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Geraldine Chatelard

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Jordan: A Refugee Haven --- Country Profile

Géraldine Chatelard

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Migration to, from, and across Jordan since the Palestinian exodus of 1948 has played a key role in the country's politics, economy, and society. These movements have several underlying, interacting patterns. The main ones are connected to regional geopolitics, the fluctuations of the oil economy in the Persian Gulf, and efforts by the kingdom's Hashemite monarchy to ensure its own stability.

Jordan is a case in point for how various forms of mobility can have strong political and economic implications, both domestically and regionally.

Like most other Middle Eastern states, Jordan is a recent creation, having been established in 1921 within borders drawn by European colonial powers. It soon became the first host of Palestinian refugees. These people have arrived in several waves since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, forming a very large and integral part of the kingdom's population.

Because of the unresolved issue of Palestinian statehood, this migration has constantly posed a challenge to the Jordanian regime. At the same time, it has been an asset to the country's economic development.

In particular, it has allowed Jordan to receive large amounts of development assistance from the international community to help resettle and integrate the refugees. The remittances of those Palestinians who went to look for work in the Gulf also played a major role in developing Jordan's public and private sectors.

The most recent large-scale wave of Palestinian migration to Jordan was that of "returnees" from Gulf countries, most of them expelled from Kuwait following the 1991 Gulf War.

In addition to receiving Palestinians, Jordan has also hosted forced migrants from other countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon during the 1975-1991 civil war, and Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War and after the 2003 removal of Saddam Hussein following the Anglo-American military intervention.

Besides its status as a haven, the kingdom has played a regional role in transit migration. Palestinian refugees, for example, created a pool of cheap labor that showed up, via Jordan, as labor flows in the Gulf. Among those expelled in 1991, a significant part used Jordan as an entry point to the West Bank.

In the other direction, West Bankers have been transiting Jordan in significant numbers since the second Palestinian uprising started in 2000. In addition to Palestinians, forced migrants from Lebanon's civil war in the 1970s found their way through the kingdom to settle in the United States, and Iraqis have used Jordan as a base since the 1991 Gulf War to seek asylum in Europe and elsewhere.

Conversely, domestic politics have created a limited trend of forced migrants to other Arab countries or to Europe: members of illegal political movements that wanted to avoid imprisonment, such as the Communists in the 1950s and 1960s; members of antimonarchical Islamic parties; and guerrillas of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) who were forcefully expelled after

September 1970.

Jordan's economic development is tightly coupled with the dynamics of mobility. On the one hand, this means the reception of Palestinian forced migrants. On the other hand, this has involved labor exports to feed the oil-producing Gulf states' demand for foreign workers.

Remittances, together with foreign aid, have contributed to developing sectors of the Jordanian economy by providing start-up money for Jordanian businesses and for large state-sponsored projects. However, the demand for Arab workers in the Gulf shifted in the mid-1990s: today only highly skilled Jordanians go abroad while the less skilled face an unemployment rate of up to 30 percent in Jordan.

In a Jordanian labor market that has become highly segmented along ethnic and gender lines, men employed in agribusiness or construction come from more populated or less affluent Arab countries such as Egypt and Sudan, and female domestic workers originate from Southeast Asia.

Following a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, joint Jordanian-Israeli industrial ventures (the so-called Qualified Industrial Zones) have been importing male and female labor from India, Bangladesh, and other Southeast Asian states.

The 1991 Gulf War, one of the periodic shocks imposed on Jordan by conflict in neighboring countries, forced a recomposition of the various migration flows and reshaped labor supply and demand.

On the one hand, over 300,000 Jordanian citizens were forcefully "repatriated," a contentious term when applied mostly to Palestinians who maintained little connection to Jordan as citizens.

On the other hand, within a decade, large numbers of Iraqis came to Jordan to stay long term or in transit. This flow might have been as high as 1 million when combining estimates of Iraqis in Jordan made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), figures published by asylum and migration agencies in Western countries over that period, and available data for Iraqi expatriates in labor-importing Arab countries (Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Yemen, and Libya).

