



Track: Emerging issues
Dialogue: Perceptions of Migration
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Draft paper:
A portrayal of illegal migration as seen from press lens:
The case of Egypt

The main objective of this draft paper is to look into the ways in which the Egyptian press has dealt with the issue of illegal migration. It is an attempt to address questions such as what is the dominant storyline in which this issue is covered, and in what frames and also in what way was the press coverage effective in swaying potential migrants from going through illegal channels, what is the profile of an illegal migrant as portrayed in the press coverage and what are the reasons mentioned in the coverage for such type of migration. Said another way, is economic migration prevailing over political migration?

In order to try to find answers, I have scanned a random sample of press articles in both pro-state and opposition press. The paper is therefore focusing on scanning some of the press reports to try to understand some of the key issues about illegal migrants

A historic brief:

It would be interesting to have a quick look at the evolution of Egyptian migration flow.

Three phases are identified:

1-1 First phase: Post revolution period: very limited number of students, professionals and during the 60s international migration took various forms including permanent, temporary, legal and illegal but was restricted in scope and scale

2-2- Second phase: 70s the pattern changes in nature, size and destination. After the 73 oil boom the Gulf States were the preferable destination

3-3 Third phase: During the 80s migration continued to Saudi Arabia

According to national estimates, the total number of Egyptians abroad is about 2.7million. They comprise about four percent of the total population of Egypt and about 1.5million of the total migrants all over the world. Two third of the Egyptian migration is temporary while the other third is permanent.

4-4 Fourth phase: it is interesting to note that since the year 2000 Egypt in fact acts as both a source and host country at the same time. In other words, its migrants go to host country whereas it has acted as a host country for migrants coming from Africa particularly Southern Sudan and Eritrea.

It is interesting to note that the national estimates and figures do not include any reference to how much illegal migration constitute out of the overall migration which is telling of how the state is handling an important problem such as illegal migration.

But according to a press report published in the evening edition of Al-Ahram newspaper on 2/12/2002 it stated that the number of Egyptian illegal migrants have reached 1482 young men who were deported from



various parts of the world. It does not however, explain how they have obtained such a figure or from which sources. This again raises the issue of the lack of a proper database through which to monitor the rise and fall in numbers of illegal migrants in order to be able to deal with it.

The three most favoured destinations, according to press coverage, were Italy, Turkey and Lebanon. The US was among the most favoured destinations but after 9/11 it has become almost impossible to illegally enter the US.

The main objective of this paper is to identify some of the patterns and trends and dynamics of press coverage on illegal migration

Profile of an Egyptian illegal migrant:

One can safely say that Egyptian migrants are a selected group in terms of age, sex and educational status. They are young (between the ages of 21-35), more male than females, a high educational status and most of them have failed to obtain a job opportunity in Egypt. In 1987 CAPMAS survey indicated that Egyptian migrants were almost exclusively males (97.7 per cent). The age group was 89.8 per cent of cases between 20-44 years old.

The motivation behind the migration:

In almost all press accounts, the economic motivation came out as the sole motivation behind illegal migration. What has been missing in press coverage however, particularly the pro-state press is that the political dimension of the issue goes largely unreported by the press. When some of the illegal migrants were asked about the motivations behind accepting to go through illegal channels they stated that high rates of unemployment, meager wages and the high costs of living in Egypt were the primary reasons for their decision to put their lives at risk.

The most common storyline

Perhaps the most common storyline in terms of illegal migration in the Egyptian press is the one related to traffickers. Most illegal migration in Egypt is done through traffickers which is a thriving business in a country like Egypt. Average migrants from Egypt pay \$5000 to either individuals or firms. The Egyptian press is awash with stories about young men who have been tricked by traffickers and were lured into paying thousands of dollars to be able to migrate out of the country.

The press, nonetheless, plays an important part here because some of those trafficking firms can post advertisement in national papers thus they gain some kind of legitimacy. For example warning statements issued by Egyptian foreign minister against the risks of illegal migration are not given proper space whereas advertisements posted by such firms gets a better space because they are paid for. One, however, would question the influence the press enjoys within the circles of those young men. In other words, in what way is the press able to sway those young men from traveling through illegal channels? Clearly the press has very little influence in that domain. Despite the many stories of failures, tragedies, death and acts of racism committed against some of those young men which the press keep reporting about, there are still those who are willing to take a risk.

2-The kind of frames used in reporting illegal migration stories in the Egyptian press is done through the crisis frame. The story line usually focus on the appalling conditions in which immigrants often find themselves, the failure stories of immigrants, the tricking of traffickers and the death facing them.

The crisis frame was also reflected in the many stories about incidents in which some Egyptian migrants have lost their lives. The dominant perception in some of those stories is that those young men are presented as inflicting damage on "Egypt's image" abroad but no questions were posed for example about



the social responsibility should the state uphold for not providing those young men with the needed work opportunities?

One must note however, that the press coverage failed to ask the important questions such as to why thousands of Egyptian young men would throw themselves into such circumstances (although opposition papers did cover this issue but only in terms of using it as a platform to launch an attack on the government rather than address the real issues).

In a study about what was their source of information about migration 67 persons out of 99 persons said that it was through "relatives and friends". Only 3 per cent of the 99 said their source was the Egyptian authorities while one percent said embassy and 12 per cent said internet and 16 per cent said general literature.

It seems also important to note that while 64% of the overall sample claims that they chose specific destination countries for general job opportunities, only 12.6% of Egyptian migrants have a specific job offer, let alone a contract. Considering that in many EU member states having a job contract is a necessary precondition to being admitted legally in the hosting country. It might be possible to speculate on the lack of proper documents by Egyptian migrants.

It is true that, when asked about whether it was possible to enter a destination country without appropriate documents 93.2% of the respondents answered no, but obviously no different answer could have been expected and, yet, almost 7 of the respondents were not aware of the necessity to hold appropriate entry documents.