

# The Sociology of Refugee Migration in the Arab World

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The migration issue is one of the most important in the modern world. A survey was conducted in the form of a semi-structured interview among 150 migrants from the Middle East and North Africa to find out the causes of migration, as well as the difficulties faced by the migrating population. The age of the respondents ranged from 25 to 58 years. This age group of respondents was chosen since, unlike the younger generation, they are more likely to feel all the difficulties that arise during migration. In the second part of the study, a statistical analysis of migration to the Gulf countries was carried out. For this part of the study, an analysis of census data for the period 2005–15 was undertaken. According to the results of the interview, the most common reasons for migration are the economic situation in the country or the hostilities taking place in it. The problems that migrants mainly face are also most often of an economic nature. They also face hostility from host societies. The state might support migrants by increasing social benefits and the organisation of special courses that will increase the chances of finding a job. The study found that countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar are characterised by the largest flow of migrants. A major problems during migration to the Gulf countries is the large number of illegal migrants, as well as a biased attitude towards them from the indigenous people.

**Key words:** *Migration, refugee migration, migration in Arab world.*

## Introduction

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2016), there are 65.3 million internally displaced people in the world. Among them, approximately 21 million are refugees fleeing conflict or persecution. A growing proportion of refugees travel to Europe, crossing the Mediterranean Sea through Greece or Italy, often in unsafe fishing boats or other vessels (Freedman et al., 2017; Shneikat & Ryan, 2017).

The issue of refugee migration is inevitably becoming a priority on the political agenda of the European Union, especially after the recent influx of refugees from Syria, which has been suffering from hostilities since 2011.

Refugees are protected by international law, so they have a number of rights, including protection from returning to the country from which they are fleeing, access to asylum procedures and measures to ensure respect for their fundamental human rights so they become independent citizens of a country (UNHCR, 2016).

Refugee migration is not a new phenomenon. Whenever a conflict arises, there is a mass exodus of people. However, it was only with the crisis of Jewish refugees in 1933–42 that refugee movements began to be officially registered. Recent figures indicate both an increase in the number of refugees and a change in the nature of refugee flows (Robinson, 2016).

Africa and Southeast Asia were considered the main sources of refugees, which caused concern among European politicians. Instability and conflict in the Middle East and Africa after the uprisings in the Arab Spring of 2011 led to large movements of migrants (Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2014). The main result of the 2003 Iraq War and the ensuing crisis was the displacement of approximately 4.7 million Iraqis (Amnesty International, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2006).

Over the past six years, fundamental political changes have occurred in the Arab countries of the Mediterranean. In some countries, political upheavals and mass protests have occurred, which in some cases led to political reforms or replaced authoritarian regimes. However, unlike expectations at an early stage of mass protests, political freedom did not increase, except in Tunisia (Kaufmann et al., 2010; Nikolaeva et al., 2018). In some countries, instability and oppression have intensified, and government performance is still worse than in many other regions.

Studies related to the political aspects of migration often focus on the impact of migration on domestic policies in countries of origin of migrants (Kapur, 2010). It is believed that the possibility of migration for residents sets a downward limit on the degree of dissatisfaction with public policy (Meseguer & Burgess, 2014). Another type of literature relates to forced migration – situations in which people face prosecution or fear for their lives. There is sufficient evidence that political violence and civil conflict have a strong influence on migration between regions, as well as on international migration (Bohra-Mishra & Massey, 2011).

A study of the causes of migration from Nicaragua to the United States confirmed that political factors are important aspects of migration (Lundquist & Massey, 2005). Many

people left Nicaragua not because of direct violence and feelings of insecurity but rather distrust of the stability of the government. A qualitative study of migrants from Spain and Romania also finds evidence to support the hypothesis that political factors influence migration decisions (Bygnes & Flipo, 2017). The initial descriptions of the refugees concerned the number of people displaced due to political and economic reasons. However, recent concepts of refugee migration include environmental cause as a potential cause of forced migration (Toffle, 2015).

