



Regional Mixed Migration Prospects 2030

This briefing paper is based on research and analysis undertaken by the Mixed Migration Centre in the Middle East. Given the nature of this analysis, the accuracy of any events predicted to take place in the future does not have absolute scientific or otherwise verifiable basis.

Author: Talha Jalal

Analytical Support: Hannah Leach and Georgina Sword-Daniels.

SUPPORTED BY:



Introduction

The Middle East, North Africa, and more broadly, the Near East is perhaps the most critical region in the world from a mixed migration standpoint. This importance stems from the fact that the region has always been a juncture of mixed migratory movements and continues to both host and produce a very significant proportion of the world's migrants – to include those forcibly displaced as well as voluntarily on the move. Whilst hundreds of thousands of people transit through this region annually, the stocks of foreign-nationals resident here are greater in number than the combined population of Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Austria and Hungary and nearly the same as the combined population of Canada and Australia. In 2016, there were an estimated 54 million foreign nationals in the Middle East region – a figure likely to be much higher now. Over a third of these are the migrant workers that populate the Arab Gulf¹. Seen as a whole, the migration profile of the region is very diverse and the recent uptick in the flows of refugees within and from the region is only a minor component of it.

Current trends and future prospects of migratory movements to, from, and within this region are susceptible to geopolitical shifts that are currently underway, to climate change and [environmental degradation](#), to demographic changes both within the Middle East and in Africa and Asia from where many transiting and source migrants originate, and to economic development and forces of globalization in general. In addition to this, there is also the impact of restrictive and securitised migration policy developments in Europe, United States, and Australia that, on the one hand, affect mixed migratory flows from the Middle East and North Africa through a [ripple effect](#) across routes, and on the other, by altering the normative international migration governance frameworks in favour of externalisation, and at the expense of individuals' ability to seek asylum, of freedom of movement, and of access to fundamental rights.

The Analytical Approach

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), in keeping with current trends in human mobility, takes a unique and much needed approach to analysing migration: the on-the-ground operational reality is such that people move across borders without any pretence of self-categorization. This reality, which goes hand in hand with the evolution and multiplication of the drivers of migration, requires a comprehensive view. It also, at the same time, demands that migration is viewed as a long-standing phenomenon of human history, rather than a problem which needs a solution. The MMC undertakes analysis and knowledge creation which can help, in line with multilateral and intergovernmental consensus, to make human mobility safe, predictable, and orderly.

As such, this approach is guided by our understanding of what “mixed migration” is. Mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including forced migrants who flee persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have different legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under International Human Rights Law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.

1 See MMC Middle East [Monthly Trends Analysis](#) for February 2018

Present Context and Challenges

As of the end of 2016, the Middle East hosted over 45% of all refugees globally. Syria, Iraq and Yemen – countries with ongoing conflicts – together accounted for nearly one third of the world's total conflict-induced internal displacements by the end of 2015. At the same time, the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries continued to host some of the largest populations of migrant workers in the world. In total, migrants make up 13% of the population of the region as a whole. These examples not only speak to the scale of mixed migration in this region, but also to its sheer complexity, as home to populations from the world over, migrating for diverse and shifting motivations².

Some of the key challenges relating to migration in the region are as follows. These challenges, to some extent, also speak to the future prospects:

- **Migration in the Middle East is by and large an urban phenomenon. In MENA, the percentage of [forced migrants residing in cities](#) is as high as 80-90 percent.** Mixed migration flows also tend to cluster in and around large urban centres of the region. This urbanisation of human displacement in MENA means that migrants, including those forcibly displaced, are no longer contained in isolated areas such as camps, but are instead part of existing and constantly expanding urban populations. Consequently, humanitarian and developmental needs of migrants are increasingly intertwined with the needs of host communities in urban settings, calling for an integrated and long-term approach to these challenges.
- The **overall migration profile of the region is very diverse**, and the recent influx of Syrians to neighbouring countries and in Europe, has distorted perceptions of such and consequently response. In the Levant and Turkey, where

migrant groups like Afghans, Iraqis, Sudanese, Yemenis, and several others from East, South, and Central Asia are in the minority, access to services and protection has comparatively worsened for them as resources have been redirected towards crisis response. Access to services in the region is also often conditional upon holding a particular type of status (such as the Temporary Protection status for Syrians in Turkey). In Jordan and Iraq, for example, access to healthcare and financial assistance is stratified either through group-specific subsidies or restrictions, creating a barrier for many. Further, isolation, loneliness and depression are commonly reported among Somali and Sudanese communities in Jordan, with relatively little access to psycho-social support.

