

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON MIGRATION AND REFUGEES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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International migration is a result of the functioning or malfunctioning of the global system, in both its political and economic segments. In few places is this more evident in the second decade of the 21st century than in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA).

Domestic and international conflicts have produced consecutive waves of refugees over the past several decades. The current Syrian displacement is the most important refugee crisis the world has witnessed in recent times. Consecutive crises and the reactions and responses to them have revealed and reinforced the fragility of nation-states in the Middle East. “Nations” were broken down into their constitutive elements. Building the new political system in Iraq after 2003 based on religious, ethnic, and sectarian belongings stands out as an eloquent example of the breakdown of a “nation” that was already fragile because young. The drive behind this system-building process in Iraq could be considered as global. It had been conducted after an intervention that aimed not only to realize the interests of Iraqis but also to achieve the “global good”. In Syria, violent actors in the civil strife that soon engulfed the country after it rose up demanding a pluralistic and democratic political system brought out their religious and sectarian affiliations and their open hostility to all others. In a way, the precedent of Iraq, followed by the practice of power in that country in the last decade, “legitimized” the political identification with primordial belongings. So far, the process has culminated in the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) symbolically doing away with the borders between these two countries. Nation-states are the cornerstone of the international system. The concept is certainly not without its flaws, either in theory or, more especially, in practice. All the same, disfiguring nation-states and building new political units on bases other than nations is an open challenge, not only to directly affected countries but also to the whole international system. If some of the cross-border

population flows are due to the population’s wishes to escape violence and seek safe refuge in bordering or neighboring countries, others are an outgrowth of the realignment of political units along criteria other than nations.

The Syrian crisis is a significant manifestation of the global reach of refugee issues. With Syrian refugees overflowing into neighboring Europe, the crisis brought out the closer-than-ever interlinkages between regions, and the inadequacy of the responses it has generated from actors at the international and regional levels. It has not proved possible, using the tools at the disposal of the international system, to find solutions to the conflict or to the resulting refugee flows – and this is not the first conflict of its kind. Neither Iraqi refugees a decade ago nor Palestinian refugees before them found solutions to their predicaments either. According to the international refugee regime, return to countries of origin, resettlement, and local integration are the durable solutions to refugee crises. Return to countries of origin demands the settlement of the political problems at the origins of population flights. For decades such solutions have proven elusive. Resettlement opportunities are a drop in the sea. Local integration first requires substantial financial resources for it to be carried out under conditions of equality and non-discrimination on religious, sectarian, ethnic, gender, political opinion, or other grounds while at the same time also realizing the unmet economic and social demands of native populations. Host countries do not have these resources. The global responses to these crises did not make up for the large shortfall in resources. Second, given the volumes of population involved and the history of recent and fragile state formation in the region, local integration could open the door to the reconfiguration of the regional state system, which, obviously, is but a sub-system of the international system. “Sub-national communities”, the sub-regional state system, and the international system do not show any sign of being ready for such a reconfiguration. Therefore, it could be said that global responses have allowed neither local integration, resettlement, or voluntary return, nor the solving of the political problems necessary for that latter solution to materialize. From a global perspective, the reach of the consequences of the refugee crises, especially the current Syrian one, is brought harshly to light by the population overflows to Europe.

But MENA is also an origin and transit region for international migration for employment purposes. Workers migrate within the region and to fellow Arab countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in search for better employment opportunities than those their own economies can create. With the same objective, they also migrate to Europe and beyond, where they additionally respond to demand for labor. From countries to the south of MENA, workers arrive with the intention of joining flows to Europe. Nearly six decades after decolonization, the functioning of the global economy has not permitted African countries to develop and to raise the standards of living of their citizens. Rules of the global system and the functioning of sub-regional and “national” economies may well be at the origin of the prolonged stalemate and the resulting international migration within Africa as well as out of the continent.

Unconsciously, labor seems to be moving to where the other factor of production of production, capital, looks abundant. With the liberalization of movements of goods, services, and capital, one question that arises is whether it is possible to keep labor as constrained in its mobility as it is at present. Occasioned to considerable extent by migration from or through MENA, away from the policy realm, some research is being carried out on the liberalization of labor movements and its consequences. Good parts of civil society call for this liberalization. This reveals an evolution in global thinking about migration and the exclusive rights of nationals to access the territories of the states to which they belong. It also exposes a development in ideas about states’ monopoly over decisions about access to their territories. In sum, this is a reconsideration of “sovereignty”, or rather of how it could be re-defined in an era of steadily increasing globalization.

Ibrahim Awad’s most recent publications include [“Population Movements in the Aftermath of the Arab Awakening: The Syrian Refugee Crisis between Regional Factors and State Interest”](#).