

Majd Abuamer\*

## What Do Arabs Think About When They Think About Migration? Insights from the Arab Opinion Index (2011-2022)\*\*

### فِيمَ يفكر من يفكر في الهجرة؟ إجابات من المؤشر العربي (2022-2011)

**Abstract:** This paper examines Arab public opinion trends on migration based on data from eight Arab Opinion Index surveys conducted annually by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in 14 Arab countries in 2011 and 2022. It explores the desire to migrate, the motives behind migration, and the preferred destination. The findings reveal that around a quarter of Arab citizens have consistently expressed a desire to migrate over the past 12 years, with higher interest recorded among the youth compared to older age groups, men compared to women, and those with at least a secondary school education compared to those with lower education levels. The paper highlights economic conditions as the primary motivation for migration. Additionally, it shows that half of those wishing to migrate select Europe and the Arab Gulf countries as their preferred destinations.

**Keywords:** Arab Public Opinion; Arab Opinion Index; Migration; Youth; Arab Countries.

**الملخص:** تهدف هذه الورقة إلى قراءة اتجاهات الرأي العام في المنطقة العربية نحو الهجرة، من خلال استطلاعات المؤشر العربي الثمانية التي نفذها المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات دورياً في 14 بلداً عربياً خلال الفترة 2011-2022، وذلك عبر ثلاثة محاور رئيسية: الرغبة في الهجرة، ودوافع التفكير في الهجرة، ووجهة الهجرة المفضلة. وتبين النتائج أن ربع مواطني المنطقة العربية يرغبون في الهجرة بنسبة شبه ثابتة على مدار الاثنتي عشرة سنة الأخيرة، مع ارتفاع هذه النسبة لدى الشباب مقارنةً بالفئات العمرية الأكبر سناً، ولدى الرجال مقارنةً بالنساء، ولدى الحاصلين على مستوى تعليمي ثانوي فأكثر مقارنةً بالحاصلين على مستويات تعليمية أدنى. وتظهر الورقة أن تحسين الأوضاع الاقتصادية ما زال العامل الأهم في تفكير مواطني المنطقة العربية في الهجرة، وأن نصف الراغبين فيها يفضلون أن تكون هجرتهم إلى بلدانٍ أوروبية ودول الخليج العربية.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الرأي العام العربي؛ المؤشر العربي؛ الهجرة؛ الشباب؛ البلدان العربية.

\* Researcher, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Email: majd.abuamer@dohainstitute.edu.qa

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## Introduction

“We are all becoming migrants”, states Thomas Neill in *The Figure of the Migrant*, reflecting on the unprecedented increase in regional and international migration, rendering our time “the century of the migrant”.<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of the third millennium, the Arab region has experienced repeated waves of migration driven by episodes of violence, internal wars, and deteriorating economic, security, and political conditions in many countries. From 1990 to 2020, the number of Arab migrants and refugees surged from approximately 10.8 to 32.8 million – an increase of 203% over three decades.<sup>2</sup> This figure encompasses internally displaced persons, regional and international migrants (permanent and temporary),<sup>3</sup> economic migrants, refugees, those fleeing for political and security reasons, and the forcibly displaced.

Among the most significant trends in Arab migration are forced migration and youth (aged 18-24) migration. The latter includes the migration of Palestinian youth since the Nakba in 1967, Lebanese youth since the civil war in 1975, Iraqi youth under authoritarian repression and the chaos that followed the US occupation of Iraq. Add to this Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan youth who have migrated due to authoritarian rule and economic hardship. More recently, Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni youth have been forced to migrate after peaceful protests in their countries devolved into internal wars.

Furthermore, a significant number of Arabs express a desire to migrate. Although these potential migrants are not captured in official figures, their views on migration can be gauged through public opinion polls. Such polls not only help us understand the dynamics of migration but also provide valuable insights into their conditions and the broader socio-economic and political circumstances in their countries that shape their desire to migrate.

