

# The Arab Transformations

## POLICY BRIEFS

NUMBER 8

### *What Drives Migration from the Middle East? Why People Want to Leave Arab States*

Authors

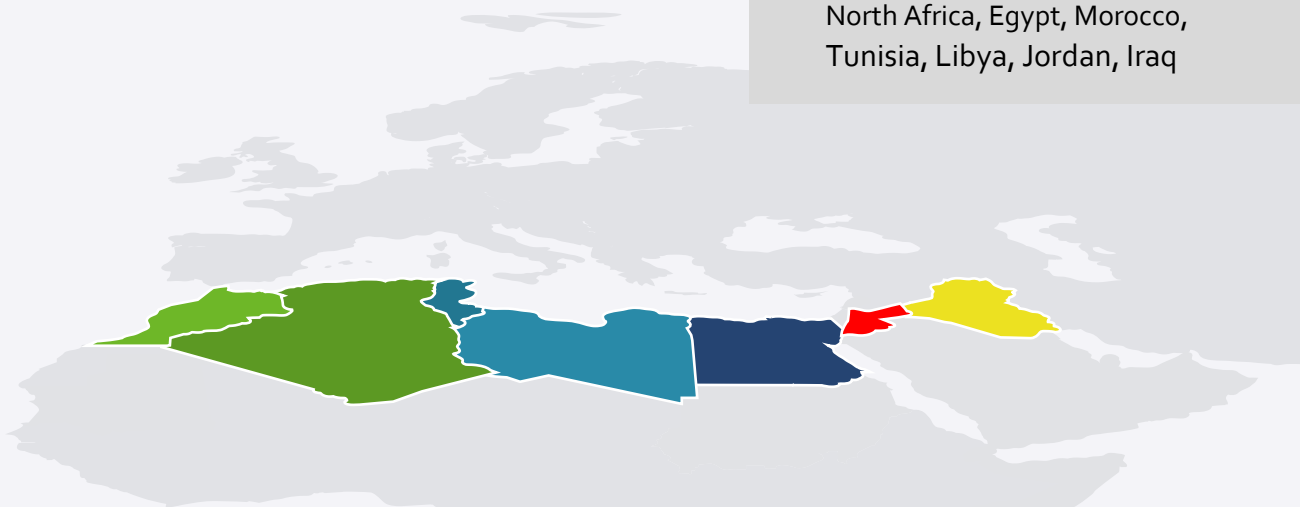
Pamela Abbott and Andrea Teti

#### Summary:

- **Drivers** of migration include conflicts and instability, but are mostly economic.
- Over half of migrants and displaced persons originating from MENA stay within the region.
- Most likely to emigrate are **young, educated men** seeking **temporary** stays to find **work**
- EU public debate focuses on potential security threats from population inflows, but ignore **economic benefits** both to host countries (supporting EU welfare systems) and to countries of origin (e.g. remittances)
- EU policy must avoid falling victim to short-term electoral calculus and focus on long-term solutions to causes of migration.

#### Key words:

- Migration, Arab Spring, Security, European Union, Middle East and North Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Iraq



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## 1. Introduction

Data from the [Arab Transformations public opinion survey](#) provides strong indications about the nature of population movements from Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. As such they are crucial in designing responsive, evidence-based policy.

ArabTrans data shows those who have considered migrating tend to be **young, male**, and with **higher levels of education** (the notable exception being Libya). In all countries surveyed, **young people** are more likely to have considered migrating; in nearly all countries the **economy is the main** driver of migration; and although a substantial portion of those considering migration think of a permanent move, large proportions are considering only **temporary** migration. This underscores the importance of economic policies which actually deliver inclusive growth and social cohesion.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this data: first, that the economic causes and strong temporary dimension of migration provide EU Member states with opportunities to reap the **benefits** of migration, both to the economy as a whole and to welfare systems in particular; second, that MENA countries of origin present significant internal **differentiation** suggesting policy should reflect specific national circumstances.

The single major obstacle to public discussion and designing evidence-based policies which maximise the benefits of migration to both host countries and countries of origin is a political context which conflates and securitizes refugees and migrants. Paradoxically, the tone of this debate and the way policy is designed and implemented may have much to do with any socio-political polarisation of migrants in host countries.

