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The Fuzzy Lines of International Migration.
A critical assessment of definitions and estimates in the
Arab countries

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Abstract

Since emigration and immigration plug into the highly sensitive and subjective issues of nationhood and identity, the definition of what a migrant is and is not, and the dissemination of knowledge about international migration are themselves intrinsically subjective matters. Since statistics are produced out of data routinely collected by state administrations and because international migration moves individuals from one state to another, data on international migration are by their very nature difficult to collect and require international harmonisation of statistical procedures. The paper reviews and discusses the various criteria that states use to define a migrant: the country of birth and the country of citizenship of individuals and, by cases, those of their parents, as well as their duration of stay. It shows that in migration matters, truth is not unique, and different points of view can produce contrasted, but not contradictory, estimates.

Keywords

International Migration, Arab Countries, migration statistics

1. Introduction*

“The Lebanese are in greater numbers outside than inside their nation”; “Gulf states don’t have immigrants, only foreign-workers”; “a descendent of a Moroccan is a Moroccan wherever he lives” ; etc. Because emigration and immigration plug into the highly sensitive and subjective issues of nationhood and identity, the definition of what a migrant is and is not, and the dissemination of knowledge about international migration are themselves intrinsically subjective matters.

Statisticians have offered a definition of international migration that they declare universal. In an effort to produce data that can be compared and aggregated at the world level the United Nations (UN) defines international migration as a change in country of residence. Admitting that at any moment in time one person has one and only one country of residence, this definition prevents omissions and double-counting. The same person is defined as an emigrant for his or her country of origin and an immigrant for their country of destination. Logically the total numbers of emigrants and immigrants are expected to be the same at world level.

There are two obstacles, however, which hamstring this definition. First, the definition does not fit in with what politicians and societies at large intuitively regard as migration. Immigrants are, intuitively seen, as persons originating elsewhere. But “originating” and “elsewhere” are, as we shall see, very unclear notions. The second obstacle is that the UN definition is not straightforwardly transformed into an operational, unequivocal mode of data collection and processing.

Because statistics are produced by states to serve their own needs both in terms of policies and politics, and because international migration deals with highly sensitive issues related to nationhood, statistics of international migration are not always available. And when statistics are available they are not always reliable. Because statistics are produced out of data routinely collected by state administrations and because international migration moves individuals from one state to another one, data on international migration are by their very nature difficult to collect. As a result, while international migration is recognised as a key issue in many societies and one that deserves sound and informed policymaking, more often than not policymakers and other migration stakeholders lack the minimal statistical evidence, which would be necessary to make informed decisions. Moreover, administrative records on which statistics are grounded are primarily geared towards citizens who are the bearers of rights, while international migrants are elusive not only because they are mobile but also because they do not enjoy several of the rights that entail administrative registration.

This paper will first briefly review the definition of migration then successively address technical issues linked with the nature of the phenomenon and some conceptual issues deriving from its mostly subjective vision.

2. Definitions and the problems they raise

2.1 International migrant

The UN uses two distinct definitions for “international migrant”. The first applies to the individual, who is defined “as any person who changes his or her country of usual residence. A person’s country of usual residence is that in which the person (...) normally spends the daily period of rest” (UN 1998, p.17). The second applies collectively to the migrant population and defines the “international migrant

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stock [as] the number of people living in a country or area other than that in which they were born” (UN 2009).

The two definitions are not fully consistent with each other. After all, persons who return to their country of birth after a period of residence abroad are counted as international migrants using the first definition. However, they are not international migrants according to the second. In other words, immigrant stocks measured as the born-abroad, or foreign-born, population miss the returnees, an important category in countries affected by significant movements of temporary emigration. In MENA countries, this will particularly affect the measurement of mostly temporary emigration to the Gulf States, from a country of origin point of view: numbers of current emigrants are much smaller than numbers of persons who at one point in their lives have migrated, whether currently abroad or returned.

2.2 Foreign-Born and Foreign-Nationals

Another problem raised by the UN’s second definition is that not all countries provide statistics of their resident population by country of birth, in which case the UN proposes to replace the country of birth by the country of citizenship: “if the number of foreign-born was not available, the estimate refers to the number of people living in a country other than that of their citizenship” (UN 2009). In the most recent version of the UN International Migration Report (2009), 179 countries provide data on their foreign-born population, 42 countries on their foreign population, and 9 countries no information at all. Table 1 illustrates the differences between the two definitions.

