

Border Disputes and Migration Drivers in Africa: A Socio-Political Reading According to Realist Theory

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ABSTRACT

This research paper seeks to demonstrate the strong relationship between the persistence of border disputes among African countries and the worsening levels of forced and irregular migration, as well as asylum. The study adopts the realist approach to analyze the migration reality in West Africa by considering the state as the unit of analysis. The paper concludes that the state-centric view of the migration issue remains the main reason behind its aggravation, due to the mismatch between political borders and the tribal map in West Africa.

Keywords: Border disputes, West Africa, forced migration, the state

INTRODUCTION

Migration between nation-states is an ancient phenomenon driven by the economic needs of receiving countries, particularly during the periods of building their economies, during wars, and in their aftermath. However, the twentieth century was marked by the international system's adoption of a legal legacy that regulated relations between states through agreements and treaties governing the movement of individuals across borders. This made the state the sole actor in managing migration and the primary beneficiary of its returns.

In the African continent, there are numerous reasons and motivations that compel individuals to leave their places of origin toward other countries. However, the search for a safe environment that provides means of livelihood remains the main driver of African migration within the continent or toward other continents. Border disputes are among the leading security issues causing migration, as claims to annex territories not belonging to the state hinder the legal movement of individuals due to border closures and the threat of violence to create a new geopolitical reality.

With the declining trend toward resolving border disputes in Africa and the reliance on temporary settlements lacking the political and military mechanisms to ensure their sustainability, many African countries are experiencing latent and active conflicts that threaten human security and push for further migration flows within the continent and toward Europe and Asia.

Accordingly, the following question may be posed:

To what extent do border disputes among African states contribute to the worsening levels of migration within the continent and toward European and Asian countries?

Hypothesis

The longer border disputes persist among African states, the more forced and irregular migration flows, as well as asylum-seeking, will worsen between these countries.

First: Explaining International Migration from a Realist Perspective

The phenomenon of international migration falls within interdisciplinary fields of knowledge, studied by many researchers across various disciplines such as law, political science, sociology, psychology, economics, and others. This is primarily due to the diversity of its dimensions and its impact on the migrant, their country of origin, and the receiving country.

Legal specialists, for example, have made the state the unit of analysis in their studies, thus focusing on regulatory policies such as the granting of entry visas, determining the duration of stay, as well as prohibition and deportation policies. Sociologists have examined social structures and have, in their studies, considered the sending society, the receiving society, and the migrant community as a single unit of analysis. Psychologists, on the other hand, have focused on the individual's motivations for migration and the extent to which the desire to change one's place of residence takes root within the migrant, thereby reaching generalizations that allow for the identification of the key factors governing the phenomenon of migration.

1- Definition of International Migration

In migration literature, researchers provide comprehensive definitions covering the various dimensions of this phenomenon. Researcher Mohammed Shafiq, for instance, defines it according to several criteria: ¹

- **Psychological criterion:** This relates to whether migration is voluntary, driven by personal will and desire, or whether it is displacement caused by push factors such as wars, famines, natural disasters, unemployment, or by coercion from authorities.
- **Numerical criterion:** This concerns whether the migration project is collective, resulting from threats faced by the society as a whole, or individual, particularly among youth seeking to build a better future.
- **Temporal criterion:** This pertains to whether the goal of migration is permanent residence and integration into the host society, or whether the migrant maintains the intention to return to the homeland after achieving the objectives of the migration project.
- **Economic criterion:** This relates to whether the migrant's goal is to seek better opportunities for work or trade, or whether the migration is for tourism or medical treatment.
- **Legal criterion:** This addresses whether the migration is legal, governed by visas and residence permits, or illegal, involving secret entry into the host country, forged documents, or even valid documents used to overstay the legal residency period.