This paper examines trends in Arab public opinion on migration, focusing on Arab citizens’ responses to three questions: “Would you like to emigrate?”, “what is the main factor that would prompt you to emigrate?”, and “to which country would you like to emigrate?” This analysis is based on Arab Opinion Index (AOI) data from eight public polls conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies between 2011 and 2022, covering 14 Arab countries.<sup>4</sup>

## Desire to Migrate in the Arab World: An Overview

The question, “Would you like to emigrate?” was posed to a representative sample of 180,911 Arab citizens over the last 12 years. According to the results of the 2022 AOI, 28% of respondents expressed a desire or intention to emigrate, marking the highest percentage recorded in the survey’s history. Previous findings showed the same among 22% in 2019/2020; 26% in 2017/2018; 24% in 2016; 23% in 2015; 22% in both 2012/2013 and 2014; and 24% in 2011. These figures reflect relatively minor fluctuations, with the percentage of Arabs wishing to emigrate ranging from 22% to 28%. Although these variations are statistically insignificant, the overall consistency of the figures – along with their rise in the most recent survey – suggests that the percentage of Arabs hoping to emigrate, currently around one-quarter of the population, may exceed one-third in the coming years.

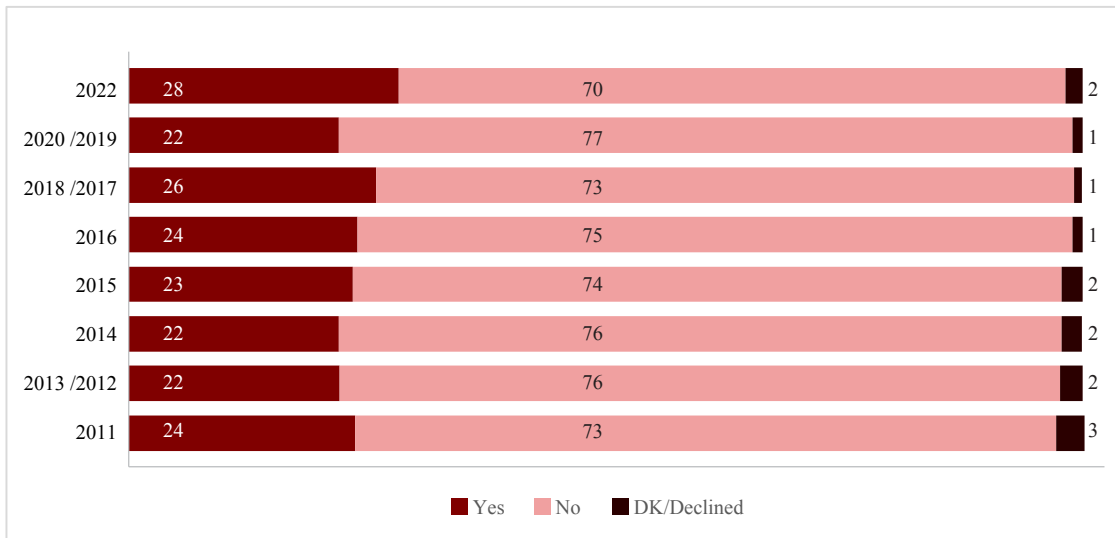
<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), *Situation Report on International Migration 2021: Building forward Better for Migrants and Refugees in the Arab Region* (Beirut: ESCWA Publications, 2022), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations defines an international migrant as “any person who has changed his or her country of usual residence”. It distinguishes between short-term migrants, who have changed their countries of usual residence for at least three months, but less than one year, and long-term migrants, who have done so for at least one year. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: 2021), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> The Arab Opinion Index is a comprehensive tool designed to capture trends in public opinion on a set of economic, social, and political issues across the Arab world. To view the Arab Index reports and data, see: ACRPS, “Arab Opinion Index Program,” accessed on 12/14/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2jzaxumr>

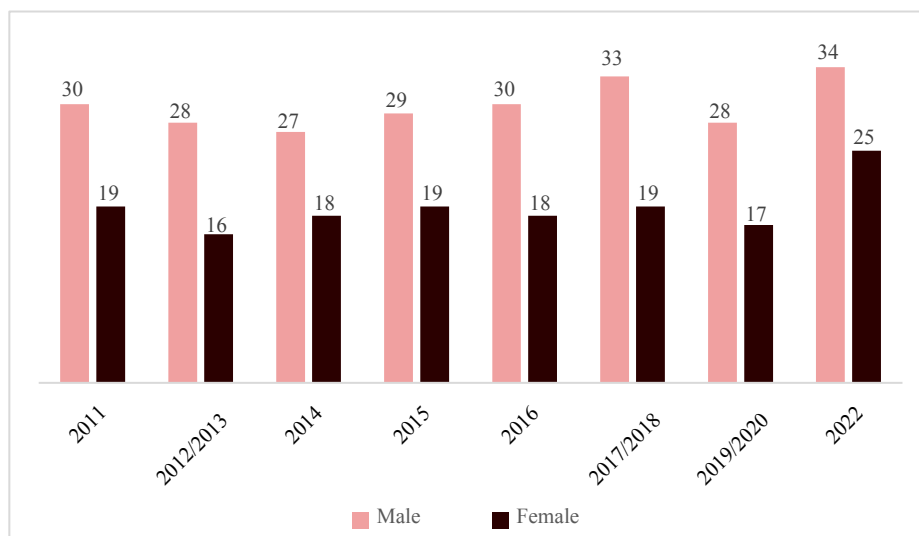
**Figure (1): Trends in Public Opinion on the Desire to Emigrate in the Arab Region**



