

Navigating Return: Motivations, decision-making processes, and emotional responses among Egyptian migrants in Jordan

CASE STUDY



SUMMARY

This case study focuses on return migration, specifically exploring the experiences of Egyptian migrants who had lived in Jordan. Despite the initially perceived temporariness of their migration, a number of Egyptians establish long-term residency in Jordan. However, the lack of active integration efforts and citizenship opportunities leads to their eventual return to Egypt. Drawing on interviews with Egyptian returnees, this case study addresses motivations for repatriation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Family reunification, health concerns, job dissatisfaction, financial goals, and emotional ties, motivate the return of Egyptians.

Emotions on returning to Egypt oscillate between regret over financial circumstances and fulfillment found in familial connections.

Future plans include potential returns, reintegration, entrepreneurial ventures in their country, and concluding their migration journey.

AUTHORS

Professor Ayman Halaseh, Director, Information and Research Center King Hussein Foundation (IRCKHF);
Hala Abu Taleb, Head of Research, IRCKHF;
Rawan Rbihat, Senior Researcher, IRCKHF;





This photo was taken by Ali Zaraq and Farah Hallabeh in Delga village, Menya governorate, Upper Egypt, featuring Egyptian returnee men from Jordan.

Introduction

Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that shapes the lives of millions around the globe. The Middle East, in particular, is a region with significant migratory patterns, as individuals seek opportunities, stability and a better quality of life in host countries. Among the various forms of migration, return migration, where individuals decide to repatriate to their home countries, offers a unique lens through which we can understand the intricate interplay of economic, social and emotional factors that influence such decisions.

This case study explores the complex dynamics of return migration, specifically examining the experiences of Egyptian migrants who previously lived in Jordan. The migration of Egyptians to Jordan is recognised as a temporary occurrence, notwithstanding the fact that a significant number of them have established long-term residency there. Nevertheless, Jordan does not actively endorse the integration of these migrants nor grant them the chance to acquire Jordanian citizenship, which ultimately leads to their inevitable return to Egypt.

Through in-depth interviews, the study explores the motivations driving repatriation, the complex decision-making processes individuals navigate and the emotional responses upon returning to their homeland. Key themes include family reunification, aging and health concerns, employment conditions, financial objectives, emotional factors, community influence and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a nuanced interplay of factors shaping the migration journey and contribute valuable insights to the broader field of migration studies.

As the dynamics of migration continue to evolve, understanding the motivations behind return migration becomes crucial for policymakers, researchers, and communities alike. By exploring the specific case of Egyptian migrants in Jordan, this study not only contributes to the existing literature on return migration but also offers insights into the broader discourse on migration patterns in the Middle East.

In the sections that follow, we outline the preliminary findings of the study, unpacking motivations, decision-making processes, emotional responses, and future considerations that characterize the experiences of those who have chosen to return to Egypt. Through this exploration, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape the choices made by returning

migrants and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the intricacies of human mobility in the contemporary world.

Methodology

Sample Selection: The basis of this case study is derived from the insights obtained through interviews conducted with Egyptian migrants who previously resided in Jordan and made the decision to return to their home country. The sample comprises a total of 15 participants.

The interviews took place in three different locations: Dalga village and Mallwai City in the Minya Governorate, and Assiut city in Assiut Governorate. All of these locations are situated in Upper Egypt (Şa'īd Miṣr), the southern region of Egypt encompassing the Nile River valley south of the delta, which is the main source of Egyptian labourers in Jordan. The interviews were carried out by Egyptian researchers representing each region, employing the snowball method.

The study focuses on Egyptian workers who resided in Jordan for over a decade. Only two of the 15 participants spent less than 10 years (between 6-8 years) in Jordan. The aim of the study was to understand the distinctive difficulties and encounters associated with long-term migration. By honing in on this group, the study addresses a gap in existing research and explores the factors influencing the decision-making of individuals who have established a more extended presence in Jordan. The goal is to gain insights into how these long-term migrants contribute to both their personal development and that of their home country, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics associated with extended stays in the host country.

