



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BY KHALED HASSAN

International migration is one of the current most important socio-economic and political phenomena in the Middle East. Its importance increased in the early 1970s as a result of the huge increase in oil prices and the adoption of ambitious development plans, especially in the GCC (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain). International migration provided solutions not only to many countries of the region, but also to countries from outside the region. It helped the sending countries deal with the problem of unemployment and secured successive flows of foreign currencies needed for investment and development. It also helped the receiving countries by producing the necessary labor force to meet the requirements of development plans.

The historical classification of the countries of the region as immigrant-sending or immigrant-receiving countries does not adequately describe the current situation of international migration in the region. From the early twenty-first century, the region faced many complicated political and economic circumstances, represented in the outbreak of the second Gulf War against Iraq in 2003, the revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen beginning in 2011, the outbreak of civil wars in some of these countries, and the global financial crisis of 2008. As a result of these circumstances, new patterns of international migration in the region have appeared and consequently many of these countries have multiple classifications according to their relationship with international migration.

This paper aims to explain the current patterns of international migration in the Middle East; to lay out a new classification of international migration streams in view of the changing socio-economic circumstances of the region; and to highlight the main reasons for international migration and future of international migration in the Middle East.

Current Patterns of International Migration in the Region

Six patterns of international migration in the Middle East can be determined and classified as the following:

Intra-Regional Migration: includes migration from one Middle Eastern country to another. The main purposes of this form of migration are to improve living conditions, to get better job opportunities, and to cope with the problem of unemployment in the home countries. The largest sending countries with this pattern of migrants are Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine while the largest receiving countries are the GCC and Jordan. Before the second Gulf war in Iraq in 2003, and before the civil war that followed the Libyan revolution of 2011, Iraq and, Libya were among the main receiving countries of international migration in the region. Intra-regional migration is characterized as migration among developing countries that have common cultural, social, linguistic ties, and strong bonds of civilization. The number of intra-regional migrants from the Middle East to the six countries of the GCC reached about 6.2 million in 2013 (League of Arab States LAS, 2014).

Migration to the Region: this pattern includes migration from other regions to the countries of the Middle East. The main purpose of this migration is to find work and residence in one of the Middle East countries. Migrants of this pattern come mostly through official work permits and contacts and their residence is limited to the duration of work permits or contracts. Workers from Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka), represent the majority of such migrants, and they mostly migrate to the GCC. A current estimate of the number of migrants from Southeast Asia to the GCC was about 15.9 million in 2013 (LAS, 2014).

Table 1: Estimates of Migrants from Outside the Middle East to the GCC, 2013

Countries	Number of Migrants
India	6,828,957
Bangladesh	3,147,251
Pakistan	2,915,556
Philippines	1,790,282
Indonesia	911,884
Sri Lanka	326,461

Source: United Nations, Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2013 revision

Migration out of the Region: this pattern includes immigrants from the Middle East region to countries in other regions, mostly in Europe and North America. Immigrants from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco represent the largest flow of immigrants from the Middle East, towards Europe, followed by the stream of immigrants from Egypt to Europe and North America. The majority of immigrants of this pattern seek permanent residence abroad.

Transit Migration: it is a new pattern of migration, basically represented by immigrants from Southern and East Africa (Southern Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia) to Egypt and immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to North-West African countries (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). Libya was one of the major host countries to transit migration before the outbreak of the civil war (2011). The main purpose of this pattern of migration is temporary residence in one of these host countries in preparation for their second phase of migration outside the region (mostly to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea) or to some other countries inside the region (Israel in particular).

Illegal immigration: This is a new pattern of immigrants, starting in the 1990s, which grew as a result of tightening of entry procedures, residence and work permits to Europe, especially against migrants from developing countries, in addition to increasing the economic pressures in the countries of origin. The main stream of illegal migration in the region is represented by migration from the countries of the southern

4 MAY 2016

Mediterranean (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) to the countries of the northern Mediterranean Sea (especially Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Sicily, France and Spain). This pattern is not limited to migration from the region but extends to include a large part of transit immigrants from Africa.

Due to the nature of illegal migration, accurate statistics are not available and most are conflicting estimates. The United Nations estimates indicated that the number of illegal immigrants to Europe were about 219,000 in 2014, including 171,000 from Libya, accounting for a 40 percent increase compared to 2013. Illegal migration across the Mediterranean Sea resulted in the drowning of more than 3,500 migrants in 2014. The number of illegal immigrants that drowned in the first four months of 2015 reached about 1,600. The ILO estimates that illegal immigrants about 10-15 percent of the number of migrants in the world, which amounted to 244 million migrants in 2015.

