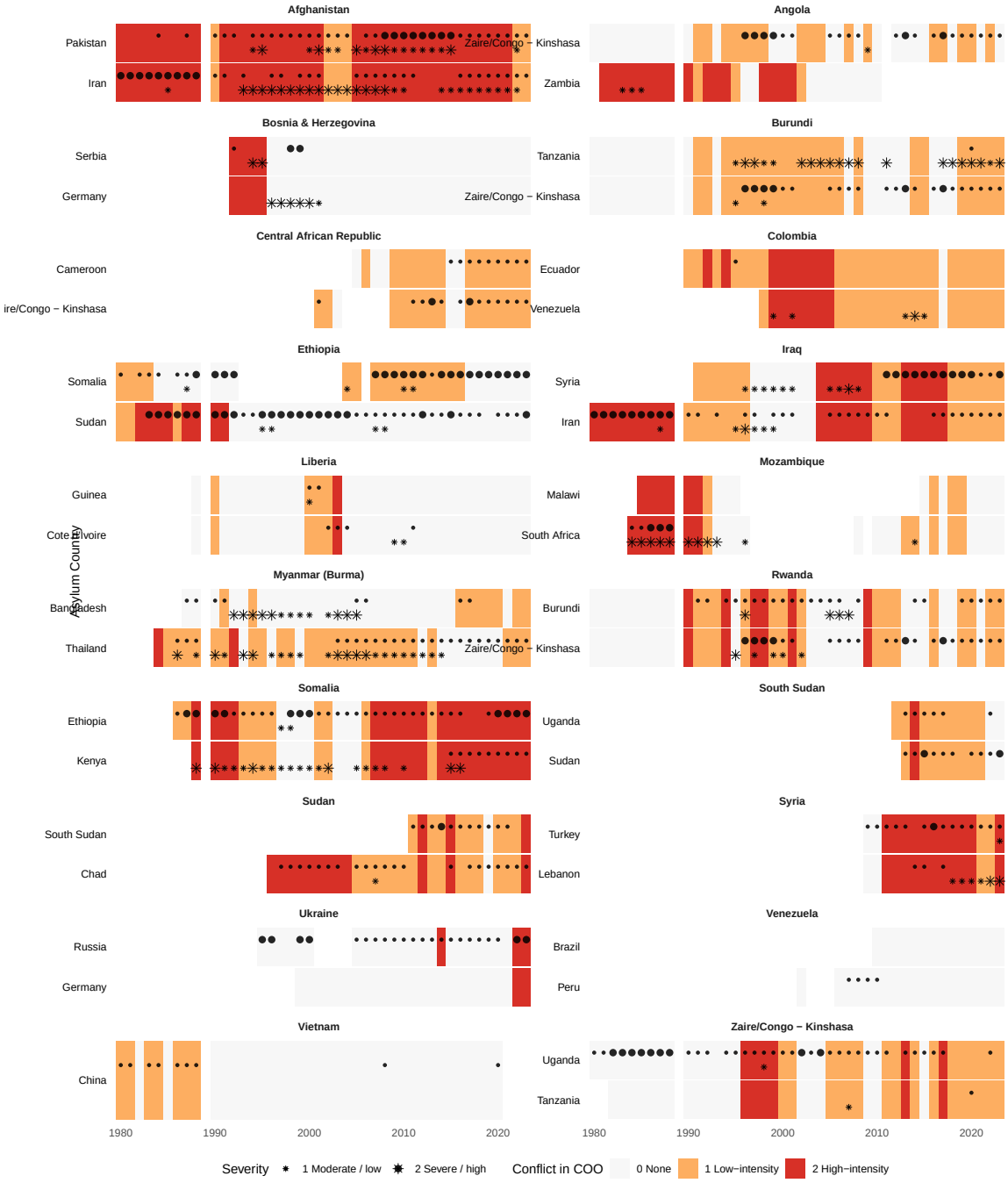
These aggregate effects depend not only on the magnitude of each factor's impact, but also on how frequently these conditions occur. I document three descriptive facts about their distribution. First, asylum-country push factors are widespread. Figure 4 shows that among the largest refugee-hosting dyads, 86.8 percent experienced asylum-country conflict and 68.4 percent had a forced return policy at some point. Across the full sample, 29 percent of dyad-years involve asylum-country conflict, comparable to the 27 percent with origin-country conflict. Consistent with the theory, 76.8 percent of returns occur in years with at least one asylum-country push factor.

