



# The Arab Spring and Beyond

## Human Mobility, Forced Migration and Institutional Responses

**20 March 2012 (11.15am–6.00pm)**

**Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford**

**3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, OX1 3TB**

This report<sup>1</sup> analyses the main themes arising from the presentations and discussions at ‘The Arab Spring and Beyond: Human Mobility, Forced Migration and Institutional Responses’ workshop organised by the International Migration Institute (IMI), Refugee Studies Centre (RSC), and Oxford Diasporas Programme on 20 March 2012.

The workshop invited international scholars, practitioners and policy makers to examine the extent to which the Arab Spring has shifted both migration and forced migration dynamics and governance in North Africa and the Levant. The workshop consisted of three panels. The first panel, entitled ‘Revolution, asylum and mobility’ explored how varying processes of political, economic, and social contestation in North Africa and the Levant have affected human mobility. The second panel, entitled ‘Migration and institutional responses during the transition’ examined how events have transformed or impacted the institutional behaviour and responses of international organisations and civil society groups working in the field of migration and displacement. The final panel, entitled ‘Diaspora mobilization, transnational networks and civic society’ discussed how publics and governments in North Africa and the Levant have positioned or repositioned themselves in relation to issues of forced migration and migration.

### Background to the workshop

This workshop built upon the ‘North Africa in Transition: Mobility, Forced Migration and Humanitarian Crises’ workshop, convened by IMI and RSC in May 2011, which explored how the evolving revolutions and crises linked to the Arab Spring were affecting existing patterns of mobility and generating new ‘mixed’ migration flows, as well as how institutions were responding to new humanitarian and displacement crises. In particular, panellists at the May workshop observed that the regional crises were prompting some economic migrants to become forced migrants; pushing forced migrants into irregular migration channels; and causing multiple migrant groups, including seasonal and long-established migrants, to be ‘involuntarily immobile’. Panellists also observed that apart from large-scale displacement within and from Libya, migration patterns from other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, such as Tunisia and Egypt, seemed to have remained unaffected by the political turmoil, in contrast to predictions made by some politicians, journalists, and researchers about mass displacement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Written by Ayla Bonfiglio. Thanks are owed to Dawn Chatty, Hein de Haas, Nando Sigona and Jacqueline Smith for their feedback and comments.

## Generating and constraining, changing and persisting migration patterns

One of the main issues to emerge during the presentations and discussions at the workshop was the extent to which the Arab Spring impacted migration patterns in the region. Far from being the catalyst for waves of refugees to flee to European shores, participants argued that the Arab Spring played a greater role in generating intra-regional forced migration flows, constraining and changing migration patterns, and drawing greater attention to pre-existing migration flows.

Regarding generating forced migration flows within the region, Urs Fruehauf (UNHCR Syria) revealed that approximately 30,000 Syrians have registered with UNHCR in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Libya, compared to the less than 300 refugees registered before the start of the Arab Spring. Hassan Boubakri (University of Sousse) explained that the fighting and March 2011 NATO bombing in Libya displaced between 70,000 and 80,000 Libyan families, averaging five to seven members each, to Tunisia by June 2011. These figures describe the forced migration of nationals from their countries; more than 800,000 migrants living and working in countries affected by the Arab Spring have also been displaced within the region. Intra-regional migration flows account for 98 per cent of the total displacement resulting from the Arab Spring, according to Violeta Moreno Lax (Refugee Studies Centre).

In terms of constraining migration, Claire Oxby (University of Bern) observed that many migrants engaged in cross-border trade in Tamanrasset, Algeria have experienced a decline in their freedom of movement because political instability, conflict, and crisis arising from the Arab Spring have hindered economic opportunities, increased state border controls and deportations, and, subsequently, increased labour exploitation by employers who are aware of migrant traders' vulnerability and unofficial status. Emmanuel Gignac (UNHCR Libya) discussed how approximately 9,600 refugees and asylum seekers in Libya remain involuntarily immobile because their economic vulnerability and threatened security have left them without the capability to seek asylum elsewhere or return to their countries of origin. In Syria, Jonathan Steele (*The Guardian*) and Urs Fruehauf found that the deteriorating economic situation and the closing of embassies have left many nationals and Iraqi refugees trapped, for their capabilities to move have been severely limited and refugees are unable to receive necessary interviews for resettlement to third countries. Hence, the Arab Spring has had the effect of inhibiting movement, by constraining the economic and political factors that often drive migration.