Forced Migration (Refugees): this pattern of migration became more widespread in the region after the second Gulf War and the invasion of the international coalition forces in Iraq (2003). It also increased significantly following the ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions that swept many countries in the region in 2011. The Middle East currently suffers from many streams of refugees. The largest stream of refugees is from Syria to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. Another stream is from Iraq to Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. The third stream is from Libya to Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. In addition to the traditional stream of refugees from occupied Palestine to the neighbor countries (Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Iraq).

Data from UNHCR indicates that the number of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries exceeded 4 million by the end of 2015, distributed as 1.8 million in Turkey, 1.2 million in Lebanon, 700,000 in Jordan, 250,000 in Iraq, 130,000 in Egypt, in addition to 270,000 Syrians who sought refuge in Europe.

Classification of Current Migration Streams

Sending Countries: Mostly countries with high population growth, weak economic growth, low standards of living, low levels of investment, and high unemployment rates,

4 MAY 2016

especially among youth. Countries of this group include Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria.

Receiving Countries: Mostly the oil-rich countries of the region that enjoy high income, small populations, but suffer from insufficient and qualified manpower to fulfill the targets of their economic development plans. These countries tend to restore this shortage by bringing laborers from abroad. Countries of this group are represented by the GCC in addition to Jordan.

Transit Countries: mostly countries of the region with a geographical location that represents a gateway for migration to other neighboring countries, mainly to the European coast. Illegal immigrants might include both their citizens and citizens of other countries. This group is represented by the five countries of North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco). Most transit migrants from outside the Middle East come from East Africa and sub-Saharan African Countries.

Refugee Countries: include countries of the region that suffer from political unrest, ethnic conflicts, and civil wars. Countries of this group are currently represented by Syria, Iraq, Libya, Palestine and Yemen.

The classification of some countries in the region in the context of international migration has changed dramatically. Iraq and Libya have changed from migrant-receiving countries to refugee-sending countries, while Syria and Yemen have changed from being migrant-sending countries to being refugee-sending countries. Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco currently have triple classification as migrant-sending, migrant-receiving and transit countries.

Reasons for Migration in the Middle East

The reasons for migration in the Middle East differ according to the diversity of the current migration patterns. Economic aspects represent the common denominator among official and illegal migration patterns. Lack of peace and security and political instability represents the major reasons for forced migration and asylum in the region. A recent study of international

4 MAY 2016

migration in Egypt (Egypt-HIMSS, 2013) showed that the disparities between economic conditions in the country of origin and country of destination represents the vast majority of the causes of international migration among most would-be Egyptian migrants. Insufficient income and unemployment especially among youth represents the most important economic push factors associated with the country of origin, with rates of 7.8 percent and 5.2 percent of all reasons of migration respectively. Availability of jobs and higher wages represents the most important pull factors associated with the economics of country of destination, with rates of 12.6 percent and 7.7 percent of all reasons of migration respectively. Better standards of living in the country of destination compared with the country of origin represent the main reason for international migration among Egyptians with a rate of 38.8 percent of all reasons of migration.

Causes for international migration in the Middle East are not free from social reasons. Marriage and joining the family members abroad represents the most important reason for female migration, especially to other Arab countries in the region, with a rate of 1.7 percent of all reasons of migration. Access to further education is the highest non-economic reason of migration to countries outside the region, especially to Europe and America by a rate of 6.4 percent of all reasons of migration. The same study (Egypt-HIMS, 2013) indicated the loss of security and safety as a result of outbreak of wars in many countries in the region as the main reason for forced migration by a rate of 79.2 percent of all reasons of forced migration among refugees in Egypt, followed by religious and ethnic persecution with a rate of 20.4 percent. The vast majority of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Sudan are accompanied by their family members, with rates of 91.0 percent, 76.0 percent, and 55.0 percent respectively.

There is no significant variation in the reasons for migration among the countries of the region, the variation may observe only in the ranking and percentage of reasons.

Future of International Migration in the Middle East

It is hard to predict the future of international migration in the Middle East. Such predictions depend on several economic, political and social factors. The main determinants of the future of international migration can be summarized in the two sets of factors:

In view of the current extreme economic deterioration, governmental corruption, inflation and high unemployment rates in the major sending countries of the region, migration is expected to increase from countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon. The

4 MAY 2016

current social and political instability in some countries of the region is expected to increase the levels of forced migration from countries like Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen.

