

The Difficult Conceptualisation of Circular Migration between the EU and the MENA Region¹

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Abstract. This article examines the extent to which circular migration (CM) can be framed first as a useful migration typology and second as an efficient migration strategy in the MENA region and between the latter and the EU. After discussing the difficult conceptualisation of the circular migration model, it alludes to the inherent discrepancies between the normative, empirical and prescriptive connotations of the concept, then it analyses different examples of circularity in the MENA region and between the latter and the EU. It concludes that since the very concept of circular migration (as proposed by the EU) is still in its exploratory and genesis phases, it is advisable to refrain from conferring an overvalued significance on the CM approach and to consider it rather as a strategy inherent to a more global approach to labour migration in the EU-MENA context. On a more theoretical level, and beyond the specificities of the EU and MENA, this article would suggest caution in the normative use of circular migration. As much contention prevails over circular migration as a migration typology, it would be recommendable that CM be rather considered an option, a policy initiative suitable for some countries more than others, or a strategy to manage migration trends in transnational contexts.

Keywords: *circular migration, EU, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*

I. Circularity in the backdrop of new and shifting migration geographies

As migration dynamics have grown into a confusing interplay of social, human and spatial variables, the frontiers of mobility have become increasingly

¹ The findings of this article are inspired by and based on a series of meetings (Intensive Thematic Session, *The Role of Circular Migration in the Euro-Mediterranean Area* Florence, 17 - 19 October 2007; Conference with Policy-Makers, *Circular Migration: Experiences, Opportunities and Constraints for Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries*, January 27-28, 2008, Florence) and original research on circular migration undertaken in the framework of the Consortium of Applied International Migration (CARIM) at the European University Institute in Florence, www.carim.org.

unfathomable, and the challenges posed by the latter more and more complex.

Circular migration (CM) has lately come to the forefront in migration management as an innovative option that could address intricate migration issues.² At first glance, circular migration seems like a natural scenario deriving from increased patterns of labour mobility and merging geographical boundaries.

Presented as a triple-win situation that could satisfy the supply of labour market in both origin and receiving countries, provide in some cases an alternative to the permanent settlement dilemma in host countries, and mitigate the problem of brain drain afflicting origin countries,³ the CM paradigm has increasingly caught the attention of various international players.

A plethora of literature on migration has tackled in the last decade temporary migration policies and programmes (TMPPs) as migration opportunities that could respond –at least partially – to the challenges of undocumented migration, fill in labour and demographic gaps, and provide new avenues for the international circulation of skills.⁴ Temporary migration schemes are thought *a priori* to consolidate the link between migration and development.⁵ There is also an underlying but unverified assumption that the increase in temporary migration programmes for both highly-skilled and lower-skilled migrants could decrease irregular migration.⁶

In a wider perspective, this interest in temporal migratory trends can be linked

² See for example IOM's report, "World Migration 2005: Costs and Benefits of International Migration," Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2005 ; GCIM's report, "Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action", Geneva: Global Commission on International Migration, 2005; the Abu Dialogue's Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual labour for Countries of Origin and Destination in Asia, "Contractual Labour Mobility in Asia Key Partnerships for Development between Countries of Origin and Destination", 21-22 January 2008.

³ An underlying assumption is that if circular migration schemes are facilitated, there will be less "pressure" for migrants to relocate their families and settle in destination countries. See Graemo Hugo, "Circular Migration: keeping Development Rolling," Migration Information Source, June 2003, 2.

⁴ For a discussion of the interrelationships between temporary migration and development, see for example, Kevin O'Neil, "Using Remittances and Circular Migration to Drive Development," Migration Policy Institute, June 2003, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=133>.

⁵ For a recapitulation on the envisaged benefits of circular migration schemes, see, for example, Steven Vertovec, "Circular Migration: the Way forward in Global Policy", Working Paper, International Migration Institute, 2007, 1-9.

⁶ See European Commission, "Towards a comprehensive European Migration Policy: Cracking down on employment of illegal immigrants and fostering circular migration and mobility partnerships", May 2007, <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/07/678>.

to a new overall approach to migration. In an international order marked by an uneasy relationship between nation-states and transnationalism, priorities have been reformulated. Hence, since migration is an inevitable phenomenon commensurate with security and sovereignty concerns, it is essential to deal with the contentious matters that migration provokes through devising appropriate policy areas. In this respect, promoting temporary and circular migration schemes (TCMSs) seem like an ingenious route to address the thorny issues posed by irregular and permanent migration.

Circular migration should thus be analysed as an offshoot concept derived, on the one hand, from the particularities of the present world, and, on the other hand, from a renewed interest in temporary migration,⁷ stemming from an international drive to restructure migration perspectives in response to various challenges.

These remarks notwithstanding, the CM paradigm has provoked strident controversy. Some scholars are particularly suspicious when it comes to presenting circular migration as a breakthrough in migration management. It is thus emphasised that circular migration “cannot be considered as a new phenomenon”, and should be *conceptualised* and *assessed* against the background of previous temporary programmes involving schemes of circularity.⁸ Others warn against reviving the idea of temporariness in migration, in many ways reminiscent of the European Guest Worker labour programmes of the 1960s and the 1970s.⁹ Hence, in the wake of the Guest Worker programmes, which stirred up diverse controversies concerning the settlement

⁷ It should be emphasised that temporary migration movements have gained considerable importance in the Asian region, in North America, and in the Euro-Mediterranean Zone. See Tanya Basol, “Mexican Seasonal Migration to Canada and Development: a Community-based Comparison,” *International Migration* 41 (2): 3-26, 2003; EU Commission, “an EU Approach to Managing Economic Migration,” Green Paper, Brussels, (January 2005); Graeme Hugo, “Migration in the Asia-Pacific region”, a paper prepared for the Policy Analysis and Research Programme for the Global Commission on International Migration, September 2005; Philip Martin, “Migrants in the Global Labour Market”, Geneva: Global Commission on International Migration, 2005.

⁸ See Ahmet Icduygu, “Circular Migration and Turkey: an Overview of the Past and Present: some Demo-Economic Implications,” *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/10*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_10.pdf, 1. Icduygu argues that Guest Workers programmes in the 1960s between Turkey and Europe were based upon circularity.

⁹ See Abdelrazak, Zekri, “La dimension politique de la migration circulaire en Tunisie,” *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/17*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_17.pdf. For more details on the Western European Guest Worker System”, see Stephan Castles, “Guestworkers in Europe: A Resurrection?” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 40 (Winter 2006): 741-766.



and integration of the workers and their families, there was a general consent in Europe, especially during the 1980s, that temporary labour programmes were not the solution to the region's labour needs.