The Arab Spring has also caused migrants to change between migration categories. Several of the speakers observed that many migrant workers in North Africa were forced to flee as refugees to third countries. Hassan Boubakri explained that between 350,000 and 400,000 third-country nationals crossed into Tunisia from Libya between February and June 2011; and Mohammed Abdiker, (International Organization for Migration) revealed that a total of more than 800,000 migrants left Libya for places such as Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Chad, Malta, and Italy, to name a few. Claire Oxby observed that Tuareg soliders who had been recruited to Libya by Colonel Ghaddafi were displaced to Niger and Mali. Similarly, increasing xenophobia and racism in Libya and Mali have prompted more than 100,000 black sub-Saharan migrants to flee and become asylum seekers in neighbouring countries. In addition to migrants becoming refugees, Oxby found that events related to the Arab Spring have caused the further displacement of refugees or have forcibly returned refugees to their countries of origin. For instance, many of the refugees crossing the Malian border into Niger were originally from Niger, but had been displaced during upheavals in 1990 and 2007.

Lastly, participants agreed that many of the migration patterns observed since the start of the revolutions and crises were movements that predated the Arab Spring, and achieved greater international attention because of the Arab Spring. In the case of Egypt, Phillip Marfleet (University

of East London) argued that many of these pre-existing migration patterns are driven by the same factors and historical trends that contributed the revolution, namely, neo-liberal trade agreements and land reforms, causing the collapse of subsistence agricultural production, high levels of unemployment and internal displacement, and out-migration. Polly Pallister Wilkins (School of Oriental and African Studies) held that the Arab Spring brought attention to existing migration flows from Libya and Tunisia to northern Mediterranean states, as well as to migration control mechanisms. Hassan Boubakri echoed this point, stating that night departures by boat from Tunisia to Europe had been recorded for at least two decades prior to the revolution.

Thus, when we explore mobility in the context of the Arab Spring, it is important to recognise that in addition to causing considerable intra-regional displacement, revolutions and crises have also prompted migrants to enter forced migration flows, constrained mobility, and brought attention to persisting patterns of migration. Recognising the diversity of migration patterns not only nuances the picture of movement since the start of the Arab Spring, it crucially draws attention to the equally diverse range of migration impacts resulting from or existing through the Arab Spring. Participants revealed that the consequences of migration do not only lie with forced migrant-receiving countries, like Tunisia, but also with migrant-sending countries, like Niger or Chad. If the movement of third-country nationals in Libya becomes constrained or if such individuals are forced to become refugees, countries of origin, which depend on the remittances sent by nationals working abroad, must go without such income. Moreover, if refugees in Libya are forced to return to their origin countries, then such countries must learn to integrate 'forced' returnees into society.

### **Differentiation of migrants, forced migrants, and migration experiences**

A second theme to emerge during the presentations and discussions at the workshop was the way in which the Arab Spring impacted the lives and livelihoods of migrants differently, according to migrants' ethnic group, language fluency, dress and appearance, legal status, and possession of identity documents. For instance, in Tamanrasset, Claire Oxby observed that Tamashek-speaking migrants have had relatively more freedom of movement than Hausa-speaking migrants during the Arab Spring – which sparked increasing border controls, deportations, and racism towards sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya and Algeria – because they more easily blend in with the national population through speaking a locally accepted language and adopting local customs and behaviours. She explained that they are able to do this because Tamashek-speaking migrants have more flexible notions of identity and belonging and, as a result, many assume multiple identities, which they are able to switch between when crossing cultural borders. On the other hand, Hausa-speaking migrants have experienced severe constraints to their mobility because they are seen more as outsiders.

