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Migration as Diplomacy: Labor Migrants, Refugees, and Arab Regional Politics in the Oil-Rich Countries

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Sciences Po

Abstract

This article explores the political dynamics of labor migration in the Middle East. It seeks to explain the politics of Arab population movements by looking at historical trends in regional integration and contends that migration to the oil-rich countries, including refugee flows, has been the key factor driving Arab integration in the absence of effective institutions and economic integration processes. To account for the influence of this largely forgotten factor, the article looks at the formal and informal institutions that have shaped massive labor flows from the 1970s onward. It offers historical evidence pointing to the role of migration in Arab regional integration by looking at free circulation of Eritrean refugees and migrants in the Arab region using oral history and administrative archives. Linking labor migration, refugee movements, and regional politics, the article introduces the concept of “migration diplomacy” as an analytical framework and argues that the politics of regional integration can be better understood when looked at through the lens of migration.

Introduction: Magnitude and Complexity of Migration in the Middle East

The world’s highest ratio of migrants to national population is to be found in the Middle East,¹ and the region is one of the most fascinating arenas in which to observe international labor flows. Economic migration and forced displacement have led to the formation of a highly integrated regional labor market. Labor migration is one of the most dynamic economic factors in the Middle East, and remittances sent home by migrant workers in the region exceed the value of regional trade in goods² as well as official capital flows.³ The growth of migrant labor in the Middle East was both rapid and massive and went hand in hand with the development of the oil economy. The stock of migrants went from 800,000 to 1.8 million between 1970 and 1975.⁴ In the 1980s, the Middle East became the largest market for migrant labor the world has ever known, and, according to Sharon Stanton Russell and Michael Teitelbaum, just before the 1991 Gulf War the oil-rich states of the Arab Gulf taken together numbered more than seven million migrants, five million of whom were workers.⁵ Migration to the oil-rich countries accounts for an overwhelming part of migratory trend levels in the region. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, some 37.1 percent of the population is foreign, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosting up to eighty-one percent of migrants, and foreign workers constituting at least seventy-five percent of the workforce in Saudi Arabia, eighty-two percent in Kuwait, and almost ninety percent in Qatar and the UAE at the beginning of the 2000s.⁶

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46 Since the mid-1950s, the region has also played host to one of the largest
47 refugee populations in the world. Numbering approximately 900,000 in 1950,
48 1.3 million in the 1960s, 1.6 million in the 1970s, and two million in the 1980s,
49 the Palestinian refugee population has grown steadily since 1947 to 4.5
50 million today.⁷ Not including Sudanese internally displaced (IDP) and inter-
51 national refugees, the extended region itself holds more than six million refu-
52 gees, who include some 4.5 million Palestinian refugees (exiles from 1947,
53 1967, and 1973 and their descendants) and approximately 1.5 million Iraqis in
54 Syria and Jordan since 2006.⁸ In smaller but significant numbers, the region
55 has also been harboring refugees from the horn of Africa: Eritreans in Sudan,
56 Yemen, and Saudi Arabia since the 1960s and the war of independence
57 against Ethiopia, as well as Somali populations from Ethiopia and Somalia in
58 Yemen since the 1980s and increasingly since 1991. Palestinians as well as
59 other refugees (Eritrean, Somalis, Sudanese, etc.) from first to third generation
60 are generally included in foreign labor statistics, notably in GCC states.

61 Considering the magnitude of the migratory phenomenon in such a highly
62 strategic region, one may find it hard to understand the relative paucity of
63 research on the politics of migration. Early work lamented the absence of
64 migration-related research and data on the Middle East. Part of the gap in
65 knowledge has been filled, but mainly for sending countries and mostly at the
66 macroregional level. An extensive body of literature deals with the macroeco-
67 nomic effects of labor migration in sending countries. Despite the fact that the
68 impact of remittances on local economies is still a question open to debate
69 and its evaluation in terms of development efficiency and sustainability
70 remains controversial,⁹ migration to the Gulf states is considered to have accel-
71 erated the development of Egypt and Yemen, of certain regions of India,
72 Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia,
73 and to have sustained the direct livelihood of many in the
74 Palestinian-occupied territories as well as the survival of the economy itself.
75 More detailed analyses on the sociology of labor migration are still to be
76 done, especially in receiving countries. After a surge in interest in intraregional
77 population movements in the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of the oil boom,
78 migration research in the Middle East remained the confine of applied economic
79 research and international organization reports. One of the reasons for neglect-
80 ing the impact of migration on Middle Eastern politics can be attributed to the
81 fact that migration trends were expected to be temporary and meant to decline
82 in the 1990s.¹⁰ Since the 2000s, demographers, historians, and political scientists
83 have taken a second look at one of the key factors of social and economic
84 change in the region both in receiving and sending countries.¹¹

85 The complexity of the underlying patterns of migration from and within the
86 Middle East has long been emphasized,¹² and different migration systems are
87 centered on subregional zones (the *Mashrek*, the Arabian peninsula, the
88 Afro-Arab zone) with different emigration and immigration drivers (popu-
89 lation, economics, security, international relations). The dominant features of
90 mobility in the region nonetheless lie with two major factors: the oil economy

91 and conflict. The labor-intensive development of the oil economy in GCC states
92 and Libya since the 1970s accounts for massive levels of economic migration
93 taking the form of contract labor, often deemed temporary, while the
94 Arab-Israeli conflicts (1947, 1967, 1973), the first Gulf War (the Iran-Iraq con-
95 flict, 1980–1988), and the two subsequent ones (the Gulf wars that started in
96 1991 and 2003) account for persistent waves of refugees. Politics is generally pre-
97 sented as a key determinant for population movements in the Middle East.¹³ Be
98 it the Palestinian exiles in the Gulf, the migrants' exodus from Kuwait in the
99 wake of the 1991 invasion by Iraq, or the Iraqi presence in Jordan and Syria
100 after 2003, the main factor behind these short-lived and seemingly short-term
101 waves of forced migration is war. More general structural and political determi-
102 nants of labor-force mobility have rarely been explored.