Second, quality of life in asylum typically exceeds that in the origin country. Outside Europe and North America, GDP per capita is higher in asylum than origin countries on average ($8,938 vs. $6,780). Many refugees also receive UNHCR assistance: across the Global South, 77 percent of asylum-country-years receive funding, with mean support of $256 per refugee. In origin-peace years without push factors, origin countries are richer in only 10.4 percent of dyad-years, yet those dyads account for 44.1 percent of returns, confirming that return is disproportionately concentrated where the origin country offers better economic prospects.

Third, transition costs are high. The mean conflict duration among protracted situations in the data is 13.3 years, and Devictor and Do (2016) show that refugees in protracted situations live in asylum for an average of 21 years. Among all refugees in the sample, 57.3 percent live in contexts where most refugees live in urban or rural settings outside camps, where integration deepens over time. Repatriation funding, which can reduce transition costs, is typically modest in scale: even among origin-country-years that received any UNHCR repatriation funding, 26 percent were allocated less than $100 per returnee, with a median of $270. The distribution is highly skewed: a small number of generously funded operations pull the mean to $899 per returnee, while most returns take place with far less international support.

These conditions explain the aggregate patterns in Section 2. Because asylum-country shocks are frequent, much of global return is driven by host-country push during ongoing conflict. Because quality of life in asylum typically exceeds that at home and transition costs are high, peace alone rarely produces large-scale repatriation.

Figure 4: Origin-Country Conflict and Asylum-Country Push in Major Refugee Situations



Note: The 20 largest refugee-producing origin countries and their two largest asylum countries. Each tile represents a dyad-year. Background color indicates origin-country conflict intensity. Circles denote asylum-country conflict; stars indicate forced return policies.

6 Alternative Explanations and Robustness

I address the main alternative explanations here; full results are reported in Appendix Tables 8–14 and Figure 5. Across these checks, the coefficients on asylum-country conflict, forced return policies, and urban settlement are stable in sign and magnitude. Origin-country conflict, GDP ratio, and conflict duration are generally signed as expected but lose significance in some cases. This asymmetry suggests that asylum-country push factors are the most robust predictors of return, while origin-country security and economic conditions are relevant but less reliably estimated.

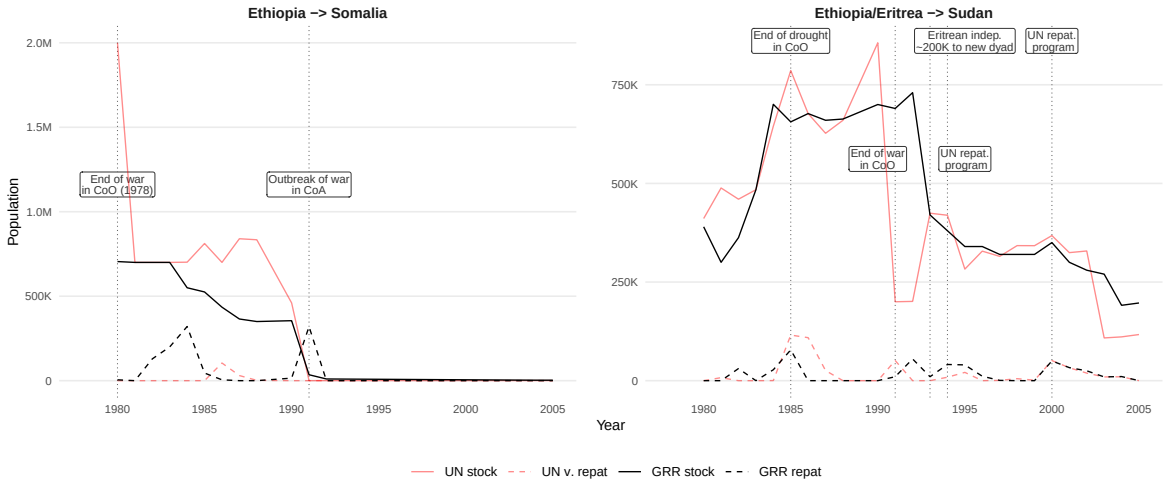
A first concern is that UCDP conflict measures may not capture the kind of definitive war termination that refugee return requires. I re-estimate the model using Fearon's (2017) civil war coding (which dates discrete war episodes rather than annual conflict thresholds), logged battle deaths, a de-escalation indicator, a three-year moving average of returns, and an indicator for peace agreements. Several of these specifications show that origin-country security conditions do play a role in predicting return, though the substantive magnitudes remain smaller than those of asylum-country push factors.