## 2. The European Context

Public and policy debate in Europe has focused on the economic costs and security risks involved in population movements into the EU. These debates recognise that economic underdevelopment and political instability and insecurity drive migration, solutions offered thus far from Europe have focused on three axes: 1. **economic** policy supporting development in MENA countries to minimise causes of migration; 2. **Security** policy aiming to improve detection and neutralisation of violent radicalisation; 3. Arrangements for migrants' and refugees' **claims** to be assessed in MENA countries of origin or transit before reaching Europe.

However, current **economic strategies** have failed: promising inclusive development via privatization of state assets and weakening of regulatory frameworks (e.g. in labour and financial markets) they have actually increased

socio-economic dislocation: this was a major cause of the 2010-11 Arab Uprisings<sup>1</sup> and is the single greatest cause of migration.

Conversely, European public and policy debates **ignore economic benefits** of migration such as their role in key sectors (e.g. healthcare, agriculture), or the positive impact on funding for welfare services such as pensions as well as the economies of origin (e.g. via remittances).

Moreover, systematically **conflating migrants with refugees and asylum seekers** – the former are driven by economic conditions, the latter are displaced by conflict or persecution – has increased the vulnerability of both groups, making them easy targets for populism and xenophobia. This helps polarise European politics, facilitates right-wing populist platforms, and reinforces precisely those short-term domestic electoral imperatives which have been allowed to trump effective long-term solutions. This constitutes a significant obstacle to discussing, designing and implementing rational, evidence-based policy framework working in the interest of European countries.

### 3. Context, Costs and Benefits of Migration

According to the [International Office for Migration](#) in 2015, 10 per cent of displaced populations and migrants globally came from the MENA region – overwhelmingly from the Mashreq and North Africa. The main countries of origin were Syria (5m), Palestine (3.5 m), Egypt (3.3m) and Morocco (2.9m). A significant amount of this migration – just over half – remains within the region. Europe is the second most popular destination, with 50 per cent of North African migrants, 22 per cent of Mashreqis, and 17 per cent of migrants from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries ending up there. The top destinations in Europe are France, Spain, and Italy.

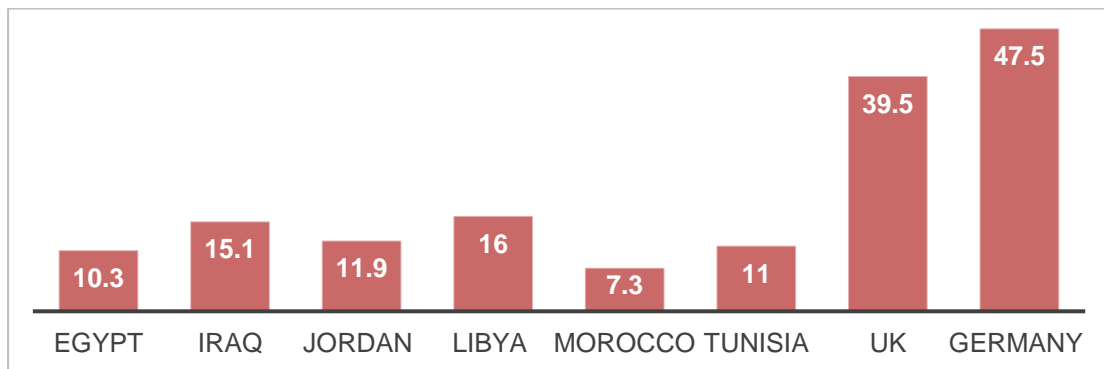
Predicting future migrant and refugee flows is difficult. The main cause behind increased refugee numbers at present is **conflict** in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, the resolution of which would also reduce flows towards other countries as well as Europe. **Economic push and pull factors** are likely to drive remaining immigration to Europe.

Although the economic profile of MENA countries is far from uniform, **income differentials with Europe** remain high: per capita Gross National Income (GNI) of the six MENA countries included in the Arab Transformations survey varies between one sixth and one third of major European states.

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Abbott and Andrea Teti (2017). *Socio-Economic Inequality and the Failure of Development Strategies for the Middle East*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.