In foreign literature, migration is expressed through three closely related terms. The word "**Immigration**" refers to settlement and is used by receiving countries to indicate the non-permanent

stay of migrants within them. The term "**Emigration**" is used by sending countries to indicate displacement and departure, while "**Migration**" conveys the meaning of voluntary and positive movement and is used by other parties concerned with migration.²

Based on the above definitions, international migration can be defined as: **“The movement of individuals between countries for the purpose of work or to engage in any other economic, cultural, or social activity. It may occur on a permanent basis, with the migrant settling permanently in the host country, or on a temporary basis, with the migrant returning to their country of origin.”**

2- Definition of Irregular Migration

There are various terms used to describe irregular migration. Some refer to it as *illegal migration*, emphasizing its contradiction with the principles of Islamic law, which require obedience to those in authority and, consequently, compliance with the regulations governing individual mobility. This designation aligns with the term *illegal migration*, which denotes a violation of state laws. However, for some countries—such as Spain—legal compliance by migrants does not appear to be a major concern, as the economic benefits derived from employing undocumented labor often outweigh issues related to their mode of entry or duration of stay.

Others refer to this phenomenon as *clandestine migration*, which occurs without the knowledge of the authorities responsible for managing and regulating the entry and exit of individuals. However, the term *clandestine* does not fully capture the essence of irregular migration, particularly in light of technological advancements and the development of border and maritime surveillance methods. Movements of irregular migrants are often not hidden from coast guard forces.

Attempts to provide a nominal definition of irregular migration reveal a lack of full comprehension of the phenomenon under study. Receiving countries define it as: **“The arrival of a migrant at the country's land or maritime borders through unlawful means, or by lawful means using forged documents, or valid documents granted for a limited period with state approval, followed by a refusal to leave after the expiration of legal residency.”**³

Definitions from the perspective of sending countries, on the other hand, describe irregular migration as: **“The departure of a citizen from the state's territory through unauthorized points of exit, or through authorized points using forged documents.”**⁴

Formulating a comprehensive definition of irregular migration requires accounting for all its surrounding dimensions. Legal compliance and respect for regulations are not matters that prospective migrants are easily convinced of. Moreover, there is an almost complete conflict between the irregular migrant and the receiving states, as there are no clear shared goals between the two. This conflict is the defining feature in managing this issue. The legal frameworks regulating the movement of people do not include the notion of accepting irregular migrants, making the attempt to bypass these laws an urgent necessity for them.

This research paper proposes adopting the term *irregular* to describe the phenomenon of movement that contradicts the law. Irregular migration can therefore be defined as: **“The movement of individuals across states in a manner that contradicts the interests of these states and the provisions of their established legal systems governing the flow of persons between them.”**

3- The Concept of Asylum

The concept of asylum is defined according to the variables of time and place, as a refugee is characterized by being in a location that is not their homeland and during a period in which they cannot remain in their country. Thus, a person is described as a refugee when they are forcibly driven to seek safe refuge for a certain period.

Asylum is generally defined as: **“The protection granted by a state to a foreign national who seeks it, either within the territory of that state or in a location related to one of its institutions abroad.”**⁵

Asylum involves three fundamental elements:

- a. Allowing the asylum seeker to enter the territory of the asylum-granting state.
- b. Providing shelter, which is more than a mere temporary refuge for the refugee.
- c. Offering a degree of positive protection by the authority responsible for the territory of the asylum state.

In the Qur'an, asylum carries two meanings:

- The first is **spatial**, referring to the availability of safety in a place, as in the verse: ﴿لو يجدون﴾ [التوبة: 57] ملجأ أو مغارات أو مدخلا لولوا إليه وهم يجمعون﴾.
- The second is **personal**, related to the individual who provides protection to the refugee, as in the verse: ﴿وإن أحد من المشركين استجارك فأجره حتى يسمع كلام الله ثم أبلغه مأمنه ذلك بأنهم قوم لا يعلمون﴾ [التوبة: 6].

The Prophet ﷺ, though surrounded by the eyes and swords of the polytheists, was not killed due to the awe inspired by Banu Hashim and his uncle Abu Talib.

In international law, asylum consists of five elements⁶:

1. Asylum is a legal protection guaranteed by law.
2. Asylum is granted by one state in response to actions taken by another state.
3. Asylum is granted in a specific location — within the territory of the state, it is called territorial asylum; or in one of its embassies or consulates, it is called diplomatic asylum.
4. Asylum is granted to an individual, who is then referred to as a refugee.
5. Asylum is a form of temporary legal protection.