103 In this article, we examine migration patterns in the oil-rich countries using
104 the dual lens of war and political/economic factors and analyze the impact these
105 patterns have had on regional integration. Considering the scarcity of sources on
106 migration policy, asylum policy, and refugee law in a context where most macro-
107 historical migration trends can be accounted for by informal practices, one must
108 complement administrative and political documentation with oral history and
109 interviews. We focus on the empirical case study of the migration politics sur-
110 rounding the Eritrean refugees during the war of independence against
111 Ethiopia (1962–1991) using administrative archives to highlight the political
112 dimension of labor migration.

113 114 *Labor Migration in the Middle East: A Critical Narrative*

115
116 The narrative of labor migration in the Middle East is well known and
117 thoroughly documented.¹⁴ The literature has largely emphasized the economic
118 and demographic determinants of labor import,¹⁵ and there have been many
119 contributions to the analysis of the political economy and political demography
120 of Arab intra-regional migrations in the 1970s and the 1980s.¹⁶ Oil-rich states
121 have long argued that their migration policies were in fact depoliticized along
122 the lines of orthodox economists' arguments in favor of laissez-faire policy.¹⁷
123 Their deeds belie this argument: What they have in fact engineered is a political
124 management of migration flows. Contrary to Nazli Choucri, who considers the
125 initial phases of Arab labor migration in the GCC countries "individual,"
126 "private," and nonpolitical compared to a "state"-managed Asian labor
127 import in the 1980s,¹⁸ and in support of Sharon Staton Russell, we will argue
128 that migration to the region has always been politicized along lines that vary
129 across time and countries.

130 After the Second World War, the development of oil production in the
131 sparsely populated Arabian Peninsula led to a massive increase in labor
132 demand and an urgent need for foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, the United
133 Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. The oil-producing countries'
134 demand for labor was mainly met by regional inflows from highly populated
135 neighboring Arab countries like Yemen and Egypt and, to a lesser extent,

136 Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, or displaced populations like Palestinian refugees after
137 1947. Almost all categories of workers were targeted by public and private
138 recruiters in the oil-producing states, from domestic laborers and construction
139 workers to blue- and white-collar workers, in the private and public sector.

140 The shift in price-setting power for crude oil from Western-owned private
141 or semi-private oil companies (ARAMCO or British Petroleum) to the Arab
142 states of the Peninsula led to a massive increase in oil prices, further enhanced
143 by the regional political context. During *tafra* (the period of high oil income
144 from 1973 to 1986–1987), growth, state building, and massive inflows of
145 mainly Arab immigrants shaped the country's political development. The
146 steady increase in oil demand and the oil embargo of 1973–1974 generated enormous
147 income for oil-producing countries and put them on a rapid but “extensive”
148 development path heavily reliant on labor import. Within a decade, oil
149 revenues tripled (from two hundred billion dollars for the 1971–1975 period
150 to six hundred billion dollars for the 1976–1980 period), and oil-financed socio-
151 economic development programs targeting infrastructures, education, industry,
152 services, agriculture, etc., triggered a massive flow of contract labor into economies
153 lacking a sufficient and adequately skilled or trained workforce. Most oil-
154 producing countries therefore relied heavily on foreign labor to achieve economic
155 development. As a result, in the 1970s, seventy-two percent of the labor
156 force in the GCC countries was foreign. The most cited studies on migration
157 during the oil boom come from the numerous data surveys, policy-oriented
158 reports,¹⁹ and articles²⁰ conducted by the International Labor Organization's
159 team of economists.

160 Interestingly enough, economic and demographic factors of migration fail
161 to account completely for the counterintuitive variations in the volumes of
162 migration during the late-1980s economic recession, which shook the region.
163 Analysts agree that the collapse of oil revenue caused neither a large-scale reex-
164 port of foreign labor nor a drastic fall in regional migration levels.²¹ The lack of
165 correlation between economic factors and migration is mainly due to political
166 pressure on migration policies. Recession nevertheless saw a change in
167 migratory trends. With migration patterns extending further and further “east-
168 ward,” immigration from Southeast Asia started increasing while Arab labor
169 was either left unrenewed or simply replaced.

170 This change in the composition of the migrant labor force took place pro-
171 gressively. Asian workers had been present in the Gulf since the 1940s, notably
172 in former British residency states. The circulation of indentured labor and the
173 activity of the British East India Company in the Indian Ocean saw a first
174 inflow of Commonwealth workers from Pakistan and India to the trade,
175 service, and administrative sectors. The 1820 Treaty, which put Gulf Trucial
176 states or sheikhdoms under British supervision for commercial and strategic
177 matters, further accelerated this process. In the 1930s, the British imported
178 large numbers of Indian workers in order to secure control of the oil sector in
179 the Gulf.²² In 1975 there were around two million foreign workers in the oil-
180 producing states, sixty-eight percent of them Arab and the rest mainly from

181 Asia, with a small proportion of skilled occidental workers. In 1983 the number
182 of foreign workers increased to five million, of whom fifty-five percent were
183 Arabs. The proportion of Arab workers kept declining throughout the 1980s
184 and the 1990s as Arab nonnational populations continued to grow in absolute
185 numbers in the GCC countries. The change was more brutal in some countries
186 than others: Between 1975 and 1985, the relative share of the Arab foreign
187 workforce in Saudi Arabia went down from ninety to thirty-two percent.²³ In
188 the 1980s, 44.3 percent of the three million Egyptian expatriates returned
189 from Libya and the oil-producing countries, particularly in 1986 and 1989.
190 Often called the “third and fourth phases” of migration,²⁴ Asian migration
191 became more complex in the 1980s and onward, including an increasing
192 variety of nationalities (South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Philippines,
193 Thailand); this trend afforded the GCC countries more autonomy vis-à-vis
194 Arab-sending countries on the regional and international political scenes.

