ABSTRACT: Should I stay or should I go? The effects of Arab Spring and Economic Crisis on Return intentions of Egyptian and Moroccans living in Italy

Elena Ambrosetti* (Sapienza University of Rome), Eralba Cela (Polytechnic University of Marche), Tineke Fokkema (Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute), Angela Paparusso (Sapienza University of Rome), Viviana Premazzi (University of Milan and International and European Forum of Migration Research - FIERI)

Introduction

According to Istat, immigrants from North Africa are among the largest immigrant groups in Italy. Moroccans and Tunisians are the first two communities, followed by Egyptians. Moroccan and Egyptian residents in Italy are respectively 501,610 and 90,365 according to ISTAT statistics of 1st January 2011.

The history of migration to Italy of the two communities is different in some aspects. The first Moroccan immigrants in Italy were adult males who arrived without their families to Italy and who carried out activities of street trade. They arrived in Italy during the 1970s and the 1980s. A part of them lived between Italy and Morocco, travelling back and forth, and considering the trade as a seasonal business. Due to the increasing difficulties in renewing the residence permit, and even only to get a visa to return to Italy, they were subsequently forced to choose whether to stay in the country of emigration or to return permanently to their homeland. Since the regularization of 1986 and during the 1990s, most Moroccans have entered progressively in industrial, construction, agriculture and services’ sector. Consequently, they have moved to the regions where there has been labor demand. In the early 1990s, Moroccan minors arrived in Italy to help their fathers as street sellers. Apart from this immigration of children, there were also young men, informally entrusted to relatives and countrymen of their parents, who trusted to provide a professional future for the young people. At the same time, to lay the foundations of economic assistance for their old age. Family reunification, started since the 2000s, has resulted in new flows of immigrants and contributed to the growth of the Moroccan community in Italy and to its settlement (Allasino & Ricucci, 2006). Many Moroccan immigrants have clearly expressed the intention to stay for a long time in Italy. For some of them, especially the young people growing up in Italy, this choice will almost certainly be a permanent stay. Accordingly, the Moroccan community is one of the first immigrant group to face, with a large proportion of second generation and the aging of its members, features of an established community in Italy.

* Corresponding author: elena.ambrosetti@uniroma1.it
Italy is the major destination for Egyptians in Europe. Mass migration of Egyptians to Italy started at the end of the 1990s. This trend has constantly increased during the last decade. Egyptians are concentrated in a few Italian regions, especially in the Northern regions and Latium (Rome region). They are mostly employed in the trade sector (fruits and vegetables sellers, small restaurant owners, flowers sellers). Similar to the case of Moroccans, at the beginning it was a male predominant migration, later women arrived for family reunification. Till now, the Egyptian community is predominantly male based with a sex ratio of 228%. However, a high percentage of Egyptian families is now present in Italy due to a process of gradual settlement of the community, which has led to the birth of a second generation.

Generally, the first-generation migrants' links with the extended family in Egypt remain strong. While they are economically and social-culturally integrated into the Italian society, they continue to be strongly linked to the country of origin in cultural and social terms (CeSPI, 2005). With regard to the idea of returning, temporarily or permanently, however, there is a general ambivalence: many of them seem to cultivate a myth of return, perhaps going back home when retired or once the children have reached a certain economic stability (Ricucci, 2010). Moreover, the phenomenon of return migration differs by generation, the more stronger among first-generation migrants, and could be “gender specific”, i.e. women being less oriented than men to return to the home country (de Haas & Fokkema, 2010).

Return migration has different paths for first- and second-generation migrants. According to a common argument, in fact, the ethnic ties and the intensity of border-crossing should be reduced in the shift between generations. Nevertheless, recently Ambrosini (2008) invited consideration of the second generation as a “transnationalism test”. Studies from as far apart as Boston, Massachusetts and Senegal (Leichtman, 2005; Levitt, 2001; 2002) have found in fact that immigrant transnationalism is not a phenomenon confined to the first generation, but it can extend to the second and subsequent generations. Moreover, a rapid and successful integration does not preclude the second generation from engaging in a range of transnational/diasporic activities linking them back to their ‘home’ country (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005).

Family issues are not the only factors that influence the ‘stay-or-return’ decision. There are also associated considerations and decisions related to the constraints and opportunities that could arise in the two contexts of origin and destination. In particular, according to neoclassical migration theory, the more migrants are integrated economically and social-culturally in the destination country, the weaker the link with the country of origin, and the less the likelihood to return to the
home country (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Massey et al., 1998; de Haas & Fokkema, 2011). By contrast, segmented assimilation theory and the broader literature on transnationalism consider integration and bonds with countries of origin as complementary rather than incompatible (Portes et al., 1999; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Accordingly, return migration can also be the outflow of successful integration in receiving countries (de Haas & Fokkema, 2011).