As a result of new communication facilities and the globalization process, the youth of the region have become more open and responsive towards the culture of the West, and consequently the intention of migrating to America, Australia and Europe is expected to increase. Illegal migration from the south to the north of the Mediterranean Sea also expected to increase due to the strict regulations of entrance to Europe, especially for migrants from developing countries, and semi- or low-skilled workers.

Based on the results of studies conducted on migration intention or aspiration among Egyptian youth (Hassan, 2013, and IOM, 2011) we can conclude that Egypt's revolution of January 2011 had no impact on the intention to migrate or the reasons for migration among Egyptian. Work-related reasons are still the most influential factors for potential migration (more than 80 percent of the reasons for potential migration are economic).

Table 2: Reasons for Potential Migration, 2011

Reasons for migration	Migration Experience		Total
	Return	Non	
<i>Work-related reasons:</i>			
Unable to find a job	8.6	6.7	7.6
Income insufficient to support family	26.0	13.4	17.5
Seeks a job and/or income	4.0	6.0	5.5
Increase opportunities to save money	1.7	2.2	2.2
Improve standards of living	44.4	50.0	48.8
<i>Family-related reasons:</i>			
Need for money to get married	2.3	5.2	4.2
Need for money for the family	1.8	0.7	1.3
Accompany/follow spouse	0.8	4.2	2.0
<i>Other reasons:</i>			
Educational purposes	0.4	1.8	1.4
Desire to go abroad	2.9	4.5	3.2
<i>Other:</i>	7.1	5.4	6.3
Total	100	100	100
Number	269	375	644

Source: IOM, 2011. Egypt after January 25: Survey of Youth Migration Intentions.

Migration and the GCC

In view of the current sharp reduction in oil prices, the ability of the GCC to generate new jobs has decreased, and the demand for migrant workers is expected to decline, especially, if the GCC is attempting to shrink its plans and programs. In general, if the demand for labor is greater than the supply of national employment, the need for foreign migrants will continue.

As a result of high unemployment rates among youth in the GCC, policies to replace expatriate workers with national labor in the GCC markets it is expected to grow - and the opportunities for migration to the region is lessening.

Levels of competition between Arab and Asian migrants in the GCC labor markets represent another important factor influencing the future of intra-regional migration. Skills, wages, and extra costs such as travel, housing, leave, etc. are the most important economic considerations in preferring workers of different nationalities. Such economic considerations currently give advantages to Asian over Arab migrants.

As long as Arabic is still the official language of business in the GCC, the demand for highly educated and professional Arab workers will continue, given the shortage of the corresponding qualifications among national workers.

It is important to indicate that migration, especially to the GCC, is highly affected by the political situations and relations between the sending and receiving countries in the region. Any change in the migration or labor policies of the receiving countries, would affect the current and future flows of migration.

References:

Hassan, K. (2013). “Future of Egyptian Labor Migration after the Arab Uprising”. The International Seminar of “International Migration in the Middle East and North Africa after the Arab Uprising: A Long Term Prospective”, Cairo, Egypt, 22-23 April 2013.

Hassan, K. (2009). “Intra-regional Migration as a Tool in Absorbing Arab Unemployment”. In *Intra-regional Labor Mobility in the Arab World, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Arab Labor Organization (ALO)*, Cairo, pp. 65-92.

International Organization of Migration (IOM). (2011). “Egypt after January 25 Survey of Youth Migration Intentions”. IOM and IPSOS, edited by Pitea, R. and Hussain, R. Cairo, Egypt.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2013). “Trends in International Migration Stock: the 2013 Revision- Migrants by Age and Sex”, December 2013.

Khaled Hassan is a demographer, economic consultant and statistical expert with a track record in demography and human development, international migration, labor force and labor markets and environment and climate in the Middle East and North Africa. He holds a PhD in Economics Management (Sadat Academy for Management Sciences), and Master of philosophy in Demography (Cairo Demographic Center). Currently, he is the Vice-President of the Egyptian Society for Migration Studies (EGYMIG). Previously, he was international consultant at UNDP-Kuwait, statistical consultant at the US Naval Medical Research Unit in (NAMRU 3) Cairo, Egypt, and Visiting Professor at the Cairo Demographic Center (CDC). He has published numerous books, studies and academic articles.

To receive invitations to our events and copies of our latest publications, please email us at contact.mei@nus.edu.sg with your first name, last name, company or organization and preferred email address.