- **Migration management regimes are many and often incongruent within each country, resulting in** protection gaps for migrant populations that don't fit within existing regimes. Notably, the only countries in the region that have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention (and its 1967 Protocol) are Turkey and Iran, both of whom apply limitations to its operationalisation. Turkey, for example, applies a geographic limitation in that only arrivals from Europe are eligible for full refugee status. This means that most vulnerable people fall under temporary or subsidiary protection regimes and not the Refugee Convention.
- The **Kefala system** in the Middle East, and particularly in the Arab Gulf, continues to result in serious human rights abuses and protection issues for migrant workers. Moreover, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran and the countries of the GCC are all non-signatories to the **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW) (1990)**.

² [Ibid.](#)

- **Firewalls between immigration authorities and basic services are absent** in all destination and transit countries in the region such as Turkey. This results in a lack of access to primary services and a heightened risk of detention and forced returns for irregular migrants.
- **Independent access to and monitoring of migrant return and detention** in regional migratory hubs like Turkey is largely absent,

which makes forced returns and **refoulement** to unsafe countries of origin such as Afghanistan a continued protection challenge. Field reports continue to emerge that other countries in the region are also sending people back to Syria, despite being unsafe for return, as they struggle to manage large numbers and local populations begin to show fatigue of hosting.

Future Prospects

The Middle East region presents a mixed picture for migration prospects in both the mid and longer terms. This owes in many ways to the geography of the region – it is situated at the crossroads of the Global North and the Global South. Moreover, the region is a patchwork of middle income states like Syria, some of which have collapsed, of high income states like those in the Arab Gulf, of relatively modern and strong states like Turkey, and of exceptionally poor countries like Yemen, all of which results in a complex mix of drivers of internal as well as outward movements.

The Evolving Drivers of Migration and their Impact

- **Political reconfiguration in the region**, which has been underway in particular since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and thereafter since the Arab uprisings of 2011, will continue in the next 5 years, and most probably extend into the 20-year horizon. One of the dimensions of this concerns population swaps, ethnic and sectarian cleansing, and consequently internal displacement, and in turn, further displacements across international borders. The Kurdish regions of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, remain in a state of flux, whereby Turkish military campaigns and Kurdish aspirations for autonomy will continue

to generate IDP movements. At the same time, parts of the region, which have historically been mixed, albeit held together under national groupings, will continue their [slide towards segregation](#) along Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and other contested lines, therefore resulting in at least some people seeking political asylum abroad in the face of persecution and inability to return to their homelands.

- As demonstrated by **the fall of some regional dictatorships** in recent years, the immediate aftermath of the decline of a despotic regime is chaotic. National borders, as imagined in the twentieth century, could be replaced, in the absence of authoritarian regimes in the region, by pockets of human collectives with far more complex intercommunal relationships than the simplistic national units of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and so on. The Turkish context presents a case which could, within the 20-year horizon, result in a similar scenario. Whilst President Erdogan is poised to rule for the foreseeable future, his political downfall or death (which is likely to happen in the next 20 years), could result in Turkey being divided along Islamist and Republican lines, which could in turn lead to civil unrest and therefore displacement toward Europe. In such a scenario, the many forced

migrants present in Turkey will be amongst the most vulnerable and could potentially decide to move onwards.

- **Ongoing insecurity and conflict in Iraq, Syria, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories**

will remain a key driver of migratory flows in the region. These conflicts are not expected to be resolved in the next five years and therefore will continue to generate internal displacement, as well as cyclical external displacement of people returned from neighbouring countries as well as Europe.

