ARAB REGIONAL POLITICS IN THE OIL-RICH GULF ARAB STATES AND LABOR MIGRANTS, REFUGEES

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Abstract:

This article explores the political dynamics of labor migration in the Middle East. It seeks to explain the politics of Arab population movements by looking at historical trends in regional integration and contends that migration to the oil-rich countries, including refugee flows, has been the key factor driving Arab integration in the absence of effective institutions and economic integration processes. To account for the influence of this largely forgotten factor, the article looks at the formal and informal institutions that have shaped massive labor flows from the 1970s onward. It offers historical evidence pointing to the role of migration in Arab regional integration by looking at free circulation of Eritrean refugees and migrants in the Arab region using oral history and administrative archives. Linking labor migration, refugee movements, and regional politics, the article introduces the concept of "migration diplomacy" as an analytical framework and argues that the politics of regional integration can be better understood when looked at through the lens of migration.

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Introduction: Magnitude and Complexity of Migration in the Middle East

The world's highest ratio of migrants to national population is to be found in the Middle East, and the region is one of the most fascinating arenas in which to observe international labor flows. Economic migration and forced displacement have led to the formation of a highly integrated regional labor market. Labor migration is one of the most dynamic economic factors in the Middle East, and remittances sent home by migrant workers in the region exceed the value of regional trade in goods as well as official capital flows. The growth of migrant labor in the Middle East was both rapid and massive and went hand in hand with the development of the oil economy. The stock of migrants went from 800,000 to 1.8 million between 1970 and 1975. In the 1980s, the Middle East became the largest market for migrant labor the world has ever known, and, according to Sharon Stanton Russell and Michael Teitelbaum, just before the 1991 Gulf War the oil-rich states of the Arab Gulf taken together numbered more than seven million migrants, five million of whom were workers. Migration to the oil-rich countries accounts for an overwhelming part of migratory trends in the region. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, some 37.1 percent of the population is foreign, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosting up to eighty-one percent of migrants, and foreign workers constituting at least seventy-five percent of the workforce in Saudi Arabia, eighty-two percent in Kuwait, and almost ninety percent in Qatar and the UAE at the beginning of the 2000s. Since the mid-1950s, the region has also played host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Numbering approximately 900,000 in 1950, 1.3 million in the 1960s, 1.6 million in the 1970s, and two million in the 1980s, the Palestinian refugee population has grown steadily since 1947 to 4.5 million today. Not including Sudanese internally displaced (IDP) and international refugees, the extended region itself holds more than six million refugees, who include some 4.5 million Palestinian refugees (exiles from 1947, 1967, and 1973 and their descendants) and approximately 1.5 million Iraqis in Syria and Jordan since 2006. In smaller but significant numbers, the region has also been harboring refugees from the horn of Africa: Eritreans in Sudan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia since the 1960s and the war of independence against Ethiopia, as well as Somali populations from Ethiopia and Somalia in Yemen since the 1980s and increasingly since 1991. Palestinians as well as other refugees (Eritrean, Somalis, Sudanese, etc.) from first to third generation are generally included in foreign labor statistics, notably in GCC states. Considering the magnitude of the migratory phenomenon in such a highly strategic region, one may find it hard to understand the

relative paucity of research on the politics of migration. Early work lamented the absence of migration-related research and data on the Middle East. Part of the gap in knowledge has been filled, but mainly for sending countries and mostly at the macroregional level. An extensive body of literature deals with the macroeconomic effects of labor migration in sending countries. The impact of remittances on local economies is still a question open to debate and its evaluation in terms of development efficiency and sustainability remains controversial.