Today, the concept of temporary migration is being revisited by policy-makers in the view of avoiding previous pitfalls. In its attempt to embark on a new migration path with third countries, for instance, the European Union has put temporary migration labour programmes back into the limelight,¹⁰ and has picked on circular migration as a profitable option for meeting certain human, developmental and economic objectives in both source and destination countries.¹¹ More specifically it has proposed to integrate in national migration frameworks favourable elements that could facilitate the circular mobility of migrants, such as devising more flexible visa regimes in the backdrop of mobility partnerships.¹²

Proposing to probe into the far-reaching implications of circular migration from both conceptual, empirical, and prescriptive angles, this article discusses the difficult conceptualisation of circular migration. Then, it tackles the applicability of CM schemes between the European Union and the MENA region¹³, and within the region itself.

After a critical review of the circular migration concept, the paper picks out examples of circular migration patterns in the region. It asks whether circular migration – as understood by the EU – could evolve into a comprehensive solution in the region,

¹⁰ Focusing on the consolidation of legal migration and the facilitation of temporary migration schemes several EC-funded programmes between EU member states and third countries have been launched. Examples are the Morocco-Spain programme for managing seasonal immigration (January 2006-June 2008), and the Egypt-Morocco-Italy programme for “sharing learning for a better migration life” (December 2006-May 2008).

¹¹ See Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “Migration and Development: Some Concrete Orientations”, COM(2005) 390 final, September 2005; Communication from the Commission, Policy Plan on Legal Migration, COM(2005) 669 final, Brussels, December, 2005; See Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “On Circular Migration and Mobility Partnerships between the European Union and Third Countries”, Brussels, COM (2007) 248, May 2007.

¹² See Hugo Brady, “EU Migration Policy: An A-Z”, Centre for European Reform, February 2008, 10.

¹³ Since delimiting the frontiers of the MENA region has acquired several political connotations over the years, it is important to note that the paper particularly addresses countries that are geographically close to Europe. More specifically it targets Eastern and Southern Mediterranean countries, and does not claim to cover the whole geopolitical construct implied by the MENA region.

and tries to identify the dynamics that enhance or hinder its application. Another fundamental question that the article brings up is whether circular migration policies could be easily integrated into the policy-making migration agendas of MENA governments.

II. The vague notion of circular migration in the EU-MENA context

Circular migration has always existed in unmanaged ways. The current terminological notion refers though more to a managed circularity than to a spontaneous pattern of rotational migration. In order to dispel confusion, migration scholars attempted to frame the concept in various ways. A broad definition defines circular migration “as a continuing, long-term, and fluid movement of people between countries, including both temporary and more permanent movements.”¹⁴

A more concise definition proposes, instead, to define the present notion of circular migration with the following criteria: temporary, renewable, legal, respectful of migrants’ rights, circular in the sense that freedom of movement between source and host countries is not hindered, and managed in such a way as to fill in the gaps of labour demand and supply.¹⁵

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to distinguish circular migration from mere temporary or seasonal migration. In fact, circular migration implies repetitive or repeat migration which is not necessarily temporary or seasonal. Temporary migration could on, the other hand, imply a one-off journey back and forth.¹⁶

Although the concept remains blurred, its fluidity is thought to be intentional. It is thereby safe to define circular migration as flexibly designed repetitive migration patterns between different migration destinations.

The elasticity of the concept does in fact allow for a whole range of choices

¹⁴ Kathleen Newland and Dovelyn Agunias, “How can Circular Migration and Sustainable Return Serve as Development Tools?” background paper for the preparation of the first meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), Brussels, 9-11 July 2007.

¹⁵ Philippe Fargues, “Circular Migration: is it Relevant South and East of the Mediterranean?” CARIM analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/40, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_40.pdf.

¹⁶ Jean Pierre Cassarino, “Patterns of Circular Migration in the Euro-Mediterranean Area: Implications for Policy-Making”, CARIM analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/29, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_29.pdf,

both in attempts to concretise and organise CM projects. Nevertheless, this conceptual imprecision creates stark ambivalence regarding the components, applicability and objectives of circular migration, which in the end undermines the very functionality of the concept.

The lack of consensus over the definitional implications of circular migration in migration research poses various problems. And the profusion of meanings and connotations facilitates neither the elaboration of a common conceptual framework, nor the application of a model either for researchers or for policy-makers. For instance, whereas the EU Communication plays on the notion of return as “one of the key conditions” in circular migration,¹⁷ some scholars studying circular migration on a larger scale emphasise the elements of permanence in circularity and the elements of circularity in permanence.¹⁸ Then we must not forget that circular migration has complex temporal components, but also complex spatial ones which blur the boundaries between circularity and permanence and raise pertinent questions on the finality of CM programs.¹⁹ Furthermore, the term could be classified both as a migration typology, which can be divided into several subtypes,²⁰ a policy initiative launched by specific organisms and as a particular by-product of temporary migration.

¹⁷ See Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “On Circular Migration and Mobility Partnerships between the European Union and Third Countries,” 11. It is important to note that the EU envisages circular migration of third-country nationals already settled in the EU; however, it does not expand further on the elements of permanence and circularity. Thus, in the EU Communication on circular migration (p. 8), the element of permanence is discarded and is perceived as a pitfall that could “defeat” the very “objective” of circular migration.

¹⁸ Circular migration can imply different scenarios among which repeated return visits of permanent migrants to their origin countries, or repeat migration followed by definitive return. See Newland and Agunias, “How Can Circular Migration”, 6.

¹⁹ A pertinent question would be whether circular migration implies the final return of the migrant to the country of origin. For instance, is the circular migrant a permanent migrant in the sense that his/her circularity does not entail his final return to his source country, but to another immigration country? Whereas some scholars consider this scenario as circular migration (Newland and Agunias), EU communications stress the idea of return to the country of origin.

²⁰ See for example Agunias and Newland, “How Can Circular Migration,” 6; Agunias and Newland, “Circular Migration and Development: Trends, Policy Routes and Ways Forward”, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, D.C, 2007.

