

Provincialization of Europe and the Middle East? Migration, regional competition and the global perspective

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Globalization challenges both the Middle East and Europe in the sense that global competition tends to leave states in both regions as being of secondary importance on the international political scene (compared – for instance – to growth-states in Asia or Latin America). The point in this article, however, is that the same seems to be the case for the two regions. With a term from Karoline Postel-Vinay, we can speak of a provincialization of the regions, which affects their conditions for taking part in the competition between regions in a global perspective.

It seems that Europe and the Middle East are caught between several difficult challenges. They have to deal with losing ground in a new multipolar world of regions and at the same time they have to find solutions to their “manpower issue”. The problem is certainly not the same in the two regions. The ageing of Europe’s population is in itself an economic challenge in so far as the expenses to pensions and health care are growing rapidly and inflicting costs on a workforce which in large areas of Europe is declining. The Middle Eastern region faces huge challenges in low growth rates and excess labour, resulting in poor opportunities for the young populations of the Arab states. Migration is thus an important aspect of the provincialization issue.

Migration and the Middle East in a new, multipolar world

As emphasized by Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller in their classic “The Age of Migration” the Middle East contains all relevant conditions for producing migrants. It is “an area where enormous political, cultural and economic diversity has resulted in many varied types of migration and mobility.”¹ The migration is internal, meaning that it takes place behind borders, like for instance – taking refugees as example – in Iraq where the invasion in March 2003 resulted in a huge number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It is also regional – a large number of Egyptians used until recently to work in Libya (the local perspective) as well as a large number of Egyptians work in the Gulf (the interregional perspective).² The politically most significant population movements related to the Middle East, however, are the transregional movements, first of all towards Europe.³ These movements seem to be rather stable, as demonstrated by Philippe Fargues et al: the “emigration from South and East Mediterranean countries (SEM) is continuing at a steady rate, while immigration to these countries is increasing, particularly in various irregular forms.”⁴ A large amount of research projects have documented the migratory movements within the MENA-region.⁵

This article attempts at taking the discussion a bit further by discussing how new global tendencies related to the migration phenomenon affect the relation between Europe and the Middle East. The latest decades have witnessed a growing connectivity between processes of globalization, social transformation and migration, which has considerable consequences for the global migration trends and patterns, yet to a different degree in different regions of the world.

Taking the Middle East and its relations to the EU as point of departure it can be claimed that the political and institutional developments are creating huge challenges for the attempts at cooperation. On one side the complex challenges in the Middle East have led to pragmatic tendencies in European foreign policy in the MENA-region.⁶ On the other side the EU itself is experiencing a continuously slow integration process, which only recently saw the Lisbon Treaty finally being adopted as the legal foundation for the Union.

The EU’s attempts at becoming an important actor on the international political scene are thus far from unfolding. This (lack of) development becomes a reality while a simultaneous global trend furthermore is affecting the EU in attempting to realize its potential, namely a provincialization of Europe in

world politics, as claimed, among others, by Karoline Postel-Vinay.⁷ The alleged provincialization of Europe has different aspects. The phenomenon should be understood within the framework of a new multipolar reality, where rising powers (China, India, Russia, Brazil etc.) are entering the political scene and where global demographic tendencies imply that Europe (or rather: the EU), despite its recent enlargements, is being outnumbered by growing populations in other regions of the world.

Provincialization of Europe and the Middle East

The reasons for this reality are a combination of an ageing of the European population and a continuously rapid, yet gradually stagnating, population growth in other regions in Asia, Africa etc. The concept of provincialization of Europe has for some time been discussed within postcolonial theory, where it has been a central theme (at least) since the influential book by Dipesh Chakrabarty on postcolonial Europe.⁸ The different tendencies related to the concept of provincialization of Europe seem to run parallel and in a certain way to reinforce each other. The overall demographic and political weakening of Europe in a global context is supplemented by the absence of progress for the internal institutional processes within Europe, meant to bring about more coherent and efficient foreign policies for the EU in its (Middle Eastern) neighbourhood.

The states in the European neighbourhood – in short the southern Mediterranean states – are, of course, also a part of the global demographic tendencies and experience the comparative “decline” of the European population in the sense that the need of a workforce is registered as a demand for manpower in the societies close to the European borders. This still does not mean, that it becomes more easy to get across the European borders. On the contrary the states are experiencing an even increasing blockade of emigration towards Europe, partly due to securitization.

