

EGYPT: A NEW PLAYER IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATION SYSTEM

By
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“Egyptians have the reputation of preferring their own soil. Few ever leave except to study or travel; and they always return ... Egyptians do not emigrate” (Cleland 1936: 36, 52). This was the case until the middle of the twentieth century with few exceptions. Only small numbers of Egyptians, primarily professionals, had emigrated before 1974. Then, in 1974, the government lifted all restrictions on labour migration. The move came at a time when Arab Gulf states and Libya were implementing major development programs with funds generated by the quadrupling of oil revenues in 1973. The number of Egyptians working abroad in the Arab region around 1975 reached about 370,000 as part of about 655,000 total migrants (Brinks and Sinclair 1980). By 1980 more than one million Egyptians were working abroad. This number more than doubled by 1986 with an estimate of 2.25 million Egyptians abroad (CAPMAS 1989). The emergence of foreign job opportunities alleviated some of the pressure on domestic employment. Many of these workers sent a significant portion of their earnings to their families in Egypt. As early as 1979, these remittances amounted to \$2 billion; a sum equivalent to the country’s combined earnings from cotton exports, Suez Canal transit fees, and tourism.

The foreign demand for Egyptian labour peaked in 1983, when an estimated 3.28 million Egyptians workers were employed abroad. After that year, political and economic developments in the Arab oil-producing countries caused a cutback in employment opportunities. The decline in oil prices during the Iran-Iraq War forced the Arab Gulf oil industry into a recession, which costs some Egyptians their jobs. Most of the expatriate workforce remained abroad but new labour migration from Egypt slowed considerably.

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Even so, in the early 1990s, the number of Egyptian workers abroad still exceeded 2.2 million (Farrag, 1999; Ministry of Manpower and Emigration, 2003; Zohry 2005b).

The majority of Egyptian labour migrants are expected to return home eventually, but thousands left their country each year with the intention of permanently resettling in Europe, Australia, or North America. These emigrants tended to be highly educated professionals, mostly doctors, engineers, teachers, and highly skilled professionals.

Why do they migrate?

Until the mid-1950s, foreigners came to Egypt but Egyptians rarely migrated abroad (Zohry, 2003). Egyptian emigration was not only a reflection of the oil boom in the Arab Gulf countries and the need for manpower in neighbouring countries in mid-1970s, but also of economic difficulties and high rates of population growth in Egypt in the second half of the 20th century. Rapid population growth is one of the crucial problems that have hindered development efforts in Egypt. While the doubling of Egypt's population between 1897 and 1947, from 9.7 million to 19 million, took fifty years, the next doubling took less than thirty years, from 1947 to 1976. Today, Egypt's population is about 74 million which means that another population doubling occurred in the last 30 years. The annual population growth rate is around two percent. About 95 percent of the population is crowded into around five percent of the total land area that follows the course of the Nile. The remaining 95 percent of the land is arid desert. Although it can be seen as a kind of 'natural response' to the geography of economic opportunity, migration to large cities has further unbalanced Egypt's population distribution.

Associated with rapid population growth is a high level of unemployment. Current official unemployment rate in Egypt is about 10 percent, but independent estimates push the rate up to 20 percent (UNDP, 2005; Zohry, 2005a). However, to control unemployment, Egypt will need to achieve a sustained real GDP growth rate of at least 6 percent per year[†]. The economy has to generate between 600,000 and 800,000 new

[†] Current GDP growth rate is 4 percent (World Bank, 2006).

jobs each year in order to absorb new entrants into the labour force. The size of the informal sector and the level of over-employment in the public sector add to the complexity of the problem.

