

International Public Policy Forum  
Qualifying Round Essay

[School Name]  
[Street Address]  
[City, State, Zip, Country]  
[Phone]

On the topic:

*“Resolved: When in conflict, a nation's self-interest should outweigh its international commitments to migrants.”*

Composed by:

[Student Name]  
[Student Name]  
[Student Name]

On our honor, we pledge that we have received no unauthorized assistance on this work.

Coached and Submitted by:

[Coach's Name]  
[Team Contact Phone Number]  
[Team Contact Email Address]

## **Introduction**

The migration crisis has exploded into one of the cardinal problems of the 21st century. Today, more than 258 million displaced migrants are in need of a new home (United Nations). Numerous countries have signed non-binding treaties, such as the *New York Declaration*, which promise to protect migrants. However, a small number of countries cannot honor these commitments as they lack the resources. As a result, many migrants “languish in overcrowded detention centers” and suffer numerous human rights violations (Sakuma). In these cases alone, we advocate for a nation’s self-interest to outweigh its commitment to migrants due to resource burdens and economic challenges that impact current residents and migrants alike.

## **Defining Terms and Burdens**

In order to discuss the resolution properly, the affirmative will define a few key terms. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants, the term “migrant” refers to a person whose “decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of personal convenience” (UNESCO). Under this definition, “migrant” does *not* include refugees or any other forcibly displaced people. Therefore, the resolution is concerned *only* with people who migrate out of their own free will rather than of necessity.

Due to the different parameters of who are defined as “migrants” and “refugees,” the UN has also created distinct legal frameworks for each (Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration). As per the *New York Declaration*, nations have the burden to “[protect] the safety, dignity and human rights and fundamental

freedoms” of migrants; otherwise they fail to meet their commitments (United Nations General Assembly).

“National interest” is often defined in terms of interstate relations: the “identity [of [a] nation] against encroachments by other nations,” but in this situation a more domestic definition must be used (Navari). The most relevant definition is “national interest as a given set of needs... that lie at the root of the survival of every political group” as it takes a domestic, need-based view (Gumiensky). The definition also accounts for national resources pointing out that “[c]onstraining the fulfillment of these needs... are the nation's resources” which would include the cost of migration to a nation (Gumiensky).

Thus, the *only* situations that the resolution is concerned with are ones where there is a forced tradeoff between self-interest and the commitment to migrants. This is a tiny percentage of cases — the vast majority of nations can and must meet both obligations. However, we argue that the very small subset of nations who experience this conflict must protect self-interest first, as it is a matter of national survival and quality of life for all involved: both current residents and potential migrants.

### **The Lack of Resources and Human Rights Violations**

While accepting migrants and integrating them is an important goal, it is important to recognize that it takes an extraordinary amount of resources to organize, relocate, and house migrants. When unstable countries are forced to follow international commitments to migrants, they fail to meet the guidelines set by the *New York Declaration*, hurting their citizens and the migrants themselves in the process. Being forced to follow through on commitments creates a

resource dilemma; a nation either harms its own interests, abandons migrants, or fails in an attempt to avoid both.

A contemporary example of this dilemma is Libya: a failed state facing a titanic migration crisis. Libya has been in turmoil since the removal of Muammar Gaddafi, the former dictator of Libya. According to the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, the people of Libya “have suffered too and deserve to live in a normal country.” According to the UN, the promotion of “the welfare of the Libyan people” by a “Libyan-led and Libyan owned political solution” is its sole focus in resolving the instability that Libya faces. With the UN focus on the Libyan people, Guterres felt “it would be very difficult to argue that disembarkation in Libya is disembarkation in a safety situation” (UN News). However, Libya is also obligated to follow the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants, as it has ratified the convention in 2018. This predicament of whether to allocate resources towards the national interest of the welfare of Libyans or to the migrants causes Libya’s condition to further spin out of control. Faced with an impossible choice, nations such as Libya cut back on both their national interests and obligation to migrants. This path only furthers the instability the Libyan people face and also increase the violence migrants face on a daily basis.

According to John Yang, the internal conflict in countries similar to Libya exacerbates the difficulties that migrants face. “Libya has been in an almost constant state of chaos” since the overthrow of Gaddafi (Hall and Trew). Airstrikes and assaults are becoming a new normal in Libya as “blood-soaked debris of death” only remain on the streets. Medical teams “struggled to carry away body bags” from a migrant center that was hit by an airstrike (Yang). Due to the

constant presence of airstrikes and raids, there are few resources that are devoted to migrants or its citizens in need.

Due to the lack of resources, many migrants live in poor or dilapidated conditions. For example, conditions in migrant camps are characterized by “severe overcrowding, lack of light, and very little ventilation” (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). Due to the lack of resources, smugglers and traffickers take advantage of the situation and extralegally bring migrants into detention centers. The International Organization for Migration estimates there are 2.5 million irregular migrants in Libya, and many of them are “jailed and condemned to forced labor” (Karasapan).

Furthermore, malnutrition is common in these detention camps as the “average number of calories provided to migrants on a daily basis...is 35% of the quantity actually required” (UNHCR). According to the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Libya’s health care system is facing challenges due to the lack of medicine and general infrastructure. A dysfunctional health care system in Libya has led to diminished access to migrant camps. According to the migrants interviewed in Libya, “several bodies of migrants are found every week” due to malnutrition or disease (UNHCR).

Similarly, a lack of resources for migrants causes many human rights abuses. According to one migrant interview in Italy, “sometimes [migrants] are beaten for no reason” (UNHCR). Many migrants in these camps show injuries caused by guards who beat them with sticks, rocks, and metal bars. Many have also witnessed the brutal deaths of other migrants. These traumatizing experiences could have been avoided if Libya first focused on rebuilding its government and medical system.