The rift between the normative and empirical aspects of circular migration: the limitations to conceptualising CM in the EU-MENA context

If the objective is to present circular migration as a broad migration “typology” or as flexible paradigm, then there is an obvious discrepancy between the model and its application in the policy-making field. Circular migration could theoretically imply various repetitive patterns and trends of movements, which do not necessarily correspond to the specific type of managed and selective circularity envisioned by the EU, other international organisms or European countries.²¹ More specifically, whereas in a theoretical perspective, circular migration implies the unconstrained and voluntary movement of people, circular migration programmes as designed by some countries have targeted seasonal migrants who return every year to do some jobs related to agriculture or industry or who are selected according to very stringent criteria.²² This contradiction notwithstanding, there are also divergences over the understanding of circular migration programmes in the European Union. Thus, whereas some EU countries would like to target highly-skilled migrants, others would like to apply circular migration schemes to seasonal migrants.²³

In the EU-MENA context, regardless of matters related to defining circularity, there is no consensus or common vision so far on the different constitutive aspects that would allow the implementation of circular migration. Thus, researchers and policy-makers in the MENA region are ‘still in the dark’ when it comes to framing the model.²⁴

In fact, the understanding of circular migration in respect to the MENA region remains arbitrary, and elements of implementability in the EU-MENA region are still blurred.²⁵ Also, in concrete terms, there is real doubt as to whether the EU

²¹ See Cassarino, “Patterns of Circular Migration.”

²² I refer mainly to temporary migration programs targeting seasonal migrant women who come to Spain for the strawberry-picking season. These women are selected according to very strict criteria that do not necessarily take into consideration humanitarian needs.

²³ Brady, “EU Migration Policy”, 10.

²⁴ See CARIM Coordination Team, Proceedings of two CARIM Meetings on Circular Migration, *CARIM Proceedings 2008/1*, http://cadmus.eui.eu/dspace/bitstream/1814/9912/1/CARIM_Proceedings_08_01.pdf.

²⁵ Common questions raised by policy-makers and researchers from the MENA Region in the two meetings organised on circular migration revolved around the following: Should circular migration be firmly institutionalised or can it entail certain degrees of flexibility? Should its implementation be left to the discretion of national migration policies? How can states ensure the sustainability of circular migration programmes? Does it require new legislation in host and source countries? How should the state approach the social and political rights of

and cooperative third parties have, on the one hand, appropriate policy instruments and, on the other hand, adequate cooperative channels to introduce and jointly monitor circular migration schemes.

Additionally, on a definitional level, circular migration is presented as a flexible albeit regulated migratory pattern with various benefits: mitigating brain drain, favouring the return of human capital and remittance inflows, with migration as an incentive for development.²⁶ However, on the empirical level, there is no clear and conclusive scientific assessment regarding the benefits of circular migration or the optimal ways to institutionalise these practices.²⁷ It is also controversial whether CM could contribute to alleviating the EU's demographic problems and labour shortages.²⁸

One could thus question whether the normative construct of circular migration encompasses elements, which are not even verified empirically. Hence, from a methodological perspective, the rift between the promised potential of circular migration and its unclear empirical outcomes cast doubt on the concept's applicability.

In a wider perspective, before discussing the specifics of CM schemes between the EU and the MENA region, it is also worth mentioning that previous pitfalls regarding provisional labour programmes in Europe have made migration researchers cautious when it comes either to revisiting worn-out migration concepts or conferring on temporary migration, with its various derivatives, a prescriptive formula. Moreover, relying on past normative lessons derived from Guest Worker programmes does not necessarily help avoid old traps, for circular migration today is supposed to operate in different socio-political and economic

circular migrants? To what extent are visas portable given the backdrop of overregulated border controls? And how can states make sure that the migrants' work permits and benefits are portable? Should circular migration research at this point also engage in studying patterns for the return and reintegration of the circular migrants in their origin countries? All these questions point to the fact that circular migration programmes are highly sophisticated schemes that require planning, coordination and monitoring between concerned parties. In the absence of thought out and coordinative measures, circular migration is likely to remain a conjectural issue. See Proceedings of two CARIM Meetings on Circular Migration.

²⁶ See EU Communication on Circular Migration, 8.

²⁷ For observations on the unsure empirical applicability of circular migration, see, for example, Steffen Angenendt, "Circular Migration: a sustainable Concept for Migration Policy," *SWP Comments*, June 2007.

²⁸ Castles, "Guestworkers in Europe", 758-759. Castles also argue that as the European Union will be facing major labour gaps, employers will fight to "retain" qualified temporary migrants, and thus the system of rotation will defeat its purpose.

constellations.²⁹ Thus, migration research based on revisiting former circularity patterns is not transferable to the present international context.

Working Hypotheses

In the light of these reservations, the article argues that there is a discrepancy between the model of circular migration as envisaged by the EU and circular migration as such in the MENA region. In other words, the notion as proposed by the EU is not compatible with the understanding and traditions of circularity existent in the Middle East and North Africa. Whereas circular migration scenarios do exist in the region, political contexts and national prerogatives there do not allow the application of the model as viewed by the EU. The article also demonstrates how the unclear concept, objects and implementation tools of circular migration pose certain problems when it comes to framing the concept in the MENA region.

In order to prove these two claims, the paper first distinguishes between the Middle Eastern and North African contexts since requisites and prospects for circular migration schemes are different in the two cases. Second, it demonstrates that background conditions in the Middle East will more likely hinder the application of CM programmes as visualised by the EU. In North Africa, whilst repeat migration schemes seem at first easier to apply, negative indicators generated by incompatible policy-making stances between the EU and North African countries undermine these schemes.

Despite the distinction that the paper wishes to make between the Middle East and North Africa, it is argued that under present circumstances, circular migration in both contexts cannot develop into a broad migration strategy for reasons revolving around conflicting policy-making agendas. Although pilot projects of temporary migration do take place between the EU and the MENA region and although there are circular movements within the region itself, prospects for a sustainable CM approach as a structural part of a wider global migration approach are slight.³⁰

²⁹ See also concluding remarks elaborated by Icduygu in “Circular Migration and Turkey”, 15.

³⁰ The article differentiates between limited temporary labour and circular migration projects (TLCM) and a structured as well as sustainable circular migration approach in the region. It argues that temporary migration pilot projects are by no means a reflection of the ambitious definition of CM as a “as a continuing, long-term, and fluid movement of people between countries, including both temporary and more permanent movements.” See Newland and

The reasons why this paper looks for differences between the Middle Eastern and Northern African contexts despite the undoubted presence of similarities can be justified as follows: assessing the feasibility of circular migration schemes in the Middle East requires different analytical tools from those enabling the assessment of circular migration schemes in North Africa.

