Somali Migrations and Displacements

Recently, I had an interesting experience in the immigration office while picking up my new Kenyan passport. One of the officers there approached and directed me to the reception desk; to my shock, he told his colleague at the desk, "Please attend to this Somali migrant/refugee." As a Kenyan citizen of Somali ethnicity, I did not expect this at all. However, I believe that this happened because most of the time in the eyes of the Kenyan authorities, there is not much distinction between Kenyan Somali citizens and Somali refugees/migrants. Ever since this occurrence, I have been pondering the question of exactly who is an immigrant or refugee in Africa? This subject is particularly perplexing, considering the history of migration and people's livelihoods from the pre-colonial era.

Contemporary wars and armed conflicts completely devastate the communities involved, fundamentally changing the lives of those affected. What was known becomes unknown, what was safe becomes unsafe, and what was familiar becomes unfamiliar (Bonnin 1998). In this way, war and armed conflict constitute a serious threat to human security (Ahmed Ali 2019). Furthermore, people become vulnerable when they are displaced and removed from their daily livelihoods. Displacement is often viewed as a temporary or transitory phenomenon; however, recent history in countries such as Somalia demonstrates that it can sometimes become a prolonged, if not permanent, condition.

Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since the dawn of the global War on Terror, refugees and migrants have found themselves securitized and constructed as dangerous others, labeled as security and economic threats to the host nations. Issues pertaining to their legal status, identity, and economic activities have caused refugees and migrants to be further politicized and framed within the compounded context of security and migration. This understanding has informed the various policies and approaches adopted by host countries such as Kenya, South Africa, Australia, Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Moreover, in situations where conflicts have become protracted, the experiences and status of refugees have become correspondingly more complex.

The contributions to this forum advance the existing literature on migration, displacement, and the diaspora experience with a focus on Somali refugees and migrants, promising to expand our understanding of one of the most complex humanitarian issues of the twenty-first century.

They underline certain exemplary aspects and address gaps in the literature on the Somali diaspora in Africa and beyond, such as the role of the ruling political party/regimes or leader in shaping the immigration policies and the impact of structural and cultural violence on the bureaucratic management of the Somali refugee resettlement program in Kenya. The authors have skillfully achieved two crucial objectives: they have focused on a timely and fascinating issue while also directing our attention to the contemporary realities and developments of Somali migrants and refugees in Africa and beyond.

Despite the wealth of literature available on the Somali diaspora, including studies on migration flows, transnational networks, and the continued engagement of migrants with their country of origin—which includes but is not limited to providing financial remittance—there continues to be insufficient evidence-based research on host countries' migration management policies, women's agency in identity construction, and mobility through private enterprise. With this in mind, the forum contributions here focus on three main areas, namely, the impacts of migration policies and bureaucracies of host countries on Somali refugees in East and South Africa; Somali women's agency in navigating and negotiating a range of identities (such as gender, ethnic/cultural, religious, and socioeconomic); and the nexus between the Somali diaspora migration/mobility and the development of Somali entrepreneurial skills in Asia, particularly in China.

Beth Elise Whitaker contributes to the thematic area on the impact of host countries' migration policies with an article that demystifies the so-called refugee crisis by observing that most African migrants and refugees are found in other African countries and that migration is not a new phenomenon. This runs counter to reports heavily articulated by media outlets, which stress that migration has become a transnational security issue. It is commonly assumed that international migration is the cause of immense human suffering as portrayed by the media. Recently, this has informed the foreign, security, and migration policies adopted by countries that receive refugees and migrants, particularly from war-torn states, as a way to control and curb undesired migration which is perceived as a security threat to the receiving state and region.

In order to better understand migration issues within the African context, it is helpful to contextualize the dynamics of migration in the precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. Perhaps the most salient fact is that in both the colonial and post-colonial eras, refugees and migrants in the African continent have been products of political (wars/conflicts), economic, and socio-cultural (persecution based on identity and belief) causes, and their displacement has most often had a finite timeline. However, the situation of refugees and migrants in the post-colonial period has become one of semi-permanent or permanent change, especially for those people whose countries of origin have experienced protracted conflicts, such as Somalia. Policies toward migrants and refugees depend

on the relations between the host country and the migrants, their country of origin, and their economic and political activities. This situation is clearly demonstrated by the experiences of the Somali refugees in Kenya who have been constructed as a security threat because of the al-Shabaab terrorist attacks and as economic competitors based on their entrepreneurial skills.

