

WHY DO SOME CIVIL WARS GENERATE
MORE REFUGEE FLOWS THAN OTHERS?

A Master's Thesis

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September 2025

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Bilkent University 2025

To my family



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The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
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by

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By Özge Karban

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of International Relations.

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ABSTRACT

WHY DO SOME CIVIL WARS GENERATE MORE REFUGEE FLOWS THAN OTHERS?

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Although civil wars are widespread, they produce highly unequal refugee flows. Because displacement reshapes politics and economies in origin, host, and broader regions, understanding what drives volume is essential for effective management. Existing research on conflict-induced forced migration highlights state violence, local insecurity, and social networks in countries of asylum; however, it tends to underplay rebels—the primary belligerents whose behavior structures civilians’ exit choices. This thesis addresses that mid-level gap by centering rebel–public relations. I theorize that three coercive practices—forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding—generate negative rebel reputations that simultaneously signal personal danger, illegitimacy, and organizational desperation. These signals operate as push factors that increase the propensity to flee. To evaluate the argument, I assemble a new dataset by merging sources on refugee movements, rebel reputation, and intrastate conflicts, yielding 206 country–rebel group–year observations from 1980 to 2011. The statistical results do not support the specific hypotheses. Nonetheless, limitations in

data availability, coverage, and operationalization—especially sparse reputation measures and coarse temporal aggregation—caution against strong inferences. Rather than disconfirming the theory, the null findings indicate where measurement and design must improve. Substantively, the project clarifies mechanisms linking rebel conduct to displacement and motivates future data collection on coercion, finer-grained temporal designs, and models that incorporate interactions with state behavior and local protection networks.

Keywords: forced migration, civil war, refugee flows, rebel groups, negative reputation

ÖZET

NEDEN BAZI İÇ SAVAŞLAR DİĞERLERİNDEN DAHA ÇOK ZORUNLU GÖÇ YARATIR?

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Her ne kadar iç savaşlar yaygın olsa da, ortaya çıkardıkları mülteci akışlarının düzeyi büyük ölçüde farklılık gösterir. Yerinden edilme; kaynak, ev sahibi ve daha geniş bölge ülkelerinin siyasetini ve ekonomisini yeniden şekillendirdiği için, hacmi neyin belirlediğini anlamak etkili yönetim açısından hayati önemdedir. Çatışma kaynaklı zorunlu göç literatürü devlet şiddeti, yerel güvensizlik ve sığınma ülkelerindeki sosyal ağlar gibi etmenleri öne çıkarır; ancak sivililerin çıkış kararlarını belirleyen başlıca muhripler olan isyancıların rolünü çoğu zaman ikinci plana iter. Bu tez, orta düzeydeki bu boşluğu isyancı-toplum ilişkilerini merkeze alarak ele alır. Üç zorlama pratiğinin—zorla katılım (askere alma), çocukların devşirilmesi ve zorla finansman/kaynak toplama—aynı anda kişisel tehlike, gayrimeşruluk ve örgütsel umutsuzluk sinyalleri veren olumsuz bir isyancı itibarı ürettiğini; bu sinyallerin de kaçış eğilimini artıran itici faktörler olarak işlediğini öne sürüyorum. Argümanı değerlendirmek için, mülteci hareketleri, isyancı itibarları ve ülke içi çatışmalarına ilişkin kaynakları

birleřtirerek 1980–2011 dnemine ait 206 lke–isyancı grup–yıl gzleminden oluřan yeni bir veri seti oluřturuyorum. İstatistiksel sonular zgl hipotezleri desteklememektedir. Bununla birlikte, veri mevcudiyeti, kapsama ve operasyonalizasyonla ilgili sınırlılıklar—zellikle itibar lmlerinin seyreklięi ve zamanın kaba dzeyde toplanması—kuvvetli ıkarımlardan kaınmayı gerektirir. Teoriyi geersiz kılmaktan ziyade, bu “null” bulgular lm ve tasarımın nerelerde iyileřtirilmesi gerektięine iřaret eder. znde, alıřma isyancı davranıřı ile yerinden edilme arasındaki mekanizmaları netleřtirir ve zorlama uygulamaları zerine daha iyi veri toplama, daha ince zaman znrlkl tasarımlar ve devlet davranıřı ile yerel koruma aęlarıyla etkileřimleri ieren modeller iin yeni ynler nerir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: zorunlu g, i savař, mlteci akınları, isyancı gruplar, olumsuz itibar

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COW	Correlates of War
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
OIP	Other Persons in Need of International Protection
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
REF	Refugees
ROC	Individuals in Refugee-like Situations
RTG	Reputation of Terror Groups Dataset
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
STA	Stateless
UKN	Unknown
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

While the number of other forms of interpersonal violence—from murder to international wars—has declined over time, the number of civil wars continues to show an upward trend, with the sole exception of the 1990s. Since the end of World War II, more than 250 civil wars have occurred across the globe. Today, active conflicts persist in numerous countries, including Syria, Yemen, Libya, Chad, Somalia, and South Sudan (We Are Living in the Age of Civil War | The New Republic, n.d.). Naturally, these violent conflicts have devastating consequences, one of the most pressing being the mass displacement of people fleeing conflict zones. For instance, the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has forced approximately 14 million Syrians to cross international borders and seek asylum—mostly in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. In addition, more than 6.8 million people have been internally displaced within Syria (Syria Refugee Crisis Explained, n.d.). Given these insights, why is it important to study the relationship between civil wars and forced migration?

Refugee flows have direct social, economic, and security-related impacts on two levels: the individual and the international system. At the individual level, the most pressing issue is the humanitarian crisis faced by displaced persons. Every individual has the fundamental right to live free from the fear of persecution. In the face of civil war, many are compelled to leave their home countries in search of safety—yet, for a significant number, displacement does not bring an end to fear and insecurity (Moore

& Shellman, 2004). The routes taken by refugees are often extremely dangerous, especially with smugglers involved. These smugglers exploit those without legal migration options, leading them through risky, irregular paths. Along the way, migrants face abuse, exploitation, and life-threatening conditions—many perish, treated as mere commodities by profit-driven actors (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], n.d.). Yet, the challenges do not end upon arrival. Displaced individuals often struggle to rebuild their lives in a new environment and to adapt quickly to unfamiliar social settings (More than Employment – Building a New Life and a Better Society – UNHCR Serbia, n.d.).

When it comes to the international level, most observers agree that forced migration imposes substantial costs on both national and regional economies (Moore & Shellman, 2004). Within the country of origin, beyond the devastating death tolls, conflict-induced displacement and refugee outflows significantly diminish the labor force. Moreover, a large proportion of refugees are skilled workers, and their departure results in a significant loss of human capital—in other words, brain drain—for conflict-affected states (Rother et al., 2016). These losses within the home country are mirrored by a different set of challenges for host countries. Refugees fleeing violence often arrive in receiving countries with limited possessions and face severe restrictions on mobility, employment, and access to basic services (Rother et al., 2016). These hardships not only impact the refugees themselves but also impose considerable financial burdens on host states, which must divert resources to provide humanitarian aid and legal protections (Kaya & Aydin, 2021; Bove & Böhmelt, 2016). Consequently, public services in many receiving nations are stretched even

further, undermining development prospects for both refugee and host populations in the long term (Rother et al., 2016).

From a security perspective, one of the main concerns is that refugees might contribute to the spread of conflict across borders and destabilize receiving states (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). In addition to the spillover of violence, the arrival of refugees is also linked to other sources of insecurity—ranging from the presence of armed elements in refugee camps to the potential spread of disease (Milner, 2009). As internal instability intensifies and neighboring states attempt to prevent further refugee inflows, the risk of external intervention by international actors, particularly states with vested interests in the crisis also increases (Bove & Böhmelt, 2016). Accordingly, tensions between the origin and host countries may escalate into interstate disputes, fueled by the strain of accommodating large displaced populations (Neumayer, 2005). For these reasons, asylum mobility is a global issue that must be carefully managed by the international community. It affects not only the countries of origin and destination but also the stability and development of entire regions. That is why it is essential to understand the underlying causes of such movements—only then can effective and informed responses be developed.

However, while there is an extensive literature on voluntary migration, only a small number of studies has attempted to understand the variation in the volume of asylum mobility (Türkoğlu, 2022; Melander & Öberg, 2007; Schmeidl, 1997; Moore & Shellman, 2004). Despite the wide range of forced migrants—from asylum seekers to environmental migrants—existing research has predominantly focused on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees (i.e., externally displaced

individuals who have been formally recognized and granted refuge), particularly those affected by the generalized violence of armed conflict (Castles, 2003). Yet, much like voluntary migrants, IDPs and refugees also make decisions based on utility maximization. Although the conditions under which these decisions are made differ substantially due to the extraordinary pressures of forced displacement, not everyone flees immediately—even in the midst of intense violence. People are more likely to flee only when the perceived benefits of doing so outweigh the costs of staying, such as when their lives are in imminent danger (Adhikari, 2012; Adhikari, 2013; Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009; Davenport et al., 2003; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007; Moore & Shellman, 2004, 2006, 2007).

Given this choice-centered approach, most of the literature concludes that political violence is the main determinant of refugee flows (Adhikari, 2012; Adhikari, 2013; Davenport et al., 2003). Accordingly, some of these studies focus on different types of violence, such as politicide or state repression (Braithwaite et al., 2021; Türkoğlu & Chadeaux, 2019; Uzonyi, 2014); others concentrate on the perpetrators of violence, including state-led violence or civil wars, which typically involve reciprocal violence between state and dissident actors (Davenport et al., 2003; Moore & Shellman, 2006; Davenport et al., 2019). In addition, several articles examine general features of conflict, such as its intensity or geographical spread (Fearon & Shaver, 2020; Conte & Migali, 2019; Melander & Öberg, 2007). Beyond these studies with a security-oriented focus, a smaller number of articles examine the impact of socioeconomic factors, such as average wage levels or the presence of social networks in the destination country. However, compared to political determinants, socioeconomic factors remain understudied and tend to yield mixed

results (Adhikari, 2012; Davenport et al., 2003; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007; Neumayer, 2005; Özaltın et al., 2020; Türkoğlu & Chadeaux, 2019; Zimmermann, 2011).

In the broader migration literature, political and socioeconomic determinants are commonly categorized into two overarching groups: push and pull factors. Push factors refer to conditions that drive people away from their home countries—such as poverty or political instability—while pull factors represent the attributes that attract people to a host country, such as greater political freedom or higher GDP per capita (Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009; Türkoğlu, 2022; Özaltın et al., 2020; Türkoğlu & Chadeaux, 2019). This distinction can also be understood as corresponding to the stages of displacement: in the first stage, push factors shape the decision to flee, while in the second stage, pull factors influence the choice of destination (Moore & Shellman, 2006). In that sense, pull factors complement the explanatory power of push factors by amplifying their effect on displacement. Furthermore, the literature can also be organized by different levels of analysis—ranging from household-level determinants of refugee movement, such as individual access to services and resources, to system-level factors like interstate networks and broader geopolitical ties (Adhikari, 2012; Bohra-Mishra & Massey, 2011; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007; Schon & Johnson, 2021).

Building on this overview of the forced migration literature, there is still much to be done in understanding the conflict–migration nexus. This thesis asks: Why do some civil wars generate more refugee flows than others? I examine the dynamics of rebel groups—armed actors with political goals who revolt against the state (Jo & Niehaus, 2018)—for two primary reasons. First, I chose to study push factors,

specifically rebel groups' relations with the public, because pull factors do not adequately explain why people flee in the first place. As such, they cannot directly account for why some conflicts produce significantly more refugees than others. Second, while existing studies offer detailed insights into both micro- and macro-level determinants of forced migration, there remains a serious gap at the mid-level. To the best of my knowledge, although a few articles incorporate dissident violence as a variable, there is no comprehensive research that systematically explores how group-level characteristics influence the scale of refugee flows across different conflicts. For example, regarding the rebels' relations with their constituency, I found only one study examining the relation between forced recruitment and asylum. However, since the study uses survey data and limited to Senegal, it does not provide a full picture on this causation (Schaub & Auer, 2023). Given that rebel groups are among the primary actors in civil wars, their role deserves greater scholarly attention.

Accordingly, this thesis investigates how specific rebel group tactics shape patterns of forced migration during civil wars. Rebel organizations, heavily reliant on civilian populations for critical resources such as manpower and funding, adopt a range of strategies—recruitment, taxation, and service delivery among them—to secure what they need. These behaviors form the basis of the group's reputation, which serves as a signal to civilians, shaping how they assess risk and decide whether to stay or flee. Rather than responding passively to violence, civilians interpret rebel actions through the lens of strategic calculation, anticipating the group's future behavior. While some rebels invest in legitimacy through public service provision, civilian protection, or political organization—thus signaling stability—others resort to coercion when voluntary support is unattainable. Tactics such as forced recruitment or extortion

often reflect a lack of discipline, weak capacity, or disregard for civilian welfare. Though these coercive methods may yield short-term gains, they erode trust, intensify fear, and ultimately damage the group's credibility. As fear mounts and trust collapses, civilians become more likely to flee. Therefore, this thesis argues that a rebel group's negative reputation significantly increases the likelihood of forced displacement.

More specifically, negative reputation tactics directed at the civilian constituency—such as forced recruitment, child soldiering, and financial coercion—may yield short-term benefits, but they fundamentally undermine a group's long-term viability by driving civilians to flee. These actions convey three interrelated signals: insecurity, illegitimacy, and desperation. Forced recruitment endangers families, breaches trust by harming the group's supposed base, and exposes the group's failure to mobilize voluntary support. Child recruitment magnifies these consequences—it evokes profound fear due to the vulnerability of children, violates deeply held societal norms, and suggests that the group has exhausted its legitimate options. In both cases, the rebel group transitions in the public eye from a potential protector to a predatory force. Similarly, forced funding deepens economic hardship, delegitimizes the movement by prioritizing extortion over ideology, and highlights the group's inability to sustain itself otherwise. Together, these coercive behaviors dismantle the group's credibility and moral standing, leaving civilians with little choice but to seek refuge elsewhere in pursuit of safety and autonomy.