Egyptian Migration to Arab Countries

Migration of Egyptians to Arab countries is known as “temporary Egyptian migration”, simply because Egyptians who go to work in Arab countries – as well as other nationalities – do not gain any rights by staying longer time in these countries; they are not eligible to any kind of citizenship rights, so that they always return to their origin. With the long tradition of temporary migration of Egyptians to Arab countries, Egypt is now experiencing what is called “*the permanence of temporary migration*” (Farrag 1999: 55), or what I may call “the culture of temporary migration”. Migration to the West is referred to as “permanent migration” since a great proportion of migrants stay in destination countries, gain some rights, naturalize, and then enjoy full citizenship rights.

In the last three decades, flows of “temporary” migrants to neighbouring Arab countries exceeded permanent migration to Europe and North America. Official secondment through government authorities on the basis of bilateral contracts is one of the main forms of temporary migration, with work largely in branches of Egyptian companies, particularly the construction sector. According to estimates of the Central Agency of Statistics (CAPMAS) estimates, the total number of Egyptian temporary migrant labourers is about 1.9 million. Most of the demand for Egyptian labour comes from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan, and Kuwait. Migrants to these countries comprise 87.6 percent of the total number of Egyptian migrant labourers.

Egyptian Migration to Europe

From the beginning of the 1960s, political, economic, and social developments led some Egyptians to migrate permanently to North America and European countries. According to CAPMAS estimates, the total number of permanent Egyptian migrants in non-Arab countries is slightly more than 0.8 million (824,000). About 80 percent of them are concentrated in five countries: USA (318,000 or 38.6 percent), Canada (110,000 or 13.3

percent), Italy (90,000), Australia (70,000), and Greece (60,000). The other 20 percent are mainly in Western European countries, such as Netherlands, France, England, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Spain (CAPMAS, 2001). The statistics given by CAPMAS are just estimates which are drawn from the reports of Egyptian embassies abroad, records of cross-border flows from the Ministry of Interior, emigration permits from the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration, and some other sources. Receiving countries' estimates differ from those of CAPMAS. For example, the Italian government estimates there are around 35,000 Egyptians in Italy whereas CAPMAS gives a figure of 90,000 (Fargues, 2005).

Historically, Egyptian migration to Europe started about two hundred years ago in the beginning of the 19th century, after the Napoleon's Egypt Campaign (1798-1801) when Mohamed Ali, the founder of modern Egypt, sent the first Egyptian mission to Italy in 1813 to study printing arts, and another mission to France in 1818 to study military and maritime sciences in order to form a strong Egyptian Army, based on European standards of that time. Since that time, there were always a channel of communication between Egypt and Europe. Europeans used to migrate to Egypt and they formed successful minorities in Alexandria and Cairo until early fifties of the 20th century[‡]. The economic pressures and transition to socialism at the Nasser era led many European Egyptians to return to Europe. In addition, Egyptians started to migration to the West in the 1960's. Active and successful Egyptians live at present at most of the large metropolitan areas in many European countries.

Egyptians in the West are perceived to be more educated than migrants to the Arab gulf countries, their migration is a family-natured migration, and they comprise a brain drain to their origin. They include Egyptians who were sent by the Egyptian government to study abroad but many of them preferred to stay in the country of destination after the end of their missions to teach and research in the West. They also include a successful segment of businessmen.

[‡] Mainly Italians and Greeks.

Egyptian networks in Europe are well-established. For example, Egyptian medical doctors established their own society (Egyptian Medical Society) in the United Kingdom, which includes more than 120 members, many of whom reside in London and are university professors (Egyptian Medical Society UK, 2006). In addition to medical doctors, Egyptians in the UK are mostly highly skilled professionals (scientists, pharmacists, journalists, engineers), in addition to a small proportion of semi-skilled workers. Egyptians in Italy founded many Egyptian clubs and NGO associations. They also founded what is called “Italy-Egypt Cultural Association” and they lobby to support the idea of the introduction of courses in Arabic language in the Italian public schools (Stocchiero, 2005).