195 As early as the 1960s, Arab immigrants started to be considered a source of
196 political activism and a potential threat to the states and regimes of the GCC.
197 Arab diasporas constituted a transnational network through which issues
198 could travel and political action could be organized outside the purview of the
199 host states, if not in direct opposition to them. The risk of “foreign agitation”
200 was obviously put forward by GCC states in moments of crisis, as Robert
201 Vitalis has shown for the 1950s labor unrest in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern province.
202 But the GCC states also came to see them as a more substantial or existential
203 threat to national identity. Naturalization, which the oil-rich countries had
204 opened to “ethnic” Arab migrants in the 1960s and the beginning of the
205 1970s, had become virtually impossible by the mid-1970s. Strict nationality
206 and citizenship laws based on lineage were enforced, preventing non-nationals
207 from gaining access to socioeconomic and political rights and cutting them off
208 from the benefits of patrimonial welfare politics. The change in the composition
209 of immigration and the selective preference given to Asian migrants in the 1980s
210 may also be seen as an illustration of these “anti-integration” policies aimed at
211 controlling the boundaries of the nation and excluding non-nationals from both
212 the welfare system and the polity.²⁵ Disenfranchised and likely to be “passive
213 observers of political processes rather than potential activists or claimants on
214 social services and other benefits of citizenship,”²⁶ Asian workers were not
215 meant to gain access to indigenous resources and political participation.

216 Beyond its economic rationale and the response to immediate market
217 incentives, the selection of foreign workers illustrated a regional political strat-
218 egy. Oil-producing states have justified their labor import policies on the basis of
219 cost effectiveness. But along with the mechanic effects of push-pull factors and
220 labor shortages, the dynamics of labor migration also require a thorough analy-
221 sis of the policies and motivations that help determine the nature and volume of
222 migrant labor flows. And in the case of the Arab region, politics as much as
223 economic rationale seem to have shaped the trends of labor circulation.

224 Several “migration crises”²⁷ occurring at different levels point to the politi-
225 cal nature of migration. Most interestingly, their study lends credit to the idea,

226 initially posited by Nazli Choucri about the 1980s phases of Asian migration,
227 that the origins and composition of migrant worker populations should be inter-
228 preted as the joint result of public policies of both sending and receiving
229 countries.

230 The case of Thailand is exemplary at the binational level. Yearly streams of
231 labor from Thailand to the GCC rose from a few individuals to 105,016 between
232 1973 and 1982,²⁸ with a large number of Thai workers going to Saudi Arabia,
233 and continued until the Saudi government ruled out Thai immigration after a
234 diplomatic clash in 1990. After a heist and the murder of three Saudi diplomats
235 and a businessman in Bangkok, the Saudi government gave a *mot d'ordre* of not
236 renewing 250,000 Thai workers' visas and work permits in June 1990, signaling
237 the exclusion of Thailand from a blooming migration circuit in Southeast Asia.²⁹

238 The Gulf War of 1991 provides a massive illustration of the important role
239 played by migration politics. In the wake of the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam
240 Hussein, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the governments
241 of Jordan and Yemen expressed more or less explicit support for Iraq. It not
242 only proved to be a clumsy international positioning but also a dangerous polit-
243 ical move for their citizens in the GCC countries. The 1991 "migration crisis"
244 led to the expulsion of 800,000 Egyptians from Iraq, Jordan, and Kuwait,³⁰ 8,000
245 Yemeni from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries,³¹ and some 350,000
246 Palestinians from Kuwait and 100,000 from Saudi Arabia.³² In total, an esti-
247 mated two million Arab workers and dependents left the Gulf. This movement
248 had massive repercussions on the political economy of labor migration in the
249 Middle East.³³ First and foremost, it accelerated the replacement of Arabs by
250 Asian and Southeast Asian workers and clearly highlighted the political
251 nature of labor imports.

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Regional Integration and Labor Migration

255 Regionalism and regional integration have long presented difficulties for scho-
256 lars struggling to capture the "evolving architecture of regionalization."³⁴
257 Most research on regionalism has gone beyond the analysis of geographical
258 or politically integrated units in an effort to describe complex sets of interactions
259 within groups of actors or zones. For that matter, Louise Fawcett contrasts the
260 soft regionalism of the Arab world and the hard regionalism of the European
261 Union, insisting on a spectrum that goes from one to the other, from a sense
262 of awareness or community to the consolidation of pan- or subregional
263 groups and networks through common institutions and organizations.³⁵
264 Social-constructivist approaches applied to political identity in the Arab
265 world³⁶ have helped define the political integration processes beyond the
266 crude measurement of hard factors such as state power, intergovernmental
267 cooperation, supranational delegation of sovereignty, and formal institutional-
268 ization of interdependence. In the Middle Eastern case, in order to evaluate the
269 efficiency of economic integration processes, one needs to measure the degree of
270 integration between labor markets provided through both formal and informal

271 kinds of regulation. And this task requires, among other things, that labor
272 migration be brought under scrutiny. Our interest lies in the overlapping of
273 these two aspects of regional integration, and in this respect it is critical to
274 take into account the politics of labor migration in the Middle East.

275 On the one hand, the literature on Arab regional integration generally
276 laments the weakness of intraregional exchanges and the inefficiency of regional
277 institutions. They tend to paint a “gloomy picture” of Arab integration, depict-
278 ing instead the conditions of Arab “disintegration.”³⁷ Regional integration is
279 deemed to have failed, according to economic indicators and institutional cri-
280 teria posited by the theoretical literature on regionalism.³⁸ United Nations
281 and World Bank reports confirmed in the late 1990s³⁹ that indicators of liberal-
282 ization of trade and economic interdependence were still low despite insti-
283 tutional proliferation, including the 1998 Greater Arab Free Trade
284 Agreement. Between 1985 and 1990, intraregional trade accounted for only
285 six and seven percent of total export and import from and to the Middle East.
286 The integration of labor markets since the 1960s, epitomized by the case of
287 the oil-rich countries, is nonetheless generally understated as an economic
288 factor of integration. One could argue that it has not only compensated for
289 the failure of commodity market integration and weak corporate capital flows,
290 but also that it has constituted a pioneering experiment in global labor-market
291 integration that resulted from successive phases of globalization.