- **Climate change and environmental degradation**

is most certainly going to be a key driver of mixed migratory movements within and from the region in the following 20-year period. Parts of the Arab Gulf region, which currently experience some of the hottest summer temperatures in the world, are [projected to become uninhabitable](#) within the next 80 years. The warm-water coasts in this region could be the first to experience brutal combinations of heat and humidity. These conditions would not be constant, but spikes would become increasingly common, driving people to move much sooner than the tipping point at the [end of this century](#). This especially has severe implications for migrant workers who often toil in extreme conditions and are exposed to inhumane levels of heat in the region. These migrants could be forced to look for livelihoods elsewhere (either in their countries of origin in South and East Asia, or elsewhere in Europe) because of the rising temperatures.

- In conjunction with climate change, **water poverty in the region**, which is already at alarming levels, will also likely be a driver of conflict and northward movements from the region. Jordan, for example, is one of the most water-stressed countries in the world. Yemen, on the other hand, has seen its [water table drop](#) so much in the past few decades that its capital Sana'a may become the first capital city in the world without

a viable water supply. Both of these countries are important from a migration perspective. Jordan is likely to keep hosting significant numbers of Syrians, as well as Sudanese, Yemeni and Somali forced migrants through the next five years. But water stress is likely to force the government's hand to expedite involuntary returns of these vulnerable migrants during the next five years. At the same time, the ongoing war in Yemen, which has further exacerbated Yemen's capacity to sustain itself, may drive more Yemenis to attempt to seek refuge in Oman, across the Horn of Africa, in Saudi Arabia, and further afield in Jordan. These competing drivers will add to the complexity of migratory flows in the region, and when mismanaged or externalised, could result in further political instability.

- Turkey, which continues to host over 4 million foreign nationals, including those forcibly displaced, while also having a large population of its own at nearly 80 million, is a [major earthquake zone](#). The region of Istanbul, which hosts over a million migrants and a total population of nearly 20 million is [expected to be hit](#) by a **major earthquake within the next 30 years**. This could trigger a secondary displacement of displaced persons residing in Istanbul onwards toward Europe as the scale of this disaster is expected to be quite large and the damage to infrastructure quite severe.
- The destruction of healthcare infrastructure in Syria, which was one of the best [in the region](#), and the absence of such in Yemen, has significantly increased the regional risks in the event of an epidemic. This can potentially generate some internal displacement in the region, however it is not particularly clear what such a scenario could look like. The incidence of chronic diseases however is likely to grow as many sections of the population in regional conflict zones are not receiving basic care for chronic conditions, and with the continued absence of healthcare infrastructure in conflict ridden areas of Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, in particular, people will seek

healthcare elsewhere such as in Turkey, Jordan, and Europe. This should most likely result in a steady **healthcare related flow of migrants** over the next five years and beyond.

- Despite all the risks, **socio-economic development will also continue in the region.** This will continue to drive people to large regional urban centres like Istanbul, Cairo, Amman, Izmir, Beirut and so on. Irregular migrants from parts of Africa, South and Central Asia will continue to look for work opportunities in these urban centres, which hold significant demand for manual labour as well as for work in the shadow economies. In the next five years, the rights of the invisible migrants who work in the shadow economy will remain tenuous. Over the next 20 years, the Arab Gulf, on the other hand, is likely to see a lot of automation, nationalization of [workforce](#), and shift away from construction towards service-based economy, which could drive low-skilled labour from Asia elsewhere or trigger some return migration towards South and East Asia.
- From an economic standpoint, migration in the region generates a very significant proportion of the global remittance flows annually. **Remittances** to the MENA region stood at [\\$53 billion](#) in 2017, and are expected to keep growing, albeit slowly. In MENA, Egypt is the largest recipient of remittances, and the fifth largest recipient globally at \$20 billion during 2017. This also speaks to the contribution of Egypt to regional labour migration stocks, which are expected to remain significant in the next five years. At the same time, MENA and Arab Gulf region in particular are the source of outward [remittance flows](#), especially to South Asia, which gained \$117 billion in remittances last year.
- In middle and upper income countries of the region, including in particular, Jordan, Lebanon and GCC states, migrant workers carry out essential social and economic functions. The

social structures and economies of these countries are heavily reliant on migrants who are primarily managed under the Kefala system. Despite some provisions in the drafts of the Global Compact on Migration and international advocacy on the issue, **the Kefala system** is poised to continue as such, at least in the next five-year period, and therefore the protection concerns and rights violations that occur because of this archaic migration management system will continue as well (including a lack of governmental oversight; physical, sexual and psychological abuse; instances of debt bondage and modern slavery). Tied to this, is also the issue of no integration pathways or possibility of civil rights for these migrants. In the absence of such, extreme socio-economic stratification will continue over the next five years, and fundamental human rights concerns will remain.

