Interview – Kelly Greenhill

Dr. Kelly M. Greenhill is a political scientist with faculty appointments at Tufts University and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She also serves as an Editor of the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs book series and as Director of the MIT-Seminar XXI Program. Greenhill holds an SM and a PhD from MIT, a CSS from Harvard, and a BA from UC Berkeley. Greenhill is a scholar of international relations and security studies, with research interests in four overlapping lines of inquiry: migration and refugees; the politics of information; military intervention, coercion, and conflict; and asymmetric influence in international politics. Greenhill has published four books, including *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*, winner of the 2011 International Studies Association's Best Book of the Year Award; a second, expanded and updated edition is forthcoming. She is currently preparing for publication a fifth book, provisionally entitled *Fear and Present Danger: Extra-factual Sources of Threat Conception and Proliferation*. Greenhill's other publications on the topic of engineered migration as an instrument of statecraft include "*Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War*," "*Open Arms Behind Barred Doors: Fear, Hypocrisy and Policy Schizophrenia in the European Migration Crisis*," "*When Migrants Become Weapons: The Long History and Worrying Future of a Coercive Tactic*," and "*Deal-making, Diplomacy, and Transactional Forced Migration*" (with Fiona Adamson), *International Affairs* (forthcoming, 2023).

Greenhill's research and political commentary have also appeared in a variety of peer-reviewed journals and in myriad national and international media outlets. Her work has been cited and employed in legal briefs in cases argued before the U.S. Supreme Court and in policy briefs and planning guidance for other civilian and military organs of the U.S. government. Outside of academia, Greenhill has served as a consultant to the United Nations and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, NATO, the World Bank, and the Ford Foundation; as a defense program analyst for the U.S. Department of Defense; and as an economic policy intern for then Senator John F. Kerry.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I have fairly broad interests and a rather ecumenical worldview on what is important and interesting in the fields of political science, international relations, and security studies. Broadly speaking, however, I tend to be most excited by research that is problem-focused and brings new lenses, tools and/or (types of) sources—primary or secondary—to bear in answering important, policy relevant questions. I don't mean using new tools or techniques to show us what we already know, but rather using new data, whether historical, archival, qualitative sources or new technique-enabled quantitative findings, to provide improved purchase on, and understandings of, pressing real-world problems.

How has the way you understand the world shifted over time, and what (or who) prompted the most important shifts your thinking?

In line with my previous answer, I tend to learn more and shift my thinking when exposed to viewpoints and disciplines other than my own, as well as to literatures outside of my own subfield and discipline. I approach these sources of new and different knowledge with my own background, experience, and knowledge, but then by marrying what I already know with the new and different, I find I can often productively assimilate, synthesize, and triangulate to shift, expand, and amend my own prior, *ex ante* frame(s) of reference. This is not to say I don't also learn a good

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deal from my own subfield and discipline—I do!—only that knowledge acquired from outside my own intellectual comfort zone and from exposure to new historical documents or perspectives tends to be more influential in driving my own cognitive sea-changes and paradigm shifts.

Your book *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* provides a detailed analysis of the exploitation of migrant flows as an instrument of coercion. What is engineered migration, and what political purposes does it serve?

Strategically engineered migrations are those that are deliberately created, manipulated, or simply threatened in the service of domestic and/or international political, economic, or military objectives. The use of migration as an instrument of statecraft is common across the globe and can be divided into four, often overlapping categories—dispossessive, exportive, militarized, and coercive engineered migrations.

Dispossessive engineered migrations are those in which governments and/or non-state actors displace a group or groups to acquire the territory or property of those displaced or to eliminate them as a threat to its own ethnopolitical or economic dominance. This class of events includes what is commonly known as ethnic cleansing. In the recent war in the Tigray province of Ethiopia, for example, observers reported that, by using targeted and indiscriminate killings, as well as other forms of violence and intimidation, Ethiopian and neighboring Eritrean government troops and paramilitaries deliberately and systemically aimed to demographically re-engineer Western Tigray into an ethnically Amharan-dominated region. This involved destroying Tigrayan villages and driving out or forcibly relocating those displaced by cleansing operations.

In contrast, *exportive engineered migrations* are those migrations engineered either to fortify a domestic political position—by expelling political dissidents and other domestic adversaries—or to discomfit, humiliate or (in extremis) destabilize foreign government(s). From mid-2021 and into early 2022, after luring them to Minsk from as far away as South and Southwest Asia, Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime allowed migrants and refugees to enter EU member states such as Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Evidence suggests that, at a minimum, Lukashenko aimed to punish the EU for its criticism of his regime and for newly imposed sanctions as well as to embarrass EU member states, confronted with this engineered migration emergency.

