

# BRIEFER

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## HOW THE UNITED STATES CAN PREVENT THE WEAPONIZATION OF CLIMATE MIGRATION IN A WARMING WORLD: A HUMANE APPROACH

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*The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and do not represent the position of the Center for Climate and Security or the Council on Strategic Risks.*

In the summer of 2021, several European Union (EU) countries began to see an influx of irregular migration from neighboring Belarus. Migrants, including children, from throughout the Middle East, Africa, and some as far away as Cuba, overwhelmed border officials in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland as they attempted to enter the EU<sup>1</sup>. The ensuing humanitarian crisis was not spontaneous but rather a well-calculated act of retaliation on behalf of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. In response to EU sanctions placed on Belarus over its repression of protests against a fraudulent presidential election, Lukashenko used vulnerable migrants and refugees as political pawns.<sup>2</sup> Deploying a combination of misinformation and disinformation, Lukashenko encouraged people considering migration to come to Belarus as a means to enter the EU.<sup>3</sup> The case of Belarus demonstrates how weaker states can employ unconventional tactics to fight against stronger nations. Although portrayed by the media as a new precedent, countries have weaponized migrants before. Cuba, Turkey, and

1 Rob Schmitz, "The EU Accuses Belarus of Luring Global Migrants into Other European Countries," NPR, October 12, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/12/1045345417/poland-belarus-lukashenko-eu-migrants-asylum>. "Lithuania Says Belarus Officers Illegally Pushed Migrants over Border," BBC News, August 18, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58255448>.

2 Yuras Karmanau, "Explainer: What's behind the Crisis at Belarus-Poland Border," AP NEWS, November 11, 2021, sec. Immigration, <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-business-belarus-poland-middle-east-e3debd6f6f8cbc9ba6b59fa8aa322d8>.

3 Sigrid Lupieri, "The Belarus Border Crisis Shows It's Getting Easier to 'Weaponize' Refugees," Washington Post, November 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/22/belarus-border-crisis-shows-its-getting-easier-weaponize-refugees/>.

Morocco, to name a few, have used similar tactics in the past.<sup>4</sup> While weaponized migration might not be entirely new, it is likely to become increasingly common as intensifying climate change contributes to further human displacement and migration. In this context, nations, including the United States, should get ahead of the phenomenon by changing their approach to climate migration - through policies that recognize and address the role climate change plays in decisions to migrate.

## A CLIMATIC SHIFT IN GEOPOLITICS

Climate change is reshaping the environment and the power dynamics among nations. In this new era of increasingly severe weather, resource stress, and biodiversity loss, states will try to find new ways to leverage the consequences of a warming world to their advantage. Lacking equal economic and military firepower to larger countries, smaller nations may exploit climate change's risks and threats.<sup>5</sup> Of growing concern is the potential for the weaponization of climate migration. As highlighted in the White House Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration, "Climate change related migration could cause greater instability among U.S. allies/partners and thereby cause a relative strengthening in adversary states. In addition, adversaries could incite or aid irregular migration to destabilize U.S. allies/partners."<sup>6</sup> According to the World Bank, by the year 2050, climate change could force as many as 216 million people to migrate within their own countries—a more common type of movement than international migration.<sup>7</sup> What is less well-understood is just how many of those displaced will ultimately seek to cross country borders, let alone how rogue nations or political movements could leverage these migration patterns in acts against their adversaries, including the United States.

## MULTICAUSALITY OF MIGRATION

Migration is multicausal, ranging from socioeconomic considerations to family reunification to escaping violence,<sup>8</sup> and in the near term, climate change will unlikely be the single influencer in a person's decision to migrate. Instead, climate change will likely amplify a person's decision to relocate. For example, we can look at Pakistan last fall, where unprecedented flooding displaced nearly 8 million people, but was far from the single factor in the choice of many to permanently relocate. In years past, many Pakistanis temporarily left their homes; seeking shelter in neighboring cities until the waters receded and they could safely return. Now, many have decided to stay

4 Kelly M. Greenhill, "Morocco 'Weaponized' Migration to Punish Spain. That's More Common than You Think," *The Washington Post* (Online), June 1, 2021, sec. Politics, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2535630154/citation/B5E1A58489AD407BPC/2>.

