

## MIGRANTS, REFUGEES, AND DISPLACED PERSONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: AN APPROACH FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

*Migrantes, refugiados e deslocados no Oriente Médio e Norte da África: Uma abordagem desde o Sul Global*

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**Abstract.** This article aims to introduce aspects involved in studies on migratory dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In this sense, we present some historical dynamics for defining the territories of what is considered the MENA region, as well as highlighting the participation of these countries in the context of the migratory and humanitarian crises that have characterized the dynamics of mobility in and in the region. In such a context, we draw attention to the politicization of migratory phenomena and to the still sparse study and research initiatives that analyze the migratory dynamics of countries in the MENA region to the global south. Finally, the article introduces the discussions on migrations in the MENA region that are part of this dossier, inviting the reader to dialogue with different theoretical-methodological approaches on the migration phenomenon in that context.

**Keywords:** The Middle East and North Africa; South-South Migrations; Refuge; Displacement.

**Resumo.** O presente artigo visa introduzir aspectos implicados nos estudos sobre as dinâmicas migratórias no Oriente Médio e Norte da África (MENA). Nesse sentido, apresentamos algumas dinâmicas históricas de definição dos territórios do que se considera a região MENA, assim como colocamos em relevo a participação desses países no contexto das crises migratórias e humanitárias que tem caracterizado as dinâmicas de mobilidade na e da região. Em tal contexto chamamos à atenção para a politização dos fenômenos migratórios e para as ainda esparsas iniciativas de estudos e pesquisas que analisem as dinâmicas migratórias de países da região MENA para o sul global. Por fim, o artigo introduz as discussões sobre as migrações na região MENA que integram o presente dossier, convidando o leitor para a interlocução com diferentes aproximações teórico-metodológicas sobre o fenômeno migratório naquele contexto.

**Palavras-chave:** Oriente Médio e Norte da África; migrações sul-sul; refúgio; deslocamento.

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## **The Migrant, Refugee and Displacement Issues in the Middle East and North Africa**

The purpose of this dossier was to open a space for dialogue with researchers and scholars who, coming from different geographical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives, direct their research efforts in analyzing the characteristics of migrations and forced displacements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in intra-regional and extra-regional terms. Throughout this process, we were faced with challenges, including that of dialoguing with different and multifaceted interpretations in studies on migration and refuge, regarding both the limitation on which countries and regions are part of this geographic space and how the MENA has been academically constructed as an object of study. Precisely this aspect, the construction of the Middle East as an object of academic research, has been one of the most challenging and controverted scholarly issues along many decades, due to the colonial/western connotations of the definition and delimitation of what is called 'Middle East.' While it is not the objective of this introduction nor this special issue to address that controversy, however, we acknowledge the ideological and political connotations that using a specific definition including certain countries can have. The traditional definitions of 'Far East' and 'Near East' were coined by the British in 19<sup>th</sup> Century do deal with their colonies in Africa and Asia. The first one gradually became 'Middle East,' including mainly the countries in the Levant, Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Turkey and Egypt. More elaborated definitions included 'Middle East and North Africa,' extending the region until Morocco and even Mauritania, and eventually the Horn of Africa (Scharnweber, 2016). Some shared political, economic and societal dynamics drove to more complex definitions that tried, on one hand, to provide more coherent academic approach; and on the other hand, to systematize the foreign policy initiatives taken by regional and extra-regional states. This way, the 'Greater Middle East' or the 'Broader Middle East' has been coined later on to provide the geographical reference to the United States initiative on economic and political liberalization of a wide geographic area of Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Sharp, 2005). In that broad definition of the Middle East were included Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the former Caucasus and Central Asian Soviet republics. Precisely, the inclusion of Afghanistan was justified by the 2002 invasion of the country to eliminate Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden as well as to promote a regime change to replace the Taliban rule started in 1996. Thus, for this article and special issue, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) represents a broader definition that includes Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In particular, along the path of construction of the dossier, the developments of the situation in Afghanistan leaped to the eyes of the world dramatically. The recent de-facto instalment of a new Taliban rule in the whole country, reintroduced the concerns from not only the regional neighbors but also the more geographically

distant countries, such as those from the European Union (EU), about a new flux of refugees trying to flee from the country.