Labor Migration in the Middle East: A Critical Narrative

The narrative of labor migration in the Middle East is well known and thoroughly documented. The literature has largely emphasized the economic and demographic determinants of labor import, and there have been many contributions to the analysis of the political economy and political demography of Arab intra-regional migrations in the 1970s and the 1980s. Oil-rich states have long argued that their migration policies were in fact depoliticized along the lines of classical economics arguments in favor of laissez-faire policy. Their deeds belie this argument: What they have in fact engineered is a political management of migration flows. Contrary to Nazli Choucri, who considers the initial phases of Arab labor migration in the GCC countries "individual," "private," and nonpolitical compared to a "state"-managed Asian labor import in the 1980s, and in support of Sharon Station Russell, we will argue that migration to the region has always been politicized along lines that vary across time and countries. After the Second World War, the development of oil production in the sparsely populated Arabian Peninsula led to a massive increase in labor demand and an urgent need for foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. The oil- producing countries' demand for labor was mainly met by regional inflows from highly populated neighboring Arab countries like Yemen and Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, or displaced populations like Palestinian refugees after 1947. Almost all categories of workers were targeted by public and private recruiters in the oil-producing states, from domestic laborers and construction workers to blue- and white-collar workers, in the private and public sector. The shift in price-setting power for crude oil from Western-owned private or semi-private oil companies (ARAMCO or British Petroleum) to the Arab states of the Peninsula led to a massive increase in oil prices, further enhanced by the regional political context. During tafra (the period of high oil income from 1973 to 1990-2014), growth, state building, and massive inflows of mainly Arab immigrants shaped the countries' political development. The steady increase in oil demand and the oil embargo of

1973-1974 generated enormous income for oil- producing countries and put them on a rapid but "extensive" development path heavily reliant on labor import. Within a decade, oil revenues tripled (from two hundred billion dollars for the 1971-1975 period to six hundred billion dollars for the 1976-1980 period), and oil-financed socioeconomic development programs targeting infrastructures, education, industry, services, agriculture, etc., triggered a massive flow of contract labor into economies lacking a sufficient and adequately skilled or trained workforce. Most oil-producing countries therefore hinged heavily on foreign labor to achieve economic development. As a result, in the 1970s, seventy- two percent of the labor force in the GCC countries was foreign. The most cited studies on migration during the oil boom come from the numerous data surveys, policy-oriented reports, and articles conducted by the International Labor Organization's team of economists. Interestingly enough, economic and demographic factors of migration fail to account completely for the counterintuitive variations in the volumes of migration during the late-1980s economic recession. Analysts agree that the collapse of oil revenue caused neither a large-scale re-export of foreign labor nor a drastic fall in regional migration levels.

Disenfranchised and likely to be "passive observers of political processes rather than potential activists or claimants on social services and other benefits of citizenship," Asian workers were not meant to gain access to indigenous resources and political participation. Beyond its economic rationale and the response to immediate market incentives, the selection of foreign workers illustrated a regional political strategy. Oil-producing states have justified their labor import policies on the basis of cost effectiveness. But along with the mechanic effects of push-pull factors and labor shortages, the dynamics of labor migration also require a thorough analysis of the policies and motivations that help determine the nature and volume of migrant labor flows. And in the case of the Arab region, politics as much as economic rationale seem to have shaped the trends of labor circulation. Several "migration crises" occurring at different levels point to the political nature of migration. Most interestingly, their study lends credit to the idea, initially posited by Nazli Choucri about the 1980s phases of Asian migration, that the origins and composition of migrant worker populations should be interpreted as the joint result of public policies of both sending and receiving countries. The case of Thailand is exemplary at the binational level. Yearly streams of labor from Thailand to the GCC rose from a few individuals to 105,016 between 1973 and 1982, with a large number of Thai workers going to Saudi Arabia,

and continued until the Saudi government ruled out Thai immigration after a diplomatic clash in 1990. After a heist and the murder of three Saudi diplomats and a businessman in Bangkok, the Saudi government gave a mot d'ordre of not renewing 250,000 Thai workers' visas and work permits in June 1990, signaling the exclusion of Thailand from a blooming migration circuit in Southeast Asia.

