

Overseas immigration liaison officers: 'Knowledge brokers' and transnational spaces of mid-level negotiations shaping extraterritorial migration control practices

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Abstract

A significant yet overlooked aspect in many states' extraterritorial migration control efforts is their immigration liaison officers (ILOs) posted to foreign jurisdictions, who make decisions and take actions abroad to support their country's immigration goals. Importantly, this occurs within an interconnected system of nation-states, requiring mid-level officials from *multiple* states to co-operate. Yet, there is very little analysis on what happens in these foreign jurisdictions where officials from across national and organisational boundaries interact and negotiate the management of migration flows. This article aims to fill this gap by drawing on empirical research on the UK's overseas immigration liaison network. Analysis is based on original interviews with Home Office officials, Freedom of Information requests, and documentary research. I find that UK ILOs are a main contact point between the country they represent, local authorities in the host state, and Global North counterparts from other states, making them key sites for the transnational exchange of information, 'intelligence' and 'know-how'. In this way, they are like 'knowledge brokers', contributing to a 'global-local diffusion' of ideas. Despite power hierarchies, this is not a one-way transfer from the Global North to the South. Instead, I find Global South actors are also key subjects in this process. By going beyond policies on paper and formal inter-state agreements, this study offers important insight into a largely hidden yet central part of a state's extraterritorial migration control: informal spaces of negotiation between mid-level officials from across national and organisational boundaries who negotiate and contest migration control practices.

1. Introduction

The extraterritorialisation of migration controls, where governments attempt to regulate international movements outside their juridical borders, has important implications for understanding state power and the interconnectedness of nation-states in managing migration flows ([FitzGerald 2020](#); [Ostrand and Statham 2021](#)). As [FitzGerald \(2020: 9\)](#) aptly puts it, migration control is no longer monopolised by a single state: ‘(c)oercion is shared’. States in the Global North routinely exchange information and collaborate on deciding who to deter, detain, and deport. ‘Sending’ and ‘transit’ states are also increasingly incorporated into migration control initiatives on behalf of ‘destination’ states ([Pijnenburg, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Rijken 2018](#)). While a considerable amount of research on extraterritorialisation has focussed on powerful ‘destination’ state (and European Union (EU)) perspectives (e.g. [Boswell 2003](#); [Zolberg 2003](#); [Gibney 2005](#); [Lavenex 2006](#); [Ryan and Mitsilegas 2010](#); [Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2015](#)), a burgeoning body of literature is also investigating the inter-state dynamics and state-level negotiations involved (e.g. [Paoletti 2011](#); [Wolff 2016](#); [Tittel-Mosser 2018](#); [Laube 2019](#)). This has provided important insights into the role of government officials from ‘sending’ and ‘transit’ states—key actors in extraterritorialisation processes ([Stock, Üstübici and Schultz 2019](#)) who ‘actively react to, interpret, and adapt’ policy agendas to their own domestic contexts and interests ([Adam et al. 2020: 3](#)). Most studies on extraterritorialisation, however, fail to go beyond the macro-political level to investigate what happens on-the-ground, in the social world, where mid- and lower-level officials from across nation-states interact and are responsible for implementing migration controls.

This article, by contrast, takes into serious consideration local locations of extraterritorial migration control where immigration officials make decisions and take actions outside their ‘destination’ state’s jurisdiction and evaluates the implications this has on migration governance and available migration pathways. I do this by studying the UK’s overseas immigration liaison network, which is made up of civil servants posted to foreign countries who support and help enforce the UK’s visa system and immigration goals. In 2015, the UK

had 188 people working in 45 cities across 36 foreign states ([Ostrand FOI 40413 \(2016\)](#)).

These immigration liaison officers (ILOs) contribute to the UK's migration system in several important ways; they interpret and apply immigration goals to local contexts, influence outcomes on-the-ground and produce knowledge and 'intelligence' that feeds-back into the Home Office. By going a step beyond policies on paper and formal inter-state agreements, this study offers important insight into a largely hidden yet central part of a state's extraterritorial migration control: the day-to-day interactions and choices shaping decisions and actions abroad. Importantly, this occurs within an interconnected system of nation-states and interdependencies, requiring mid-level officials from *multiple* nation-states to interact, learn, and negotiate the management of migration flows. In this way, 'coercion is shared'; it is also transformed and contested at the local level.

Empirically, this article provides an in-depth look into immigration liaison networks, which have received virtually no attention to date,¹ perhaps due to states shrouding their activities in secrecy. The relatively concealed presence of ILOs in the field and the lack of public documents on their decisions and actions further makes immigration liaison networks a difficult area to study. Drawing on 20 original semi-structured interviews with Home Office officials, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, and extensive documentary research, this article sheds light on how decisions are made by ILOs on-the-ground, in foreign jurisdictions. Whose ideas, interests, and actions matter? How is knowledge circulated, and what effects does this have on states' migration management? Immigration liaison networks are important but largely overlooked mechanisms of extraterritorial control. Together with visa systems and carrier sanctions, they help states 'quietly' keep 'unwanted' migrants, including asylum seekers, away from their territorial borders where individuals have greater access to human, civil, and procedural rights ([FitzGerald 2020](#)).