This is due to the excessively turbulent political setting in the Middle East and the Middle Eastern governments' agendas which are more structured by security politics and the conditionalities of ongoing conflicts than by migration-related issues.³¹ It would also be worth pondering whether North Africa's extreme geographical closeness to some EU member states dictates different priorities in policy-making agendas.

Because the unstable Eastern Mediterranean region is deeply marked by ongoing political conflicts, governments tend to rivet their attention on immediate matters that derive from the region's special structure and problems.³² In fact, the Eastern Mediterranean political context dictates the region's migration preoccupations as the latter are strongly influenced by political and security concerns.

On the other hand, due to the relative absence of acute conflicts,³³ political conditions in North Africa seem at first glance to be more favourable to the development of particular CM schemes. Yet, North Africa's geographical closeness to the EU and the strident controversy over the management of irregular migration between the two regions,³⁴ as well as the disagreements over the external dimension of EU's immigration policy³⁵ more easily leads to discordance concerning the rationale and objectives of CM schemes endorsed by the EU.

Agunias, "How Can Circular Migration and Sustainable Return Serve as Development Tools?" Brussels, 9-11 July 2007.

³¹ These conditions do not apply to the Southern Mediterranean countries where the geopolitical context is less affected by ongoing conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

³² Presently, migration agendas in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon are very much concerned with the issue of Iraqi refugees in the wake of the US-led war in Iraq.

³³ It is noteworthy that the region is not devoid of conflicts. We cite mainly political instability in Mauritania, looming struggles between the government and the opposition in Algeria and border problems between Morocco and Algeria over the Sahara issue.

³⁴ For instance, geographical proximity contributes to irregular migration from North Africa to the EU as increased controls on the shortest routes explain the proliferation of alternative and usually longer and more dangerous routes.

³⁵ Ounia Doukoure and Helen Oger, "The EC External Migration Policy: The Case of the MENA countries", *CARIM Research papers 2006/07*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM-RR_2007_06.pdf.

III. The EU vision of circular migration and the particularities of the Middle East

By revisiting the concept of circular migration, the EU would ideally like to privilege *managed circularity* in a migration system and make sure that migration agendas are beneficial to both sending and destination countries. Yet, to what extent does the notion of circular migration find a positive echo in the Middle Eastern context? Are there sufficient in-built tools (agreements, supportive political stances, institutional approaches) in the region to facilitate or pave the way for circular migration? If not, is there a propensity in the region for pro-circular migration policies?

The aforementioned theoretical and empirical reservations towards circular migration apply even more to the Eastern Mediterranean countries for the following reasons:

The first one developed above is of a general nature and hinges on the controversial functionality of the concept and its potential benefits for origin countries.

The second reason revolves around the precarious political setting in the region that is not favourable to a pro-circular migration approach. Prevailing conditions do not enhance or favour a vision of circularity – as described by the European Commission – between the EU and the Middle East or within the region itself.

As noted before, migration agendas in the Eastern Mediterranean have been lately shaped and reshaped by various political and ethnic conflicts.³⁶ Furthermore, on a policy-making level, migration is perceived as essentially a ‘security issue’ closely related to the difficult control of borders, to refugee crises, and to concerns posed by irregular migration.³⁷ If the idea of circular migration, as promoted by the EU, implies regulated and managed movement, more research should be carried out on how CM can be made compatible with the controversies of irregular migration in the region, forced migration patterns induced by conflict-

³⁶ I refer here to the unprecedented wave of Iraqi forced migration after the US-led war in 2003 in Iraq and the Palestinian exodus since 1948.

³⁷ For an account on how security agendas dictate migration issues, see Françoise De Bel Air, “Irregular Migration: the Socio-Political Stakes in Jordan”, CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/78, http://cadmus.eui.eu/dspace/bitstream/1814/10511/1/CARIM_AS%26N_2008_78.pdf.

laden circumstances, and fluid frontiers as well as lax border control.³⁸

The third reason is of a historical nature as circular migration in the region has been spontaneous or informal, and is embedded in societal structures.³⁹ In other words, patterns of circularity have not obeyed institutionalised policy-instruments or top-down approaches of management. These movements remain fluid and unstructured.

The fourth and final reason revolves around the lack of political support for circular migration, on the one hand, and the quasi-absence of in-built policy instruments on the other.⁴⁰ Thus, in many Eastern Mediterranean countries, migration agendas are not well elaborated and are relegated down the policy ladder.⁴¹ In fact, migration agendas seem to be superseded by more overriding security, political, and economic questions closely related to the turbulence of the region and to the various socio-economic difficulties which governments have to remedy.

In addition, against the backdrop of political systems in the Arab world where institutionalism is rather low,⁴² the institutionalisation of circular migration policies seems particularly difficult, and there needs to be some reflection on how informal practices of circular migration could be reconciled with an EU policy-oriented notion of circular migration.⁴³

³⁸ For more information on how fluid borders structure migration agendas in the region, see Fadia Kiwan,

“Les dimensions sociopolitiques de la migration irrégulière au Liban,” *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/51*,

http://cadmus.eui.eu/dspace/bitstream/1814/10095/1/CARIM_AS%26N_2008_51.pdf.

³⁹ Cassarino, “Patterns of Circular Migration.”

⁴⁰ See Proceedings of two CARIM Meetings on Circular Migration.

⁴¹ See Kiwan, “La perception de la migration circulaire au Liban,” *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/14*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_14.pdf.

⁴² See for example Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 36 (2004): 139-153; ; Rex Brynen, Baghat Korany and Paul Noble, eds, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Amin Saikal and Albrecht Schnabel, eds, *Democratization in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003).

⁴³ It is worth mentioning that implementing circular migration schemes does not only hinge on devising pilot projects or signing state-managed bilateral agreements, but on creating private and public incentives in both origin and receiving countries, matching supply and demand needs, elaborating adequate legal instruments as well as attractive private and public return migration incentives. In short, circular migration schemes encompass various elements that must be dealt with in the pre- and post-phases of circularity.

In the following paragraphs, I will detect existing scenarios and the historical precedents of circularity in the region, and analyse their characteristics. I will concentrate particularly on the Lebanese-Syrian, Jordanian and Palestinian cases, and demonstrate that the nature of circular trends does not currently predispose this region to a structural CM approach.

Examples of existing patterns of circular migration in the Middle East: The gap between informal circularity and “circular migration”

Various patterns of quasi-circularity, either historical or spontaneous, characterise the region. These trends remain, however, largely unmanaged, and depend on various socio-political contingencies.