Using the criterion of country of nationality instead of country of birth, i.e. recognising foreigners instead of foreign-born persons as immigrants, corresponds to the definition proposed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). For the IOM immigration is “a process by which non-nationals move into a country for the purpose of settlement” (IOM, 2004). As we will see in section 4 below, using the two criteria of country of birth and country of citizenship interchangeably generates conceptual ambiguities, particularly in MENA countries where nationality is governed by a strict rule of *jus sanguinis*. Acknowledging that “many of the concerns related to international migration are citizenship-specific”, the UN, therefore, recommends that data be provided on the two subpopulations of foreign-nationals and foreign-born persons (UN 1998, p.84).

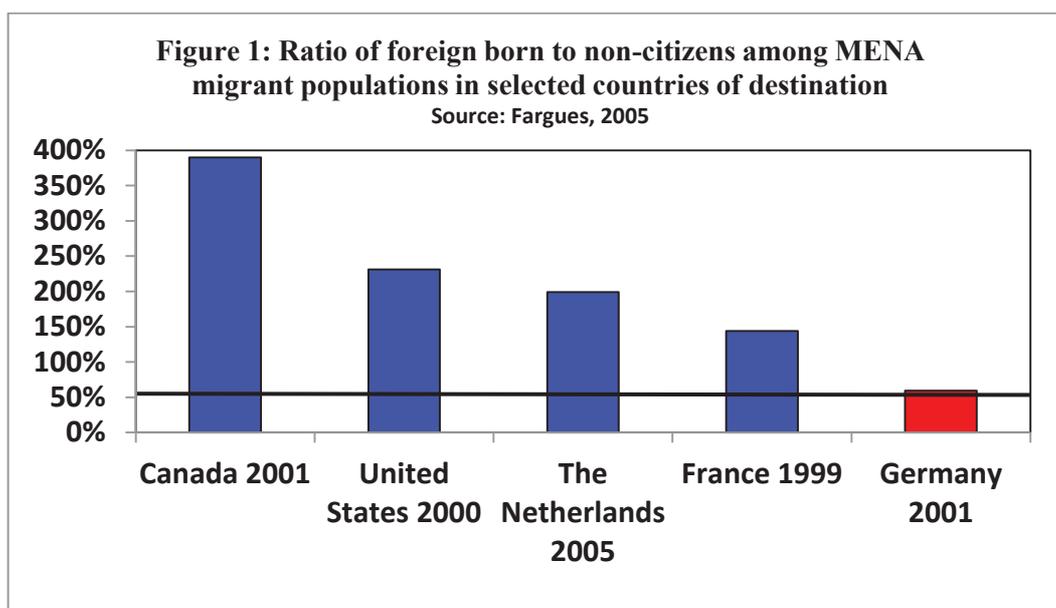
Table 1: Sub-populations defined by international migration

Country of residence		In Residents with an immigration background		Out Non-residents with an emigration background	
Country of birth		In	Out	In	Out
Country of nationality	National	<i>Natives with born-abroad parent(s) (second-generation)</i>	<i>Naturalised immigrants</i> <i>Returned nationals</i>	<i>Emigrants</i>	<i>Born-abroad from emigrant parent(s)</i>
	Foreign-National	<i>Non-naturalised natives with born-abroad parent(s)</i>	<i>Foreign Residents</i>	<i>Born in the country from migrant parent(s) subsequently emigrated</i>	<i>Returnees and other re-emigrated former immigrants</i>

Using the criterion of country of nationality, one makes a distinction between nationals and foreign-nationals, a dichotomy that does not correspond to actual cross-border migration. Indeed persons who never moved can be foreign-nationals in the country where they were born and live: e.g. sons and daughters of Moroccan or Turkish migrants in Germany before the implementation of the 1999 code of nationality that introduced a degree of *jus soli*; some 250,000 stateless persons in Kuwait (bidoon, i.e. ‘without’ a nationality) most of them the descendants of Bedouin tribes moving from time immemorial across a desert spanning Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia (De Bel-Air, 2013).

Symmetrically persons who actually moved can be nationals of a country where they were not born but in which they currently live: for example, naturalized immigrants from MENA countries in Canada, the US, the Netherlands or France; and nationals born abroad who have migrated to their country of nationality, often, but mistakenly, treated as return migrants; e.g. Egyptians born in the Gulf States who now live in Egypt. Moreover, some persons have multiple nationalities and can be counted several times according to the criterion of country of nationality.