It is clear that the immigration policies of some receiving African states are shaped by the ruling political party/regime, leaders, and the experiences of hosting those refugees and migrants. For instance, the Kenyan government has had different immigration policies toward Somali refugees at different times. During President Daniel Arap Moi's regime, there was initially an open-door policy, which was based on normative commitments, international obligations to human rights treaties, Kenya's foreign policy of "good neighborliness," and a desire to provide humanitarian assistance to populations affected by conflict. However, toward the end of Moi's regime, the Somalis were securitized and vetted in an attempt to distinguish between Kenyan citizens of Somali ethnicity and Somali refugees. In 1989, the government of Kenya issued pink cards to those it identified as Kenyan citizens of Somali ethnicity and deported those who were not considered citizens. In 1994, when this author attempted to apply for a national Identification Card (ID), the authorities demanded to see her parents' pink cards as proof of her identity as a Kenyan citizen of Somali ethnicity, despite the fact that she was born in Mombasa and raised in Nairobi. Fortunately, even though her mother had been displaced from her birthplace—Isiolo—during the *Shifta* war, she was able to produce her pink card. The *Shifta* war (1963–1967) was a secessionist struggle that broke out when the political leaders of the Somali community in northeastern Kenya and part of the Boran community in the Isiolo, Marsabit, and Moyale districts petitioned the British Government to allow them to secede from Kenya and join Somalia before Kenya was granted independence. The major political parties at the time, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), opposed the idea of partitioning the country, and consequently the *Shifta* war broke out in 1967 between the Northern Frontier People's Progressive Party (NFPPP) and the Kenyan government. The violent crackdowns by the Kenyan government caused a large-scale displacement and disruption to the way of life in the Northern Frontier District (NFD), resulting in a shift from pastoralist lifestyles to sedentary urban lifestyles.

Under President Mwai Kibaki's regime, the status of refugees was formalized by the issuance of Alien ID cards, but shortly after the famous 2006 Refugees Act, the rights of refugees to movement and place of residence were restricted and the Somalia/Kenya border was closed, constructing Somali refugees as a transnational security threat.[1] Meanwhile, under the current Uhuru Kenyatta regime, Somali refugees are further securitized in an era of global War on Terror by associating them with al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks.

It is important to note that among all the refugee communities hosted in Kenya, the Somalis are the only ones to have had the misfortune of having their identity constructed based on their ethnicity as Somalis and of being referred to in derogatory terms such as *Warriya* (which means "hey" in the Somali language). Furthermore, since the *Shifta* war, the Kenyan government has politicized and institutionalized their identity as outsiders. As a result, for decades, immigration and identification policies have been intertwined and determined by historical, political, and economic interests within the country and the broader east African region.

Sophia Balakian addresses the ways in which multiple and overlapping bureaucracies affect the lives of Somali refugees by summarizing the multifaceted accumulation of governing institutions that Somali refugees are subject to in Kenya and beyond. She demonstrates how the larger refugee resettlement process involves multiple governmental and non-governmental agencies, and that the nature of this process is uncoordinated, halting, and arbitrary. In keeping with the existing literature on forced migration, it can be argued that the influx of refugees and migrants from war-torn countries in the post-Cold War era has rendered the global regimes and institutions that govern refugees inadequate to address the issue of their citizenship. This is evident especially in the bureaucratic process of resettling protracted refugees such as the Somalis from one country to another. The stories of two young Somali men seeking resettlement in Canada that Balakian narrates highlight the scope of the challenges encountered by Somali refugees and migrants in Kenya.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Somali refugees and migrants in Kenya experience structural and cultural violence, practices that are deeply entrenched in history as mentioned above. They often internalize this repressive relationship, which exacerbates mistrust between them and their host country. Balakian's (2020) article, although rich and granular, would have been enriched by the inclusion of an analysis that directly linked the situation of the Somali refugees and their experiences to the shifting policies, local political discourses, stereotypes, narratives, and competing priorities and interests of Kenya as a host country.

Nereida Ripero-Muñiz critiques the prevailing representations of Somali women as helpless victims of patriarchy and a protracted armed conflict by analyzing how they have negotiated and navigated through their gender, cultural, and religious identities in diasporic spaces. She has achieved this by using empirical data from their experiences in two popular Somali neighborhoods: Eastleigh in Nairobi, Kenya, and Mayfair in Johannesburg, South Africa. This important contribution speaks to the gendered impact of forced migration on Somali women and the complex ways in which it modifies their gender relations and roles. It can also be argued that the expectations of their families back home have imparted urgency to the need for Somali migrant women to adapt and survive in these new diasporic spaces. This new experience and exposure have empowered Somali migrant women to transit from the private to the public sphere

by assuming roles that were not traditionally assigned to them, such as being the providers for their families. These new opportunities have enabled them in many cases, despite multiple challenges, to achieve a level of economic independence.