4- Realist Theoretical Analysis of International Migration

Realism represents a paradigm in international relations that emerged in the 1950s, placing security at the core of its explanation of relations among states. The state is regarded as the principal actor in the international system, driven to confront the external world in order to preserve its interests, foremost among them security. According to realists, conflicts between states are what achieve balance and stability in the international system. Liberals, on the other hand, oppose this view, focusing on values associated with individuals such as liberty, the primacy of rights, private property, and freedom of economic competition.

Realism designates the state as the unit of analysis, considering it the sole actor in international relations and relying on an empirical approach. Some of its main assumptions include the following⁷:

- International relations are predominantly characterized by conflict, as the interests of states are not aligned but rather contradictory.
- Political gain takes precedence over moral principles; a state will not relinquish a political position for the sake of upholding a particular moral principle.
- Power is the fundamental truth in international relations, and friendship is merely the result of a temporary alignment of interests.
- International conflict is justified by the absence of security, prompting states to increase their power. Moreover, human nature tends toward the desire for control and dominance, which drives states toward conflictual behavior.
- Realism is based on core concepts, chiefly power — defined as the ability to influence others through threat — as well as balance of power and national interest.

The strategy rooted in the realist perspective does not rely on the collective management of migration, but rather considers it an internal affair falling under the foreign policy domain of the state — particularly due to its association with security at the turn of the new century. Security thus became a strong factor in justifying state behaviors, especially those arising from migration-related issues. However, a number of researchers believe that the realist approach is ineffective in addressing such issues, since realism relies on the concept of power — a notion that does not align with migration policy. The control of the movement of individuals is a matter of sovereignty, not of power⁸.

Second: The Evolution of Border Disputes in Africa and Their Impact on Intra-Continental Migration Flows

The African continent is characterized by ethnic and racial diversity, with almost no country lacking the presence of various ethnic groups that form its society. However, the problems arising from this ethnic and racial plurality in Africa are linked to the lack of alignment between political borders and sociological boundaries. This has led to unresolved border disputes among many African states.

1- The Issue of Border Revision Among African States

Perspectives on the development of border disputes in Africa are divided into two main currents: the first calls for revising the borders inherited from colonialism, while the second supports maintaining the current borders.

Proponents of border revision justify their stance by arguing that the national states in Africa did not adhere to the classical Westphalian model based on national unity, and that different identities were forcibly merged into new political entities that are fragile in terms of social cohesion.

Opponents of border revision argue that reopening the issue would lead to wars between African states. Moreover, many of these borders have already been subjected to international arbitration, making reconsideration unnecessary.

In addition, there is a need to respect the Charter of the Organization of African Unity (1963), which affirms the obligation to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of African states. Furthermore, African leaders committed during the Cairo Summit in 1964 to uphold the borders resulting from the national independence of each African country.

The following table presents examples of some border disputes in Africa since the independence of these countries from European colonialism.

Table (1): Examples of Some Border Disputes in Africa⁹

| Current Status | Implemented Agreements | Colonial Legacy Borders | Cross-Border Resources | Cross-Border Minority | Period of Conflict | Parties to the Conflict |
|---|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---|----------------------------|
| The dispute was settled under the 1978 agreement | + | + | + | + | (1961-1950) (1977-1963) (1978-1977) | Ethiopia / Somalia |
| Nigeria relinquished it in 2008 | - | - | + | + | (2002-1963) | Cameroon / Nigeria |
| Conclusion of the 1970 agreement | - | + | + | - | (1970-1961) | Algeria / Tunisia |
| Conclusion of the 1970 agreement | - | + | + | - | (1970-1962) | Algeria / Morocco |
| Conclusion of the 1970 agreement | -/- | +/+ | +/- | +/- | (1970-1963) | Ethiopia / Kenya |
| Conclusion of the 1961 agreement | - | + | - | + | (1961-1960) | Côte d'Ivoire / Liberia |
| Settled by the 1963 agreement | + | - | + | + | (1963-1960) | Mali / Mauritania |
| Settled by the International Court of Justice in 1994 | - | + | + | + | (1994-1935) | Chad / Libya |
| Settled by the International Court of Justice in 1992 | - | + | + | - | (1992-1980) | Guinea-Bissau / Senegal |
| Conclusion of the 1984 agreement | + | + | - | + | (1984-1962) | Kenya / Somalia |
| Settled by the International Court of Justice in 1994 | + | + | + | - | (1994-1990) | Tunisia / Libya |
| Latent dispute | + | - | - | - | (Present -1997) | Malawi / Tanzania |
| Latent dispute | + | + | + | + | (1984-1963) | Mali / Burkina Faso |
| Latent dispute | - | ? | - | - | (1966-1964) | Ghana / Burkina Faso |
| <i>Conclusion of a colonial agreement</i> | - | - | - | - | 1972 | Guinea / Gabon |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Settled by the 2002 agreement | + | + | - | - | (1992-1952) (2002-1998) | Ethiopia / Eritrea |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|----------------------------|-----------------------|