Refugee-hosting communities face a number of challenges. First, in addition to the humanitarian assistance offered to refugees, there is an economic burden involved in ensuring the safety and protection of refugees. Securing refugee camps by providing housing and services such as sanitation and providing legal assistance to refugee communities requires a lot of management effort (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

Second, the health and education systems of the host communities go beyond their borders in an attempt to meet the needs of the refugees, which leads to economic and social consequences for the host communities. Moreover, massive flows of refugees can lead to a saturation of the labour market, which causes unrest when members of the host community realise that refugees are contributing to unemployment and lower wages (Berti, 2015).

Similarly, the large movement of refugees to new territories can lead to significant socio-cultural consequences. Finally, political disagreements arose over the management of the refugee movement. Economic and political pressure in the host countries caused social tensions between various political and sectarian sectors and between refugees and residents (Sachs, 2016).

As can be seen, the problem of migration is one of the most important in modern conditions. The objectives of this study were therefore formed. It involved:

- conducting semi-structured interviews among migrants from the Middle East and North Africa
- highlighting the main causes of migration, as well as problems that migrants may face (based on the obtained data)
- conducting a statistical analysis of migration to the Gulf countries, using census documents
- highlighting the main pros and cons of migration to these countries.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

Based on the objectives, the study is divided into two parts. The first part presents a survey, which was conducted among migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. The survey took the form of a semi-structured interview, since such a method provided respondents with greater freedom to express their opinions. In the second part of the study, a statistical analysis of migration to the Gulf countries is shown based on census data for different years.

### ***Participants***

The survey was conducted among representatives of the adult population of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. The age of the respondents ranged from 25 to 58 years. 150 people were interviewed.

### ***The Participant Selection Criteria***

Most of the respondents were former residents of countries that have the highest number of refugees. The age group of respondents (from 25 to 58) was chosen since, unlike the younger generation, they are more likely to feel all the difficulties that arise during migration. When surveying children and/or adolescents, it is impossible to cover such topics as employment and payment for housing.

### ***Research Instrument***

The survey consisted of four questions, each of which somehow touched upon issues of migration and the circumstances that it entails. The first question ('Can you say that you would not migrate if other conditions existed in your country?') was the most general. Since most of the respondents were forced migrants, it was worth assessing what percentage of them would have preferred to stay in their own country under more favourable conditions.

Further, the respondents were asked to list the main reasons why people migrate ('Could you name the main reasons for migration (including for you personally)?'). Respondents were offered several answers: military conflicts, economic problems, lack of housing, lack of work and more, where respondents could name their options. All the answer options, except the last one, were proposed to be evaluated from 0 to 5, where 0 was the most insignificant, and 5 the most significant.

In the next question ('Could you name the most common problems that migrants face (including yourself?'), the respondents were asked to name the main problems that refugees

faceted. This question helped us to assess which aspects of refugee life were the most complex. In this question, respondents were asked to choose from the proposed answer options.

**Table 1:** Possible answers

Possible answer	Place to answer
Low state benefit	
Housing problems	
Inability to get a job	
Biased attitude	
The language barrier	

In the last question (‘What would you like to change in the migrant support system?’), respondents were asked to express an opinion on what could be changed in the refugee support system. Respondents were asked to choose from several answer options, with the possibility of choosing several.

**Table 2.** Possible answers

Possible answer	Place to answer
Increasing social benefits	
Expansion of benefits	
Free language courses	
Providing preferential conditions when buying accommodation	
Employment courses	
Other	

The main document for the analysis of migration to the countries of the Persian Basin was UNICEF’s Migration Profiles (<https://esa.un.org/migmgprofiles/indicators/files/SaudiArabia.pdf>). The Saudi Census was also used (<https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/391>) together with data from the UNICEF ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)).