To test the applicability of this argument, I conducted a large-N quantitative analysis using an original, merged time-series cross-sectional dataset. The unit of analysis is

the rebel group–country–year, and the study covers 206 observations between 1980 and 2011, spanning 63 rebel groups across 26 countries. The dependent variable—variation in external forced migration—is measured by the refugee rate, calculated by dividing UNHCR data on the number of refugees originating from each country by its total population in the same year (World Bank). The three main independent variables are drawn from the Reputation of Terror Groups dataset (RTG), which systematically codes the reputational behaviors of rebel groups. While the dataset captures both positive and negative reputation-building strategies, this study focuses specifically on the latter—coercive tactics such as forced recruitment, child soldiering, and forced funding. These behaviors signal to civilians how rebels are likely to treat them, influencing perceptions of threat or protection and, ultimately, decisions to flee across borders. To account for other factors that might influence refugee flows, I include four control variables: polity score, logged GDP, rebel group peak size, and whether the group engages in cross-border operations or not. After merging the RTG and COW Intrastate War datasets with UNHCR’s refugee data, I employed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to assess the effects of rebel coercion on displacement patterns. Although the results do not support the three core hypotheses, they reveal statistically significant relationships between refugee flows and all control variables which offers promising avenues for future research. Possible limitations related to data coverage, selection bias, and model specification are also acknowledged and discussed in detail following the results.

Lastly, the structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 offers a detailed discussion of key concepts and definitions, alongside a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the causes of forced migration. Building on current explanations for

why some civil wars lead to more displacement than others, Chapter 3 presents a new approach by examining the impact of rebel groups' relations with the public on refugee movements. This chapter engages with the literature through the theoretical mechanism of "reputation building," with a particular focus on how coercive behavior by rebel groups can increase the likelihood of civilian flight. Subsequently, Chapter 4 outlines the research design, provides an in-depth discussion of all variables introduced earlier, and describes the steps of operationalization—from data management to regression analysis. It then presents the regression results and reflects on their implications, while also discussing a certain assumption of analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarizing the literature, theoretical framework, key findings, and possible limitations, while leaving the door open for further research on this important subject.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter has two primary aims. First, it offers a detailed discussion of key concepts and definitions essential for understanding the relationship between civil wars and forced migration, with a particular focus on how rebel groups' interactions with the public influence refugee flows. Accordingly, I clarify the distinctions between different forms of displaced people, define civil wars as a form of political violence, and identify what constitutes a rebel group. Building on these concepts, this thesis specifically investigates the movement of refugees in cases of reciprocal government–dissident violence—commonly referred to as civil wars—through the lens of rebel groups, who are politically motivated violent actors within such conflicts.

Second, the chapter reviews existing literature on the conflict–migration nexus. Setting aside socio-economic factors, much of the prior research on forced migration emphasizes state violence or overall conflict intensity as the most influential push factors, often overlooking the role of rebel group characteristics—even though rebel groups are key actors in civil wars. In particular, the impact of specific rebel tactics—such as recruitment strategies or resource extraction methods, which shape groups' relationships with the public—remains underexplored. Therefore, in this section, I point out that gap in the literature and highlight the fundamental need to consider rebel behavior as a critical factor in understanding the volume of conflict-induced migration.

2.1. Conceptual Foundations: Definitions and Terminology

2.1.1. Who Is Considered a Refugee?

To understand the impact of civil wars on forced migration flows, first, it is necessary to define what constitutes forced migration. As Turton (2003) argues, forced migrants warrant special attention because, unlike voluntary migrants, they flee situations of profound distress. Their presence compels scholars and policymakers to confront fundamental questions regarding moral responsibility, societal values, and the boundaries of our moral community. In its broadest sense, forced migration refers to the movement of people who are compelled to leave their homes due to intolerable conditions, often taking extraordinary risks to escape. Bauman (1998) describes such individuals as the “poor majority” who seek to escape the “discomforts of localized existence,” a phrase that can encompass a wide spectrum of adversity—from direct threats to life and liberty, to the absence of educational or employment opportunities.

Within this expansive understanding, several forms of forced migration can be identified. These include individuals fleeing persecution and crossing international borders—commonly referred to as refugees—as well as IDPs, who are forced to abandon their homes but remain within their country’s borders. Another related category is asylum seekers, who have left their countries and are seeking formal recognition and protection as refugees. Forced migration may also occur due to development-induced displacement, such as that caused by the construction of dams, airports, roads, luxury housing projects, or the creation of conservation areas and game parks. Additionally, environmental degradation, natural disasters, industrial accidents, or pollution can produce so-called environmental refugees. Finally,

victims of human trafficking, who are forcibly relocated across international boundaries for the purpose of exploitation, also fall under the broader umbrella of forced migration (Castles, 2003).

Despite the wide range of forms forced migration can take, most empirical studies situated at the intersection of conflict and migration literature adopt a narrower operational definition, focusing primarily on refugees and IDPs. For instance, Moore and Shellman (2004) define a forced migrant as “one who, owing to a fear of persecution, has abandoned her or his dwelling in favor of relocating elsewhere, either within or beyond the borders of her or his country of residence.” This more focused definition facilitates clearer measurement and analysis of forced migration, particularly within the context of civil wars, where fear, violence, and displacement are deeply intertwined. Building on this conceptual framework, it is therefore important to examine how the two most commonly studied categories—IDPs (displaced within borders) and refugees (displaced across borders)—are formally defined within both international legal instruments and scholarly discourse. Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) defines IDPs as:

‘persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border’ (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, n.d.).

Refugees, on the other hand, are defined under international law by the 1951

Refugee Convention. According to the convention:

A refugee is a person that 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.' (*The 1951 Refugee Convention*, n.d.)

This narrow definition of the term '*refugee*' only focuses on cases of fear due to individual-specific factors and fails to account for situations of generalized violence such as civil wars. Therefore, regional legal documents such as the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration have adopted a broader definition, including people who are forced to leave their country because of "external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights, or events seriously disturbing public order" (*The 1951 Refugee Convention*, n.d.). Because this thesis aims to investigate the relationship between civil wars and refugee flows, it adopts the broader definition of the term '*refugee*' and further includes people in refugee-like situations, defined as "groups of persons who are outside their country or territory of origin and who face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained" (International Organization for Migration, n.d.).

Additionally, after clarifying the definitions of the terms *IDP* and *refugee*, it is important to highlight that the causes and dynamics underlying these two types of displacement differ significantly and require separate analytical attention. According to the literature, the primary explanation for this distinction stems from the theory of utility maximization, which suggests that individuals conduct a cost–benefit analysis

when deciding whether to flee or not. Both internal and cross-border displacement involve substantial costs; however, crossing international borders is generally far more costly than internal movement. For instance, becoming a refugee may involve illegal border crossings, the risk of arrest or persecution, navigating dangerous routes, or paying large sums to smugglers. Even upon reaching a country of asylum, individuals often face additional challenges such as learning a new language, obtaining legal work permits, securing employment, and adjusting to an unfamiliar culture. As a result, the decision to flee internally versus externally reflects distinct strategic calculations and should not be treated as equivalent (Turkoglu, 2022).

For example, a quantitative study by Moore and Shellman (2006) specifically analyzes when individuals become IDPs versus refugees and demonstrates that this is a strategic decision shaped by both push and pull factors. Their findings indicate that factors such as proximity to international borders, government and rebel violence, topography and infrastructure, and the presence of ethnic kin across borders are among the most influential in shaping this decision. Despite these differences, much of the forced migration literature does not clearly distinguish between internal and external displacement, often opting for a more comprehensive treatment of forced migration as a whole. However, I argue that a more focused approach enhances analytical clarity; researchers should examine either IDPs or refugees specifically, rather than grouping them together under a single framework. Given the harsher conditions under which decisions to cross international borders are typically made, I find external displacement particularly compelling. Therefore, this thesis focuses exclusively on refugees and does not include cases of internal displacement.

Lastly, although often overlooked in existing studies, asylum seekers remain an important category for analyzing conflict-induced migration. These are “people who have made a claim for asylum but whose cases have not yet been determined.” Despite their uncertain international legal status, asylum seekers have already experienced many of the push factors caused by war and made the difficult decision to cross an international border. They are, therefore, clearly relevant to research on migration caused by civil wars. However, it can be challenging to distinguish individuals fleeing political conditions—such as widespread violence—from those migrating primarily for economic reasons in search of better living standards. This difficulty is especially pronounced because political upheaval is frequently followed by violent conflict, economic collapse, and widespread human rights violations, which blur the boundaries between political and economic motivations. As a result, asylum applications may sometimes be used by economic migrants to bypass immigration controls (Turton, 2003). For this reason, I have chosen to exclude asylum seekers from the scope of my analysis.

Keeping these definitions and explanations in mind, in this study, the term *refugee* refers to individuals who feel unsafe, uncomfortable, and increasingly disconnected due to the conditions of civil war—so much so that the benefits of leaving outweigh the costs. These individuals value their security and wellbeing, deciding to cross borders in search of these in a host country, leaving the conflict behind. According to my theory, people depart primarily for security when they feel threatened by the coercive tactics of rebel groups actively harming civilians. Such tactics not only endanger lives but also expose the illegitimacy of these groups. Recognizing this illegitimacy removes any incentive to remain, especially when people perceive that

they have no meaningful voice and that their needs are disregarded. Moreover, witnessing the rebel group's desperation leads individuals to conclude that a future with stability and welfare in their home country is unlikely. Therefore, in this context, refugees are understood as recognized asylum seekers who have fled their country during a civil war in pursuit of security and welfare—needs they believe can only be met beyond their national borders due to the coercive tactics of rebel groups.

2.1.2. What Constitutes a Civil War?

Violence is a complex phenomenon whose extent and nature are often shaped by the specific context in which it occurs. Kalyvas (2006) defines it as “the deliberate infliction of harm on people.” When such violence is politically motivated—for instance, civilians are targeted with the aim of gaining political advantage—it is referred to as political violence (*11.1: What Is Political Violence? - Social Sci LibreTexts*, n.d.). Sousa (2013), on the other hand, explains political violence using the World Health Organization's definition as “the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals.” Although one emphasizes harm and the other emphasizes force, both definitions highlight politically motivated actions that result in harmful or destructive outcomes.

When it comes to the scope of these actions, the term “political violence” is generally used to describe violent activities within a state, rather than between states. Respectively, in this thesis, political violence refers specifically to different types of violent intrastate conflicts. Depending on who the perpetrator and the target are, intrastate conflicts or acts of contention can take many forms. For example, if the government is both the initiator and the target of violence, the act is referred to as a

“coup.” When the government directs violence against a political challenger, it may be labeled in various ways, such as “human rights violations,” “counterterrorism,” or “state repression.” Another form of political violence is initiated by political challengers, such as dissidents or rebel groups. If their target is the government, the violence may be classified as a revolution, insurgency, or terrorism. Finally, when both the government and rebel groups engage in reciprocal violence, the conflict is defined as a civil war (Davenport et al., 2019).

Yet, in order to understand whether certain borderline cases can be considered under this category, it is helpful to go over a few additional details. First of all, the actors involved in civil wars need to be organized groups operating within a country and participating in a violent conflict. Secondly, one must consider how much killing has to occur and at what rate. The most commonly used threshold by scholars is 1,000 deaths, which helps distinguish civil wars from low-intensity rural insurgencies. Thirdly, regarding the aim of the violent activity, a civil war must be fought over a political objective—such as control of the government, a group’s separatist ambitions, or opposition to a disputed government policy. In other words, this type of political violence typically involves struggles for power at the central level, within a specific region, or efforts to push for major policy change. Lastly, it is important to note that civil wars can sometimes overlap with interstate wars (Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2006).

Of course, within the rich literature on forced migration, it is possible to find studies focusing on many different forms of political violence—from genocide to politicide—alongside civil wars. However, in this thesis, I specifically focus on

instances of civil war. Since these cases involve two distinct types of perpetrators, one of them being a rebel group, I find this type of reciprocal violence particularly interesting and worth deeper examination. Moreover, the effects of civil wars are often far-reaching, with civilians almost always suffering the most, despite not being the direct targets. As we have seen in cases like Syria, such intrastate conflicts can destabilize entire regions by generating large numbers of refugees and placing pressure on neighboring states. For these reasons, civil wars are well suited as a category for studying how refugee flows are affected by political violence, especially from the perspective of the relationship between dissident groups and the civilian population.

Continuing this discussion on what constitutes a civil war, I needed to adopt a stricter definition during the operationalization process. To identify the relevant cases, I used data on “intrastate wars” from the Correlates of War (COW). According to COW, “civil war” is a subtype of intra-state war, defined as an armed conflict between a state government and one or more organized non-state actors, which meets the broader COW definition of war—namely, sustained combat involving organized armed forces and resulting in at least 1,000 battle-related combatant fatalities within a twelve-month period (Sarkees & Dixon, 2020).

Based on these professional definitions, this study seeks to capture, through cases of civil war, the dynamics of intrastate violence shaped equally by the actions and attitudes of both governments and rebel groups. Such contexts create unbearable security challenges, a profound lack of hope for the future, and high levels of uncertainty for individuals within the country. In line with my theoretical

mechanism, during civil wars, rebel groups that fail to build a positive reputation often resort to coercive tactics—forcing and harming civilians to obtain the resources they need to sustain the conflict. These tactics generate severe insecurity, uncertainty, and discomfort for individuals, ultimately compelling them to leave their country.

2.1.3. What Is a Rebel Group?

Violent non-state actors can be defined as groups or organizations that operate outside state control, often lacking formal legitimacy, and use violence as a core tactic to pose a collective challenge to national or international security. They frequently fill governance gaps by offering alternative services, providing goods, or creating parallel structures. These actors are quite diverse in form, including warlords, militias, and paramilitary forces, etc. (Williams, 2008). However, for the purposes of this thesis, three specific types of violent non-state actors need to be examined more closely. Although the terms "rebel group," "insurgent group," and "terrorist group" are often used interchangeably—and these categories are not mutually exclusive, as many groups display features of more than one—it is still important to distinguish between them for the sake of analytical clarity in a study targeting specifically civil wars.

