

Egyptian irregular migration to Europe

Ayman Zohry¹

Abstract

In this paper, I explore characteristics of Egyptian who migrate irregularly to Europe and reasons of irregular migration from the point of departure through a field survey in some Egyptian villages known of sending irregular - as well as regular - migrants to Europe (mainly Italy and France). The survey gathered information about the level of awareness of potential migrants about irregular migration and migrants smuggling from Egypt. The results indicate that the vast majority of youth who want to migrate to Europe as well as current migrants intend to return to Egypt after a temporary stay in the countries of destination. These findings suggest that the Egyptian migration to Europe is a reproduction of the pattern of Egyptian migration to the Arab Gulf countries, where young males migrate to achieve specific financial goals and then they return.

Keywords: Egypt; Europe; irregular migration; youth.

Introduction

"Egyptians have the reputation of preferring their own soil. Few ever leave except to study or travel; and they always return ... Egyptians do not emigrate" (Cleland 1936: 36, 52). This was the case until the middle of the twentieth century with few exceptions. Only small numbers of Egyptians, primarily professionals, had emigrated before 1974. Then, in 1974, the government lifted all restrictions on labour migration. The move came at a time when Arab Gulf states and Libya were implementing major development programs with funds generated by the quadrupling of oil revenues in 1973. Currently, the total number of Egyptians abroad is more than three million; two million in the Arab Gulf countries and one

¹ Independent researcher based in Cairo, Egypt.

Email: azohry@zohry.com

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million in the West (Ministry of Manpower and Emigration, 2003; Zohry 2005a).

From the beginning of the 1960s, political, economic, and social developments led some Egyptians to migrate permanently to North America and Europe. According to official estimates, the total number of permanent Egyptian migrants in the West is slightly more than 0.8 million (824,000). About 80 percent of them are concentrated in five countries: USA (318,000), Canada (110,000), Italy (90,000), Australia (70,000), and Greece (60,000); the other 20 percent are mainly in Western Europe (CAPMAS, 2001).

The economic pressures and transition to socialism at the Nasser era led many Egyptians to migrate to the West in the 1960s. Egyptians in the West are perceived to be more educated than migrants to the Arab gulf countries, their migration is family-natured, and they comprise a brain drain to their origin. They include Egyptians who were sent to study abroad but many of them preferred to stay in the country of destination after the end of their missions to teach and research in the West. After lifting all barriers on migration by 1975, the pace of Egyptian migration to the West has declined, while temporary labour migration to the Arab oil-producing countries banged.

The current stream of Egyptian irregular migration to Europe started in the eve of the 21st century with massive number of fresh graduates and less-educated unemployed youth engaged in irregular migration to Europe, either through the Mediterranean Sea via Libya or by over staying tourist Schengen visas. The main reasons behind this new type of migration are high unemployment rates among Egyptian youth, the difficulty for Egyptian youth to find employment opportunities in the Arab Gulf countries due to the competition they face there due to the massive number of cheap South East Asian labour, and the geographical proximity between Egypt and Europe and the ease of travelling to Libya where most of the boat journeys to Europe usually start (Zohry, 2005a; 2005b).

This study explores characteristics of Egyptian youth who irregularly migrate to Europe and explain reasons of irregular migration from the point of departure through a field survey in some Egyptian villages known of sending irregular migrants to the EU countries, mainly Italy and France.

Data and Methods

A field survey was carried out by the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Emigration to determine the push factors in Egypt as identified by ever and potential migrants. The research further tries to define the socio-political and economic environment in which the decision to migrate matures. The survey also gathers information about the level of awareness of potential migrants about irregular migration and migrants smuggling from Egypt. An important element of the survey is the identification of the information consumption habits of the potential target group.

The study population was set to be young males between 18 and 40 years old. This segment of population forms the pool from which illegal as well as legal migrants (regular/irregular) come from. The fieldwork took place in urban and rural areas in eight Egyptian governorate (provinces); the selection of the governorates within each region and the selection of fieldwork sites within each governorate were based on the existence of well-established migration streams (legal and illegal) between these sites and European countries.

The standard questionnaire included sections on background information, migration intentions, international migration experience, migration of friends and relatives, exposure to media, and youths' plans for the future. Some 1,552 youth were successfully interviewed, 491 of them were return migrants at the time of data collection. In addition to the field survey, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with youth in four governorates. Through FGDs, qualitative data on migration intentions and experiences were collected to support and explain quantitative data collected through the field survey.

Migration Intentions

The results of the field survey indicate that the prime desired destination for Egyptian youth who wish to migrate is Italy; more than one-half of the study population (53.4 percent) stated Italy as their favourite destination. France comes second with almost one-fourth of respondents stated it as their favourite destination in Europe (23.2 percent). The relative weight of other countries is almost negligible; other countries include the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Greece, and Sweden. Respondents who expressed their desire to migrate to any European country were asked about their reasons behind their intention to migrate. Reasons are classified under two categories; reasons related to origin (push factors), and reasons related to destination (pull factors). With respect to push factors, three main reasons were stated by a significant number of respondents; "income in Egypt is lower than in Europe", "bad living conditions in Egypt", and "no job opportunities available in Egypt."