Using, instead, the country of birth criterion, one makes a distinction between natives and foreign-born or born-abroad persons. Migrants are then persons born in a country different from that where they live. It is theoretically a non-ambiguous distinction as every individual has only one country of birth. But this is true only if international borders do not move. Dividing a nation’s territory into smaller nations “creates” international migrants. So, for example, persons born in Russia and residing in Uzbekistan, who were internal migrants at the time of USSR, became international migrants once the Soviet Union collapsed. Uniting nations, meanwhile, into a single territory “removes” international migrants. An example here might be persons who migrated from Sana’a to Aden before 1990 and who ceased to be international migrants once the two Yemen became one nation in 1990.



The two criteria of country of birth and country of nationality produce remarkably diverging estimates. Figure 1 plots the ratio of foreign-born persons to foreign-nationals in the case of individuals originating in the MENA and residing in North America or Europe. This ratio varies from a high 390% in Canada (100 nationals of a MENA country per 390 migrants born in a MENA country) to a low 60% in Germany (100 nationals of a MENA country for 60 migrants born in a MENA country). Two main factors explain the difference between countries of destination: first, the rate of naturalisation, i.e. acquisition of the nationality of the destination country, which for MENA migrants is the highest in Canada, and still high in the United States, the Netherlands and France, but very low in Germany. Second, the principle governing nationality at birth varies from an exclusive or dominant *jus soli* conferring their country of birth's nationality to individuals (Canada, US, the Netherlands and France in Figure 1) to a dominant or exclusive *jus sanguinis*, by which descent determines nationality (Germany in Figure 1).

2.3 Second generation and diaspora

These two notions are commonly found in the literature as well as in the political discourse on migration. They represent though non-measurable, loose and disputable-

The term "second-generation" (or even third-generation) migrants refers to persons born in the country where they live to immigrant parent(s) or grand-parents. They are not themselves migrants but, sociologically, they are sometimes considered to be a transitional group and, therefore, they are singled out as a topic for research, or a target for particular policies (e.g. education policies). The problem is that the very notion of second- or third-generation is misleading. Indeed, migration produces marriages between migrants and natives (whether they are a common or a rare phenomenon) and intermarriages create one new population out of a variety of old ones. The same individual can belong to generation number x from his mother's side and to generation number y from his father's; and this applies to each of the two parents, the four grandparents, the eight great-grandparents, etc. As a result, the same individual can be simultaneously categorised as "second" and "third" generation, or "second" and "fourth" (or "fifth", or more) generation. If one goes deeper in genealogies, the vast majority of individuals will be found to have some mixed generation migrant ancestry.

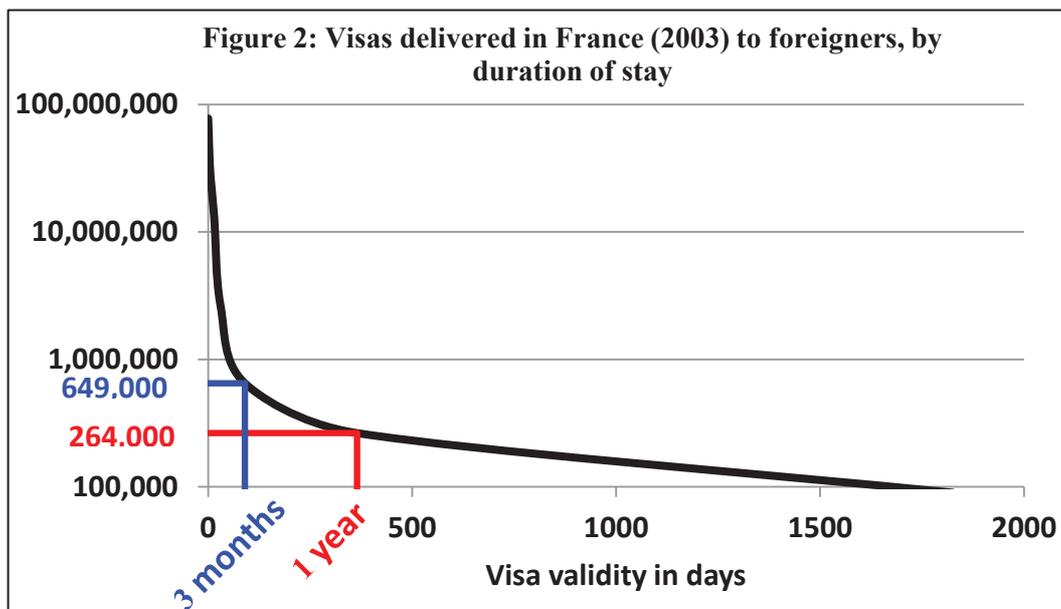
Diaspora refers to persons who claim a common origin and who show attachment, or even nostalgia, for that origin. This is typically a non-measurable population. What is a national origin for people originating from regions where nations are recent? For example, what origin should "Turcos" (as they are often called) claim in South America: Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, while one or several