In both cases, tightly intertwined political and economic factors heavily conditioned the out-migration of these groups from the Gulf or Iraq, their reception, and their subsequent livelihood strategies within Jordan. For many, the continuation of their migration away from Jordan was also affected. These last migratory trends call into question the relevance of applying to Jordan a framework of analysis that systematically distinguishes between forced and voluntary migration, or between population movements prompted by economic and political causes.

Palestinian Refugees, Displaced and Other Migrants

Jordan is host to the largest number of Palestinian refugees in any single country in the world. These refugees are under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the special UN agency that has been operating since 1950 to provide relief and works to the 900,000 Palestinians displaced to neighboring regions by the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

During the first Arab-Israeli war, Jordan received a large influx of refugees and later annexed the West Bank of the Jordan River — a part of pre-1948 Palestine. Within two years, Jordan's population increased from 500,000 to 1.5 million, one-third of them refugees.

During the second Arab-Israeli war of June 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank, sending to the Jordanian East Bank another 400,000 Palestinians who were not deemed refugees but rather internally displaced, as they had not crossed an internationally recognized border. Roughly 175,000 of them were also refugees from the 1948 war.

As of June 2010, Palestinian refugees and their descendants registered with and clients of UNRWA numbered over 1.9 million of Jordan's total population of 6 million. To make the issue of statistics and categories more complex, tens of thousands of Palestinians have settled voluntarily on the East Bank since 1948. It is generally acknowledged that roughly half of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin, but numbers are highly politicized and therefore contested.

Because of the unresolved dispute over the establishment of an independent Palestinian state west of the Jordan River, Palestinians are the longest-standing refugee caseload in the world.

Jordan has the highest ratio of refugees to indigenous population of any country. This is a fact that the Jordanian authorities frequently stress, if only to spur donor countries to keep funding UNRWA's shrinking budget, but one which is rarely acknowledged outside of the Middle East. Palestinians do not fall within the responsibility of UNHCR and are therefore rarely included in statistics on worldwide refugee trends and caseloads.

Another reason for this lack of recognition is that the majority of Palestinian refugees in Jordan are also citizens of the host state with the exception of 300,000 Palestinians who took refuge in Jordan from the Gaza Strip in 1967. The Jordanian government has welcomed resettlement projects undertaken by international organizations or US development agencies within the broader framework of development. These projects have generally boosted the whole Jordanian economy.

UNRWA has continuously provided health and education services to its clients — currently only 341,500 living in camps, and a majority self-settled. Grants and loans from oil-producing Arab states also made possible job creation for refugees. But despite the scale of foreign assistance, Jordan, a country with scarce natural resources, remains to this day largely devoid of industries and other productive activities apart from agriculture and tourism.

The size of the Palestinian population in Jordan is such that it has allowed some Israeli leaders to claim that "Jordan is Palestine." Therefore, in addition to the challenge of economically integrating the Palestinians, the Jordanian regime has always aimed at controlling independent expression of their political claims within the kingdom so as to prevent Jordan from becoming a "replacement state" for the Palestinians.

The Palestinians' political integration within Jordan was made highly conditional on their allegiance to a ruling monarchy that strove first to protect its own stability in the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than engage militarily with Israel. A significant number of Palestinian families, mostly from the upper middle class and above, accepted the terms of the pact with the Hashemites and have thrived in Jordan. But a very large number of educated Palestinians emigrated from Jordan as early as the 1950s.

During the 1960s, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) managed to make Jordan its political and military base against Israel. The development of these activities posed a direct threat to the monarchy. The tension culminated in 1970-1971. In that period, fighting erupted between the regular army and PLO guerrillas.

In the end, several thousand paramilitary troops and their leaders were expelled from Jordan, in

some cases accompanied by their families. Most took refuge in Lebanon, where they reconstituted their military organization, a development most analysts see as having precipitated the eruption of the Lebanese civil conflict in 1975.

