



North Africa in Transition: Mobility, Forced Migration and Humanitarian Crises¹

6 May 2011 (13h00-18h00)

Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford
3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, OX1 3TB

13h00–15h00 Session 1 – Mobility, displacement and immobility in the context of the North African popular uprisings

Chair: **Dawn Chatty** Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford

Speakers:

Hein de Haas International Migration Institute, University of Oxford

Julien Brachet Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, University of Paris

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford

Philip Marfleet Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging, University of East London

A history of migration in North Africa: continuities and discontinuities

Hein de Haas, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford

Dr Hein de Haas opened the event by outlining the historical migration drivers and trends in North Africa. He explained that to understand the current migration ‘discontinuities’ discussed during the workshop, we must first acknowledge the ‘continuities’. Thus, his presentation examined four diverse, yet inter-connected, migration systems in the region: migration from the Maghreb to Euro-Mediterranean states, migration to and within the Gulf, an intra-regional sub-system to Libya, and trans-Saharan migration. In terms of historical migration trends in the region, Dr de Haas explained that the number of sub-Saharan migrants and refugees arriving in North Africa has been increasing since the 1980s. Since 2000, there has been an anti-immigrant and xenophobic backlash, especially in Libya, against sub-Saharan migrants, while the European Union has intensified its border controls.

Dr De Haas concluded his discussion by highlighting the nature of current migration flows resulting from the 2011 uprisings. There has been large-scale return migration from Libya, excluding sub-Saharan migrants who may be stuck in Libya. The humanitarian crisis inside Libya has led to a refugee crisis in neighbouring states, particularly Tunisia. However, boat migration from Tunisia to Europe, which has existed since the 1990s, has not seen a major increase. This appears to dispel the notion that Europe is subject to a migration invasion resulting from the uprisings.

¹ Prepared by Ayla Bonfiglio

Temporary perturbations and structural changes of the Libyan migration system

Julien Brachet, IRD, University of Paris

Dr Julien Brachet showed that in addition to benefiting Libya economically by meeting the country's demand for workers, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have been a source of political gain. The Libyan government's policy towards sub-Saharan migration has been calculated to maintain strong links with both the European Union and the African Union by (mis)representing Libya as a barrier that prevents waves of illegal migrants from reaching Europe and by appearing to be tolerant of illegal sub-Saharan migration to Libya. In demonstrating Libya's commitment to EU and AU interests, the government has carried out periodic and large-scale expulsions of sub-Saharan migrants.

The current conflict in Libya has further challenged the security of this population, who have historically encountered widespread racism and violence in Libya, as black Africans are being seen as mercenaries in the conflict. The 2011 uprisings in North Africa have drawn attention to the long-standing problem of violence against sub-Saharan migrants in Libya, as well as the political manipulation of migrants more generally. These problems will continue if no steps are taken to protect this vulnerable group.

Protecting invisible Sahrawi and Palestinian refugees in Libya

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford

Palestinian and Sahrawi refugees in Libya highlight the multiple and overlapping forms of migration that exist within the Middle East and North Africa, for they are both refugees and overseas students/migrant workers. Dr Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that their multiple statuses are linked to why these populations do not receive international protection and why they are essentially 'invisible'. She explains that Libya does not recognise their refugee status because they migrated to the country voluntarily for educational and employment purposes, and because Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Dr Fiddian-Qasmiyeh also attributes the invisibility of these groups to the international community and international media's classification of other migrant groups as 'more needy' – a vulnerability hierarchy – or 'more worthy' – a geopolitical hierarchy. The invisibility and multiple statuses of Palestinians and Sahrawis have become poignant issues in the wake of the 2011 uprisings.

Dr Fiddian-Qasmiyeh examined the ways in which the current violence in Libya has impacted their status and protection needs, as almost one thousand Sahrawi refugees and an estimated fifty to seventy thousand Palestinian refugees were stuck in Libya during the outbreak of the conflict. Furthermore, she explored whether it is the responsibility of the international community to provide these individuals with protection, suggesting that the refugee status of these two populations be accentuated rather than diluted and that resettlement outside of the region be considered as a durable solution.

Philip Marfleet, University of East London

Dr Philip Marfleet argued that the current revolutions and migration patterns in North Africa are linked to the dominance of the neoliberal agenda of development institutions in the region over the last 20 to 30 years. Despite bringing important structural changes to North African states by ending centralised economies, liberalisation placed emphasis on private capital and lent power to small elite-controlled networks. This caused wealth centralisation and inequality, the elimination of state-subsidies, and rapid and widespread public immiseration. Consequently, the Egyptian government

encouraged emigration relieve social pressures, create greater links abroad, and prompt the flow of remittances into the country. Additionally, widespread immiseration and high unemployment combined with more recent democratisation has prompted emigration to Europe to continue. Dr Marfleet was careful to distinguish what he saw as a steady migration trend from alarmist rhetoric that claims young, unemployed North Africans will flood European shores.