Background

Over the course of four decades, [Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan](#) have played a significant role, particularly in the service, agriculture, and construction sectors. Interviews with Ministry of Interior officials suggest an estimated 420,000 Egyptians are in Jordan, constituting the largest demographic among expatriate workers. Notably, the Ministry of Labour indicates that this figure might be conservative, with an actual count potentially surpassing 520,000. Of these, approximately 320,000 lack official documentation or work permits. The

migration is predominantly male, driven by the allure of economic opportunities and improved living standards in Jordan, juxtaposed against the challenging economic and social conditions in their home country.

Under the [Jordanian Residency and Foreigners Affairs Law No.24/1973](#), foreigners can obtain residency through specific circumstances. Notably, individuals with a work contract, those enrolled as students in Jordanian academic institutions, or those seeking to invest in approved commercial or industrial projects by the relevant ministries can secure residency. It is crucial to note that Egyptian workers lack the option to reside in Jordan upon cessation of work or retirement, aligning with the outlined residency criteria.

Moreover, acquiring Jordanian nationality is challenging due to Arab countries' reluctance to confer their nationality upon nationals of other Arab nations, primarily driven by political considerations. This reluctance is reflected in the nationality laws of Arab countries, which generally discourage dual nationality within the Arab League. For instance, [Jordan's Nationality Law No. 6/1954](#) stipulates that an Arab residing continuously in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for at least fifteen years can apply for citizenship, contingent on renouncing their original nationality with written approval from their home country, if permitted. Eligibility requirements encompass maintaining a positive reputation, having a legal source of income, mental soundness and pledging allegiance to His Majesty the King before a magistrate. This stance is reinforced by the [Arab League Convention on Nationality of 1954](#), explicitly stating that acquiring the nationality of another Arab League country necessitates government approval, leading to the loss of the previous nationality.

Furthermore, the policies that influence the situation of Egyptian workers in Jordan contribute to migrants choosing to return to Egypt. For instance, many Egyptians migrate to Jordan but are unable to bring their families along [due to various legal and administrative limitations and conditions](#), which, even if fulfilled, are frequently denied.

Given these restrictions, Egyptian workers find themselves compelled to return to their home country after years of employment in Jordan. The decision to return becomes an inevitable necessity, raising the pertinent question of when this return should take place.

Motivations for return

Family Reunification: A prevailing motivation for return among the participants was the desire for family reunification. The narratives highlighted the profound longing to be reunited with family members, especially children and spouses. One participant vividly expressed the emotional toll of being away from his children, emphasizing the transformative impact of family ties on the decision to return.

'The first time I came back, I found my boy walking and talking, and it was fine, of course. He said to his uncle, 'Dad.' When I came to look at him, he didn't see me. He didn't know me. But this life also affects a person's psyche, when your son no longer knows you. When I had my daughter with me, I found her

also growing up. So that's it; one has to settle down and be with his family in his country.'

- Egyptian returnee, 42, lived in Jordan for 6 years

It is important to note that there are policies in place that prohibit Egyptian workers from bringing their families with them to Jordan. As a result, the workers are left alone, which significantly contributes to their strong desire to return home. This paradox is evident to individuals who arrived in Jordan several years ago and successfully brought their families to reside with them. These individuals exhibit a significantly stronger inclination to establish roots and stay in Jordan compared to those who arrived alone.

"Sheikh Nasser have been there [Jordan] for about twenty years or thirty years, and with his children were born there and now they are studying in Jordanian universities, he doesn't want to come at all. He still makes money, and it means that God is pleased. He just loves the country there and tells you that this is a country he loves, and his children are with him. That's what made him stay, that his wife and children are with him. So, his family is with him, and God is providing for him, so he is working in the country for the future of his children. So, the man doesn't want to come to Egypt."

- Egyptian returnee migrant worker, 43, lived in Jordan for 10 years.

Despite these restrictions, some Egyptian men do not prefer to take their families with them to Jordan for various social reasons, including their own unwillingness to be separated from the extended family and live alone in Jordan.

"I couldn't leave my wife and family. Could I have taken her with me? Yes, I could have, but it wouldn't have been right to bring her to a foreign country. Like the Jordanians say, 'It's better to be close to the mud of your homeland than have a soft pillow.' This means that your people are more important to you. This is what made me come back, and honestly, it's a very nice country, and I've built a better life there."

- Egyptian returnee, 44, lived in Jordan for 20 years

Aging, Health Concerns and Social Norms: The factor of aging emerged as a significant motivator, with participants expressing concerns about health and physical capabilities as they advanced in age. The desire for accessible healthcare and assistance played a pivotal role in the decision to return.