The AOI results reveal that Arab men have been more likely than women to consider migration over the past 12 years. For men and women, the percentage has remained nearly constant. Standing at approximately one-third for men, the percentage fluctuates between 27% and 34% of the total respondents. However, the percentage has not exceeded one-fifth for women, hovering between 16% and 19%. The only exception to this pattern occurred in the 2022 survey, when the proportion of women wishing to migrate rose to a quarter.

However, some Arab countries exhibit only slight gender differences. In 2022, 67% of Lebanese men and 61% of Lebanese women expressed a desire to migrate. Similarly, 55% of Sudanese men and 48% of Sudanese women reported the same wish, while 23% of Libyan men and 20% of Libyan women indicated their desire to migrate. Notably, Kuwait recorded identical migration intentions among both genders, standing at 12%. Overall, these gender differences in migration aspirations have remained largely consistent over the years, with no statistically significant changes.

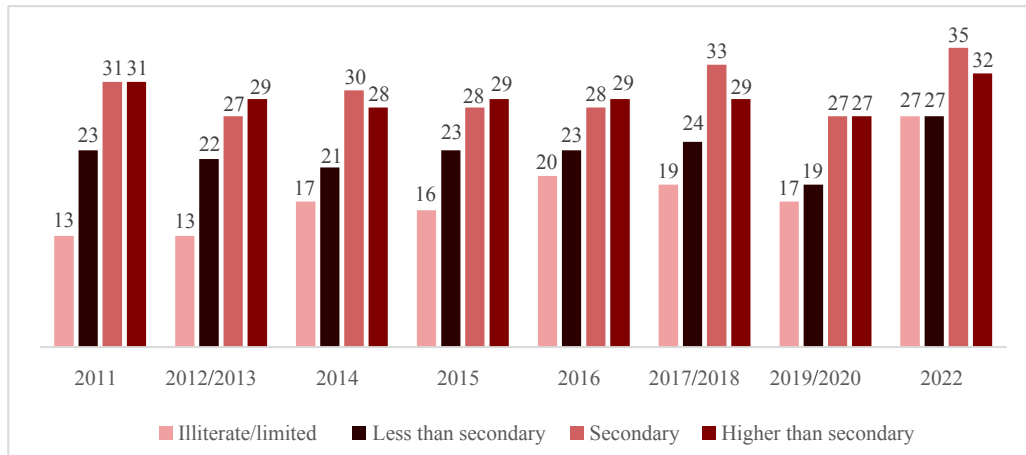
**Figure (2): Percentages of Those Wishing to Emigrate in the Arab Region Based on Gender**



Despite the unprecedented increase in the desire to emigrate across various demographic groups in 2022, an analysis of the results shows that over the years, there has been a direct correlation in the Arab