Because of Egypt's political and economic history, recent increases in education, and improved opportunities to leave the country, he explained that we must question how to consider Egyptian migrants. Are migrants who have faced economic marginalisation at the hands of neoliberal development agendas and/or who have experienced politically and economically unstable situations in their states, merely 'economic migrants'?

15h30–17h30 Session 2 – The key protection and legal challenges faced by the international community in light of large-scale displacement

Chair: **Oliver Bakewell** International Migration Institute, University of Oxford

Speakers

Dr Michael Willis Middle East Centre, University of Oxford

Mr Marc Petzoldt International Organization for Migration

Ms Elizabeth Eyster United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Michael Willis, Middle East Centre, University of Oxford

Dr Michael Willis provided an overview of the political situation in Tunisia and the Western Maghreb. He explained that major challenges facing Tunisia are the weak economy and collapse in tourism, the refugees arriving from Libya, and the engagement of youth in politics. He explored the events preceding the elections in Tunisia, the directions the country is likely to go in, and the impact on migration issues. He explained that the two parties being watched carefully are an Islamist party and the successor to the incumbent party, for there is fear regarding the impact that either would have on the country.

Concerning Algeria and Morocco, Dr Willis explored the reasons why these countries had not staged revolutions. He explained that in Algeria, there is not a clear leader to unite against, for leadership is opaque. Moreover, the opposition is divided and the violence from the street protests against the government in the 1990s remains in people's memories. In Morocco, there is a more liberal political atmosphere. Thus, the country has not experienced the same pressured and contentious environment as Tunisia and Egypt. However, there are similarities with Tunisia and Egypt, including very high unemployment rates and poor social conditions.

Marc Petzoldt, International Organization for Migration

Mr Marc Petzoldt began his presentation by providing an overview of IOM's operational role in facilitating the return and transit as well as the protection of migrants in North Africa. He explained that the exodus from Libya is a very challenging situation for the organization, which has little and unreliable access to Tripoli and intermittent access to Benghazi. The situation changes daily and they do not have a clear idea of how many migrants are in pro-Gaddafi areas of the country and trying to

leave. Another challenge for IOM lies in the insufficient capacities of source countries to absorb returning citizens from Libya and to survive without the remittances they had been receiving from their kin abroad.

Mr Petzoldt concluded by discussing the current protection needs in Tunisia. He explained that IOM has 2,500 migrants left in its areas of operation. However, there is an increasing number of cases requiring specific protection needs, for instance helping trafficked victims and unaccompanied minors, and preventing migrants from being smuggled or trafficked. Another situation IOM is facing is migrants who do not want to return to their place of origin and who do not fall under the classic refugee definition. Host governments have made it clear that they want these migrants to leave and IOM is anticipating harsh climactic conditions in the summer. Thus, the organization is under pressure to find a solution.

Elizabeth Eyster, United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Ms Elizabeth Eyster began her presentation by outlining UNHCR's limited operations in Tunisia before the Libyan crisis. She explained that once the conflict began, 150,000 Egyptians and other third-country nationals arrived, followed by 50,000 Libyans. Two themes Ms Eyster emphasised were the humanitarian spirit of Tunisians in responding to the migration crisis and the restructuring of UNHCR's role. The Tunisian government opened its border to all fleeing the crisis and called upon UNHCR at the outset to assist in the response. Tunisians contributed caravans of food and accepted migrants into their homes, schools, and communities. Additionally, rather than insist on establishing a refugee camp, for Tunisians and Libyans opposed the idea, UNHCR adapted its operations to meet the needs of the situation. UNHCR set up a transit centre for a network of Tunisians and Libyans to meet new arrivals, identify a host family for them, and provide them with food assistance.

Ms Eyster concluded her presentation by summarizing the challenges that UNHCR faces. First, while UNHCR was effective in responding to the in-migration of third-country nationals, it has been slow in responding to the needs of Libyans and finding resettlement spaces for persons of concern. Second, there is a lack of resources to sustain the host-family situation, should Libyan displacement become protracted. Third, a phenomenon Ms Eyster called 'regionalisation' is responsible for a tense political atmosphere in country. She explained that the regions where the revolutions began were extremely poor with high percentages of unemployment and are the same regions that the crisis is affecting and where host families risk being over-stretched. If UNHCR and governments do not address the tension and pressure on resources in these areas, politically motivated groups may threaten democratisation.

17h30–18h00 Session 3 – What lies ahead? Wrap-up and closing comments

Hein de Haas, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford

Dr Hein de Haas provided a brief evaluation of the protection challenges emerging from North Africa and the Middle East and an examination of the key dilemmas faced by the international community as it assesses humanitarian, political, and military realities. He emphasised the importance of distinguishing what is new about migration in the region, what is continuous, and what is transformed. He concluded by noting that there remain many open questions such as: What will be the effects of migrants who return to the region following the revolutions? How will we distinguish those 'worthy' of protection? What is the responsibility of the international community?