of their ancestors came from the Ottoman Empire which no longer exists? What level of attachment or nostalgia to the country of origin is necessary to belong to a diaspora? What if the person has several, possibly conflicting, origins?

2.4 Migration and mobility

Not all travellers crossing an international border are migrants and actually migration is only a small part of mobility. Most border crossing movements are two-way, with people returning to their point of departure after a limited stay abroad. Duration of stay at destination makes the difference between migration and mobility. It is commonly admitted that for mobility to become migration, a stay of at least one year is necessary.¹

At the level of global flows, (long-term) migrations are in the tens of millions compared with more than one billion people crossing international borders every year. Moreover international mobility is booming, while migration is growing only slowly. According to another definition, numbers, and the overall picture of international migration, would be completely different. Data from France (2003) will provide an idea of what would be the magnitude of international migration were the duration of stay to be defined in a different way: in 2003, 264,000 foreign-nationals entered with a visa valid for one year or more, compared with respectively 649,000 and 2,673,000 with visas valid for 3 months or more, or for 1 month or more (Figure 2).



Numbers registered in a local embassy illustrate the difference between mobility and migration. In the year 2012, the French consulate in Algiers delivered 136,379 visas to Algerian citizens: this represents the number of legal travellers from Algeria to France.² Out of these, 7,756 long-term visas (more than 3 months) including: 2,846 students, 3,471 family members of Algerian long-term residents in France and 67 workers. Only the last two categories, representing 2.6% of all visas, could be considered migrants. One might add some of the 5,374 short-term visas (less than 3 months), those which allow

¹ An alternative definition has been proposed by the UN but not universally adopted, according to which a migrant is labelled a long-term or a short-term immigrant whether he/she stays or intends to stay for more than a year, or at least 3 months but less than a year (United Nations, 1980).

² <http://alger.ambafrance-dz.org/Statistiques-visas>

the holder to apply for a long-term residency that was delivered the same year, bringing the percentage to a maximum of 6.5%.

3. Built-in technical problems

3.1 Counting flows

There is an intrinsic obstacle to accurately capturing flows of migrants. Recording mobility is a continuous process, performed through administrative routines. A traveller is registered at the moment he or she crosses the border and on a few other occasions (e.g. when applying for residence, for employment...). Visas and permits are of different kinds and specify the authorised duration of stay, theoretically allowing departing migrants (one year or more) from simple travellers (less than one year).

Would, therefore, a detailed statistic of visas or permits provide reliable data on migration flows? This is not the case because actual stay may substantially differ from what is provided for by the visa. It can be shorter (e.g. Egyptian citizens who have permanent Canadian residency, or even citizenship, as a safety net, but actually live in Egypt) or longer (e.g. pilgrims admitted for the *Umrah* in Saudi Arabia who stay beyond the duration of their visa to seek employment). Another reason is that not all migrants have a visa or a permit of stay, either because they are not requested to do so (e.g. Syrian workers in Lebanon) or because they have entered as asylum seekers or irregularly, a situation that is common in the MENA region (Fargues, 2009)

For the above reasons, differentiating between simple mobility (entry will be followed by exit before one year) and migration (the person will stay at least one year) can only be done *ex-post*, at least one year after the entry. There are no easy statistics of this kind. The complexity of cross-border flows of people is reflected in the UN “taxonomy of international inflows and outflows according to entry status established by receiving state”. This taxonomy lists 18 sorts of movements (e.g. daily commuting; transit; business travel; study abroad; settle abroad; asylum; etc.) and four points in time where a person moving across an international border changes status: citizens leaving; foreigners entering; foreigners leaving; and citizens re- entering. In total it represents 72 types of movements, a diversity that no administrative statistics capture (UN 1998, p. 19-20).

