

Migration: A Multifaceted Tool in the IW Toolbox

By Dr. Tom Searle

Dr. Tom Searle is a contractor currently serving as the Deputy Regional Adviser for CENTCOM and SOUTHCOM in the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC).

Migration is the most destabilizing force in the world today, vastly exceeding the impact of nuclear weapons, war, poverty, oppressive governments, natural disasters and all the other causes of instability that news outlets focus on. In fact, the main destabilizing impact of the other factors is the migration they cause. For example, consider the 2026 war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. By the time of the mid-April ceasefire more than one thousand people were killed in Lebanon, [but more than one million migrated](#) to other parts of Lebanon. In other words, for every person killed, a thousand others were displaced. It is the displaced people, not the dead ones, who are causing a humanitarian crisis, expanding the crisis out of the combat zone into the rest of the country, and destabilizing Lebanon.

Likewise, Venezuela also saw mass migration in recent years. The Venezuelan economy crashed between 2013 and 2020, dropping per capita Gross Domestic Product by 73% and producing the [worst economic performance](#) of any nation in the world during that period. Poverty in Venezuela caused some domestic instability, but government oppression successfully controlled the internal instability. However, Venezuelan poverty and government oppression produced mass migration. Nearly [8 million Venezuelans](#) left the country—about 25% of the population—destabilizing the entire region from Peru to Mexico and the U.S.

Migration is often discussed as if it were a [natural phenomenon](#) beyond human control, like sunspots or earthquakes. However, recent [success controlling migration](#) across the

U.S. southern border demonstrates that migration can be controlled. On closer examination it becomes apparent that migration is a powerful irregular warfare (IW) tool, and one U.S. policy makers have ignored or underestimated for too long.

Every migration has two aspects: emigration from the place the migrants leave and immigration to the place the migrants arrive. This essay will describe the IW employment of migration by starting with emigration before tackling immigration.

Emigration as an IW Policy Tool

Emigration serves a variety of different functions for the nations and non-state actors who employ it.

Emigration as Political/Military Objective

The most obvious way to use emigration as a policy tool is ethnic cleansing when a state or non-state actor seeks to achieve homogeneity over a particular area by driving out members of disfavored groups. The term [ethnic cleansing](#) came into use during the wars accompanying the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, but the process is as old as human history with groups routinely trying to drive each other out of desirable territories. In addition to the former Yugoslavia, forced emigration was used by various factions in the Iraqi civil war that [followed the fall of Saddam Hussain](#) in April 2003. It is being used today in the [civil war in Sudan](#), and will no doubt continue to be employed to achieve the political goal of demographic change.

It is worth remembering that while the term ethnic cleansing is frequently used, forced migration is also used to achieve religions or political homogeneity rather than

ethnic purity. For example, when it took over Iraq's Ninewa province in 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) launched a campaign to [drive out religious minorities](#). Likewise, the Cuban regime forced thousands of people it found undesirable (*escoria* or "scum" according to the regime) to leave during the [Mariel Exodus of 1980](#), and these people were not singled out for ethnic reasons.

Emigration to Prevent Revolution

The attitudes toward emigration in Marxist countries have been complex and contradictory since at least the 1960s. Karl Marx asserted a [labor theory of value](#) under which the proper value of a good or service is the value of the labor that went into creating that good or service. If one accepts this theory, then the total value a nation produces is a direct result of how many productive workers it has, and no government would want productive workers to leave since that would decrease the wealth of the nation. This was the theory behind the [Berlin Wall](#) and the other measures Soviet bloc countries enacted to prevent emigration out of the communist bloc. There were some exceptions to the Soviet ban on emigration, such as allowing some [Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel](#). But the Soviet government followed the labor theory of value in requiring a [high exit fee](#) from citizens with more education to reimburse the government for its investment in their education and the lost value Soviet society would have received from these productive workers if they had remained in the USSR. The Soviets might have been correct to restrict emigration since a key moment in the fall of European communism was when [Hungary opened its border with Austria](#) allowing East Germans to escape the Soviet bloc.

In Latin America, however, communist and socialist governments have taken a different approach and allowed or encouraged emigration as a means of managing domestic discontent and preventing a revolution. [Cuba turned to this approach](#) when the end of the Soviet Union meant an end to massive economic subsidies from Moscow and an economic crisis in Cuba.

The 2020s have seen [another massive exodus](#) from Cuba driven by another economic crisis. Almost 20% of Cuba's population are estimated to have left the island in just two years (2022 and 2023). As in the Venezuelan example mentioned earlier, government oppression prevented a revolution due to economic hardship, but emigration has also been a key factor in preventing a revolution because young, energetic, dissatisfied, and ambitious people who might lead a revolution can improve their lives at lower risk by leaving than by rebelling.