Following a long-standing tradition of repeat migration, patterns of circularity between Syria and Lebanon have been occurring for decades. Especially during the post-war period (1990-2005),⁴⁴ Syrian labour migrants rushed to Lebanon – commonly considered as Syria’s economic hinterland, for temporary or seasonal journeys. However, after the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 and the severance of relations between the two countries, this number has decreased drastically.

During the post-war period, repeat migration has been facilitated by the abolition of visa procedures between Lebanon and Syria. Also, the fact that these back and forth journeys remained, to a certain extent, unmanaged gave an enormous margin of leeway for commuting workers.

It is worth mentioning in this respect that Syrian-Lebanese treaties in economic, labour and cultural sectors have been ratified so as to strengthen cooperation between the two countries, yet none has institutionalised this type of labour migration.

In short, though Syrian-Lebanese labour migration presents elements of circularity and is ingrained in the countries’ historical structures, it remains contingent upon unpredictable political conditions.⁴⁵ For example, after the extension of former President Emile Lahoud’s mandate in 2004 and the adoption of UN Resolution 1559, a special unit was created in the Lebanese Ministry of Labour

⁴⁴ The ratification of the Ta’if treaty in 1990 endowed Syria with Lebanon’s guardianship in the name of regional stability and security politics. Syrian troops were stationed in Lebanon until 2005.

⁴⁵ Since 2005, Lebanon has been rocked by several periods of instability as a result of which temporary Syrian migrants had to leave the country and return hastily to Syria.

so as to institutionalise Syrian-Lebanese temporary migration.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Lebanon's unstable political climate and successive crises since 2005 have hindered any progress on this level.⁴⁷

Patterns of circularity are also noticeable between Lebanon and African countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria. These patterns are also anchored in historical structures and have always been perceived as part of a provisional trend.

There are also trends of increasing circularity, notably in the post-war period, between Lebanon and the Gulf countries.⁴⁸ These patterns are usually contingent on a job offer in the Gulf countries and are to a large extent conditioned by Lebanon's successive economic crises and turbulent politics. In fact, since 2005, temporary Lebanese emigration to the Gulf countries has been triggered by Lebanon's intermittent political crises. While most of these migration patterns are expected to remain temporary, as men usually travel unaccompanied, we are still lacking recent statistics that would allow an assessment of the scope of the phenomenon. On the other hand, such a repetitive migratory trend cannot be said to provide a successful example of circular migration, as emigrants tend to live in circumscribed conditions, and endure several limitations.⁴⁹

In spite of these circular journeys, though temporary migration is very familiar in Lebanese circles, the notion of 'circular migration' does not feature in Lebanon's policy-making agenda, and most importantly, there is "no public methodical and global reflection in order to elaborate a public political line in terms of migration" in the country.⁵⁰ This is largely due to the unstable political setting of this small Arab republic and to the fact that migration issues are superseded by more crucial imperatives linked to the stabilisation of the country and to the lack of

⁴⁶ See Kiwan, "La perception de la migration circulaire."

⁴⁷ Most recently, Syria has declared to be considering an embassy in Beirut once the political climate becomes more stable. This could, indeed, be a first step so as to normalise troubled Syrian-Lebanese relations. See "Assad says Syria may open Lebanon embassy", *International Herald Tribune*, June 5, 2008,

<http://www.ihf.com/articles/reuters/2008/06/05/africa/OUKWD-UK-SYRIA-LEBANON.php>.

⁴⁸ Guita Hourani and Eugene Sensenig Dabbous, "Insecurity, Migration and Return: The Case of Lebanon following the 2006 Summer War," *CARIM Research Report 2007/01*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM-RR2007_01_Hourani&Sensenig.pdf.

⁴⁹ Lebanese male migrants in Saudi Arabia live for example in rather circumscribed social conditions.

⁵⁰ Kiwan, "La perception de la migration circulaire," 3.

consensus over political matters in the internal and external policy realms.⁵¹

In the absence of stable political conditions and in the light of contentious border demarcation,⁵² it is unlikely that Lebanon will embark on a coherent and comprehensive migratory policy, let alone a structured CM approach.

The Jordanian case presents other interesting features that might shed more light on the feasibility or non-feasibility of a CM approach in the region.

In Jordan, various trends of circularity can be detected. Temporary labour migration between Jordan and surrounding Arab countries such as Syria and Egypt has longstanding traditional and geostrategic roots. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of Jordanian labour migrants move back and forth between Jordan and the Gulf countries; and though this temporary labour migration tends to be more or less organised, it falls short of a managed circularity framework.⁵³

Notwithstanding these patterns of circularity and despite the fact that permanent migration to Jordan is becoming more restrictive,⁵⁴ “circular migration is not monitored as such” in the country.⁵⁵ Even though institutional setups regulate migratory flows between Jordan and some countries and governmental plans⁵⁶ or bilateral agreements facilitate the accession of migrants to Jordan’s labour markets,⁵⁷ these measures fall far short of what could be called circular

⁵¹ For more information, see Kiwan, “La Migration dans les Agendas politiques libanais,” *CARIM Analytical and Synthetic notes 2008/43*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_43.pdf.

⁵² It is noteworthy that Lebanon has not formally demarcated its borders with Syria, and that, the Shebaa farms controversy is still pending. Whereas Lebanese authorities declare the Shebaa farms, a piece of land in the South of Lebanon, to be occupied by Israel, international actors such as the UN claim that the territory is Syrian and not Lebanese. In addition to that, Lebanon’s borders remain porous. Thus, until now, due to the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict, and to political wrangling between the government and the opposition represented by Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite Party, there is no clear understanding of the state’s territorial sovereignty and border control.

⁵³ Fargues, “Circular Migration: is it Relevant?”

⁵⁴ Mohamad Olwan, “Circular and Permanent Migration : a Jordanian Perspective,” *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/34*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_34.pdf, 1.

⁵⁵ Email Communication with Francoise de Bel Air, expert on migration in Jordan, April 2008. See also Fathi Aroui, “Circular Migration in Jordan,” *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic notes 2008/35*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_35.pdf, 1-25, 2.

⁵⁶ See Strategic Plan of the Jordanian Ministry of Labour (2006-2010) which tackles some measures pertaining to guest workers, available at http://www.carim.org/polsoctexts/PS2JOR021_EN.pdf.

