

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN THE ARAB REGION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR KEY ACTIONS

League of Arab States

The Arab region witnessed intensive changes during the last decade which had an important impact on migration trends, types and repercussions, on migration policies as well as the relationship between sending and receiving countries.

Most of the region's countries witnessed rapid economic liberation and significant impacts of structural adjustment programmes; in addition to, the expansion of the globalized media and information. The region have also endured several conflicts and wars, and an increase in poverty and unemployment rates. This lead to amplifying migration pressure. Furthermore, and due to the tightening of forbidden policies practiced by the received countries, the region emerged diversified types of migration. i.e., the undocumented, the transit, the forced and the skilled migration.

Aiming to participate in identifying the substantive issues related to international migration, we will present in this paper the most prominent challenges that International Migration in the Arab and the Mediterranean region presented during the last decade.

Followed are suggestions for alternative policies concerning international migration management and opportunities utilization, as well as remarks on how the Arab League contributes to better understanding and deal with the key aspects of migration in the region and at the international level.

A. PROMINENT EMERGING CHALLENGES

1. Contraction of Migration Opportunities

At a time when the Arab region accustomed for decades to migration to the Western countries and recently to the Gulf, and to remittances and other migration benefits, and while the migration pressure noticeably increased and is expected to continue increasing during the next era (Arab Human Development Report, 2002), the receiving countries of the European Union and Gulf countries reinforced their frontier closure policies.

As a result, regular migration from the Arab World to Europe suffered a set back, and the number of Arab migrants to the Gulf decreased from 72 per cent in 1975 to 39 per cent in 1990 and to 25 per cent in 2002 of the total number of immigrants in these countries. The Gulf war in 1990-1991 resulted in the return of over 2 million migrants to their home country in the region. This situation contributed in the contraction of opportunities for regular migration which drove youth to irregular migration attempts and for part of them to join violent organizations.

2. Increase of Undocumented and Transit Migration

Although European regulations and cross-border rules have been strengthened, it is noticed that undocumented migration in the Mediterranean region have increased dramatically in the last decade. For example, undocumented migrants crossing Gibraltar Strait to Spain is estimated around 14,000 to 21,000 person yearly. The authorities in Spain caught yearly around 7,000 undocumented migrants in the late 1990's.

- As a result of the increased undocumented migration and the difficulty of controlling it, security perception and procedures have been strengthened in the host countries, including generalization of

visa, tightening procedures on the borders, arrests and control of foreign residencies and recently the attempts to establish camps for refugees and undocumented migrants within the Maghreb countries. Therefore, contradicting with human rights conventions

- The restriction of migration leads also to the increase of smuggling industry. In fact, most of the undocumented migrants are helped to cross borders by human smugglers as the smuggling became an industry with enormous profit. Their annual income is estimated around 3-4 million dollars in Europe only. It exceeded 10 billion dollars per year worldwide and this industry is growing from 20-30 per cent in the 1990's and to 70-80 per cent today.
- On the other hand, undocumented migration through the Mediterranean sea has resulted in tragic endings; in addition to, regular policies of arrestation, often in inhuman conditions. Thousands of undocumented migrants are dead yearly drowning in the sea. The number of migrants who died drowning in Gibraltar Cap is estimated at 17,000 persons during 1993-2000.
- Another new phenomenon which appears in the region is the *transit migration*, as most of the Maghreb countries have turned into transit countries for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East to pass to European countries. The number of sub-Saharan migrants in Libya is estimated at around 2 million in year 2001, and the number of migrants who enter the Maghreb countries is estimated at around 63,000 to 80,000 yearly through the 1990's.

Therefore, the migration process and policies have entered a vicious circle. Poverty, unemployment, globalization of media, wars and conflicts have increased migration pressure along with closure of borders which leads to the irregular/undocumented migration and the stimulation of the industry of smuggler, the security obsession, the xenophobia and racism. This in turn leads to more pressure on decision makers who tend to apply more security procedures and policies and more pressure on sending countries. The question here is how to break this circle? And from where should we start?

3. *Forced Migration*

During the last decade many Arab countries have witnessed wars and severe conflicts that led to the escape of thousands looking for safe shelter. The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian land and the mass destruction performed by Israeli troops forced large number of the Palestinian population to leave their country. The estimated number of Palestinian refugees in 2000 is around 3.7 million which is equivalent to 61.8 per cent of the total Palestinian population.

Moreover, the civil war in Lebanon that lasted around 20 years resulted in forced migration of around 900,000 persons. Elsewhere, the first Gulf war resulted in the migration of around 1.6 million Iraqis. And again the wars and conflicts in Somalia and Sudan lead to the migration of thousands from their home countries.