Table Key: (+) Indicates the existence of a border dispute. (–) Indicates the absence of a border dispute. (+/–), (+/+), (–/–) Indicate irregularity in the presence of the dispute.

The table clearly shows that most border disputes between African countries remain unresolved either due to agreements made between the concerned states that were never implemented, or because the disputes remain latent and can be raised by states at any moment. Several disputes have been settled through agreements between the involved countries or through intervention by the International Court of Justice.

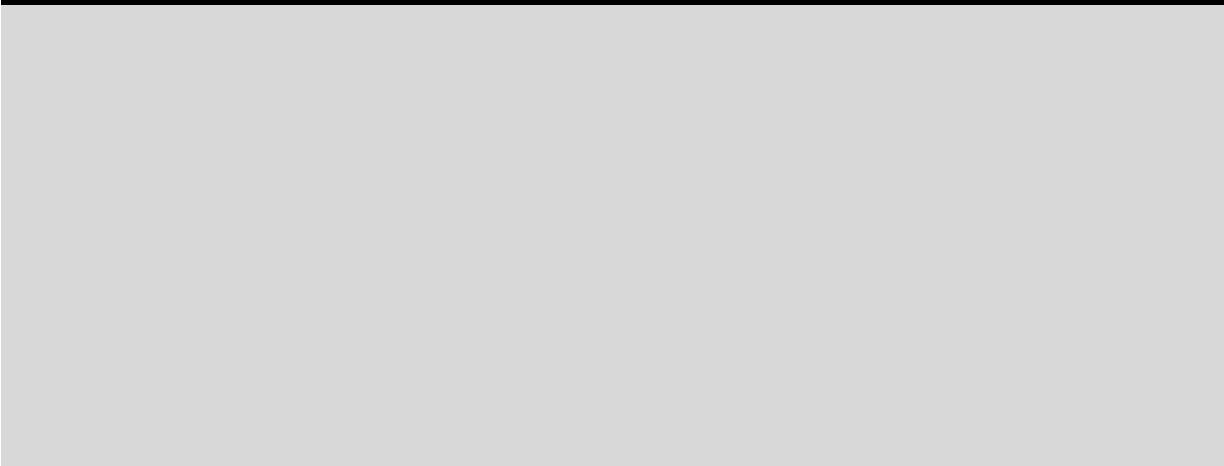
The table also highlights the presence of cross-border minorities among many African countries—such as Ethiopia and Somalia, Cameroon and Nigeria, Mali and Mauritania, Kenya and Somalia, Mali and Burkina Faso—alongside natural resources that stretch across these borders. These factors explain many of the disputes between African states over political borders that do not align with sociological and economic boundaries.

2- Forced Migrations Between African Countries (Case Study: Mali and Côte d'Ivoire)

Intra-African migration is predominantly characterized by forced displacement resulting from internal conflicts between ethnic groups, as well as interstate disputes over border demarcation. These conflicts often become violent, particularly when they are linked to the absence of justice in the distribution of resources among ethnic groups and states.

Table (2): The Ten Most Common Transnational Migration Corridors in West Africa (As referenced in the original data).