A rebel group is defined by Jo and Niehaus (2018) as “a politico-military armed group that revolts against existing national governments militarily and has political goals.” This definition highlights several key attributes: rebel groups are organized, engage in violence, challenge state authority, and pursue political objectives such as autonomy, independence, or regime change. In contrast, excluding state terrorism,

terrorism is defined by Kydd and Walter (2006) as the use of violence against civilians by non-state actors to attain political goals. A group is classified as a terrorist group if it systematically targets civilian populations as a means of political coercion. Insurgency, on the other hand, is defined by O'Neill (2005) as “a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.” Insurgent groups typically adopt a combination of guerrilla warfare, propaganda, and political mobilization to undermine or reshape state authority.

Based on these definitions, we can distinguish between different types of violent non-state actors. While all three types of groups pursue political objectives, terrorism is primarily set apart by its deliberate targeting of civilians. The main difference between rebel and insurgent groups, on the other hand, lies in their methods and strategic orientation: rebel groups typically engage in irregular or even conventional armed conflict—often in the context of civil wars—whereas insurgents tend to wage prolonged, low-intensity struggles aimed at undermining state legitimacy, often without directly controlling territory. Moreover, while insurgents aim to weaken, overthrow, or extract concessions from a recognized authority, rebels may pursue a broader set of goals, including secession, revenge, or control over resources. These distinctions in tactics and objectives add important nuance to how such groups are analyzed and categorized in academic research (Kydd & Walter, 2006; O'Neill, 2005; Jo & Niehaus, 2018).

Given that this thesis focuses on asylum mobility induced by civil wars, the primary actors under examination are rebel groups, as they are central to this form of political violence. However, it is important to reiterate that in practice, these group identities often overlap, and many non-state actors may be classified differently across studies depending on context, tactics, and framing. Accordingly, in this study, I used the RTG dataset and specifically selected only those groups that are simultaneously classified as rebel groups, in order to examine how such actors interact with the public.

Lastly, important to note that, for these non-state armed actors, including rebel groups, the ultimate objective is the survival of the organization. Research by Akcinaroglu and Tokdemir (2020) demonstrates, for instance, that enduring over time can itself be considered a significant accomplishment for such groups. Building on this, the theoretical mechanism in this thesis suggests that groups cultivate a reputation—either through constructive strategies or coercive tactics—to secure the human and financial resources necessary for their continued existence. In the context of this study, such engagement occurs primarily through coercive means, including forced recruitment and extortion. These survival-driven actions send powerful signals to the public: they reveal the insecurity, illegitimacy, and desperation of the group, which in turn significantly influence individuals' decisions to flee.

2.2. Understanding the Conflict–Migration Nexus: A Literature Overview

The contemporary literature on migration is broadly divided into two branches: the well-studied field of voluntary migration (emigration) and the relatively underexplored area of forced migration (involuntary migration, asylum mobility or in

this case, conflict-induced migration). Voluntary migration is primarily driven by economic factors and typically highlights income per capita as the key variable influencing individuals' decisions to migrate. In contrast, the primary drivers of forced migration, as emphasized in existing research, include war, genocide, dissident violence, and state repression, while economic, non-violent political, and demographic variables are generally found to play a much more limited role. Studies in this field typically focus on understanding the patterns of IDPs and refugee flows across the globe (Turkoglu, 2022; Melander & Öberg, 2007; Schmeidl, 1997; Moore & Shellman, 2004).

While these structural drivers are crucial for identifying the contexts in which displacement occurs, they do not fully explain how individuals make the decision to flee. That is why many studies start from micro-level explanations—particularly the utility-maximization framework—to better understand individual choices. According to migration theory, individuals are rational actors who value their security and assess the relative risks and benefits of mobility. Expectedly, they choose to flee only if the anticipated advantages outweigh the perceived dangers or sacrifices (Adhikari, 2012; Adhikari, 2013; Melander & Öberg, 2007; Moore & Shellman, 2004, 2007; Davenport et al., 2003). Even in cases of extreme violence, this logic still applies: people do not flee indiscriminately to the nearest safe place, and some opt to remain in conflict zones despite the risks (Moore & Shellman, 2007; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007; Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009). Accordingly, most studies on both voluntary and forced migration—including key works such as Davenport et al. (2003), Melander & Öberg (2007), and Moore & Shellman (2004, 2006, and 2007)—adopt a choice-centered

perspective in which migration is viewed as a rational cost-benefit calculation (Adhikari, 2013).

However, it is essential to differentiate between the decision-making processes underlying standard migration and those movements triggered by fear of persecution or generalized violence. In the case of asylum mobility—unlike voluntary migration—individuals often face highly constrained circumstances such as imperfect information, high levels of stress, and severely limited timeframes.

Moreover, security risks introduce additional costs that do not necessarily eliminate but significantly diminish the relevance of other socio-economic factors in shaping migration decisions, such as relative employment opportunities or the presence of social networks (Moore & Shellman, 2007; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007; Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009). Building on this idea, most scholars in the literature agree that political violence is the main determinant of refugee flows, because—as suggested by Davenport et al. (2003)—people tend to flee most when their physical integrity is under threat (Adhikari, 2012; Adhikari, 2013). However, under the umbrella term of violence, there are numerous claims based on the type of violence (e.g., politicide, civil war), the perpetrator (e.g., states, dissidents), or other features of conflict (e.g., intensity, duration).

Firstly, different types of violence have distinct effects on individuals' decisions to flee (Braithwaite et al., 2021). The most commonly studied forms of one-sided violence include politicide, genocide, and state repression, while civil war and international war are frequently examined examples of two-sided violence in the literature. Some research focuses only on one type of violence. For instance,

Türkoğlu and Chadeaux (2019) analyze the impacts of civil war on asylum mobility in their study of pull factors. They demonstrate that the proximity of democratic and wealthy potential hosts has a significant effect on the volume of refugees escaping from reciprocal violence between state and rebel groups. It is also possible to find studies comparing the effects of two or more different types of violence. For example, Uzonyi (2014) focuses on state-sponsored mass killing and examines the relative effects of genocide and politicide on forced migration. He concludes that although both are state-sponsored killings, politicide creates more refugees compared to genocide.

Secondly, there are studies in the literature that propose typologies to distinguish the sources of threat by focusing on the perpetrator of violence. For example, Davenport et al. (2003) introduce a categorization based on three distinct sources of threat: state violence, dissident violence, and joint state–dissident violence or civil war. They argue that all three types of threats significantly affect migrant production. Building on a similar taxonomy, Moore and Shellman (2006) examine the effects of state-sponsored mass killings on the outflow of refugees versus IDPs. Their findings suggest that genocides and politicides produce more refugees and fewer IDPs compared to other forms of state coercion, dissident violence, and civil war.

Additionally, rather than focusing on who the perpetrator is, some studies classify violence based on how the perpetrator implements it. For example, Braithwaite et al. (2021) distinguish between direct violence (e.g., shelling, shootings) and indirect violence (e.g., torture, sexual assault, or forced labor), emphasizing the form in which violence is carried out rather than its source.

Lastly, beyond the types and perpetrators of violence, there are additional conflict-related variables—such as the intensity, geographic spread, or duration of an armed conflict—which are widely studied for their effects on asylum mobility. For instance, Fearon and Shaver (2020) examine conflict intensity, measured by conflict-related deaths, and highlight the significance of both immediate and sustained levels of violence in shaping displacement outcomes. Similarly, Conte and Migali (2019) examine the intensity of violence along with its geographic location, finding that these combined spatial factors explain a substantial portion of the variation in asylum applications and refugee stocks during state-based armed conflicts. Melander and Öberg (2007) also explore both the magnitude and scope of violence. However, in contrast to Conte and Migali, they conclude that while the geographic spread of fighting and the degree to which urban centers are affected significantly influence displacement patterns, the intensity of fighting itself is not significantly related to the number of forced migrants.

Moreover, while often regarded as less central or merely complementary to violence-related factors, socio-economic variables have also received considerable attention in studies of conflict-induced migration. Although findings remain mixed (Ozaltin et al., 2020), existing research highlights the multifaceted roles these factors can play. For instance, in addition to security-related factors, Engel and Ibáñez (2007) evaluate socio-economic determinants and argue that while landholdings and social capital may conventionally deter displacement, they can also increase a household's likelihood of becoming the target of direct threats—thereby indirectly contributing to forced migration. With respect to economic conditions, Neumayer (2005) finds a negative association between average wages and refugee flows, suggesting that

improved economic prospects reduce the likelihood of flight. In terms of social dynamics, a notable example is provided by Adhikari (2012), who explores how dense social networks influence mobility decisions and demonstrates that such networks can significantly lower displacement risks by helping individuals better manage insecurity and remain in their communities.

Alongside the conventional distinction between violence-related and socio-economic explanations, the literature has also introduced some alternative categorizations. One such, though relatively less-preferred, is the typology of root causes, proximate conditions, and intervening factors, as outlined by Schmeidl (1997). Root causes are generally economic in nature; the study particularly emphasizes factors like economic underdevelopment and overpopulation; both positively associated with refugee flows. Proximate conditions, by contrast, typically involve political violence that directly triggers forced migration—such as human rights violations, ethnic and civil conflicts, external interventions, and international wars. As can be inferred, root and proximate conditions largely correspond to the socio-economic and conflict-related categories previously discussed. Unlike these two, intervening factors do not directly cause displacement; rather, they refer to conditions that facilitate or constrain movement in response to root or proximate conditions. These are most often socio-economic in nature—such as migrant networks or transportation linkages—and their complementary influence tends to diminish when root or proximate conditions become particularly severe (Schmeidl, 1997).

Another alternative and more common classification are the distinction between pull (inflow) and push (outflow) factors. While push factors include conditions related to

the 'home state' and aim to understand 'what scares people away' from the country of origin, pull factors pertain to the 'host state' and analyze 'what attracts people' to the country of destination (Türkoğlu & Chadeaux, 2019; Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009). All the factors listed above—ranging from the geographical spread of violence to the type of perpetrator—can be referred to as push factors, as they increase the cost of staying in the home country by endangering individual safety and eventually induce people to move out. In addition to direct violence and security threats, other examples of push factors commonly found in the literature include poverty, political instability, and religious intolerance (Ozaltin et al., 2020). In general, the migration literature focuses on these push factors and acknowledges them as the main determinants of refugee flows.

On the other hand, the role of pull factors in shaping individuals' decisions to flee has received relatively limited attention in the literature. Some of the most prominent pull factors include the geographical proximity of the host country, its political and economic conditions, and migrants' potential ties with the destination—such as the presence of established diaspora communities. For example, Türkoğlu and Chadeaux (2019) demonstrate that refugees are more likely to seek destinations where they can enjoy basic rights, live free from repression, and access decent economic opportunities. Accordingly, having neighboring countries with higher GDP per capita and more democratic regimes increases forced migration during civil wars by raising the expected quality of life in the destination. Similarly, Conte and Migali (2019) find that the presence of migrant communities in the host state facilitates refugees' adaptation and lowers the perceived costs of flight. Therefore, in addition

to push factors, the availability and characteristics of destination states also influence the scale of refugee outflows.

Furthermore, the typology of push and pull factors can also be conceptualized as two distinct stages of displacement. According to Moore and Shellman (2006), the first stage is victimization, during which individuals make the decision to flee—prompted by push factors that make staying in the country of origin increasingly undesirable or dangerous. These may be economic or conflict-related in nature, such as root causes or proximate factors. Once that decision is made, the second stage involves evaluating socio-political and economic opportunities in the broader region. At this point, refugees determine where to relocate, guided by pull factors that draw them toward destination countries (Türkoğlu & Chadeaux, 2019; Davenport et al., 2003). Given this framework, it is not surprising that pull factors have received relatively less attention in the forced migration literature. While push factors serve as the primary triggers for displacement, pull factors play a more complementary role—similar to positive intervening factors—by facilitating, rather than initiating, the overall migration process.

Lastly, the contemporary literature on forced migration engages with different levels of analysis. On the one hand, research conducts micro-level analysis by examining individual or household determinants of refugee flows—such as age, education, land ownership, or access to public services (Bohra-Mishra & Massey, 2011; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007). On the other hand, it also provides macro-level explanations grounded in state- and system-level factors. At the state level, examples include human rights violations or regime change, while at the system level, scholars investigate interstate

networks of amity or animosity and their structural consequences (Adhikari, 2012; Schon & Johnson, 2021). Based on these insights, I argue that the existing literature lacks a robust body of mid-level analysis—an approach situated between individual-level and structural-level explanations. Recognizing this gap, my study aims to introduce a mid-level perspective to the conflict–migration nexus by examining how rebel group dynamics shape the volume of refugee flows during civil wars.

To the best of my knowledge, the effects of rebel group dynamics on the creation of refugee flows remain highly understudied. Given that civil wars are fought between a government and at least one rebel group, as mentioned above, I believe that the characteristics of these groups—particularly their relationships with the public—are crucial for understanding why some civil wars generate more refugees than others. Therefore, I argue that current research on the relationship between forced migration and civil wars lacks a mid-level analysis focused on group-level factors of the rebel actors involved. In this thesis, I address that gap by examining how the reputation-building strategies of rebel groups influence forced migration.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary aim of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical mechanism of reputation-building that explains how rebel groups' relationships with the public influence civilians' decisions to flee during conflict. Accordingly, the chapter begins by discussing the dual identity of many non-state actors as both rebels and terrorists, and demonstrates how a theoretical framework often applied to terrorist groups can also be relevant in a thesis focusing on rebels. It then moves on to explore the core dynamics of rebel-society relations, particularly the rebels' dependence on resource allocation from the public. As explained in detail, in order to secure the resources they need, rebel groups generally adopt one of two strategic paths: they either build a positive reputation or cultivate a negative one across different audiences. While both approaches aim to meet material and organizational needs, a negative reputation—especially in the eyes of the general public—signals a lack of legitimacy and a high propensity for harm. This alienates civilians to the point that many choose to flee. Therefore, in this thesis, I argue that negative reputation-building by rebel groups is positively correlated with higher volumes of refugee outflows in the context of civil wars.