292 On the other hand, the most salient characteristic of Arab regional inte-
293 gration is the sense of community based on a shared language,⁴⁰ a set of
294 shared values, and the loose sense of collective identity linked to Arabness.
295 Beyond essentialism, the politics of identity in the Middle East has been a
296 key issue and a strategic factor in the social construction of the “Arab world.”
297 The cultural dimension of Arab integration was massively represented in the lit-
298 erature in and on the region during the Cold War, especially as it served and
299 illustrated the endeavor of pan-Arab politics. The politics of shared identity
300 led Arab thinkers like Zaki al-Arsuzi to evoke the possibility of an Arab
301 regional citizenship that would unite all Arab national identities within an
302 “exemplary republic.”⁴¹

303 Discourses on Arab integration in fact dwell more on the ambition of a pol-
304 itical project that aimed to unify and homogenize the region rather than on
305 actual institutional integration.⁴² Through the creation of the League of Arab
306 States in 1945 and subsequently of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958,
307 Arab political leaders and transnational activists sought unity⁴³ rather than inte-
308 gration. Arabism was presented as a challenge to a postcolonial nation-state-
309 centered regional order based on ethnocultural grounds by Egyptian and
310 Syrian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Shukri al-Quwati, who signed the
311 treaty founding the UAR. In turn, the UAR served as an instrument of hege-
312 mony for both “Arab republics” and for the Ba’ath party, enabling them to mon-
313 opolize the legitimate discourse on Arabness and Arab integration for at least
314 two decades. Historians of Arabism and analysts generally overlook the role
315 of labor market integration within the wider process and focus on the

316 intellectual and institutional history of regional integration. Three factors can
317 account for this lack of attention. First, the main actors of migration manage-
318 ment, the oil-rich states, came from countries that were not portrayed as key
319 actors of Arabism. Second, migration politics are “low” politics compared to
320 high politics and diplomatic endeavors. Third, most of the regulation and insti-
321 tutions relevant to labor migration were, and still are, semiformal or informal,
322 bilateral at best, and failed to give birth to standing regional organizations.
323 Oral history and the history of administrative practices regarding asylum and
324 entry and exit policies open up an additional dimension of regional integration
325 significant enough to reappraise the process as a whole.

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*The Informal Politics of Labor Migration in the Middle East: Migration as
Diplomacy*

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The process of regional integration in the Middle East is atypical with regard to
other models such as Europe or even the Americas: It has mainly been fueled by
formally or informally regulated labor-force transfers between countries in the
region.⁴⁴ Therefore, we argue that migration policy should be analyzed as an
indirect form of foreign policy that uses the selection of migrants and
quasi-asylum policies as a form of diplomacy.

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At the regional level, patterns of worker mobility organized along the lines
of regional and international politics have been a key to understanding what
could be called the Arab “migration diplomacy.” This diplomacy is nonetheless
to be understood as including formal and informal, public and private diplo-
macy. Bypassing the channels of formal institutions and agreements, the politics
of workers’ circulation has been shaped by the decisions of both public and
private actors, state administration, and embassies on a bilateral and temporary
basis, and by firms and recruitment companies on a contractual business basis.
Most sending countries have created public institutions to manage and organize
labor emigration while at the same time retaining a public-private partnership in
the management of migration flows: Overseas employment ministries, agencies,
and offices flourished in Asia in the 1970s (the Overseas Employment
Corporation established in 1976 in Pakistan and 1979 in Bangladesh, the
Office of Overseas Employment Service Administration in Thailand, the
Korea Overseas Development Corporation in South Korea). But similar insti-
tutions also started to appear in the Arab sending countries in the 1970s. The
1971 Egyptian constitution mentions the competence of the state in managing
migration flows, and the 1981 presidential decree (n°574) defines the compe-
tence of the Ministry of Emigration Affairs and Egyptians Abroad until the
Ministry of Manpower and Emigration was created in 1996 (presidential
decree n°31) and the Supreme Committee of Emigration was created in 1997.

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In the receiving countries, the politics of labor import from the 1960s to the
1980s was characterized by a clear preference granted to Arab immigrants in
oil-rich countries that was not formalized by bilateral agreements or migration
quotas. Nevertheless, the patterns of regional migration politics followed those

361 of regional integration politics.⁴⁵ In the context of Arab regional integration
362 politics, fostered by pan-Arab ideologies, migration was the only field of
363 actual integration between states and economies. Labor migration, its regu-
364 lation, and the social, cultural, and financial flows that go with it are the very
365 domain in which Arab integration has taken concrete form.⁴⁶ Arab migrant
366 worker flows and the remittances of capital they generated “have been the
367 most important feature of regional integration”⁴⁷ in the Middle East.

368 The sequence of Arab labor circulation and regional integration of labor
369 markets lags behind the institutional history of Arabism. Five major historical
370 phases are generally identified in the saga of Arabism: the intellectual premises
371 (nineteenth and early twentieth century), the rise (from the Palestinian uprising
372 of the 1930s to the Egyptian revolution of 1952), the consolidation (from the
373 Egyptian to the Iraqi revolution of 1958), the decline (1958-1967), and the
374 demise after 1967.⁴⁸ The first wave of regional integration through labor
375 migration came as a result of the war of 1947-1948 and the creation of the
376 state of Israel, which caused the exodus of around 700,000 Palestinian Arabs
377 who relocated mainly in the then-Jordanian West Bank or Cisjordan area but
378 also fled to Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and in smaller numbers to the Arab
379 peninsula. The 1967 war generated subsequent waves of Palestinian refugees
380 who either left the Palestinian-occupied territory or the first country of
381 asylum to reach the oil-rich states and the better work opportunities they
382 offered. Between 1947 and 1960, the population of Kuwait doubled, and the pro-
383 portion of non-Kuwaiti in the population rose to fifty-three percent in 1965 with
384 around thirty percent of all non-Kuwaitis being Palestinian.⁴⁹ In 1975,
385 twenty-five percent of the Saudi Arabian workforce was Yemeni (from North
386 Yemen). Around sixty percent of the Jordanian labor force was working in
387 the Gulf during the 1970s, including both Jordanians and Palestinians with
388 Jordanian passports. The share of foreign Arab population in the oil-producing
389 countries rose dramatically and started raising problems of national integration
390 for the receiving states, which were later reformulated as issues of national
391 security. The governments in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE started devel-
392 opment policies in the late 1980s, raising requirements for participation by
393 nationals in the workforce.