This article also aims to advance understanding on how an increasingly interconnected and globalised system of migration control operates in practice. Despite important studies on the implementation of migration controls at and within 'destination' states and regions (e.g. [Ellermann 2009](#); [Mountz 2010](#); [Eule 2018](#); [Borrelli 2020](#)), there is very little analysis on what happens in foreign jurisdictions and, importantly, how inter-state interactions and interdependencies between officials from the Global North and South can shape outcomes (though see [Ostrand and Statham 2021](#)). As UK ILOs have no legal authority abroad, they

rely on the willingness and capacity of local immigration and police to cooperate to achieve migration enforcement goals, such as arresting individuals and groups suspected of involvement in irregular migration. Decisions on the training and capacity building provided by ILOs to local agencies are likewise dependent on, and shaped by, local officials. Additionally, UK ILOs routinely collaborate with ILOs from other Global North states in Europe, North America, and the Asia Pacific who are posted to the same country by sharing information and ‘intelligence’ on migration trends, individuals and groups, and by carrying out joint training and investigations. By analysing these mid-level practices of cooperation ([El Qadim 2014](#)), I illustrate the significant role of interactions, negotiations, and contestations between officials from across national and organisational boundaries in making specific decisions, strategies, and actions that shape outcomes on-the-ground.

Importantly, the local knowledge and ‘intelligence’ produced and learned by ILOs is also circulated back to the UK, helping inform the Home Office’s response to ‘unwanted’ migration flows and perceived ‘risks’. From the Home Office’s perspective, this improves knowledge of ‘current and emerging risks, enabling targeted action’ and more effective controls ([HM Government 2016a](#)). This means that decisions and actions by ILOs—often in cooperation with counterparts from multiple nation-states—extend beyond the single state where they are located. Such ‘overseas intelligence’, for example, can notify Border Force and other law enforcement agencies about an individual due to arrive in the UK ([Bolt 2016: 37](#)) or contribute to the ‘risk profiles’ used by visa officers to make decisions ([Vine 2014: 21](#)). ILOs are thus significant sites for the circulation of knowledge across organisational and national borders. Drawing on global policing literature and research on *police* liaison officers (e.g. [Bigo 2000](#); [Goldsmith and Sheptycki 2007](#); [Bowling and Sheptycki 2012](#); [Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki 2019](#)), I conceptualise ILOs as ‘knowledge brokers’ who facilitate the transnational exchange of information, ‘intelligence’, and ‘know-how’, making them significant actors in a globalised and interconnected system of migration control. This helps us see ILOs as *contributors* to a globalised system rather than officials simply posted abroad to help enforce the restrictive migration goals of the country they represent.

The next section of this article locates the study within existing literature on extraterritorial migration control, focussing on the gap in analyses on mid-level practices, negotiations, and inter-state interdependencies. Here I also discuss research on global policing and how it

offers insight on the role of ILOs within an increasingly globalised system of migration control. I then present my methods, followed by an overview of the UK's immigration liaison network, which illustrates the relative autonomy and discretion ILOs have in relation to the Home Office within the UK. This section also demonstrates the knowledge production role and feedback loop, where information collected and interpreted by ILOs is distributed back to the Home Office and can inform migration enforcement priorities and actions. It establishes the important role of ILOs posted to foreign jurisdictions in the UK's strategy to stem 'unwanted' and irregular migration. The next two sections cover the international dimension shaping UK ILOs' decisions and actions, focussing first on the dependencies and interactions with immigration and police in 'sending' and 'transit' states and second on the routine collaboration with ILOs from other European, North American, and Asian Pacific states. Together they demonstrate one of the key contributions of this article: interdependencies and routine communications at the mid-level, between officials from *multiple* nation-states, shape specific strategies, decisions, and actions on-the-ground. I conclude by reflecting on key findings and by considering their implications for global migration governance.

2. What role for mid-level bureaucrats and international interactions in extraterritorial migration control?

Over the last decade, a growing body of literature on extraterritorial migration control has focussed on the negotiation process and inter-state dynamics leading to the creation (or absence) of bi- and multi-lateral agreements on migration (see e.g. [Paoletti 2011](#); [Reslow 2012](#); [Wolff 2016](#); [Tittel-Mosser 2018](#); [Laube 2019](#); [Adam et al. 2020](#)). These studies have highlighted the power of 'sending' and 'transit' states in shaping migration policy, centring them as important 'subjects, rather than mere objects of policies from the Global North' ([El Qadim 2014](#): 242). This has deepened understandings of extraterritorialisation beyond analyses on how and why 'destination' states attempt to control migration outside their sovereign territories—namely to better prevent 'unwanted' migration by circumventing self-imposed commitments for upholding human, civil, and personhood rights, including *non-refoulement* ([Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2015](#)). Investigating the 'interactive political process' during negotiations on EU bilateral agreements, for example, [Laube \(2019\)](#) shows Turkey, Moldova, and Morocco each used different strategies to respond to EU

extraterritorialisation efforts by enhancing their opportunities for greater mobility of their own citizens ([Laube 2019](#)). Or, as [Wolff \(2016: 89\)](#) puts it, Turkey and Morocco ‘are not passive actors when confronted with the externalisation of border controls and are able to influence to some extent the EU.’ [Reslow \(2012\)](#) similarly argues that to understand why countries decide to participate (or not) in EU migration policy initiatives, it is necessary to examine the domestic preferences and processes in the specific ‘sending’ and ‘transit’ states.