A participant pointed to the contradiction between societal expectations of old age and the demands of semi-skilled work. This suggests that social norms dictate that older men should not engage in certain tasks, as it is deemed inappropriate for individuals of their age group. The participant's sons, who were employed alongside him in Jordan, perceived a misalignment between the social norms and expectations associated with aging and the job responsibilities assigned by their employer.

"My children told me, 'Dad, you've grown older, and we don't like anyone telling you to do this or that. Get up, wash this, wash the car.' It's like they're saying, it is time for you have your rest and whatever you need, we'll take care of it for you at home."

-Egyptian returnee, 65, lived in Jordan for 25 years.

Employment Conditions: Participants expressed dissatisfaction with job prospects in Jordan, highlighting the restricted demand in the labour market and conflicts with employers as recurring issues. For individuals who have resided in Jordan for an extended duration, the conflict with their employer serves as a definitive incentive to depart. However, this occurs only after they have accomplished certain objectives, particularly those pertaining to financial savings. Even if employers attempt to retain them, these individuals have already made a premeditated decision to return.

High cost of living: One of the reasons that motivated Egyptians to go back is the exorbitant cost of living in Jordan, coupled with the expensive work permits resulting from the exploitation of intermediaries and the prevalence of illegal trade contracts. This problem becomes apparent to newly arrived Egyptian immigrants. Conversely, individuals who arrived many years ago and resided there for a prolonged duration did not encounter comparable levels of exploitation based on their experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, a few participants cited this as an underlying factor.

"As you say, the situation has become tough here and there (Jordan and Egypt). Going to Jordan used to be easy, but life now has become contracts, and the contract now costs, it would cost you a hundred thousand (Egyptian pounds). Now, someone with a hundred thousand (Egyptian pounds) would tell you, 'What should I do (in Jordan)? Work here instead.'"

- Egyptian returnee, 65, lived in Jordan for 25 years.

Religious Motivations and Financial Objectives: One of the participants (Egyptian returnee, 39, lived in Jordan for 15 years) highlights the religious aspect as a motivation for migration. He cites some verses from the Holy Qur'an that urge striving in the land, earning a living and encouraging people to serve each other instead of remaining in their place. According to the Qur'an, if it were not for this striving and people pushing one another, the land would be corrupted. He says that a person must take reasons, and travel is one of the reasons that may succeed or fail. The participant also talked about his wife and how she pressured him to travel and save money like his peers who bought cars and built houses and villas. In addition, his children would ask him for a lot of things that he cannot fulfill. At the same time, he says that this is not bad, and it is not their fault, and he cites a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, "The upper hand is better than the lower hand," which indicates the virtue of giving and helping others.

Participants who had successfully achieved their financial goals saw the return to Egypt as an opportunity to invest in business ventures or undertake projects. Their view of what constitutes

financial stability played a crucial role in shaping the choices of individuals who could now afford to return and potentially contribute to their home communities.

Emotional Factors: Emotional factors, such as homesickness, a sense of belonging, and a yearning to be part of their home community, significantly influence on the decision-making process.

Participants expressed a desire to settle in their country, live a typical life, and be close to their cultural roots.

'I felt that I also wanted to settle in my country, have my family, and live the usual life that people live in my country.'

- Egyptian returnee, lived in Jordan for 10 years.

Community Influence: The decisions of returnees were significantly swayed by friends and relatives who had already returned to Egypt. The sense of isolation experienced by some participants following the departure of acquaintances and family members from Jordan prompted them to contemplate returning. The lack of social activities for Egyptian workers in Jordan can contribute to a spectrum of negative emotions and experiences, ultimately playing a pivotal role in influencing their choice to return to Egypt. Social activities can effectively address essential components such as social connection, support networks, cultural engagement, and information exchange, which are crucial for the well-being and decision-making of Egyptian workers in Jordan.. The absence of these elements can contribute to a profound sense of isolation and dissatisfaction, thereby prompting the decision to return home.

COVID-19 Pandemic: The global COVID-19 pandemic exerted an additional layer of influence on the decision-making process. Concerns regarding personal safety and a desire for closer proximity to family members in Egypt led some individuals to reconsider their stay in Jordan. Travel restrictions and precautionary measures resulted in prolonged stays for some participants, influencing their employment situations and ultimately their decision to return.