Many migrants in these makeshift detention camps also face sexual violence alongside other human rights abuses. There are reports by survivors that describe the guards as “unbearable” as they rape or sexually abuse migrant women or girls. This issue is so prevalent among migrant communities that “they had been advised to take a three-month contraception injection before departure” (UNHCR). On top of the psychological, emotional, and physical damage that rape victims face, victims feel unsafe returning to their own communities. According to an account to UNSMIL, a survivor “can’t be expelled back home” since her brothers will kill her since she is no longer a virgin.

Due to the chaos in Libya and the continued human rights abuses in detention centers, many migrants have stated “their lives have become worse” since they have migrated (Hayden). Many migrants are jumping ship from one failing state to another, which is detrimental to their quality of life. Thus, it is critical that Libyan national interests come before commitments — a nation cannot help others if it cannot help itself.

### **Privatization and the Economy**

Countries should also not allow more migrants in when it would create additional poverty. While most countries can accommodate both economic growth and increased migration, we focus in on the issue Venezuelan migrants have presented for many Latin American countries.

Specifically, current intakes of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia are threatening its economy. Colombia will be taking in two million Venezuelan migrants by the end of the year. Such a high number of incoming migrants has put economic strain on the country, leaving its government to re-strategize in economic planning. Colombia’s constitution requires for it to stay

under a certain budget. To meet this constitutional mandate, Colombia has been looking into privatization of certain government-owned firms. However, privatization would seriously shake up the political dynamic in Colombia. The current administration in Colombia would face serious backlash and lose support from the left wing as well as union workers. Unfortunately, Colombia will have to privatize as more migrants enter, because its public debt has been increasing by twelve percent annually for the past decade (Tomaselli).

Privatization causes serious backlash from certain political activist groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Both of these groups heavily oppose privatization within Colombia, and they also have a long history of causing violence. Both groups have gone to such extreme lengths that they have been deemed foreign terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department. The FARC is known to have rebelled against Colombian government and government officials by abducting a presidential candidate, three U.S. military contractors, and twelve other hostages for six years; assassinating a former culture minister; and hijacking a commercial plane in order to kidnap a senator. The ELN has committed similar offenses, using ransom money as well as revenue from the sales of narcotics to fund their operations. Mostly due to the FARC, violent leftist organizations in Colombia have caused over ten thousand casualties through the planting of landmines. On top of the illegal sales of cocaine and narcotics, the FARC and ELN would also conduct illegal resource extraction to generate more revenue. Because these terrorist groups are so heavily invested in avoiding privatization within Colombia, an influx of migrants will indirectly cause serious issues within the country with violence, death, and illegal activity (Felter, Renwick, and Charity & Security Network).

Furthermore, the funds required to aid refugees will be much larger than initially anticipated. While they initially asked for \$200 million USD, Colombia is now looking for over \$315 million USD more from donor countries to continue providing migrants with necessary housing, employment, health, nutrition, education, and other programs. At this rate of migrant intakes, the numbers will only increase, and countries will not be able to continue to support Colombia. Colombia would go into debt to continue humanitarian aid, and economic decline would surely follow (Bennouna).

Moreover, any sort of migration between Latin American countries gives migrants an even smaller chance of an improved standard of living than does moving to the United States. In his role as “professor emeritus in sociology and a distinguished scholar of demography,” Donald Bogue categorizes migrants who move between two developing nations into three different groups. He determined that the three incentives for Latin Americans to migrate between countries are as follows: forced migration of low skilled people due to poverty, unemployment, or social unrest; migration of intermediate skilled people due to lack of employment at home; and people with specialized skills, also moving for better employment opportunities. Bogue then conducted a study on twelve Latin American countries. He found that while United States’ immigrants on average improve their standard of living and escape poverty after five years, the economic status of Latin American immigrants stays relatively the same. He also found that while the US has about a twelve percent immigrant population, Latin American countries on average have a population that is only about one percent foreign born. In addition, returning migrants from other Latin American countries were valued much more and much better off economically in their home countries than were returning migrants from the US. Bogue reasons



that birth rates and amounts of economic opportunities are the reasons for these disparities. Latin American countries have much higher birth rates and much smaller availabilities for employment than do developed countries such as the United States (Harms). Consequently, this makes it very difficult for their economies and employment rates to sustain massive inflows of immigrants.

### **The Need for Borders and Nation-States**

When weighing whether a country's self-interest is more important than obligations to migrants, it is also essential to look at the alternatives and address negative concerns. Negative proposals necessarily embrace unlimited free movement for those choosing to migrate. This is infeasible — the idealistic view of a world in which billions of people participate in a single democracy and have an equal say is quixotic (Fukuyama). Geography and trade are also heavily adapted towards borders and the idea of nation-states (Rodrik).

### **Conclusion**

While nearly all countries have an obligation to welcome migrants, the assumption that every country must do so despite the domestic issues they face is ill-advised. As shown in Libya, accepting migrants notwithstanding contradictory national interest exacerbates the harms migrants and citizens face. Pressuring countries in a state of chaos to accept migrants is irresponsible as only human rights abuses, dangerous conditions, and drained resources will follow. Moreover, an endlessly increasing intake of migrants ignites ethnic conflict, endangers migrants, and destabilizes the recipient state. Finally, many countries' economies suffer under the strain of economic migrants, as seen in Colombia. Migrants traveling to a nation whose national

interest is in conflict with them is just moving from a bad situation to a worse one. Thus, for the very small number of cases where national self-interest and obligations to migrants conflict, one must resolve in favor of national self-interest to protect both current residents and potential migrants.

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