5 Chad M. Briggs, "Climate Change and Hybrid Warfare Strategies," *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 4 (2020): 45–57.

6 The White House, *Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration* (Washington, D.C., 2021), 9, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

7 "Groundswell Report," World Bank, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/13/climate-change-could-force-216-million-people-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries-by-2050>.

8 P. Krishnakumar and T. Indumathi, "Pull and Push Factors of Migration," *Global Management Review* 8, no. 4 (August 2014): 8–13.

in cities, like Karachi, where they believe they will have a better chance at making a living versus returning to their prior work as farmers. After years of declining crop yields, water scarcity, and an agriculture system that favors feudal landlords, it has become increasingly difficult to survive as a farmer in Pakistan. At the same time, information gathering about job opportunities, safety, migration options, and pre-existing ethnic enclaves also influences how and where a person chooses to move.<sup>9</sup> The same will hold for those displaced by climate change. In turn, bad actors can manipulate, distort, or even falsify this information to influence migration patterns, coercing people to overwhelm the borders of neighboring countries.

The type of information that influences a person's migration can range from accurate information to misinformation (i.e., false, or inaccurate information such as rumors) to disinformation (i.e., deliberately inaccurate information such as propaganda). As explained by Ruokolainen and Widén, asylum seekers often come across all three types of information.<sup>10</sup> Within this spectrum, misinformation and disinformation can be used to manipulate and even weaponize people's movements, especially in a warming world. The pathways these falsehoods follow can be equally unreliable and a target for manipulation. Many migrants rely on social media and information gathered by family, friends, and acquaintances when considering relocation.<sup>11</sup> Migrants may also turn to even less dependable sources outside of these personal networks, such as human smugglers and traffickers. From Belarus to the United States, there is documented evidence that smugglers have purposefully spread misinformation to influence migration patterns and to profit.<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the inauguration of President Biden in January 2021, immigration attorneys reported the spread of misinformation amongst migrants located throughout Northern Mexico. The false information alleged that migrants waiting in Mexico under President Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' program would be allowed into the United States on certain days or at specific U.S. Ports of Entry. The

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9 Hilda Ruokolainen and Gunilla Widén, "Conceptualising Misinformation in the Context of Asylum Seekers," *Information Processing & Management* 57, no. 3 (May 1, 2020): 102127, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2019.102127>.

10 Ruokolainen and Widén.

11 Ruokolainen and Widén.

12 Smugglers used social media platforms, specifically Facebook, to spread misinformation about the opening of Polish borders and to advertise their services. Andrew Higgins, Adam Satariano, and Jane Arraf, "How Fake News on Facebook Helped Fuel a Border Crisis in Europe," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/22/world/europe/belarus-migrants-facebook-fake-news.html>.

rumors spread via WhatsApp, word of mouth, and even smugglers.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Belarus, government officials, in combination with human smugglers, created an unlikely pathway between Baghdad and the EU.

## DRIVERS OF MISINFORMATION: DESPOTS TO SMUGGLERS

Shortly after the EU started placing sanctions on Belarus over its crackdown on anti-Lukashenko demonstrators, the country began issuing tourist visas to Iraqis. The visas allowed Iraqis, many from Kurdistan, to legally enter the country under the guise of a visiting tourist. Many Iraqis then turned to smugglers to secure their eventual passage to the EU. As one investigative report revealed, smugglers were charging \$5,000 to \$15,000 per person for guaranteed safe arrival to the EU.<sup>14</sup> However, it appears that these entrepreneurial smugglers did not act alone but were aided by Belarusian government officials. Receipts for hotels run by the Belarusian government and lists of Iraqi passport numbers and names were found on the Polish-Belarus border. Among the cache of paperwork, travel documents were found signed by Belarusian officials, equally implicating the government in profiteering from the smuggling scheme.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, in August 2021, Lithuania accused 12 Belarusian officers of illegally entering the country while pushing migrants across the border.<sup>16</sup> After crossing into the EU via Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland, many Iraqis found themselves in detention centers instead of on their way to Germany or France as initially planned. Belarus' actions demonstrate how a rogue nation can develop an infrastructure to weaponize migration to neighboring states and profit from it. Other countries could easily follow suit in the coming decades as climate change and human migration likely increase.

