



Irregular Migration and Refugee Crises as Emerging Non-Traditional Security Threats: Implications for Human Security and Regional Stability

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Abstract

Irregular migration and refugee crises have emerged as some of the most significant non-traditional security challenges confronting the international community in the twenty-first century, generating complex humanitarian, governance, and security concerns that transcend national boundaries. This study examines irregular migration and refugee crises as emerging non-traditional security threats and evaluates their implications for human security and regional stability, with particular reference to Africa, the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the West African sub-region. The study adopts a qualitative research design relying on documentary analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents, and reports produced by international and regional organizations. Guided by Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory, the paper critically examines the structural drivers of irregular migration, the evolving securitization of migration governance, and the multidimensional consequences for both source and host countries. The findings reveal that irregular migration is primarily a manifestation of persistent human insecurity arising from conflict, poverty, environmental degradation, and weak governance, while increasingly being framed by states as a national security concern requiring extraordinary policy responses. The study argues that migration governance should move beyond traditional border-control approaches towards integrated strategies that simultaneously promote human security, regional cooperation, and sustainable development, and proposes an Integrated Human Security Governance Framework that balances legitimate state security interests with humanitarian obligations. The paper recommends strengthening governance institutions, addressing the structural drivers of forced migration, enhancing regional cooperation through ECOWAS and the African Union, modernizing border management, and adopting evidence-based migration policies capable of promoting both human security and regional stability.

Keywords: Irregular Migration; Refugee Crises; Human Security; Non-Traditional Security; Regional Security Governance.



1. INTRODUCTION

Irregular migration and refugee crises have become defining features of the contemporary international security landscape. Once viewed primarily as humanitarian concerns, they are now widely recognized as multidimensional non-traditional security challenges with significant implications for national security, regional stability, and human security, driven by armed conflict, political instability, environmental degradation, and weak governance. These dynamics are particularly evident in Africa and West Africa, where protracted conflicts and fragile institutions continue to generate large-scale displacement alongside terrorism, organized crime, and climate-induced migration.

Nigeria occupies a pivotal position within this regional security environment, functioning as a country of origin, transit, destination, and return for migrants and refugees amid insurgency, banditry, and economic hardship. This study adopts an integrated perspective, examining irregular migration through the complementary lenses of Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory while proposing the Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (IHSG Framework) as a governance-centred approach to sustainable migration management.

This study contributes to migration and security scholarship in two significant respects. First, it repositions irregular migration from a narrow border-control or humanitarian issue to a multidimensional human security concern requiring integrated governance responses. Second, it proposes the IHSG Framework, which balances legitimate state security interests with humanitarian obligations, offering scholars and policymakers a practical tool for addressing the structural drivers and security implications of forced migration.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The increasing convergence of irregular migration, refugee crises, and non-traditional security threats has elevated migration governance from a humanitarian concern to a strategic policy priority. Traditional policy responses have frequently addressed the symptoms of migration in isolation rather than the structural governance deficits and human insecurity that sustain it.

This study is therefore timely because it examines irregular migration through the integrated



perspectives of Human Security and Security Studies, proposing the IHSG Framework as a model emphasizing preventive governance, institutional coordination, and human-centred security. The study is particularly relevant to Nigeria and the wider West African region, where increasing population mobility continues to intersect with insecurity and regional development aspirations.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing scholarly and policy attention devoted to irregular migration and refugee crises, important conceptual and policy gaps remain in understanding their relationship with contemporary security governance. Existing literature has examined migration from humanitarian, legal, and border management perspectives, but these are often treated independently, resulting in fragmented analyses that insufficiently explain the interaction between governance failures, human insecurity, and irregular migration. In many cases, migration is addressed primarily through reactive measures such as border enforcement, which fail to address the structural conditions that drive forced migration.

This challenge is especially significant within West Africa, where Nigeria exemplifies these dynamics by functioning simultaneously as a country of origin, transit, destination, and return. This multidimensional role presents governance challenges that cannot be adequately addressed through conventional migration management alone. This study addresses this gap by examining the migration-security nexus through Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory, and by developing the IHSG Framework as a conceptual model for promoting preventive governance and institutional coordination relevant to Nigeria, West Africa, and similarly situated regions.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine irregular migration and refugee crises as interconnected non-traditional security challenges and to evaluate the implications of governance, human security, and regional cooperation for sustainable migration management.



