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► **To cite this version:**

Mohamed Elsayeh. Circular and return migration of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya. International Migration, 2024, 10.1111/imig.13334 . hal-04694950

**HAL Id: hal-04694950**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04694950v1>**

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# Circular and return migration of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya

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## Abstract

The return of Egyptian migrants to Egypt following the onset of crisis in Libya in 2011 raises important questions about their classification as “returnees.” This article demonstrates the impact of the crisis on Egyptians' livelihoods. Field research conducted in Egypt in 2016 reveals that, at least in part, from 2011 onwards Egyptians were engaged in circular migration to and from Libya as a livelihood strategy because of failed reintegration in Egypt. The Egyptian government, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations provided varied levels of protection and assistance in evacuating migrants; however, they lacked awareness about returnees' socio-economic needs. Egyptians were largely unsupported by state and non-state institutions upon their return and therefore remained reliant on families and social networks. Initiatives aimed at providing aid to returnees, such as those introduced in Ghana and Niger, were generally absent in the Egyptian context. The absence of support had other unintended consequences, including increased levels of domestic violence and reduced educational opportunities for children in households hosting returnees.

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## INTRODUCTION

Egypt remains to be one of the top remittance recipient countries. Indeed, in 2023 alone, the inflow of international remittances recorded was USD 19.5 billion, making Egypt the top remittance recipient in the Middle East and North Africa region (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2024, 33) and the sixth in the world in 2023, according to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (State Information Service, 2024). Libya has particularly been a primary destination for Egyptian migrant workers. Of the approximately 6.5 million Egyptians abroad prior to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, 2 million resided in Libya alone and 2.2 million (one-third of the total number of Egyptians abroad) resided in Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain (Zohry, 2013, 48). Most Egyptian migrant workers (96.6%) in other Arab States were reportedly male, in contrast to Egyptian migrant workers in Europe, to which emigration from Egypt was reported to be “fairly gender-balanced,” with 58.1 per cent being male (Aghazarm et al., 2012).

The migration of Egyptian nationals to Libya, nonetheless, is not a recent phenomenon. The Egyptian state organised the migration of Egyptian teachers, bureaucrats and other professionals during the era of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952–1970) as part of a policy of secondment that aimed to “cater to the educational and bureaucratic staffing needs” of a newly independent Libya (Tsourapas, 2015). Under President Anwar el-Sadat (1970–1981); however, Egypt-Libya relations deteriorated, which prompted Libya's deportation of Egyptian migrants and the Egyptian government's ban on travel to Libya (Tsourapas, 2015, cited in Zampagni et al., 2017, 19). Yet during President Hosni Mubarak's administration, Egyptians started returning to Libya by 1989, even before the Four Freedoms Act allowing freedom of movement between Egypt and Libya was signed a year later (Pesha & Mada Masr, 2015, cited in Zampagni et al., 2017, 19–20). The circular migration of Egyptian nationals to and from Libya was in fact common. Indeed, “fieldwork conducted with returnees in Egypt highlighted the circular migratory pattern, which was reflected in regular visits [to Libya] from the 1990s and early 2000s until the crisis [of 2011]” (Sadek, 2019, 16).

In Libya, protests against Muammar Gaddafi in February 2011 resulted in political unrest that eventually led to upheaval. The crisis had a direct and significant impact on these Egyptian migrant workers because Libya was a favoured destination for them given its attractive job opportunities in the construction, agriculture and trade sectors. Before the crisis, Egyptian migrants in Libya numbered approximately one million, constituting the largest group of migrants before 2011 (IOM, 2011, cited in Sadek, 2019, 8).

Following the eruption of violence in February 2011, 790,000 migrant workers and their families fled Libya, crossing the border into neighbouring countries. This crisis-induced displacement was considered the worst witnessed in the Middle East and North Africa region “since the first Gulf War, when 250,000 migrants were evacuated” and “one of the largest migration crises in modern history” (Aghazarm et al., 2012, 5). The International Organization for Migration and border officials documented 263,554 individuals (including 89,681 [Third Country Nationals] and 173,873 Egyptians) crossing the Libya-Egypt border by January 2012 (Aghazarm et al., 2012, 12).

