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Drivers, Trends and Patterns of International Migration in the Arab Region

In a time of unprecedented human mobility, migration governance has become a pressing global issue that affects millions of people around the world. To address this issue, the United Nations General Assembly held its first high-level Summit on Migrants and Refugees in September 2016, with the aim to develop a global approach towards governing international migration. The Summit resulted in the adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. The Declaration provides for two global compacts: the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, and the global compact on refugees, both capturing concrete commitments of states.

The Declaration is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015, which emphasizes the importance of human mobility for development, and highlights the risk that poorly-managed migration poses on the States' ability to strive for inclusive and sustainable development. This subject is of utmost importance to the Arab region, which hosts roughly 14 per cent of global international migrant stocks, and where diverse and complex migration and displacement dynamics provide both opportunities and significant challenges for sustainable development. This brief defines migration drivers, and discusses the main trends and patterns of migration from, to and through the Arab region. , and highlights the migration of some groups, namely youth and women.

Drivers of Migration

Three interrelated patterns of migration may be observed in the Arab region: a) regular and irregular labour migration; b) forced migration; and c) mixed migration flows. International labour migration, the movement of persons from one State to another for the purpose of employment, is addressed by most States in their migration laws. In addition, some States take an active role in regulating outward labour migration and seeking opportunities for their nationals abroad. While regular migration occurs through

recognized, authorized channels, irregular migration takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries. From the perspective of destination countries it is entry, stay or work in a country without the necessary authorization or documents required under immigration regulations.

Forced displacement to, from and through the Arab region is largely the result of people fleeing conflict, severe breakdowns in public order, generalized violence or persecution. Movements are large scale and may be sudden in nature, and can result in the temporary or protracted displacement of people outside or within countries of origin. Secondary to the economic, social and political drivers, environmental factors such as acute weather conditions and climate change may contribute to the decision to migrate.

The Arab region is also witness to large scale, cross-border, mixed flows of people moving irregularly for various reasons. Mixed movements involve a number of people traveling together, generally in an irregular manner, using the same routes and means of transport, but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have varying needs and profiles and may include asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied/separated children¹, and migrants in a vulnerable situation². Human traffickers and migrant smugglers often play an important role in irregular, mixed migration.

A range of drivers and root causes thus shapes population movements to, from and through the Arab region: while refugees for example flee conflict, persecution, generalized violence and human rights violations, labour migrants are primarily in search of work, opportunities and livelihoods, and others move to join family members. Those motives can sometimes combine and further complicate the analysis of drivers and patterns of migration.

Refugees and other persons in need of international protection are the subject of a separate, distinct and independent process towards a global compact on refugees. However, because of the difficulties of having data that accurately separate refugees from migrants, the numbers used in this paper, calculated by UN DESA, include international migrants, and estimates of refugees and other types of migrants.

Migration to Arab countries

The size of the international migrant population in the Arab countries has expanded by 150 per cent from under 15 million in 1990 to nearly 35 million in 2015. An estimated 12 per cent of the world's labour migrants were in the Arab region, according to available estimates from 2013³.

¹ Unaccompanied minors and separated children are more driven by the need to access international protection and/or employment. Their migration is commonly facilitated by family and informal networks.

² There is no intentionally agreed upon definition for mixed migration. This definition has been taken from UNHCR's 10-Point Plan in Action, 2016 Update.

³ ILO, 2015. "ILO Global estimates on migrant workers." Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_436343.pdf. The "Arab Region" used in the ILO report refers to Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, State of Palestine, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

The GCC⁴ in particular is a major hub for labour migrants. Migrant workers comprise an estimated 67 per cent of all workers in this sub-region⁵. GCC countries receive by far the largest number of migrants in the Arab region, with stocks reaching 25 million in 2015. With the exception of Oman and Saudi Arabia, migrants make up the majority of the population in GCC countries; of this migrant population, over 70 per cent are male. With over 10.2 million migrants in 2015, Saudi Arabia has remained the largest migrant host country in the Arab region since 1990 when comparable data are available. In the United Arab Emirates, migrant stock rose by over 500 per cent between 1990 and 2015, reaching 8.1 million, while Kuwait hosted 2.9 million migrants in 2015. Other main migrant and refugees host countries are Jordan (3.1 million), and Lebanon (2 million)⁶.