### ***Research Issues and Restrictions***

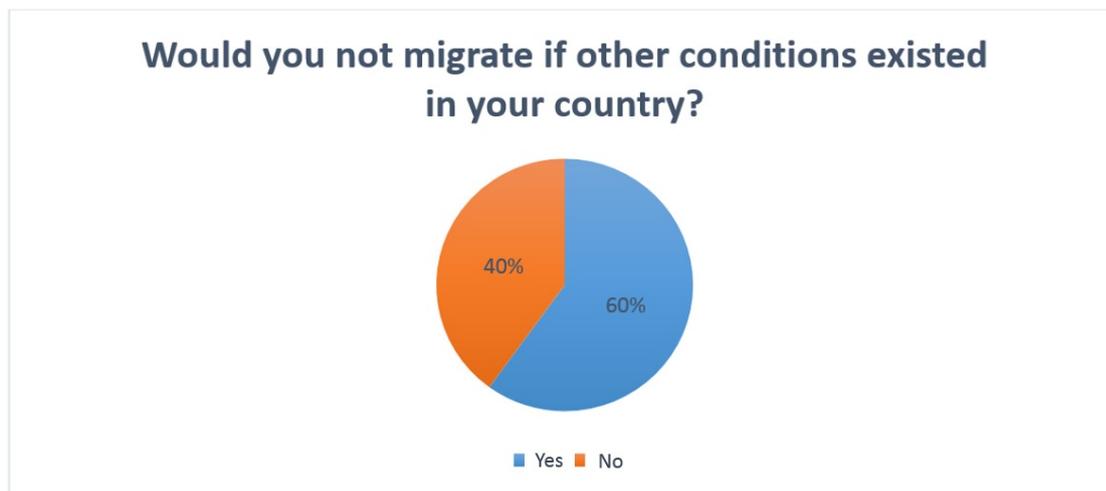
One of the main limitations in a semi-structured interview is that the answers to all questions are subjective in one way or another. Something that may be unacceptable to one respondent could be acceptable to another.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded and analysed. The most common answers are highlighted and grouped into categories. After collecting the necessary information, the analysis of the research data was performed using the STATISTICA system. This software, based on Microsoft Windows, allows visualising data during statistical analysis.

### **Results**

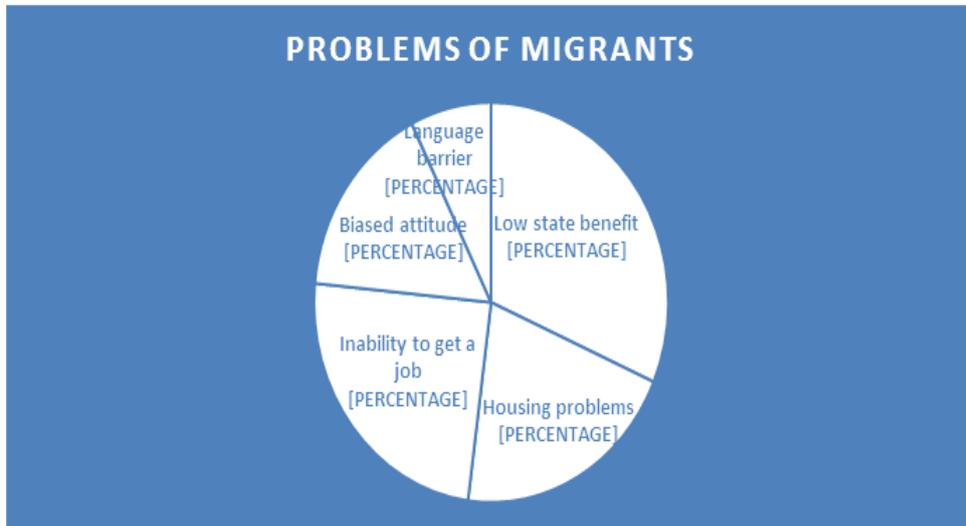
The results on the first question turned out to be quite unpredictable, since the majority of respondents (60 per cent) noted that under other conditions they would refuse to leave their native country.