3.1. Blurring the Lines: Using Terrorism-Based Explanations to Understand Rebel Group Behavior

Although both are non-state actors engaged in violent activities for political purposes, the conflict studies literature typically distinguishes between rebel groups

and terrorist groups, particularly based on their targets and tactics. As discussed in Chapter 2, rebel groups are organized non-state actors that oppose the government through violence within the context of civil wars. They are politically motivated and engage in direct armed conflict with the state (Jo & Niehaus, 2018). Terrorism, by contrast, is widely understood as a costly signaling tactic that deliberately exploits fear—typically by targeting noncombatants—in order to influence state behavior or shape public opinion. In other words, terrorist groups, while also politically motivated non-state actors, primarily direct their violent tactics against civilian populations (Kydd & Walter, 2006). However, many real-world cases reflect a dual identity; that is, many rebel groups can also be considered terrorist organizations, as they frequently adopt terrorist tactics alongside conventional or guerrilla warfare—highlighting a significant overlap between the two categories.

Some well-known examples of rebel–terrorist group hybrids include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, which pursued a Marxist revolution and fought the Colombian state, but was labeled a terrorist organization by the U.S. due to its coercive tactics, such as kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations. Similarly, the Taliban carried out suicide bombings and attacks on civilians during its prolonged conflict with the Afghan government and foreign forces. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka pioneered the use of suicide vests in its campaign for Tamil independence, while the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which seeks Kurdish autonomy from the Turkish state, is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the EU, and the U.S. for its attacks on civilians. Importantly, several influential scholars—including Crenshaw, Kydd and Walter, or Fortna—acknowledge this overlap between rebels and terrorists,

noting that the categories are not mutually exclusive. Fortna (2015), in particular, examines rebel groups that use terrorism versus those that do not, finding that the use of terrorism significantly affects conflict outcomes, war duration, and international legitimacy.

Therefore, in this study, I apply a theoretical mechanism developed in the terrorism literature—the concept of terrorist group reputation—to analyze how rebel groups interact with, and are perceived by, the public. Specifically, I use data from RTG dataset, which includes groups that employ terrorism, some of which also engage in guerrilla warfare and qualify as rebel groups (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). However, I focus only on groups with a dual identity, excluding purely terrorist organizations that are not involved in civil wars as rebel groups.

3.2. Feeding the Fight: How Resource Needs Shape Rebel–Public Relations

While states are regularly financed through citizen taxation and enjoy vast financial and military capabilities, non-state actors — including rebel groups — face substantial costs without the institutional advantages of the state. To sustain their operations, rebel groups require a wide range of resources, such as acquiring weapons, funding travel and training, and managing day-to-day logistics and organizational infrastructure. Accordingly, their survival depends heavily on securing both physical and non-physical resources, which can be obtained through various means. Externally, rebel groups may receive support from states seeking to undermine or overthrow a hostile regime. For example, during the Cold War, superpowers frequently sponsored terrorist and insurgent organizations as part of their broader efforts to expand spheres of influence and wage proxy wars. Internally,

these non-state actors often rely on their constituencies — broadly defined as the aggrieved populations they claim to represent and protect — for the financial, logistical, and human resources they need to operate effectively (Byman et al., 2001; Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Tokdemir, 2021).

Particularly following the decline of superpower rivalry and the end of widespread state sponsorship after the Cold War, domestic resource acquisition has become increasingly critical for rebel groups (Byman et al., 2001). Consequently, their interactions with the public are now largely defined by a sustained dependency on securing vital inputs for survival. To meet these needs, rebel groups adopt varying strategies. Some aim to foster public loyalty and sympathy by winning hearts and minds—generating a favorable reputation—while others resort to coercion and violence, extracting support through fear and thereby accumulating a negative image. These divergent approaches help build financial reserves, attract recruits, and uphold operational momentum (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Tokdemir, 2021).

Accordingly, this thesis rests on the core assumption that the rebel–civilian relationship is fundamentally structured around the strategic imperative of securing essential resources. Building on this logic, I investigate how differing methods of obtaining such support—particularly coercive or violent ones—shape patterns of asylum mobility in civil war contexts.

3.3. Reputation Building as Strategy: How Rebels Construct Their Image Across Different Audiences

Given that rebel groups are often heavily reliant on public support and access to local resources, their survival—and, more broadly, the dynamics of civil war including individuals' decision to flee—largely depends on the power they derive from their

reputation. Following Akçınaroğlu and Tokdemir (2018), reputation refers to the collective and commonly held assessment of a rebel group's behavior, which in turn shapes whether the audience adopts a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the group (Carreras et al., 2013). To build such reputations, rebel groups generally pursue one of two broad strategies: cultivating a positive image to encourage voluntary contributions or relying on coercion to extract the support they need. For example, FARC were known for attempting to win the hearts and minds of the local population. In remote rural areas where state authority was significantly undermined, FARC built a positive reputation and established local hegemony by adopting state-like functions and roles (Röhl, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2022; Voyvodic, 2024).

Yet, building a positive image is not the only strategy rebel groups adopt. In many cases, groups turn to coercive tactics and brutality, even toward their own constituencies, to secure resources and impose control. Many rebel groups, including the Sudan Liberation Movement in Darfur, the Liberation Front in Ethiopia, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, pursued such a path and engaged in violent practices during civil wars (Zenn, 2014; Agboga, 2013; Haer et al., 2020). For instance, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda deployed its militants to steal medicine and abduct children. Similarly, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone relied on forced recruitment of men and children to loot and attack villages. Boko Haram in Nigeria also acquired substantial resources through kidnapping, drug trafficking, and the forced recruitment of children. These examples illustrate that even without public support, rebel groups can sustain themselves through coercion and violence—strategies that deliberately cultivate a negative reputation (Denov, 2010; Tokdemir, 2021).

Table 1: Reputation-Building Strategies by Audience Type

Type of Audience	Positive Reputation	Negative Reputation
Constituency (In-group)	Built through activities such as public service provision or media outreach	Built through coercive practices like forced recruitment or extortion
Non-Constituency (Out-group)	Not applicable, as positive reputation-building is typically limited to the constituency	Formed through use of extreme violence and targeting children

When it comes to the target of reputation-building, rebel group strategies can be broadly understood as comprehensive plans of action directed at two distinct audiences: the constituency and the non-constituency. These reputation strategies—shaped by the group’s policies and behavior—determine how the group is perceived by each audience and ultimately influence its ability to recruit members, secure resources, and maintain support. The first audience, the constituency, refers to the population the rebel group claims to represent. This group may be defined along ethnic, religious, or ideological lines. For instance, PKK identifies ethnic Kurds in Turkey as its constituency, while Action Directe in France appealed to leftist individuals who shared its political ideals. Toward this in-group, rebel groups may adopt both positive strategies—such as providing services or establishing a political wing—and negative strategies that rely on coercion and intimidation, including

forced recruitment of adults or children (Tokdemir, 2021; Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Fortna, 2015).

Moving on, the second audience—often labeled as the non-constituency, out-group, or target audience—comprises those who fall outside the group's representational claims, or simply anyone left out of the constituency—in other words, the broader public. This may include individuals who openly support the government or those who remain neutral. For the PKK, this category includes ethnic Turks; for Action Directe, it consists of those who reject its leftist ideology. Unlike the in-group, toward which rebel groups can build both positive and negative reputations, engagement with the non-constituency remains considerably restricted. Interactions with this out-group typically involve tactics designed to instill fear or demonstrate power, often resulting in a negative image. Efforts to build a positive reputation are generally reserved for the in-group. Nevertheless, rebel groups do not entirely disregard the non-constituency when developing their strategies. Although their primary focus remains on their core supporters, they may also undertake calculated actions toward the broader public to achieve wider strategic objectives (Tokdemir, 2021; Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Fortna, 2015).

One such notable tactic toward the non-constituency is selective targeting, which involves directing violence against carefully chosen representatives of the state—such as military personnel, political elites, or government institutions—rather than engaging in indiscriminate attacks. This approach can sometimes prevent widespread alienation of the broader population and may even evoke limited sympathy or respect from the out-group, within which the rebel group theoretically cannot build a

positive reputation. However, selective targeting is resource-intensive, requiring significant manpower, funding, and technical capability (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018). As a result, while rebel groups may attempt to mitigate the negative impact of their violence on the non-constituency, it is rare for these populations to remain unaffected. As generalized violence spreads, members of the out-group often develop a negative perception of the rebel group—one that can significantly influence their decision to flee.

3.3.1. How Rebel Groups Build Positive Reputations

As mentioned above, rebel groups that primarily rely on the support of individuals for their survival may attempt to win the hearts and minds of their constituencies by building a positive reputation. For instance, Hezbollah invests in its Shia constituency by allocating significant resources to secure their loyalty (Connell, 2021). Similarly, despite having limited means, Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) undertook initiatives such as enacting gender equality laws, implementing land reform, building infrastructure, and providing social services (Connell, 2021). By dedicating their already scarce time and resources to the welfare of their constituents, both groups succeeded in attracting a high number of voluntary recruits—an achievement that ultimately enabled them to endure against the powerful Israeli and Ethiopian armies, respectively (Tokdemir, 2021). More broadly, as illustrated by the case of the EPLF, building a positive reputation is not a singular act; rather, rebel groups can employ various means to support individuals and secure their loyalty.

One of the primary ways to build a positive reputation is by investing in essential public goods such as food, healthcare, education, security, and law and order. Naturally, this process is highly resource-intensive. It requires a certain degree of territorial control, strong ties with local populations, and minimal resistance from the public. However, if rebel groups manage to overcome these obstacles and allocate their limited resources to the welfare of the people they claim to represent, they can send a costly signal of commitment to their constituency. Especially in areas where state authority is weak or absent, assuming state-like roles and compensating for inadequate public services becomes a powerful strategy to address grassroots grievances and secure support. This approach fosters feelings of gratitude and loyalty toward the group, enhances its legitimacy, and ultimately facilitates recruitment (Berman & Laitin, 2008; Brown, 2020; Dugan et al., 2012; Levitt, 2004, 2008; Lyons, 2016; Tokdemir, 2021; Tokdemir & Akçınaroğlu, 2016, 2018). For example, LTTE secured both territorial control and community support by providing services such as education and healthcare, which helped foster youth loyalty and reduced the group's reliance on coercion (Frerks, 2023; Chandrakanthan, 2020; Tokdemir, 2021).

Besides providing goods and services, another way of building a positive reputation is by establishing a political wing or political party, which helps groups expand their legal outreach and alleviate the negative image caused by their violent actions in the eyes of the public (Azani, 2013; Neumann & Smith, 2005; Tokdemir, 2021; Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). Having a political party or political wing allows groups to consolidate public support, as political branches serve as effective tools for reaching out to local populations, spreading the group's ideology and cause, and reframing the group's violent actions by highlighting the political aspirations behind

them (Cronin, 2009; Tokdemir, 2021; Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). This approach serves as an important grassroots mechanism that fosters loyalty and legitimacy, which in turn enhances the group's rank and maintains its operational capacity—both essential for the group's survival (Düveroğlu, 2024). For example, in the case of Northern Ireland, the IRA had a political arm called Sinn Féin, which helped mobilize community support through a bottom-up approach. This included the provision of social services and the promotion of Irish nationalism and social equality. The political wing also played a crucial role in political negotiations and international lobbying efforts (Whiting, 2016).

Moreover, rebel groups with a positive reputation often use media as part of their broader strategy to gain public support. Controlling media outlets allows them to highlight achievements, commemorate sacrifices, and communicate their message to a wider audience. Through television, the internet, or print platforms, they disseminate narratives that reinforce their legitimacy. By framing their struggles through collective grievances and symbolic language—such as myths and imagery—they strengthen group identity and portray themselves as heroic and resilient. This strategy not only expands their reach but also fosters loyalty and commitment by reshaping both victories and losses in ways that resonate with supporters. Overall, when a rebel group uses media to spread its message, it becomes easier to convince individuals who already have some connection to current members (Farnen, 2008; Pekgözlü et al., 2007; Paul, 2009; Tokdemir, 2021; Kruglanski et al., 2011). Many groups today achieve this through websites and printed or online publications aimed at shaping public perception. However, more expensive investments, such as owning

TV or radio stations, remain rare due to their high cost (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016).

Like any other type of investment, building a strong reputation benefits rebel groups in both the short and long term. The provision of public goods, mass media outreach, and political engagement all contribute to establishing legitimacy and securing crucial support from the constituency. Supporters who believe in the group's cause are likely to pass that belief on to family members—even to future generations—making constituent sympathy a vital long-term resource. This sustained loyalty helps the group remain active by providing a steady pool of potential recruits to replenish or expand its ranks. For example, in the case of the IRA, members often came from the same families across generations, illustrating the enduring value of cultivating a strong reputation (Dugan & Young, 2010; Tokdemir, 2021; Cronin, 2009). However, not all rebel groups pursue positive reputation-building strategies, as such efforts are often risky and resource-intensive. Even with substantial investment of funds and skilled personnel, success is not guaranteed. The possibility of failure—especially when the payoff is uncertain—makes these strategies less appealing, particularly when resources are limited and could be used elsewhere (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Tokdemir, 2021).

3.3.2. How Rebel Groups Build Negative Reputations

Given that reputation is a two-way street, building a positive image through activities such as providing goods and services, forming a political party, or operating a press outlet is a risky investment. It is costly in terms of time and financial resources and requires substantial backing from the constituency and internal networks to begin

with. As a result, not every rebel group is capable of pursuing this strategy. Despite the long-term benefits of cultivating a positive reputation, some groups that lack the capacity to meet these demands may instead opt for a negative reputation by relying on cheaper and less risky tactics—primarily coercive ones. These groups often turn to violence not only as a means of survival but also to secure recruits, fund their operations, and consolidate their power. Rather than fostering long-term support through voluntary contributions, they may coerce civilians into providing food, shelter, or money, or forcibly recruit children and young males—methods that are relatively low-cost compared to positive reputation-building and do not require pre-existing support (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016, 2018; Tokdemir, 2021).

For instance, Sierra Leone's RUF employed numerous brutal tactics to secure resources and strengthen its presence in the region, including the forcible recruitment of young men and children, as well as attacks on villages for looting (Denov, 2010). Similarly, Boko Haram obtained significant funding through criminal activities such as kidnapping, drug trafficking, and bank robbery, while also recruiting children into its ranks. These examples illustrate that, although such violent strategies may alienate the constituency, they allow groups to rapidly acquire resources without requiring time, effort, or initial support (Tokdemir, 2021).