Despite important contributions from studies on inter-governmental co-operation, emphasis remains on the macro-political level. Analyses focus on inter-state negotiation processes and whether migration cooperation agreements are reached between states or not but stop there. This ignores the complex local conditions and dynamics informing outcomes on-the-ground, as well as feed-back loops that can inform states’ migration control strategies and enforcement actions. Adequately understanding extraterritorialisation, and how it develops in the social world, thus requires going beyond policy texts, political intentions, and inter-state negotiations. This study examines the UK’s immigration liaison network precisely to unpick these dynamics: to investigate how extraterritorialisation transpires in practice.

Sveral studies on the implementation of migration controls at and within ‘destination’ states and regions have highlighted the important role of local officials’ discretionary powers in determining how formal policies are administered in practice (e.g. [Ellermann 2009](#); [Mountz 2010](#); [Eule 2018](#); [Borrelli 2020](#)). These officials ‘negotiate between the abstract rules of bureaucracy and the concrete social reality’ ([Eule, Loher, and Wyss 2018](#): 2720), often resulting in a substantial ‘gap’ between written policies and actions on-the-ground ([Ellermann 2009](#); [Mountz 2010](#); [Eule 2018](#); [Borrelli 2020](#)). Research on visa decision-making at European consulates also demonstrates the significance of officials’ discretion (e.g. [Scheel 2018](#); [Infantino 2019, 2021](#)). These studies importantly show that officials’ decisions are often informed by organisational learning and informal interactions with peers, where ‘tricks of their trade’ and knowledge about the local context is shared. For example, [Scheel \(2018\)](#) finds that officials’ assessments of visa applications are based on their interpretations of ‘migration risk’ which are shaped by a ‘local practical knowledge’ and informal decision-making criteria that circulate among consular staff (see also [Infantino and Rea 2012](#)). Still, relatively little is known about how interactions, negotiations, and contestations between

officials from *across* national and organisational boundaries can lead to specific decisions, strategies, and actions on migration control—something this article aims to address.

[Infantino \(2019, 2021\)](#) provides an important exception to this by studying EU visa decision-making in the Belgium, French, and Italian consulates in Morocco. She shows that diplomats and officers from these different consulates make up ‘Schengen peers’ who form a ‘community of practice’ ([Wenger 1998](#)), where they learn and develop ‘local knowledge’ through informal interactions. This has led to shared understandings of ‘migratory risk’ among national Schengen consulates, informing officers’ interpretation of information and evaluation of visa applications. Like [Infantino \(2021: 1041\)](#), I find ‘that learning happens across borders of policy’ and influences specific decisions and actions at the operational level. However, I go a step beyond her study to investigate immigration liaison networks, which are responsible for working with local foreign state actors and airlines to prevent irregular movement abroad, rather than making decisions on who deserves a visa or not. This creates a dependency on local immigration and police—which is not the case with visa policy. Importantly, it allows for exploration of the role of local officials in ‘sending’ and ‘transit’ states, who are often (though not always) from the Global South, in shaping outcomes. I also examine UK ILOs’ interactions with foreign counterparts from Europe, North America, and the Asia Pacific rather than focussing on ‘Schengen peers’ alone, where the lifting of internal border controls and common Schengen rules create clearer interdependencies and reasons for cooperation. Including non-Schengen European states, as well as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA—who, collectively with the UK, are referred to as the Five Country Conference (FCC)²—provides insight into if and how co-operation occurs between officials from states with similar but not necessarily the same policies and goals. Very few studies on migration control have empirically examined this larger operational cooperation among Global North peers. What does it look like, and what are the implications for global migration governance and understanding how state power operates in practice? I additionally add to [Infantino’s \(2019, 2021\)](#) important insights by investigating the way knowledge production and learning from abroad by ILOs is circulated and can feedback into states’ migration and border control practices.

The literature on global policing and *police* liaison officers provides useful insight on the role of ILOs in distributing information and how they relate to an increasingly globalised system

of migration control. According to [Bowling and Sheptycki \(2012; 4\)](#), ‘(t)ransnational (police) liaison officers are the “practical glue” that binds global policing together. They give advice and build capacity, train, and mentor other police personnel and coordinate joint operations, often spanning continents.’ Operating within and between police agencies across national and organisational borders, [Bigo \(2000\)](#) likens police liaison officers to ‘station masters’ who direct and move information to where it needs to be. While ‘policework’ is still largely a local matter, with direct interactions between police and the public primarily involving local officers, [Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki \(2019: 205–206\)](#) argue that behind the scenes, ‘policework’ is increasingly shaped by global forces. This includes, for example, linking national policing hubs to transnational databases and expertise—extending police resources and knowledge beyond the local and national context ([Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki 2019: 205–206](#)). Similarly, frontline migration and border control ‘work’ is mainly carried out by local immigration, police, security, and airline staff. Yet, as we will see, there are important global dynamics at play, where, in some cases, ‘intelligence’, training, and ‘know-how’ stem from international sources. Like police liaison officers ([Goldsmith and Sheptycki 2007: 11–12](#)), ILOs are an important part of this system. They are one of the main contact points between the country they represent, local authorities in the host state, and Global North counterparts from other states. This puts them in position to circulate information to actors from across national and organisational boundaries. In this way, they are like ‘knowledge brokers’—intermediaries that connect different sources and users of knowledge, and, through their interpretation, produce knowledge.

