



ROUNDTABLE SERIES

# Migration and Arab societies

October 2023 - April 2024

Attendance:

in person at 12 rue Raymond Aron - 75013 Paris  
and/or online via Zoom

# Organizing committee

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## Introduction

The question of migration within the Arab world has not attracted significant interest in the past. In the literature, few studies focus on migration in non-Western contexts in general, and fewer still look at Arab states. The very concept of «migration state», introduced by J.F. Hollifield in 2004 in migration studies, applies only to liberal democracies. In general, a Eurocentric paradigm has dominated migration studies since the Cold War era, highlighting Western Europe's security concerns and dilemmas (Tsourapas, 2021). The tendency to overlook migration dynamics in non-Western contexts still persists, although some researchers have started to challenge this Eurocentrism (Tsourapas 2021; Thiollet & Natter, 2022). This can also be explained by the paradigmatic approach in the field of international relations which tends to consider states of the Global South as weak states (Migdal, 1988), or as all-powerful entities, particularly in the case of Arab rentier states (Beblawi, 1987; Beblawi & Luciani, 2015; Tsourapas, 2021).

Yet such a perception is deceptive when it comes to understanding migration trends and their effects on local societies. Far from passively enduring migration in the region, Arab states have proven able and willing to attract or expel immigrants, as well as to limit and control their emigrants and citizens abroad (Tsourapas, 2021; Thiollet, 2021 et 2022). Contrary to popular belief, the region has often witnessed exceptional migration phenomena (Thiollet, 2016).

Nevertheless, existing studies on the subject focus essentially on two distinct types of migration; on the one hand, economic migration, associated with the Gulf region since the 1960s; and on the other hand, forced migration, mainly due to conflicts within the region (Fargues, 2017). If part of this forced migration has taken the form of a migration flow towards Western countries, in reality the vast majority of such migrations has occurred within the region itself (Thiollet, 2013).

Historically, research on migration in the Arab world singles out the Gulf countries, perceived as attracting regional and international immigration, while countries of North Africa and the Middle East are associated with political or economic emigration (Ferhi, 2009). Yet, far from being places of emigration alone, MENA countries are increasingly becoming places of temporary or permanent immigration (Bensaad, 2009 ; Alcaraz, 2018), both in the context of the European Union's border control externalization (Boubakri, 2022) and in that of emerging refugee rentier states in the Arab world (Tsourapas, 2021). Furthermore, the growing interest in migration linked to climate disruption and the still controversial notion of the «environmental migrant» is of particular concern to the countries in this region, which are suffering the consequences of climate change (Sadeq and Mekouar, 2021). For example, the unprecedented droughts that affected Syria between 2006 and 2011 and the almost total flooding of northern Sudan since 2019 have become an integral part of the region's migration problem.



The 2011 Arab Spring and the Syrian and Libyan civil wars raised new questions and sparked interest over the issue of migration in the Arab World. Multiple studies focused on the impact of 2011 on pre-existing migration patterns in the region (Bel-Air, 2012 ; Pagès el Karoui, 2015 ; Fakhoury, 2016), whereas others focused on the emergence of new phenomena such as the evolution of the relationship between the State and refugees (Fakhoury, 2021 ; Natter, 2021 ; Mamdani, 2020 ; Mufti, 2014), the impact of migration on urban space (Fawaz et al., 2018 ; Dorai & Puig, 2012; El-Khoury Tannous et al., 2018) or on women's place within migration flows (Shah, 2004). Indeed, one of the most significant changes in migration patterns in the past 50 years is that women have been increasingly able to migrate on their own. In the Arab world, women represented 33% of the migrant population in 2019 (UNPFA, 2019).

The migration crisis in the Mediterranean since 2011 has also given rise to numerous studies on migration governance in general (Pécoud, 2015; Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023) and in the Euro-Mediterranean area in particular (El Qadim, 2015; Cassarino, 2022; El Qadim, 2015). While Antoine Pécoud points out in *Depoliticizing migration: Global Governance and International Migration Narratives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) that international organizations discursively construct migration as a depoliticised governance issue, the work of Jean-Pierre Cassarino shows how Arab countries impose reciprocal conditionality systems on these organizations (Cassarino, 2018).

In addition, more attention has been devoted to the growing sub-Saharan immigration within North African states, as illustrated by Camille Cassarini's study on the legal irregularity of sub-Saharan immigration in Tunisia (Cassarini, 2020), or by Vincent Geisser's research on the status of sub-Saharan migrants since the downfall of Ben Ali (Geisser 2019).