394 In the sending countries, exit visa procedures were lightened in the 1960s
395 and 1970s. Egypt’s political and cultural capital within the region directly ben-
396 efit its diaspora.⁵⁰ Egypt suspended previous restrictive emigration policies in
397 1973 while launching the *infitah* (open door) politics, and in 1974, exit visa
398 requirements were suppressed for emigrants.⁵¹ Egyptian migrants within the
399 Arab world in the 1960s were predominantly skilled workers, mainly teachers
400 and administrators. At the beginning of the 1970s, they joined with flows of
401 Palestinian, Jordanian/Palestinian, and Syrian but also Iraqi and Lebanese
402 workers, giving rise to a massive wave of both skilled and unskilled migration
403 to the Gulf. In turn, the sending countries were also attracting other categories
404 of immigrants. Egypt and Lebanon served as an educational hub in the region
405 with prestigious universities for students and intellectuals from the rest of the

406 region and Africa; Lebanon attracted unskilled workers from neighboring
407 countries; and Egypt attracted Sudanese unskilled workers. The idea of an inte-
408 grated Arab labor market was pervasive in the 1970s, and some policy makers
409 considered treating the Arab region as a single territory, with mobility being
410 one of the many forms of interaction possible between state units. In 1957 the
411 League of Arab States commissioned its Economic Council to promote the prin-
412 ciple of freedom of movement for workers, and in 1965 the first conference of
413 Arab Labor Ministers endorsed the principle. In 1967 an agreement was
414 signed by Jordan, Syria, and Egypt to call for free circulation of workers in
415 the region.

416 None of the main receiving countries signed the agreement, and the oil-
417 producing countries steadily refused to sign any binding convention concerning
418 the access to their labor markets for foreign nationals. Even though oil-rich
419 states participated in the Arab integration process in a subdued but extremely
420 efficient fashion, they failed to reap the political benefits of this participation.
421 The Arabian Peninsula was indeed considered a minor eulogist of Arabist poli-
422 tics compared to the vocal advocacy of Nasser's Egypt, Ba'ath-led countries like
423 Iraq and Syria, or the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen since
424 1970.⁵² In the case of the oil-producing countries, pan-Arabism was, as
425 Michael Barnett puts it, an "informal institution" rather than a set of
426 organizations.⁵³

427 The change in the selection of migrants engineered in the 1980s was also
428 done with a view to securing more independence for oil-rich states from their
429 traditional sources of labor. The political momentum of the oil-rich states can
430 be measured through their ability to control migration patterns from the
431 1980s onward. The informal coalition was institutionalized in 1981 with the cre-
432 ation of the GCC states. Oil-rich countries proved able to implicitly shape the
433 dynamics of regional politics. In 1983 fifty-five percent of the five million
434 foreign workers in the GCC states were Arabs. As previously explained, the
435 proportion of Arab labor slowly declined throughout the 1980s, and by 1995
436 Asian workers outnumbered Arab nationals by one million in the GCC
437 countries.⁵⁴ Putting cost-of-labor factors to the fore, which heavily favored the
438 import of Asian labor, the oil-producing countries diversified away from the
439 integrated Arab labor market and staunchly defended the quasi dependence of certain
440 sectors of their economies on Egyptian labor.

441 Migration policy is indeed an indirect instrument of foreign policy, and the
442 opening and closing of borders on the receiving or sending side have been used
443 as tools of political leverage, as shown by Nazli Choucri in the case of the
444 Libya-Egypt migration couple.⁵⁵ Beyond regional logics, bilateral meetings
445 and negotiations between state officials, diplomats, businessmen, and recruit-
446 ment agencies contributed to engineer the patterns of labor migration
447 between "migration couples." These processes hardly ever gave way to formal-
448 ized and perennial agreements. Much more than the short-term political weapon
449 it has often been used as, migration flows have proven in the long run to be a key
450 factor shaping regional politics.

451 *Migration Policy as Asylum Policy by Proxy: The Palestinian and the Eritrean*
452 *Case*

453 Today, more than eighty-eight percent of registered Palestinian refugees (4.7
454 millions) are located in Arab near-eastern countries,⁵⁶ and more than half a
455 million of them were still in the Gulf⁵⁷ after the expulsion of approximately
456 450,000 from the region after the 1991 Gulf War due to the position adopted
457 by the Palestinian Authority. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the Gulf states are
458 party to the 1951 Geneva Convention, the 1965 Casablanca Protocol of the
459 Arab League of States for Palestinian refugees, or the 1967 Organization of
460 African Unity Protocol that guarantees protection and assistance to international
461 refugees. However, the link between population dynamics and international vio-
462 lence has been discussed mainly within the context of the Palestinian refugee
463 case, and the refugee flows in the Middle East clearly highlight the intercon-
464 nection between migration and displacement.⁵⁸ Indeed, the treatment of Palestinian
465 refugees has become a central issue to the extent that it can be taken as symbolic
466 of Arabism and pan-Arab politics as a whole. The equation between Arabism
467 and the Palestinian cause started with the first exodus of 1948, as shown by
468 Constantin Zurayq, the Syrian historian who first coined the word *nakba*.⁵⁹

469 Even though Saudi Arabia was not a United Nations Relief and Works
470 Agency (UNRWA) asylum country and did not recognize the Casablanca
471 Protocol status for Palestinian refugees, the kingdom hosted Palestinian refu-
472 gees as early as 1948. The state was simply applying the Protocols' provisions
473 de facto through a liberal entry and residence regime for Palestinian exiles of
474 1948 and 1967. As a token gesture of Arab solidarity and an act of informal
475 diplomacy, the Arab managers of the ARAMCO recruitment sections opened
476 an office in Beirut in 1948 in order to reach the Palestinian population. After
477 1967, large numbers of Palestinian refugees were recruited and sponsored by
478 the ARAMCO, then a public-private Saudi-US company.⁶⁰