3.2 Counting the absent (emigrant stocks)

Migration statistics are obtained from data collected in the population. The problem with emigration is that emigrants are not physically present in the population they belong to as emigrants. Arab states, despite paying increasing interest to their émigrés (Fargues 2013), do not have robust means to count them. In several countries – Egypt in 1996 or Tunisia in 2004– specific questions were asked in population censuses in order to include (former) members of the household, who currently reside abroad. However, data obtained this way are difficult to interpret since a migrant is observed indirectly through a respondent: what if there is no respondent (the entire household has migrated); or more than one respondent (several heads of households claim the same person as one member of their family)?

The above shortcomings also apply to sample surveys on emigration conducted in the origin countries of migrants (e.g. Egypt in 1984, EUROSTAT survey on Push and Pull factors of international migration, etc.). These surveys include an additional, specific problem. Because migrants are in small numbers compared with non-migrants and in order to get round the very low cost-effectiveness of random samples in this case, these surveys over-sample in the regions of high emigration. But interpreting specific data may then become difficult. For example, if a survey of this kind includes a question on the desire to emigrate in the population under study, there is a strong (but unnoticed) built-in bias. Indeed, the desire to emigrate can be assumed to be linked with perceived

opportunities of migrating (if migration is not one's realistic option, one does not express a desire to emigrate). This is itself linked with the actual prevalence of emigration: the higher the rate of emigration from a region, the stronger its migration networks, i.e. the perceived opportunity of migrating. In other words, the survey will miss the regions where people have the lowest desire to emigrate in relation with their not being connected to migrant networks.

Because one can only reliably enumerate people who are "in", and not people who are "out", migration data are typically obtained for immigrants, not for emigrants. As a consequence, emigration from a given country has to be reconstructed as the aggregated immigration originating from this country as enumerated in all other countries of the world. There are several pitfalls in this way of counting emigrants. The most important is that not all destination countries count their immigrants and that not all those that do publish immigration statistics. This is a major obstacle in a number of Arab countries whose émigrés are destined for countries which produce no, or very little, immigration statistics: e.g. the Gulf states and Libya, but also Lebanon and Jordan... With some very few exceptions, only emigration to OECD countries will be accurately captured.

3.4 Estimating the unrecorded

Several categories of migrants are difficult to record through the administrative routines that usually provide statistics: refugees in periods of great rush; irregular migrant workers, circular migrants, etc. *Ad hoc* methodologies may then become necessary to estimate their numbers and characteristics. As an example, we describe below a methodology specifically designed for a survey of Iraqi refugees in Egypt in 2008 (Fargues *et al.*, 2009).

In 2008, Egypt had become a country of first asylum for many Iraqi refugees. How many were they? Based on entry data, the Egyptian government and UNHCR estimated that their number could be around 150,000, most of them unregistered by either UNHCR or the government. Using snowball sampling, a survey was then conducted to better know the situation. In order to assess the size of the population, each interviewed person was asked whether they were registered or not with UNHCR. The results were as follows. Out of a sample of 4,130 refugees, 2,607 were registered with UNHCR, 1,469 were not registered and 54 gave no information about their registration status. UNHCR provided as well the information that 10,786 Iraqis were registered with their office in Egypt. As a result, the total number of Iraqi refugees in Egypt could be estimated as $10,786 \times (2,607 + 1,469) / 2,607$, which is 16,864 (instead of 150,000).

4. The Role of subjectivity

How many migrants from country A reside in country B? Any statistician would be keen to provide an unambiguous answer to this unambiguous question. However, numbers of migrants vary according to the counter and the counted. The four questions below illustrate the conceptually ambiguous nature of migration.