Despite the body of work on global policing ([Bigo 2000; Bowling and Sheptycki 2012; Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki 2019](#)), few studies have investigated the activities and decision-making processes carried out in the Global South (though see [Bowling 2010](#)). More importantly, there remains a gap in how local actors from Global South countries can shape information circulated by liaison officers and their specific decisions and actions. As [El Oadim \(2014\)](#) argues in her analysis of French–Moroccan cooperation on migration, it is important to take into consideration actors from the Global South as *subjects* rather than *objects* of policies (see also [Karadağ 2019](#)). Focussing on mid-level practices of cooperation between France and Morocco, [El Oadim \(2014: 242\)](#) exposes informal ‘brokering spaces’ where mid-level actors from Morocco inform and contest decisions made by French actors. Following this rare study, I interrogate mid-level spaces of negotiation and contestation that inform

ILOs' decisions and actions. In doing so, I contribute to El Qadim's study by including interactions with counterparts from the Global North, providing a fuller examination of inter-state dynamics at play.

Building on analyses that emphasise the global interconnectedness of the current nation-state system of extraterritorial migration controls ([FitzGerald 2020](#); [Ostrand and Statham 2021](#)), this article aims to examine how a 'shared coercion' of movement operates in practice. It focuses specifically on 'the middle and lower bureaucratic tiers of the global system,' below state representatives working bilaterally ([Bowling and Sheptycki 2012](#): 5). Here I add to a previous co-authored paper ([Ostrand and Statham 2021](#)) which demonstrates how ILOs, and their co-operations with foreign counterparts, fit within the larger equation of a state's extraterritorial migration efforts, linking the macro-political inter-state level to on-the-ground 'street-level' interactions. That article demonstrates agency 'beyond remote control', where 'actions in the social world, outside a destination state's jurisdiction and control, have substantial bearing on its extraterritorial management' ([Ostrand and Statham 2021](#): 31). This article, by contrast, focuses specifically on the operational level, enabling a more detailed analysis of what happens in practice, especially the interactive process between mid-level officials from *multiple* nation-states. By conceptualising ILOs as 'knowledge brokers', this analysis also goes beyond my previous work by arguing that ILOs contribute to a globalised system of migration control by helping facilitate a 'global-local' ([Frowd 2014](#)) diffusion of ideas and practices. Finally, I add to the literature by considering the implications of this transnational cooperation and knowledge exchange in shaping global migration pathways.

3. Method and data

This research is based primarily on 20 semi-structured interviews with current and former Home Office officials, between July 2016 and Oct 2017. The interviewees were largely mid-level civil servants who had experience working abroad and with foreign state actors. They were selected based on their familiarity with the UK's overseas operations and all had experience managing or implementing extraterritorial migration controls. The analysis focuses on Home Office officials' perceptions of the liaison network and of foreign officials' role in this process as I was unable to obtain interviews with any foreign state actors, despite my

Interview	Civil service rank	Operational experience abroad
D	Mid-level	Yes
E	Senior	No
F	Mid-level	Yes
G	Mid-level	Yes
H	Junior	No
I	Mid-level	Yes
J	Mid-level	Yes
K	Junior	Yes
L	Mid-level	Yes
M	Mid-level	Yes
O	Mid-level	Yes
P	Mid-level	Yes
Q	Mid-level	No
R	Mid-level	Yes
S	Mid-level	Yes
T	Senior	No
U	Mid-level	Yes

Source: [Ostrand and Statham 2021](#).

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The interviews are supplemented by original FOI requests and documentary research on primary and secondary legislation, explanatory memorandums, impact assessments, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration reports, UK policy papers and press releases, and UK ILO job advertisements. While official UK documents describe the general objectives of the immigration liaison network, there is virtually no information on what ILOs do in specific countries, who they work with and how these decisions are made. Drawing on original interviews, FOI requests and job advertisements allowed me to overcome this gap and, importantly, to go beyond previous research on extraterritorialisation, which has relied almost exclusively on official policy documents and interviews with high-placed civil servants. In doing so, I provide unique insight into Home Office officials' extraterritorial activities, decision-making process on-the-ground and their view of the role of foreign state actors. This makes visible important spaces of negotiation where mid-level officials from different states interact, co-produce and contest migration practices—a process that is largely informal and takes place outside of public view.