The Middle East, however, does not constitute an important part of a reconfiguring global reality in the sense that the region is developing into a growth center in world economy. On the contrary, the Middle East seems, unintentionally, to avoid becoming part of the positive economic and political aspects of globalization. Besides, the Middle East is suffering from the consequences of the securitization of migration in the West, which seems especially to concern itself with the migration from the Middle East. Summing up it seems that the Middle East, as well as Europe, is a victim of global

competition in an emerging new world order. The Middle East and Europe are both losing ground in a new multipolar world of regions and this reality affects the understanding of transnational movements related to migration in the Mediterranean, both as to how these movements are perceived on the European side and as to how they are perceived on the Middle Eastern side of the Mediterranean sea.

In a highly competitive global environment migration plays an important role as a phenomenon which challenges security and therefore becomes high politics – and a core issue in European-Middle Eastern relations. In order to conceptualize this reality it is relevant to draw on a terminological distinction suggested by Rainer Bauböck in connection with an attempt at developing a political theory of migrants in a transnationalist perspective.⁹ Bauböck discusses to which degree it can be useful to differentiate between international, multinational, supranational and transnational relations and phenomena.¹⁰ He makes the point that whereas the term international meaningfully can be attached to activities or relations undertaken by nation-states within a “traditional” neorealism scheme, on the other hand the term transnational can be attached to activities or phenomena related to non-institutional or non-state actors, “be they organized groups or networks of individuals across borders.”¹¹

In connection with attempts at developing these concepts further, Steven Vertovec discusses how opportunities and constraints in the migration processes arise from the character of social capital in the involved networks and goes through a number of studies within this area. He points to political opportunity structures as important for the process, defined by “the openness or closure of formal political access, the stability of alignments within a political system, and the presence or absence of influential allies.”¹² Furthermore he underlines the importance of mobilizing structures, defined as “collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.”¹³ The lack of opportunity structures in the Middle East, as demonstrated by several Arab Human Development Reports¹⁴, contributes to creating a permanently high motivation for migration. This of course also adds to political unrest and thereby to a potential radicalization of unemployed, marginalized groups of young Arabs.

In understanding migration as an important issue in this context the role of transnational networks becomes highly relevant. Different phenomena attached to migration processes like chain migration related to family reunion, migration networks, (be they official, semiofficial or clandestine), or ethnic

diasporas all constitute examples of transnational social formations. But also more problematic phenomena like human trafficking or illegal migration activities organized by people smugglers can be seen as manifestations of transnationalism. With the tendency of securitizing migration movements and with the growing focus on radical Islamist organizations in the last decades the interconnectedness between security and migration develops new dimensions in the narratives related to transnational social movements.

At the national level, as Laurie Brand explains – exemplified in a recent article looking at Lebanon and Jordan – migration poses challenges to the nation.¹⁵ Taking the latter as an example, for instance “Jordan has been profoundly shaped by multiple episodes of immigration and emigration, voluntary and forced, economic and conflict-induced.”¹⁶ National narratives can (more or less obvious) function as state strategies, where migration movements are used by the incumbent Middle Eastern regimes to include or exclude migrants from the nation. But they can also function as part of an ideological basis for oppositional movements and as such represent contestations of regime legitimacy.

In addition – and in some ways in opposition – to the formal, institutional relations between Europe and the Middle East, we find a plethora of informal networks attached to transnational social formations. A large number of these are connected to migration processes, and therefore become subject to securitization by European governments but also more or less by the Middle Eastern regimes. The interconnectedness between migration and security is a reality on both sides of the Mediterranean and plays a role in the policies on behalf of the governments north as well as south of the Mediterranean. The organizational setup built by the EU in order to deal with its changing foreign policy and security conditions is challenged by complex structures of transnational social movements and networks.

Migration from MENA and the European immigration regime

A UN report shows that in 2010 the total number of international migrants in the world was expected to reach 214 million. Out of this global total Europe was expected to host one-third, around 70 million people.¹⁷ Since the turn of the century Europe has overtaken Asia as the region with the largest amount of immigrants and this seems to be a stable tendency. According to Eurostat the number of third country nationals residing in the EU is about 18,5 million.¹⁸ In order to find the total number of people in Europe with a non-European

background it would be necessary to add an estimate of the number of people with a European citizenship but with a non-European background. An important part of the explanation why it is difficult to determine the actual number of migrants in Europe has to do with the very differentiated character of the migration processes towards Europe. A huge amount of irregular migration processes take place in the Mediterranean and one of the results of that is that a large number of illegal immigrants with a non-European background are living in Europe.

According to national statistics as well as reports on transnational movements “emigration from South and East Mediterranean countries is continuing at a steady rate, while immigration to these countries is increasing, particularly in various irregular forms.”¹⁹ Here the different dimensions and dynamics of contemporary international migration are taken as points of departure – with a focus on the Mediterranean in a broad sense, including the Middle East, transit migration with the Maghreb states etc.²⁰ Important aspects are phenomena like irregular migration, illegal migration etc. and how this complex reality has implications for state policies dealing with migration and security.