Second, refugees may fear returning because of broader repression rather than active conflict. I account for this using measures of ethnic exclusion (EPR), civil liberties (Freedom House), political terror (PTS), genocide or politicide, and broader political violence (PITF). A third concern is endogeneity: the positive coefficient on asylum-country conflict could reflect reverse causality if large refugee populations contribute to host-state conflict, as in the "refugee warrior" hypothesis (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1989; Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006). To address this, I lag all independent variables by one year and exclude the dyads most closely associated with the "refugee warrior" concern.

I conduct a range of additional specification and sample checks. I examine voluntary returns only, replace continuous controls with quartile dummies, include origin and asylum GDP per capita separately, substitute UNHCR per-refugee funding for the urban variable, and restrict to the top three asylum countries per origin country. I vary the econometric approach using OLS, two-way clustering by origin and asylum country, and negative binomial regression, and estimate specifications with origin-country fixed effects. Leave-one-out analyses show that severe forced return policies, low-intensity asylum-country conflict, and the GDP ratio are stable across every origin-, asylum-, and region-level exclusion, with no single unit driving the result. High-intensity asylum-country conflict, by contrast, is identified primarily from Sub-Saharan African dyads: excluding this region flips the sign of the coefficient, though the low-intensity asylum-country conflict coefficient is stable and positive.

7 Case Study: Ethiopian Refugees in Somalia and Sudan

Figure 5: Returns of Ethiopian/Eritrean refugees from Somalia and Sudan (1980–2005)



Note: The 1993 drop in refugee stock in the Ethiopia/Eritrea → Sudan panel reflects splitting of this dyad into Ethiopia and Eritrea at Eritrean independence; approximately 200,000 refugees previously recorded under Ethiopia were reassigned to the new dyad. In the Ethiopia → Somalia panel, civil war broke out in Somalia in 1991, but UCDP begins coding the conflict as severe from 1988. *Source*: GRR and WRS archives.

The statistical analysis above identifies which factors predict return within dyads and presents descriptive patterns to understand global trends across all protracted refugee situations. To trace the theory's mechanisms in a specific context, I examine two dyads from the same origin country that together illustrate the core mechanisms. Ethiopian displacement produced two major refugee populations during the Cold War: ethnic Somalis who fled the Ogaden War into Somalia, and Tigrayans and Eritreans who fled the civil war into Sudan. Figure 5 plots refugee stocks and returns for both dyads and overlays UNHCR data on the GRR estimates, demonstrating the substantial data discrepancies described for this case in Section 4.1.

Ethiopia → Somalia: Push-Driven Return

An estimated 700,000 Ethiopians were displaced into Somalia by the Ogaden War in 1977–78. In the early 1980s, the end of active fighting in the Ogaden, combined with a UNHCR repatriation program providing cash grants and six months of food rations, generated substantial return among refugees. The transition costs for these refugees were comparatively low: most were living in camps in poor conditions rather than integrated into Somali communities, and had been in asylum for only a few years.[12] Yet more than half chose to stay. As conditions in the camps improved and a local settlement program allowed refugees to cultivate land, expected quality of life in Somalia came to exceed what many anticipated at home, even after insecurity in the origin country had fallen.[13]

By 1990–1991, a new wave of Ethiopian refugees, largely Oromos displaced by forced villagization, had joined the remaining Ogaden refugees. Ethiopia remained insecure. Yet mass return occurred,

[12] Initial camp conditions were severe: "Problems of water supply, firewood stripped from an almost bare landscape, disease and starvation face refugees and relief officials daily" (WRS, Somalia, 1981).