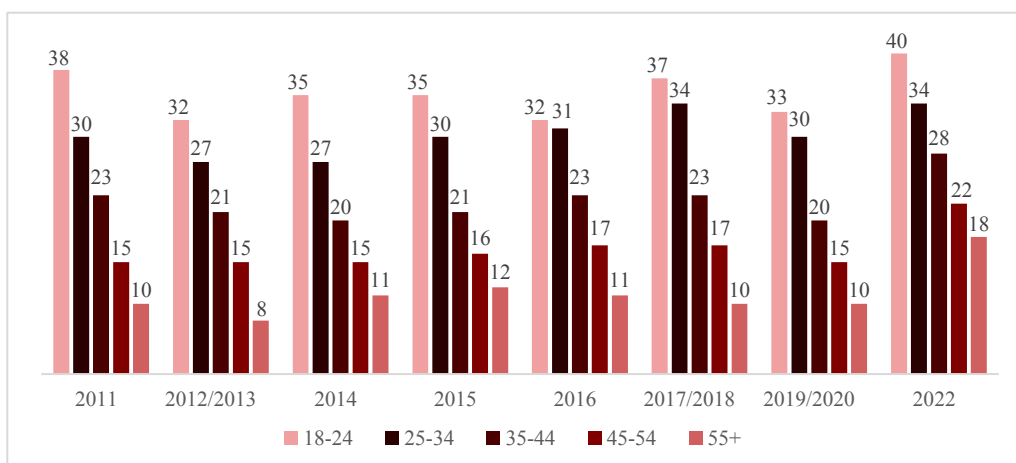
region between educational level and the desire to emigrate. The percentage of those wishing to emigrate is notably higher among those with higher levels of education – such as graduate degrees, university degrees, and even secondary education – compared to those with lower educational levels (never completing secondary school or illiterate). This pattern feeds into the already challenging “brain drain” siphoning out talent from Arab countries, which has been exacerbated by initiatives in North America, Europe, and Australia to attract skilled migrants. Additionally, the availability of job opportunities in the Arab Gulf countries has driven migration patterns as the preferred destinations of those wishing to emigrate.

**Figure (3): Percentages of Those in the Arab Region Wishing to Emigrate by Educational Level**



In contrast, the results reveal an inverse relationship between the desire to migrate and age. Among young people aged 18-24, the desire to migrate consistently exceeds one-third in various years, peaking at 40% in 2022. This was followed by the 25-34 age group, with migration intentions shared among one-third to one-fourth, ranging from 27% to 34%. The desire to migrate then declines among those aged 35-44, with rates falling to approximately one-fifth at 20% to 23%. For older age groups, particularly 45-54 years and over 55, the desire to migrate is significantly lower, not exceeding 17% and 12% respectively. However, an exception was noted in 2022, when the rate shot up to approximately one-fifth for both groups. Therefore, youth emerges as a defining characteristic of Arab migration. This is particularly evident in Lebanon where the 2022 report showed that 80% of youth aged 18-24 years, as well as 72% of 25-34 year-olds wished to emigrate.

**Figure (4): Percentages of Those in the Arab Region Wishing to Emigrate by Age Group**



## Indicators of Contemplating Migration in the Mashreq

Of the different Arab regions, the Mashreq (Iraq and the Levant) records the highest percentage of citizens wishing to emigrate, even though surveys do not include Syria, which has been the source of the most prominent waves of global migration over the last decade. In 2022, the percentage of those wishing to emigrate across the Mashreq as a whole was 41%, while the percentage for the entire Arab region stood at 28%. Notably, Palestine records the lowest desire to emigrate in the Mashreq, followed by Iraq and Jordan, and Lebanon, where the particularly high desire significantly contributes to the overall high figure for this region.

In Jordan, an analysis of public opinion over the years shows a gradual increase in the percentage of citizens wishing to emigrate, reaching nearly 50% in 2022. This trend can be partly attributed to the worsening economic challenges, including rising prices and tax burdens on the middle class, as illustrated in Figure 6.

In Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza Strip), the percentage of those wishing to emigrate has remained relatively constant over the years, standing at one-fifth of the respondents. However, it is important to distinguish between the West Bank and Gaza Strip when examining aspirations of migration. At the beginning of the new millennium, the percentage of those wishing to emigrate was higher in the West Bank than in Gaza.<sup>5</sup> However, with the imposition of the Israeli blockade in 2007, the percentage in Gaza rose rapidly and noticeably then gradually increased as a result of the deteriorating living conditions and repeated Israeli assaults. By 2011, 19% of respondents in Gaza expressed a desire to emigrate, compared to just 10% in the West Bank. This gap widened further by 2022, with 33% of Gazans wishing to emigrate, compared to 14% in the West Bank.

In 2022, Lebanon recorded the highest rate of desire to emigrate in the Arab region at 63%, rising sharply from rates recorded in previous years. The increase after 2020 can be largely attributed to the deterioration of Lebanon's already fragile economic, political, and security conditions that followed the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, the unprecedented collapse of the Lebanese currency, the acute economic contraction, and the ongoing political crises that culminated in the October uprising (2019-2021).