4. UK immigration liaison network: autonomy, discretion, and knowledge production

The UK's immigration liaison network, Immigration Enforcement International (IEI)³, is an important but relatively hidden part of the UK's extraterritorial migration control. The goal of the network is 'to identify, disrupt, and prevent abuse of UK immigration controls' in advance of the country's physical territory ([HM Government 2016a](#)). Or, as an interviewee put it, 'to push that threat further and further away from our borders' (M), which the Home Office considers more effective than trying to 'tackle them (unwanted migrants) once they arrive'(T). ILOs see themselves as a 'key element' in the UK's strategy to stem irregular migration by providing 'upstream obstruction' and 'tackling' unwanted migration 'as far away from the UK as possible, at the root of the problem' (A, E, M, T). Officers attempt to do this by supporting the UK visa system and by working with airlines and foreign immigration and police to deter, prevent, and penalise 'unwanted' and irregular movement. This includes creating and updating the 'risk profiles' used by UK visa officers; training and advising airline staff, local security agents and UK visa officers in using profiling techniques and identifying inaccurate and fraudulent documents; training local immigration and police

in areas like investigative skills, profiling, interviewing, and intelligence collection; and working with local authorities to investigate and arrest individuals and groups suspected of involvement in unauthorised migration. Capacity building through training and ‘expertise transfer’ is especially common and viewed by the Home Office as ‘more cost effective than large scale programming and/or equipment investment’ ([Home Office 2020](#): 1). ILOs also provide an important intelligence function where they collect, analyse, and disseminate information on migration-related trends, perceived ‘risks’, and foreign states’ migration control capacities (A, F, T; [HM Government 2019](#); [Vine 2014](#): 30):

All the data, all the activities and data on what those individual countries do, provides us with the ability to obtain information and intelligence that allows us to identify criminals involved in the facilitation of irregular migration and human trafficking (T).

This information collected from abroad then feeds-back into the Home Office and helps inform its migration control strategy and enforcement actions (A, F, M, T; [HM Government 2016a](#); [Toms and Thorpe 2012](#): 26).

The UK’s immigration liaison network is located in most regions around world (see [Fig. 1](#)). In 2015, the UK had ILOs in 36 foreign states, including rich liberal countries in North America and Europe (e.g. Denmark, France, Germany, and the USA), wealthy Gulf states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) and relatively poorer states in the Caribbean and South America (Jamaica and Columbia), Sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana and Nigeria), and South and Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, India, Thailand, and Vietnam) ([Fig. 1](#)). Given the breadth of the UK’s immigration liaison network, it is unsurprising that there is considerable variation in the specific strategies and activities across different locations. Each liaison operation ‘has to be country specific’ (U) and ‘tailored’ to the local and regional context (A, D, M, O). In France, for example, a main priority of ILOs is preventing unauthorised immigration by plane as there are a lot of French airports with regular and cheap flights to the UK (M). In Ghana, on the other hand, liaison officers prioritise identifying ‘miss-documentation’ and ‘forgeries’ during the visa process and carrying out capacity training and development for local authorities (I, L).

Figure 1.

UK immigration liaison network locations, December 2015.

Importantly, ILOs possess a relatively high degree of autonomy and discretion in pursuing strategies for immigration management in the given state they are posted to. They interpret and make judgments about perceived levels of ‘immigration risk’ and ‘need’, and use that to inform their activities (A, D, E, M, O, Q, U). According to Home Office officials, these decisions are based on ‘evidence’ and ‘a lot of analyses’ looking at the specific problems related to unwanted migration flows from (or through) a specific country and region (M, T, U). One interviewee explained how this works:

So, I am not going to spend time in Thailand talking about human trafficking from Burma to Thailand because there is *no threat to the UK* from that trafficking. *We have no evidence* of it coming directly from Thailand. Does that make sense? So (the network) is not going to waste money on what it perceives as not a UK priority (U, emphasis added).

Instead, Home Office officials believed that unauthorised migration travelling through the international airport in Bangkok is a larger area of concern due to high volumes of inbound flights from countries in Africa and Asia that are considered higher ‘risk’ and outbound flights to the UK (A, F, U). As a result, a key priority of the network in Thailand is working with airlines to prevent passengers without the necessary travel documents from boarding planes, including training and advising airline staff on UK visa requirements, identifying inaccurate documents, and providing updates on ‘emerging’ trends in forgeries or other potential ‘immigration risks’ (A).

The immigration liaison managers in each country use the information collected and interpreted by their ILOs to develop specific strategies in their given country because they know ‘what your current threats are, (and) what is the continuous problem you keep seeing’ (U). This is important because it shows that key decisions and actions are not made by senior Home Office officials operating within the UK. In fact, according to an FOI request, the Home Office did not even have ‘centrally recorded records’ on the training and other activities carried out by its immigration liaison operations prior to 2014 ([Ostrand FOI 42825](#)

([2017](#))), suggesting very limited oversight and top-down direction. The relative discretion and autonomy of ILOs is also supported by UK job advertisements, which describe ILOs as being responsible for ‘making judgements on whether to undertake work, responding flexibly to changing priorities, risk assessing and disseminating intelligence, developing risk profiles, and crime work with minimal input from the immigration liaison manager ([HM Government 2016a](#)). A 2019 job advertisement for Bogota, Colombia, for example, also said the ILO ‘would be expected to *craft and implement creative projects* in the region’ using Overseas Development Assistance funding received by the liaison network ([HM Government 2019](#), emphasis added). Again, this indicates that many important decisions are made on location and not in the UK.

The interpretation and collection of ‘overseas intelligence’ by ILOs abroad is also significant. Not only does it inform the UK’s strategy and actions within a specific country, but it can also feed into the UK’s immigration and border control generally. One interviewee emphasised this:

One of the more important aspects of IEI’s (the immigration liaison network’s) work is that by working abroad it allows us to gather information and intelligence to help the Home Office identify those involved in facilitating irregular migration and human trafficking’ (T).