Since the events of 1970-1971, Jordanian society has been increasingly polarized. Individuals have been pressured to identify either as Palestinian or Jordanian, and to unambiguously express their political allegiance in order to access public jobs and resources made more scarce by economic recession.

The Political Economy of Emigration

Even leaving aside direct political considerations, there was no easy solution to the problem of integrating a population that tripled between 1952 and 1979, especially as the available farmland shrank dramatically with the excision of the West Bank from the kingdom in 1967. In this context, the Jordanian government fostered the export of manpower to oil-producing countries in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Framed by the ideology of Pan-Arabism, this emigration was conceived of as Jordan's contribution to Arab unity and economic integration.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Jordanian nationals, alongside many Lebanese, directly contributed to the establishment of state systems in emerging Gulf countries, setting up and staffing ministries, educational and medical facilities, and other public services. A large number of Palestinians were skilled thanks to UNRWA, which had promoted education and vocational training.

It is generally acknowledged that Jordanian emigrants to the Gulf in this early phase were overwhelmingly Palestinians. Entire families settled in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, often keeping only loose connections with Jordan apart from their passports. This was true even if their new countries of immigration seldom offered them and their children access to citizenship. They developed new identities, becoming, for example, the "Palestinians of Kuwait," and new attachments to more affluent ways of life.

The oil price increase of 1973 inaugurated the second phase of labor migration to oil-producing countries. The new preeminence of the private sector served as a strong pull factor for more laborers to participate in infrastructure development, while competition with workers from Southeast Asia forced an upward trend in the skill levels of exported Jordanian and Arab workers.

The Jordanian government did not attempt to attach disincentives to the out-migration of well-educated professionals, which was not regarded as a brain drain. On the contrary, in the 1970s, the government set as a national development objective the education of people for export, thus expanding and systematizing training efforts.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, an average 42 percent of the Jordanian labor force was expatriated, and the domestic unemployment rate, which had peaked at 12 percent in the 1960s, went down to 2 percent by 1986. In 1987, 350,000 Jordanians, overwhelmingly male, were working abroad, over 50 percent in Saudi Arabia alone. More than 30 percent were university graduates, and 40 percent were in professional positions. A large number of migrants were accompanied by their families.

In addition to bringing down unemployment and helping to defuse political tensions, emigration allowed the Jordanian state to tap the remittances of its expatriates to the point of securing a continuous source of financial revenue. Jordan has been described as the world's only oil-economy with no oil, i.e., a state highly dependent upon foreign aid from oil-producing states and upon remittances from its nationals working in these countries.

The fluctuations in Jordan's economic development have followed the ups and downs of the oil market. Worldwide, between 1974 and 1991, Jordan was the fourth-most dependent country on migrant earnings. In 1984, for instance, remittances amounted to US\$1.2 billion, or one-fourth of GDP.

For expatriate workers, the flow of remittances maintained the link with relatives or members of the extended families that had remained in Jordan. Remittances were invested in consumption activities, largely in residential properties and on imported goods. Yet, part of them went into productive investments, particularly in agricultural technology in the Jordan Valley, which increased job availability in that sector.

In order to divert part of these remittances, the Jordanian state set up a number of control mechanisms on international money transfers while heavily taxing imported goods. Contrary to what could be expected, these measures did not discourage remitters, who had limited options to invest their savings in Gulf countries and no secure long-term prospects as only guest workers but not citizens. The Jordanian government used the revenue extracted from remittances to improve the balance of payment, invest in infrastructure development, and create jobs in the public sector.

Segmented Labor Migration to Jordan

The considerable remittances and the scale of emigration led to structural transformations of the domestic economy and of the labor market. Following a period when employment within Jordan was scarce, the period 1976 to 1982, which witnessed the second rise in oil prices, saw a decline in unemployment.