Nevertheless, despite this wealth of existing research on different aspects of migration in Arab societies, there is nevertheless a persistent research asymmetry on the subject. Beyond the political reasons that can account for this discrepancy - migration is often considered a national security issue and the preserve of political regimes - this asymmetry also highlights the geography of employment and of scientific institutions, the economics of research funding and the politics of academic publications, all of which seem to favor advanced democracies as the object of interest for scientific research on migration (Kabbanji, 2014; Natter & Thiollet, 2022).

The preferred theoretical framework within the field of migration studies has tended to reproduce hegemonic forms of exclusion and power (Dahinden, 2021 et 2022). Relying almost exclusively on the nation-state paradigm, migration studies ignore colonial and racist legacies as well as patriarchal forms of knowledge production, and introduce a binary heteronormativity. These conceptions of migration, centered around the nation-state, rely solely on a methodological nationalism and imply three epistemological traps that still shape a huge part of the research on migration: the naturalization of the international nation-state order; the ontological perception of "migrants" as ready-made objects of research; and finally the depiction of migration as a problem of government (Tazzioli, 2022).

Added to this is the fact that, in the past twenty years, migration studies have increasingly been approached from a securitisation lens. The growing securitisation of migration policies, combined with the criminalisation of irregular border-crossing, contributed to discursively constructing the migrant as a threat to national security

(Bourbeau, 2011; Huysmans, 2000). Nonetheless, the proactive involvement of North African countries in the cooperation on migration and border controls cannot solely be ascribed to increased securitisation policies. North African countries' role in shaping these migration policies is first and foremost driven by their own national and regional interests. Far from passively applying guidelines from the West, Arab states often transpose them in an adaptive and selective way so as to reinforce their own positions at the national and international level (Cassarino, 2018; El-Qadim, 2015; Barsoum et al., 2017; Sboui, 2006).

Based on these introductory remarks, our conference series seeks to shed light on migration issues in the Arab world while questioning local scientific production on the matter. By shifting our focus away from existing theories of migration, we hope to sketch out new research perspectives on the phenomenon of migration in Arab societies.

Our conference series will be structured around 7 round-table discussions, each focusing on a central aspect of the subject.

# Program

## Session 1 | 12 October 2023 (in person)

### **Critical knowledge production on migration**

This first round-table introduces us to the theoretical debate on migration and proposes to go beyond methodological nationalism and the state-centric approach. By doing so, we seek to challenge the predominant Eurocentric view in migration studies and propose a decentred perspective which includes approaches from the Global South. We bring the very notion of 'migrant' back into the debate by looking at how it is constructed.

## Session 2 | 14 November 2023 (in person)

### **Migration governance in the Arab World**

What are the theoretical and analytical tools allowing us to approach and understand the governance of migration in the Arab world? Who are the actors in this governance and what is its effective impact? What role do the Arab States play in defining, circulating and implementing the norms and narratives of international organizations on migration?

## Session 3 | 14 December 2023 (online only)

### **Migration and socio-political tensions in the Arab world**

This third session looks at the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of migrants in Arab societies. A resurgence of xenophobic attitudes towards migrants has been observed in several countries of the region and invites us to reflect on the socio-political tensions associated with migration.

## Session 4 | 18 January 2024 (online only and in anglais)

### **Political economy of migration in Arab states**

This fourth round-table focuses on the interaction between migration and economics within the Arab world, at the state level (how the states in the region benefit economically from regular and irregular migration flows) and at the institutional level (the role of international and humanitarian organizations in this regional migration economy). The round-table will particularly explore the "migration diplomacy" of Arab states and the way in which migration flows are used for political or economic ends.

## **Session 5 | 15 février 2024 (online only and in anglais)**

### **The contribution of migrants to the economies of Arab countries**

The fifth round-table explores the participation of migrants in the formal and informal economies of host countries. The journey of migrant/refugee entrepreneurs will be highlighted, as well as the ability of migrants and refugees to negotiate diverse economic opportunities through their own community networks.

## **Session 6 | 14 mars 2024 (in person)**

### **Migrations et espaces urbains dans le monde arabe**

In this sixth round-table discussion, we will debate the link between migration and urban space in Arab societies. We will interrogate the way in which migration shapes the urban space while questioning the way urban spaces shape migrants. Does the urban context favor the integration of migrants in Arab societies or is it, on the contrary, a factor of anonymity and exclusion ?

## **Session 7 | 18 avril 2024 (in person)**

### **Art et migration**

How has migration been seized by artistic production? This is the question we would like to address in the last round-table discussion of our migration cycle. Not only do we wish to interrogate the representation of migrants in the Arab literature, cinema or performing arts, but also look at art as a form of expression and integration of migrants in host societies.

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