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## **Refugee Crises and the Emergence of “Refugee Studies”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mass relocation inside and across borders has become a distinguishing feature of the twenty-first century. It is the most prominent element of human insecurity. People have been displaced as a result of war, genocide, and human rights violations. As the flow of displaced persons across borders has expanded rapidly, the problem of mass displacement has dominated international politics and public discourse. The United Nations Refugee Agency's chief, Antonio Guterres, refers to the twenty-first century as a "century of people on the move". More and more people are on the move around the world than ever before. Today's media is flooded with the reports of great disasters that lead to people being forced to flee from their native land in search of safe locations. Large numbers of people die before reaching a place of safety. The present century provides great evidence to the huge involuntary movement of populations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Horn of Africa etc. More than 68 percent of the refugees come from five different countries: Syria (6.8 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.4 million) Myanmar (1.2 million) and Venezuela (4.6 million) (UNHCR, "Figures"). War in the contemporary times and in the recent past has been the force of displacement. However, the historical documents of the past disclose various other reasons that have led to the expulsion of an individual or an entire population. The emergence of refugees crisis drew attention from social, political and academic spheres. This paper attempts to trace the academic involvement in the representation of the refugee crises and its subsequent development into an academic discipline.

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**Key Words:** Refugee, Crisis, Displacement, Refugee Studies, UNHCR.

According to the UNHCR, roughly 89.3 million people will be displaced by conflict, persecution, or natural disasters by the end of 2021, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Out of 53.2 million, 89.3 million persons affected have been displaced internally, with the remaining 27.1 million refugees and 4.6 million asylum seekers. Displacement dynamics have evolved over time and will keep shifting as time passes owing to a variety of factors such as population expansion, urbanization, global warming, and resource insecurity. Inability to resolve current conflicts and avoid new conflicts, as well as failure to adapt to climate change, will result in a sustained and intensified generation of mass displacement.

Middle East is the largest source of refugees in the present century and conflict is the hallmark of contemporary displacement with Palestine and Syria as major hot spots. Middle East constitutes almost 40 percent of the 60 million refugees worldwide. The frontline countries are under considerable duress due to the huge influx of displaced people. The Arab-Israel conflict is the most enduring conflict in contemporary times, which is continuously producing refugees since 1948. In 2011, an uprising generally referred to as the 'Arab spring' swept across the Arab world. It started from Tunisia and reached across Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Syria and other nations. The uprising was to overthrow the long serving leaders and to reform the political structure of the Arab world.

Apart from persecution, wars and conflicts as driving forces, climatic change is also a massive 'Push' factor for sparking huge population displacements. The term 'Environmental refugees' or 'Climatic Refugees' is used to represent all those people who have been displaced by environmental changes. The term "environmental refugees" was popularized by Lester Brown in 1970. He defined environmental refugees as "those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardize their existence and/or seriously affects the quality of their life" (qtd in Berchin, I et al 148). Every year huge of populations are displaced by sudden onset of weather events like floods, forest fires, droughts, intense storms etc. In 2021, World Bank estimated that by 2050, climate change would displace 216 million people worldwide having Latin America, sub-Sahara Africa and Southeast Asia as three major hotspots ("Groundswell Report"). Climate changes can also induce conflicts resulting in wars. Extreme climate disrupts the traditional patterns of coexistence which could result in a full-fledged conflict. The problem of sub-Sahara is the first example of this kind. Climatic changes were so severe that it resulted in a deadly conflict. Jeffrey Mazo of the institute of Strategic Studies argues that the ongoing conflict in Darfur in the sub-Sahara is the "first modern climate change conflict" and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has supported this statement. The people caught up in this conflict suffered by the conflict itself and by the climatic change in terms of food, water etc. (74).

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### **Historical Background of Refugees Crisis**

The persecution of religious or ethnic minorities was a common phenomenon in early modern Europe. Thousands of individuals were persecuted, killed, deported, or forced to flee their homes as a result of Europe's religious split and war. Persecution and deportation of Jews have been a recurrent aspect of

Europe since the eleventh century. (Zolberg et al, Escape 5). In 1492, the Catholic monarchs conquered the last Muslim territory on the Iberian Peninsula and issued the Alhambra Edict. Moorish rule in Spain was brought to an end and catholic conformity was enforced. It expelled all the Jews from the territories if they resisted conversion to Catholicism. 150,000-165,000 Sephardim were forced to leave the country. In 1572, during the night of St Bartholomew, thousands of French Calvinists were massacred. Between 1568 and 1648, around 60,000-150,000 protestant Dutch departed the Spanish Netherlands to live in the United Provinces of England amid the Dutch uprising. The Spanish kings exiled 27, 0000-30, 0000 Moors during 1609-14. One of the best-known Early Modern forced displacements is the expulsion of French Huguenots. Louis XIV's repeal of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 blocked Huguenot migration, forcing them instead to convert to Catholicism. From 1680s to 1750s, 150, 000-200,000 Huguenots left France and were dependent on Christian charity and generosity of European protestant states (Lachenicht 263-64). 19th century saw the obsession of 'nationalism' and the beginning of the creation of nation-states including people sharing common cultural characteristics and excluding those who did not. Walter Bagehot termed 19th century as the century of nation building resulting in mutual genocide, evacuation and displacement of people, which continued throughout the 20th century. The colonial expansion of the European nations paved the way for migration of Europeans to so called 'new world'. About 50 million Europeans migrated and settled in the colonized lands thereby uprooting millions of indigenous people and pushing them to the remotest corners. The same era also saw the European slave trade during which about 10 million blacks were abducted and sold to white Europeans (Nag 4753).