Yet, although coercive tactics may appear to be an effective short-term strategy for acquiring internal resources, they often lead to serious long-term drawbacks. The core issue lies in the quality and sustainability of the resources obtained. Unlike groups that benefit from positive reputations—receiving voluntary support, committed recruits, and stable financial aid—those relying on coercion tend to

acquire low-quality and unsustainable resources. While such tactics may meet immediate needs, they frequently alienate the local population and make it difficult to sustain long-term support. The use of force typically results in one-time gains, such as looting, and generates uncommitted recruits who remain only for personal gain or flee at the first opportunity. Individuals recruited through coercion tend to lack long-term loyalty or motivation; they often seek short-term financial rewards or escape as soon as they can (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Gates, 2002; Tokdemir, 2021). As a result, coercive recruitment increases the presence of undisciplined and disloyal members within rebel ranks, ultimately undermining organizational cohesion, operational effectiveness, and even the group's long-term chances of survival (Mason & Krane, 1989; Weinstein, 2007).

Once recruitment is based on threat, rebel groups must continuously invest in cautionary tactics to prevent defection—an ongoing cost that further drains group resources (Gates, 2002; Tokdemir, 2021; Eck, 2014). The need to retain forcibly recruited members and maintain access to looted or extorted resources also diverts attention and weakens the group's strategic focus over time (Düveroğlu, 2024).

Especially when public support is already weak, such coercive practices lead to an even deeper reliance on violence. This reinforces a vicious cycle: the group, unable to restrict the use of force among its members, acts increasingly recklessly, further eroding public support and increasing public resentment and hatred (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018; Weinstein, 2007; Eck, 2014; Tokdemir, 2021).

In sum, although negative reputation and fear-based tactics may help rebel groups secure immediate resources, they pose serious risks to the group's long-term

survival. These methods erode civilian support, deplete manpower, and reduce the quality and sustainability of the resources obtained, ultimately weakening the group's resilience and capacity to endure (Tokdemir, 2021). Beyond their internal consequences, this thesis argues that negative reputation also shapes public decisions to flee during civil wars by sending three critical signals: one of insecurity, one of illegitimacy, and one of desperation.

First, a negative reputation signals a security problem. When rebel groups resort to violence and coercion, it communicates to civilians that their lives are at risk—not just now, but in the future. People begin to fear persecution, displacement, or even death, and flee in search of safety. Second, it raises a legitimacy problem. The group's violent or exploitative behavior undermines any claim to moral or political authority. Rather than viewing the rebels as rightful representatives of their cause, civilians begin to see them as untrustworthy actors whose actions contradict the values they claim to fight for. As a result, individuals no longer see any meaningful reason to remain or support the group—actively or passively—and become more inclined to leave. Third, it conveys a desperation problem. The use of coercive, indiscriminate tactics reveals that the group lacks sufficient support or capacity to achieve its goals through other means. Civilians interpret this as a sign of weakness and recognize that the group is unlikely to succeed in the long run. With little faith in the group's prospects, and few incentives to stay, flight becomes the most rational option.

Taken together, these signals—threat, illegitimacy, and desperation—undermine the rebel group's credibility in the eyes of the public. The more a group becomes

associated with violence, injustice, and futility, the more civilians begin to look for a future elsewhere. In this sense, a negative reputation functions not only as a survival mechanism for the group, but also as a powerful push factor driving displacement.

In this thesis, I identify three key indicators of negative reputation within a rebel group's constituency. One of the most prominent is forced recruitment, which involves abduction, intimidation, or physical coercion to compel individuals—often young men or children—to join the group (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban employed a variety of brutal tactics to sustain its ranks, including public executions and forced enlistment of young males—often leveraging tribal and familial pressure to do so (Düveroğlu, 2024). This form of violence reflects the broader three-pronged dynamic that surfaces repeatedly in cases of negative reputation: it threatens civilians' security, undermines the group's legitimacy, and reveals a deeper sense of desperation.

First, forced recruitment generates a sense of insecurity. Civilians living in the group's territory begin to fear for themselves or their loved ones, knowing they could be abducted or conscripted at any moment. Once recruited, individuals are cut off from their communities, exposed to violence, and marked as combatants—putting them at constant risk of injury or death. This deeply personal threat compels many to flee before they or their family members are targeted. Second, forced recruitment undermines the group's legitimacy. By turning its violence inward—harming the very people it claims to represent—the group erodes public trust and moral authority. Civilians are less inclined to passively tolerate or actively support a group that preys upon its own base. The group is no longer seen as a rightful representative, but rather

as an unjust and unaccountable actor from whom association must be avoided. Third, it conveys desperation. The use of coercion reveals that the group lacks sufficient voluntary recruits and is willing to enlist untrained individuals by force simply to maintain its numbers. This, in turn, weakens public faith in the group's capacity to achieve success in the civil war. When a group is viewed as both illegitimate and incapable, people see little point in staying behind and begin seeking security and opportunity elsewhere.

In short, forced recruitment does not just sustain rebel groups tactically—it also damages their reputation strategically. It transforms them into actors associated with fear, injustice, and failure, all of which increase the likelihood that civilians will disengage or flee. Based on this, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: *If rebel groups engage in forced recruitment, people are more likely to flee.*

Second, child recruitment refers to the coercive enlistment of underage individuals (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). For instance, in Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army abducted children using small, mobile militant bands (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1997). Similarly, Boko Haram, a Nigerian fundamentalist group, gained notoriety for forcibly recruiting children as part of its broader campaign of violence (Zenn, 2014). This tactic, like other coercive strategies, also reflects the same three-legged dynamic identified earlier: it threatens civilians' security, undermines the group's legitimacy, and signals a deeper level of organizational desperation.

First, on the security front, child recruitment provokes an even stronger fear response than adult forced enlistment. Because children are more vulnerable, physically weaker, and emotionally defenseless, their involvement in violent conflict increases the perceived risk for families living in rebel-held areas. The fear of losing a child—or seeing them subjected to extreme harm, trauma, or death—leads many civilians to flee before they or their loved ones are targeted. In this context, protecting children becomes not just a personal priority, but a survival imperative.

Second, the use of child soldiers creates a severe legitimacy crisis. Children are widely seen as the future of any society, and placing them on the frontlines signals that the group does not value the long-term welfare of the community it claims to represent. Rather than acting as protectors or political representatives, the group appears reckless and unjust—willing to sacrifice the next generation for short-term gain. Such actions violate deeply held moral and humanitarian norms, leading civilians to reject the group's authority and withdraw their support. Even passive forms of endorsement, like staying in the territory, become less justifiable in the eyes of the population.

Finally, child recruitment conveys a particularly stark form of desperation. While forced recruitment of young adults already implies a shortage of willing fighters, turning to children—who are even less capable of combat—reveals just how depleted and desperate the organization has become. It suggests that the group cannot afford to wait for children to grow, train, or develop capacity, and must instead rely immediately on the most unprepared and vulnerable members of society.

This erodes any belief in the group's future viability. Civilians are less likely to tie their fate to an actor that appears incapable of achieving long-term success.

Taken together, child recruitment intensifies the breakdown of security, legitimacy, and strategic vision. It alienates the group from its constituency, reduces public faith in the movement, and increases the likelihood that civilians will seek protection and opportunity elsewhere. Based on this, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: *If rebel groups engage in child recruitment, people are more likely to flee.*

Third, forced funding includes activities such as extortion, revolutionary taxation, and other forms of financial extraction imposed on civilians against their will (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). For instance, RUF, active during the Sierra Leonean civil war, employed brutal methods not only to recruit fighters but also to generate financial resources. The group routinely attacked villages, looted property, and set up roadblocks to demand money from civilians (Denov, 2010). While the tactic differs somewhat from coercive recruitment, the same three-part model of security concerns, legitimacy erosion, and desperation signaling still applies.

From a security standpoint, forced funding may not pose an immediate threat to physical safety in the same way as abduction or forced conscription. However, it generates an indirect but equally damaging form of insecurity. Constant financial extortion undermines people's ability to sustain their livelihoods. As households are repeatedly stripped of their savings, crops, or property, economic life becomes

unviable, and basic needs can no longer be met. The inability to secure food, shelter, or medical care under persistent economic pressure leads many to flee—not just from fear of violence, but from the impossibility of surviving in rebel-controlled zones.

Second, forced funding severely damages the group's perceived legitimacy. When rebels prioritize financial gain over their proclaimed cause, it sends a clear signal that they are driven by greed rather than grievance. Constituents begin to question whether the group is truly fighting on their behalf or simply exploiting them.

Moreover, the very nature of greed suggests an absence of limits—unlike political grievances, which may be negotiated or resolved, greed tends to escalate. This dynamic creates a sense of unpredictability and danger: if a group is willing to exploit its own people for profit, there is no telling how far it might go. Civilians are therefore incentivized to disassociate themselves, both ideologically and physically, from the group.

Finally, the reliance on forced financial extraction reveals a deep level of organizational desperation. It demonstrates that the group cannot sustain its operations through voluntary contributions or external support. Instead, it must resort to daily looting and coercive taxation, operating more like a disorganized group without a stable base. This projects an image of instability and incapacity. If the group is unable to fund itself today, constituents have little reason to believe it can provide protection, services, or leadership in the future. Rather than remaining in a territory governed by actors who cannot ensure their own survival, let alone that of the community, people become more likely to leave.

In short, forced funding not only reveals the group's immediate financial desperation—it also erodes its strategic credibility. It casts the group as driven by greed rather than grievance, incapable of sustaining itself, and indifferent to the long-term welfare of the community. Taken together, these signals undermine public trust, weaken the group's legitimacy, and increase the likelihood that civilians will flee in search of security, justice, and stability. Based on this, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3: *If rebel groups engage in forced funding, people are more likely to flee.*

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN & RESULTS

This chapter has two primary aims. First, it presents a detailed discussion of the research design—specifically where the data is drawn from, how the dependent, independent, and control variables are measured, and how all these elements are operationalized in the analysis. To that end, I employed existing datasets on refugee flows, rebel group reputations, and civil war cases. The volume of refugees is captured through a refugee rate, while the independent variables—forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding—are drawn from the RTG dataset as indicators of negative rebel reputations. Alongside these, I included four control variables: polity score, GDP, rebel group peak size, and cross-border operations. Then, an OLS regression was conducted to explore how rebel coercion shape patterns of forced migration across borders.

Second, the chapter presents the regression results for the three hypotheses, each of which anticipated a positive relationship between coercive rebel behaviors and the volume of refugee flows during civil wars. Unfortunately, the findings do not support these expectations. However, all my control variables exhibited statistically significant effects that are worth highlighting. More importantly, the lack of empirical support for the hypotheses may reflect not a flaw in the theoretical assumptions, but rather certain analytical limitations. These include issues related to data availability (particularly variation in rebel groups and temporal coverage), the complexity of merging multiple datasets, and theoretical choices with mixed

consequences. Therefore, these factors may have constrained the empirical leverage of the research rather than undermining the validity of the theoretical expectations.

4.1. Data

To test my hypotheses about the relationship between variation in forced migration and rebel groups' relations with the public during civil wars, I conducted a large-N quantitative analysis. The unit of analysis is country–rebel group–year. No primary data collection was undertaken; instead, the study integrates four pre-existing datasets. The dependent variable—refugee flow—relies on data from the UNHCR's *Population Figures* dataset (Refugee Data Finder, n.d.). To calculate the refugee rate, I use country population figures from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators* (World Bank, 2025). For the independent variables, I draw on the RTG dataset by Tokdemir and Akçınaroğlu (2016), which includes measures of both positive and negative rebel group reputations. Since my focus is specifically on forced migration occurring during civil wars, I matched the RTG data with conflict data to ensure that each country–group–year observation corresponds to an active civil war. The presence of civil war is determined using COW Intrastate War Dataset (Sarkees & Dixon, 2020). Finally, I include four control variables in the analysis: the GDP of the country, the polity score of the country, the peak size of the rebel group, and whether the group engages in cross-border operations. All of these control variables are drawn from the RTG dataset.

4.1.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is the variation in external forced migration—more simply, the volume of refugees. As previously mentioned, since this research focuses solely on cross-border displacement, statistics related to IDPs are excluded. The UNHCR data on refugees that I used in this study aligns with the broader definition of “refugee” adopted in the analysis and supported by international norms. The dataset covers the period from 1962 to 1999 for 137 countries, and from 2000 to 2024 for 177 countries, with the most recent update in June 2025. While the dataset includes both the country of origin (home country) and the country of asylum (host country), this research centers on the push factors that drive people to flee their homes in the first place. Therefore, I used only the information related to the country of origin—specifically, to identify in which years and from which countries people fled due to conflict-related pressures.

Additionally, the data categorizes externally displaced persons into four groups: refugees (REF), asylum seekers (ASY), individuals in refugee-like situations (ROC), and other persons in need of international protection (OIP). For the purposes of this study, however, I include only refugees and those in refugee-like situations, excluding both asylum seekers and other individuals in need of international protection. As explained in Chapter 2, although asylum seekers often flee civil wars and might seem relevant to this analysis, their claims have not yet been adjudicated, making it difficult to determine whether they are escaping political violence or migrating for economic reasons. Including them could introduce ambiguity, as asylum channels are sometimes used by economic migrants to bypass immigration restrictions. To preserve a clearer analytical focus on verified cases of forced

displacement, I chose to leave them out of the study. Following this exclusion, the dataset comprises 56,075,853 refugees and 6,820,194 individuals in refugee-like situations, totaling 62,896,047 externally displaced persons out of a grand total of 110,423,831.

However, I did not use raw refugee counts as the indicator of my dependent variable, since absolute numbers can be misleading without accounting for population size. For example, 5,000 refugees from a country with a population of 1 million represents a much greater degree of displacement than the same number from a country of 10 million. To address this, I calculated a refugee rate by dividing the number of refugees by the country's total population in the corresponding year. Population data were drawn from the World Bank's development indicators and merged with the refugee data by country and year. This approach yields a rate—ranging between 0 and 1—that enables more meaningful cross-country comparisons by capturing the proportional, rather than absolute, scale of displacement. However, since this ratio is highly skewed, I log-transformed it to approximate a more normal distribution, allowing OLS estimation to perform more reliably. As a result, the analysis more accurately reflects the intensity of forced migration relative to a country's population size, offering a better assessment of the potential impact of rebel group behavior.