During the return process, Egyptian migrants encountered risky land journeys. Many crossed the border to Tunisia on foot or by bus or car, sometimes relying on smugglers. Some attempted to travel by sea. Around 63,000 Egyptian nationals arrived in Tunisia between 28 February and 3 March 2011 (Aghazarm et al., 2012, 12). Following the arrival of an increasing number of migrants at the border, air and sea evacuations to Egypt took place. During their journeys to Tunisia, Egyptian migrants were charged considerably high fares and their mobile phones and money were confiscated. Prior to their repatriation, Egyptian nationals spent up to 4 days in border camps managed by the Tunisian government and many different organisations. Land travel to Egypt similarly presented significant risks because migrants were forced to pay bribes to militias, their belongings were confiscated and vehicles in which they travelled were shot at.

In addition to these challenges, Egyptian migrants also faced significant difficulties upon return, in large part due to lack of opportunity in their home communities. Field research conducted in Egypt reveals that, at least in

part, from 2011 onwards Egyptians engaged in a form of circular migration to and from Libya as a livelihood strategy due to limited employment opportunities and assistance from institutional stakeholders in Egypt (Zampagni et al., 2017, 35–53), pointing to a lack of prospects for reintegration. Different stakeholders provided varied levels of protection and assistance during the evacuation process, however, there was a lack of assistance catering to and awareness about returnees' socio-economic needs following return. Many returnees had to rely on families and social networks for support, and this placed an added burden on households and on returnee-hosting communities.

It is safe to argue that the many cases of Egyptian circular migrants who migrated to and from Libya before, during and after the crisis have been overlooked. Existing research has commonly focused on Egyptian migrant workers from Libya as returnees, while simultaneously highlighting that they began returning to Libya following the fall of the Gaddafi regime (Hafez & Ghaly, 2012; Zohry, 2011, 2013). Although Egyptian migrants were exposed to crisis-induced insecurity in Libya as a result of widespread racial discrimination and xenophobia that intensified during the crisis, it became common for those who returned to Egypt to re-migrate to Libya, as the field research conducted has revealed. Thus, I argue in this article that although Egyptian nationals fleeing Libya have generally been considered “returnees” in the literature, this classification is problematic because in many cases their crisis-induced migration has been circular in nature. Moreover, analysis that excludes this form of mobility misses out on important nuances relevant to Egyptians' experiences and lessons for crisis-displaced persons more generally.

This article is organised into five subsequent sections. The first section problematises the use of the term “returnees” to refer to all Egyptian migrants who had returned from Libya at the onset of the crisis and places the article within a broader theoretical framework. Next, I discuss both the push and pull factors that have driven the migration of Egyptian nationals to Libya before and after the crisis as well as the challenges they faced while in Libya prior to their return. The third section of this article focuses on migrants' post-return experiences and the impediments they faced. The fourth section discusses the lack of assistance migrants received upon return, and how this prompted consideration of re-migration as a livelihood strategy. I conclude the article by highlighting the ways in which migrants' difficulties during the return process, including their failed reintegration, contributed to circular migration patterns. I also briefly discuss the implications this has for future research and policymaking.

This article is based on focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with Egyptian nationals who had been caught in the crisis in Libya. In 2016, we consulted respondents during 4 months of fieldwork conducted in three Egyptian governorates—namely Fayoum, Minya and Sohag. The sites selected were among the governorates from which the highest number of Egyptian nationals had migrated to Libya. A gatekeeper in each governorate facilitated the recruitment of field research participants, who were men primarily under the age of 35 with basic education. The selection targeted those who had migrated to Libya at least twice to seek work. Fifty-three Egyptian migrant workers participated in the focus group discussions in the three governorates, from which 15 were selected for in-depth interviews. Stakeholder interviews were also conducted with relevant governmental entities, international and inter-governmental organisations, including United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations and experts.

## EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WORKERS CAUGHT IN LIBYA: “RETURNEES” OR “CIRCULAR MIGRANTS”?

Graziano Batistella (2018) rightly points out that there are several forms of return due to the different types of migration and the variety of reasons behind migration decisions. Indeed, it is a prevalent misconception in policy discussions and planning to view return migration as a uniform phenomenon. Important nuances should be taken into account when studying the return of diverse populations: those displaced by political or environmental crises;

those who are forced to return home on the basis of their irregular status; students; refugees or asylees; short-term returnees for work or health reasons; and permanent or temporary migrants.

Before further problematising the classification of Egyptian migrants returning from Libya as "returnees," it is helpful to examine their return through the lens of transnationalism, according to which "return does not constitute the end of a migration cycle" (Cassarino, 2004, 262). The contrasting perspective put forward by Cassarino on transnationalism on the one hand, and the structural approach to return migration on the other, is particularly relevant. According to Cassarino, the structural approach "argues that return is not solely analysed with reference to the individual experience of the migrant, but also with reference to social and institutional factors in countries of origin" (Cassarino, 2004, 257). In this light, return and reintegration are predominantly based on the financial and economic resources that migrants are able to bring back home (Cassarino, 2004, 257). Conversely, transnationalism considers that "returnees prepare their reintegration at home through periodical and regular visits to their home countries. They retain strong links with their home countries and periodically send remittances to their households" (Cassarino, 2004, 262).

The case of Egyptian migrant workers returning to Egypt in the midst of Libya's crisis makes an important theoretical contribution to the literature on return migration. It notably raises complex and interesting questions regarding the classification of Egyptian migrant workers returning from Libya as "returnees." This is because return may occur on an "occasional, seasonal or temporary" basis depending on circumstances following return, such as the political situation in the country of origin, job mobility and career advancement, among others (Changgui & Zweig, 1995, cited in Pailey, 2016, 2; Sinatti, 2011, cited in Pailey, 2016, 2). In the Egyptian case, return was complicated by all these circumstances, considering that Egypt had itself recently undergone its own revolution overthrowing the government of Hosni Mubarak. The country's political transition yielded uncertainty for returnees, including the reality of high youth unemployment (Abdel Ghafar, 2016). Indeed, some "returnees" we consulted revealed that their re-migration to Libya was due to limited to no economic opportunities in Egypt.

As the literature outlines, "permanent return after the first [migration] trip seems to be determined by family reasons, a failed migration attempt but also the fulfilment of a savings target" (Vadean & Piracha, 2009, 2). However, in the Egyptian case, the unplanned return was unsustainable by these standards, considering that many migrants dipped into or lost their savings during the return process. Moreover, return migration, as Vadean and Piracha (2009, 7) highlight, "seems to be more common among members of relatively richer households" and many return migrants "are target savers originating from middle or upper middle-class families."

In terms of migrant backgrounds, the case of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya is in line with research demonstrating that male migrants and migrants with a lower level of education are more likely to be circular migrants (Constant & Zimmermann, 2011, cited in Constant et al., 2012). Whereas return migrants are ostensibly more likely to be of a higher socio-economic status, "circular migrants are members of poorer and relatively larger families" (Vadean & Piracha, 2009, 7-8). Vadean and Piracha (2009, 2) add that, in comparison with return migrants, circular migrants are more likely to "originate from rural, less developed areas." Indeed, research has shown that the majority of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya are men with basic education (Sadek, 2019, 12).

Constant, Nottmeyer and Zimmermann (2012, 4) define circular migration as the "systematic and regular movement of migrants between their homelands and foreign countries typically seeking work." The experience of many Egyptian nationals we consulted, however, suggests a broadening of our understanding of circular migration, since their patterns of movement were not always systematic and regular. While some had indeed returned and could be considered "returnees," others were involved in less systematic and regular circular migration patterns and depended on opportunity structures in place, which could be erratic considering the post-revolution eras of both Egypt and Libya. Circular migrants continued to return to Libya as a livelihood strategy despite the risks involved, in particular politically motivated violence and widespread xenophobia against Egyptians in Libya.

