

# Transnational Academic Mobility: Experience of Arab Social Scientists

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The paper is concerned with the trajectory of Arab scholars teaching and researching outside the Arab region. There is scant literature about the phenomena in which Arab scholars leave the region to universities mainly based in Europe and North America. Contemporary transnational academic mobility hinges first on the expansion of Western universities, or what is referred to as internationalization, and second on the strategic action of institutions aiming to attract international scholars to improve their academic assets, relying on the scholars' choice to permanently relocate as migrants (Pherali, 2012, 314).

The purpose of this paper is to underline the career trajectory of Arab mobile social scientists and humanists and their nature of engagement with the Arab world. In this article, mobility refers to cross-border mobility. I define "mobile academics" as well-established social scientists and humanists, who are currently based outside the Arab region but whose research in the realm of social sciences and humanities focuses on Arab countries.

This paper adopts a qualitative strategy, a case study design, and unstructured interviewing using the life history method. The article draws on an exploratory study examining the trajectory of Arab academics, their engagement with the Arab world as well as key mobility enablers, benefits and constraints by examining the case of 15 Arab scholars who are currently based outside the Arab world. The form of sampling is purposive sampling whereby respondents are selected on the basis of their relevance to the research objectives. The data was collected qualitatively through unstructured interviews. The data was analyzed thematically by developing concepts, categories, and themes which emerged from the narratives of participants. This research aims to debunk the trajectory of these participants based on their own narrative.

In the following sections, I begin historicizing academic mobility. Then I discuss mobility as an academic practice while focusing on mobility motives, enablers and constraints. I conclude with reflections on the research questions and proposals for further research.

## 1. Mobility Motives: The Role of International Politics and Neoliberal Policies

The mobility of scholars across borders is not a new phenomenon and has always been a core aspect of academia. Academic mobility was pervasive in Ancient Greece, while the

Arab scientific community and the medieval university system in Europe were characterized by larger transnational communities of scholars compared to then modern universities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century for instance, places such as Andalusia and the Mediterranean region encouraged intellectual exchange between Christians, Jews and Muslims. In Europe's Middle Ages, teachers were recruited transnationally and depended on student fees and governing. This was reflected during the colonial era, and in contemporary times of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries however this time governed by borders and immigration regulations (Kim, 2009, 388).

With the expansion of imperial European powers, universities became state institutions in Europe, but also in their colonies, which significantly shaped and framed cross-border academic mobility. During this colonial period, the transfer of knowledge was done through the academic realms in overseas colonies. In North America for instance, universities were modeled after Oxford and Cambridge and university academics were recruited from Britain. These academic expatriates considered their entry to the British colonial universities as entry in the British colonial government service. In Latin America, universities were staffed with European scholars (Kim, 2009, 389).

On that score, Terri Kim posits that in addition to individual choices and decisions, academic mobility is often framed and shaped "by regional and international political and economic relations of power in specific times, and also affected by non-government actors (such as work of Foundations)". For example, a certain pattern of academic mobility was identified during the First and Second World Wars when German and Austrian scientists migrated to the US and UK. A significant share of transatlantic mobility was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the International Education Board. After the Second World War, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed flows of transnational academic mobility following the end of the British Empire and the competition between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War, the rise of the European Union, and the global "War on Terror" have significantly shaped academic mobility and migration (Kim, 2009, 392-394).

Drawing upon the impact of international politics on academic mobility during the Cold War period, it is possible to briefly sketch the impact of international politics on transnational mobility of Arab academics in general and on the South-North migration in particular. In the 1960s and 1970s Arab scholars, especially in social sciences and humanities traditionally moved within the Arab region between Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, while progressive Arab regimes fostered and actively funded this type of regional mobility. After the 1970s, the crisis of the progressive nationalist model hindered this type of mobility and colonial centers such as the UK and France were increasingly favored as a destination of mobile academics. In turn, as scholarly research conducted by mobile academics in overseas colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century developed new fields of knowledge in social sciences and humanities, the transnational academic mobility of

Arab scholars to old centers of colonies achieved significant adjustments in social sciences to address and research local problems of the region (Interview).

Today transnational mobility is taking place on a new scale and frequency and is endowed with new motives and actors. According to Kim, contemporary patterns of academic mobility are different from the past and the current strong flows are affected by the following factors: "(1) neoliberal market principles, filtered through (2) the globalisation of corporate university governance and management, and (3) the continuing brain drain/brain gain policy discourse at both international and regional levels" (Kim, 2009, 400). These factors and forces have implied a larger market opportunity in Western universities.

Against these factors, interview scholars revealed that the limited opportunities of permanent lectureship or professorship in the Arab region is identified as one of the core motives of academic migration mainly to the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK. More specifically, interviews with Arab scholars revealed that many academics often find it difficult to gain permanent lectureship in the Arab region and are trapped in hourly paid part-time jobs or working under short-term contracts. It has been reported that the experience of Arab scholars in the Arab region is marred by the lack of institutionalization of hiring procedures and the prevalence of politics in the hiring practices and procedures.

