ACTORS IN FORCED MIGRATION

An Interview with Kelly Greenhill

Dr. Kelly Greenhill is an associate professor at Tufts University and a research fellow in the Belfer Center's International Security Program at Harvard University. She studies the security of migration change. Her work focuses on new security challenges, including forced migrations, and how these may be used as a political weapon or a tool for diplomacy. Her recent book, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*, won the 2011 International Studies Association's Best Book of the Year award. Greenhill also was a co-author and co-editor (with Peter Andreas) of *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict*. She spoke with the *Journal* about her work and how she sees forced migrations playing out on today's world stage.

Journal of International Affairs*: In your work, you have analyzed forced migration in three different, recurring forms. Can you describe these?*

Kelly Greenhill: There are three kinds of coercers, two of which serve a more active role and one that is more passive. The first type is generators, and those are actors who, as the name implies, act directly to either create or threaten to create migration or refugee crises with the intent of coercing a target. A prominent historical example would be Fidel Castro, who has used this technique three times against the United States. Most famously, Castro did so in 1980 with the Mariel boatlift, which resulted in 125,000 uninvited Cubans landing in the United States.

Slobodan Milosevic also tried this in the lead-up to and during the war over Kosovo in 1999, albeit less successfully. But, for a time, it appeared that he would be successful, given widespread concerns in Europe about further inflows of refugees from the Balkans. In some sense, we are seeing something of a redux of this kind of panic now, although the cast of characters has changed.

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Agents provocateurs, the second type, also serve in an active role, but they do not create outflows of people themselves. Rather, they act indirectly to catalyze or stimulate the creation of outflows by others. So for instance, to stick with the Kosovo example, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) quite intentionally and explicitly attacked Serbian targets, including police officers and other officials, knowing full well that the Serbian government and Serbian security forces would crack down brutally, thus generating outflows from Kosovo. And members of the KLA leadership acknowledged as much. This technique was also used by the National Liberation Front in the French-Algerian War and certainly by other groups as well.

The final category is what I call opportunists, and here, too, as the name implies, these are folks who are exploiting opportunities of migration refugee crises. But because these crises exist, or at least could exist, opportunists can take advantage of this behavior, these crises generated by others, to extract their own political and military or economic rewards—or payoffs—from a coercer's perspective.

Journal*: Would you say it is this last category of actors, opportunists, that causes the migration patterns of refugees seen in Syria today?*

Greenhill: In Syria, we have seen examples of opportunists acting in some of the recipient states. In Turkey, for instance, there have been documented cases of the Turks closing the border, or threatening to close the border, unless they were able to extract something from potential targets. There are some other examples coming out of Syria that are more speculative examples of this, too. Sometimes the evidence is hard to come by, and sometimes it is hard to really pin down what is happening until time has passed.

But that is not the only thing we have seen happening in Syria. We have also seen episodes at an earlier period in the conflict of active exploitation and generation [migration as engineered by generators] by various branches of the Assad regime. So for example, we have seen pamphlets distributed that essentially tell citizens that they should pick up and go before the regime removes them. In certain areas, people have been directly targeted and encouraged to leave. There is also some evidence that people have been strategically removed from areas and sent to particular border crossings and not others. And certainly, there has been some understanding on the receiving side that these outflows have been engineered. But my sense is that, from the Syrian government's side, we have not seen so much of those moves as of late because they have been too busy fighting the war to play those games.

Journal: *As non-state actors become more prominent on the international stage, are they using forced migration as a tool in different ways?*

Greenhill: Historically, it is somewhat difficult for non-state actors to act as generators for obvious logistical reasons. But because of the mechanisms that agents provocateurs use, it is just as likely to see state or non-state actors acting as agents provocateurs. They are usually actors who are relatively weak compared to the party they are trying to influence, whether on the generating side or on the target side.

Coercers will choose their tactic based on the capabilities at their disposal, just as is the case with traditional military coercion. So it is no accident that we see more non-state actors appearing in the agents provocateur category—their capabilities are expanding. And in terms of opportunists, I would say one is more likely to see states in that role. In part, this is because when opportunists are taking advantage of a situation, they sense it is about closing state borders—either agreeing to host particular groups or not host particular groups, for example.

Journal: *Where do you think this issue is most pressing today? Would you say that it would be migrants moving from North Africa into Europe?*

Things can change on a dime if we see a massive crisis. But I think your intuition is dead on. If we are talking about right here and now—yes, I would say Europe, and particularly Western Europe, because Western European democratic targets are more attractive than others. I would say, sure, North Africa or the Middle East, but sometimes these flows are coming from much farther afield. [Muammar] Gaddafi is no longer in power, of course, and while Eastern Europeans might have thought this problem was going to go away with Gaddafi, the Libyan government did it again last May; so it did not solve their problem. Additionally, sometimes migrants coming from North Africa—either from the eastern or the southern Mediterranean routes—are coming from farther afield. So, I feel confident in saying that Europe seems to have a bigger problem than we [in the United States] do. Not trivially from North Africa, but not totally. North Africa is both a source and a transit point.