Considering that Egyptians' circular migration was not necessarily systematic and regular in all cases, one may argue that this case study demonstrates challenges in measuring circular migration. Many respondents in our study reported having "been to Libya for two or more visits" (Sadek, 2019, 12). Therefore, while some may have

re-migrated once, others commonly re-migrated several times seeking work. Highlighting Egyptians' circular patterns of migration to and from Libya and the ways in which the crisis in Libya made their migration more circular in nature, Sadek (2019, 16) explains that "many have even attempted or successfully gone to Libya after 2011 and had to return with the second wave of violence in 2015 that witnessed events such as the beheading of Egyptian Copts in Libya by the Islamic State." Thus, in post-revolution Libya, despite risks, the circular migration of Egyptian nationals continued unabated.

As I demonstrate in this section, circular migration is clearly differentiated from "eventual permanent return migration" (Constant et al., 2012, 5) in terms of both its characteristics and the characteristics of migrants engaged in each form of mobility. In the literature on the subject, Egyptian migrant workers who had returned from Libya have usually been referred to as "returnees." However, based on the analysis presented in this article, I argue that this does not allow for the nuance of circular migration as evidenced in the Egyptian case. In the next section, I develop this argument further by first examining migrants' return from Libya and the factors that contributed to their circular mobility.

## LIBYA AS A DESTINATION FOR EGYPTIAN MIGRANTS

Migration to Libya has been a desirable goal for many young Egyptians because travel costs are affordable and living conditions in Libya are relatively favourable (Sadek, 2019, 16). The ease of access and low costs of migration to Libya relative to the high costs of migration to Gulf States has made Libya an attractive destination for Egyptian migrant workers. The portion of the income paid to sponsors in Saudi Arabia under the *kafala* system, for example, as well as the less favourable exchange rate in Saudi Arabia in comparison with Libya, made the latter a more favourable destination for Egyptian migrant workers. One Egyptian returnee who had worked in both Saudi Arabia and Libya explained his reason for migrating to Libya, particularly in relation to the *kafala* system:

In Saudi [Arabia] you're under the *kafala* system. Your visa is in someone else's name. In Libya you are more free, you work daily. [...] If you travelled to another place, like Qatar or Saudi Arabia, you would not be able to pay your debts.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

Significantly, the cost of migration to Libya from Egypt continued to be low, relative to migration to Gulf States, during and after the crisis. I argue that the low cost of migration to Libya has facilitated the circular or repeat migration of Egyptian migrant workers before, during and after crisis. Although there are assumptions that distance travelled is not always a good indicator of affordability, poor households may still find migration across short distances particularly costly (Black & Collyer, 2014). Indeed, these same distances (both from Libya to Egypt and within Egypt) were significantly more costly to cover during the crisis, as noted in my introduction. Moreover, due to the limited assistance they received upon return, Egyptian "returnees" from Libya often relied on family members for financial support. Nonetheless, the cost of migration has not limited the ability of Egyptian circular migrants to return to Libya since the country offered higher income opportunities which increased the flow of remittances to Egypt.

For some Egyptians who returned home, the priority was to re-migrate to Libya despite their experiences of xenophobia and discrimination before and during the crisis. Moreover, the loss of jobs due to employers leaving Libya, rather than insecurity, was a primary reason for return to Egypt (Sadek, 2019, 21). Literature suggests that the inability to work, coupled with exclusion from host communities, can push migrants to leave destination countries with higher standards of living (Sydney, 2019). Yet, despite being subjected to ill-treatment in Libya, Egyptian migrant workers still engaged in a form of circular migration as a livelihood strategy following the outbreak of violence.