Like it happened after the civil wars started in Yemen, Libya, and Syria after the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the sole idea of waves of refugees knocking the doors of the developed Europe is something that deeply concerns the policy-makers. European authorities, on one hand, are trying to prevent a massive new flux of irregular migrants in times when they are still recovering from the heavy burden represented by the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, most of the governments are also trying to tackle the raising anti-migrant narratives within their own societies that became very evident during and after the 2015 crisis, when far-right groups tried to maximize the exploitation of the refugee drama, as former Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini did in 2019<sup>1</sup>.

Just looking at some figures can justify, to some extent, the European concerns. More than 570,000 Afghans were already among the asylum seekers in the European Union since 2015<sup>2</sup>, more than half of them in Germany. The largest amount of the Afghan refugees, however, only arrived to Europe during what it was called the “European migrant crisis” of 2015, resulting from the civil wars abovementioned, and despite the fact that Afghans have been one of the largest refugee populations of the world in the last 40 years<sup>3</sup>. During that year of 2015, the record number of 1,325,000 people sought for asylum in one of the EU member states, including a majority of Syrians, but also Afghans, Nigerians, Pakistanis, Iraqis and Eritreans, among other groups from the Sahel and the Middle East and Horn of Africa<sup>4</sup>.

The phenomenon got an extended visibility due to the media usage of images of refugees trapped at the Eastern borders of the Union, primarily in the Balkans, where the transit of migrants from Turkey to Greece became dramatic, chaotic, and often violent, because of the treatment by security forces trying to prevent the entry to some countries. The tragic death of the three-year-old Syrian Kurdish migrant Alan Kurdi, near the touristic Mediterranean beach of Bodrum, Turkey, became a symbol of the migrant/refugee drama<sup>5</sup>. But also, demonstrated on one hand, the general failure of state policies aimed at protecting citizens from a certain death in their journey to a better life; and on the other hand, the existence of clandestine networks that benefit from the same irregular migration from countries in crisis towards the more developed ones<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/23/italys-salvini-in-court-for-blocking-migrant-ship>>.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-taliban-crisis-europe-less-welcoming-stance-refugees/>>.

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>>.

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>>.

<sup>6</sup> <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/middleeast/alan-kurdi-death-trial.html>>.

Despite the abovementioned, and the visibility that the refugee drama acquired at the Southern and Eastern borders of the EU, this region is not the main recipient of refugees or irregular migrants, neither in the past crises nor in the future coming one. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only in Iran there are 3,636,000 people of concern, which include 780,000 Afghans refugees, 586,000 Afghan passport holders, and 2,250,000 undocumented Afghans<sup>7</sup>. Unofficially, the Iranian authorities are already mentioning one million new refugees crossing the Afghan-Iran border since October 2021. According to the same official source, Turkey is currently hosting almost four million refugees in their lands, 3.6 million of them being Syrians<sup>8</sup>; and Jordan, 753,282 from 57 different nationalities<sup>9</sup>. Finally, Lebanon, a country that is already passing through a very drastic institutional, socio-political and economic crisis, has been hosting 1.5 million Syrian refugees until very recently<sup>10</sup>.

The approach to the issue of the massive migrations from the broader MENA region by the mainstream media reflected in addition the strong 'politization' of the phenomenon by most of the governments affected. Some Eastern and Southern European countries tried to use them as a bargain chip to achieve financial concessions from Brussels. Turkey forced the signature of a comprehensive deal with the EU after the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan threatened to open the borders for the migrants to reach Europe<sup>11</sup>. Some Arab countries also started to refuse accepting more refugees if no additional aid was provided from international organizations<sup>12</sup>. Overall, the extreme political use of the migrant/refugee issues has contributed to the lack of long-term responses to a phenomenon affecting millions of people in the whole world, and killing thousands every year in their journey to run away from a very dramatic life conditions. And because of this lack of long-term solutions, the current refugee crisis that already started in Afghanistan will show similar features that previously. Thousands of Afghans already left the country through diverse ways, and more will do in the coming months and years if nothing is preventing the new de facto authorities to impose life conditions unacceptable to millions.