479 To a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia supported the Eritrean cause in the war of
480 independence against Ethiopia (1962–1991) by financing the guerrillas but also
481 by facilitating entry and residence for exiles and guerrilla fighters. Arab
482 countries in general, and the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia in particular, sup-
483 ported the Eritrean guerrillas from the 1960s to the 1990s on an ideological basis
484 and allowed Eritrean refugees to enter and settle in the oil-rich countries using
485 migration politics as an asylum policy by proxy. Eritrean refugees were con-
486 sidered as Arabs oppressed by a colonial Christian power (Ethiopia) supported
487 by both Israel and the United States until the Marxist revolution led by Haile
488 Mariam Mengestu in 1974. Their struggle was understood in a geopolitical
489 context and was seen by the Arab states around the Red Sea as a key strategic
490 move toward protecting the “Arab identity of the Red sea,” which they consider
491 an “Arab lake.”⁶¹ Rather than straightforward political support through explicit
492 asylum rights, the stance of the Saudi government was to welcome Eritrean
493 migrants; in turn, the financial flows of remittance from the kingdom became
494 a crucial source of support for the freedom fighters.
495

496 Even though the historiography remains controversial on the emergence of
497 an Arab political culture of the guerrilla, the intellectual, financial, and political
498 connections between the first political movements promoting independence and
499 the Arab world is clearly established. Arabized elites from Eritrea gathered
500 within the Muslim league in 1946, the *Harekat Tahrir Iritriya* (Eritrean
501 Liberation Movement) in 1958, and the Eritrean Liberation Front, and
502 started to claim autonomy from the Ethiopian domination that was formally
503 established over the former Italian colony after the British army withdrew in
504 1952.⁶² The essence of the political culture of the guerrilla has drawn the atten-
505 tion of historians and political scientists up to now.⁶³ Primary sources and his-
506 torical accounts in Arabic strongly defend the idea of an Arab identity of the
507 independence struggle based on the support granted to the guerrilla by neigh-
508 boring Arab countries. The discourse produced by political leaders in the
509 1960s and the 1970s was strongly influenced by Arabism and by the ideological
510 resources it provides for claiming independence.⁶⁴ Therefore, the presentation
511 of Eritrea as an Arab country and of Eritreans as Arabs was acknowledged
512 as a regional political commonplace, which led to the blooming of propaganda
513 and pseudo-historical literature on Eritrea's "Arabness."⁶⁵

514 As a consequence of this political emphasis on the Arab identity of the
515 guerrilla and of the Eritrean people, from the 1960s to the 1980s most of this
516 Eritrean population, although already covered by the *prima facie* refugee
517 status granted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,
518 entered Saudi Arabia either on a pilgrimage visa or without any documentation
519 at all. Two Royal Decrees issued in 1974 and 1979 temporarily granted the
520 Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) the status of *kafil* (sponsor) for Eritreans
521 who wished to come and reside in the Kingdom. Sponsorship being one of
522 the main constraints on individual immigration for persons without a job con-
523 tract, the Royal Decree therefore served as an "asylum policy" by proxy for
524 Eritrean exiles. At the time, the residence permit (*iqama*) to be obtained
525 through the Ministry of Interior was free of charge for Eritreans, contrary to
526 the regular procedure. The *iqama* is issued on presentation of an ELF letter
527 recognizing the petitioner as Eritrean.⁶⁶

528 The 1979 Royal Decree was abolished in 1981, but various public services,
529 including the Service of Passport and Immigration at the Ministry of Interior
530 and the regional offices of the Ministry of Labor, remained particularly tolerant
531 in their treatment of Eritrean "immigrants" till the beginning of the 1990s.
532 Between 1984 and 1985, the status of *kafil* was briefly granted again to the
533 ELF thanks to the outcome of the Jeddah conference, gathering all Eritrean
534 independence parties and factions in exile.

535 The support for Eritrean exiles is embodied by a series of semiformal or
536 informal administrative practices, which can be traced in the documentation
537 gathered in local Sudanese administration where former Eritrean refugees
538 registered after leaving Eritrea before migrating to the oil-rich countries.⁶⁷
539 Eritreans could enter the country without a predefined job contract or prospec-
540 tive employer; the procedural burden of immigration registration was alleviated;

541 and the public administration showed tolerance vis-à-vis undocumented
542 migrants.

543
544
545 *The Circulation of African Exiles: Travel Documents and Arab Politics*

546
547 The concept of a regional citizenship was theorized by Zaki al-Arsuzi⁶⁸ in 1965
548 but never gave way to concrete administrative or political measures, such as an
549 “Arab passport.” The Arab National Convention on Nationality, adopted on
550 April 5, 1965, fell well short of Arsuzi’s hopes by asserting that whoever pos-
551 sessed the nationality of any of the states of the League of Arab States was
552 Arab (article 1). The definition chosen was tautological and merely institutional.
553 It failed to address the question of infra- or supranational identity by referring,
554 once again, to nation-states as sole providers of identity.⁶⁹ In spite of the
555 mention of Arab identity in preambles to all national constitutions in the
556 region excepting Israel and Turkey,⁷⁰ Arab nationals still needed passports or
557 identity documents to circulate in the region. The processes of migrant and
558 refugee identification in the region remain partially informal nonetheless, due
559 to weak or rather inefficient state bureaucracies. In this context, rather than a
560 rational-legal set of screening procedures assigning each individual a permanent
561 label, identification has become a political process highly sensitive to represen-
562 tational variations but with very pragmatic outcomes, including the right to
563 access a territory.

564 As Jane Caplan and John Torpey have demonstrated, the categories under
565 which foreign nationals are labeled indicate the limits and extent of their rights,
566 duties, and freedom of movement.⁷¹ In the case of the Arab world in the 1970s
567 and 1980s, the relative informality of registration and identification of migrants
568 was linked to prevailing social, political, and cultural representations of the self
569 and of others. The administrative procedures operate in a context in which
570 formal bilateral or regional agreements on labor migration are virtually
571 nonexistent.