## Racial discrimination and xenophobia

Constantly, Nottmeyer and Zimmermann (2012, 13) rightly point out that circular migrants “can be victims of discrimination and xenophobic attitudes” and that “they bear the risk of exploitation due to lack of employment protection, and lack of integration opportunities.” Being subjected to widespread racial discrimination and xenophobia, which intensified as a result of the crisis, however, apparently did not factor prominently into decisions to re-migrate to Libya. This suggests that re-migration became an important livelihood strategy for those migrants without recourse in Egypt. The experiences of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya ought to be considered in order to understand the circumstances under which they migrated: re-migrating to Libya became a priority, despite the tangible risks they faced related to civil unrest, racial discrimination and xenophobia. The case of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya adds to our understanding of the link between xenophobia and situations of crisis, as well as how experiences of xenophobia may not hinder re-migration.

The discrimination and xenophobia faced by Egyptian migrants in Libya stemmed, at least in part, from the perception that they had a role in the Libya crisis. Racial discrimination and xenophobia can be exacerbated or precipitated by the statements and actions of political leaders (Miller, 2018, 3). This became particularly evident after Muammar Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, accused Egyptian migrants of instigating protests in Libya following the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Gaddafi's statements contradicted evidence to the contrary, thus having an adverse impact on Egyptians in Libya.

Discrimination and xenophobia against Egyptian migrants in Libya manifested in physical attacks in the streets and in homes, verbal abuse, and refusal by employers to pay wages after the start of the crisis. One Egyptian returnee summarised his experience with his Libyan employer:

I was working as a contractor for one Libyan and I had my friends work to finish his house. He owed us 8,000 Dinars in total and has been delaying paying them on the basis of excuses. I went to his house and told him I will take my money either by killing you or by being killed. He told me to leave before he shoots me. I resorted to another Libyan to help me. He came with me to my employer and told him that he was projecting a bad image for Egyptians and that he should pay me to pay the other workers. He talked to him in private and later told me to wait for a week and I will be paid. I called the Libyan mediator and he told me to forget about being paid so I realised they were together in this. I had to pay the workers half their pay from my personal pocket so I lost a lot of money after paying all workers.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

While racial discrimination and xenophobia can become exacerbated in the context of political upheaval, as the previous respondent indicates, they are not exclusive to crisis. Sadek (2019) explains that “there was a clear distinction of what ill-treatment entailed before and after 2011.” Field research conducted in Egypt indeed proved that before the crisis, for example, disputes between Egyptian migrants and Libyan employers were common. After 2011, Egyptians were at risk of being killed (Sadek, 2019). Thus, while the previous respondent's predicament may have been common pre-revolution, post-revolution the non-payment of wages was often conducted under threat of violence. This violence only increased in subsequent years with the rise of the so-called Islamic State in post-revolution Libya. According to Delphine Pagès-El Karoui (2015, 4), in 2015 the situation in Libya was dire for Egyptians, including religious minorities:

More than 50,000 Egyptians returned after the decapitation of 21 Coptic (Christian) Egyptians by IS (Islamic State) whose killing was immediately publicised on social media. Egypt responded with retaliatory air strikes against IS, with help from the Emirates. During this period, other Egyptians, many of whom were Copts, were kidnapped or killed, generally by Islamist militias. Egyptian



migrants were thus hostages of regional geopolitics and Copts constituted a doubly symbolic target, both as Christians in a context of sectarian violence, and as Egyptians, in retaliation against their country's policies, being doubly accused by their aggressors of supporting the loyalists in the East of Libya and having ousted the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in July 2013.

While Egyptian migrants in Libya have been specifically targeted amidst politically motivated violence, re-migration to Libya continued to be the most feasible livelihood strategy, despite the significant physical risks it entailed. This was due in particular to the lack of alternative livelihood strategies and failed reintegration in Egypt, which I delve into in the next section.