Regional Integration and Labor Migration

Regionalism and regional integration have long presented difficulties for scholars struggling to capture the "evolving architecture of regionalization." Most research on regionalism has gone beyond the analysis of geographical or politically integrated units in an effort to describe complex sets of interactions within groups of actors or zones. For that matter, Louise Fawcett contrasts the soft regionalism of the Arab world and the hard regionalism of the European Union, insisting on a spectrum that goes from one to the other, from a sense of awareness or community to the consolidation of pan- or sub-regional groups and networks through common institutions and organizations. Social-constructivist approaches applied to political identity in the Arab world have helped define the political integration processes beyond the crude measurement of hard factors such as state power, intergovernmental cooperation, supranational delegation of sovereignty, and formal institutionalization of interdependence. In the Middle Eastern case, in order to evaluate the efficiency of economic integration processes, one needs to measure the degree of integration between labor markets provided through both formal and informal kinds of regulation. And this task requires, among other things, that labor migration be brought under scrutiny. Our interest lies in the overlapping of these two aspects of regional integration, and in this respect it is critical to take into account the politics of labor migration in the Middle East. On the one hand, the literature on Arab regional integration generally laments the weakness of intraregional exchanges and the inefficiency of regional institutions. It tends to display a "gloomy picture" of Arab integration, depicting instead the conditions of Arab "disintegration." Regional integration is deemed to have failed, according to economic indicators and institutional criteria posited by the theoretical literature on regionalism.

United Nations and World Bank reports confirmed in the late 1990s that indicators of liberalization of trade and economic interdependence were still low despite institutional proliferation, including the 1998 Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement. Between 1985 and 2014, intraregional trade accounted for only six and seven percent of total export and import from and

to the Middle East. The integration of labor markets since the 1960s, epitomized by the case of the oil-rich countries, is nonetheless generally understated as an economic factor of integration. One could argue that it has not only compensated for the failure of commodity market integration and weak corporate capital flows, but also that it has constituted a pioneering experiment in global labor-market integration that resulted from successive phases of globalization.

The Informal Politics of Labor Migration in the Middle East: Migration as Diplomacy

The process of regional integration in the Middle East is atypical with regard to other models such as Europe or even the Americas: It has mainly been fueled by formally or informally regulated labor-force transfers between countries in the region. Therefore, we argue that migration policy should be analyzed as an indirect form of foreign policy that uses the selection of migrants and quasi-asylum policies as diplomacy. At the regional level, patterns of worker mobility organized along the lines of regional and international politics have been a key to understanding what could be called the Arab "migration diplomacy." This diplomacy is nonetheless to be understood as including formal and informal, public and private diplomacy. Bypassing the channels of formal institutions and agreements, the politics of workers' circulation has been shaped by the decisions of both public and private actors, state administration, and embassies on a bilateral and temporary basis, and by firms and recruitment companies on a contractual business basis. Most sending countries have created public institutions to manage and organize labor emigration while at the same time retaining a public-private partnership in the management of migration flows: Overseas employment ministries, agencies, and offices flourished in Asia in the 1970s (the Overseas Employment Corporation established in 1976 in Pakistan and 1979 in Bangladesh, the Office of Overseas Employment Service Administration in Thailand, the Korea Overseas Development Corporation in South Korea). But similar institutions also started to appear in the Arab sending countries in the 1970s. The 1971 Egyptian constitution mentions the competence of the state in managing migration flows, and the 1981 presidential decree (n°574) defines the competence of the Ministry of Emigration Affairs and Egyptians Abroad until the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration was created in 1996 (presidential decree n°31) and the Supreme Committee of Emigration was created in 1997. In the receiving countries, the politics of labor import from the 1960s to the 1980s was characterized by a clear preference

granted to Arab immigrants in oil-rich countries that was not formalized by bilateral agreements or migration quotas. Nevertheless, the patterns of regional migration politics followed those of regional integration politics.