Due to Home Office’s secrecy around the ‘data’ and ‘evidence’ used to inform its decisions and assessments of ‘risk’ (see e.g. [Ostrand FOI 46078 \(2018\)](#); [Home Office 2015](#): 15), it is difficult to track specific examples. However, interviews and official documents make it clear that ‘overseas intelligence’ is one source of information that helps the Home Office improve its ability to respond to perceived ‘immigration risks’ and ‘can lead to strengthened controls and policy changes in the UK’ (Toms and Thorpe 2012: 26; A, F, T; [Bolt 2016](#); [HM Government 2016b](#); [Vine 2014](#)). For example, reports from ILOs helped justify the decision to impose restrictive transit visas on Egyptians, Syrians, and Libyans in 2012 ([Home Office 2011](#)). The immigration liaison network in the region viewed ‘transit without visa abuse to be the biggest—current general migration risk from Syrians’ and a significant concern for Libyans and Egyptians—evidence the Home Office used to support its change in visa policy ([Home Office 2011](#): 3–4). This is unlikely to be a one-off occurrence. Between October 2014 and September 2015, the immigration liaison network produced and disseminated 829

‘intelligence reports’ ([Bolt 2016](#): 38). The UK’s National Crime Agency, in comparison, only disseminated 287 ([Bolt 2016](#): 38).

ILOs ‘regularly provide strategic intelligence briefing(s) to UK colleagues’ on things like ‘global facilitation networks’, trends in ‘immigration abuse’ and other ‘new and emerging threats’ (Toms and Thorpe 2012: 26), ‘enabling targeted action to be taken’ by Border Force, Immigration Enforcement and the National Crime Agency at and within the UK’s territory ([HM Government 2016a](#); A, F, M). For example, ILOs in Accra, Ghana ‘produced a monthly analysis of asylum claims linked to visas issued by the Accra visa section’ that were then used to ‘improve’ decision-making and provide feedback to visa officers ([Vine 2012](#): 18). Information distributed by ILOs has also included ‘critical intelligence from overseas ... relating to an individual due to arrive in the UK,’ which then enables Border Force and other law enforcement agencies to act ([Bolt 2016](#): 37). In this way, the collection, interpretation, and production of knowledge by ILOs has implications for migration enforcement that extend beyond the specific country where they are working. As we will see in the next two sections, foreign officials from both the Global North and South play an integral role in this process. They actively contribute to the decisions, actions, and ‘intelligence’ collected by ILOs.

5. Navigating dependencies and limits on power: working with local immigration and police agencies

While ILOs have considerable autonomy and discretion in their decisions *vis-à-vis* the Home Office, much of what they can achieve in a specific country is influenced by local officials. ILOs interpret and apply the UK’s immigration objectives in local settings, where they have no formal enforcement power and face uncontrollable local circumstances, such as the interests and institutional capacity of the foreign state and its immigration and police agencies ([Ostrand and Statham 2021](#)). This lack of legal authority abroad creates dependency on foreign state actors to carry out migration enforcement-related activities. ILOs, for example, are unable to prevent an individual’s movement out of a foreign country or arrest and prosecute people they suspect of participating in, or facilitating, irregular migration. They must rely on the local officials and airlines to do so. This dependency is clearly illustrated by an interviewee’s account of what happens when fraudulent travel

documents are identified. The interviewee explained how ILOs work closely with UK visa staff and airline officials to help them recognise inaccurate travel documents and advise them to refer any cases to the local immigration or police. Once this happens, it is 'out of (the network's) hands' and up to local officials to decide if and how to respond: 'they take it from there. *It is their country, they do their stuff, it is their laws*' (U, emphasis added).

ILOs' reliance on foreign state actors to achieve enforcement-related activities mean they often must adapt their strategies to reflect the local interests and conditions in the specific country: '(o)ur strategy varies depending on the country and the relationship in that country' (T), especially 'what kind of relationship they (local officials) give us back' (U). For example, when liaison officers in Thailand identified a rise in counterfeit British passports at the airport in Bangkok, they attempted to address the issue by

increase(ing) the awareness of the documents being used, and effectively mak(ing) them targeted so the people who want to use them, do not use them anymore because they know that every time they use (fake) UK documents they are going to get jumped (U).

However, as ILOs were unable to gain the aid of Thai police in arresting individuals attempting to use these documents, they had to adjust their strategy by training Thai immigration in identifying people entering Thailand on counterfeit UK documents. A Home Office official explained this decision by saying,

that is all we can do ... (Thai immigration) doesn't really care who is leaving their country. They only care about who is coming in. So, we are only going to train them on who is entering the country on UK documents ... (in) simply getting across (that) these are our documents (and) these are the types of forgeries that we have encountered and found (U, emphasis added).

In another example, an interviewee described how ILOs were unable to get local Egyptian authorities to cooperate on any migration control or enforcement-related activities and thus had to focus their efforts on collecting 'intelligence' and training airlines in identifying and preventing passengers with inadequate travel documents from boarding planes (I). In Ghana, by contrast, immigration and police are relatively willing to cooperate, which gives ILOs considerable scope to develop prevention and capacity building initiatives, including training

in interviewing, profiling techniques, investigative skills, and intelligence use (S). The ‘good relationship’ in Ghana also allowed the Home Office to provide material support, such as ‘small forgery equipment to (the Criminal Investigation Department of the Ghanaian Police Service), like magnifiers, UV lights, etc.’ (S), as well as IT equipment ‘worth over £10,000’ to Ghana’s immigration agency (BHC Accra 2013). Home Office officials additionally said the Ghanaian police’s willingness to act on ‘intelligence’ provided by UK officers on individuals and groups suspected of involvement in irregular migration means they are able to be more ‘effective in combating corruption, reducing fraud, (and) improving the capacity and capability of local law enforcement authorities’ (I, L)—something that does not occur in Egypt.