The Maghreb hosted 1,158,749 migrants in 2015 (1.3 per cent of the total population). According to the available data, Libya hosted the largest number of migrants (771,146) followed by Algeria (242,391). In 2015, according to UN DESA data, 71 per cent of migrants in the Maghreb came from within the Arab region, mainly the State of Palestine (343,650), Somalia (125,349) and Iraq (84,490). Migrants from countries outside the Arab region mostly came from France, totaling 43,936, with a large share likely returning diaspora. The Maghreb is both a region of origin and destination for migrants, as well as a transit region, with flows particularly large to and through Libya.

In turn, the Mashreq hosted 7,086,022 migrants in 2015 – twice as many as the region hosted in 1990 (2,929,860), including large numbers of refugees. In total, over 90 per cent of migrants in the subregion came from other Arab countries. Circulation of labour in the region is longstanding, including for instance an estimated 630,000 Egyptians in Jordan according to the country's latest census⁷. Lebanon also hosts considerable numbers of migrant workers, including domestic workers, and refugee populations who have entered the labour market.

India is by far the largest single origin country of migrants in the region, with Indians representing nearly one quarter of all migrants in the region, most of them in the GCC. South Asian⁸ countries account for 44 per cent of migrants in the Arab region, while migrants from South East Asia⁹ account for 10 per cent. A further 37 per cent of migrants in the region originate in other Arab countries.

The steep increase in population movements is also largely attributed to the increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in recent years as a result of the ongoing conflict in the region. Today, the Arab region hosts more than 16 million internally displaced persons and over 8 million refugees¹⁰. Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt are the countries within the Arab region hosting the highest

⁴ Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

⁵ ILO, 2015. "ILO Global estimates on migrant workers."

⁶ Note that these figures are based on UN DESA data compiled in 2015 largely from national census data. While this includes refugee data shared by UNHCR for countries in which refugees are not included in census data, it does not capture the most recent official refugee data from 2016. Data on Palestinian refugees from UNRWA are included in UN DESA data, except in the case of Palestinian refugees in the State of Palestine.

⁷ The Jordan Times. (2016, January 30). Population stands at around 9.5 million, including 2.9 million guests.

⁸ Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka.

⁹ Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam.

¹⁰ Note that some refugees have subsequently been internally displaced, for example in the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq, and hence would be counted both within refugee data and IDP data. Sources: UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2016; IDMC Global Internal Displacement Database, data from end 2016.

number of refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic. Between them, these countries host over 2 million Syrian refugees, more than 13 per cent of all refugees in the world, not including Palestinians. The majority of the 5.3 million Palestinian refugees are concentrated in Jordan, the State of Palestine and Lebanon¹¹.

Migration from Arab countries

Much of the migration from Arab countries is driven by displacement and the search for work. Over the past 25 years, the number of migrants from the Arab countries has grown steadily. In 2015, it was estimated that 26.1 million people from Arab countries were living outside their country of birth. That is almost 5.7 million more than in 2010 and almost 15 million more than 1990¹². This recent upsurge is mostly explained by the increase in flow of migrants from the Mashreq due to conflict¹³.

As of 2015, 14.8 million migrants from the Mashreq were living outside their countries of birth, representing 57 per cent of all migrants from the Arab region. In 2015, migrants from the Maghreb¹⁴ totaled over 5 million. This number amounts to 21 per cent of all migrants from the Arab region, making the Maghreb the second largest sub-region of origin after the Mashreq. The number of migrants from the Arab LDCs¹⁵ has increased from around 2.1 million in 1990 to almost 4 million in 2010 and to 9.4 million in mid-2016. The increase of 141 per cent between 2010 and 2016 was the biggest leap in 25 years. The number of migrants from the GCC countries, the lowest in the region, almost doubled, increasing from a little over 303,000 in 1990 to almost 700,000 in 2016 (constituting 2.6 per cent of all migrants from the region)¹⁶.