## RUMORS, CONFUSION & COERCION

The movements of those displaced by the effects of climate change are particularly vulnerable to manipulation because no international legal protection exists for people displaced by climate change. The term 'climate refugee' has recently increased in popularity as more attention has been given to the nexus between climate change and migration, but it is not a term that is defined in international law. Although some regional agreements offer protection to climate migrants,<sup>17</sup> the current global definition of a refugee established at the 1951 Refugee

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13 Priscilla Alvarez, "Smugglers Spread Misinformation at the Border. The White House Says Now Is Not the Time to Come.," CNN, February 10, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/10/politics/immigration-biden-misinformation/index.html>.

14 Benas Gerdziūnas et al., "Baghdad to Lithuania: How Belarus Opened New Migration Route to EU," [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com), July 15, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/baghdad-to-lithuania-how-belarus-opened-new-migration-route-to-eu/>.

15 Rob Schmitz, "The EU Accuses Belarus of Luring Global Migrants into Other European Countries," NPR, October 12, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/12/1045345417/poland-belarus-lukashenko-eu-migrants-asylum>.

16 "Lithuania Says Belarus Officers Illegally Pushed Migrants over Border," BBC News, August 18, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58255448>.

17 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) (Kampala, Uganda: African Union, 2009), [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36846-treaty-kampala\\_convention.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36846-treaty-kampala_convention.pdf).

Convention and subsequent 1967 Refugee Protocol protects people fleeing persecution “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, though legitimate arguments can and are made for climate refugees falling under the “particular social group” designation, many displaced by climate change are likely to continue to fail to meet such a definition unless there is a major change in interpretation of the Refugee Convention. Yet, as the actions of President Lukashenko demonstrate, misinformation and disinformation surrounding asylum availability can be engineered to weaponize the irregular movement of people. Just as the term “climate refugee” is rife with confusion and misunderstanding, so too are the complicated immigration laws surrounding humanitarian protection, including within the United States.

In September 2021, as the European Union struggled to cope with the increasing number of asylum-seekers from Belarus, the United States faced a similar dilemma in Del Rio, Texas. Thousands of Haitians began converging on the Del Rio Port of Entry, hoping to enter the United States. A combination of factors, including a misunderstanding about available humanitarian benefits, rumors, and misinformation, probably drove the mass influx of Haitians to the U.S.-Mexico Border. The change in the U.S. presidential administration was interpreted by some that the United States was taking a more migrant-friendly approach. President Biden’s extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) Designation for Haiti may have also been misinterpreted.<sup>19</sup> To qualify for the program, a person had to prove that they have “been continuously physically present in the United States” since Haiti was designated a TPS country.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, people currently residing outside of the United States, including the thousands of Haitians who came to the Del Rio International Bridge in the Fall of 2021, did not qualify for TPS. Nonetheless, they still went to the U.S. Port of Entry, hoping to enter the United States. When it comes to human displacement caused by climate change, the complex processes and eligibility requirements of programs like TPS could lead to even greater confusion in the future.

Passed as part of the Immigration Act of 1990, the TPS Program allows nationals from designated countries to remain and work in the United States, temporarily, without fear of deportation. TPS includes “natural disasters” among potential designation criteria,<sup>21</sup> implying applicability to climate-driven displacement and prompting calls for TPS expansion to include climate migrants.<sup>22</sup> However, such an expansion would only apply to those already in the United States and offer no pathway to permanent residence. Yet, as evidenced by the events in Del Rio, TX, last fall, rumors and misunderstandings contributed to thousands of Haitians going

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18 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2010), <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>.

19 James Dobbins et al., “How Hope, Fear and Misinformation Led Thousands of Haitians to the U.S. Border,” *New York Times*, Late Edition (East Coast), September 17, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2573616746/citation/1604A7F1ED15430DPQ/1>.

20 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Temporary Protected Status,” March 16, 2022, <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status>.

21 101st Congress, “Immigration Act of 1990,” Pub. L. No. 101–649 (1990), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-104/pdf/STATUTE-104-Pg4978.pdf>.