It is clear that all the main push factors are economic; they are related to income disparities between Egypt and receiving countries, bad living conditions, and unemployment. It was also clear from the focus group discussions that most of those who wish to migrate and also those who were deported while attempting to migrate are young unemployed males. Most of them are primarily unemployed and lack the opportunity to join the labour market for many years after their graduation. With respect to pull factors, the main three reasons that attract youth to think of migrating to Europe are "having friends in Europe", "having relatives in Europe", and "having a job offer in Europe."

Friends and relatives are the main source of information regarding the desired country of destination; more than 80 percent of the respondents rely on their relatives and friends on sketching a hypothetical picture on conditions prevailing in the country of destination. The role of media is less than 10 percent, while the role of the Internet, general readings, embassies, and the Egyptian authorities is almost negligible.

The vast majority of respondents (94.7 percent) mentioned that they ever heard about the deported illegal migrants. Almost three-fourth of the respondents are aware of the consequences of illegal migration but at the same time 78 percent of the respondents believe that legal migration to Europe is not easy. Many of the focus group discussions' participants tried to migrate legally but they failed to do so. It is the contradiction between what is legal and what is possible that drive youth to migrate illegally.

"In case of travelling abroad, do you intend to come back to Egypt after a specified period of time?" The responses to this question indicate that the vast majority of youth (87.9 percent) who want to migrate to Europe intend to return to Egypt after a temporary stay in the countries of destination. Only 7.2 percent indicated that they may permanently stay abroad.

Migration Experience

Again, and the same as the distribution of countries of destination by potential migrants, come Italy and France on top of the list of countries of destination. Some 61.2 percent of return migrants targeted Italy and 15.7 targeted France, then come Germany, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Greece, Sweden, and Switzerland. Current Egyptian migration streams nowadays target Italy and France. Ever migrant youth were asked about reasons behind their migration decision; reasons are the same as prospective migrants.

Who are the persons who helped youth migrate to Europe? On whom do youth rely on their endeavours to the unknown? Do they rely only on friends and relatives? Do they rely on migration brokers? The results of the survey indicate that relatives (in Europe and Egypt), along with migration brokers are the main key players in paving the way for those who wish to cross the Mediterranean Sea to the northern costs. Relatives in Europe and Egypt helped 47.4 percent of ever migrants to cross the Mediterranean while migration brokers helped 22.5 percent of them.

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Despite their high educational profile², current Egyptian migrants work in the informal sector of the receiving countries' economy. Egyptians, Filipinos, and Peruvians are the most highly educated migrants groups in Italy (Reyneri, 2004). *"Job opportunities for migrants in Italy lie at the lowest level of the occupational ladder even for the highly educated ones,"* (Reyneri, 2004:1145). Despite the fact that most of the Egyptian migrants in Europe work in lower-level jobs, more than three-fourth of the migrants evaluated their migratory experience positively; 33.1 percent regarded their migration experience as a "very good" experience while 44.7 percent regarded it as a "good" experience. Only 22.2 percent regarded their migration experience as "bad" or "very bad". In their evaluation, youth reflected on their work and stay in Europe as well as the returns of migration (remittances and work opportunities). It is important to indicate that satisfaction as regarded by ever migrants is to find a job, any job, and to be able to remit money to their left-behind families in Egypt.

Migration Dynamics

FGDs with return migrants indicate two groups of migrants with two patterns of financial expenses; the first group follows the Egypt-Libya-Italy route via migration brokers who facilitate their migration in boats through the Mediterranean, and the second group migrates by air through a tourist Schengen visa with the intention to overstay it. The cost of the sea route is cheap; it amounts for an average of 15,000 Egyptian Pounds (about €2,000), while the air route cost amounts for an average of 50,000 Egyptian Pounds (about €6,700) and in many cases amounts for 70,000 Egyptian Pounds (about €9,500). So that it is clear that the cost of migration increases as the probability of success increases and hazards decrease.

The sea route is the choice of the poor; those who can not afford the cost of a Schengen visa (true or falsified). How-

² More than 50 percent of Egyptian migrants in Italy and France have completed high school education.

ever, the hazards associated with the sea route do not prevent youth from trying this route. It is important here to indicate that the cost of migration is only to facilitate entry to the destination countries; they do not include any other services such as facilitating entry into the labour market. Migrants who take any of the routes know where to go when they enter the country of destination. They go directly to their friends and relatives who help them settle and introduce them to the labour market.

In the focus group discussions, current migrants indicated that their stay in Europe is temporary even if it lasts for many years. Moreover, they mentioned that Europe to them means working hard and remitting money to their families in Egypt. It is clear that the psychic base of unskilled and semi-skilled Egyptian migrants is still there in their villages in Egypt.