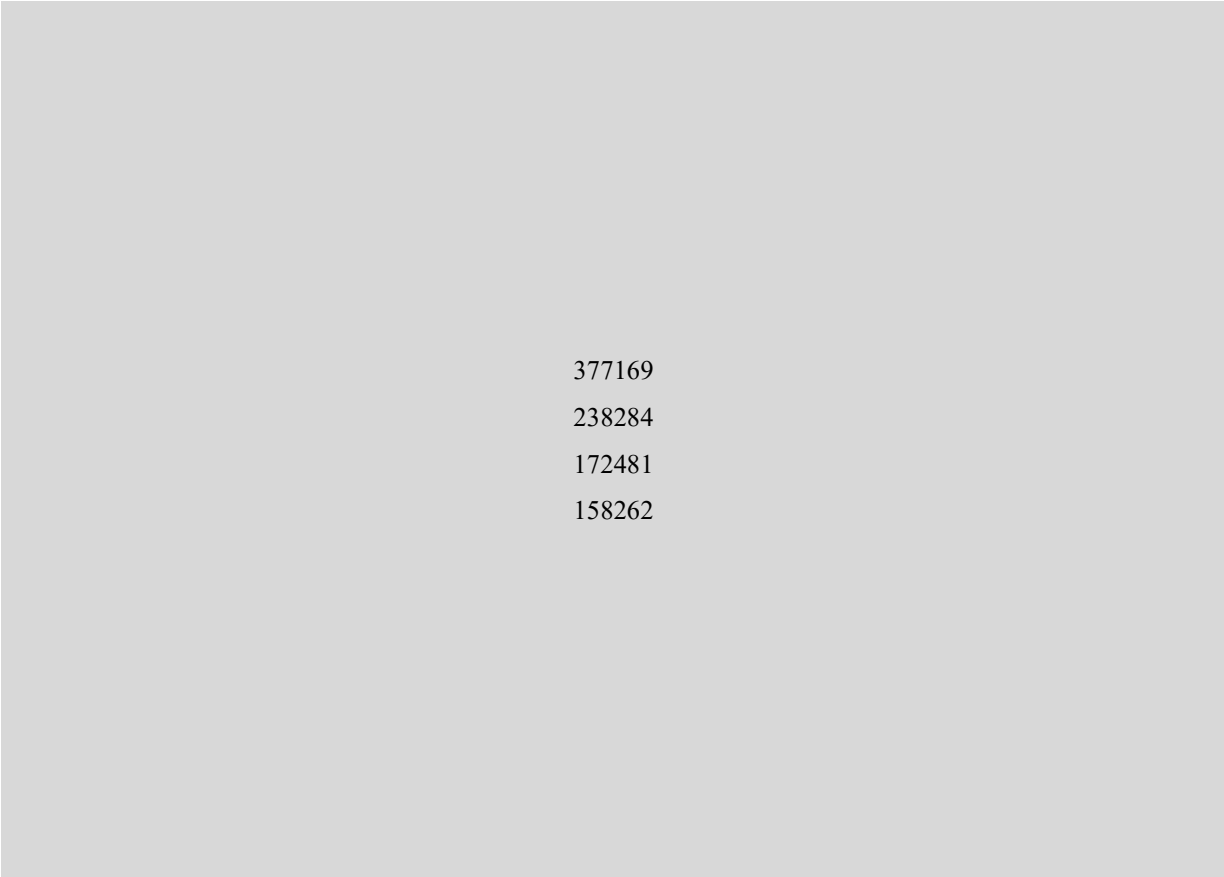
| Number of Migrants (2020) | | Mi gr ati on Di re cti on (F ro m — To) |
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Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Distribution (2020)

The table shows that Côte d'Ivoire is the leading host country for cross-border migrants, with a population exceeding one million. Nigeria also serves as a preferred corridor for migrants, receiving large numbers from Mali, Guinea, Senegal, and Benin. These statistics confirm that the state in Africa is unable to prevent migrant flows, as people remain in constant movement in search of food and physical security.