Here we see local immigration and police are active participants who exert power over the UK’s decisions and actions by influencing what (if any) training, resources, and capacity building support they receive from the UK: ‘it is a two-way street ... We work and build relationships in a country, but they also work with us’ (T). In developing projects with local agencies, ILOs do not simply determine what is needed, or tell local agencies they are ‘inefficient in certain ways’ (T). Instead, they learn from them and listen to the wants and perceived needs of their foreign counterparts. They are there to ‘liaise’ (A) and ‘see how (they) can make improvements to their systems’ (I). In this way, ILOs gain local knowledge from foreign colleagues about what is ‘needed’ in the specific country. This ‘international exchange’ can also help ILOs develop intelligence ([HM Government 2016a](#)), which then feeds into the UK’s immigration and border control strategy in that country and generally.

Local officials in some countries also actively seek-out specific types of training, resources, and capacity-building to support their own domestic goals (E, I, O, T). In one example, an interviewee said the local authorities in Dubai are ‘so progressive and forward looking’ that they ‘travel to Hong Kong, Canada, and Holland, and *pick up their own ideas and then come back to us* (the immigration liaison network) for personnel training’ (O, emphasis added). This interviewee further explained that police, immigration, and airport security agencies from countries in the Middle East often request trainings from ‘Western countries’ in areas like ‘basic frauds, passenger profiling, (and) intelligence development’ (O). Another interviewee said liaison officers in Ghana provided training in ‘human-trafficking’, document authenticity, and investigative skills at the request of Ghanaian state actors (I). Even when

training and capacity building programmes are initiated by UK ILOs, as is generally the case in Thailand, local state actors are still an active part of the decision-making process:

(Thai police and immigration authorities) never really come to you directly. So, if you want something, it is down to us ... to engage with them. And really, we ask them '*what would they want from us?*' There may be some skill they are not getting from someone that we can provide them' (U, emphasis added).

The above examples demonstrate how the immigration liaison network's activities are informed, contested and, in some cases, initiated by foreign state actors in 'sending' and 'transit' states, rather than the other way around, which is often implied in literature on extraterritorial migration control. Not only do local immigration and police exert agency over the network's strategies by deciding whether to cooperate, but they provide information about the local context and specific agency 'needs,' influencing the types of training and resources they receive from the UK. Here we see learning and adaption are not linear, one-way processes where knowledge and 'expertise' are transferred from the Global North to the South. Rather, as [El Qadim \(2014: 242\)](#) shows, mid-level officials from 'sending' and 'transit' states are also key subjects shaping migration control practices. Importantly, as ILOs are a main contact point between the UK and local authorities in the host state, they also act as mediators, interpreting and distributing information on the interests, goals, and 'needs' of different states and agencies. In this way, they are like 'knowledge brokers' facilitating transnational and inter-organisational exchanges of information.

6. Pooling sovereignty at the operational level: cooperation with officials from the Global North

Another important form of international cooperation is between UK ILOs and ILOs from other Global North states who are posted to the same country. Outside of Europe, very little research on migration controls has examined such operational collaboration, especially involving both EU and FCC states. Yet, as we will see, it is extensive and important. In Thailand, for example, UK ILOs routinely work with their counterparts from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, and the USA (C).

This type of cooperation is standard and occurs in all countries where the UK's immigration liaison network is located:

(W)e work very closely with European partners and FCC partners ... *it is very rare that you see us do something just on our own.* More often than not we are working with the Australians, the Canadians, the Germans, the French, the Americans. It is very much making sure that *we are delivering as a whole* to build up the capability of (local authorities and airlines) (T, emphasis add).

Although interviewees said there are minor differences in levels of engagement between European and FCC officers based on individual and institutional characteristics, 'overall co-operation is high across all countries' (C, F, O). According to Home Office officials, this is due to shared policy goals, trust, and good working relationships, which are based in part on historical legacies of working together in other areas, like security, defence, counterterrorism, and law enforcement (A C, F, M, T). Cooperation among ILOs from Global North states is generally viewed as a 'mutually beneficial' way to address perceived 'common threats to our shared democracies' (E)—it is a pooling of sovereignty to better achieve policy goals.

One basic but important way EU and FCC ILOs work together is by simply informing each other about their activities in a given foreign state, such as the resources, training, and capacity building they are providing to airlines and the local immigration and police. Home Office officials emphasised the importance of this, explaining that it prevents repetition and saves resources (O, T, U):

(T)here is no point offsetting each other all trying to do the same thing. Because essentially you end up delivering the same training two or three times. (So, communication is key) because you don't want to be in that situation where we just delivered the same thing ... To give them something that they are already getting is a waste of our time and money (U).