The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the drivers and dynamics of irregular migration and refugee crises as interconnected non-traditional security challenges, with particular emphasis on governance deficits, conflict, socioeconomic inequality, and environmental pressures;
2. evaluate the implications of irregular migration and refugee movements for human security, national security, and regional stability, including existing governance responses at the national, regional, and international levels; and
3. propose an Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (IHSG Framework) to strengthen preventive governance, institutional coordination, and sustainable migration management.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study examines irregular migration and refugee crises as contemporary non-traditional security challenges within the broader framework of human security and strategic security governance. It focuses on the interrelationship between governance deficits, human insecurity, forced displacement, and regional security, with particular emphasis on Africa and the West African sub-region. Nigeria serves as the principal case study because of its strategic position as a country of origin, transit, destination, and return for migrants and refugees, as well as its central role in regional migration governance.

The paper adopts a qualitative, documentary research approach and draws on relevant academic literature, policy documents, and reports produced by national, regional, and international institutions. While acknowledging the legal, humanitarian, and developmental dimensions of migration, the study primarily approaches the subject from the perspective of Security and Strategic Studies. Accordingly, its analysis is directed towards understanding the governance implications of irregular migration and refugee crises and identifying institutional strategies capable of strengthening preventive governance, regional cooperation, and sustainable migration management.



The paper is organized into six major sections covering the introduction, conceptual and theoretical framework, methodology, findings and discussion, conclusion and policy implications, and references.

1.6 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Migration refers to the movement of people from one location to another with the intention of establishing residence, occurring within or across borders and being voluntary or involuntary. When occurring outside established legal frameworks, contemporary migration increasingly generates governance, humanitarian, and security challenges.

Irregular migration refers to the movement of persons across international borders outside the legal and regulatory frameworks governing entry, residence, or employment in destination countries. It should not automatically be equated with criminality, since many irregular migrants are compelled by armed conflict, persecution, environmental degradation, or poverty; within Africa, it is often facilitated by porous borders, weak migration governance, and protracted insecurity across regions such as the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.

A refugee is defined under the 1951 UN Convention and 1967 Protocol as a person outside their country of nationality owing to a well-founded fear of persecution, a definition further expanded within Africa by the 1969 OAU Convention. A refugee crisis occurs when the scale of forced displacement overwhelms the capacity of governments and humanitarian organizations to provide adequate protection.

Human Security, popularized by the UNDP Human Development Report (1994), shifts the focus of security from protecting state sovereignty to protecting individuals across seven interrelated dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Within this framework, irregular migration and refugee crises are manifestations of deeper human insecurities rather than merely border management issues.

Non-Traditional Security refers to threats falling outside conventional military aggression that nonetheless undermine the security of states and societies, including climate change, terrorism, cyber insecurity, human trafficking, and irregular migration. These transnational,



multidimensional threats require cooperative governance at national, regional, and international levels rather than military responses alone.

Regional Security Governance refers to the collective institutional arrangements through which neighbouring states address common security challenges. In West Africa, organizations such as ECOWAS increasingly recognize that terrorism, organized crime, and irregular migration require coordinated regional responses extending beyond military cooperation to intelligence sharing, humanitarian coordination, and migration management.

1.7 Critical Review of Literature

Scholarly interest in irregular migration and refugee crises has expanded considerably over the past three decades, reflecting the growing recognition of migration as both a humanitarian and security concern. While substantial literature exists on the causes, consequences, and governance of migration, significant differences remain regarding how migration should be understood within contemporary security discourse. Three major debates are particularly relevant to this study.

Migration as a Humanitarian Concern versus a Security Concern

One of the most enduring debates concerns whether irregular migration should primarily be viewed as a humanitarian phenomenon or as a security challenge. Humanitarian scholars emphasize that migrants and refugees are principally victims of armed conflict, persecution, poverty, environmental degradation, and governance failures who require international protection and humanitarian assistance. This perspective is strongly reflected in international refugee law and the broader human security paradigm, which prioritizes the protection of individuals over territorial defence.