In the context of Arab regional integration politics, fostered by pan-Arab ideologies, migration was the only field of actual integration between states and economies. Labor migration, its regulation, and the social, cultural, and financial flows that go with it are the very domain in which Arab integration has taken concrete form. Arab migrant worker flows and the remittances of capital they generated "have been the most important feature of regional integration" in the Middle East. The sequence of Arab labor circulation and regional integration of labor markets lags behind the institutional history of Arabism. Five major historical phases are generally identified in the saga of Arabism: the intellectual premises (nineteenth and early twentieth century), the rise (from the Palestinian uprising of the 1930s to the Egyptian revolution of 1952), the consolidation (from the Egyptian to the Iraqi revolution of 1958), the decline (1958-1967), and the demise after 1967.

The first wave of regional integration through labor migration came as a result of the war of 1947-1948 and the creation of the state of Israel, which caused the exodus of around 700,000 Palestinian Arabs who relocated mainly in the then-Jordanian West Bank or Cisjordan area but also fled to Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and in smaller numbers to the Arab peninsula. The 1967 war generated subsequent waves of Palestinian refugees who either left the Palestinian-occupied territory or the first country of asylum to reach the oil-rich states and the better work opportunities they offered. Between 1947 and 1960, the population of Kuwait doubled, and the proportion of non-Kuwaiti in the population rose to fifty-three percent in 1965 with around thirty percent of all non-Kuwaitis being Palestinian. In 1975, twenty-five percent of the Saudi Arabian workforce was Yemeni (from North Yemen). Around sixty percent of the Jordanian labor force was working in the Gulf during the 1970s, including both Jordanians and Palestinians with Jordanian passports. The share of foreign Arab population in the oil-producing countries rose dramatically and started raising problems of national integration for the receiving states, which were later reformulated as issues of national security. The governments in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE started development policies in the late 1980s, raising requirements for participation by nationals in the workforce. In the sending countries, exit visa procedures were

lightened in the 1960s and 1970s. Egypt's political and cultural capital within the region directly benefited its diaspora.

Egypt suspended previous restrictive emigration policies in 1973 while launching the *infitah* (open door) politics, and in 1974, exit visa requirements were suppressed for emigrants. Egyptian migrants within the Arab world in the 1960s were predominantly skilled workers, mainly teachers and administrators. At the beginning of the 1970s, they joined with flows of Palestinian, Jordanian/Palestinian, and Syrian but also Iraqi and Lebanese workers, giving rise to a massive wave of both skilled and unskilled migration to the Gulf. In turn, the sending countries were also attracting other categories of immigrants. Egypt and Lebanon served as an educational hub in the region with prestigious universities for students and intellectuals from the rest of the region and Africa; Lebanon attracted unskilled workers from neighboring countries; and Egypt attracted Sudanese unskilled workers. The idea of an integrated Arab labor market was pervasive in the 1970s, and some policy makers considered treating the Arab region as a single territory, with mobility being one of the many forms of interaction possible between state units. In 1957 the League of Arab States commissioned its Economic Council to promote the principle of freedom of movement for workers, and in 1965 the first conference of Arab Labor Ministers endorsed the principle. In 1967 an agreement was signed by Jordan, Syria, and Egypt to call for free circulation of workers in the region. None of the main receiving countries signed the agreement, and the oil-producing countries steadily refused to sign any binding convention concerning the access to their labor markets for foreign nationals. Even though oil-rich states participated in the Arab integration process in a subdued but extremely efficient fashion, they failed to reap the political benefits of this participation. The Arabian Peninsula was indeed considered a minor eulogist of Arabist politics compared to the vocal advocacy of Nasser's Egypt, Ba'ath-led countries like Iraq and Syria, or the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen since 1970. In the case of the oil- producing countries, pan-Arabism was, as Michael Barnett puts it, an "informal institution" rather than a set of organizations.