Due to the centralization of the main migration routes coming from Asia and Africa towards the more developed European countries, the political and academic debates surrounding the migration/refugee issue have been addressing

<sup>7</sup> <<https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>>.

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>>.

<sup>9</sup> <<https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Jordan%20country%20factsheet%20-%20February%202021.pdf>>.

<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/lebanon>>.

<sup>11</sup> <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/turkish-president-threatens-to-send-millions-of-syrian-refugees-to-eu>>.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-26/jordan-says-it-won-t-take-in-any-more-syrian-refugees>>.

these main refugee problems affecting recipient developed societies. Most of the times these debates disregarded the other routes or migration trends that transversally move across the Global South. Therefore, the academic production on the topic remained unbalanced, reflecting perspectives produced within the migrant/refugee recipient countries, rather than other perspectives coming from the migrant producing countries or from contexts in which the migration is not perceived as an existential threat to the lifestyle of the recipient communities, like for instance Latin America.

### **A critical and off-center perspective**

It would be interesting to locate the debate on migrations in the MENA in the background of the “decentered” reflections we make of this region from the MENA and Latin America (LA). These “displaced perspectives” – from MENA and LA on the issue of migrations “in” and “of” MENA-, assume a critical and decentralized approach (considering the position of the organizers – one in Qatar and the other in LA, as well as authors) on the migration phenomenon in the region. This implies facing the challenge of addressing the issue of migration governance “in this” region and “this” region, as well as understanding the dynamics of the neoliberal macroeconomics that is often configured as a cause of exclusion, social and economic inequalities, ethnic and/or religious conflicts in the region, generating hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, migrants, and refugees.

In general, the approach to migrations in the region is completely crossed by Western preconceptions about a still distant, “wild,” conflicting, uncivilized, and unassimilable east. In this direction, governments, civil society organizations and immigrants from this region are excluded from the process of elaborating lasting, sustainable, and positive long-term solutions. In other words, a good part of the financed actions developed in the region are guided by the perspective of emergency, fragmented and with few openings to possible good local practices. The results can be catastrophic and frustrating as you can see when looking at the case of Syria and Afghanistan.

### **Invisibility and overflow**

Despite the great diversity present in the MENA countries, a homogenized view of the region still prevails, disregarding cultural, political, and historical differences, among others, and which make the phenomenon of migrations in the MENA a fact that has not yet been analyzed. This invisibility only seems to be broken when the East “overflows” its geographic limits and reaches the West through large waves of migrants and refugees from there. If it is true that the phenomenon of migrations from MENA to the West seems to corroborate the notion of the inability of these countries to ensure human rights and individual freedoms, it is also true that this phenomenon only seems to be relevant when

it becomes an issue to be faced in the national territory of western countries. In other words, the issue of migration and refuge in the MENA only integrates the international agenda when these physical and geographical “overflows,” but which are also symbolic and cultural, go beyond the territorial limits of the distant and “contained” MENA.

Along these lines, we could ask ourselves how to make the “turn” in the way the topic is approached. A question that should be asked initially is what challenges OM countries face in relation to the phenomena of displacement, migration, and refuge, and why these challenges should only be defined by a certain Western notion that is based on “Eastern/Arab/Muslim nature” often described as conflicting, barely understandable. For what reasons, for example, should internal migration in the MENA be less of a humanitarian issue than the one facing American and European countries?

There is a latent criticism about the absence of global governance on the issue of migration or refuge, or about the partiality with which this is pursued, since decisions on policies financed by international organizations, economic blocks, etc., are north-eastern centered and economically oriented, excluding important actors and their good practices, not only because of their GDP but also because of their “nature”. In this sense, migratory crises are “naturalized” when they occur in certain geographic territories, such as those taking place in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, etc.

### **Agency and Recognition**

The reflections brought by the authors in this dossier indicate that academia plays a vital role in the process of building the Middle East as an object of studies and research (Said, 2007). Among the many challenges indicated, the task of recognition must be considered, both of individuals and groups who migrate in situations of vulnerability as subjects with agency and of the growing critical mass formed by “native” authors of this context, still little explored theoretically and methodologically in studies conducted from the establishment in the field of migration studies in general.