- Many of the citizens of upper income countries in the region, and the economically well-to-do citizens of middle income countries, pursue education and training opportunities in European countries, as well as in other Western countries. This outward migration contributes to the human development of the region, upon the return of such migrants. At the same time, increasingly restricted movement from the region, is also leading to further stratification in terms of who is able to migrate and who isn't, thereby deepening wealth disparity locally. Citizens of the GCC countries, for example, increasingly enjoy visa free travel to European and other Western countries. This trend of **[deepening disparity in ability to be mobile across borders will further deepen in the next 20 years.](#)**
- **The impact of externalisation policies** of European Union member states will, over the next five years, continue to result in [domino effects](#) across the Eastern and Central Mediterranean migratory routes. The MENA states along these routes, particularly those that are transit countries, will in turn, make efforts to

keep migrants off their territories. Push backs from Europe will continue to trigger further violent push backs in the Middle East. Over the following 20 years, these trends will crystallise as state practice and consequently changes in Customary International Law whereby externalisation will begin to be reflected in accepted transnational norms. As a corollary, migration in the Middle East, as a continuation of trends in Europe, will become even more securitised, and European external border controls will likely extend deep into Middle Eastern and North African territories. Moreover, freedom of movement in the region will suffer as a result and proliferation of more dangerous routes towards Europe will spike.

Migration Governance in the Region and Beyond

- The most important processes for migration governance currently underway are the negotiations on the two Global Compacts for refugees and for regular migration. The GCR and GCM are the most ambitious normative frameworks for migration governance arguably since the Refugee Conventions were written. Both of these Compacts are very relevant to the MENA region, and will have a long-lasting impact in terms of burden sharing between host states, and providing protections to people on the move to, from, and within the region. The conclusion of the negotiations in 2018 and the implementation of the Compacts over the next five years will determine the future of the Refugee Convention of 1951. If the GCR, in particular, fails, it will leave the region without prospects for durable solutions and may sound the death knell for the Refugee Convention as well. This prospect is tied to the fact that some of the key instruments of the global refugee management or protection regime, such as resettlement, which is in turn tied to burden sharing between states, and in particular the individual right and ability to seek asylum, stand severely undermined and are largely dysfunctional. As the Refugee Convention approaches obsolescence and loses normative basis, a failure to revamp the regime via the GCR will leave us with a critical gap, and, potentially, a complete loss of confidence in it. The GCM, on the other hand, comes as an ambitious wish list in the absence of any prior international migration governance regime. It is much needed nonetheless, in order to infuse human mobility with at least some predictability and order, no matter what the drivers of it are. The GCM and GCR, have a high degree of interplay. Because of the fact that many of the emerging drivers of forced migration have fallen beyond the determinants of refugee status originally envisioned in 1951, and secondly because many forced migrants today are unable to become refugees as such in the eyes of the law, [complementarity between the GCM and GCR](#) is critical to ensure that people do not fall through the cracks.
- In addition to the two Global Compacts, there are a number of other complementary frameworks which can and should be signed by states in the region to enhance protections for people in mixed migratory flows. These include, in particular, the state-led Migrants in Countries in Crisis ([MICIC](#)) initiative, the International Convention on Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families ([ICRMW](#)), and a more futuristic and comprehensive soft-law initiative led by Columbia University called the Model International Mobility Conventions ([MIMC](#)). Most states in the region are non-signatories to the ICRMW and this speaks to the future of protection challenges faced by migrant workers in the region. Also relevant for the economic prospects of Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as for their spill over effects on nationals and other non-Syrian migrants, are the [Jordan and Lebanon Compacts](#) negotiated by the governments of Jordan and Lebanon with the involvement of the World Bank, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the