## RE-MIGRATION AS A RESPONSE TO THE LACK OF REINTEGRATION IN EGYPT

The International Organization for Migration specifies factors that lead to successful reintegration following return. It highlights that reintegration is:

a multidimensional process that requires the re-establishment of economic and psychosocial ties. As such, successful reintegration depends on various factors such as the migrant's time spent abroad as well as his/her personal abilities and resources; the acceptance by his/her family, peers, and community; but also on environmental and structural capacities as well as development and economic opportunities available in the country of origin.

(International Organization for Migration, 2017, 2)

Furthermore, as the International Organization for Migration explains, the sustainability of reintegration that renders the decision to re-migrate one based on choice and not on necessity is achieved when "returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers" (International Organization for Migration, 2017, 3).

In light of this definition, this section focuses on the factors upon return that contributed to Egyptians' re-migration to Libya. Reflecting failed reintegration, the unintended economic and psycho-social consequences of return form an integral part of why migration became circular for Egyptian nationals. Indeed, crisis in Libya had varied socio-economic implications for Egyptian migrants' post-return. Lack of jobs, depression, domestic violence and reduced educational opportunities for children were among the most significant consequences following return to Egypt, especially since families and households were dependent on remittances to meet basic needs. As Hendow (2018) explains, families and communities in countries of origin who have depended on remittances from abroad for shelter, to cover basic needs, repay debts, cover the costs of health care and pay school fees, as well as prepare siblings for marriage, can become severely affected. The return of spouses and other family members from abroad following the loss of income therefore can, and in the Egyptian case did, result in an increased financial burden on households.

Nonetheless, of particular significance in the present case study are social mores around gender roles that had a notable impact on men following return, even though community support was present in areas where "returnees" represented a large share of the population. Male "returnees" admitted feeling ashamed because they could not fulfil Upper Egypt's societal expectations to be the primary breadwinners for their families. They also faced difficulty preparing siblings for marriage through the payment of dowries. Such feelings of inadequacy can make it difficult for migrants to find their place in society following their return (Flahaux, 2017), an issue faced by Egyptian "returnees" to varying degrees.

In the case of Egyptian migrant workers, permanent return to Egypt following the outbreak of violence in Libya was difficult for those who became increasingly unable to support their families because of loss in income. In the

context of their circular migration, it can even be argued that debts incurred from the journey back to Egypt at the onset of the Libyan crisis may have forced more Egyptian migrants who had returned from Libya to eventually re-migrate. This is apparent from accounts provided by Egyptian returnees, one of whom stated that:

I and others in similar circumstances have been in debt for so long to repay the costs of our trip, our return and other things. I still have a sister to prepare for marriage, which is very difficult.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

Loss of income also resulted in the inability to send children to school. In other cases, children had to attend public schools instead of the private schools previously attended, as indicated by this returnee:

I returned with no money at all! Demand for jobs increases with the large numbers of Egyptians returning. [...] Many people were in debt and had to repay the cost of their travel or return. I am now unable to give my children the same pocket money and privileges they used to have. I took my children out of private nursery school and sent them to public ones. I decided to be more creative and went to work as a taxi driver.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

Loss of income, coupled with limited job opportunities in Egypt, forced “returnees” to resort to temporary modes of sustenance. They often became reliant on family members and friends for emergency monetary assistance, as implied by one participant in a focus group discussion:

Work opportunities in the village are only available for one month here and on certain days, if harvesting every year, you would find work during this period 15 days for agriculture and 15 days for farming but the rest of the year no jobs at all.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

Indeed, limited and seasonal job opportunities in rural areas in Egypt have pushed and will arguably continue to encourage young migrant workers to engage in circular migration.