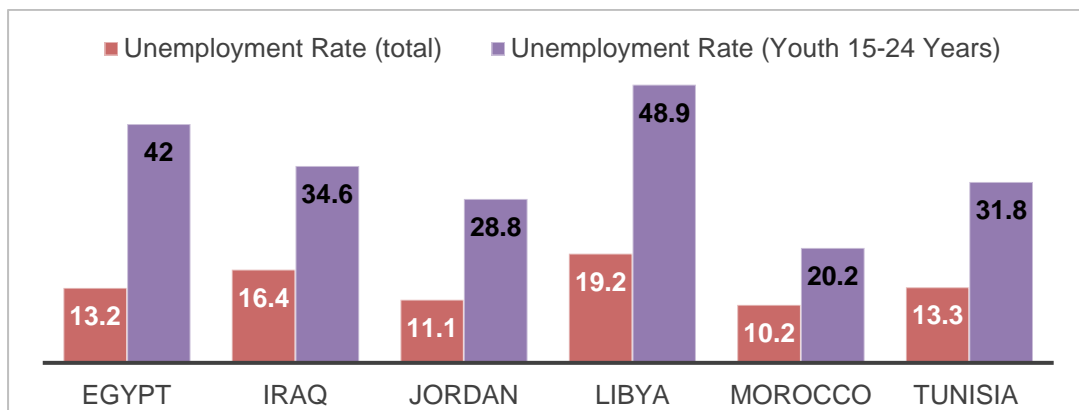
Figure 1: GNI per capita for Selected MENA and EU Countries (PPP\$)



Source: World Development Indicators, 2014.

All MENA economies surveyed here are weak and at best stagnating. In particular, **unemployment** – especially amongst youth – remains high. A key finding from the 2014 Arab Transformation survey is that the main **driver of the Arab Uprisings was people’s concerns about the economic situation** their countries faced. Moreover, in 2014 people continued to see this as the single greatest challenge for their countries.

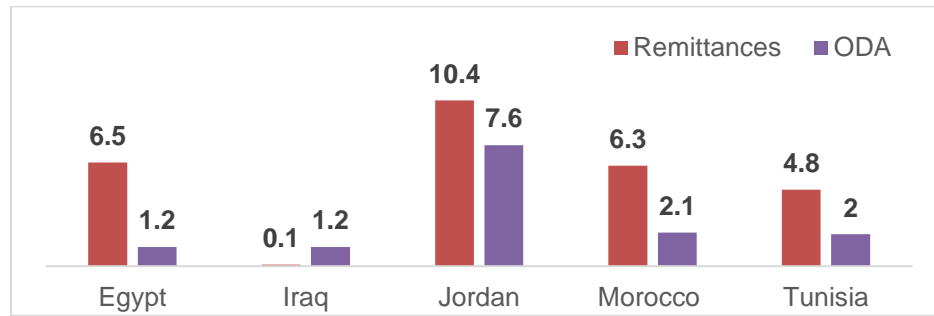
Figure 2: Official Unemployment Rate and Youth (18-24 Years)



Source: World Development Indicators, 2014.

Host countries benefit more from migration than countries of origin. OECD studies find migrants are positive for labour markets and **stimulate economic growth** in developed countries, and have a **positive impact on the public purse**. However, developing countries can also benefit: they lose out through ‘brain drain’, but there are benefits including remittances, which are important source of income, and **help reduce poverty and support macroeconomic stability**. In four of the six countries covered by the Arab Transformations survey, remittance receipts are noticeably higher than Official Development Assistance (ODA). Egypt, for example, has long seen migration – both to Europe and the Gulf – as part of its development strategy.

Figure 3: Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Personal Remittances as % GDP in 2014



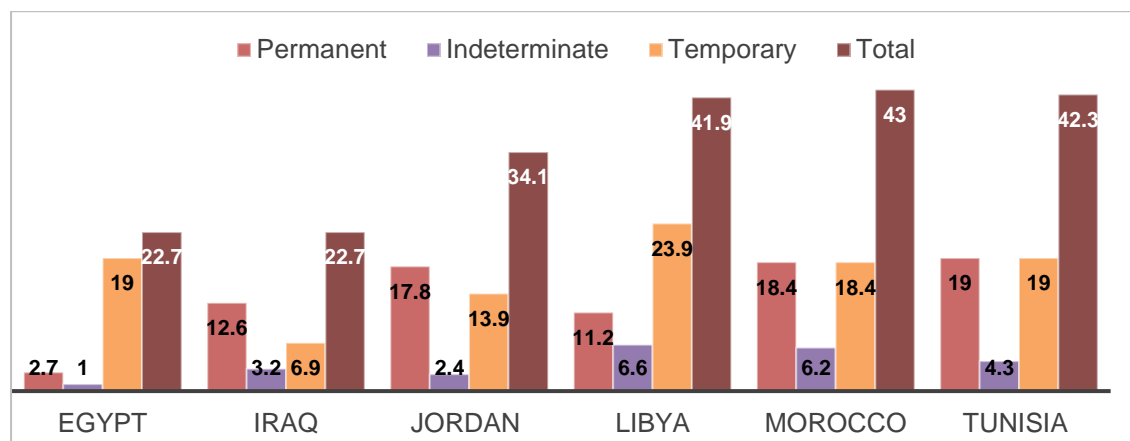
Source: World Development Indicators. Note: Data for Libya not available.