International Labour Organization. Regional consultations for migration in the Arab region such as the Arab Region Consultative Process (ARCP) are also relevant mechanisms, albeit few and far between. Moreover, externalisation agreements between the EU and some countries in the region, including the EU-Turkey March 18 agreement and the Afghan Joint Way Forward agreement are also highly relevant for regional migration governance. These agreements continue to spawn national and local legislative and procedural changes as well as follow-on readmission agreements in the region and beyond. Finally, the Kefala system remains the primary migration management regime in the Arab Gulf as well as, to some extent, in Lebanon and Jordan, and the process to dismantle or weaken it, if at all, is likely to continue during the next five years and possibly beyond.

Challenges and Opportunities

Two challenges that stand out in the region are managing premature returns and the youth bulge:

- In the next five years, as the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, [Afghanistan](#), and Libya drag on, even if at low intensity, **premature returns** from Europe and from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey will create serious protection and [reintegration challenges for returnees](#). Furthermore, due to a combination of aforementioned drivers, such returns will generate internal displacements as well as cyclical migration patterns, and are likely to aggravate the current situation and prolong the crises.
- Combined with the challenges of [managing the youth bulge](#) in North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia, the political prioritization of returns and readmission policies, and dearth of **regular pathways** whether for resettlement

or labour mobility, will contribute to the causes of irregularity and have a [destabilising](#) effect on countries of origin. This is likely to be a continuing challenge during the next five years.

Two opportunities that could be leveraged are prospective regular pathways and greater coherence in regional migration governance:

- The youth bulge in the MENA region, and in general in the broader Near East, also presents a key opportunity for the **promotion of seasonal and skills-based [mobility partnerships](#)** between countries within the region and especially with those in Europe. Proposals for such mobility schemes that would facilitate trainings and employment in a targeted manner, filling critical market gaps, have been included in the draft of the Global Compact on Migration. Implementation of such schemes can generate predictability in migration governance and ease demographic pressures in both sending and receiving states.
- Ongoing bilateral and multilateral dialogues around migration governance, and legislative developments in countries, also present an opportunity for the MENA region to **promote coherence among national migration management regimes**, as well as to bring national regimes, legislations, and procedures, more in line with international protection frameworks for people on the move, including in particular, for those seeking asylum. Such measures would ensure that people in mixed migratory flows, especially those that fall through the cracks and are not covered by existing frameworks due to emerging drivers of migration, are also afforded much needed protections and access to their fundamental human rights.

Prosperity and Mobility: Promising Approaches for the Region

- Migration in the region is and has always been a source of wealth generation and multiculturalism. Forced migration and internal displacement in the region, however, remain a significant burden, but at the same time, if utilised properly, also a great [source of human and financial capital](#). As demonstrated by the remarkable [financial gains made by cities](#) in Turkey hosting Syrian refugees, such as Gaziantep, it is indeed possible to manage displacement to the benefit of both hosts and refugees alike. Much of the financial capital, amounting to billions of dollars annually, that irregular migrants and refugees inject in smuggling and shadow economies of the region merely to cross borders, can be redirected into gainful businesses. What the region needs is more safe, predictable, and regular migration, not less migration as such.
- To make mobility work for all, advancement of political and economic integration in the region, which has taken a back seat since 2011, must be re-prioritised over the next 20 years. This could entail increased opportunities for freedom

of movement and labour mobility within the region, akin to the European Union. Over a 20-year horizon, even if taking place among a select few states, such progress would contribute to making the region [richer and more stable](#). During this longer-term horizon, cities of the region, as in the rest of the world, can play a critical role in operationalising such integration at a city-to-city level. The fact that Gaziantep in Turkey, which had long standing ties to Aleppo in Syria, has effectively become the proxy financial, social and political base for the Aleppine population, hosting not only them but also their wealth and aspirations, speaks to the promise that cities hold for migration and integration in the region.

- Finally, positive policies, which aren't all that novel, including [family reunification](#), [labour market integration](#), and pathways to civil rights will surely improve the prospects of all people on the move to, from, and within the region, if actually implemented and adopted widely.

For more information visit:
mixedmigration.org