Conversely, security-oriented scholars argue that unmanaged migration may generate significant implications for border security, public order, transnational organized crime, terrorism, and social cohesion, particularly where state institutions lack the capacity to regulate large-scale population movements. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that



these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Rather, irregular migration simultaneously presents humanitarian obligations and legitimate security concerns that require balanced and integrated policy responses.

Governance, Human Security, and Forced Migration

A second body of literature attributes irregular migration primarily to governance deficits rather than migration itself. Scholars argue that weak institutions, political instability, armed conflict, socioeconomic inequality, environmental stress, and limited access to essential services create conditions that compel individuals to migrate through irregular channels. From this perspective, migration represents a symptom of broader human insecurity rather than its principal cause.

The human security literature reinforces this argument by emphasizing that sustainable migration management requires addressing the structural drivers of displacement through improved governance, conflict prevention, economic inclusion, environmental resilience, and institutional development. This approach shifts policy attention from reactive border control towards preventive governance capable of reducing the conditions that generate forced migration.

Regional Governance and Migration Management

A third strand of scholarship examines the role of regional institutions in responding to irregular migration and refugee crises. Organizations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have developed legal and institutional frameworks promoting refugee protection, regional cooperation, and orderly migration governance. Despite these initiatives, implementation remains uneven due to limited institutional capacity, inadequate coordination, resource constraints, and differing national policy priorities. Consequently, migration governance within many developing regions continues to rely heavily on reactive responses rather than integrated long-term strategies.



1.8 Research Gap

Although existing scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of irregular migration and refugee crises, much of the literature continues to examine humanitarian protection, border security, governance, and human security as separate analytical domains. Comparatively limited attention has been devoted to integrating these perspectives into a unified framework capable of explaining how governance failures, human insecurity, and regional instability collectively generate contemporary migration crises.

This study addresses that gap by combining Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory to examine irregular migration as a multidimensional non-traditional security challenge. It further proposes the Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (IHSG Framework) as an analytical model for strengthening preventive governance, institutional coordination, and sustainable migration management within Nigeria, West Africa, and similarly situated regions.

1.9 Theoretical Framework

Human Security Theory

Human Security Theory, popularized by the UNDP Human Development Report (1994), argues that genuine security should focus on protecting individuals rather than merely defending state sovereignty, broadening security beyond military threats to include economic deprivation, food insecurity, and environmental degradation. Applied to this study, the theory explains that migration frequently results from deficiencies in human security within countries of origin, meaning durable solutions require addressing the structural causes of displacement rather than relying exclusively on restrictive border policies.

Securitization Theory

Securitization Theory, developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde), explains how political actors transform ordinary policy issues into security threats through political discourse, after which governments justify extraordinary measures that might otherwise be politically unacceptable. Migration has increasingly undergone this process,



portrayed not merely as an immigration issue but as a threat to national security and public order, resulting in stricter border controls and expanded security cooperation; however, excessive securitization risks overshadowing humanitarian obligations and refugees' rights.

Relevance of the Combined Theoretical Framework

Human Security explains the structural drivers of irregular migration by emphasizing the vulnerabilities experienced by individuals and communities, while Securitization Theory explains how governments increasingly interpret migration through the lens of national and regional security. Together, these theories demonstrate that irregular migration and refugee crises are simultaneously humanitarian phenomena, governance challenges, and emerging non-traditional security threats requiring responses that balance state security with the protection of human dignity.

1.10 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on the documentary method of data collection using secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and reports from international organizations such as the United Nations, UNHCR, IOM, the African Union, and ECOWAS.

Data were analysed using the descriptive-analytical method: the descriptive component examines the causes and governance dimensions of irregular migration and refugee crises, while the analytical component evaluates their implications for national security, human security, and regional stability, with particular attention to the Nigerian and West African contexts. The study is guided by Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory, enabling a balanced assessment of migration as both a humanitarian concern and a non-traditional security challenge.

Although the study relies exclusively on secondary data rather than primary field research, evidence was triangulated across multiple academic and institutional sources, providing a robust basis for analysing irregular migration and refugee crises within the framework of contemporary Security and Strategic Studies.