Other positive benefits include the potential for diaspora engagement to **improve trade links and investment**, as well as **supporting skills and knowledge transfer**, unlocking the potential benefits of globalisation for both countries of origin and destination.

#### 4. What Drives People to Emigrate?

The Arab Transformations survey found that on average across the six countries analysed just over **one third of people had considered living abroad**. However, a far smaller proportion actually do so. In addition, data shows that considering emigration does not mean people intend to *settle* in another country: a majority considered migrating **temporarily for employment or education**. Moreover, interest in migration **varied by country**: nearly half of Moroccans say they have considered migration, compared to just under a quarter of Iraqis and Egyptians. Just over a fifth of Tunisians, Jordanians and Moroccans have considered **permanent** migration, compared to only 2.7 per cent of Egyptians. These differences suggest that migration reduction policies must be **tailored** to the specific conditions in each local context.

Figure 4: Considered Living Abroad, % by Country

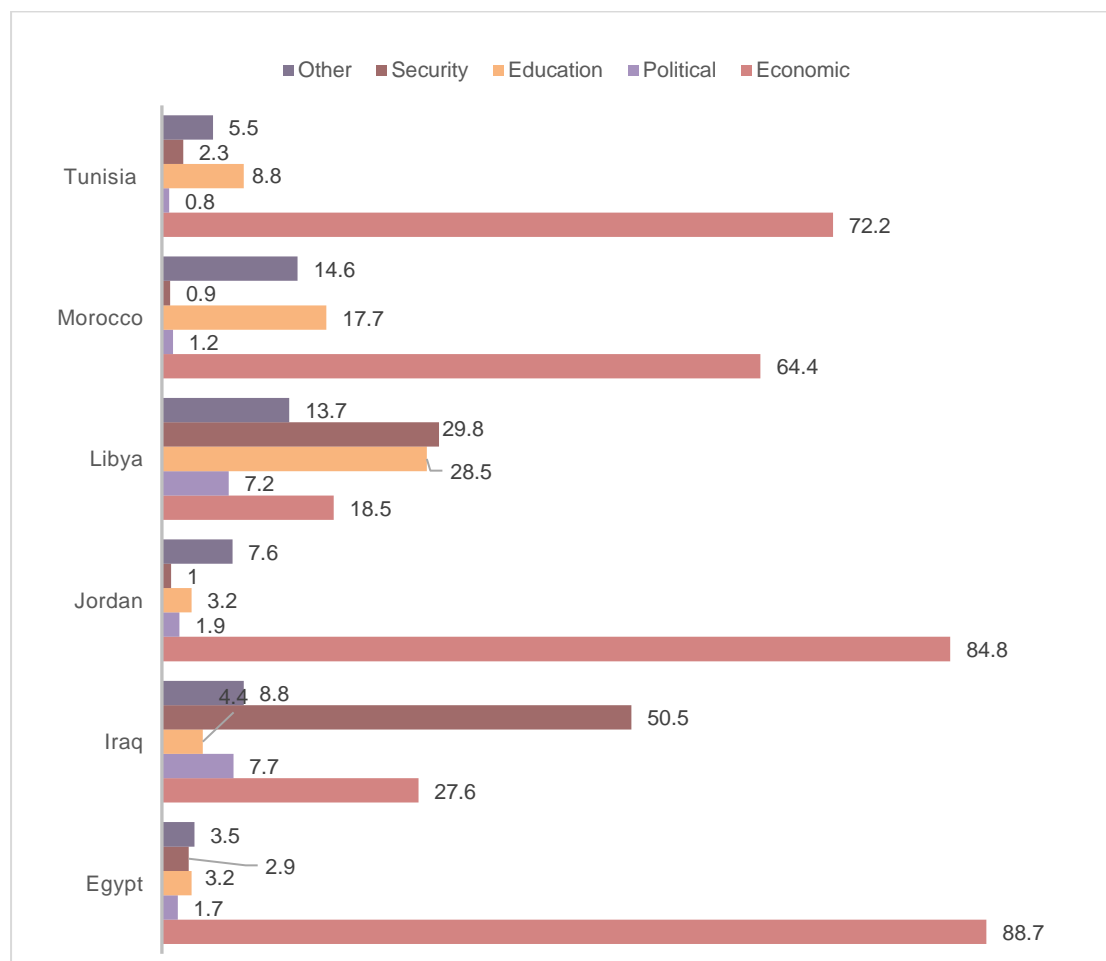


Source: Arab Transformations Survey.

The **main reason** people give for considering migration is economic. The exceptions are Iraq and Libya: in Iraq security reasons are more important, and those living in Central Regions significantly more likely to have considered migrating than those living in the north or in the south. In Libya, security and education are more important factors than economic. Political reasons account for only a tiny proportion – just three per cent.

Those considering migration for **economic reasons** are also relatively more likely to say they hope to move permanently, although even then nearly half want to go for a limited period. Conversely, a clear majority of those considering migration for **educational reasons** intend to go for a temporary period, suggesting student visa restrictions might not be very effective levers of migration reduction. Only one third of those wanting to migrate for **security reasons** want to move permanently. At around 7 per cent, Iraqis and Libyans are more likely to consider migration for **political reasons**.

**Figure 5: Main Reason for Considering Moving Abroad, % Thought About Migration by Country**



Source: Arab Transformations Survey. NB: 0% in Egypt, 1.1% in Iraq, 1.6% in Jordan, 2.3% in Libya, 1.2% in Morocco, and 10.5% in Tunisia answered 'do not know' or refused to answer.