Discussion

Recently, a new stream of migration to Europe can be easily recognized; current migrants to Europe are less educated than Egyptian migrants to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Current migration stream can be regarded as "the migration of the poor" or "Egyptian Youth's Exodus". Since migrants are pushed by unemployment and economic hardship and their movements are sometimes irregular. This study presented the characteristics of the current migration stream depending on the report on a field survey on "Attitudes of Egyptian Youth Towards Migration to Europe." The results of this survey identified push factors in the country that affect youth's migration decisions. Push factors in the country of origin (Egypt) are overwhelmingly economic; Egyptian youth regard migration – legal or illegal – as a possible way to escape poverty and unemployment.

The choice of destination country in Europe is not a free choice; migration to Europe is concentrated in a set of Egyptian villages; each village has its own destination, the two major destinations are Italy and France. So that one may confidently say that migration to these two destinations are op-

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erated in a *close market* where new entrants come from the same village or group of adjacent villages. In addition, some villages in the Nile Delta shifted their migration directions from the Arab Gulf countries to Italy. Youth in this village claim that migration to the Arab Gulf countries is not beneficial like before.

An important factor that plays a major role in stimulating migration streams to Europe is the wealth of successful migrants and return migrants. Remittances of Egyptian migrants who work in European countries are important factors that stimulate a continuous stream of migration. Potential migrants claim that ordinary workers can save an average amount of €6,000 per annum while working abroad (about 40,000 Egyptian Pounds). Potential migrants claim that the "*savings of one-year work in Europe is more than a lifetime salary in Egypt*". Building luxurious houses in rural Egypt, marriages, and consumerism behaviour of returnees are strong factors that attract new young men to migrate. When youth weigh the risks of illegal migration against the expected returns, they prefer to take the risk for an *assumed* better life.

"*Egyptians have the reputation of preferring their own soil. Few ever leave except to study or travel; and they always return ... Egyptians do not emigrate*" (Cleland 1936: 36, 52); after 70 years of Cleland's famous conclusion on Egyptians' migration behaviour, his conclusion on return is still valid. The results of the study indicate that the vast majority of youth who want to migrate to Europe intend to return to Egypt after a temporary stay in the countries of destination. In addition, most of return migrants used to remit money regularly to their families to build new houses and to start new projects for them in their home villages as a preparation for their return to Egypt. The masculine nature of the current Egyptian migration stream to Europe and the importance of remittances to the left-behind families strengthen the ties between origin and destination in a way that keeps the probability of return high. Despite the fact that the legal framework for migrants to the Arab Gulf countries is very differ-

ent from the legal framework in Europe, these findings suggest that the Egyptian migration to Europe is a *re-production* of the Egyptian migration pattern to the Arab Gulf countries, where young males migrate to achieve specific financial goals and then they return to Egypt.

In addition, Egyptian migration to Europe is different from other migration streams that target the same destination: Egyptian migration is mainly male-dominated and temporary labour migration in general, while other streams involve males and females who usually intend to stay in the destination countries in general. Also it is important to note that contemporary Egyptian migration stream to Europe is different from the Egyptian migration stream to the West in the 1960s and early 1970s which was motivated by political unrest, economic pressures, and transition to socialism at that time. Most of Egyptian migrants at that time were highly educated and economically established. Contemporary migrants to the West (to Europe) are less educated males who suffer poverty and unemployment to the extent that one may call this new stream of migration "*migration of the poor*".

Most of the interviewees are aware of the negative effects of this phenomenon. They also show a high degree of awareness of legal migration procedures such as having a valid travel document, visa, work permit, and so on, but they believe that the legal migration route is almost impossible. They believe that they can not comply with the regulation of legal migration to Europe. Many of those who took the short cut to Europe through Libya tried to get visas to Europe but they failed. They claim that this is a valid justification of their illegal attempt to migrate to Europe.

With respect to migration smuggling and the role of migration brokers, the focus group discussions indicated that the Libyan route of migration is the cheapest and the frequently used route. Due to the open borders between Egypt and Libya, Egyptians do not need a visa to get into Libya; they do not even need a valid passport; Egyptians can enter Libya using their Egyptian national identification card only.

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Daily buses between Cairo and Tripoli are there for an average of 150 Egyptian Pounds (about €20). Mini vans and microbuses from home to home are available from some villages in rural Egypt to specific destinations in Libya, where all passengers belong to one village and in many cases they come from the family.

The role of formal/governmental media as a source of information on migration is almost negligible. The main source of information about migration is relatives and friends. The very limited role of governmental agencies, journalism, media, and embassies makes it easy for rumours and falsified information on migration to be widespread. Due to the way information about migration is disseminated, it is not a surprise to notice that migration streams to Europe are originated in a network of a group of villages in the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt where family members and relatives help each other in sustaining migration flows and lubricating migration through legal and illegal means. The results also indicated the importance of migration brokers in the process of illegal migration.

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