⁵⁷ See for example the website of the Jordanian embassy in Qatar: <http://www.jordanembassy.com.qa/index2.htm>. For more information on bilateral labour cooperation

migration schemes. Mobility partnerships remain thereby intricately connected to private and economic interests, and have not evolved into a state-managed vision in the realm of migration.⁵⁸

Certainly circular migration schemes could prospectively help alleviate many economic problems afflicting the Kingdom, such as unemployment, oversaturated labour markets, and low wages in certain sectors. CM might also provide new outlet opportunities for highly-skilled naturalised Palestinians suffering from professional or social discrimination in an implicitly segmented society. Nonetheless, precedence is given to tackling undocumented migration, and reforming labour legislation in order to uphold migrants' rights in Jordan.⁵⁹

Also, in the backdrop of recent regional confrontations, priorities are given to refugee settlement as well as stability and border control issues.

In short, despite the fact that there are pronounced trends towards temporary migration from and into Jordan, the abovementioned elements call into question whether the socio-political requisites in the country could presently contribute to a large-scale CM approach

More importantly, Jordan remains first and foremost a transit country and a "refugee haven"⁶⁰ in the Arab world,⁶¹ whose migration parameters are mostly dictated by geopolitical variables and whose policy-making priorities are structured around concerns hinging on economic and political stability.⁶²

Palestinian exceptionalism also tells us something about the problematic feasibility of CM schemes in the Middle East, as it not only prevents the implementation of circular migration schemes across Palestinian borders, but also impinges on migration agendas in the wider Arab world.

In the absence of clearly defined territorial rights, circularity across the Israeli border is limited to Palestinian workers' daily journey back and forth to

agreements between Jordan and UAE, see *Jordan Times*, March 16, 2006, and *Jordan Times*, January 17, 2007.

⁵⁸ Email Communication with De Bel Air.

⁵⁹ See Olwan, "Circular and Permanent Migration", 17-18.

⁶⁰ Géraldine Chatelard, "Jordan: a Refugee Haven", *Migration Information Source*, July 2004, 7.

⁶¹ The country has hosted Palestinian refugees ever since the 1948 Palestinian exodus, displaced Iraqi migrants after the 1991 Gulf war and the 2003 US-led War in Baghdad.

⁶² Chaterland, "Jordan: a Refugee Haven"; De Bel Air, "Irregular Migration."

work.⁶³ And Palestine's undefined political status and restrictive migration policies *vis-à-vis* Palestinians hinder the implementation of formal temporary migration schemes with third countries.

Beyond these causes, Palestine has become more of a *transnational or fluid nation* in the Arab world, a situation which affects the priorities of migration policy-making in the region.⁶⁴ On the one hand, the question of Palestinian refugees and their integration shapes and leads to various restrictions upon the migration agendas of other Arab states, particularly Lebanon and Jordan. On the other hand, Arab states have used the Palestinian-Israeli question and Palestine's undefined political status as a pretext to refrain from abandoning beaten policy paths – whether in drives towards more political liberalisation⁶⁵ or reform of policy-making agendas in migration – in the name of stability and security concerns.

All these examples serve to show that in the Eastern Mediterranean, circularity is frequent, yet it does not match the notion of circular migration as envisaged by the EU. More particularly, it does not comply with a top-down approach, and is largely dependent on *mutable contingents*.

These examples also draw attention to the variables of border control and disputed territoriality and their undoubted influence on circular migration schemes in the Middle East. On the one hand, facilitated circularity in the region has been informally connected with certain states' porous frontiers. For instance, Lebanon's porous frontiers and ineffective border control with Syria and Palestine does facilitate undocumented circularity in many ways. However, this circularity does not match, by any means, the notion of CM as defined by international organisms.

On the other hand, circularity in the region has been linked with the erosion of state sovereignty and it is thus increasingly perceived in a bad light. It has particularly an uneasy relationship with authoritarian states' conception of territorial sovereignty, as these states increasingly perceive migration governance more in terms of a security issue than as a question of free movement.

⁶³ See Haim Yacobi, "Circular Migration in Israel", *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/19*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_19.pdf.

⁶⁴ See Shahira Samy, "Irregular Migration in the South Eastern Mediterranean: Socio-Political perspectives", *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/69*, http://cadmus.eui.eu/dspace/bitstream/1814/10114/1/CARIM_AS%26N_2008_69.pdf, 8.

⁶⁵ See Brynen, Korany and Noble, eds, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*; Saikal and Schnabel, eds, *Democratization in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003).

IV. The EU-North African case: are CM schemes a burden-shifting measure?

At first glance, the North African region seems to lend itself to a more realistic application of a broad CM approach. The region's geographical closeness to Europe contributes to shaping migration imperatives, and to enhancing the incentives of cooperation in the EU-Southern Mediterranean migration system.

However, in the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate that while contextual settings are more favourable to circular migration schemes (CMSs) in the region than in the Eastern Mediterranean, considerable hindrances get in the way of their implementation. For this purpose, I will explore, on an illustrative basis, circularity in Egypt,⁶⁶ Morocco, and Algeria.

In Egypt, patterns of circularity to the Gulf countries, Jordan and Libya have traditional and historical roots. In addition to these historical precedents of repeat migration, bilateral agreements, which could be labelled as mobility partnership deals, are present. For example, the recent Italian-Egyptian model of cooperation for managing labour migration⁶⁷ could pave the way for more developed schemes of circularity between the two countries. However, the relevant question is whether these cooperation models go beyond managing legal migration flows, and can actually evolve into an institutionalised and sustainable CM approach.

Egypt's difficult position at the crossroads of the Middle East and North Africa overburdens its migration agenda. Thus, the country is not only a refugee haven, but also a hub and a passageway for undocumented and transit migrants. Its priorities presently rotate, on the one hand, around finding convenient solutions to the dilemmas posed by the refugee question (notably Sudanese and Iraqi refugees) and, on the other hand, around restructuring its own migration apparatuses, objectives and visions so as to tackle various economic and social hurdles inherent in Egyptian society.

Moreover, even though temporary migration is deeply ingrained in Egypt's history, the notion of managed circular migration is not part of the policy-making

⁶⁶ Although Egypt is at the crossroads of the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean region, it will be considered in this article as part of North Africa or the Southern Mediterranean.

⁶⁷ Implemented by the Egyptian Ministry of Immigration and Manpower, the IMIS and IDOM schemes have provided a framework for organising labour migration between Italy and Egypt. See Howaida Roman, "[Italian-Egyptian Model in Managing the Emigration From Egypt to Italy. Dimensions and Prospects](http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_18.pdf)", *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/ 18*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_18.pdf, 1-12.

jargon in Egypt – at least not to date.⁶⁸

As a result, Egypt has institutional apparatuses propitious to launching temporary labour migration schemes with the EU and surrounding countries. However, the country's contextual setting and migration priorities do not presently favour the development of a structured CM strategy.