In addition to ethnicity, culture, and language determining how migrants cope with events related to the Arab Spring, Emmanuel Gignac described how legal status and identity documentation has also affected the level of protection that migrants and refugees have received. For instance, in Libya, third-country nationals have experienced arbitrary detentions and physical aggression, and displaced minority groups have faced insecurity at the hands of revolutionary brigades and not had their protection rights upheld. Moreover, refugees and asylum seekers, which Gignac and Shaden Khallaf (American University in Cairo) argued are the most vulnerable migrant groups in Libya, have been forced to be immobile in the country and have had insufficient access to UNHCR, which does not have a legal footing in Libya or a strong relationship with new authorities. Lastly, the Tuareg and Tebu populations in southern Libya struggle with issues of citizenship and statelessness, respectively. The Tuareg do not have sufficient identity and status documentation, and experience increasing levels of marginalisation according to whether they have passports, government issued identification

documents, birth certificates, or no form of identification. The Tebu have had their citizenship withdrawn, have no documentation, and therefore enjoy no state rights.

## Migration versus refugee crisis

A third theme to emerge through the presentations and discussions during the workshop was the necessary cooperation and collaboration of migrant and refugee organizations to address the different protection and assistance concerns arising from the population movements generated and constrained by the Arab Spring. Primarily, UNHCR and IOM had to ensure that all third-country nationals and refugees living in countries affected by revolutions and crises, as well as those newly displaced by such revolutions and crises, received appropriate support and protection.

Mohammed Abdiker explained that in Libya, one of the initial steps that IOM and UNHCR took was to jointly recognise the majority of movements connected to the revolution as being a part of a 'migration crisis' rather than a 'refugee crisis'. Crucially, this meant that most movement concerns required IOM's mandate and operational expertise in 'migration management' and in ensuring that states fulfill human-rights obligations towards migrants within their territories. IOM's operations included determining the specific needs of migrants in Libya, facilitating travel documents, conducting travel and health assessments, and providing transportation. Providing protection to refugees and IDPs within Libya – presently totalling 9,600 and 50,000, respectively – more directly fell within UNHCR's mandate. However, the refugee agency lacked access to many of these persons because it had no formal relationship with authorities in the country (Gignac).

Gignac argued that the Libyan migration crisis was a unique operation for UNHCR and IOM as it required that they merge their mandates, expertise, operations, and institutional cultures to prevent the crisis from escalating into a humanitarian or a protracted displacement crisis. It also obliged them to coordinate their efforts to provide assistance and protection to migrants a part of 'mixed' flows.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the two organisations worked together to ensure borders with Egypt and Tunisia remained open and to organise third-country resettlement with governments. Moreover, IOM referred individuals (mainly from Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea) seeking asylum to UNHCR; and UNHCR lent its operational expertise to coordinate interventions for shelter, non-food items, and food; lobbied the Egyptian and Tunisian governments to provide temporary 'asylum' spaces; and ensured that the principle of *non-refoulement* was not violated as the migration crisis was being addressed.

Positioning movements related to the Arab Spring as a 'migration crisis' has also had important implications for migration flows to Europe. Violetta Moreno Lax argues that labelling the situation as such has allowed European governments to categorise North African migrants arriving at its borders as economic migrants, who need to be returned to their countries of origin, rather than as asylum seekers deserving protection. However, she points out that before the Arab Spring, 75 per cent of all migrants arriving in Italy from North Africa were seeking asylum, and half of these went on to receive refugee status. This begs the question: Is 'migration crisis' an appropriate term for migration to Europe from countries impacted by the Arab Spring, or is it obscuring necessary international protection? European governments have not introduced additional reception schemes since the start of the Arab Spring, and reception standards have been markedly sub-standard to dissuade arrival, Lax explains; thus the scale of withheld protection is unknown.