In the particular context of Arab Spring, we can assume that in the European destination countries, mass migration from Southern Mediterranean countries following the uprising did not occurred as announced by the media. The main consequences in terms of migration and mobility happened in the countries of origin that received a large number of displaced persons and return migrants from neighboring countries (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012; Fargues, 2012). For instance, during spring and summer 2011, about 1,128,985 people escaped war from Libya to Tunisia, Egypt, Niger, Algeria, Chad and Sudan (IOM, 2011). Almost two years after the beginning of the Arab Spring, the political and economic situation in the countries of origin is still of great incertitude. As a consequence, we can hypothesize that return to these countries may be partially discouraged by the present situation. This could be in fact influenced by the different migratory projects: those who already decided to come back, will maybe postpone their return, while those who didn’t decided yet, will maybe be less motivated because of the political and economic instability.

Another factor that could influence return intentions is the economic situation in Italy: global economic crisis that affected Italy since 2008 had in general a weak impact on migration (Ambrosetti, 2009). Only a small part of migrants left Italy since 2008: since the beginning of the crisis, data from migration flows (Istat) shows that the number of entries of migrants has always been higher than the number of exits. However, if the crisis persists, migrants might change their future intention to stay in Italy.

**Research aim and questions**

This paper aims to explore the return migration intentions of first and second generations of Moroccans and Egyptians, taking into account the consequences of the Arab Spring and the current economic crisis for the aspiration to return to Egypt and Morocco: does those two factors have become an important factor in the ‘stay-or-return’ dilemma? And if so, do the changing circumstances in Italy, Morocco and Egypt either encourage or hinder a return? What is the impact of migrants’ integration and transnational ties on this decision? Are there striking differences between the first and second generation and between men and women?
As alternative and competing hypotheses are possible regarding the relationships between return intentions, integration and transnationalism, the study will be explorative in nature; no specific hypotheses have been formulated beforehand.

By exploring the effect of Arab Spring and the economic crisis in Italy on ‘stay-or-return’ we will take into account the mediating role of transnational ties and integration levels. We will compare the perspectives of the first and second generation and the perspectives of men and women.

Data and Methods
This paper benefits from some of the results of a broader project called “Transmediterraneans. North African Communities in Piedmont, between continuity and change” that FIERI is carrying out with the support of the Compagnia di San Paolo foundation. Qualitative face-to-face interviews were realized with Moroccan migrants living in the cities of Turin, Rome and Ancona and with Egyptian migrants living in the cities of Turin and Rome. Sampling was done according to gender, age, birth place and year of arrival in Italy. Accordingly, the interviews were grouped as follows: “old pioneers” (men who arrived more than 20 years ago), first-generation women who arrived for marriages or to re-join husbands, “new pioneers” (men who recently arrived alone), and second-generation youths (over 18 years old, born in Italy from Egyptian/Moroccans parents or who arrived in Italy as infants).

Interviews were done in Italian and lasted an average of 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted under a semi-structured outline that included various aspects of life: arrival, sense of community, intergenerational relationships, transnational ties with Egypt, new media use.

Preliminary results
Recent changes in political life in Egypt have awakened among both first- and second-generation immigrants a sense of belonging that had been worn away over time. Among first and second-generation of immigrants there were support and mobilizing activities, for example, organizing voting procedures. A few people have returned to Egypt to participate in the protest movements and to be closer to their family members but most of the migrants remain sceptical on the possibilities to going back to Egypt and to develop business activities. Several second-generation young people have shown an emotional participation and interest in the Egyptian events and rediscovered their pride of being Egyptian. The way in which this situation will evolve will depend on both the diaspora commitment and the institutional initiatives promoted by the Egyptian government to involve and enhance Egyptians abroad (first and second generation).
Second-generation migrants' ties with Egypt are in most of the cases extremely different from those of their parents and almost none of the people interviewed intend to return to live permanently in their country of origin.

Because of the economic crisis, we met few cases of Moroccans, who have obtained Italian citizenship and who intend to move away from Italy, not to return to Morocco but to move to other EU countries with good job opportunities and a more generous welfare state. The return to the country of origin due to the economic crisis in Italy seems rarely to be an option; a lot of migrants will stay in Italy to give their children good education. Those who have greater economic capital and have accomplished a successful process of social integration, become transnational actors, looking for other ways, that lead to an entrepreneurial project in the country of origin or to a new migration in other European countries, where they can benefit from the Italian experience and, even, from the Italian citizenship.

The idea of the return rarely becomes a concrete choice. It seems to be more an idea than a concrete plan or fulfillment and it almost never appears as an uniform and definitive decision. Anyway it is worth pointing out that they speak about returns, that there are rumors around return projects (and sometimes it happens). Moreover, beyond the actual small size of the phenomenon, we are facing a loss of human capital for the Italian system, which are generally the better equipped human capital: those who speak Italian, who are better integrated, who have acquired (or recovered) skills and professionalism. Therefore the return seems to be a success instead of a failure for Moroccans migrants.

References


International Organisation of Migration (IOM) online database: [http://www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)

Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat) online database: [http://demo.istat.it](http://demo.istat.it)