Another illustrative example is Morocco where dynamic migration trends have created various patterns of permanent and repetitive migration.

Examples of temporary or quasi-circular migration to and from the country are many.

Agreements with Spain and France have paved the way for temporary and seasonal migration programmes.⁶⁹ In Spain, temporary labour or seasonal programmes laid solid foundations for the legal management of temporary migratory flows between the two countries. Also, against the backdrop of Morocco's historical connection with France, several labour migration accords between the two countries have encouraged a certain mobility and circularity there.⁷⁰

I would argue, however, that these programmes cannot be categorised as prototypes of circular migration, for they operate under very restrictive conditions, and do not allow for the kind of flexibility that the normative concept of circular migration seems to propose.⁷¹ It is worth debating whether these circular patterns do not remain rather inscribed within the logic of temporary labour migration programmes (TLMP). In this light, it is important to look at the finality of these temporary schemes. Relevant questions are whether these schemes really differ from mere seasonal programmes or short-term employment perspectives, and whether they have the potential to develop into the kind of ambitious and dynamic circularity that the normative concept of circular migration promises. In fact, does the Temporary and Circular Labour Migration approach (TCLM) between the EU and Morocco go beyond providing a legal mold for managing migration patterns?

⁶⁸ See Proceedings of two CARIM Meetings on Circular Migration.

⁶⁹ I refer for instance to the AENEAS-CARTAYA "Programme for Ethical Management of Seasonal Immigration" between Morocco and the Huelva Province whereby selected women travel to the province for the fruit-picking season (March-June 2008).

⁷⁰ It is estimated that seven thousand seasonal workers are recruited every year by France. See Mohamaed Khachani, "La migration circulaire: cas du Maroc," *CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/07*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_07.pdf, 11.

⁷¹ For an account on the definitional aspects of circular migration, see Newland and Agunias, "How Can Circular Migration."



The efficacy of this approach remains controversial.⁷²

On another level, due to Morocco's geographical proximity to Europe, the country's previous experience in setting up Guest Worker agreements with European countries and to its more or less stable politics, it would be worthwhile studying the advantages and the feasibility of circular migration programmes. More importantly, thanks to an array of migration programs,⁷³ Morocco has become endowed with ingrained institutional structures capable of laying a solid foundation for more sophisticated temporary and circular labour migration schemes.

Still, despite the assumption that the Moroccan case seems an opportune laboratory in which the feasibility of TCLM approach might be monitored, many other important aspects have to be taken into account.

In addition to the contentious finality of temporary migration schemes discussed above, reluctance has been expressed by Moroccan policy makers and researchers when it comes to circular migration. Indeed, the latter is perceived as being intricately coupled with the external dimension of the EU migration policy, and with the politics of readmission.⁷⁴ A worthwhile effort would be one that attempts to bridge the gaps between the EU and Morocco's policy-making stances so as to strike a balance between the needs of both.

In Algeria, several quasi-circularity scenarios are traceable. Various journeys of temporary migration are observable between Algeria and several European countries. Organised frameworks providing for the recruitment of Algerian migrants in external markets for a limited time frame help structure temporary migration schemes. Still, migration policy-making in Algeria is not auspicious to the development of a CM approach.

⁷² The criteria pertaining to selecting "temporary migrants" have been criticized and depicted by some as restrictive tools to circumscribe and control migration. See for example Kemal Kirsici, "[Three Way Approach to Meeting the Challenges of Migrant Incorporation in the European Union: Reflections from a Turkish Perspective](http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_RR_2008_03.pdf)," *CARIM Research Reports 2008/03*, http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_RR_2008_03.pdf, 14.

⁷³ Many EU-financed programs - such as *Support for the Movement of the People* whose aim is to empower ANAPEC as an "international interlocutor" so as to manage labour migration to Europe and support returnees - have been launched with Morocco so as to strengthen the country's management capacities in the realm of migration.

⁷⁴ For an account on divergent perceptions regarding this issue, see proceedings of two CARIM Meetings on Circular Migration (for example, p. 52). For an account on the rift between the external dimension of EU migration policy and Morocco especially in matters related to irregular migration and readmission accords, see Abdelkarim Belguendouz, "Le Maroc et la migration irrégulière: une analyse socio-politique", forthcoming, CARIM, European University Institute, Florence, 2009.

Although there are inherent institutional moulds that “contain instruments of migratory mobility”, Algeria’s migration policy is not actively working on promoting circularity, and the policy-making migration apparatus has not yet seriously addressed the issue of circular migration.⁷⁵ Migration imperatives presently impinge on tackling irregular and transit migration in the country, as well as dealing with Algeria’s new status as a destination of immigration. Thus, whereas Algeria has, in the past, focused in its migration agenda on the integration of its Diasporas abroad, it is increasingly confronted with many intrinsic problems engendered by migration flows, to which the country remains ill-prepared. Furthermore, as in the Moroccan case, there is a political reluctance to adopt a terminological lexicon proposed by the EU.

Possible drawbacks in the North African case

These observations draw attention to some drawbacks that restrict the implementation of a sustainable CM approach in the region. Hence, as stated before, while it is true that geographical proximity enhances cooperation in the field of migration; it also creates friction and suspicion. In political discourses, some scepticism towards EU-imposed proposals prevails as these proposals are linked to Europe’s desire to shift its migratory burden onto neighbouring countries.⁷⁶ Circular migration seems to pose a specific problem in this area as it is directly associated with the logic of readmission accords, given that the EU communication on CM links the issue of circular migration with return migration.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is important to note that circular migration schemes or mobility partnerships promoted by the EU bear some aspects of conditionality: in order for circular migrants to benefit from certain mobility packages and flexible visa regimes, third countries are expected to cooperate more closely on thorny migration-related issues such as undocumented migration.⁷⁸

There is also a more subtle clash of imperatives in policy-making discourses

⁷⁵ Se Hocine Abdelaoui, “[La dimension socio-politique de la migration circulaire en Algérie](http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_13.pdf)”, 1, *CARIM analytical and Synthetic notes 2008/13*, 2008. http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM_AS&N_2008_13.pdf.

⁷⁶ Doukoure and Oger, “The EC External Migration Policy: The Case of the MENA countries.”

⁷⁷ These reservations were expressed by North African policy makers and researchers during the policy-makers’ meeting on circular migration organised by CARIM in Florence in January 2008. See CARIM Coordination Team, Proceedings, 2008.