Irregular Migration of Egyptians to Europe

In the face of tightened policy adopted by the European Community (European Union), especially after the Schengen agreement in 1990 and the Maastricht Treaty (requiring a visa, strict border surveillance, and imposing a selective ceiling for work permits), illegal migration increased and illegal migration networks grew, especially from Morocco to Spain across the Straits of Gibraltar and from Tunisia and Libya to the nearby Italian coasts and islands across the Mediterranean. Statistically speaking and due to the clandestine nature of this movement of people, accurate figures of the numbers involved are difficult to estimate. Although the governments of sending countries set measures to stop illegal migration, they can not eradicate it completely. Similarly, the governments of host countries in Europe can not stop the movements of illegal migration with high rates of success due to the complicated nature of this phenomenon and its linkages to policy and socioeconomic conditions in the sending and receiving countries.

The current stream of Egyptian irregular migration to Europe started in the eve of the 21st century with massive number of fresh graduates and poorly-educated unemployed youth engaged in irregular migration to Europe either through the Mediterranean Sea via Libya or by over staying touristic Schengen visas. The main reasons behind this new type of

migration are not related to the tightened policy adopted by the European community, but mainly to the following reasons:

1. Unemployment: the increasing severity of unemployment is one of the main push factors that stimulate a strong irregular migration stream to Europe.
2. Associated with unemployment is the difficulty for Egyptian youth to find employment opportunities in the Arab Gulf countries due to the competition they face there due to the massive number of cheap South East Asian labor who migrate to the same destination.
3. Geographical proximity and the ease of travelling to Libya where most of the boat journeys to Europe are originated.

Characteristics of current migration stream to Europe

A field survey was carried out by the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Emigration to identify the push factors in Egypt as identified by ever and potential migrants. The research further tries to define the socio-political and economic environment in which the decision to migrate matures. The survey also gathers information about the level of awareness of potential migrants about irregular migration and migrants smuggling from Egypt. An important element of the survey is the identification of the information consumption habits of the potential target group[§].

The study population was set to be young males between 18 and 40 years old. This segment of population forms the pool from which illegal as well as legal migrants (regular/irregular) come from. The fieldwork took place in urban and rural areas in eight Egyptian governorate (provinces); the selection of the governorates within each region and the selection of fieldwork sites within each governorate were based on the existence of well-established migration streams (legal and illegal) between these sites and European countries.

[§] This survey was carried out by the Emigration Sector of the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration in cooperation with Italia Cooperation and the International Organization for Migration.

The standard questionnaire included sections on background information, migration intentions, international migration experience, migration of friends and relatives, exposure to media, and youths' plans for the future. Some 1,552 youth were successfully interviewed. In addition to the field survey, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with youth in four governorates. Through FGDs, qualitative data on migration intentions and experiences were collected to support and explain quantitative data collected through the field survey.

The results of this survey indicate that push factors in the country of origin (Egypt) are overwhelmingly economic. Egyptian youth regard migration – legal or illegal – as a possible way to escape poverty and unemployment. With respect to the reason for migration, the study indicates that the main reasons behind migration are the low wages and salaries in Egypt compared to Europe, bad living conditions, and the lack of job opportunities in Egypt, especially among fresh graduates. At the time of the fieldwork about 40 percent of the interviewees were not engaged in any work for cash. This is not a precise measure of unemployment but it reflects the degree of unrest among youth for not being engaged in any productive work. Many of those youth are university graduates who failed to find any job opportunity for years after graduation.

The choice of destination country in Europe is not a free choice; it is closely related to the migration networks and linkages between origin and destination which determine the choice of the country of destination in Europe. Migration networks that stimulate migration flows between Egypt and Europe are completely different from migration networks between Egypt and Arab Gulf countries. Migration of Egyptian youth to Europe is managed and activated by family kinship and ties while migration of Egyptians to Arab Gulf countries are usually managed by a set of regulations, certified migration brokers, and many other conditions. Migration to Europe is concentrated in a set of Egyptian villages in specific governorates; each village has its own destination; the two major destinations are Italy and France. So that one may confidently say that migration to these two destinations are operated in a *close market* where new entrants come from the same

village or group of adjacent villages. For example, a single village in Fayoum governorate is specialized in sending migrants to Italy while another village in Gharbiya governorate is specialized in sending migrants to France.