572 In this context, it is particularly interesting to study the case of this marginal
573 category of migrants in the Arab world. The history of Eritrean refugees in the
574 Arab world illustrates the power of social representations of Arabness and indirect
575 asylum policies. Through both state and nonstate activism, Eritrean exiles
576 negotiated conditions of access and mobility for Eritreans in the Arab world
577 during the 1960s and 1970s. The Eritrean transnational advocacy networks
578 were managed by guerrilla parties like the Eritrean Liberation Front and the
579 networks of partisan politics aimed at securing freedom of movement and mili-
580 tary and financial support for the Eritrean war of independence. For this
581 purpose, in the 1960s and 1970s parties in exile based in Cairo, Khartoum,
582 Sana’a, and Beirut developed and communicated a political discourse proclaim-
583 ing the Arabness of the Eritrean nation and the Arab identity of the people of
584 Eritrea.⁷² In 1964, during a press conference in Damascus, Idris M. Adem,
585 Eritrean guerrilla leader in exile, asserted that “there are no others in Eritrea

586 but Arab citizens,”⁷³ and Eritrean political figures hammer throughout their dis-
 587 courses and writings the Arabness of Eritrea and of Eritreans.⁷⁴

588 The consequences of this activism can be seen in the quasi-asylum policy
 589 that some Arab countries developed in favor of Eritrean refugees. They could
 590 enter Arab countries that did not recognize the mandate of the United
 591 Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the international
 592 refugee status linked to the 1951 Convention, and they were granted working
 593 and residence permits. Most Eritreans were registered as refugees in Sudan or
 594 Yemen, countries that had signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and hosted
 595 UNHCR offices⁷⁵ and were given Convention Travel Documents⁷⁶ (CTDs)
 596 that allowed them to leave their first country of asylum and travel around the
 597 region. In the context of pan-Arab politics, the government of Sudan issued
 598 vast numbers of CTDs that were valid in the Arab world, contrary to the pre-
 599 scription of UNHCR regulations.⁷⁷ Most CTDs observed in the
 600 Commissioner of Refugees (COR) archives in Khartoum mention “Arab
 601 countries” or “Arab countries excluding Israel and South Africa,” which reflects
 602 the positioning of the League of Arab States in regional politics. CTDs were
 603 used as passports and were recognized and accepted as legitimate travel docu-
 604 ments for Eritrean refugees, even in the oil-rich countries that had not signed
 605 the 1951 Convention but were the preferred destination of secondary migration
 606 for Sudanese-based exiles. COR archives host numbers of expired CTDs from
 607 the 1970s and the 1980s in cardboard boxes that display visas and stamps
 608 from oil-rich countries, some of them even bearing handwritten enumerations
 609 of the number, names, and ages of dependents. Some also bear the handwritten
 610 note “to accompany employer” alongside the visa and residence stamp deliv-
 611 ered by the Service of Passport and Immigration of the receiving country. In
 612 this context, the CTD is not just the exact equivalent of a national passport, it
 613 also serves as a job contract and a residence permit; thus, the immigration
 614 policy can be understood as an informal asylum policy.

615 The liberal asylum policy of the State of Sudan gave rise to difficulties and
 616 even breaches of international law in the Middle East, where the right to a
 617 national passport and freedom to travel were much more restricted than a refu-
 618 gee’s right to a CTD. Sudanese CTDs for Eritreans started raising suspicion in
 619 Western countries in the late 1970s, but they remained valid in the Middle East
 620 until the beginning of the 1990s and sometimes even beyond the end of the war
 621 and the independence of Eritrea in 1993.⁷⁸ The analysis of the individual docu-
 622 mentation of labor migrants, and in this case refugees, supports the writing of a
 623 social history of mobility that links micro and informal institutions to the struc-
 624 tures and culture of Middle Eastern political history.

625

626

627

626 *Conclusion*

627

628 Macro and micro analyses of migration and asylum trends argue in favor of a
 629 reappraisal of the role of oil-rich states in shaping regional integration.
 630 Despite the widely acknowledged demise of Arab regional integration as a

631 political and institutional process, the achievements of informal and de facto
 632 integration processes linked to labor migration and refugee movements need
 633 to be emphasized. Behind the well-known tones of pan-Arabism and the insti-
 634 tutional buildup of the 1960s and 1970s, the main actors of regionalism in the
 635 Middle East were in fact labor migrants and refugees. The Middle East case
 636 helps us reassess the historical importance of mobility as a political phenomenon
 637 and the role of migrants and refugees as political actors. The structures and pat-
 638 terns of regional migration systems are determined not only by economic factors
 639 but also by political incentives, whether these be formulated as explicit public
 640 policy and diplomacy or implemented through administrative practices shaped
 641 by political representations. Migration policy embodied in a wide spectrum of
 642 formal and informal practices contributed to the regional political dynamics,
 643 and migrants and refugees could be considered essential historical actors, at
 644 the regional and the local levels, in both sending and receiving countries.

645 NOTES

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 648 University), and Neil Martin for his careful reading.

649 1. By Middle East, we mean Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya,
 650 Oman, Palestinian territory, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and
 651 Yemen, excluding North African Arab states, Iran, and Turkey.

652 2. Heba Nassar and Ahmed Ghoneim, "Trade and Migration, Are They Complements or
 653 Substitutes: A Review of Four MENA Countries," (Economic research forum, Working Paper
 654 0207, 2002).

655 3. Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Arab Versus Asian Migrant Workers in the GCC Countries,"
 656 UN Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab
 657 Region, Population Division Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations
 658 Secretariat Beirut, (May 15–17, 2006).

659 4. Having started exploiting oil in the 1970s, by 1983, Libya's Secretariat of Planning esti-
 660 mated that half of Libya's population was constituted of foreigners, mainly Egyptians and
 661 Asians. See Nassar and Ghoneim, "Trade and Migration," 9.

662 5. Sharon Stanton Russell and Michael Teitelbaum, "International Migration and
 663 International Trade" (World Bank discussion paper no. 160, 1992).

664 6. Source: National Statistical Units and Population Division of the Department of
 665 Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, Trends in Total Migrant
 666 Stock: The 2005 Revision <<http://esa.un.org/migration>>.