Moreover, drawing upon the nature of academic research and the importance of research partnerships and empirical research evidence (Morano-Foadi, 2005), academic researchers tend to have additional opportunities to move compared to those who mainly teach. When asked about their motives to migrate, most of interviewed scholars mentioned the need for research funding opportunities, which are mainly available in Western-based institutions. One can conclude that the scholars' decision to migrate is influenced by governmental and institutional policies that aim for the proliferation of knowledge production. In the US, the Fulbright Foundation annually funds 1,200 US scholars and 900 visiting scholars. Other funding agencies, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Ford Foundation train international academics and fund international research projects.

Conversely, knowledge production or transfer of knowledge does not constitute a funding priority in most institutions in the Arab region and in turn research funding remains scant in the region. In general, Arab scholars usually pursue their first research funding experience through a fellowship grant. Once scholars have published the fellowship-related publication, the permanent residency or full-time lectureship in Western institutions becomes more accessible.

Another important motive for academic migration is the repulsion factor. At the moment, the principle of repulsion that started with the Cold War period, is pervasive: "In some countries, academics are persecuted with violence, and occasionally through more subtle pressures. The process has been documented. The list of chauvinisms is long – and of course intolerance and discrimination have not disappeared by any means" (Kim, 2009,

399). It was reported by several interviewed scholars that the main reason for their transnational mobility is conflict and violence in their country of origin including Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. Limited freedom of speech and limitations on other freedoms in the region is another reason for departure.

## 2. Mobility Enablers: Social and Cultural Capital

The previous section focused on political configurations and institutional structures that frame academic mobility. In this section however, the article aims to shed light on the enablers of academic labor mobility of Arab scholars. According to Harald Bauder, while academic mobility exposes scholars to new environments, triggers creativity, and fosters knowledge production, literature pertaining to transnational academic mobility rarely examines the labor mobility of scholars as migrants, taking into account their social and cultural contexts and employment conditions (Bauder, 2015, 1).

When asked about the most vital enablers that facilitated their migration from the Arab region to institutions in the Global North, most interviewed participants cited the importance of cultural and social capital as being the key enablers that facilitated their mobility. Most of interviewed scholars have at least one degree from an international institution. This international exposure played a key role in achieving their transnational mobility. Another related factor is their fluency in a foreign language that is considered as a *sine qua non* condition for their mobility.

Another important enabler mentioned by almost all interviewees is the social and academic network of scholars. The network with academic institutions and scholars whether in country of origin or country of destination is considered as a key-enabler for academic mobility as it opened the door for recruitment and employment practices in international institutions. Academic networks tend to be expanded and cultivated through mainly professional training at home institutions but also short-term research contracts, conference participation, and partnership with institutions overseas.

## 3. Mobility Constraints

According to Morano-Faodi, academics tend to “perceive mobility as somehow necessary to career progression in science, as part of ‘excellence’ requirement” (Morano-Faodi, 2005, 145). However according to Bauder, there is no evidence today of the scientific benefits of mobility in terms of increasing competitiveness and exploitation of results. According to Louise Ackers “it is clear that the *quality* of the mobility experience is often less important than the *fact* of mobility” (2008:420). According to Ulrich Teichler (1996:347), “literature has a tendency to uncritically valorize mobility and to neglect its dark aspects”. “Like other dark workplaces, academia experiences trends towards neoliberal labour practices, including labour flexibilization, increasing competition, eroding tenure systems, declining wages and the segmentation of academic labour” (AUCC, 2003 in Bauder, 2015, 9).

On that score, increasing job opportunities in countries of destination such as the US, the UK, and Canada are often coupled, and due to the factors and forces mentioned above, with increasing job insecurity: "There is increasingly short-term contract-based employment; and professors negotiate their salaries individually with their institutions rather than simply following standardized national scales" (Kim, 2009, 394). Precarious mobility tends to be prevalent while secure mobility becomes more difficult to achieve.

In that context, it is important to note that mobile Arab scholars tend to first encounter precarious mobility and not necessarily the purported secure one. With the lack of long-term prospects, Arab academics tend to first pad their CV with several fellowships and are affiliated to different centers at the same time. In fact, multiple affiliations have become possible by being employed by two or more institutions simultaneously in transnational research projects and with different types of tailored contracts. However, these short-term contract researchers are jammed in this precarious type of modality and overwhelmed with several affiliations and in turn unable, with so many engagements, to focus on publishing, which is the most substantial requirement of stable mobility.

While academic mobility is uncritically valorized and tends to be perceived as a way to upward social mobility (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017, 1241), recent scholarship focuses on the role academic mobility plays in producing and reproducing inequalities and intensifying "social differences within the globalizing higher education system" (Findlay et al., 2012, 16). According to Basak Bilecen and Christof Van Mol, academic mobility constitutes a central field for "understanding the ways in which social inequalities are produced and reproduced" (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017, 1241).