[13] By the mid-1980s, conditions had improved to the point where local Somalis obtained food in the camps, "where conditions are often better than in the surrounding desert" (WRS, Somalia, 1985).

effectively ending the protracted situation. The driver was not improving conditions at home but the collapse of conditions in asylum:

> "Beginning in December 1990, as fighting in the Somali civil war intensified in areas where the refugees lived, UNHCR personnel were evacuated from Somalia, and assistance programs for the refugees stopped. Large numbers of Ethiopian refugees began fleeing Somalia and returning to Ethiopia... Only some 35,000 Ethiopians who were trapped at Qoryoley refugee camp or who fled from various camps to Mogadishu expecting to find help there stayed in Somalia." *(WRS, Somalia, 1991–1992)*

This episode illustrates Hypothesis 1: when insecurity in asylum rises sufficiently, refugees return even when the origin country remains insecure. It corresponds to the lower-left cell of Table 1, where origin-country conflict is ongoing but there is a host-country push present, so refugees return.

Ethiopia/Eritrea → Sudan: Non-Return Despite Peace

The second dyad tells a contrasting story. An estimated 700,000 Tigrayans and Eritreans fled Ethiopia's civil war into Sudan beginning in the 1960s. This case illustrates that the end of conflict is not sufficient to prompt return when transition costs are high and quality of life in asylum exceeds that at home (Hypotheses 2 and 4).

In May 1991, the Mengistu regime fell and the EPLF took control of Eritrea, ending the conflict. Under conventional accounts, this should have triggered large-scale repatriation. Instead, only about 10,000 returned in the year of independence. A dispute between the Eritrean government and UNHCR over repatriation funding prevented the launch of a return program; Eritrea demanded more rehabilitation assistance than donors were willing to provide. Without adequate support to reduce transition costs, the return condition remained unsatisfied for most refugees even though the origin country was at peace.

A repatriation program began in 1994 and generated some return, approximately 81,000 over two years, but roughly 320,000 remained. The stalled return was attributed to "financial disputes over the scope of the repatriation program, and deteriorating relations between the governments of Sudan and Eritrea" (WRS, Sudan, 1997), alongside insecurity at the border. When a second program launched around 2000, providing transportation, reintegration grants, and housing, return accelerated: approximately 130,000 repatriated over five years, consistent with Hypothesis 4's prediction that reducing transition costs increases return. Yet even then, approximately 200,000 refugees chose to remain. In 2002, UNHCR invoked the cessation clause, revoking Eritreans' refugee status and requiring them to "repatriate, file individualized asylum claims to remain in Sudan as refugees, or take steps to become permanent legal residents of Sudan" (WRS, Sudan, 2003). Only 20,000 repatriated; the vast majority stayed.

The archival evidence points to quality-of-life considerations as the primary explanation. On the origin side, a survey found that roughly 85 percent of refugee households indicated that assistance levels in Eritrea would be a major determinant of their return decision (WRS, Sudan, 1997). On the asylum side, refugees had built substantial lives over decades. By the early 1990s, half lived in camps with access to food aid, health and education programs, and technical training, often among relatives or co-ethnics and renting agricultural land, while the other half lived in urban areas.[14] When encouraged to return in 2001, for example, many chose to remain longer to harvest their crops.[15] For

[14] "Eritrean refugees who had lived for decades in settlements in the east among relatives or members of similar ethnic groups were able to farm and graze their livestock" (WRS, Sudan, 2005). Camp residents "received food aid, health and education programs, literacy and technical training, and special aid for women and children from UNHCR and other assistance groups. About 12,000 children attended 30 refugee schools in the camps" (WRS, Sudan, 1999).

[15] "Many other would-be returnees chose to remain longer in Sudan to harvest their crops" (WRS, Sudan, 2002). This

this population, the quality of life built over decades of exile exceeded what they expected in Eritrea, and they opted to stay even after conflict had ended and transition costs had been reduced.

