Migrant Workers in the Middle East: Introduction

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Transnational labor migration is one of the most visible features of our globalizing world. The International Organization for Migration estimates that there are 214 million migrant workers crossing national borders in the world today. Migration both in and to the Middle East constitutes an important part of this movement of laborers and has deep roots. In the mid-fifteenth century, workers across a broad spectrum of occupations, including stevedores, boatmen, and bakers, trekked from areas in eastern and central Anatolia to the new imperial Ottoman capital, Istanbul, where they lived and worked for months and even years. Workers from outside the Middle East also have been part of the fabric of life in the region for several centuries, the slave trade from sub-Saharan Africa, which long supplied labor for a variety of purposes, being one of the most notable. Migrant workers took on new significance in the twentieth century, especially after the oil price hikes of 1973. Today the nations on the Arabian Peninsula, the destination for most workers, have the highest ratio of migrants to locals in the world.

Some of this migration is within the region itself. Ahmet İçduygu and Deniz Sert, in their contribution to this issue, document the sizable numbers of Turkish workers who have migrated to North Africa and other parts of the Middle East, many as employees of Turkish construction and service firms. Turkish migration to Europe has overshadowed this movement of workers, but in the last five decades it has accounted for about a million workers. Helene Thiollet also describes a substantial flow of workers within the Middle East, which she notes is closely connected to the refugee problem in the region. Several million refugees, the bulk of them Palestinians, form a sizable proportion of the labor force in the area. Since the 1950s the movement of workers has also integrated the region and helped to define a unified Arab zone. In this process, Eritreans, on the western side of the Red Sea, came to be defined as Arabs and were extended virtually free entry into Saudi Arabia. For Thiollet, this is an example of the labor-receiving states of the Middle East using migration as a form of diplomacy.

For several decades South and Southeast Asia have been the most important source of workers from outside the region, and large numbers of both skilled and unskilled laborers circulate from their homes to the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia. The migration from the Indian subcontinent began in the late nineteenth century and emerged from longstanding commercial and

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 79, Spring 2011, pp. 4–6
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doi:10.1017/S0147547910000268

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

religious networks, as Stefan Tetzlaff shows in his contribution to the issue. The Indian presence grew dramatically with the British invasion of Mesopotamia, then a province of the Ottoman Empire, which was spearheaded by troops from the Indian Army, who were accompanied by Indian workers. Tetzlaff also shows that the British Indian state mediated migration to Mesopotamia, which was a new destination for Indian workers. The Indian nationalist movement opposed the emigration of laborers under contracts of indentured servitude, which the British had to take into account when formulating migration policy. Similarly, Iraqi authorities had great power to influence the inflow of Indians, which they began to wield after the successful Iraqi revolt of 1920, and over the following decade, the number of Indian migrants in Iraq fell sharply.

The politics of migration to the region—and the critical role that states play—is a major theme in several of the articles that follow. While the push-pull models of economists may help explain the direction of the movement of people, they cannot explain when and why it takes place. From the 1970s, as Robyn Rodriguez shows, the Philippines became a major source of migrant workers to the Middle East because the state used the export of its citizens as a development strategy: Remittances by migrants would help the balance of payments situation, and foreign employment would reduce unemployment at home. Through a number of government agencies—the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, the Technical Education and Skills Development Administration, and a network of embassies and consulates—the Philippine state has been intimately involved in the recruitment and deployment of Filipinos and Filipinas overseas. Rodriguez labels the Philippines' political order a "labor brokerage" state.

States on the receiving end of migrants are no less active in trying to regulate the flows of those seeking work and economic sustenance. Oded Korczyn presents a poignant picture of the exercise of bureaucratic power in which the border control officers of the Israeli Interior Ministry appeal to the inflexible logic of laws and rules to deport sojourners, a category that Korczyn uses to encompass migrant workers and asylum seekers, whether documented or undocumented. The framework of laws and rules is what enables the state officials to enact great suffering and pain but continue to view themselves as moral beings, he argues.

Alongside this politics from above, a vibrant politics from below has been no less critical in shaping the lives of migrant workers. John Chalcraft describes the vigorous activism, marked by strikes and other forms of overt action, of outside labor in the Arabian Peninsula, especially those from other Arab countries, in the 1950s and 1960s. Inspired by the Arab nationalist and republican and leftist ideas of the time, these workers championed transnational labor solidarity. With this paper, Chalcraft also questions the conventional assumption that migrant workers fragment labor unity.

Robyn Rodriguez also documents the dramatic transnational activism that migrants from the Philippines have spawned. In 1996 grassroots groups of Philippine migrant workers around the world formed a coalition,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Migrante-International, which in 2009 intervened successfully in support of a labor dispute with an employer in Saudi Arabia. Migrante's Middle East affiliate pressured the Philippine embassy to support the rights of workers, and in Manila it pressured the state to not recruit workers for the Saudi employer and to ensure that the workers' contractual claims were met.

Migrante-International operates with an expanded definition of citizenship. Citizenship, and the passport of which it is proof, has been and continues to be used to restrict the movement of workers. Iraq in the 1930s explored the expulsion of all foreign workers who did not adopt Iraqi citizenship, and Israel uses the category of noncitizen to discipline sojourners. Migrant workers from the Philippines now appeal to their state to defend their rights as citizens, even if they are employed outside the country, which points to a reconfiguring of the concept of citizenship in a globalized world.

Citizenship figures in a third sense in this issue and is found in the essay by Neha Vora on Indian migrants in Dubai, a state that does not allow any possibility for migrants to become citizens, or even permanent residents. Yet Indian businessmen, many of them long-term residents who are critical to the functioning of the Dubai economy, enjoy neoliberal economic freedoms from which they have profited enormously, but which subject Indian migrant workers to highly exploitative conditions of employment. In this way these Indian elites are invested in the maintenance of the political status quo, becoming "unofficial citizens," in Vora's language.

The consequences of this substantial flow of migrant workers are felt not only in the Middle East but also in the regions from which the laborers originate, an issue explored by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella in their study of Kozhikode, or Calicut, on the southwest coast of India. Trade and Islam have long connected Kozhikode to the Persian Gulf and are critical for Muslim identity in the region. The links were deepened with the migration of workers to the Gulf from the 1970s oil boom, which led to the transfer of capital, new economic practices—particularly with respect to labor—and religious orientations to Kozhikode. Globalization has transformed life in southwestern India, not only through the expansion of markets but through the mediation of migrants who come into contact with and then transfer new ideas and practices.

What is at stake with this special issue? The readers of *International Labor and Working-Class History* are asked to consider the importance of South-South relations in the twentieth-century global order and the importance of these connections for a global labor history. We also ask our readers to recognize the creativity of these migrants in the Global South as they grapple with the transnational reality of their lives. Despite shocking and highly exploitative conditions of work, migrant workers have resisted and continue to resist both state and capital. Finally, we point our readers to the most fundamental fact of twentieth-century global labor history: There are many more who seek work than there are jobs for them. For at least a century there has been a global crisis of employment. While long confined to the South, it now appears to be becoming the norm in the North as well.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000268 Published online by Cambridge University Press