Militarized engineered migrations are those conducted, usually during armed conflict, to gain military advantage against an adversary—i.e., via the disruption or destruction of an opponent's command and control, logistics, or movement capabilities—or to enhance one's own force structure, via the acquisition of additional manpower or resources. All parties to the Syrian Civil War used this technique to some degree. In those cases where displacement was undertaken to deny opponents access to civilian support, supplies and succour, the displaced often ended up as refugees in neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, or farther afield in the EU. It bears noting, in addition, that many of the Syrians that ended up in Turkey have in turn been used as pawns in Turkey's repeated efforts since 2015 to coerce the EU into providing it with an array of political and economic concessions—i.e., in serial attempts at coercive engineered migration.

Finally, *coercive engineered migrations*—the principal focus of my book *Weapons of Mass Migration* (*WMM*)—are those outflows deliberately created or manipulated (or just threatened) in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states. For instance, over a two-day period in spring 2021, Moroccan officials allowed more than 8,000 people to cross unimpeded into the tiny Spanish enclave of Ceuta, both to punish and coerce Spain over its behaviour and policies towards the Polisario Front, a separatist movement that has been battling for the independence of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony annexed by Morocco.

Where else have we seen engineered migration in practice?

As the examples above suggest, engineered migration is a tragically common and widespread phenomenon. Indeed, it is a tool that has been in use for centuries and on every continent of the globe other than Antarctica. In the first edition of *WMM*, I identified at least 56 cases, involving dozens of coercers, dozens of targets, and dozens of victimized populations. The forthcoming second edition features dozens of additional cases. A number of these new

cases have happened since the first edition was published, but a non-trivial number comprise previously unidentified historical cases of which I was until recently unaware.

You argue that between 1951 and 2006, coercive engineered migrations were attempted at least once a year, on average. And of the 56 cases identified in your book, they achieved virtually all of their goals 57% of the time, and at least some of their objectives nearly 75% of the time. Why is weaponised migration such an attractive policy option, and what accounts for its high success rate?

CEM can be attractive to relatively weak actors who have few effective tools of influence at their disposal when trying to affect the behaviour of their often more powerful targets. Manufacturing crises (or simply threatening to do so) is a tried-and-true strategy for weak actors seeking negotiations and concessions from stronger actors opposed to granting either. Indeed, many relatively weak actors view crisis generation as a necessary precursor to negotiations with their more powerful counterparts. The strategic creation of crises represents one of the few methods of leverage weaker states have against their much more powerful counterparts. After manufacturing military standoffs, humanitarian emergencies, and other potentially escalatory crises, weak actors can turn around and offer to make them disappear in exchange for military, economic, and political concessions.

So, why does this method of nonmilitary persuasion ever work? Arguably, it most often succeeds because it is a strategy that merges the international and domestic concerns of a state into one and transforms its domestic normative and political virtues into international bargaining vices. This perverse transmutation is possible for two reasons. First, although liberal democracies are likely to have made normative and juridical commitments to protect those fleeing persecution (and sometimes privation), some segment of the societies within liberal states is usually unwilling to bear the real or perceived costs of upholding these commitments.

CEM can also be attractive to—and has been historically used by—powerful states, such as the US and Russia, in a variety of circumstances when more traditional tools of influence, such as the use of military force, are viewed as too costly or potentially escalatory. Both editions of *WMM* feature a variety of such cases. At the same time, it bears noting, CEM is not a super-weapon. Although its success rate when undertaken has historically been quite high, especially as compared to conventional tools of coercive diplomacy, its high success rate may be because it is only deployed very selectively, and only against targets that coercers view as highly vulnerable.

Moreover, even when deployed, things don't always go according to coercers' plans. For one thing, targets that appear vulnerable at the outset may grow less so over time, depending on how targets respond to weaponization. Moreover, the "weapons" in migration-driven coercion—the victimized displaced—have agency and may undermine coercive attempts by, among other things, moving in larger numbers and in different directions from those envisioned by would-be coercers. Thus, weaponized migration is rarely a policy instrument of first resort. Nevertheless, although the limitations are real, so are its potential merits—from a strategic, albeit not a moral standpoint.