While the unintended economic consequences of return are significant, so too are the social and psychological consequences. Research in rural areas in Egypt with a high number of “returnees” revealed that the loss of income and increased competition for jobs following return had longer-term implications for “returnees” and their families. Spousal violence and depression among “returnees” were common. Psychosocial support for victims of domestic violence was absent. The lack of medical care was another significant issue reported by “returnees,” particularly the shortage of physicians and the inability to cover the costs of private medical treatment. Highlighting the impact of the loss of income following his return, one Egyptian “returnee” admitted to feeling agitated easily by his wife and children:

There are domestic tensions resulting from lack of income. My wife was reluctant to sell her jewellery to help us cover our expenses. But what can we do? [...] I've become less tolerant and more aggressive with her and the children. I am under a lot of pressure. The only way to release it is being violent with the family.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

The adverse economic and psychological effects on the families of “returnees” also meant that families were often unable to provide emotional or psychological support to family members who had returned, inevitably contributing to depression and domestic violence.

Circular migration therefore becomes an important livelihood strategy in the presence of limited resources and a constrained social environment. The desire to re-migrate is an indication that “migrants who experienced a certain failure in their economic and psychosocial reintegration wish to migrate again” (Flahaux, 2017). This can factor into the decision to re-migrate, despite political unrest in countries of destination (Hendow, 2018). Circular migration as a livelihood strategy in the Egyptian case study demonstrates that holistic assistance upon return—taking into account both economic and psychological needs—is crucial for improving reintegration and reducing risky post-return behaviour such as re-migration to countries experiencing unrest. The next section outlines the consequences of limited to no reintegration assistance.

## RESPONSES OF INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS FOLLOWING RETURN

Institutional responses, or lack thereof, to the plight of Egyptian “returnees” had a profound impact on their mobility and (circular) migration processes. In particular, the absence of adequate reintegration initiatives catering for the needs of returning migrants and providing them with services to mitigate the impact of crisis in Libya influenced their decision to re-migrate.

Awareness of the needs of a group is central to the success of institutional responses. Indeed, when assistance was provided, it often did not respond directly to the needs of “returnees” as outlined in the previous section of this article. Highlighting the lack of involvement of institutional stakeholders in Egypt, Zampagni et al. (2017, 53) reiterate that during field research in Egypt “there was also a lack of awareness among the institutional stakeholders interviewed of the gaps in assistance experienced by Egyptian returnees from Libya. This seemed to reflect a lack of involvement with and knowledge of this group.”

The evacuation assistance that Egyptian migrant workers received in Libya at the onset of the crisis was followed by a lack of adequate reintegration programmes following their return to Egypt. “Returnees” interviewed in rural areas in Egypt commonly referred to their deteriorating socio-economic conditions. This made circular migration a more viable livelihood option, as indicated by an Egyptian migrant respondent:

I personally know about ten people who have returned. Even though the security situation in Libya is unstable, we still want to go there because we need to earn an income.

(Egyptian returnee, interviewed by MICIC Research Team in Egypt)

The lack of awareness of the needs of returning migrants and their families, which was apparent in the lack of community stabilisation initiatives (Zampagni et al., 2017, 54), can be said to have pushed those who had returned to re-migrate. “Returnees” in different Egyptian governorates highlighted the lack of assistance from different entities following their return (Zampagni et al., 2017, 53). However, one initiative specifically targeting Egyptian migrants who had returned from Libya in 2015 was the provision by the World Food Programme (WFP) of food vouchers in Sohag, a city with a relatively high number of Egyptian “returnees.” While the WFP originally aimed at reaching 60,000 “returnees,” due to a funding shortfall they were only able to cater to 21,281 (World Food Programme, 2016, 12–13). This was one of the most important immediate interventions by institutional stakeholders given how food insecure most migrant workers were. Yet, it was the only one of its kind and quite limited in scale. Egyptian migrants caught in the crisis in Libya had risked being shot at when they left their homes to buy basic necessities, so food insecurity in Egypt was a carryover from their crisis-induced experiences in Libya. Field research demonstrates that the absence of long-term reintegration programmes in Egypt, compared to initiatives aimed at addressing short-term immediate needs, pushed many “returnees” to engage in circular migration to and from Libya.