⁷⁸ See Brady, Hugo, “EU Migration Policy”, 10.

between the Maghreb and the EU. Hence, while the Maghreb countries' policy-making stances do attach major importance to emigration and more specifically to the integration of their Diasporas in receiving countries, the EU communication on CM stresses the issue of return and reintegration to the sending country.

Moreover, it is questionable whether the existence of institutionalised schemes of temporary or seasonal migration in the Southern Mediterranean could lay the necessary pillars for the elaboration of large-scale CM programmes. Doubt prevails whether these programs are not more dedicated to managing legal migration than to enhancing scenarios of circularity.

As to the elaboration of CM programmes within North Africa and between the latter and the EU, though the region remains more stable than the Eastern Mediterranean, tensions between adjacent countries and some indicators of instability would affect the implementation of such plans.⁷⁹

V. Synthesis: Favourable and disruptive factors enhancing or hindering CM in the MENA region

This article has tackled the various paradoxes lurking beneath the concept of circular migration as well as its application in the EU-MENA context.

At times reduced to a mere synonym of a temporary guest worker programme,⁸⁰ and at times endowed with a typological dimension,⁸¹ circular migration oscillates between a potentially normative concept and a mere policy initiative. So far, no consensus, either on the scholarly or on the policy-making levels, exists on its conceptualisation and feasibility.

Notwithstanding limitations related to theorising circular migration, interesting conclusions could nonetheless be drawn on its feasibility in the EU-MENA context and within the MENA itself.

⁷⁹ I refer particularly to the closure of border between Morocco and Algeria in 1962 after Morocco's independence from France. See Hein de Haas, "Morocco's Migration Experience: A Transitional perspective," *International Migration* 45 (4), 2007 (p. 45), mentioned in Cassarino, "Patterns of Circular Migration", 3. As mentioned before, other indicators of instability can be found in Mauritania and in Algeria.

⁸⁰ Rosalio, Munoz, "Circular migration of Labor: a Global Corporate Trend", *People's Weekly World Newspaper*, April 10, 2007, <http://www.pww.org/article/articleview/11831/1/148>.

⁸¹ See Newland and Agunias's definition of circular migration in "Circular Migration and Development," 2.

1. Circularity in the MENA region seems to be privileged between countries whose proximity or historical relations predispose them towards patterns of spontaneous repeat migration.
2. In the EU-MENA context, proximity and interest on both sides in regulating migration patterns are incentives that privilege the elaboration of institutionalised mobility partnerships, which could, in turn, pave the way for more developed schemes of temporary migration.
3. In the EU-MENA context, cooperation in the domain of circular migration schemes could incentivise launching dialogue processes which serve to address divergences over migration policies between the two ends.

Nonetheless, these abovementioned points fall short of providing concrete foundations for a large-scale CM approach, as significant structural parameters and contextual settings in the MENA region are more likely to impede the latter.

The article has also allowed for the distinction of three types of circular trajectories in the EU-MENA context or within the MENA context, which do not meet either the criteria suggested by the EU or the broader notion of circular migration.

1. Some embedded movements of circularity in the MENA region are of historical origin and remain in most cases unregulated and unmanaged;
2. Some trends of circularity, particularly in the Middle East, are derivatives of political tensions and wars in the region. In these cases, refugees' rights are seldom defined in the framework of mutual agreements, and no efficient regional management channels have been set up;
3. Observed trajectories of circularity do not go beyond mere restrictive temporary pilot projects constrained in operatives and time frames. It is worth pondering whether these institutionalised mobility schemes hinge more on managing migratory flows than on addressing circular migration as a *sui generis model*.

The article has also demonstrated that four important parameters in the MENA region constrain circular migration whether inside the region or with the EU:

1. Socio-political conditions of stability;
2. Frail institutional structures that hinder a symmetrical management of circular migration;



3. Divergent policy-making priorities within the MENA region or between the latter and the EU;
4. Preoccupation with alternative priorities in MENA migration agendas.

In most MENA countries, launching an open debate on complex CM schemes seems in fact precursory, not least because migration agendas in both Eastern and Southern Mediterranean contexts remain in a transitional phase. Thus, whereas governments in the Middle East and North Africa have previously focused on emigration and remittances, they are presently confronted with intrinsic and emergent challenges linked to immigration, undocumented migration, refugee settlement and resettlement. These priorities are expected, at least for some time, to prevail over circular migration, which remains secondary or marginal in political stances on migration.

To sum up, the prevailing lack of clarity over the rationale and finality of CM does not provide a favourable context for the development of a CM approach in the region. There is an evident lack of consensus as well as evident knowledge gaps on the optimal policy-making approach as well as the best practices if more ambitious CM projects were to be developed.

In addition, the particularity of political and policy-making settings in the MENA region does not presently predispose the region to the development of a large-scale CM approach. Also, from an EU perspective, there is even doubt concerning the relevance of debating circular migration for the time being as an efficient labour and migration strategy in the Euro-MENA zone.

Even if CM schemes present some advantages for both sending and receiving countries, EU member states' migration agendas are being restructured in the light of many challenges, such as divergences over migration policies within the EU, saturated labour supply in some EU countries, as well as the direct and indirect repercussions of EU enlargement. Thus, speculation is rife whether the MENA zone remains the EU's second option for recruiting circular migrants especially in low-skilled labour.⁸²

⁸² In Italy, for example, the saturation of labour supply in some fields after EU enlargement and subsequent waves of East European emigration to the country undermine, at least in the short term, temporary migration labour programmes with the MENA region. Interview with Professor Alessandra Venturini, May 2008, Florence.

Circular migration as a strategy in migration management

As the very concept of circular migration is still in its exploratory and genesis phases, only time will tell whether it will prove to be viable.⁸³ It is thus advisable to refrain from conferring an overvalued significance on the CM approach and to consider it rather as a strategy inherent in a more global approach to labour migration in the EU-MENA context. Thus, CM schemes in the region should remain contextually-based, and their feasibility should be assessed on a case by case basis. EU mobility partnerships – whether bilateral or multilateral – need to take into consideration the political particularities and capacities of each country. One possibility would be to develop policies between the sending and receiving countries resting on the individualised management of circular migration, and to adopt tailored approaches that take into consideration the different political, legal and socio-economic particularities of each case.

On a more theoretical level, and beyond the specificities of the EU and MENA, this article would suggest caution in the normative use of circular migration. As much contention prevails over circular migration as a migration typology, it would be recommendable that CM be rather considered an option, a policy initiative suitable for some countries more than others, or a strategy to manage migration trends in transnational contexts.

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