Journal: *You pointed to Gaddafi as an example. He has been quoted as saying, "We're going to turn Europe black." Does the power of coercion over target states stem from capacity-related infrastructure concerns, economic concerns, or national identity concerns?*

Greenhill: Well, certainly for a lot of the most popular targets, the dangers are more psychological than material. But it is easier to make the argument that it is actually a security threat in light of what we have seen in Western Europe in recent years. Or in terms of it being threatening, it is a lot easier for these nativist, right-wing parties to make the case that it really does pose a security threat because you have this second-generation population vulnerable to radicalization. Why? Because they are not treated as equal—they do not have equal status in society, and they often feel disillusioned and alienated.

Flows into many of the most popular target states are considered much more threatening.

So it might be well viewed as a self-fulfilling policy problem: You think it is a threat, and therefore it becomes a threat because you traduce people orally. But it is unambiguously the case that the flows into many of the most popular target states are considered much more threatening. Flows are considered disproportionately threatening relative to their size. At the same time, the inflows to Western Europe, for instance, did jump precipitously in the last year. In 2013, about 45,000 migrants entered Europe illegally using the central Mediterranean route. And then in the following year, 2014, the number jumped to about 171,000.

Journal: *The fact that you have identified three different types of coercers suggests that this threat of mass migration can come from many different places and the dynamic can change. How can a state address this at a policy level?*

Greenhill: Absolutely. And it is always a shifting dynamic. If you close up one hole, then another one opens. So when I give briefings, I say there are effectively four non-mutually exclusive options; none is a silver bullet, and all have definite shortcomings. And at least one—maybe two—of the options that I am going to mention, I do not recommend.

Speaking objectively—not immorally but amorally—there are four things that states can do. The first is to effectively play this bargaining game with a better grasp of the informal rules, which is to say states should no longer pretend this does not happen or let it remain a problem—or an issue that is hiding in plain sight—because then they get caught flat-footed. And so, when potential targets issue a threat, they ought to take them seriously. That does not mean they should always concede to a coercer, but to not engage in diplomacy, or to ignore a threat, often leads to an outflow that might otherwise have been avoided. So, early intervention and discussion can serve to at least attenuate or minimize the damage, and maybe even allow states to avoid it.

Now, there is an obvious downside if legitimizing a coercer's threat accompanies early engagement: it can encourage recidivism. This is what ended up happening with Gaddafi. So that is the pro and con there.

One can make this bargaining game less attractive by seeking to change the attitudes of the people within potential target states. We do know, over time, that immigration tends to have no effect, or a slightly positive effect, in terms of economic outcomes, for instance. And in countries that are facing domestic demographic aging problems, an inflow might not be a bad thing. The key is to convince [native] populations that they stand to benefit from an enhanced tax base, or convince them that this really is a short-term proposition, and that immigrants do not always become permanent residents.

Another way to attenuate fear is to engage in public contingency planning and show that plans are in place for dealing with the potential flow. This can help reduce the anxiety that can be associated with inflows. One problem with this approach is that it requires long-term forward thinking, because one has to commit to making inflows seem less of a threat to make the tool of using them in a coercive fashion less effective. Politicians are not generally engaged in investing in the future. And also, even if they are successful and the outflows do not happen, they are not really going to get credit, because trying to claim the efficacy of dogs that do not bark is hard to do. So the incentives are not necessarily in place to embrace this potential solution, but there are real reasons to try.

Number three, I am not recommending, but we see it implemented increasingly in a number of places. This option is to simply make coerced migration by another party infeasible or unattractive in a different way. For example, by changing one's laws so that one can simply say, "We are not taking these people. Do your worst," or, "You can send them, but we are going to send them back." We have seen this happen. We see states building walls to try to make it harder.

Even Canada, several years ago, increased the number of countries they deemed "safe countries," and it is hard to get to Canada. So all sorts of groups of people that would otherwise have eventually ended up in Canada cannot apply for asylum status because they have landed somewhere else first.

And then finally, states can engage in regime change. Change the contestants on the ground with the expectation that whomever ends up in place of the current offender is not going to attempt to play the same game, and this seems to be what, in part, was driving EU operations in Libya. ♔

NOTES

[1] This interview is a condensed and edited version of the exchange between the *Journal* and Kelly Greenhill.