667 7. Data concern refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency
 668 (UNRWA). The numbers are a matter of controversy between institutional sources, but accord-
 669 ing to the UNRWA definition of a refugee, Palestinian refugees registered with the UN num-
 670 bered approximately 711,000 in 1950 and over four and a half million in 2009.

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681 1994); Reginald Appleyard, ed., *Emigration Dynamics in Developing Countries* (1999).
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684 C. A. Sinclair, "Labour Migration in the Arab Gulf States: Patterns, Trends and Prospects,"
685 *International Migration Review* 26 (1988): 267–86; McMurray, "Recent Trends in Middle
686 Eastern Migrations," *Middle East Report* 211, (Summer 1999): 16–19.
- 687 16. See for instance Fred Halliday, "Labour Migrations in the Middle East," *MERIP*
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- 689 17. Contrary to Alan Richard and Philip Martin, we do not consider that migration policies
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693 Middle East," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 31 (1983): 455–74.
- 694 18. Nazli Choucri, "Asians in the Arab World: Labor Migration and Public Policy," *Middle*
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- 696 19. C. Sinclair and J. S. Birks, "Towards Planned Migration in the Middle East: An
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- 701 21. J. S. Birks, I. J. Seccombe, and C. A. Sinclair, "Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf: The
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- 705 22. I. J. Seccombe and R. I. Lawless, "Dependence on Foreign Workers in the Gulf and the
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- 707 23. J. S. Birks and C. A. Sinclair, *Arab Manpower* (London, 1980); and National
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- 712 25. At the domestic level in receiving countries, the change in the origin of migrant labor
713 during the 1980s reflected political pressures and the fall in state revenues. Asian wages were
714 lower, and the gain in labor costs could help absorb part of the decline of oil revenue. A diver-
715 sified Asian workforce was also more likely to meet the demand for both highly and poorly
716 skilled labor. But Asian workers were also considered less likely to settle in the Gulf, a trait
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720 *Eastern Studies* 22 (1986): 252–73.
- 721 27. Nicholas Van Hear, "New Diasporas," *The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of*
722 *Migrant Communities* (Seattle, 1998).
- 723 28. Vichitra Prompunthum, "Overseas Employment Policy in Thailand" (paper prepared
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725 1983), cited in Nazli Choucri, "Asians in the Arab World: Labor Migration and Public Policy."
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727 the country once again to Thai domestic workers as the cost of Indonesian domestic workers has
728 risen dramatically over the past few months due to an increase in the fare and commissions of
729 Indonesian recruiting agents. See *Arab News*, June 19, 2010.
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771 *tawthîqiyya li'lâqât al-yaman ma'a Jibûti, al-Sûmâl, Irtîriyâ, Ithyûbiyâ, al-Sûdân khila al-fatra*
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792 with senior members of the Eritrean community in Riyadh and Jeddah.
- 793 67. In order to understand the political context surrounding the circulation of Eritreans, we
794 explored the archives of the Sudanese central administration managing refugee issues, the Sudanese Commissioner of Refugee. We traced back administrative practices around entry, exit and circulation of CTD holders in the oil rich countries and confronted those with a series of interviews of former Eritrean migrants refugees in Saudi Arabia in January and February 2006.
- 795 68. Zaki al-Arsuzi, *Al-jumhuriyah al-muthla* (Damascus, 1965).
- 796 69. The Convention was adopted by Egypt and the theme of Arab unity was included in
797 the Syrian Constitution of 1973, the Libyan Constitution of 1969: "The Libyan people are part of the Arab nation. Their goal is total Arab unity." Article 1 Constitution of the Arab Republic of Libya, 1969.
- 800 70. Even states that contain large non-Arab populations like Bahrain (Iranian minority)
801 have adopted the Arab standard. "Bahrain is an Arab Islamic State, independent and fully
802 sovereign, and its people are part of the Arab nation," Constitution of the State of Bahrain
803 adopted on May 26, 1973.
- 804 71. Jane Caplan and John Torpey, *Documenting Individual Identity* (Princeton, 2001).
- 805 72. On this and the historiographical debate around it, see Lionel Cliffe and Basil
806 Davidson, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* (Trenton,
807 1988); Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance and Nationalism 1941–1993* (Cambridge, 1995), but also Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, 1994).
- 808 73. Shumet Sishagne, "The Genesis of the Differences in the Eritrean Secessionist
809 Movement (1960–1970)," in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian*
810 *Studies, Vol.1, University of Addis Ababa 1984*, ed. Taddese Beyene (Addis Ababa: 1988): 451.
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811 74. For an edited version of this narrative, see propaganda volume by Muhammad Sa'id
812 Nawud, *Al-'arabiyya wa al-Islam bi-al-qurn al-afriqi* [Arabism and Islam in the Horn of
813 Africa], Sd, Sl. and Muhammad 'Othman Abu Bakr, *Tarikh Irtiriyya al-mu'asir, Ardan wa*
814 *sha'aban* [History of Eritrea, Land and People] (Cairo, 1994).

814 75. Sudan moreover created a national Commissioner of Refugees (COR) in 1967, which
815 was entitled to issue refugee cards and travel documents.

815 76. "According to article 28 paragraph 1 of the 1951 Convention, Contracting States are
816 required to issue travel documents for the purposes of travel to refugees lawfully staying in
817 their territory." *Note on Travel Documents for Refugees*, August 30, 1978, International
818 Protection (SCIP) EC/SCP/10 <www.unhcr.org>.

818 77. "(c) Geographical validity of Convention Travel Documents. Art. 17. According to
819 paragraph 4 of the Schedule to the 1951 Convention, the document shall, save in special or
820 exceptional cases, be made valid for the largest possible number of countries. States do not
821 normally restrict the document's geographical validity. Some States, however, for security reasons,
822 exclude from such validity the refugee's country of origin." *Ibid.*

822 78. Peter Nobel, "Refugee Law in the Sudan with the Refugee Conventions and the
823 Regulation of Asylum Act of 1974," *Research Report no. 64*, (Uppsala, 1982).

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