On the one hand, there was a demand for labor in agriculture, construction, and services (particularly in hotels), all sectors that had boomed as a direct or indirect effect of the local investment of remittances or of savings by Jordanian expatriates. On the other hand, there was no supply of domestic labor to meet this demand because of the extremely young age structure of the Jordanian population and the relative marginalization of women from the labor force.

This imbalance created a very high dependency on migrant labor to Jordan. As of the late 1970s, the government introduced policies favoring the immigration of unskilled and semiskilled professionals. Jordan thus became a labor recipient while continuing to export its skilled workers. Immigrants were mostly men from Egypt and Syria, with a steady growth of female Asian labor. In 1984, 80 percent of the 153,519 registered foreign workers originated from Egypt, and 13 percent from Southeast Asia.

Policy interventions, in particular through the development of labor laws, segmented the labor market into two independent sectors. One sector was reserved for nationals and provided relatively high wages and employment stability both in the private and public sectors. However, its development and maintenance depended on the revenues the state derived from remittances. The other sector (agriculture, construction, and services) was dominated by foreigners, characterized by low wages, high turnover, and almost no legal protection for workers.

This is why labor migration to Jordan cannot be seen as direct replacement migration. Foreign migrant workers did not take the place of skilled Jordanian expatriates but of unskilled nonmigrants who experienced a professional upward mobility, leaving agriculture and moving from rural areas to the cities, and contributing to the growth of the capital, Amman. The proportion of Egyptians among agricultural workers in the Jordan Valley reached 87 percent in 1986.

It was again the ideology of Pan-Arabism that provided a rationale for allowing almost unconditional emigration from neighboring Arab states. Residency of Syrians, Egyptians, and others was not subject to a permit until 1984, and the constraints of inter-Arab relations prevented the Jordanian authorities from expelling those who illegally entered the labor market.

Jordanian private-sector entrepreneurs thus always had cheap labor at hand: in the mid-1980s, undocumented, overwhelmingly Arab workers were estimated to be double or triple the number of registered foreign laborers.

By comparison, the number of non-Arab irregular foreign workers has always been negligible due to strict visa regulations and to the "kafala" system introduced in the labor law. This system of sponsorship tightly binds workers to their employers by making the latter legally responsible for the former. It also makes a worker's stay conditional on a nominal work contract, thus preventing any professional mobility and long-term social integration.

Migrants under this system, which leaves the door open to abuse and slave-like work conditions, are mainly female domestic workers from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and, more recently, Malaysia and Indonesia.

As of the mid-1980s, a drastic decline in workers' remittances and the decrease in the level of assistance to Jordan by oil-producing countries, both related to slumping oil prices, led to an increase in Jordan's external debt.

The debt, in turn, prompted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to impose a structural adjustment plan that required Jordan to reduce public spending. This entailed cutting social benefits and lifting subsidies on basic goods while freezing salaries in the public sector (which employed 50 percent of the labor force). The middle class was most affected and experienced impoverishment.

In other countries, similar structural adjustment plans have been seen to prompt a recession in specific sectors of the economy that employ foreign labor. This did not happen in Jordan.

Continuing to employ cheap foreign labor, with almost no social cost, saved the country the need to keep investing in social infrastructure such as care centers for young children or the elderly, who were nursed by underpaid Asian maids at home. In addition, it allowed the Jordanian elite, the main employer of foreign labor, to maintain a standard of living equivalent to that of the previous prosperous period.

The segmentation of the labor market and foreign labor have therefore served a political purpose by helping to defuse social struggles and maintain the stability of Jordan in times of economic crisis.

Changes and Continuities since the Gulf Wars

Access to employment opportunities outside national borders has stabilized the country politically and allowed for economic growth. Yet the country some deemed a miracle of Middle Eastern economic development in the 1970s and 1980s all but collapsed in the 1990s because of its extreme reliance on labor migration.