Your work devotes considerable attention to the idea of "hypocrisy costs". Could you delineate the term, and explain how they translate into material costs for policymakers?

Hypocrisy costs are a special class of symbolic political reputational (or audience) costs that can be imposed when there exists a real or perceived disparity between a professed commitment to liberal values and/or international norms and demonstrated state actions that contravene such a commitment. Although *neither necessary nor sufficient* for coercive engineered migration to succeed, hypocrisy costs can further enhance the likelihood of coercive success.

Hypocrisy costs are operationalized in a manner akin to what human rights network advocates call "accountability politics": once a government or its leadership has publicly committed itself to a principle, canny observers can use those positions, and their command of information, to expose the distance between discourse and practice. Such exposure can be embarrassing to coercive targets, which may try to save face by closing that distance or by making the gap disappear altogether by ending the crisis through concession to coercers' demands.

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As I argued in the first edition of *Weapons of Mass Migration (WMM)* more than a decade ago, although scholars had to that point focused most of their attention on the normatively positive potential consequences of accountability politics, hypocrisy-exposing gaps between words and actions can equally well be exploited by actors driven by less benevolent motivations, if only in cases wherein targets care about credible charges of hypocrisy. In fact, the creation of such gaps can be used as a kind of norms-enhanced political cudgel and be purposefully instigated or catalysed by self-serving actors. Then, if normative violations do in fact follow, hypocrisy costs can be imposed by domestic and international pro-refugee/migrant groups seeking to protect those under threat- as well as by coercers themselves. For instance, as mentioned in *WMM,* in the middle of East Germany's attempt to coerce West Germany in the mid-1980s with migrants flown in from south and southeast Asia, an observer on the western side acknowledged: "As West Germans become angry and start to say rude things about all these black and brown abusers of the right of asylum, it enables West Germany to be depicted as "racialist" and "in violation of its own constitution" (p.65).

Have anti-immigrant attitudes and rhetoric hardened in the West since the publication of your book? Will these trends affect the ways in which target states respond to engineered migration crises?

Again, as I detailed in the first edition of *WMM*, attitudes towards immigration, and especially irregular immigration, have been hardening in certain segments of western societies since at least the end of the 1980s. There has been, however, some ebb and flow over time, as well as hardening and softening of attitudes, depending on the complexion of the group(s) of migrants and/or refugees in question. For example, European attitudes toward Syrian refugees have been markedly different than attitudes towards Ukrainians fleeing the 2022 Russian invasion.

There has also been variability—and, in some cases, heightened polarization of views—towards immigration and border security, depending on political leanings. Again, this has not been universal, and some views and shifts in opinion transcend political stereotypes. For instance, in the United States, the percentage of people who say that increasing security along the U.S.-Mexico border to reduce illegal crossings "should be an important goal" has measuredly grown in recent years, according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Council. This increase has been principally driven by Democrats (59 percent today vs. 49 percent three years ago), rather than Republicans, who have long cited increasing border security as an important policy objective.

At the same time, as I argued in the spring 2022 issue of *Foreign Affairs*,one thing that has become more common in recent years is what I refer to as "the weaponization of the weaponization of migration," wherein politically expedient claims that adversaries are engaged in weaponized migration are deployed and used as political cover for the adoption of illiberal and possibly illegal immigration policies and to help justify an array of policies that might otherwise generate more pushback. In effect, this means that both real and potentially unfounded claims of migration weaponization are being strategically wielded in the service of other political goals and policies. This is a very interesting development, but not in a good way.

With respect to trends, as noted in the aforementioned *Foreign Affairs* article*,* such moves are likely to further weaken the global refugee regime and the universal humanitarian standards the refugee regime sought to establish and enshrine. And if the current dynamic prevails, not only will the weaponization of migration continue to be a pervasive symptom of a collapsing global migration regime, but Western governments may also further undermine the human rights and freedoms they purport to stand for.

Do you expect to see weaponised migration becoming an increasingly frequent feature of international political life?

As is true of so much of international politics, interstate diplomatic negotiations and bargaining games, coercive engineered migration is a dynamic phenomenon, the relative frequency of which is contingent upon the prevailing environmental conditions faced by the relevant actors. So, as far as we can expect going forward, much will depend on how states and non-state actors respond to the material and normative incentives and constraints offered to them going forward.

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How can target states respond to this form of coercion?