Migration Policy as Asylum Policy by Proxy: The Palestinian and the Eritrean Case

Today, more than eighty-eight percent of registered Palestinian refugees (4.7 millions) are located in Arab near-eastern countries, and more than half a million of them were still in the Gulf after the expulsion of approximately 450,000 from the region after the 1991 Gulf War due

to the position adopted by the Palestinian Authority. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the Gulf states are party to the 1951 Geneva Convention, the 1965 Casablanca Protocol of the Arab League of States for Palestinian refugees, or the 1967 Organization of African Unity Protocol that guarantees protection and assistance to international refugees. However, the link between population dynamics and international violence has been discussed mainly within the context of the Palestinian refugee case, and the refugee flows in the Middle East clearly highlight the interconnection between migration and displacement. Indeed, the treatment of Palestinian refugees has become a central issue to the extent that it can be taken as symbolic of Arabism and pan-Arab politics as a whole. The equation between Arabism and the Palestinian cause started with the first exodus of 1948, as shown by Constantin Zurayq, the Syrian historian who first coined the word nakba. Even though Saudi Arabia was not a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) asylum country and did not recognize the Casablanca Protocol status for Palestinian refugees, the kingdom hosted Palestinian refugees as early as 1948. The state was simply applying the Protocols' provisions de facto through a liberal entry and residence regime for Palestinian exiles of 1948 and 1967. As a token gesture of Arab solidarity and an act of informal diplomacy, the Arab managers of the ARAMCO recruitment sections opened an office in Beirut in 1948 in order to reach the Palestinian population. After 1967, large numbers of Palestinian refugees were recruited and sponsored by the ARAMCO, then a public-private Saudi-US company. To a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia supported the Eritrean cause in the war of independence against Ethiopia (1962-1991) by financing the guerrillas but also by facilitating entry and residence for exiles and guerrilla fighters. Arab countries in general, and the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia in particular, supported the Eritrean guerrillas from the 1960s to the 1990s on an ideological basis and allowed Eritrean refugees to enter and settle in the oil-rich countries using migration politics as an asylum policy by proxy. Eritrean refugees were considered as Arabs oppressed by a colonial Christian power (Ethiopia) supported by both Israel and the United States until the Marxist revolution led by Haile Mariam Mengestu in 1974.

Even though the historiography remains controversial on the emergence of an Arab political culture of the guerrilla, the intellectual, financial, and political connections between the first political movements promoting independence and the Arab world is clearly established. Arabicized elites from Eritrea gathered within the Muslim league in 1946, the *Harekat Tahrir Iritriya* (Eritrean Liberation Movement) in 1958, and the Eritrean Liberation Front, and started to

claim autonomy from the Ethiopian domination that was formally established over the former Italian colony after the British army withdrew in 1952.

Primary sources and historical accounts in Arabic strongly defend the idea of an Arab identity of the independence struggle based on the support granted to the guerrilla by neighboring Arab countries. The discourse produced by political leaders in the 1960s and the 1970s was strongly influenced by Arabism and by the ideological resources it provides for claiming independence. Therefore, the presentation of Eritrea as an Arab country and of Eritreans as Arabs was acknowledged as a regional political commonplace, which led to the blooming of propaganda and pseudo-historical literature on Eritrea's "Arabness." As a consequence of this political emphasis on the Arab identity of the guerrilla and of the Eritrean people, from the 1960s to the 1980s most of this Eritrean population, although already covered by the *prima facie* refugee status granted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, entered Saudi Arabia either on a pilgrimage visa or without any documentation at all. Two Royal Decrees issued in 1974 and 2001 temporarily granted the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) the status of *kafil* (sponsor) for Eritreans who wished to come and reside in the Kingdom. The 1979 Royal Decree was abolished in 1981, but various public services, including the Service of Passport and Immigration at the Ministry of Interior and the regional offices of the Ministry of Labor, remained particularly tolerant in their treatment of Eritrean "immigrants" till the beginning of the 1990s. Between 1984 and 1985, the status of kafil was briefly granted again to the ELF thanks to the outcome of the Jeddah conference, gathering all Eritrean independence parties and factions in exile.