Return migration from the Gulf started on a significant scale in the late 1980s but was dramatically accelerated by the forced "repatriation" of Jordanian workers in the wake of the 1990-1991 Gulf War. The conflict in fact presented oil-producing states with an opportunity to complete a process they had been pursuing for some time, that of nationalizing their labor forces.

A sudden influx of 300,000 forced "returnees" increased the total Jordanian population by 10 percent. It exerted heavy pressure on infrastructure, public services, and housing, thus destabilizing the system of resource and capital redistribution. It hastened the demise of the economic system upon which a welfare state had been established. By 1993, remittances had fallen to the point of accounting for only 10 percent of GDP.

The term "returnees" is misleading. For many, who were of Palestinian origin, forced migration to Jordan did not mean returning to a homeland. They were second- or third-generation residents of Gulf states, whose only tie to Jordan was the passport they held. They or their parents had already experienced displacement in 1948 and/or 1967. In the Gulf, most were professionals or skilled laborers and enjoyed a high standard of living.

The Jordanian unemployment rate peaked at 25 percent in 1991, a time when the domestic labor market was shrinking because neither the public nor the private sector could grow anymore based on the indirect revenues from the oil economy. The returnees experienced difficult incorporation into the labor market, if not dire professional downfall.

As of the mid-1990s, a temporary regional stability was reestablished following a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, and a new channel of Jordanian emigration to the Gulf was reopened for highly skilled, mobile individuals such as accountants, computer experts, lawyers, managers, and academics. Also, larger numbers began migrating and settling in industrialized countries such as Canada, the United States, and Germany. For the first time, the perception of brain drain loomed.

In 2008, it was estimated that roughly 350,000 Jordanians were working abroad. Remittances exceeded export income and amounted to just under US\$4 billion, or 20 percent of the country's GDP according to the World Development Indicators of the World Bank.

Meanwhile, Jordan's demand for foreign labor has not declined. Such labor has been used to reduce production costs in strategic sectors such as agriculture, construction, the hotel business, and the new Qualified Industrial Zones, which have remained viable and even competitive at the regional and international levels. Migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, have kept coming mainly from Egypt, Syria, and Southeast Asia.

To control and contain the ever more numerous undocumented foreign laborers, the Jordanian authorities introduced only limited measures, such as new requirements for residence permits and limited rounds of arrests and expulsions. In 2008, the official number of foreign workers was 303,325. Undocumented laborers were estimated to number over 300,000.

The 1991 Gulf War also inaugurated the large-scale out-migration of Iraqis prompted by a mixture of economic hardships and fear of persecution by their country's regime. Between 1991 and 2002, at least 400,000 Iraqis settled in Western countries through asylum or migration regimes. Large numbers also found employment in the Gulf, Yemen, and Libya.

Most transited through Jordan, the only state maintaining an open border with Iraq, whereas maybe up to 300,000 were in the country in the late 1990s, according to estimates UNHCR published at the time. Jordan is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and it has offered Iraqis neither asylum nor easy economic integration.

The latest influx from Iraq followed the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein and the insecurity that accompanied the American-led occupation. Flows peaked in 2004, that is, before the Jordanian government stopped granting universal entry to Iraqis at borders in 2005 and introduced an advanced visa system in 2007.

In practice, entry regulations have meant that Jordan has managed to curb in large part the flow of refugees fleeing large-scale sectarian violence that erupted in Iraq as of 2006. The regulations also have kept at bay less wealthy Iraqis. As a result, the majority of refugees have turned to neighboring Syria.

Although Iraqis who have relocated in Jordan are overwhelmingly members of the educated upper and middle classes, many have faced a drastic drop in social and economic status due to protectionist policies that make labor permits difficult to obtain for foreign professionals in Jordan if they are not registered with UNHCR.

A cumulative number of 50,000 Iraqis registered with the UN Refugee Agency between 2003 and 2010. Of this group, one-third have been referred for refugee resettlement to Western countries, mostly the United States.