States faced with the threat of coercive engineered migration have several options, all of which have pros and cons and none of which is a silver bullet nor guaranteed to work in all situations. As the statistics you cited in a previous question make clear, one commonly chosen option is to concede to coercers' demands. However, concession can carry the risk of recidivism. Like successful hostage takers, coercers may return to the strategy time and again, as a variety of "serial weaponizers" around the globe historically have. Nevertheless, because eventual (partial) concession is such a common outcome, more careful monitoring of the prevailing conditions on the ground in potential sending states, coupled with more aural acuity if and when potential challengers begin making threatening noises, could lead to earlier diplomatic intervention, which in turn could stave off domestic discord, unnecessary crises, and political embarrassments.

Alternatively, targets can respond to threatened flows by abrogating their humanitarian commitments, closing their borders, locking their doors, buck-passing responsibility to neighbors and/or by attempting to externalize the problem—as they have with ordinary migration flows—by partially or completely outsourcing the handling of the influx and asylum claims. But while warehousing tends to serve the needs of potential target states while keeping the potential contradictions inherent in their behavior somewhat hidden from domestic audiences, it can cause significant political problems within the states doing the warehousing and inspire resistance by potential third-party states that fear destabilizing consequences of influxes. Furthermore, willing warehousing countries sometimes become weaponizers themselves; thus, creating a new and expanded set of problems and vulnerabilities.

Cajoling and/or buying off others to keep migrants and asylum seekers out of sight and off target state territory may also come at a high political and moral cost. Contravening humanitarian and legal obligations can reinforce anti-immigration sentiment domestically and further undermine human rights and normative values many targets ostensibly hold dear. Moreover, such behaviors by one state can trigger cascades of problematic copycat behavior by others.

Another policy option for targets is to take military action to change conditions on the ground in the coercing country. But wars can be costly, and their outcomes uncertain. Although foreign-imposed change has sometimes achieved its primary objective, no such venture in the last three decades has gone wholly according to plan. Moreover, in every case, the military incursion cost more, and generated more refugees and internally displaced people, than was expected at the outset. Additionally, although it is rare, targets can sometimes simply convincingly threaten other actions that convince challengers to back down or end an outflow. When evasion succeeds, coercion will fail, or at least be less successful than coercers may have hoped.

Finally, targets can greatly diminish the potency of the tool simply by absorbing the displaced—whether for short or longer term. In doing so, targets essentially say "do your worst, I will take them all," in effect removing the strategic leverage of the coercer(s). However, accommodation is far more easily accomplished if the refugee or migrant group in question is racially/culturally/religiously seen as non-threatening; indeed, identity is far more important than numbers of migrants or refugees in determining the probable success or failure of a coercive attempt. Targets know this; unfortunately for targets, coercers also know this.

Nevertheless, if conditions are right, a judicious use of a combination of pro-active public policy, education, research, and generous side-payments, potential targets can soften attitudes towards groups otherwise likely to inspire hostility. Such measures include the development of comprehensive contingency plans, both to actively cope with specific emergencies and to help prevent local infrastructure(s) from being overburdened. They also involve education campaigns aimed at improving perceptions of particular migrant or refugee groups, or of migrants and refugees in general. Because the costs of absorption and assimilation tend to be unevenly distributed, concomitantly making provisions for those destined to bear the brunt of the costs is critical if accommodation campaigns are to have any chance of success.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

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As not everybody has the same reasons for studying IR, it is difficult to offer universal or singular advice. Different scholars have different career aspirations and different intended audiences for their scholarship. However, there are a few thoughts which I have shared with some up-and-coming scholars before and which I think are broadly applicable.

First, life is both long and short, and, with this oxymoronic observation in mind, I recommend that scholars of all ages and career stages follow their instincts and listen to their guts. It can be impossible to know ex ante if one is making the right career decision(s)—what to study; whether to pursue a policy job versus an academic one; whether to work in the public sector, go into government, or work in private industry. However, it is remarkably easy to know in one's gut if one is making a decision that feels wrong, short sighted or driven by other people's expectations. So, recommendation number one is to choose a career path that feels right and to aim to do work that feels important and consequential.

Second, coming full circle back to my answer to the first question posed in this interview, an ever-growing mountain of research suggests that what one is doing tends to trump where one is doing it in terms of job satisfaction. So wherever one lands and whatever path one chooses, my second piece of advice is to focus on big (and under-examined) problems that matter and for which we lack good or sufficient solutions.