The immigrant population in Europe, the majority of which is coming from the Middle East and Turkey, is growing and to an increasing degree securitized. The immigrants are at the same time being exposed to the construction of a common European immigration regime and to more or less national(-ist) immigration policies in each individual EU member state. The construction of a European immigration regime reflects new transnational challenges related to overall European security but also new tendencies in “local” contexts.

A interesting irony, as demonstrated by Ahmet İçduygu, is attached to the fact that “while most of the southern European countries on the Mediterranean shores together with other EU countries tend to be advocating or actually adopting a range of restrictive controls against the incoming migrant flows, their economies are able to absorb thousands of irregular migrants without any unbearable confrontation.”²¹ The southern European economies are in some areas hardly able to function without an influx of a cheap labour force from other continents, first of all, regarding Southern Europe, from Northern Africa²², but also from other regions of the world.²³ And gradually this reality is spreading to the rest of Europe in the sense that a growing part of the unskilled European labour market is being dominated by immigrant workers.²⁴

Europe is importing a labour force which Europe itself due to ageing no longer is able to provide. The EU is experiencing a radical change in its demographic composition, which makes it necessary to implement new strategies. Therefore the EU has taken up competition with the US in attracting skilled workers. The European Commission launched in 2009 a programme called the 'blue card' intending to lure highly skilled third country migrants to the European economies.²⁵ But this process started as a matter of fact many years earlier. A shrinking European labour force has for decades been balanced off by immigration resulting in a process of mutual accommodation, on one side by the European host societies and on the other side by the immigrants arriving to Europe.²⁶ According to a UN migration analysis, the EU currently integrates two million new migrants a year – a figure, which is likely to increase, as demonstrated by several migration trend analyses.²⁷ It should be emphasized, however, that this does not mean that attempts at preventing specific groups from arriving in Europe is brought to a halt.²⁸

Traditionally the challenge has been met by the EU member states with different national integration strategies, but gradually this has changed, so that – as explained by Adepoju et al – today it “has been recognized that there is a need to establish a common EU immigration policy to replace fragmented and inconsistent national regimes”.²⁹ This reality is reflected in the gradual establishing of supranational immigration policies, which also contain an integration dimension. One of the EU homepages is called “Towards a common European Union immigration policy”³⁰ and even though there might be a long way ahead before the EU will reach this goal, there is no doubt that steps on the way have been taken, so that immigration and integration policies at the national level gradually are being replaced by common EU policies. Still the concrete integration activities take place locally and will therefore have a tendency to reflect national strategies and concrete practices developed over the last decades.³¹

The different national integration strategies of course have to do with different conditions as these for instance are described by Göran Larsson et al in their analysis of minorities with Islamic background in Scandinavia and the Baltic states.³² Different ideological and political traditions have contributed to the well known integration paradigms that characterize different national and/or regional discourses and integration practices within Europe. Rob Euwals et al compare the conditions for Turkish immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands and demonstrate that a convergence has taken place bringing the

two neighbouring countries closer together regarding integration policies: "While Germany became less restrictive with respect to family reunification and family formation, the Netherlands became more restrictive (...) From 2003 onwards Dutch naturalization policy started to become stricter."³³ However, Euwals et al do not seek to explain the demonstrated changes by pointing at a supranational development at the EU level. Also other analyses have shown the same tendencies at convergence between the EU member states regarding immigration and integration policies and practices – and how these have been exposed to an increased securitization.³⁴ The overall tendency, however, is that European immigration policies are still restrictive.

Conclusion

As pointed out globalization challenges both the Middle East and Europe in the sense that global competition tend to leave states in both regions as being of secondary importance on the international political scene (compared to growth-states in Asia or Latin America). The point is, however, that the same tendency can be seen for the two regions. And what we, with Postel-Vinay, term a provincialization of the regions affects the conditions for emigration from the Middle East. Europe, the immigration continent, suffers from tendencies at provincialization, due to a decline in the region's global competitiveness for instance vis-à-vis China and potentially also India – on a different scale Brazil, South Korea, Turkey etc.

Summing up it seems that Europe and the Middle East are caught between several difficult challenges. They have to deal with losing ground in a new multipolar world of regions and at the same time they have to find solutions to their manpower issue. The problem is certainly not the same in the two regions. The ageing of Europe's population is in itself an economic challenge in so far as the expenses to pensions and health care are growing rapidly and inflicting costs on a workforce which in large areas of Europe is declining. The financial crisis adds to the problem. The Middle Eastern region faces huge challenges in low growth rates and excess labour, resulting in poor opportunities for the young populations of the Arab states. Entering Europe, however, is only a solution for the few. The bulk will have to stay. This is also a part of the provincialization issue.

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