The various challenges migrants in crisis situations face upon return to their countries of origin necessitate quick and efficient responses by different stakeholders, but also awareness of migrants' needs that is needed to introduce adequate reintegration programmes. This was particularly significant for Egyptian migrants who

lacked preparedness at the onset of the crisis in Libya. When linking limited reintegration prospects to circular migration, it is helpful to shed light on applicable frameworks, notably the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted in December 2018. This Compact offers opportunities for states to better understand and respond to the needs of migrants caught in crises. In particular, the GCM points towards stronger responses to situations of crisis and the facilitation of reintegration. Hendow (2018) underlines the GCM's emphasis on "broad multistakeholder partnerships to address migration in all its dimensions by including migrants, diasporas, local communities, civil society, academia, the private sector, parliamentarians, trade unions, national human rights institutions, the media and other relevant stakeholders in migration governance." Three of its objectives are of relevance to migrants caught in crisis, including Objective 7 to "address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration," Objective 14 to "enhance consular protection, assistance and cooperation throughout the migration cycle," and Objective 21 to "cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration." Achieving these objectives would not only lead to safer and more dignified return but significantly improve reintegration prospects for Egyptian migrant workers fleeing crises, in Libya and elsewhere.

## CONCLUSION

Research on migrant workers caught in host countries experiencing crises remains underdeveloped. The consequences of the Libya crisis on Egyptian migrant workers point to the fact that, although they are often referred to as "returnees," due to the circumstances they faced upon return, they often resorted to re-migration. Thus, their mobility was more circular in nature. Indeed, this research demonstrates that an analysis of Egyptian migrants in Libya must go beyond a discussion of their crisis-induced "return" to include an evaluation of how they engaged in circular migration as a livelihood strategy.

In fact, although migrants encountered xenophobia and violence prior to and during the crisis in Libya, the country remained an important destination for them. The low costs of migration to Libya, in comparison with the costs of migration to countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, facilitated circular migration. Moreover, our study is in keeping with previous research demonstrating that male migrants, particularly those with lower levels of education, are more likely to engage in circular migration due to limited reintegration prospects in their countries of origin.

The return of Egyptian migrant workers caught in crisis highlights the knock-on effects of loss of livelihoods. The lack of economic opportunities in Egypt made it difficult for "returnees" to find work, which led to depression and spousal violence. Limited educational opportunities for children were also common. Societal expectations of male family members in Upper Egypt further contributed to returnees' precarity, although some "returnees" found support in community structures that helped them take care of basic needs. While research has focused almost exclusively on the adverse socio-economic effects of the crisis in Libya on returnees' livelihoods, further research may be needed on the psychological effects of crisis on migrants and their families.

Despite the serious economic and psychosocial consequences of crisis in Libya, assistance was unavailable to the majority of Egyptian migrant workers, thus pushing many to re-migrate to Libya. Indeed, this case study adds to our understanding of circular migration as a livelihood strategy in the face of crisis and its aftermath, including violence, racial discrimination and xenophobia. As Pagès-El Karoui (2015, 4) explains, "the poorest migrants fairly quickly returned to Libya, despite the Egyptian government's warnings that its citizens should not travel there."

The case of Egyptian migrants returning from Libya demonstrates the importance of a coordinated approach among different stakeholders, including governmental institutions, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations as well as the private sector. Different stakeholders may provide different types of assistance, to varying degrees, making a complementary and holistic approach to assistance upon return necessary for meeting short-term but also long-term needs, notably through adequate reintegration programmes.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This chapter draws on research findings for one of the six case studies of the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) project, the research component of which was implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). Field research for the Libya-Egypt case study in the Egyptian governorates of Cairo, Fayoum, Minya and Sohag was implemented by the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) of The American University in Cairo. Key informant interviews with different stakeholders were conducted in Cairo, in addition to focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with Egyptian returnees from Libya in Fayoum, Minya and Sohag. CMRS remains the owner of the data collected. The author expresses his appreciation to Sara Sadek, who led research for the Libya-Egypt case study in 2016.

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**How to cite this article:** Elsayeh, M. (2024) Circular and return migration of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya. *International Migration*, 00, 1–12. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13334>