8 Conclusion

This paper revisits a foundational assumption in the study of refugee repatriation: that refugees return when peace is restored in their countries of origin. Using the new Global Refugee Return dataset, covering all protracted refugee situations from 1980 to 2023, I show that this account is incomplete. Most large-scale returns occur not after peace agreements but when refugees are pushed out of asylum by host-country conflict or forced return policies, frequently while war continues at home. When conflict ends, refugees often remain because their expected quality of life in asylum exceeds what they would gain from returning, and because the costs of uprooting lives built over years or decades of exile are high. This contradicts not only existing micro-level studies of return, but challenges the core foundation of the international refugee regime, that refugees will be protected in asylum and return when there is peace.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, descriptive patterns document the core empirical puzzle: returns are rare in most dyad-years, concentrated in a small number of episodes, and disproportionately occur while conflict persists in the country of origin. Second, panel models show that asylum-country push factors—forced return policies and host-country conflict—are stronger predictors of return than origin-country conditions, and that in the absence of push factors, return depends on relative quality of life and transition costs. Predicted return rates under theoretically motivated scenarios map directly onto a simple formal model: forced return policies produce return rates of 21.8 percent when conflict ends at home and 15.4 percent when conflict persists, while host-country conflict produces rates of 13.5 percent and 9.5 percent under the same conditions. By comparison, peace at home in the absence of any host-country push factor yields just 6.9 percent return, falling to near zero when quality of life in asylum exceeds that at home. Third, an archival case study of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia and Sudan traces these mechanisms in practice, showing how the collapse of conditions in asylum drove mass return to ongoing conflict in one case, while high transition costs and favorable conditions in exile sustained non-return despite peace in another.

These findings have three implications. First, they challenge the foundations of repatriation as a "durable solution" and underscore the fragility of the principle of *non-refoulement*. In principle, voluntary return after peace remains the preferred outcome: when conflict ends, conditions at home improve, and refugees have the resources to return safely, repatriation can be a welfare-improving solution. Such cases do occur, but the evidence presented here suggests they arise less frequently than commonly assumed. If most historical returns instead reflect forced return policies or war in asylum, then counting repatriations as refugees having achieved a "solution" may obscure substantial welfare losses. The decline in global refugee numbers in 2023 illustrates this tension: the reduction was driven largely by South Sudanese fleeing war in Sudan rather than voluntary return. More broadly, these findings raise normative questions about what host states owe refugees once conflict has ended but refugees prefer to remain. Even if states have met their core legal obligations by providing protection during conflict, the legitimacy of policies that induce return under such conditions warrant closer attention.

Second, the results have implications for how donor governments and international organizations allocate resources in repatriation contexts. UNHCR often directs funding toward helping refugees return and rebuild their lives, and this study provides evidence that such efforts can be effective: reducing transition costs and improving quality of life in the origin country are both associated with

is supported by the fact that the largest annual returns of this population was not after conflict but during it: in 1985, 78,000 refugees returned following the resumption of rains in Ethiopia (WRS, Sudan, 1986), despite ongoing conflict.

higher return rates. However, the findings also suggest an important reorientation. Information campaigns promoting return typically emphasize improving security conditions in the country of origin. This paper shows that refugees are highly sensitive to economic conditions as well, so emphasizing, and creating, economic opportunities in post-conflict economies may be at least as important as communicating that the war is over. This raises a challenge not only for UNHCR but for private industry and development actors: encouraging return may require investment in post-conflict economic rebuilding rather than simply reaffirming that peace has been achieved. At the same time, the results on transition costs imply that refugees who have lived in asylum for many years may rationally prefer to stay. For these populations, continued efforts to secure permanent residency and local integration in host countries may better serve their welfare than promoting return.

Third, this research raises questions about the reliability of existing refugee data. The discrepancies between UNHCR figures and the corrected estimates in the GRR dataset suggest that prior findings based on official statistics may warrant revisiting. UNHCR data often exclude unregistered populations, whose formal refugee status is frequently revoked precisely to facilitate deportation, and omit spontaneous and forced returns from repatriation counts. Incorporating archival and expert sources, as this study does, offers one way to address these gaps.

Future research should examine several questions that emerge from this analysis. What explains cross-national and temporal variation in the adoption of forced return policies? Under what conditions do international organizations successfully constrain host-country coercion? And what are the welfare consequences of return for refugees who repatriate under pressure, particularly those who return to ongoing conflict? This analysis has focused on the forced repatriation of refugees already residing within the territory of an asylum country, but two related dynamics outside its scope remain poorly measured: maritime pushbacks and other non-arrival policies in high-income countries, and circular movements between origin and asylum that fall outside a simple refugee–returnee binary (FitzGerald, 2019; Goodwin-Gill, 2011; Masterson and Vidarte, 2026).

Taken together, the evidence presented here implies a reframing of refugee return. Repatriation should be analyzed as a political process structured by host-country choices and regional dynamics, rather than viewed primarily as the downstream effect of conflict termination in origin countries. Understanding why refugees return, and whether such returns serve their interests, requires attention to the conditions of asylum, not only the prospects for peace at home.

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