---

<sup>2</sup> A mixed migration flow refers either to the varied determinants influencing a single migrant's movement or to different determinants impacting migrants in the same flow, making it difficult for organisations such as UNHCR and IOM to distinguish who should fall under their mandates. For instance, such a flow might be comprised of asylum seekers and labour migrants from the same origin country, traveling the same route, or of a group of migrants that might qualify as both asylum seekers and labour migrants.

## **Migration and the role of new North African states**

The final key issue to emerge during workshop presentations and discussions was how new North African governments are positioning themselves and will continue to position themselves regarding migration and migrants. Participants explored this issue on three levels: governments' relationships with international organisations, European governments, and their own civil societies.

In terms of new governments' relationships with international organisations, Emmanuel Gignac explained that two of UNHCR's priorities in Libya will be to work with the new government to develop institutions to better manage displacement and asylum-related issues, and to address challenges arising from mixed migration flows, such as detaining potential asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa. At present, the absence of a formal cooperation agreement with Libyan authorities has prevented UNHCR from gaining a legal foothold in the country. Additionally, Gignac argued that the absence of state institutions, the weakness of the central government, the uncertainty of the political outlook in the country, and the unwillingness of current authorities to commit to any long-term agreements makes UNHCR's task to identify and protect asylum seekers, refugees, IDPS, and other persons of concern extremely difficult.

Regarding the relationship between new North African governments and European governments, Lax explained that since the start of the Arab Spring, new North African governments and European governments have entered only into agreements that reinforce border controls through preventing illegal immigration, especially smuggling and trafficking, and facilitating return and readmission for those who have crossed the Mediterranean. No agreements have prioritised or discussed the international protection of migrants from North Africa, be it through upholding international labour, refugee, or human rights laws. Hence, Lax argues that we can expect no change in international protection practices as a result of the Arab Spring and new governments in power.

Lastly, exploring the relationship of new governments with their civil societies provides an equally dim picture of refugee and migrant protection. Shaden Khallaf explained that since the revolution began in Egypt, there has been an increase in incidences of rape and violence against refugees from sub-Saharan Africa; however, refugees have had no recourse because such crimes often go unpunished by the police, and refugees fear the authorities. Additionally, government-sponsored television and radio programmes have carried out fear-mongering campaigns, claiming that foreigners are involved with the old regime and are responsible for the country's ills. In addition to targeting migrants and refugees directly, the new government has also shut down many non-governmental organisations that deliver services to migrants and refugees. Thus, while the revolution has witnessed an expansion in social media and civil society activism, it has also witnessed a crackdown on parts of civil society, particularly affecting migrants and refugees, for fear of instability and a high degree of uncertainty regarding Egypt's future.

## Conclusion

The Arab Spring acts as a useful lens to examine migration and forced migration patterns under conditions of conflict, crisis, and regime change, and corresponding institutional and policy responses. Over the course of the workshop, participants discussed and interrogated the diversity of migration patterns resulting from, interacting with, and linked to the revolutions and crises associated with the Arab Spring; the differentiation of migrants, forced migrants, and migration experiences; the strategies undertaken by migrant and refugee institutions to fulfill their distinct mandates in the context of such diversity and differentiation; and the positioning of new North African authorities within the migration protection and management space.

The presentations and discussions at the workshop also raised some key questions and issues for future research. First, how can researchers develop a more comprehensive approach to study displacement, which accounts for constraints but more importantly recognises and examines the agency of migrants? Second, does the Arab Spring provide a case to explore the extent to which migration acts as a valve to relieve social, economic, and political pressure on governments whose countries experience high unemployment and have large youth populations? Finally, while UNHCR and IOM were prompted to merge and coordinate their operations on an *ad hoc* basis, given the unanticipated nature and scale of the intra-regional migration crisis, how should the two agencies proceed to develop operation and protection procedures to respond to future 'mixed' migration and forced migration crises?