1.11 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Irregular Migration as a Manifestation of Human Insecurity

One of the principal findings is that irregular migration is fundamentally a manifestation of human insecurity rather than an isolated phenomenon, as individuals across Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia increasingly resort to irregular migration in response to conflict, persecution, economic deprivation, and environmental degradation. This reinforces the central proposition of Human Security Theory that migration is driven by the erosion of economic, food, environmental, and personal security, and should therefore be understood primarily as a symptom of governance and development failures rather than merely a breach of immigration laws.

Socioeconomic Implications for Source Countries

Irregular migration has significant socioeconomic consequences for countries of origin. Although migration can generate developmental benefits through remittances and skills acquisition, the loss of economically active young adults and skilled professionals reduces the productive labour force and constrains public service delivery. Sustained irregular migration also reflects declining public confidence in state institutions, since remittances cannot offset the long-term developmental costs of losing skilled citizens; reducing irregular migration therefore requires improved governance, employment creation, and inclusive development.

Security and Governance Implications for Host Countries

Host countries experience complex governance and security challenges arising from irregular migration, as large-scale movements may strain healthcare, education, and social welfare systems where governance institutions are weak. Weak immigration systems and porous borders also create opportunities for criminal networks engaged in smuggling and trafficking, although migrants and refugees remain predominantly victims of insecurity rather than perpetrators of crime. Migration has increasingly been securitized through narratives portraying migrants as threats, contributing to xenophobia; sustainable governance therefore



requires balancing security concerns with humanitarian protection and social inclusion.

Irregular Migration, Transnational Organized Crime and Regional Stability

A significant finding is the growing convergence between irregular migration and transnational organized crime, as migration routes increasingly intersect with networks engaged in smuggling, trafficking, and terrorist financing across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking remain legally distinct but frequently operate along the same corridors under the same criminal organizations, reinforcing the relationship between migration, organized crime, and regional insecurity. Sustainable migration governance therefore requires coordinated regional responses, including intelligence sharing and integrated border management within frameworks such as ECOWAS and the African Union.

Nigeria as a Strategic Case Study: Migration, Human Security and National Stability

Nigeria provides a compelling case study of the relationship between irregular migration and national security, functioning simultaneously as a source, transit, destination, and return point for migrants owing to its strategic location and extensive borders. As a country of origin, the growing *Japa* phenomenon has accelerated the emigration of skilled professionals, weakening institutional capacity in critical sectors; as a transit corridor linking the Sahel to North Africa and Europe, routes through northern states are frequently exploited by smuggling and trafficking networks amid weak border management.

As a host country, Nigeria receives refugees from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger while managing the repatriation of stranded citizens through IOM-coordinated programmes, amid broader insecurity from insurgency, banditry, and farmer-herder conflicts compounded by environmental pressures in the Lake Chad Basin. The Nigerian experience thus reinforces that irregular migration is a manifestation of governance deficits requiring integrated strategies combining border management, conflict prevention, and regional cooperation.

Strategic Implications for National Security Policy

Irregular migration and refugee crises have become integral to contemporary national security



rather than isolated immigration concerns, requiring a broader conception of security extending beyond territorial defence to human security and preventive governance. Migration governance should become increasingly intelligence-led, with governments strengthening early warning systems and inter-agency information sharing, while border governance should integrate biometric identification and coordinated management with neighbouring states rather than simple militarization.

National resilience should become a central security objective, requiring a Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approach. The transnational character of irregular migration further demands stronger regional cooperation through ECOWAS and the African Union, prioritizing intelligence sharing and joint border management. Effective national security in the twenty-first century therefore depends not only on protecting territorial sovereignty but also on strengthening the governance systems that protect people from the structural drivers of insecurity.

Towards the Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (IHSG Framework)

Existing approaches to migration governance often address border security, humanitarian assistance, and development planning as separate policy domains, inadequately capturing the interconnected nature of irregular migration and human insecurity. This study proposes the IHSG Framework, grounded in Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory, which conceptualizes migration as a manifestation of broader structural failures rather than the primary security problem.