The decision to return

In this section, we will explore the decision-making process, emotional reactions, and future considerations that further define the experiences of these returnee migrants.

The decision-making process showcases a significant degree of autonomous agency. This autonomy was evident as individuals considered personal factors such as family ties, ageing concerns, employment conditions and financial objectives. While autonomy played a pivotal role, familial influence emerged as a prevalent motive, with family members occasionally urging participants to prolong their stay abroad due to several factors mainly concerning material gains and lack of opportunities in the home country. This dynamic highlighted the intricate balance between personal aspirations and familial expectations, introducing complexities into the decision-making process.

"Nobody can influence my decisions, not my father, not my mother, nor anyone else. What I see as

right in my life, I do without seeking anyone's opinion. For example, I may sell my car and buy another one without asking anyone's advice"

- Egyptian returnee, 44, lived in Jordan 20 years.

Peer and employer influence also played significant roles in shaping decisions, with peers advising caution and employers occasionally requesting extended stays. However, despite external pressures, several participants expressed unwavering determination rooted in thoughtful contemplation of the pros and cons, long-term implications, and personal aspirations. The decision to return was often a product of this reflective process, emphasising the non-impulsive nature of the choice.

Notably, the autonomy demonstrated by returnee migrants extended to rejecting employer requests for prolonged stays, underscoring the individualized nature of the decision-making process. The complexities inherent in this process were further highlighted as individuals grappled with varied emotional responses upon repatriation, ranging from contentment to remorse. This variation reflects the intricate interplay of personal, familial and external factors.

Emotional response after return

Upon return, the emotional responses among returnee migrants presented a diverse spectrum of experiences. Upon return, the emotional responses among returnee migrants varied.. For some, the homecoming brought great contentment and relief, especially among those who prioritized family reunification and felt a strong sense of belonging to their homeland.. The joy of reuniting with loved ones and the familiarity of cultural surroundings contributed to an overall positive emotional experience. In contrast, a subset of individuals grappled with feelings of remorse, especially when juxtaposing the economic prospects in Jordan with those in their home country. The perceived economic advantages abroad, a driving force for migration, created a complex emotional landscape upon return, requiring individuals to navigate the trade-offs between tangible economic considerations and the intangible aspects of life in their home country.

"The sense of estrangement has its own cost. Life isn't just about money. In Jordan, however, there's both financial stability and better psychological well-being compared to here. Yet, there's a sense of deprivation as you're far away from your family. This alone is worth a lot; missing out on seeing your children grow is a significant sacrifice. When you have a tired parent whom you can't see, that is also worth millions. Of course, living there financially is much better than here in Egypt."

- Egyptian returnee, 38, lived in Jordan 11 years.

Family dynamics shape emotional responses, with those returning primarily for family reunification often experiencing deep emotional connections and fulfillment. However, individuals returning due to external pressures, such as familial requests or societal expectations, sometimes encountered emotional challenges, particularly when these

expectations misaligned with their personal aspirations. The emotional response to repatriation prompted reflective processes, including assessments of personal growth, the impact of migration on familial relationships, and considerations of broader societal expectations influencing their decisions.

The subsequent challenge for returnee migrants involved navigating shifts in cultural identity and personal growth experienced during their time abroad, with some seamlessly reintegrating while others grappled with adapting to changes in societal norms and personal perspectives. The emotional landscape further highlighted a delicate balance between regret and fulfillment, as individuals weighed satisfaction from family reunification, reconnection with cultural roots, and pursuit of personal aspirations against perceived sacrifices in economic opportunities and career trajectories. Despite these emotional challenges, the resilience and adaptability of returnee migrants were evident, showcasing their capacity to navigate the complexities of repatriation, confront emotional dilemmas, and forge new paths in their dynamic return migration journey.

While older returnee migrants long for Jordan, they feel they cannot return or that they only want to visit rather than work. Similar views were held by those who returned to find a job opportunity in Egypt. One of the returnee migrants was an older man (75 years). He was working in Jordan alone while his family remained in Egypt. He returned to Egypt after growing older, but he began to cry because of his longing for Jordan, where he spent more than 35 years, and where he hopes to return and spend the rest of his life there:

"I want to go back; I want to go and die and be buried there [Jordan]. I felt the separation from my siblings, all of them, whom I consider my brothers and sisters, and until now, I am affected. The people I worked with are kind, their children were young, and I raised them. Until now, they hold me dear in their eyes. The parting is difficult, and I swear to God, I am affected. Until now, I am attached to their traditional head covering (Shemagh). I swear to God, we were like siblings, all of us, living together as family and relatives, and their country is beautiful."