UK ILOs also participate in joint training for airlines and local officials with their European and FCC counterparts. One interviewee offered an example of how this works:

So perhaps there are 500 local immigration authorities (in Dubai) working at the airport checking passports against boarding cards, and they all need training. So, we would split that into chunks and two or three countries would work together and train them separately (O).

EU and FCC ILOs additionally take part in joint investigations (C, F) and exchange practices and 'know how', including techniques for 'passenger profiling', 'targeting and selection', and 'sifting out the threat' (E, R). These examples show ILOs from Global North states often work collaboratively in foreign countries. Resources and knowledge are pulled in an attempt to more effectively and efficiently prevent the movement of those perceived as 'unwanted' and irregular toward the Global North. Notably, all interviewees highlighted this cooperation as important and often described a reliance on their EU and FCC counterparts and a shared sense of purpose. As one interviewee put it, 'on-the-ground we rely on each other' (T), while another, in discussing cooperation with American, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand counterparts, explained: 'The UK knew it had these other four countries to relay on for advice and support. There was a sense of shared security among FCC countries. That was useful' (E). Here we see a larger community of practice that extends beyond Schengen peers alone.

The most common form of cooperation among ILOs is sharing data on migration-related information and 'intelligence' on individuals, groups, trends, and forgeries identified, which, according to Home Office officials, occurs almost daily (C, M, P): 'predominantly, where you have day to day sort of stuff, you are dealing with passing information and intelligence and communications, saying we identified this false document being used trying to travel to the UK, etc.' (M). European and FCC officials will also authenticate travel documents used by their nationals if there are uncertainties about them (R) and, in some cases, verify information on the visas issued and refused by their state (C). Interviewees confirmed that input and data from foreign colleagues influenced their daily working practices and decisions, and feeds into their assessments of where there is more 'immigration risk' and 'need' (A, C, F, M, T). It can influence, for instance, the 'risk profiles' ILOs create for UK visa officers, the training and alerts ILOs issue to airlines, the 'intelligence' shared with local immigration and police and the information distributed back to Home Office colleagues. For example, information from an American ILO in Bangkok on a new type of forgery they identified is likely to be distributed by UK ILOs to visa officers in multiple countries, as well

as Border Force, Immigration Enforcement, UK Visas and Immigration, and the National Crime Agency within the UK. Once again, we see ILOs are important mediators in the distribution of information across national and organisational boundaries. A UK job advertisement even explicitly identified this, describing the production of ‘high quality Intelligence (*sic*) products for dissemination to the UK *and* international colleagues’ as one of the ‘key activities’ of ILOs ([HM Government 2019](#), emphasis added).

7. Conclusion

This study shows that rather than individual nation-states exercising full sovereign control over their migration and border management, implementation in ‘messy’ ([FitzGerald 2020](#)) in the social world. Mid-level officials from *multiple* nation-states contribute to defining and transforming states’ migration control practices: ‘(c)oercion is shared’; it is also negotiated and contested at the operational level. This has important global implications for migration governance. Routine interactions and transnational exchanges of information, ‘intelligence’, and techniques circulate particular types of knowledge and ‘know-how’. This has the potential to create similar understandings of ‘immigration risk’ and ways of responding to ‘unwanted’ flows, influencing who is filtered and targeted by airline, police, immigration, and border control officers across multiple nation-states. For example, profiling techniques and ‘intelligence’ learned and shared between European and FCC officials will also shape the practices and profiles taught to local immigration, police, security, and airline personnel in ‘sending’ and ‘transit’ states. In another example, UK ILOs (in some cases) provide ‘intelligence’ to local immigration and police on individuals and groups suspected of involvement in irregular migration with the expectation that the information will then be used to investigate and arrest those believed to be involved. Again, this ‘intelligence’ is often the product of transnational information sharing between European and FCC colleagues. In other words, interdependencies and interactions at the mid-level, between officials from multiple nation-states, can shape strategies, decisions, and actions on migration control practices across national and organisational borders.

This article also argues that ILOs are an important, yet understudied, part of extraterritorial migration controls who contribute to a globalised and interconnected system. Like police liaison officers ([Goldsmith and Sheptycki 2007](#): 11–12), ILOs are a main contact point

between the country they represent, local authorities in the host state, and Global North counterparts from other states. This makes them key facilitators or ‘knowledge brokers’ in the transnational circulation of information, ‘intelligence’, and ‘know-how’. They also play an important role in advising, supporting, and training frontline actors in ‘sending’ and ‘transit’ states. In this way, they are part of the ‘practical glue’ ([Bowling and Sheptycki 2012: 4](#)) that connects what [Frowd \(2014\)](#) calls the ‘the global–local diffusion’ of information and ideas on how migration and borders should be controlled. Yet, it is also important to recognise that despite power hierarchies, the diffusion of ideas is not a simple one-way transfer from the Global North to the South. Instead, I found the process is dynamic and complex, where UK ILOs can gain knowledge from local immigration and police about the context, capacity, and perceived ‘needs’ in ‘sending’ and ‘transit’ states. This learning then feeds-back into the Home Office and its relevant agencies, challenging conventional assumptions about the direction of ideas and power. By going beyond policies on paper and inter-state agreements, this article makes visible important spaces of negotiation, where mid-level officials from multiple states interact, co-produce, and contest migration control practices—a process that is largely informal and hidden from public view.