22 Wyatt G. Sassman and Danielle C. Jefferis, “Beyond Emissions: Migration, Prisons, and the Green New Deal,” *Environmental Law* 51, no. 1 (2021): 161–204.

to the United States' southern border. Thus, as long as confusion and misunderstanding continue to pervade, the easier it will be for bad actors to coerce and manipulate the movement of people for their own gains. As such, neighboring governments can leverage their role as gatekeepers of unregulated migration to influence negotiations and cooperation, as Mexican President Lopez Obrador has demonstrated in his relationship with the United States.<sup>23</sup> For example, in March 2021, President Biden sent millions of COVID vaccines to Mexico in exchange for assistance with the surge of migrants at the U.S-Mexico Southern border. In turn, President Lopez Obrador increased migration enforcement throughout the country, especially at the Mexico-Guatemala border.<sup>24</sup>

Sans travel by sea, many would-be asylum-seekers have found their way to the United States via Mexico. As a result, the country and its government have become a migratory gatekeeper for their Northern neighbors. The 'Remain in Mexico' Policy established during the Trump administration solidified this role.<sup>25</sup> While the country has equally struggled to deal with the humanitarian and security implications of migration surges seen over the years, such events have placed Mexico in a unique bargaining position with the United States. President Biden, just like his predecessors, has found himself relying on the United States' southern neighbor to control migration flows. Ultimately, this gives Mexico greater leverage in its dealing with the United States, ranging from the country's divisive energy policy to trade under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).<sup>26</sup> The implications of such political maneuvering may become far more challenging in a warming world and less sustainable absent appropriate resources and policies to accommodate migrants. As more people find themselves displaced by climate change, regional cooperation and negotiations could yield to coercion and threats of weaponized migration.

## MORE THAN WORDS

The use of weaponized migration is not a novel tactic. However, the world in which such practices might be employed is changing. With more people on the move because of climate change, it will become far easier for governments to manipulate and coerce the displaced. While the Biden administration has acknowledged the importance of climate change and migration through Executive Order 14088, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, and the subsequent White House Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration,

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23 Nick Miroff and Mary Beth Sheridan, "As U.S. Seeks to Outsource Immigration Enforcement, Mexico Gains Leverage," Washington Post, May 3, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/mexico-immigration-enforcement-leverage/2021/05/02/ca2af3aa-a854-11eb-b166-174b63ea6007\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/mexico-immigration-enforcement-leverage/2021/05/02/ca2af3aa-a854-11eb-b166-174b63ea6007_story.html).

24 Nick Miroff, Karen DeYoung, and Kevin Sieff, "Biden Will Send Mexico Surplus Vaccine, as U.S. Seeks Help on Immigration Enforcement," Washington Post, March 19, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-mexico-immigration-coronavirus-vaccine/2021/03/18/a63a3426-8791-11eb-8a67-f314e5fcf88d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-mexico-immigration-coronavirus-vaccine/2021/03/18/a63a3426-8791-11eb-8a67-f314e5fcf88d_story.html).

25 Reyes Mata, "Mexico Using Immigration Enforcement as Leverage," Las Cruces Sun - News, October 24, 2021, sec. News.

26 Dave Graham, "Economy, Energy Row and Drugs Loom at North American Summit," Reuters, January 8, 2023, sec. Americas, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/economy-energy-row-drugs-loom-north-american-summit-2023-01-08/>; Miroff and Sheridan, "As U.S. Seeks to Outsource Immigration Enforcement, Mexico Gains Leverage."

comprehensive immigration reform appears stalled. In this same vein, the patchwork of executive orders and policies from one presidential administration to the next has only caused more confusion, as evidenced by humanitarian programs like TPS, and past events like those seen in Del Rio, Texas. Therefore, how might the United States diminish such risks?