The Circulation of African Exiles: Travel Documents and Arab Politics

The concept of a regional citizenship was theorized by Zaki al-Arsuzi in 1965 but never gave way to concrete administrative or political measures, such as an "Arab passport." The Arab National Convention on Nationality, adopted on April 5, 1965, fell well short of Arsuzi's hopes by asserting that whoever possessed the nationality of any of the states of the League of Arab States was Arab (article 1). The definition chosen was tautological and merely institutional. The processes of migrant and refugee identification in the region remain partially informal nonetheless, due to weak or rather inefficient state bureaucracies. As Jane Caplan and John Torpey have demonstrated, the categories under which foreign nationals are labeled indicate the limits and extent of their rights, duties, and freedom of movement. In the case of the Arab world

in the 1970s and 1980s, the relative informality of registration and identification of migrants was linked to prevailing social, political, and cultural representations of the self and of others. The history of Eritrean refugees in the Arab world illustrates the power of social representations of Arabness and indirect asylum policies. Through both state and nonstate activism, Eritrean exiles negotiated conditions of access and mobility for Eritreans in the Arab world during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964, during a press conference in Damascus, Idris M. Adem, Eritrean guerrilla leader in exile, asserted that "there are no others in Eritrea but Arab citizens," and Eritrean political figures hammer throughout their discourses and writings the Arabness of Eritrea and of Eritreans.

The consequences of this activism can be seen in the quasi-asylum policy that some Arab countries developed in favor of Eritrean refugees. Most Eritreans were registered as refugees in Sudan or Yemen, countries that had signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and hosted UNHCR offices and were given Convention Travel Documents (CTDs) that allowed them to leave their first country of asylum and travel around the region. In the context of pan-Arab politics, the government of Sudan issued vast numbers of CTDs that were valid in the Arab world, contrary to the prescription of UNHCR regulations. Most CTDs observed in the Commissioner of Refugees (COR) archives in Khartoum mention "Arab countries" or "Arab countries excluding Israel and South Africa," which reflects the positioning of the League of Arab States in regional politics. CTDs were used as passports and were recognized and accepted as legitimate travel documents for Eritrean refugees, even in the oil-rich countries that had not signed the 1951 Convention but were the preferred destination of secondary migration for Sudanese-based exiles. COR archives host numbers of expired CTDs from the 1970s and the 1980s in cardboard boxes that display visas and stamps from oil-rich countries, some of them even bearing handwritten enumerations of the number, names, and ages of dependents. Some also bear the handwritten note "to accompany employer" alongside the visa and residence stamp delivered by the Service of Passport and Immigration of the receiving country.

Conclusion

Macro and micro analyses of migration and asylum trends argue in favor of a reappraisal of the role of oil-rich states in shaping regional integration. Despite the widely acknowledged demise of Arab regional integration as a political and institutional process, the achievements of informal and de facto integration processes linked to labor migration and refugee movements

need to be emphasized. Behind the well-known tones of pan-Arabism and the institutional buildup of the 1960s and 1970s, the main actors of regionalism in the Middle East were in fact labor migrants and refugees. The Middle East case helps us reassess the historical importance of mobility as a political phenomenon and the role of migrants and refugees as political actors. The structures and patterns of regional migration systems are determined not only by economic factors but also by political incentives, whether these be formulated as explicit public policy and diplomacy or implemented through administrative practices shaped by political representations. Migration policy embodied in a wide spectrum of formal and informal practices contributed to the regional political dynamics, and migrants and refugees could be considered essential historical actors, at the regional and the local levels, in both sending and receiving countries.

References

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