4.1 Is Carlos Slim a Lebanese migrant?

The richest man in the world is a Mexican citizen of Lebanese descent. His father was born in the part of the Ottoman Empire that would become Lebanon and his mother was born in Mexico from parents with a Lebanese (i.e. Ottoman) descent. Lebanon could legitimately claim Carlos Slim as one of her sons and he could legitimately claim Lebanon as his homeland. Were the definition of a migrant to include persons born in the country from at least one migrant parent, these two reciprocal claims would make of Carlos Slim a (second-generation) Lebanese migrant. Applying the same to his children, they would themselves be entitled to call themselves Lebanese migrants. Adopting this extensive notion of migration would perhaps mitigate identity tensions in the world and produce

substantial political benefits. Statisticians, however, would object that the reciprocal claims of Carlos Slim and Lebanon are problematic. Indeed, because of the multiplicity of “national” ancestries that each individual bears (see section 2.3 above), one would end up with many more migrants on earth than the 7 billion inhabitants of the planet.

4.2 Are there 50,000 or 350,000 Moroccans in the Netherlands?

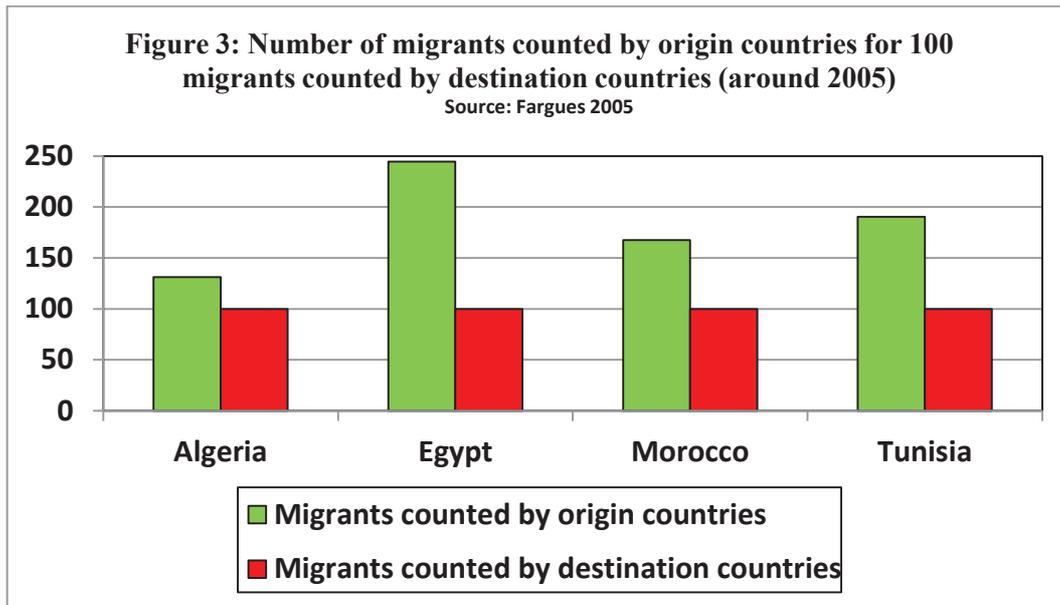
Multiple citizenship, real or simply potential, means that citizens can be counted as nationals by several nations at the same time. For example, given the same population statistics and asked the same question of “How many Moroccans reside in the Netherlands?” the Dutch and Moroccan authorities would obtain different numbers. For the Dutch authorities, there would be 51,008 Moroccan nationals residing in the Netherlands (Table 2).

Table 2: Population of Moroccan Origin in The Netherlands, 1st January 2013

<i>By Citizenship</i>		
A	Population with Moroccan citizenship	51008
<i>By Place of Birth</i>		
B	1st generation	168117
C	2nd generation: both parents born in Morocco	167872
D	2nd generation: one parent born in Morocco	32849
B+C+D	Total population of Moroccan Origin	368838
<i>Numbers of Moroccan citizens according to:</i>		
Dutch authorities = A		51008
Moroccan authorities = B + C + part of D		335989 ; 368838

Source: Statistics Netherlands

For the Moroccan authorities it would be seven times this figure with between 335,989 (all first-generation migrants plus all second-generation migrants with both parents born in Morocco), and 368,838 (the previous persons plus second-generation migrants with only one parent born in Morocco). The exact number claimed by the Moroccan authorities will depend on how many of the 32,849 second-generation migrants with one parent born in Morocco have a Moroccan-born father, since according to Moroccan Law, citizenship is transmitted by the father. Sharing the same statistics but not their interpretation the Dutch and Moroccan authorities will, naturally enough, obtain different numbers. Who is right and who is wrong? Both are right from their point of view and wrong from the other’s point of view. In migration matters, truth is not unique. In a former study (Fargues 2005), it was demonstrated that migrants counted by their country of origin are always more numerous than migrants of the same origin counted by their countries of destination (Figure 3)