According to interviews with government officials, at least 25,000 Iraqis have managed to gain residence rights in Jordan, mostly as investors, and as of 2010, many commute between Baghdad, where they work, and Amman, where their families have more security. An unknown number of Iraqis remain undocumented.

Especially in its appeal for international assistance, the Jordanian government estimates the number of Iraqis in the country to be a constant 500,000 since 2007. Independent surveys by the Norwegian foundation Fafo and the Jordanian National Center for Human Rights based on reliable methodologies and data point to a much lower number, between 150,000 and 200,000 including temporary visitors and transit migrants.

The future of the Iraqi community in Jordan will be greatly determined by what takes place in Iraq in coming years, by the relaxation or not of the entry requirements in Jordan, and by possibilities of integration in the labor market via work permits. Whatever turn Jordanian policies take, secondary migration to Western countries is likely to continue for some time via family reunification and other channels such as immigration and asylum schemes.

Finally, a recent significant trend of migration to Jordan has come from the West Bank. Since the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in September 2000 and the subsequent Israeli reoccupation of the largest part of their territory, some 200,000 Palestinians from the upper-middle class and middle class have relocated to Jordan or traveled through the Amman airport to emigrate to a third, generally Western, country.

These Palestinians, who hold Jordanian passports, saw their rights and entitlements restricted when Jordan officially severed its administrative ties with the West Bank in 1988.

In particular, a policy of "Jordanization" of the labor force was implemented at the time to contain the presence of Palestinians who were residents of the Israeli-occupied West Bank but who looked for employment on the East Bank. This has made the long-term stay of the latest wave of Palestinian immigrants extremely precarious — not only in economic terms, but also legally, as they may face deportation when their temporary passports expire and the authorities refuse to renew them.

Conclusion: Migration Management Policies

Jordan is a very small country with limited natural resources and with a history marked by sudden extreme reconfigurations of territory and population. Its economy is intertwined with neighboring

ones, be they Palestine's or that of oil-producing states such as Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Jordan's economy is therefore vulnerable to the violent political conflicts that have affected these countries. Direct and indirect policy interventions to manage migration by state actors and international organizations have been made within these unstable socioeconomic or sociopolitical domestic and regional contexts.

In addition, both labor migration and refugee reception policies have been heavily determined by political and economic considerations connected to projects of state-building and economic growth within the ideological context of Arab nationalism. The minimal institutional framework that has been established to manage these migration trends or to provide relief and protection to refugees has largely been left to international organizations, such as UNRWA for the Palestinians and UNHCR for the Iraqis.

The Jordanian government, for its part, originally limited its policies to placing strict controls on the entry and stay of non-Arab labor migrants, and to tapping the remittances of Jordanian workers abroad. However, policies have shifted in the last decade toward selecting Arab migrants too, favoring those who possess capital to invest in Jordan.

Yet, despite recently introduced entry regulations from the West Bank and Iraq, the number of what can be considered forced migrants from neighboring countries has remained high. Jordan is currently unwilling to absorb these migrants either as labor migrants or as refugees. In particular, the government keeps resisting pressures by UNHCR to become an asylum country for non-Palestinian refugees, arguing it wants to see the Palestine question solved first.

Migrants often continue their journey through irregular channels with the result that Europe, the main destination of this migration, exerted pressure on Jordan as early as the 1990s, accompanied by financial incentives, to control this flow. Jordan is now more strictly policing its borders at exit, either at the Amman airport or at the border with Syria (a step on the irregular migration route overland across Turkey or via the Mediterranean).

However, there are limited immediate prospects for large numbers of either Palestinians or Iraqis to return home from Jordan. This presents an impasse: Jordan is unable to absorb new migrants without endangering its social balance; migrants are unwilling to return home and only a limited number are able to move on via regular or irregular channels.

One way of meeting this challenge has been to open resettlement options for Iraqi refugees in Western countries. More secondary-migration options and international development assistance might be needed to help Jordan cope with what appears to be recurrent flows of involuntary migrants.

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