The framework consists of four mutually reinforcing pillars: Good Governance, emphasizing accountable institutions and the rule of law; Human Security, promoting investment in employment, education, and social protection; Strategic Security Management, incorporating intelligence-led policing and integrated border management; and Regional and International Cooperation, recognizing that non-traditional security challenges transcend national borders. The framework's principal contribution lies in bridging the traditional divide between state and human security, demonstrating that human development investment strengthens national resilience while effective governance reduces insecurity.



Figure 1: Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (IHSG Framework)

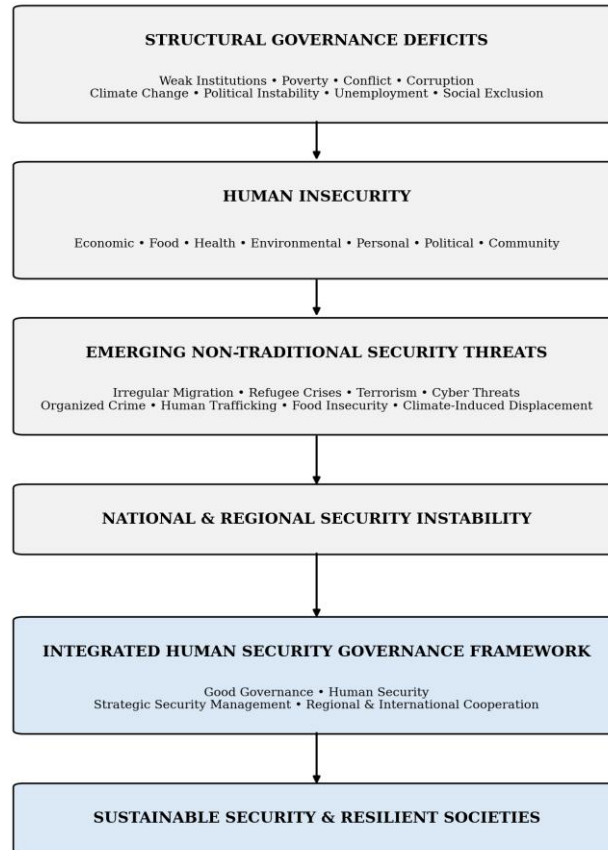


Figure 1. Proposed Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (Author's conceptualization, 2026).



1.12 CONCLUSION

This study examined irregular migration and refugee crises as multidimensional non-traditional security challenges with significant implications for human security, national security, and regional stability. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary migration cannot be adequately understood through traditional state-centric security approaches, since its underlying drivers extend beyond border management to include governance deficits, violent conflict, socioeconomic inequality, and institutional fragility. Irregular migration is therefore better understood as a manifestation of human insecurity and structural governance failures than merely a violation of immigration laws.

Drawing on Human Security Theory and Securitization Theory, the study shows that sustainable migration governance requires balancing legitimate national security concerns with the protection of human dignity and international humanitarian obligations. A major contribution of this study is the development of the Integrated Human Security Governance Framework (IHSG Framework), which advances migration-security scholarship by integrating good governance, human security, strategic security management, and regional cooperation into a unified analytical model that offers a preventive rather than purely reactive approach to migration governance.

The findings further demonstrate that Nigeria exemplifies the complex interaction between migration, insecurity, governance, and regional integration within West Africa, highlighting the need for intelligence-led migration governance, institutional reform, and strengthened regional cooperation under the ECOWAS framework; these lessons are equally relevant to other developing regions confronting similar challenges. Governments should therefore incorporate migration governance into national security strategy by strengthening institutional capacity, improving border governance, enhancing intelligence cooperation, and addressing the structural conditions that drive displacement, in collaboration with regional organizations, humanitarian agencies, and development partners.

Ultimately, effective migration governance cannot be achieved through border control alone. Sustainable security depends upon governance systems capable of protecting people as well as



borders, addressing the root causes of displacement while strengthening institutional resilience and regional cooperation. In an era of increasingly interconnected non-traditional security threats, the long-term stability of states will depend not only on their ability to defend territorial sovereignty but also on their capacity to govern human insecurity before it evolves into broader national and regional crises.

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