- The effects of the two Gulf wars are obvious in the returning of migrant workers to their countries of origin. During the first several months of 1990, two million immigrants in Iraq and Kuwait had returned to their home countries; in addition, 75,000 Yemenis returned from Saudi Arabia at the same period.
- As a result for the sudden return of thousands of migrants, huge problems emerged in the home countries; the unemployment rate in Jordan increased from 6-7 per cent in 1987 to 15 per cent in 2002. Moreover, the percentage of Yemeni's remittances decreased from 54.8 per cent of the GDP in 1987 to 15 per cent in 2000 and from 32 per cent in 1976 to 20 per cent in 1990 in Jordan. As for the Egyptian remittances, they decreased from 3,775 million dollars 1990/91 to 1,475 million dollars in 2002/03.

4. Skilled Labour Migration Is Rising

The highly skilled labour migration from the South, including Arab countries, to the developed countries have increased dramatically, where it reached 6 million immigrants in the OCDE countries. This migration is aimed at fulfilling the need of the developed countries markets and is stimulated by the increasing policies and procedures to attract such type of migrants from developing countries. Since this brain drain have cost a lot for the sending countries, it became a critical challenge.

Among emerged questions about the skilled migration from the region are; how to justify the selection policy of the developed countries encouraging brain drain which the countries of origin are in need and where these developing countries invested in them a lot; how can we develop mechanisms maximizing the mutual benefits of the skilled migration to strengthen transfer of knowledge and know-how to stimulate cooperation for development and to reduce the negative image and perception of migration?

5. Incoherent Policies of Developed Countries

The migration policies in several host countries suffer the lack of consistency on several dimensions whether as regards to cooperation policies and partnership or with economic market policies as well as the inconsistency with human rights which imposes the following questions:

- How can we justify the frontier closure policies and fighting undocumented migration combine with human rights as they contradict with the conventions recognizing human freedom of mobility?
- From the perspective of the free market and the mobility of economical factors, how can the migration issue be removed from the free market trade agenda bearing in mind that mobility of work is one of the main factors of free market and capital accumulation?
- How can the absence of the migrants' representatives, associations, and the elite in the dialogue and cooperation opportunities between sending and receiving countries be justified, particularly in dialogues concerning migration issues?
- Why is the humanistic side of the migration issue overlooked in the Media in general and the Western Media in particular?
- Does migration affect identities and the evolution of culture? Or do immigrants played important role in developing the civilization?
- How can European Union's interests be consistent with the Mediterranean policies?

B. GROWING REGULAR POLICIES RECOGNITION FOR INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION PRIORITY

Several countries in the region have extended their policy priorities to the international migration issues during the last decade, multiplying dialogue and coordination meetings, the adoption of procedures and legislations, and programmes of action; moreover, establishing mechanisms and specialized institutions. In addition to the establishment of Ministries for International Migration by the Governments of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lybia, Morocco and Syria, a number of regional consultative and dialogue processes have emerged. i.e, the 5+5 annual Ministerial Meeting (operating in the framework of Barcelona process and mediated by IOM) and the regular meetings of the Euro-Mediterranean interior ministries (mediated by ICMPD).

The past decade has also witnessed noticeable changes in the regional Governments' views and policies regarding international migration. In addition to their adoption of a number of the United Nations

conventions and protocols related to migrant rights, combating smugglers and human trafficking, reducing illegal migration, most of the Arab sending countries have adopted a positive approach to the skilled migration towards strengthening their role in transfer of knowledge and know-how. They also strengthened their policies of prevention and control of undocumented migration and of combating traffickers and smugglers.

C. ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR MIGRATION

In the light of the new findings concerning migration in the Arab region and the Mediterranean, and discussing the challenges imposed and opportunities granted, it might be worthwhile to focus international and local efforts on:

- Creating mechanisms and processes that allow the adoption of new and creative visions, approaches and instruments to humanize migration and maximize its benefits.
- Intensifying dialogue advocacy, cooperation, and partnership to collegial management of migration in a way that serves the need for development in both receiving and sending countries and to contribute in the cooperation for development.
- Supporting research and study efforts in order to reach a better understanding of the migration process impact and opportunities, and building information databases that supply documented and up-to-date data necessary for better migration management and policies.
- Providing capacity building support for governmental and NGO's bodies that deal with migration issue in the sending countries for better management of migration and utilization of its benefits and opportunities.
- Priority should be given to the migration issue in the United Nations, International Organizations, World Bank and other international and regional institutions agendas'. Moreover, the pressing need for establishing efficient and specialized mechanisms/bodies dealing with international migration.
- Intensifying activities aiming to highlight the humanistic face of migration, and to reduce the negative perception of migration, the xenophobia and the hostility against migrants.
- Ensuring the respect of international migration conventions and protocols including those protecting the rights of migrants, when adopting and implementing migration policies.

The comparative advantage of the League of Arab States (LAS), being an intergovernmental institution, is to have easy access to decision makers at the regional level. LAS has several dialogue and advocacy activities targeting these decision makers. In addition, LAS supports research in migration and development, organizing regional and sub-regional meetings on migration topics. LAS has also organized an important conference in Detroit in 2003 for diasporas in United States attended by about 1,000 participants and several meetings with Arab diasporas in Europe in Frankfurt, 2004.