Table 2: 10 Top Countries with Highest Refugee Count

Country	Year	Refugee Count
Rwanda	1994	2,309,527
Liberia	1990	735,620
Somalia	2011	297,118
Mozambique	1988	285,560
Sierra Leone	1998	279,305
Somalia	1992	268,520
Ethiopia	1984	256,080
Mozambique	1989	220,090
Afghanistan	2001	199,863
Ethiopia	1990	173,470

4.1.2. Independent Variables

There are three independent variables in this study that capture the negative reputational behaviors of rebel groups—specifically, their engagement in coercive tactics: forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding. Each of these variables corresponds to one of the study’s three hypotheses, which examine how different forms of rebel coercion influence patterns of forced migration across civil conflict-affected settings. While these variables can also be conceptualized collectively as indicators of a broader composite measure of negative reputation (such as an index ranging from 0 to 3), or as part of an overall reputation scale that includes both positive and negative components, I chose to treat them as separate variables in this analysis—aligned with my individual hypotheses—to isolate and evaluate their distinct effects.

All three variables are drawn from the RTG dataset, which was developed to assess the reputational characteristics of domestic terrorist organizations listed in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The RTG dataset covers the years 1980 to 2011 and

includes 2,641 group-year observations, representing 443 distinct terrorist groups. However, as explained in Chapter 3, since this research focuses specifically on rebel group behavior during civil conflicts, the analysis includes only those groups identified as both terrorist and rebel organizations. The RTG features a binary “rebel” variable that flags such cases, allowing for the targeted selection of relevant observations. Based on this variable, I excluded 1,478 group-year dyads not classified as rebel groups, yielding a final sample of 1,163 rebel group-year dyads. These correspond to 125 unique rebel groups drawn from the broader pool of 443 organizations.

Each of the three independent variables is coded dichotomously, so that if a rebel group engages in a given coercive tactic during a specific year, the corresponding variable is coded as 1; otherwise, it is coded as 0. The broader argument of this thesis is that rebel groups’ engagement in negative reputational behaviors is positively associated with the volume of forced migration, due to the security threats, legitimacy crises, and feelings of desperation these coercive tactics generate in the eyes of the public. Accordingly, when a group engages in forced recruitment—a tactic observed in 459 rebel group-year dyads (H1)—uses child recruitment—recorded in 793 dyads (H2)—or employs forced funding—documented in 766 dyads (H3)—external displacement is expected to follow, since these tactics put people’s well-being in danger, heighten fear and insecurity, and ultimately erode the group’s legitimacy and the public’s trust.

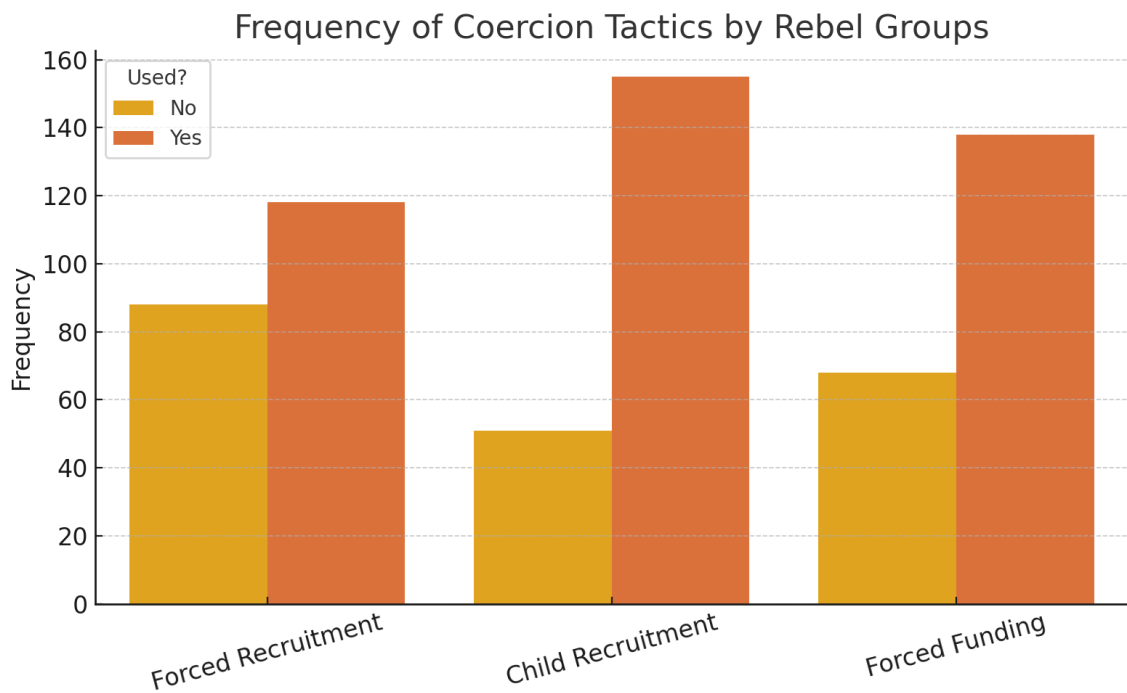


Figure 1: Distribution of Independent Variables: Rebel Coercive Behaviors

In addition to the three binary variables measuring negative reputation, the RTG dataset also includes variables capturing tactics used by rebel groups to build a positive reputation. As discussed in Chapter 3, this reflects the broader theoretical framework in which a group’s reputation is conceptualized as a two-way street, encompassing both positive and negative dimensions. Given that this thesis argues for a positive association between negative reputation and the volume of forced migration, positive reputation—reflected in actions such as public goods provision, political engagement, and media outreach—can be expected to have the reverse effect by reducing refugee flows during civil wars. However, since the core focus of this research is on rebel–public relations through the lens of coercive tactics, the variables related to positive reputation are not included in the empirical analysis.

4.1.3. Control Variables

This thesis includes four control variables: the polity score of the country in which the rebel group operates, the logged GDP of that country, the peak size of the rebel group, and whether the group engages in cross-border operations. All drawn from the RTG dataset, these variables capture key political, economic, group-level, and geopolitical dimensions of the conflict environment that may confound the relationship between rebel group behavior and refugee flows. Controlling for these factors allows for a more accurate assessment of the effect of rebel coercion on displacement patterns. While other unobserved factors—such as state-perpetrated violence or conflict duration—may also influence rebel groups' coercive behavior and refugee flows simultaneously, this thesis limits the analysis to these four variables due to data constraints.

My first control variable is polity score, which captures the political dynamics within a country, particularly regime type. It is a continuous variable that typically ranges from -10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic). As a proxy for institutional openness, accountability, and regime stability, the polity score is commonly treated as a confounding variable and is therefore frequently included as a control in cross-national studies like this thesis. Specifically, more authoritarian regimes tend to restrict political participation and suppress dissent, increasing societal grievances and potentially radicalizing segments of the population. In turn, this can incentivize rebel groups to adopt coercive tactics such as forced recruitment or extortion, especially when peaceful political expression is blocked. Polity score also influences the dependent variable—refugee flows—since people are more likely to flee from authoritarian regimes. These regimes tend to be less accountable, more prone to

indiscriminate violence, and more likely to fail in protecting civilians, all of which serve as strong push factors driving external forced migration.

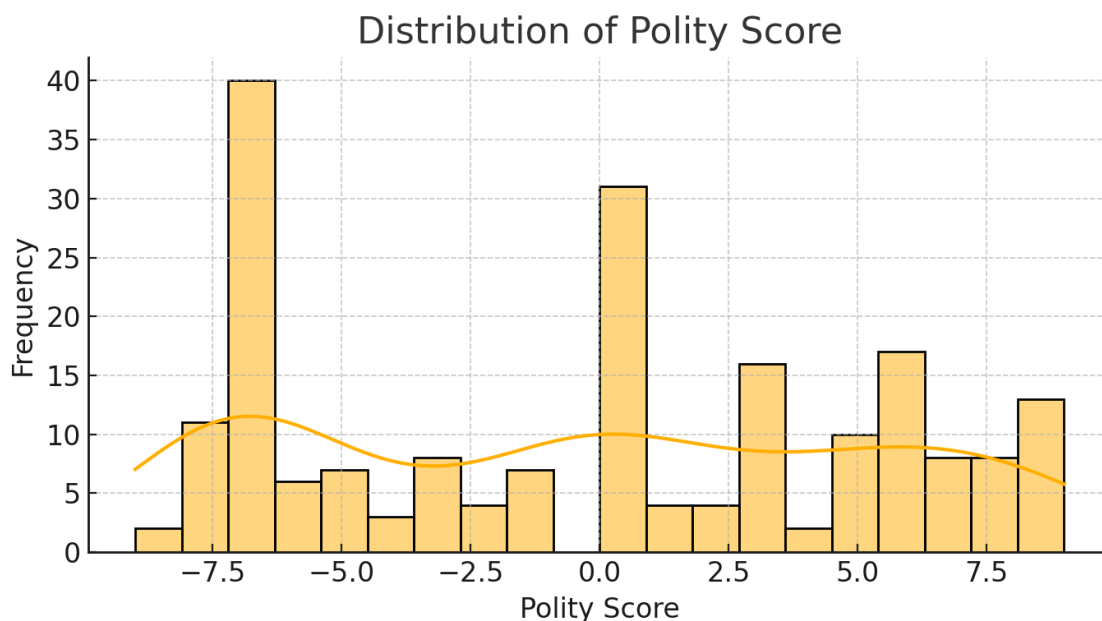


Figure 2: Distribution of Control Variables: Polity Score

My second control variable is logged GDP, which captures the economic dynamics of the country, particularly its level of economic development. It is a continuous variable that has been log-transformed to normalize the distribution. In this dataset, logged GDP values range from approximately 4.68 to 9.19, with lower values corresponding to poorer countries. Like the polity score, logged GDP is a standard control in cross-national analyses and is included here due to its potential confounding role. It is expected that poorer countries often impose more resource constraints on rebel groups, which may incentivize them to adopt coercive tactics such as forced recruitment or looting in order to sustain their operations. Simultaneously, economic underdevelopment can intensify the humanitarian consequences of conflict. In wealthier countries, individuals may have more viable options for internal displacement due to better infrastructure or stronger public

protection. In contrast, poorer countries are more likely to experience rapid service breakdowns during war, worsening living conditions and pushing more people to flee across international borders.

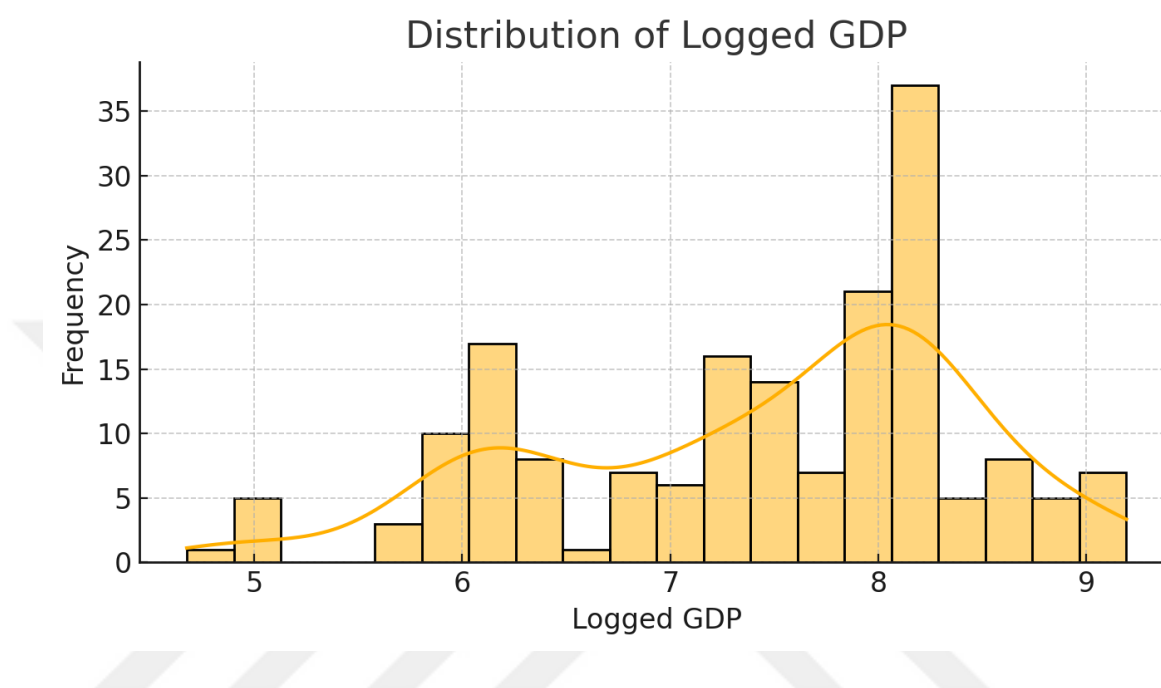


Figure 3: Distribution of Control Variables: Logged GDP

My third control variable is the peak size of the rebel group, which captures group-level dynamics, particularly the group’s strength or capacity. It is an ordinal variable coded on a four-point scale: 1 for 10–99 fighters, 2 for 100–999, 3 for 1,000–9,999, and 4 for 10,000 or more. Including rebel group size is important, as it shapes how groups operate on the ground. Smaller groups may lack the support base or resources necessary to function voluntarily and thus often resort to coercive tactics—such as forced recruitment and extortion—to sustain themselves. In contrast, larger groups may possess the capacity to provide services, offer governance, or deter state violence, allowing them to build a positive reputation rather than relying on coercion. As a potential confounder, peak size may also influence the volume of refugee flows. On one hand, larger groups with more fighters to deploy may spark more battles and

territorial contestation, leading to higher levels of displacement. On the other hand, if these groups become institutionalized and are perceived as protectors or providers, their presence might reduce civilians' incentive to flee.