The largest origin countries in the Arab region in 2015 were the Syrian Arab Republic, with approximately 5.3 million migrants residing abroad, followed by the State of Palestine (3.6 million), and Egypt (3.3 million). About half of all those originating in Arab countries remained in the region. In 2015, the top three countries of destination for migrants from Arab countries were Jordan, France, and Saudi Arabia¹⁷.

Migration through Arab Countries

The Maghreb region remains a key transit point for Sub-Saharan Africans, particularly passing through Libya and the Central Mediterranean to Europe. In 2016, over 181,000 migrants and refugees arrived in Italy, about 90 per cent of them departing from Libya, with the rest mainly leaving from Egypt. As of August of 2017, there were close to 100,000 arrivals to Italy¹⁸.

Despite entering its third year of active conflict, Yemen remains a key transit country for migrants from the Horn of Africa aiming to reach Saudi Arabia and the GCC, as well as a destination country for Somali refugees and other migrants. In 2016, a record number of over 117,000 migrants and asylum seekers were

¹¹ Statistics for Palestinian refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic estimated that 450,000 Palestinian refugees remain inside Syria in 2017. Source: <https://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis#Syria-Crisis-and-Palestine-refugees>.

¹² UN DESA, 2015.

¹³ The Mashreq countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic.

¹⁴ The Maghreb countries: Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

¹⁵ Arab LDCs: The Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen.

¹⁶ UN DESA, 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ All arrivals data to Italy have been provided to IOM by the Italian Ministry of Interior; see <http://migration.iom.int/europe/>.

estimated to have entered Yemen, mainly from Ethiopia (+80 per cent) and Somalia¹⁹. This marks a steady increase from 2013, and a major rise from a decade ago when arrivals were about 26,000.

Youth and Female Migration

Women make up an important proportion of migrants in and from Arab countries, and are. While they are more likely to migrate for family unification than are men, women also comprise an important share of labour migrant populations and mixed and forced migration flows. Their number of female migrants in the Arab region doubled from 5.6 million in 1990 to 11.6 million in 2015. However, their proportion of females among the total stock of migrants decreased from 39 per cent to 33 per cent in the same time period. Almost 60 per cent of all female migrants to the Arab region went to the GCC countries, although, their proportion in this sub-region was only 38 per cent in 2015. In contrast, females make up nearly half of all migrants in the Mashreq.²⁰

Youth (aged 15 to 24) make up an estimated 12 per cent of migrant stocks in the Arab region, based on UN DESA data. While the GCC countries hosted the largest absolute number of youth migrants in 2015 (2.7 million), youth represented just 11 per cent of the total migrant population in the GCC countries – the lowest of any Arab subregion. In contrast, while UN DESA data show just 215,000 migrant youth in the Arab LDCs, they represented 19 per cent of all migrants' stocks. Youth make up 17 per cent of migrants in the Mashreq (1.2 million) and 15 per cent in the Maghreb although in absolute terms are a much smaller number (171,171). Countries with particularly high shares of youth among migrant stocks include the State of Palestine (26 per cent), Egypt (25 per cent), and Yemen (22 per cent). The GCC countries of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have the lowest shares of youth migrants (between 7 per cent and 11 per cent).

Migration: A Reality and a Priority for Arab States

Diverse and complex migration and displacement dynamics in the Arab region provide both opportunities and significant challenges for sustainable development and illustrate even further the importance of a robust global framework to address migration challenges. The context of the Arab region calls on actors and policy makers at the local, national, regional and global levels to adopt policies and strategies that respond to the realities of the current migration dynamics.

It is clear that with or without government policies, migration will continue to be a strong demographic force in the Arab region. Higher border walls and restrictive legal and policy regimes do not stop migration or refugee movements; they tend, however, to make migration and displacement less safe and less beneficial for everyone. The Arab countries therefore need to adopt a narrative that views migrants as agents of development, and advance governance schemes that ensure the protection of migrants and their families and enhance the benefits of human mobility while decreasing the associated risks and costs.

¹⁹ Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (2017). Country Profiles: Yemen. Updated March 2017. Available from <http://www.regionalmms.org/index.php/country-profiles/yemen>.

ⁱ This brief was drafted by ESCWA team in preparation for the Regional Consultation on International Migration in the Arab Region.