The most surprising case of using emigration to prevent revolution is in today's Russia. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has allowed hundreds of thousands of healthy, [draft-age males to leave](#)

[the country](#). Traditional Soviet leaders, like Leonid Brezhnev, would never have allowed anything like this to happen. Russian President Vladimir Putin has not explained his choices but he did not [close Russia's borders to draft dodgers](#) until October 2025, three-and-a-half years into Europe's largest land war since 1945. Even the new restrictions only prevent legal emigration by men who have been drafted, leaving those who have not yet received draft notices free to go. These missing men would be valuable to both the hard-pressed Russian army and [Russia's overstretched war economy](#). The most plausible explanation for why Putin is letting them go is that Putin believes keeping discontented young men inside Russia would be more dangerous than letting them emigrate, i.e., he is using emigration to prevent revolution.

Immigration as an IW Policy Tool

Immigrants can be military and economic assets strengthening the countries they arrive in, but they can also be directed toward a third country as a form of attack, and they can serve as armed proxies used to attack their countries of origin.

Immigrants as National Assets:

Most countries welcome rich and talented immigrants who provide obvious benefits to the countries they move to. That is why [billionaires](#) and [Nobel Prize winners](#) rarely have trouble finding new countries to live in. For accommodating less extraordinary immigrants, perhaps no country does a better job than Israel where even 75 years after independence [most of the Jewish population](#) is either an immigrant or the child of immigrants. From its war for independence in 1949 to the 2026 war against Iran, Israel's military and economy have relied on immigrants and its current prosperity and security depend on its ability to assimilate immigrants.

Israel is hardly unique, even in the Middle East. For example, in addition to driving out people with different religious views, ISIS also encouraged [immigration into its physical caliphate](#) by religiously like-minded people from all over the world. These immigrants were a [major source of strength](#) for ISIS, and the group could not have defended its physical caliphate for as long as it did without their help.

Weaponizing Immigrants

In recent years Russia and its ally Belarus have been the most effective practitioners of weaponized migration. There are two main ways of weaponizing destitute and desperate immigrants. The first is to conduct some sort of activity, usually military, that forces people to migrate into countries you dislike and destabilize them. The second is to lure immigrants to a place from which you can launch them against a country you dislike. Russia did the first of these

when it invaded Ukraine in 2022, inadvertently [sending 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees](#) into western Europe. Russia would have preferred to conquer all of Ukraine and control the entire Ukrainian population, but failing that, flooding western Europe with Ukrainian immigrants was an attractive second-best option. Russia has continued to focus its [long-range strikes on civilian infrastructure](#), which is likely to produce additional refugees and additional strain on Putin's enemies in western Europe.

The second approach of inviting refugees in so that they can be launched at specific adversaries was a Russian and Belarusian tactic even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For example, in 2015 Russia launched more the [five thousand Syrian refugees](#) into northern Norway, and in 2021 they lured middle eastern migrants with promises of easy entry into the European Union and then [launched them into Poland](#). Poland built a fence to protect its borders but Belarus [dug a tunnel under the fence](#) to continue destabilizing Poland by flooding it with middle eastern immigrants.

Russia and Belarus are not alone. For example, Turkey has [repeatedly](#) threatened to [flood the European Union](#) (EU) with migrants in order to extract concessions from the EU. Furthermore, the fact that Russia and Belarus have continued to try to flood Europe with immigrants for decades suggests that it will be a continuing threat for the foreseeable future.

Immigrants as Proxies

Many immigrants have been driven from their homeland by a hostile government. If they find refuge in a country that shares their hostility toward that government then there is an overlap in interests between the immigrants and their host country. The host country might find it expedient to arm the immigrants (or refugees) and send them back to conduct military operations against the government in their home country. In return for sheltering the immigrants' family members, fighting age males among the refugees might be happy to serve as proxies of the host country conducting combat operations to overthrow the government that drove them out.

Americans are skeptical of this approach because they remember the embarrassing defeat of U.S.-supported Cuban refugees at [the Bay of Pigs](#) in 1961. In fairness to the Cuban refugees and their U.S. advisers, nothing else the U.S. has done since 1959 has overthrown the communist regime in Cuba, so the Bay of Pigs should be seen as one of many disappointments rather than proof that arming refugees is a doomed approach.

For a more successful use of refugees as military proxies, one should look to Pakistani support to the Afghan Taliban after the fall of Kabul in 2001. Sanctuary in [Pakistan was critical to the Taliban's eventual success](#) in retaking Ka-

bul, and [the government of Pakistan was ecstatic](#) over the Taliban's victory in 2021. It seems, however, the Afghan Taliban did not develop any love for Pakistan while they were refugees, and they had no desire to continue serving Pakistani interests after they reclaimed Kabul. In 2026, relations between Pakistan and its former proxies, the Afghan Taliban, [degenerated into open warfare](#) along their shared border. This is a helpful reminder that refugees might become proxies because they have few options. However, when they are victorious, proxies have more options and can become a problem for their former sponsors.

Conclusion

In recent years the U.S. Government focused enormous effort on stemming the tide of illegal migration into the United States. What U.S. officials have not always realized is that migration is an enormously powerful force globally, not just in the U.S., and that it is an IW weapon. America's interagency planners and operators must not only counter the threats migration poses to the U.S. and its allies but also exploit the opportunities migration presents for IW against America's adversaries.

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