4.3 Are there immigrants in the Gulf States?

“Immigration” and “immigrants” are quasi-banned words in the Gulf States, because those states do not want to permanently incorporate aliens in local societies, at least it is not wanted at the State level. In the eyes of governments, foreign-nationals are all guest workers or relatives of guest workers, temporarily admitted to the country. Accordingly, State policies aim at, on one hand, indigenising the work force by replacing foreign-nationals with nationals, and, on the other, not including foreign-nationals in the citizenry by discriminatory legislations (Fargues, 2011). In reality however, indigenisation policies have largely failed and some foreign-nationals settle in the Gulf, as demonstrated by the existence of a growing generation of locally-born foreign-nationals, who would elsewhere be seen as “second-generation” migrants (Shah 2013). Seeing foreign-nationals who are long-term residents in the Gulf as guests or as immigrants are statements that reflect immigration policy choices.

4.4 Are (Palestinian) refugees migrants?

In the United Nations’ most recent estimates, refugees are counted as international migrants in many countries, in particular Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Refugees include the 10.5 million refugees under the mandate of UNHCR and the 4.9 million Palestine refugees under the mandate of UNRWA (United Nations, 2013).

Most refugees registered with UNHCR are foreigners born abroad and can be considered as international migrants in their country of asylum, with regard to the two criteria of “country of citizenship” and “country of birth”. However, this does not apply to Palestinian refugees registered at UNRWA for the reason that UNRWA’s definition of a refugee also covers the descendants of persons who became refugees in 1948.³ As a consequence of this definition, UNRWA refugees born after 1948 are not migrants in their country of registration with regard to the “country of birth” criterion. But are they nevertheless migrants with regard to the other criterion, “country of citizenship”?

³ Palestine refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” The descendants of Palestine refugee males, including legally adopted children, are also eligible for registration (<http://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>)

In Lebanon and Syria, most Palestinian refugees have never been granted the nationality of their country of asylum. At best they have been granted permits of residence and travel documents. From a nationality point of view, they are stateless until a solution is agreed to the Palestinian refugee issue. In the countries where they live, they are second-generation or third-generation migrants. Whether they can be counted as international migrants according to the “country of citizenship” criterion is a matter of interpretation. In Jordan, Palestinian refugees have the nationality of their country of residence and thus they cannot be counted as international migrants regarding the “country of citizenship” criterion. The majority of people counted by the United Nations as international migrants in Jordan (2,925,800), Lebanon (849,700) and Syria (1,395,200) are actually persons born in the country who are either nationals of this country (Jordan) or stateless persons (Lebanon and Syria). From a statistical point of view, Palestinian refugees should probably not be regarded as international migrants. But it is only natural to ask which point of view should prevail: that of statisticians for whom Palestinian refugees should not be considered migrants unless they themselves, not their parents, moved across the border; or that of the social scientist for whom Palestinian refugees share much of the social and political characteristics of other refugees around the world?

Conclusion

Immigration is often at the centre of harsh political debates and thorny policy choices. But what is not straightforward is the nature and therefore the magnitude of immigration. Whether one considers the country of birth or the country of citizenship as the defining criterion, one defines either born-abroad persons or foreign nationals as immigrants. The level of overlap between these two groups varies from country to country depending, inter alia, upon policies on immigration-related matters, in particular on the access of migrants and their sons and daughters to the nationality of their country of residence. Moreover, depending on which duration of stay is chosen to distinguish immigrants from simple visitors, i.e. on how one decides to divide the continuum from short-term mobility to lifetime settlement, the numbers and profiles of migrants vary tremendously.

The fact that those counted as migrants vary according to the point of view of those doing the counting reflects the complexity of the phenomenon. Being a complex, multifaceted social reality, migration cannot be captured by any over-simplified definition. In an ideal world, immigration statistics would therefore combine the various criteria necessary to capture the different facets of the phenomenon, including the country of birth and the country of citizenship of individuals and those of their fathers and mothers, as well as their duration of stay. Regarding emigration statistics, there is no way to collect the necessary data in the origin country. Emigrants of a given country can only be counted as immigrants from this country in all other countries of the world. Building a sound system of migration statistics must therefore be conceived as a matter of international cooperation.

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