Some of the returnee migrants also keep in touch with their employers, with some even visiting their former employees in their villages in Egypt, whether during their temporary vacations or even after their final return. One of the returning immigrants hosted his employer, a businessman, in his village, who later built a mosque in the village.

Future considerations

Return to the Host Country: Several participants expressed the potential of returning to the host country, emphasising the conditional nature of their decisions. The willingness to return was contingent on overcoming specific obstacles, such as acquiring work permits or improved financial circumstances. The consideration of a potential return highlighted the fluidity of the migration experience, where individuals viewed their journey as an ongoing process rather than a definitive endpoint.

The majority of respondents who expressed their intention to return to Jordan did so because they were unable to find employment opportunities in Egypt or were stranded there during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"When I stayed in Egypt, honestly, I mean to be frank, yes, yes, I was shattered. I was shattered, meaning I didn't have, I didn't have a source of income, I can't apply for a job. I don't have the age advantage; I mean. They hire men in their twenties and thirties. But I entered my forties, I have no chance. I didn't benefit from Egypt. I benefited from abroad. Lebanon, Jordan."

- Egyptian returnee, 44, lived in Jordan for 20 years.

Participants are cognizant of the barriers that restrict a possible return to Jordan, such as bureaucratic hurdles associated with work permits and the necessity to improve financial conditions. Participants recognised that overcoming these obstacles would necessitate deliberate and proactive actions. The recognition of these challenges underscored the pragmatism with which returnee migrants approached their future considerations.

Reintegration and Re-establishment: For those contemplating a return to Jordan, the prospect involved considerations of reintegration and re-establishment. Participants envisioned scenarios where overcoming obstacles would lead to a resumption of their previous lives, with a potential for renewed employment, social connections and a continuation of the lifestyle they had temporarily left behind. The desire for a seamless transition highlighted the importance of stability and familiarity in their future plans.

While individuals expressed aspirations for a potential return, they also acknowledged the influence of external factors beyond their control. Economic conditions, geopolitical developments, and global events could significantly impact the feasibility of returning to the host country. The recognition of these external influences tempered the optimism of some participants, adding an element of uncertainty to their future considerations.

Exploration of Entrepreneurial Ventures: Some returnee migrants contemplated engagement in entrepreneurial ventures or projects in their home country. The financial stability achieved abroad provided them with a platform to explore business opportunities and contribute to local development. This entrepreneurial spirit reflected a proactive approach to leveraging their experiences and resources for the betterment of their communities.

Conclusion of the migration journey: For a subset of individuals, the return to Egypt marked the conclusion of their migration journey. The decision to repatriate was accompanied by a sense of fulfillment, with individuals embracing their roles as integral members of their original communities. This perspective signaled a transition from a transient

phase of migration to a more settled and rooted existence, emphasising the transformative nature of return migration.

Conclusion

In examining the return migration experiences of Egyptian migrants in Jordan, this case study offers a nuanced understanding of the motivations, decision-making processes, emotional responses, and future considerations that characterize their journeys. The intricate interplay of factors such as family reunification, aging and health concerns, employment conditions, financial objectives, emotional ties, community influence, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been explored, highlighting the complexity of return migration.

Emotional responses upon repatriation underscored the varied experiences, ranging from contentment and fulfillment to remorse and economic comparisons. The emotional landscape revealed the profound impact of family dynamics, societal expectations, and the process of cultural and identity shifts. Future considerations reflected a dynamic perspective, with individuals contemplating potential returns to Jordan, acknowledging obstacles, and expressing a commitment to contribute to their home country in various capacities.

In conclusion, the return migration experiences presented in this case study contribute to the broader discourse on migration studies. The findings emphasise the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multi-dimensional factors that influence the migration journey, extending beyond economic considerations to encompass familial, emotional, and societal dimensions. Recognising the fluidity of return migration as an ongoing process allows for a more holistic interpretation of the experiences of individuals navigating between multiple cultural and social contexts.

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