## 5. Recommendations

Arab Transformations public opinion surveys provide nationally representative data profiling that portion of MENA populations which have considered migrating. This data shows that those who have considered migrating tend to be **young, male**, and with **higher levels of education** (the notable exception being Libya, where there are no differences by education or gender). However, in all countries surveyed, **young people** are more likely to have considered migration. Also, in all countries, the role of **economic drivers** and the large proportions of those considering only **temporary** migration underscores the importance of economic policies which actually deliver inclusive growth and social cohesion.

This suggests that while policies focusing on **security and stabilisation** may be necessary during crises – e.g. Syria, Libya – they cannot address long term structural causes of the demand for migration. Conversely, these data emphasise the importance of genuinely inclusive post-conflict reconstruction.

The EU also faces internal challenges: in some parts of the Union appropriate migration policies would reinforce the resilience of welfare systems. Particular caution is advisable for – and within – Member States where overall or youth unemployment are already high. Indeed, 2014 Eurostat data for some Member States are not far off from MENA counterparts: Greece (52.4% youth, 26.5% overall), Spain (53.2%, 24.5%), Italy (42.7%, 12.7%), and France (24.2%, 10.3). With both the gains from migration and Europe's own youth unemployment weaknesses in mind, the EU should consider a more solidary approach. At a political level, it is important to challenge facile media narratives conflating migration and asylum, and presenting both as security risks, as well paying particular attention to the integration of migrant populations – e.g. through fairer distribution of incoming populations, and bureaucratic processing which does not criminalise migrants and refugees.

The EU should ensure that both MENA and European countries benefit from migration by progressing the 2015 Valletta agreement. This included creating a Trust Fund to promote economic development, funding for projects for youth employment and microcredit, reducing commission on remittances, and encouraging migrants voluntary return to countries of origin.



# ArabTrans

The Arab Transformations Project is an international research project operating within the European Commission's FP7 framework. The project looks comparatively at attitudes and behaviours in the context of the social, political and economic transformations taking place across Middle East and North Africa since February 2011. The countries covered are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. Ethical approval for the Project was given through the Ethical Review Procedures of the University of Aberdeen. Further details of the project can be found on the project web site at [www.arabtrans.eu](http://www.arabtrans.eu).

## Acknowledgements

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