**Figure 1.** The probability of migration under more favourable conditions in the country of residence

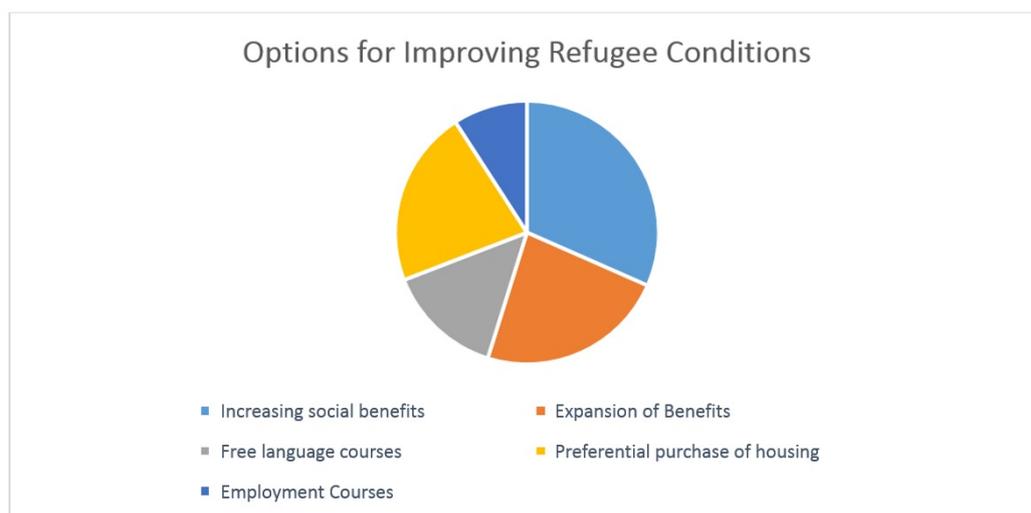
The most common reasons for reluctance to migrate were the presence of one's own home, relatives remaining in the country and more familiar living conditions.

As expected, the most common categories raised in the second issue were 'war' and 'economic situation'. Respondents noted that they were forced to leave their country because 'it became unsafe there', they 'lived in daily fear' or they 'did not have hope for tomorrow'. Among the problems named were shortages of food, fresh water and other supplies. Some respondents also reported that because of hostilities in their country, they had lost their housing and all means of subsistence. Only about 3 per cent reported that they had migrated voluntarily in order to find work and ensure a higher standard of living for themselves and their families.



**Figure 2.** The economic problems of migrants

Figure 2 shows that of the economic problems, the most common are low benefits from the state, poor housing and the lack of opportunities to work. The impossibility of acquiring housing was also named. Among the social difficulties, a ‘biased attitude’ from the host country residents was the most common. In addition, about 7 per cent of those surveyed mentioned a language barrier that hindered normal living in the host country.

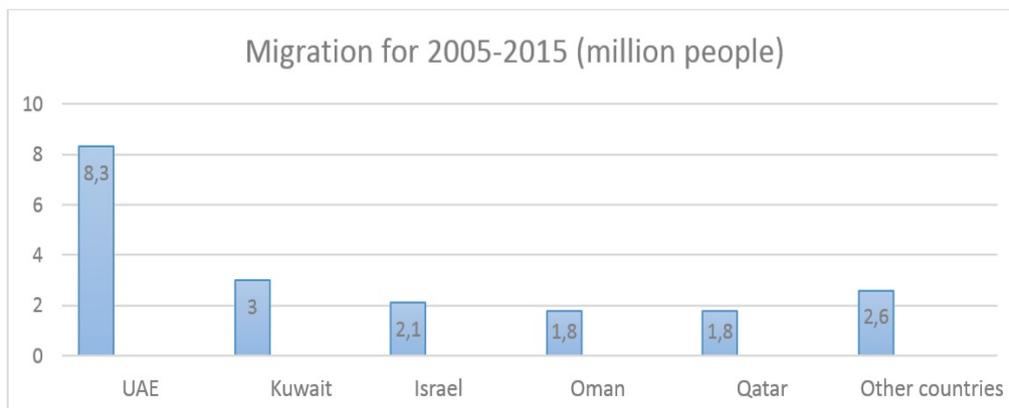


**Figure 3.** Options for improving refugee conditions

Among the answers to the last question, the respondents considered the economic component to be the most important. There was a frequent proposal to improve the refugee support system, such as ‘increasing social benefits’ and ‘expansion of benefits’ – for example, special conditions for travel on public transport. Various courses were also named, which would allow migrants to adapt more successfully to the new country or get a job.