According to Bourdieu, academic mobility endows scholars with access to institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Academic experience at a foreign university or transnational academic mobility can denote an "institutionalized form of cultural capital" or what Ackers refers to as "reputational capital" (2008). International experience allows mobile academics to get familiarized with international academic conventions and codes of conduct and improve lecturing performances. This international exposure also leads to accumulation of social capital by extending networks, social contacts, and institutional ties and enables scholars to increase their contacts to colleagues and institutions abroad.

In turn, interviewed Arab mobile scholars raised the issue of imbalanced power relations and the reproduction of existing power relations in knowledge production. One interviewee revealed that the international experience and funding opportunities available in the US exacerbates inequality with her Iraqi colleagues: "It makes my work with my colleagues in Iraq more difficult and also creates imbalanced power relations between me and them: I have way more access to grants, fellowships and all kinds of resources and my academic life is very comfortable. With my French passport, I can easily get visas anywhere, while my Iraqi colleagues can't" (...) "this creates a huge imbalance between me and them: I get the exposure, my work circulates, I get invited to conferences and to

participate to edited volumes etc., while they do not". Moreover, "the darkest aspects of this mobility is the reproduction of existing power relations between scholars: a paper published in English in a US academic journal will circulate more, have more impact than a paper written in Arabic in an Iraqi (or Arab) academic journal".

Another constraint consists of gender related differences in academic mobility. One main aspect shaping academic mobility is that female academics are less transnationally mobile than their male colleagues (Bauder, 2015, 4). In the US, 64.4 percent of international scholars are men and only 35.6 percent are women (Institute of International Education).

While there is a lack of data pertaining to the mobility of Arab female scholars, interviews with Arab scholars revealed, in line with the above-mentioned general pattern, mobile female Arab academics are often disadvantaged and constrained in their mobility due to double career families. More specifically, mobile female Arab academics tend to follow their partners in their professional mobility at the expense of their own academic mobility and path. In fact, an interviewed female scholar explained that one may enter the academic realm with the perception that it is a stable profession whereby a full-time professorship or lectureship will imply geographic stability. However, with the prevalence of mobility and its connotation of prestige and credibility, women often find themselves unable to pursue transnational mobility mainly due to dual family careers as well as family obligations, as child rearing remains heavily centered around women (Jons 2011). The role and importance of mobility in the academic realm and the limited flexibility of female scholars, may hinder their career advancement of the latter, knowing that academic mobility is significantly intertwined with academic credibility and prestige. Nevertheless, it should be noted that migration tends to be "feminized" in low-skilled labor strata (Sassen, 2000) as opposed to the academic field where gender-related obstacles have led to limited labor valorization through mobility and an under-representation of female international scholars.

Finally, interviewed scholars have reported the impact of the prevalence of academic mobility and its link to credibility and prestige on environmental sustainability. "People are so obsessed with conferences" without however taking into account the ecological footprints of such mobility. Academic mobility may imply unnecessary ecological footprints when the quality of the movement is not carefully assessed versus its quality. In fact, interviews revealed that excessive mobility may hinder publication.

#### **4. Lackluster Partnership**

Most interviewed scholars reported the lack of partnership with institutions in the Arab region and limited knowledge of available partnerships. However, they have all reported a consistent and continuous movement towards the Arab region. Their engagement with the Arab world mostly consist of family visits, fieldwork, conference participation or guest lecturing. The visits also aim at reinforcing the academic network with institutions and scholars that are affected and weakened by their residence overseas. The same

interviewee explained: "Being based outside the Arab world, especially in the USA, disconnects me from the everyday realities in Iraq, it makes my work with my colleagues in Iraq more difficult".

## 5. Recommendations

As discussed, academic mobility is intertwined with credibility, prestige, and career advancement. On that score, to foster the academic mobility of Arab scholars, it is necessary to establish professional trainings that will endow scholars with the research methods and techniques compatible with foreign institutions, which will ease the transition outside the Arab region.

There is a quasi-consensus on the importance of fostering South-South academic mobility. It is recommended to undertake the mapping and identification of potential key partners in the Global South, such as Latin America. The purpose is to foster knowledge production on and from the Global South. Nevertheless, the question remains how can we bring knowledge production back to this region when we are using definitions and concepts born and raised in the Global North?

## 6. Conclusion

This article is an attempt to trace two main patterns of transnational academic mobility. The first one pertains to academic expansion mainly framed by international politics and business motives. This pattern requires the recruitment of international academics for teaching and research assignments. On that level, the article highlights the impact of neo-liberalization and globalization on academic mobility as well as the push factors. The second pattern focuses on the individual choice of academics to migrate from the Arab region while shedding light on the enablers of this movement and purported benefits. The article also tried to take a critical approach to academic mobility by identifying underlying drawbacks or dark sides of its pervasiveness in respect to career advancement, including the role of academic mobility in the production and reproduction of inequality. Finally, in order to better gauge the phenomenon of transnational academic mobility of Arab scholars, additional research is needed to tackle quantitatively contemporary predominant trends and patterns.

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