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## Emergence of refugee Studies

The area of refugee studies and forced migration evolved in the 1980s, but academic investigation began long before the discipline's inception. It is difficult to assign a beginning date to the academic area of refugee studies, in contrast to the history of organizations such as UNHCR that developed policies for refugees. As the population of migrants grew into the millions, the study of their causes and consequences gained academic traction with specialist research institutes, academic publications, and worldwide research organizations. The periods of World War I and II are characterized by the production of huge publications on refugees, which include voluminous publications on the refugee camps, interwar international refugee organizations and its post-war successor United Nations High Commission for Refugees (Black 57). Regardless of the academic standing of refugee studies, it continues to be inextricably linked to policy definitions and queries, which, according to Malkii, is one of its primary deficiencies. (Black 58). There was a great focus on the international organizations that were created after post war years. These organizations continued to dominate the literature during 1960's and 1970's e.g. Louis Halbourn's influential history of UNHCR (Elie, 1). The situation of the refugees attracted researchers from various academic disciplines, with funding from policy organizations and research councils. The research into the subject of the origins of forced migration reached to new heights in 1980's with the publication of Europe's Unwanted by Michael Marrcus in 1985 as well as Wolfgang Jacob Myers' major study of 'Displaced Persons' in 1985 (2).

B.S.Chimini identifies four stages in the development of Refugee Studies. The first stage starts from 1914 to 1945 which dealt with specific interwar issues (14). Black argues that key contribution to refugee studies during this inter-war period was a special issue in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* on refugees, which contained about 22 articles. This study followed closely on the heels of refugee policy. About half of the 22 articles were dedicated towards the possible ways out of the refugee problems ranging from "analyses of the actions of league of nations to the consideration of potential economic benefits a more liberal refugee policy might bring to America" (58). Chimini points out that this stage has a "strong bias towards practical issues" with focus on 'absorptive capacity on land and colonialization', 'the professional refugees' (i.e., refugees such as doctors, scientists etc.), the League of Nations 'private and government organizations'" (14).

The second stage of the development extends from 1945 to 1982. It saw the "voluminous studies of the refugee camps left after the displacement of the two world wars and the works on inter-war international organization and its post war successor, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees" (Chimini 14). Following the evacuation from Vietnam in the latter part of the 1970s, a fresh and growing interest in the investigation of refugees emerged. A special issue in the *International Migration Review* on refugees contributed much towards the refugee studies. Like the previous studies, it contributed much of its space to the analyses of refugee policies, but simultaneously shifted towards other refugee experiences including "psychological adaptation and dysfunction' or difficulties of linguistic and occupational adjustment" (Black, 58-59). The volume represented a milestone in refugee studies and became the reference point for theory building (59).

The third stage from 1982 to 2000 saw a very rigorous development of the discipline such as huge scholarly output as well as the establishment of centers dedicated towards the study of refugee issues. Refugee Studies Program (RSP) was established in Oxford in 1983. It was followed by the publication of *Journal of Refugee Studies* (1988) as well as the creation of Center for Refugee Studies in New York University in 1988 (Chimini, 14). These centers provided short term as well as long term academic courses at both under graduate and post-graduate levels. Barbara Herel-Bond, founder of the RSP, described it as "expanding network of refugees around the world' who had 'collaborated in developing this multi-disciplinary field of academic pursuit'" (qtd. in Black 60). During 1989-90, the International Research and Advisory Panel were set up in as "an annual information exchange forum on refugee policy and practice" (qtd in Chimini 14).

The fourth stage from 2001 marked the decline in number of refugees. The number of refugees was lowest since 1988. Chimini states: "it is therefore no accident that Refugee Studies is now witnessing a relative decline and is being replaced by Forced Migration Studies to come to grips with current preoccupations of western policy makers with the asylum-migration nexus or the fate of growing numbers of IDPs" (15).

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## Conclusion

The discussion concludes that the refugee crisis has received substantial attention from academic disciplines, and an extensive empirical literature on the experiences of various refugee populations has been generated, broadening the field's breadth. However, it had an exponential reduction as the number of refugees fell beginning in the twenty-first century. The increased number of refugees after 2010 has renewed interest in Refugee Studies. A vast amount of literature has been created across academic fields to represent the hardship of migrants and to emphasize the formulation of policies to substantially mitigate the refugee problem.

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