The second part of the study focused on population migration to the Gulf countries. The Arab countries of the Persian Gulf can be conditionally divided into two groups according to the ethnic composition of the immigrant population and the type of policy pursued in relation to immigration. The first group includes Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where the vast majority of immigrants are Arabs. The second group includes Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, which from the very beginning adhered to a non-Arab migration policy.

As Figure 4 shows, the main percentage of migrants (8.3 million people) is in the United Arab Emirates. It is worth noting that in this case (as with other countries represented in the statistics) they are mainly labour migrants, or a part of the population applying for this status.



**Figure 4.** The number of migrants (million people) in the Gulf countries from 2005 to 2015

According to the study, migrants to these countries are mainly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines.

One of the main questions that arose in the study of these data was whether these persons were labour migrants or could be classified as refugees. A major reasons to classify part of such a population as refugees is that about a third of migrants are under the age of 19 years. Therefore, they cannot work and have the status of labour migrants, but they are so-called 'accompanying' migrants.

Certain social and economic concerns are caused by the current situation. One problem is illegal migrants who, after undertaking formal employment, leave the employer and engage in illegal labour. This does not only negatively affect the country's economy but also complicates the monitoring of the influx of migrants.

In addition, the fear of migrants (especially illegal migrants) is partly due to the possibility of their participation in extremist actions. Other negative aspects associated with migration to the Gulf countries include alertness on the part of local residents towards labor migrants and

increased inflation in countries from which migration occurs. However, it is worth noting that such migration also has positive aspects:

- Labor shortages are reduced and economic problems are resolved.
- For migrants, there are employment opportunities, and possibly salaries higher than they could previously earn.
- Remittances sent by those working abroad to their families have a positive impact on the general economic condition of the countries from which the migration occurred.

### **Discussion**

Migration an important topic today, which is why there are many studies related to it. For example, a study in 2013 related to the experience of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Canada and India. A large number of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have found their way to host countries such as Canada and India. The migration of many Sri Lankan Tamil refugees is characterised by the sustained impact of numerous traumatic events, both before and after migration (Gronseth, 2006). Issues included migration experiences, traumatic events, settlement needs and UN policies (George, 2013). The study showed that the main reasons for the migration of refugees were civil war, genocide, lack of housing and insufficient food. The results highlight the traumatic experience that leads to migration and the difficulty of obtaining refugee status in host countries (Xavier, 2008).

Every day, the basic rights of refugees are violated in countless places around the world. There is no single conceptual model that allows full understanding of the impact of various forms of traumatic experience on the life of refugees. This understanding is achieved only as a result of studies examining the life experiences of refugees (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011). All refugees need to be listened to, to enable authorities to better understand and alleviate their stress by providing appropriate settlement support services (Somasundaram, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

The migration issue is one of the most important in the modern world. It was decided to divide the study into two parts. In the first part, a survey was conducted among migrants from the Middle East and North Africa in the form of a semi-structured interview. In the second part, a statistical analysis of migration to the Gulf countries was carried out based on census data for different years.

According to the results of the interviews, the most common reasons for migration are the economic situation in the country of origin or the hostilities taking place there. The problems



that migrants face are most often of an economic nature. They find it more difficult to get a job, they have less financial support and they are not able to obtain housing. They also face rejection by society. Support for migrants could include increased social benefits and courses that will increase the chances of finding a job and integrating into the new society.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are characterised by the largest flow of migrants. By world standards, these countries are important migration recipients. One of the main problems during migration to the Gulf countries is a rather large number of illegal migrants, as well as a biased attitude towards them from indigenous people.

### **Questionnaire Sample**

#### ***Semi-structured Interview Questions***

- 1      Would you not migrate if other conditions existed in your country?
- 2      Could you name the main reasons for migration (including for you personally)?
- 3      Could you name the most common problems that migrants face (including yourself)?
- 4      What would you like to change in the migrant support system?



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