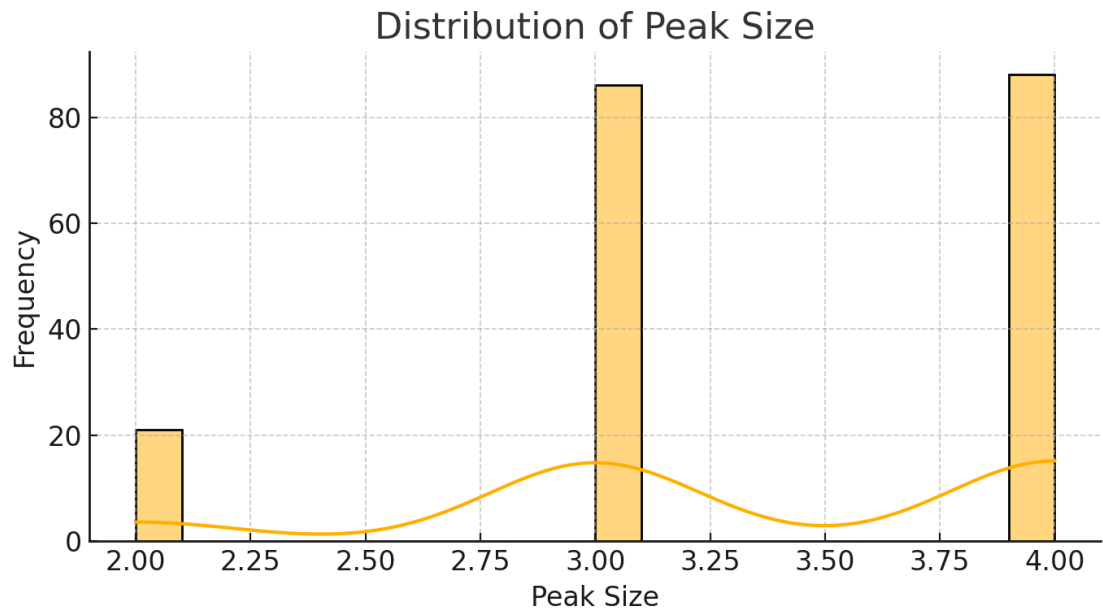


Figure 4: Distribution of Control Variables: Peak Size

My final control variable is cross-border operations by rebel groups, which captures the geopolitical scope of rebel activity—specifically, the group’s international reach. It is a binary variable coded as 1 if the group is active in more than one country. This variable is a relevant confounder because cross-border activity introduces new strategic and logistical challenges for rebel organizations and creates additional considerations for displaced civilians. On one hand, operating across borders can be costly, which may increase a group’s reliance on coercive tactics to secure resources. On the other hand, such operations may provide access to transnational funding, diaspora networks, or external sponsors, potentially reducing the need to extract resources from the local population. With respect to refugee flows, cross-border rebel activity can broaden the geographic scope of violence and produce spillover

effects. Civilians may flee not only from active conflict zones but also in response to expected regional instability. At the same time, if a group is already operating across borders, civilians might perceive fewer “safe” destinations—particularly if the group’s presence extends into neighboring countries—complicating the decision to flee internationally.

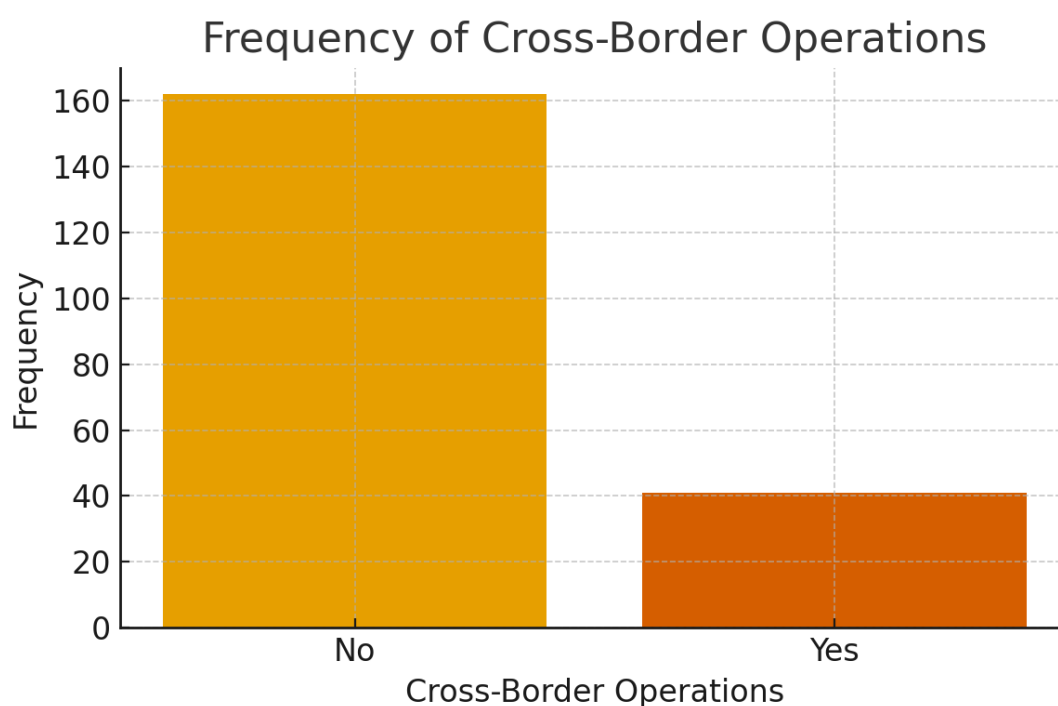


Figure 5: Distribution of Control Variables: Cross-border Operations

4.2. Operationalization

This study utilizes refugee flow data from the UNHCR. As previously discussed, two migrant categories—ASY and OIP—were excluded in accordance with the theoretical scope of this thesis. Additionally, observations with unknown (UKN) or stateless (STA) countries of origin were removed, as such cases are not compatible with the country–rebel group–year unit of analysis. Since the original UNHCR

dataset is dyadic—recording both the country of origin and country of asylum—it was transformed into a country-year format by aggregating refugee counts across all asylum countries. This transformation enabled the dataset to be merged with the RTG dataset. To ensure consistency in country identifiers, UNHCR country codes were converted to COW coding scheme used in the RTG dataset. Furthermore, national population figures were retrieved from the World Bank and merged with the refugee data at the country-year level. As detailed earlier in this chapter, the dependent variable—refugee rate—was then computed by dividing the total number of refugees from a given country by its population in the corresponding year.

The RTG dataset is used to construct the main independent variables for this thesis. After refining the dataset, I retained three binary indicators—forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding—along with country codes, year, and four control variables: polity score, logged GDP, peak size of the rebel group, and cross-border operations. To maintain consistency with the research scope, all non-rebel group observations were excluded. The RTG dataset is already structured at the country–rebel group–year level, which aligns with the unit of analysis used in the final merged dataset. However, RTG alone does not specify whether a group was active during an ongoing civil war. To address this, I merged RTG with the COW Intrastate War dataset, which documents 420 instances of civil war. Since the COW data are dyadic—listing wars by country–group dyads along with their start and end years, including recurrences—I transformed it into a yearly format. Specifically, I expanded each conflict entry to include every year the civil war was active, capturing both continuous and recurrent episodes. This transformation enabled the construction of a time-series sample of relevant civil conflicts. I then merged this dataset with the

RTG data based on country and year, allowing the analysis to focus on rebel group behavior specifically within the context of active civil wars.

Lastly, following the merge of the refugee flow and reputation datasets, I obtained the final dataset structured at the country–rebel group–year level, capturing both ongoing civil wars and the number of refugees who fled each country annually, along with the negative reputation patterns of the rebel groups fighting in those wars. The final sample includes 206 observations between 1980 and 2011, spanning 26 distinct countries and 63 unique rebel groups. With this dataset in place, the next step was to determine the appropriate regression method. Since the refugee rate is a continuous proportion bounded between 0 and 1, I employed OLS regression for my analysis. OLS seemed appropriate here because the refugee rate is neither a count nor a binary or ordinal variable, but rather a proportion-like continuous outcome. This modeling choice is valid as long as the values vary meaningfully within the 0–1 range and linear model assumptions are reasonably satisfied.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Each Variable

	count	mean	std	min	max
Refugee Rate	195.0	0.007	0.034	0.0	0.34
Forced Recruitment	206.0	0.573	0.496	0.0	1.0
Child Recruitment	206.0	0.752	0.433	0.0	1.0
Forced Funding	206.0	0.67	0.471	0.0	1.0
Polity Score	201.0	-0.254	5.64	-9.0	9.0
Logged GDP	178.0	7.43	1.016	4.678	9.192
Peak Size	195.0	3.344	0.666	2.0	4.0
Cross-Border Operations	206.0	0.214	0.411	0.0	1.0

Table 4: Operationalization and Sources of Variables

Hypothesis	Variable	Coding	Source
	Refugee Rate	Continuous variable, log-transformed, refugee count divided by total population	UNHCR & World Bank
H1: <i>If rebel groups engage in forced recruitment, people are more likely to flee.</i>	Forced Recruitment	Binary variable, coded as 1 if rebel group engages in forced recruitment, 0 otherwise	RTG Dataset
H2: <i>If rebel groups engage in child recruitment, people are more likely to flee.</i>	Child Recruitment	Binary variable, coded as 1 if rebel group recruits children, 0 otherwise	RTG Dataset
H3: <i>If rebel groups engage in forced funding, people are more likely to flee.</i>	Forced Funding	Binary variable, coded as 1 if rebel group relies on forced funding, 0 otherwise	RTG Dataset
	Polity Score	Continuous variable ranging from -10 (autocracy) to +10 (democracy)	RTG Dataset
	Logged GDP	Continuous variable, log-transformed GDP per capita	RTG Dataset
	Peak Size	Ordinal variable (1: 10–99, 2: 100–999, 3: 1,000–9,999, 4: 10,000+)	RTG Dataset
	Cross-border Operations	Binary variable, coded as 1 if group operates in more than one country, 0 otherwise	RTG Dataset

4.3. Results

Unfortunately, the findings of this study did not provide support for any of the three hypotheses regarding the impact of rebel coercive tactics on refugee flows. While one variable—forced recruitment—showed weak statistical significance, its effect contradicted my theoretical expectations by displaying a negative association with refugee rates. The other two variables—child recruitment and forced funding—were statistically insignificant across all models.

Table 5: OLS Results: Effects of Rebel Coercive Tactics on Refugee Rates

VARIABLES	(1) Refugee Rate (logged)	(2) Refugee Rate (logged)	(3) Refugee Rate (logged)
Forced Recruitment	-0.0844 (0.237)		
Child Recruitment		0.0399 (0.309)	
Forced Funding			-0.0976 (0.280)
Polity Score	-0.116*** (0.0207)	-0.114*** (0.0202)	-0.115*** (0.0205)
GDP (logged)	-0.625*** (0.127)	-0.629*** (0.127)	-0.629*** (0.127)
Peak Size	0.324* (0.185)	0.318* (0.184)	0.307* (0.187)
Cross-Border Ops.	1.006*** (0.304)	1.021*** (0.301)	0.999*** (0.308)
Constant	-3.942*** (1.205)	-3.980*** (1.220)	-3.834*** (1.254)
Observations	153	153	153
R-squared	0.418	0.418	0.418

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Regarding my independent variables, in Model 1, forced recruitment is negatively associated with the refugee rate (-0.0118 , $p < 0.1$), which directly contradicts Hypothesis 1. Rather than increasing displacement, forced recruitment appears to correlate with a decrease in refugee flows. This unexpected result might suggest that civilians are trapped in areas under tight rebel control, where forced recruitment is enforced and movement is physically restricted. Alternatively, it may reflect a measurement issue—such as underreporting or lack of access to these areas—meaning that refugee flows are occurring but not being fully captured in the data. Model 2, on the other hand, tests the effect of child recruitment. The coefficient is positive ($+0.00387$) but not statistically significant, offering no support for Hypothesis 2. Similarly, Model 3 examines forced funding, and the results show a negative but insignificant coefficient (-0.00663), indicating that Hypothesis 3 is also not supported.

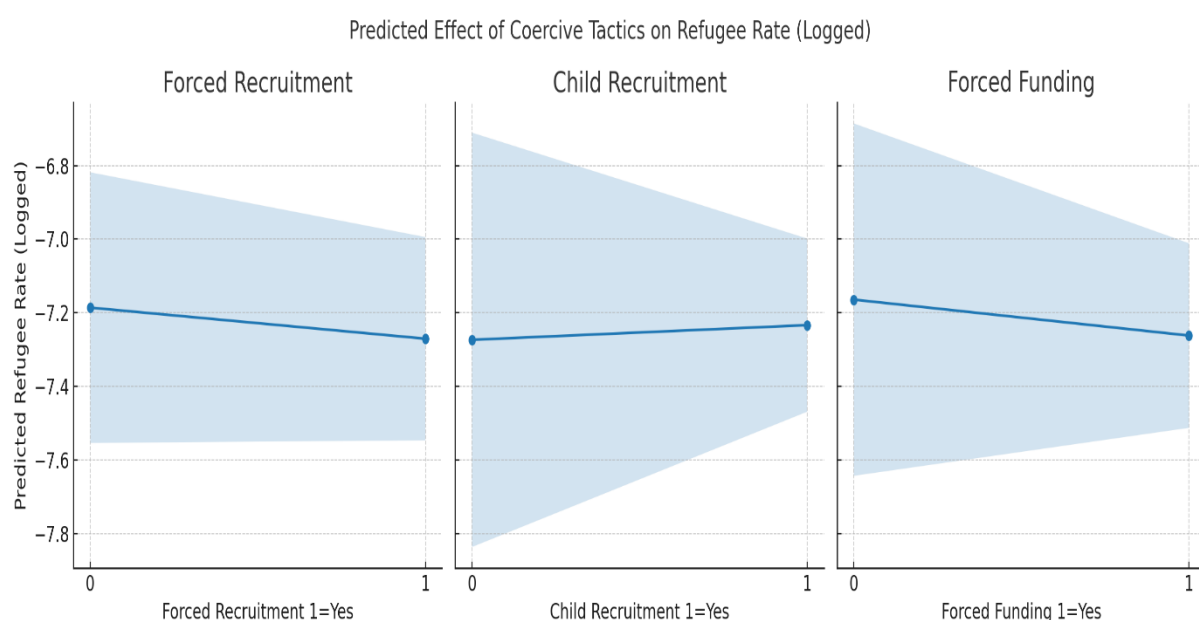


Figure 6: Predicted Effect of Coercive Tactics on Refugee Rate

This figure above displays the predicted effects of three rebel coercive tactics—forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding—on the logged refugee rate, controlling for GDP, polity score, group size, and cross-border operations. None of the effects are statistically significant and all confidence intervals are wide and cross zero, indicating considerable uncertainty around these estimates.

