

Egypt – migration, revolution and social change

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For decades Egypt was a source country for migration to states of the Gulf and to neighbouring Libya. From the early 1970s millions of Egyptians, most of rural origin, worked as contract employees in programmes initiated by the Egyptian state. These became a lifeline for the Egyptian economy - remittances growing rapidly to become the country's largest source of foreign exchange. By the 1980s there were some 3.5 million Egyptians in the Gulf region, with over 1 million in Iraq alone.

Migration soon became integral to many families and communities – a key means of supporting the kin group and the local economy, and a rite of passage for many young men, especially those from regions in which there was acute pressure on the land. The experience of migration, and the financial rewards it could bring, became part of the agenda for adulthood and a means of facilitating marriage, establishing a household and advancing status within the community.

These practices were established as part of a migration system which embraced the Gulf region and a series of neighbouring states. This also affected regions beyond the Middle East, drawing migrants from South Asia and South-East Asia. After 30 years of sustained involvement of Egyptians, however, many were displaced by Asian immigrants, while Egyptian migration declined further as a result of conflicts involving Iraq, including the Gulf War of 2003. The volume of Egyptian migration declined sharply – but changes within Egypt, together with the impacts of an embedded practice of migration, soon produced new patterns of movement.

Mass migration from Egypt had begun as the regime of President Anwar Sadat adopted policies which were to bring radical change to the economy and to social life. Sadat's programme of *infitah* introduced deregulation of trade and finance, and paved the way for more far-reaching reforms under President Hosni Mubarak, who encouraged privatisation of industry, commerce and agriculture. After 2000, migrants who had spent much of their working lives in the Gulf returned to find an Egypt much changed from the society of the post-colonial era.

Among the biggest changes was the impact in the countryside of measures for “de-sequestration” of land which in the 1950s and 1960s had been acquired by the state from private owners and distributed to landless peasants and small landholders who received rights to cultivation in perpetuity. Under Mubarak's reforms, landowners of the colonial era were entitled to retrieve their estates and to raise new rents from those cultivating the land. Millions of hectares were secured and redirected from subsistence agriculture to cash cropping. Millions of peasant families were evicted and began to move to the cities; as the rural economy came under unprecedented pressure some families also initiated new patterns of emigration, sending their young men to work in Europe.

By 2005 irregular migration across the Mediterranean to Italy and Greece was well established. Most of those involved were young men and children (aged under 18 years) who took enormous risks attempting to reach southern Europe from Libya and increasingly from Egyptian fishing ports. Despite formal efforts by European authorities to inhibit these networks, greatly increasing dangers for those involved, the pace of migration has intensified and cross-Mediterranean networks have become integral to the life of some communities – especially those in the Nile Delta in which the rural economy has been affected most profoundly by neo-liberal reform.

Drawing upon academic research in Egypt and in Europe, and upon work in Egypt by NGOs and agencies associated with children's welfare, this paper examines the rapid emergence and consolidation of the new migration networks. It considers the impact of pre-existing migration

practices, the development of new practices and of new attitudes towards the migrant experience, and the complex outcomes for migrants and for those who do not migrate.

The paper addresses the impact of exclusionary measures adopted by states of the European Union vis-a-vis migrants from North Africa and their effect in rural Egypt. It also considers the impact of Egypt's revolution upon migration - the outcomes of societal upheaval and of a huge rise in expectations of social and economic advance among millions of people. It examines in particular the implications of collapse in some functions of the Egyptian state, arguing that processes associated with the "Arab Spring" continue to stimulate cross-Mediterranean movements and to reshape regional patterns of migration.

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