Somali men and women have both experienced gender-based vulnerabilities as their roles and relations have changed due to forced migration. While some researchers (Gardner & El Bushra 2004; Bryden & Steiner 1998; Ingiriis 2014) have discussed the gender-based vulnerabilities of Somali women in situations of armed conflict and displacement, very few have looked at the vulnerabilities of Somali men. Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra (2016) have conducted a study that highlights how Somali men and women experience gender vulnerabilities differently. Besides, Ripero-Muñiz's discussion of the "bride wealth" (dowry paid to the bride) concludes that, in the contemporary moment, such exchange has been commercialized and translated into a resource that families can access when daughters marry. The reason behind this conceptualization might be the difficult financial situations in which the refugee and migrant families find themselves.

Emma Lochery traces the mobility of the Somali diaspora beyond forced migration and advances the conversation beyond sub-Saharan Africa by expanding the scope of her study to China. Her focus on migration as the nexus between the Somali diaspora's migration/mobility on the one hand and its entrepreneurial skills on the other specifically zeroes in on how members of the Somali diaspora have historically engaged in transnational trade. She discusses the intersection between the trade and migratory circuits as well as the economies of displacement from the beginning of the civil war in Somalia in the 1980s. The movement of Somalis throughout the world has occurred not only due to forced migration to Europe and North America but also due to the formation of business networks that link East Africa to China.

In Lochery's review of previous scholarship, she finds that from the 1990s onward scholars have stressed how when people move to a new country, they often create and maintain a range of social, economic, and political ties both to their new countries of residence and to their countries of origin. In this way, the Somali diaspora communities have been effectively studied as sociological entities. The dominant focus has been on their secondary movements and integration into their host countries, as well as on the role they can play in conflict and peacebuilding in their countries of origin through return, remittances, and activism. Lochery contends that mobility and migration must be considered as social processes that have been made possible by leveraging cross-border ties with kin relations. Using the case of Somali migrants and refugees, she suggests that mobility is driven largely by personal and collective livelihood strategies and aspirations. People move to seek work, trade, or refuge, to run a business, to study or marry, and/or to build a family. Furthermore, the practices of mobility cannot be understood simply as flights from violence and attempts to return

home either as refugee returnees or as diaspora investors. This is because mobility is embedded in the wider systems of profit and power. Interestingly, Lochery finds that Somali migrants have used their access to mobility, entrepreneurial initiatives, and connections based on clans and family identities to access business opportunities and open new markets. Moreover, Somali migrants have depended on their kinship, solidarity, friendship, migratory experiences, and innovativeness to create expansive trade networks that today define them as transnational migrant entrepreneurs. In the last three decades, Somali migrants and refugees have gained new status and opportunities, established new networks, obtained different nationalities/identities, languages, skills, roles, relations, and physical and social mobility, all of which have helped them to adapt to their new circumstances.

This forum highlights the opportunities and challenges that protracted conflict and migration have created for the Somali migrants and refugees. The authors contribute to the growing field of Somali studies by acknowledging the dynamic nature of migration policies, changing gender identities, and mobility trends of the Somali diaspora. It is also clear that there is an urgent need for more rigorous and systematic empirical data collection and in-depth analyses of how the Somali diaspora itself can exert an influence on the migration policies of their host countries. Even though the diaspora provides significant financial support to Somalia as well as to the host countries through remittances, the extent and effect of these contributions remain understudied. Moreover, the role and influence, if any, that the Somali diaspora has had on contributing to a sustainable peace and development in Somalia is largely unknown.

The situation of Somali refugees and migrants, as conveyed in this forum, highlights the challenges and the vulnerability that refugee communities experience today.[2] One of the realities of forced migration and conflict is that identity and status play a large part in determining the experiences of refugees. For instance, kinship has played an important role in the migratory movement of Somalis as refugees, traders, students, and as members of the diaspora. Their movement has also had a regional dimension because they prefer to settle in places where they can find their fellow Somalis. This is why in the hope of building a secure and safe home for themselves, Somali migrants and refugees have tried to replicate the cities and lives they had back home. For instance, they have transformed Eastleigh in Nairobi, Kenya, Mayfair in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America into replicas of life in Mogadishu. Given the role they play, Somali migrants and refugees can be seen as essential actors in the economic, political, social, and security development of their host countries as well as of their country of origin.

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Notes

1. The Refugees Act of 2006, which was enacted by the Kenyan Parliament and became operational in 2007, defined refugee status, replete with exclusion and cessation clauses. The Act provided refugees with the right to move and earn a living. However, its implementation presented a problem for refugees to access this right because the same law restricted their movement. The Act required refugees to reside in refugee camps unless they had authorization to live elsewhere. Moreover, the work permits were only granted in Nairobi, not in the camp, and as a result refugees had limited access to this document.

2. For instance, one extension of the Somali case could be to shed light on the migrant and refugee crisis that has resulted from the conflict in Syria.