Some villages in the Nile Delta shifted their migration directions from the Arab Gulf countries to Italy. Youth in this village claim that migration to the Arab Gulf countries is not beneficial like before and “*working for one year in Italy is better than working ten years in the Gulf*”. The migrant population to Italy from this village is increasing and youth compete to find a way to migrate, legally or illegally. Fieldwork in this village indicated that there are many young males who attempted to migrate to Italy through Libya more than once.

An important factor that plays a major role in stimulating migration streams to Europe is the wealth of successful migrants and return migrants. Remittances of Egyptian migrants who work in European countries are important factors that stimulate a continuous stream of migration. Potential migrants claim that ordinary workers can save an average amount of 6,000 Euro per annum while working abroad (about 40,000 Egyptian Pounds). Potential migrants claim that the “*savings of one-year work in Europe is more than a lifetime salary in Egypt*”. Building luxurious houses in rural Egypt, marriages, and consumerism behaviour of returnees are strong factors that attract new young men to migrate. When youth weigh the risks of illegal migration against the expected returns, they prefer to take the risk for an *assumed* better life.

“*Egyptians have the reputation of preferring their own soil. Few ever leave except to study or travel; and they always return ... Egyptians do not emigrate*” (Cleland 1936: 36, 52); after 70 years of Cleland’s famous conclusion on Egyptians’ migration behaviour, his conclusions on return are still valid. The results of the study indicate that the vast majority of youth who want to migrate to Europe intend to return to Egypt after a temporary stay in the countries of destination. In spite of the fact that the legal framework for migrants to the Arab Gulf countries is very different to the legal framework in Europe, these findings suggest that the Egyptian migration to Europe is a re-production of

the Egyptian migration pattern to the Arab Gulf countries, where young males migrate to achieve specific financial goals and then they return to Egypt.

Egyptian migration to Europe is different from other migration streams that target the same destination: Egyptian migration is mainly male-dominated and temporary labour migration in general, while other streams involve males and females who usually intend to stay in the destination countries in general. Also it is important to note that contemporary Egyptian migration stream to Europe is different from the Egyptian migration stream to the West in the 1960s and early 1970s which was motivated by political unrest, economic pressures, and transition to socialism at that time. Most of Egyptian migrants at that time were highly educated and economically established. Contemporary migrants to the West (to Europe) are less educated males who suffer poverty and unemployment to the extent that one may call this new stream of migration “*migration of the poor*”.

Some Policy Recommendations

Building on the experiences of the current stream of Egyptian youth migration to Europe, some policy recommendations may emerge. Since low income and unemployment are the main push factors that affect migration, and in order to decrease unemployment rates, the government of Egypt should create new job opportunities in the local market through attracting foreign direct investment and the private sector. This should go hand in hand with an emigration-oriented policy and opening new markets for Egyptian labour force. Bilateral agreements between Egypt and European countries regarding labour mobility are important. The quota for Egyptian migrant workers should be negotiated with receiving countries in Europe.

Egypt should make for creating new jobs within the Egyptian economy to decrease irregular migration streams to Europe. If not sufficient jobs opportunities are created in Egypt, a great proportion of the surplus of the Egyptian labour force will be channelled – regularly or irregularly - to labour markets abroad. After the saturation of the labour

market in the Arab Gulf countries and the increasing competition that Egyptian labour face in the Gulf due to the increasing number of South East Asian migration to this region, the most feasible destination for Egyptian migration is Europe. Regulating Egyptian migration to Europe should be one of the priorities of the Egyptian government. Job matching schemes and pre-departure training of migrants should be considered.

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