When it comes to control variables, logged GDP, polity score, and cross-border rebel activity emerge as consistently strong and statistically significant predictors across all three models. Wealthier countries tend to experience lower refugee rates during civil wars, likely due to stronger institutional capacity, more secure borders, and greater potential for internal displacement. The negative coefficient on polity score suggests that more autocratic regimes are more likely to produce refugee flows, possibly reflecting their weaker protections for civilians. Similarly, cross-border rebel activity is associated with higher refugee rates. One potential explanation is that such activity broadens the geographic scope of conflict and generates spillover effects, leading civilians to flee not only from zones of active combat but also from areas at risk of escalating regional instability. Lastly, peak size of rebel groups demonstrates mild significance, suggesting that larger rebel forces may contribute to displacement. One potential explanation is that cross-border rebel activity broadens the geographic scope of conflict and generates spillover effects, leading civilians to flee not only from zones of active combat but also from areas at risk of escalating regional instability.

Finally, while the core hypotheses did not receive empirical support, the consistent significance of control variables offer promising directions for future research.

Although the R-squared values across all three models remain relatively low (ranging from 0.065 to 0.084), this is unsurprising given the complex and multi-causal nature of refugee displacement during armed conflicts. It is also worth noting that the weak (10%) significance of forced recruitment and the moderate (5%) significance of the intercept observed in the OLS model may stem from model misspecification. Given that the dependent variable—the refugee rate—is bounded between 0 and 1, OLS may not be the most suitable modeling strategy, potentially distorting the true levels of statistical significance.

4.4. Discussion on Constituency vs. Non-Constituency Dynamics

Rebel–civilian relations extend beyond ties between rebels and their own constituency to include interactions with the non-constituency, or outgroup, population. Examining these relations is important, as outgroup dynamics can shape the broader conflict environment, influencing public perceptions, state responses, and patterns of civilian displacement.

As expected, the primary support base of any rebel group is the population it claims to represent. Consequently, both positive and negative reputation-building efforts are primarily directed toward the group’s own constituency. Rebel groups seek to recruit members and extract resources—such as manpower or funding—from their potential support base. For example, the PKK has no interest in recruiting ethnic Turks; it focuses instead on ethnically Kurdish individuals.

However, unlike positive reputation-building strategies, which are difficult to direct toward an outgroup, negative reputations can also be cultivated among outgroup audiences—also referred to as the target audience or non-constituency. In such cases,

rebel groups often rely on generalized violence. These attacks aim to instill fear among the broader public and pressure the government by demonstrating the group's capacity to inflict harm—a costly signal meant to gain attention and bargaining leverage.

For instance, the PKK has conducted attacks targeting both Kurds and Turks. While attacks on Kurdish populations may serve to coerce support and extract resources, attacks on Turks are more about spreading fear, gaining publicity, and strengthening the group's strategic position in the broader civil conflict (Karakoc & Sarigil, 2016; Whyte, 1990; Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2018). Thus, while coercive tactics are shaped by different strategic calculations depending on the audience, their consequences—particularly in terms of migration—can be strikingly similar.

For the non-constituency audience, concerns about legitimacy or desperation do not apply in the same way, as these individuals neither view the rebel group as their representative nor are in a position to offer explicit or passive support—such as remaining in the area in hopes of a favorable outcome. Nevertheless, indiscriminate violence against the broader public can still pose a serious security threat. Such actions not only endanger lives but also deepen fear and alienation among the wider population, including potential sympathizers beyond the group's core base.

Therefore, I also expect a negative relationship between a group's reputation among outgroup audiences and patterns of forced migration.

When considering how rebel groups are perceived externally, two forms of reputation-damaging behavior are particularly salient. First, extreme violence refers

to widespread, indiscriminate acts—often targeting outgroup civilians. This type of violence tends to alienate those who might otherwise be neutral or sympathetic, transforming the group into an enemy in the eyes of the broader public. Second, the targeting of children—whether deliberate or as a result of reckless tactics like bombing crowded civilian areas—is especially condemned. Even when unintentional, child casualties provoke strong public outrage and further erode the group’s perceived legitimacy and moral standing (Akçınaroğlu & Tokdemir, 2016). Both forms of violence intensify fear among the population and drive people to flee in search of safety.

Yet, in this thesis, the three coercive tactics I tested for their effects on refugee movements all directly target the group’s constituency, which constitutes only a portion of the total population. However, the refugee count and total population I used to calculate the refugee rate represent the entire population. This creates a serious gap in my analysis: while my independent variables are actually affecting a specific segment of society, I am making a broad assumption that these effects apply to the population as a whole. This mismatch may well be the reason why I failed to confirm my theoretical expectations and instead found statistically insignificant results.

There are possible ways to address this issue. The most promising approach would be to adjust the refugee rate accordingly—that is, to calculate the number of refugees emerging from a specific constituency group relative to the size of that group in the population. For example, in the context of intrastate violence between the Turkish government and the PKK, I could have measured not the rate of Turkish citizens

leaving Turkey overall, but the rate of Kurdish refugees leaving relative to Turkey's Kurdish population in that year. Unfortunately, no dataset is currently available that captures such disaggregated migration figures by ethnic group.

Another option would be to include hypotheses regarding the non-constituency as well. As discussed earlier, tactics targeting outgroups—such as extreme violence or the targeting of children—could also influence migration patterns, offering a more holistic view of the population's movement. However, the main limitation with this approach is that while rebel groups can build both positive and negative reputations within their constituency, they can theoretically only cultivate negative reputations within the non-constituency. This means that while one could examine the counterbalancing effects of positive and negative reputation in the constituency, the non-constituency could only be studied through negative tactics, which limits both generalizability and comparability.

Therefore, in this study, it remains problematic to assume that tactics specifically targeting the constituency can fully explain refugee movements in the entire population. In other words, there is a mismatch between the unit of analysis—the general population—and the theoretical scope of the independent variables, which focus on rebel behavior directed toward a subset of that population. Nonetheless, due to current data and analytical limitations, I have retained this approach—while emphasizing the need for future research to address this gap.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Given that civil wars remain one of the most frequent forms of violence in the contemporary era, it is crucial to examine their consequences—one of the most significant being the global flows of refugees. Accordingly, this thesis sets out to explore the relationship between civil wars and forced migration, with the aim of understanding why some conflicts result in greater refugee flows than others. Rather than adopting conventional explanations that focus primarily on battlefield dynamics, state violence, or household-level decision-making, this study emphasizes the role of rebel groups—specifically, how their interactions with the civilian population shape displacement patterns. The central argument advanced here is that rebel groups that develop a negative reputation among their constituency through coercive tactics are more likely to drive civilians to flee. Civilians, in this view, do not flee merely in response to immediate violence but as a rational reaction to persistent patterns of behavior that signal future harm and generate a sense of insecurity. These actions also expose the group’s illegitimacy and desperation—leaving civilians with no compelling reason to stay.

To test this argument, I conducted a large-N quantitative analysis based on four established datasets: UNHCR’s refugee flow data, the RTG dataset on rebel reputations, World Bank population indicators, and the Correlates of War intrastate conflict records. These sources were carefully merged through a harmonization process involving the alignment of country codes and the transformation of event-

based civil war data into a consistent yearly format. The resulting dataset, constructed at the country–rebel group–year level, comprises 206 observations spanning the period from 1980 to 2011. The dependent variable—refugee rate—was calculated as the number of refugees relative to total population, allowing for proportional comparisons across countries and time. The key independent variables consist of three dichotomous indicators of coercive rebel behavior: forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding. Four additional control variables were included to account for state and group-level variation: the country’s polity score and logged GDP, the peak size of the rebel group, and whether the group engaged in cross-border operations. To examine the distinct effects of each coercive strategy, I ran separate OLS regression models for each independent variable.

Despite the theoretical plausibility of the core hypotheses, the empirical findings do not support the claim that coercive rebel behavior increases the likelihood of civilian flight. All three independent variables—forced recruitment, child recruitment, and forced funding—were statistically insignificant under the OLS model. This lack of support may stem in part from the bounded nature of the dependent variable, which is a proportion ranging between 0 and 1, thereby challenging the suitability of the OLS approach—even though I attempted to address this by logging the refugee rate to approximate a more normal distribution. To further address this issue, I employed fractional logit and beta regression models, both of which are specifically designed for proportional outcomes. However, these alternative estimations also failed to produce statistically significant results for the three core predictors. While one control variable, peak size, showed mild significance ($p < 0.1$), the remaining three—polity score, logged GDP, and the presence of cross-border operations by rebel

groups—consistently emerged as statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that broader structural and transnational factors may exert a more direct influence on forced migration than coercive rebel tactics alone.

Importantly, the absence of empirical support should not be interpreted as a dismissal of the theoretical framework. Instead, it highlights several methodological limitations that may have constrained the empirical leverage of this study and contributed to the null findings. As discussed in Chapter 4, a major limitation lies in the mismatch between the unit of analysis and the theoretical scope of the independent variables. While the coercive tactics—such as forced or child recruitment—target a rebel group’s constituency, the refugee rate reflects displacement across the entire national population, potentially obscuring group-specific effects. Greater precision would require constituency-specific refugee data—such as displacement disaggregated by ethnic or identity groups—which remains unavailable. Alternatively, one might consider out-group-directed tactics like indiscriminate violence or child targeting, though this is conceptually limited by the asymmetric nature of rebel–outgroup reputations. Despite these constraints, the analysis proceeds with a simplified design while underscoring the need for future research using more disaggregated data and expanded modeling strategies.

Another limitation concerns the use of secondary data from multiple sources, which introduced inconsistencies, missing values, and limited coverage of rebel behavior across diverse contexts. In particular, discrepancies in country definitions between the COW and UNHCR datasets resulted in lost variation. Since refugee data is drawn from UNHCR, while the reputation and civil war variables are sourced from COW, I

was forced to exclude countries recognized in one dataset but not the other. For example, Taiwan and Yugoslavia are included in COW but not in UNHCR, whereas Aruba and Palestine appear in UNHCR but not in COW. These inconsistencies led to the exclusion of such cases from the final sample, reducing the overall number of observations. Consequently, the theoretical framework may not have achieved full empirical traction due to the reduced variation and country coverage.

A further constraint stems from the temporal and structural limitations of the datasets used. Most notably, the RTG dataset—which provides the rebel reputation data—restricted the temporal span of the analysis to between 1980 and 2011. While UNHCR refugee data spans from 1962 to 2024 and the COW dataset includes over 1,200 civil war–year observations from 1816 to 2014, the RTG dataset’s narrower scope confined the merged dataset to 206 observations between 1980 and 2011. Additionally, since population data was not available within the three core datasets, I had to incorporate external World Bank figures, which introduced further missing values. The final analytical sample thus included just 153 observations, reducing both the statistical power and the generalizability of the findings.

Another major limitation arises from the nature of the reputation data itself. The RTG dataset, originally constructed to study terrorist organizations, excludes rebel groups that do not engage in terrorism. As a result, only groups with a dual identity—those considered both rebels and terrorists—are captured, which narrows the sample and omits many relevant cases. Furthermore, because the RTG is based on the GTD, it only includes groups that have carried out more than five terrorist attacks, further restricting inclusion. These limitations reduce variation and affect the

generalizability of the findings. Future research would benefit from new datasets focused specifically on rebel organizations, with broader temporal and geographic coverage.

Additionally, the exclusion of asylum seekers from the calculation of the refugee rate presents a trade-off. While the total number of recognized refugees in the dataset was 56,075,853, asylum seekers numbered 41,327,834. This exclusion was a deliberate decision aimed at avoiding the conflation of conflict-driven displacement with potential economic migration, as some asylum claims may be strategic rather than based on genuine persecution. Focusing only on formally recognized refugees, protected under the principle of non-refoulment, sought to ensure greater validity. Yet this likely resulted in a loss of variation and the omission of individuals who were indeed fleeing violence but whose asylum claims had not yet been processed. Future research could consider including asylum seekers to better capture displacement dynamics.

The limited number of control variables also represents a constraint. Key confounders—such as conflict intensity, state violence, and territorial control—were excluded due to data availability concerns. Territorial control, in particular, can severely shape civilians' ability to flee; when rebel groups hold territory, escape becomes more difficult, directly affecting observed displacement. These and other omitted variables may confound the relationship between rebel coercion and refugee flows. However, adding more controls would have further reduced the already limited sample size. As a result, the model was kept intentionally narrow, though

future studies with more complete data should incorporate a broader set of confounders to strengthen causal inference.

Another conceptual limitation is the exclusive focus on negative reputational tactics such as coercion and violence, without accounting for the moderating effects of positive rebel behaviors. Many rebel organizations engage in governance, provide public goods, or use media to build legitimacy—factors that could counterbalance the effects of coercion. Moreover, conflicts often involve multiple rebel groups, each with distinct reputational profiles. For instance, while one group may engage in forced recruitment, another may invest in civilian protection. Civilians respond to the reputational environment shaped by multiple actors—not a single group. This complexity is not captured in the current study, which treats rebel coercion as a single-group influence. Future research should examine how positive and negative reputational strategies interact—both within and across rebel groups—to shape displacement decisions.

Despite these challenges, this study opens important avenues for future research. It focuses exclusively on rebel–constituent interactions, leaving out the potential effects of rebel behavior toward out-groups. Though rarely positive, rebel groups may cultivate out-group reputations through indiscriminate violence or child targeting—tactics that could also trigger displacement. Future studies should explore how such strategies affect out-group migration decisions. More broadly, research could investigate how rebel interactions with the state or rival groups shape forced migration. In multi-actor civil wars, outbidding behavior—where rebels escalate violence to assert dominance—may create especially volatile environments that

prompt civilians to flee. These dynamics remain underexplored and offer promising directions for future research.

In sum, although this thesis did not find empirical support for the hypothesized link between rebel coercion and forced migration, it contributes to a growing body of research that places rebel behavior at the center of the conflict–migration nexus. By emphasizing the role of rebel reputation, the study encourages scholars to reconsider how non-state actors influence displacement—not just through direct violence but also through the broader signals they send to the populations under their control. The findings underscore the need for continued theoretical and empirical inquiry into the complex ways rebel dynamics shape civilian mobility during civil wars.

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