First and foremost, the United States must reassess its current immigration laws and how climate change will likely increase irregular migration to the country's borders. New policies, resources, and legal instruments will be required to handle the complex needs of climate migrants, which would also reduce the leverage available to U.S. neighbors to use migrant flows as a bargaining chip. To begin, U.S. policymakers should look at the recommendations provided by Climate Refugees, a human rights organization, that the UN investigate how those displaced by climate change might qualify under the 'particular social groups' category of the UN refugee definition. Such a proposal could have equal application within the United States.<sup>27</sup> Although the U.S. definition of a refugee differs from that of the UN, both recognize the protected characteristic of 'membership in a particular social group.'<sup>28</sup> Therefore, U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS), the federal agency in charge of refugee and asylum adjudications, should also reexamine the definition of a refugee under Section §101(a)(42)(A) of the Immigration Nationality Act in the context of those displaced by climate change in regards to 'membership in particular social groups.'<sup>29</sup> If climate migrants could meet the definition of a refugee based on this protected characteristic there would be no need for a change in U.S. law—an important factor, considering the United States' failure to pass any major immigration reform since 1996.<sup>30</sup>

Creating legal pathways for people threatened by climate change to relocate is another important step to attend to the growing needs of migrants, preempt misinformation and disinformation, and mitigate the weaponization of refugee and asylum seekers. Therefore, policymakers should assess the implementation of regional free-movement agreements with countries that are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Free movement agreements, like the Caribbean Community, Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, and the Mercado Comun del Sur, highlight the importance and effectiveness of regional collaboration when it comes to facilitating the legal migration of those displaced by climate change.<sup>31</sup>

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27 Climate Refugees, "Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Climate Change" (New York, NY, November 8, 2022), <https://www.climate-refugees.org/advocacy/statement-unsr-climate-change-displacement>.

28 The one-word difference should be noted when it comes to the definition of a refugee used by the United States vs. the UN. The United States uses the phrase, "membership in a particular social group." Whereas, the UN uses the term, "membership of a particular social group."

29 "Immigration and Nationality Act," Pub. L. No. 96-212, § (a)(42), 1101 8 U.S. Code 1 (1980), <http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-prelim-title8-section1101&num=0&edition=prelim>.

30 "Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996," Pub. L. No. 104-208, 1101 8 U.S. Code (1996), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-104publ208/pdf/PLAW-104publ208.pdf>.

31 Elizabeth Donger, "Fleeing the Weather," *ReVista* (Cambridge) 18, no. 3 (Spring 2018), <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/fleeing-the-weather/>; Ama Francis, "Free Movement Agreements & Climate-Induced Migration: A Caribbean Case Study," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, September 1, 2019), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3464594>.

At the same time, the use of humanitarian or significant public benefit parole into the United States, established under section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration Nationality Act, should also be evaluated in relation to countries and populations highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Currently, USCIS offers a variety of humanitarian parole programs, including those for Afghan and Ukrainian nationals, family reunification for Cuban and Haitians, and many more.<sup>32</sup> These programs were created in light of current events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan. Just last month, in an effort to reduce the surge of illegal entries into the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) implemented a new process for Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans to apply for humanitarian parole. The program also eliminated the numerical cap on Venezuelans to apply for humanitarian parole.<sup>33</sup> Thus, considering the varied ways humanitarian parole has been used in the past to address complex events, it is likely it could also be used to address the growing needs of climate migrants.

While policymakers could and should consider all the above recommendations as potential options for those displaced by climate change, each is highly susceptible to political manipulation. From one presidential administration to the next, the scope and availability of such programs could dramatically shift. Ultimately, this underscores the far greater issue facing the United States: a broken immigration system. As long as the Congress fails to pass comprehensive immigration reform, misinformation and disinformation will continue to spread. The voids in U.S. immigration law and the confusion surrounding ad-hoc policy created under executive order has created the perfect breeding ground for fake information to brew. In turn, smugglers, traffickers, and other bad actors have leveraged this to their advantage at the expense of U.S. interests and the well-being of people desperate to flee harm. The compounding effects of climate change will only widen the types of misinformation and disinformation that might permeate. If the United States truly wants to diminish the risk of the weaponization of climate-driven migration, more comprehensive legislative reform that accounts for how climate-driven migration is creating new human and national security vulnerabilities will ultimately be required.

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32 Citizenship & Immigration Services, "Humanitarian Parole," U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services, accessed July 13, 2019, [https://my.uscis.gov/exploremyoptions/humanitarian\\_parole](https://my.uscis.gov/exploremyoptions/humanitarian_parole).

33 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "DHS Implements New Processes for Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans and Eliminates Cap for Venezuelans," January 6, 2023, <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/alerts/dhs-implements-new-processes-for-cubans-haitians-and-nicaraguans-and-eliminates-cap-for-venezuelans>.