In Mali, the UN Security Council decided on June 29, 2018, to extend its peacekeeping mission for additional years, as stipulated in Resolution 2364. This decision came in response to the ongoing violence in the country, which has forced thousands of Malians to flee to neighboring countries, as shown in the following table:

Table (3): Malian Refugees in Neighboring Countries, 2018 ¹⁰

| Month | June | May | April | March | February | January |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|---------|
| Niger | 57952 | 57952 | 57327 | 57285 | 57067 | 57067 |
| Mauritania | 56490 | 56490 | 56221 | 55263 | 52591 | 52591 |
| Burkina Faso | 24248 | 24248 | 24149 | 24149 | 23614 | 23874 |

Source: Mixed Migration Centre, Mixed Migration Summary (West Africa)

The table shows that the number of Malian refugees heading to Burkina Faso remained stable at around 24,400 per month throughout 2018. Meanwhile, the number of Malian refugees moving to Niger and Mauritania steadily increased—from 57,000 to 58,000 per month and from 52,000 to 52,500 per month, respectively.

In Côte d'Ivoire, economic motivations play a key role in explaining migration flows to neighboring countries, in addition to the ethnic extensions of the population into countries such as Ghana and Liberia. The following table illustrates the monthly refugee flow from Côte d'Ivoire to neighboring countries:

Table (4): Refugees from Côte d'Ivoire in Neighboring Countries During 2018 ¹¹

| | June | May | April | March | February | January |
|----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Liberia | 9461 | 9461 | 10793 | 10793 | 11087 | 11087 |
| Ghana | 6687 | 6687 | 6687 | 6687 | 6687 | 6687 |
| Guinea | 4577 | 4577 | 4577 | 4577 | 4577 | 4577 |
| Togo | 1951 | 1943 | 1943 | 1943 | 2058 | 2058 |
| Mali | 550 | 550 | 614 | 614 | 614 | 614 |
| Total | 23218 | 23218 | 24583 | 24583 | 24992 | 24992 |

Source: Mixed Migration Centre, Mixed Migration Summary (West Africa)

The table shows a higher number of refugees from Côte d'Ivoire heading to Liberia, reaching around 11,000 per month, compared to other neighboring countries. This is attributed to the political stability prevailing in Liberia. Refugees also head to Ghana with about 66,000 per month, to Togo with 2,000 displaced persons, while only 600 refugees per month head to Mali due to its security instability.

Border disputes remain one of the main causes of forced migration in Africa, and they are primarily linked to the cross-border extension of identities. In the context of seeking long-term solutions to transnational ethnic issues in Africa, the African Union included in its Agenda 2063 the establishment of mechanisms to connect these identities culturally and economically, without resorting to violence and conflict for the forced annexation of certain regions, which leads to the displacement of African refugees from one country to another.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has established the strong link between the persistence of border disputes among African countries and the worsening levels of forced and irregular migration, as well as asylum. The emphasis on the state as the sole unit of analysis in managing the issues arising from border disputes particularly migration—weakens efforts to find effective solutions to refugee and migrant flows.

For this reason, the African Union adopts a supranational approach aimed at separating the migration file from border disputes by strengthening cross-border cultural and societal ties without undermining state sovereignty.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mohamed Shafiq. *Methodology of Scientific Research*. Egypt: Al-Izrabta Library, 1st ed., 2004, p. 68.

² Migration. *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Chicago: 1983, Vol. 1, p. 1851.

³ Hassan Al-Imam. *Combating Irregular Migration*. Alexandria: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Jami'i, 1st ed., 2014, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, same page.

⁵ Jamal Fourar Al-Idi. *Political Asylum in Public International Law*. Alexandria: New University Publishing House, 2017, p. 100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ Mohy El-Din Ismail Al-Dehi. *Transformations in International Political Relations and Their Global Implications*. Cairo: Al-Wafa Legal Library, 2014, pp. 115–130.

⁸ Jacinthe Gagnon. *Immigration: The Last Stronghold of State Sovereignty?* Research Paper. Paris: Laboratory for the Study of Public Policies and Globalization, Vol. 3, September 2010, p. 24.

⁹ Francis Nguendi. Africa's International Borders as Potential Sources of Conflict and Future Threats to Peace and Security. Germany: Institute for Security Studies, May 2012, p. 4.

¹⁰ Mixed Migration Centre. Mixed Migration Summary (West Africa). London: Mixed Migration Centre, May 2018, pp. 2–5.

¹¹ Idem.