There is also the challenge of recognizing the diasporic formations established from the migrations of countries in the MENA region and that present themselves as important collectives regarding the expansion of rights in the destination countries, as well as in militancy in favor of changes in the realities of origin. Diasporas, leveraged by the flight from contexts of repression, political and religious persecution, from curtailing individual and collective freedoms, present themselves as important actors of mediation and search for solutions in the contexts of origin, but also pose pertinent questions about conflicting views of models of State.

In this sense, there is the mobilization of diasporas around the human rights agenda, strongly leveraged by the context of the Covid-19 health crisis, which

deepened the dramas that were already experienced by countries immersed in prolonged humanitarian crises, as in the Syrian and Palestinian case. In many ways, the humanitarian support agenda for MENA countries has been intertwined with other agendas for the recognition of rights, such as in the cases of the fight for equal rights for women and the fight against xenophobia, Islamophobia, Arabophobia. Here we have the notion of a soft power exerted by these diasporas that have been growing in the OM since the Arab Spring within the scope of action of civil society.

### **This Special Issue**

We are grateful to the authors who were generously willing to submit their productions on the topic, opening up important perspectives for debate and reflection. Moghadam and Jadali, in *Immigration and Revolution in Iran: Asylum Policy and State Consolidation*, takes as its object of analysis the Afghan migration in Iran and, in dialogue with the literature on the role of mobilities in the formation of the state, indicate the important role that the Migration policies played in Iranian state formation. The debate presented by the authors poses the great challenge of considering how the State can be affected by dynamics considered to be marginal, as in the case of migrations, which play decisive roles in the contours of the contemporary State.

Victor et al. in *Forced displacements in the Middle East and the life cycle of refuge in Turkey and Lebanon – from factual coverage to humanitarian journalism*, they introduce an important reflection on how journalistic coverage of migrations in the Middle East has been constructed discursively in Brazil. Bringing the example to coverage of migrations in Turkey and Lebanon, the authors point to the perspective of humanitarian journalism as an alternative journalistic practice with the potential to contribute to the formation of a public opinion critically attentive to humanitarian policies.

Santos in *Nowhere to go? The case of displaced people in Maghreb states during the Covid-19 pandemic*, taking as the object of analysis the Maghreb countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, examines the impact of the pandemic on migrants in these countries and their practices adopted in this context. The author points to an important debate on global regional inequalities with regard to health access policies, as well as the limits faced by States immersed in social and humanitarian crises in extending health coverage to migrant and refugee populations sheltered in these territories.

Carpi in the article *Ethnocracies of care and humanitarianism in Lebanon* discusses the tendency of the humanitarian system to aid people in vulnerable situations based on nationality criteria. The research carried out by the author with Syrian, Iraqi, Sudanese, and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon points to the problems of discursive hospitality based on processes of ethnicization of refugee populations. The debate opened by Carpi allows us to problematize the issue of

ethnicization of groups of migrants and refugees from and in the Middle East, pointing out how ethnicization can operate as a practice linked to the international humanitarian system aimed at these groups, interdependent on the territory where they seek protection.

The problematics addressed by the authors in this special number reflects the complexity of the migration issue affecting large groups of people, approached from a diverse perspective and theoretical-methodological approaches. Thus, the articles focus on the effect that wars, (Afghanistan, Syria, etc.) political crisis and Covid-19 pandemic had on forced migration, displacement, and refugee trends. But also, on the policies implemented by states as well as international organizations to address the challenges produced by them. But the geographical and theoretical perspective differs from that mainstream literature produced mainly from the Western developed world that tend to see the phenomenon of the migration as a 'problem' for the recipient states, rather than for the migrant producing countries.

From the Latin American Council for Social Sciences (CLACSO), Middle East and North Africa Working Group, Latin American researchers and scholars specialized in the region are trying to offer a different lens to observe and analyze the socio-political developments occurred in a very distant region geographically speaking, but often very close considering the colonial and post-colonial experiences that most states passed through (Cuadro, Setton, 2020). With a combination of different disciplinary traditions such as Political Science and International Relations; History; Anthropology; Migration Studies; Oriental Studies; and Language Studies, the Latin American scholars specialized in the region consolidated a multi and interdisciplinary corpus of knowledge not only useful to explain the MENA region to the Latin American public, but also for the same MENA region and the developed Western one.

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