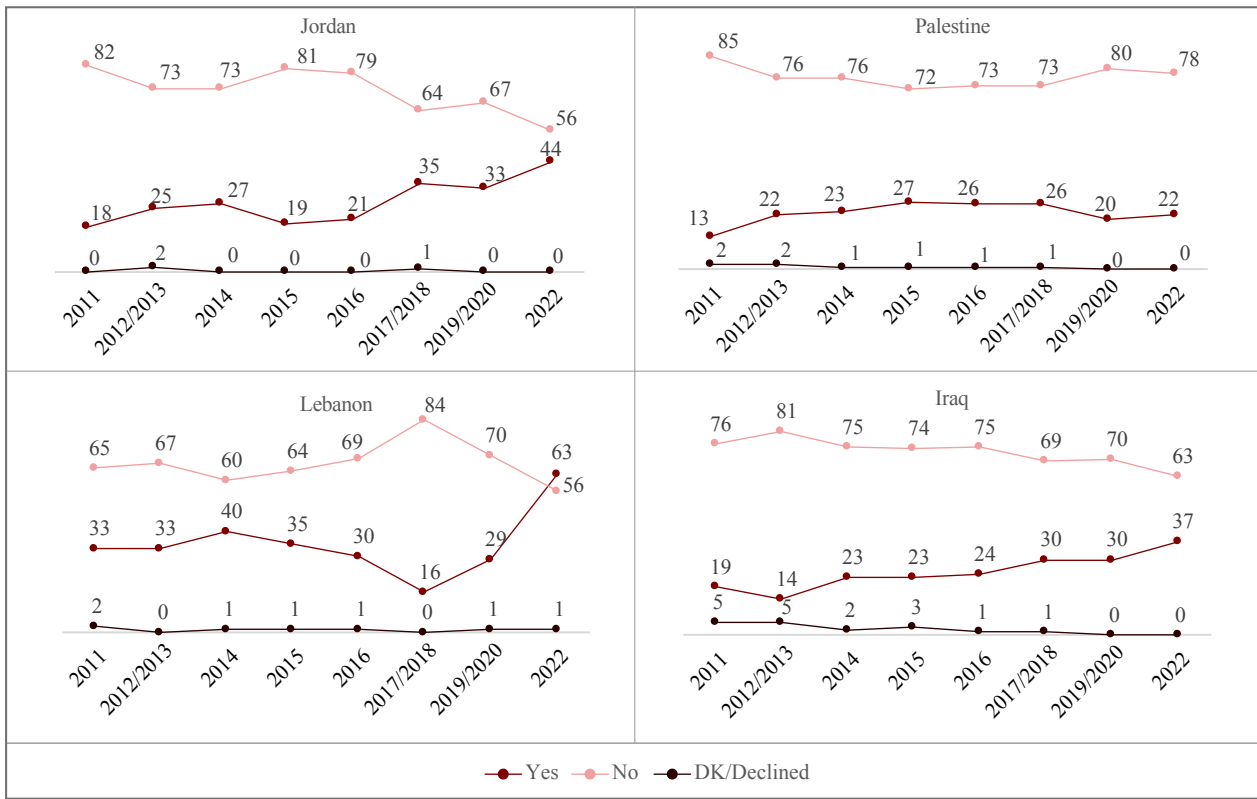
In Iraq, the percentage of citizens wishing to emigrate saw a gradual increase over the years, with some minor fluctuations. The rate rose from 19% in 2011 and steadily increased thereafter to a peak of 37% in 2022. This rise can be explained by the widespread disillusionment following the failure to meet the demands of the October uprising, compounded by the worsening security situation and the economic and health crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

When examining the motivations for emigration, analysis of the survey results over the past years shows that economic factors continue to be the major driver for citizens across the Mashreq, outpacing other reasons such as security, political, family, or educational reasons. Over two-thirds of respondents in the region cite economic factors as their reason for wanting to emigrate. This rate is most pronounced in Jordan, where more than 90% of respondents consistently cite economic factors, followed by Lebanon, where over 80% have indicated the same over the past six years, and Palestine, with 70% over the same period. Iraq, however, records the lowest percentage of respondents wishing to emigrate for economic reasons, with fewer than half over the years citing economic considerations. In Iraq, other concerns, such as the lack of insecurity and political instability, take precedence.

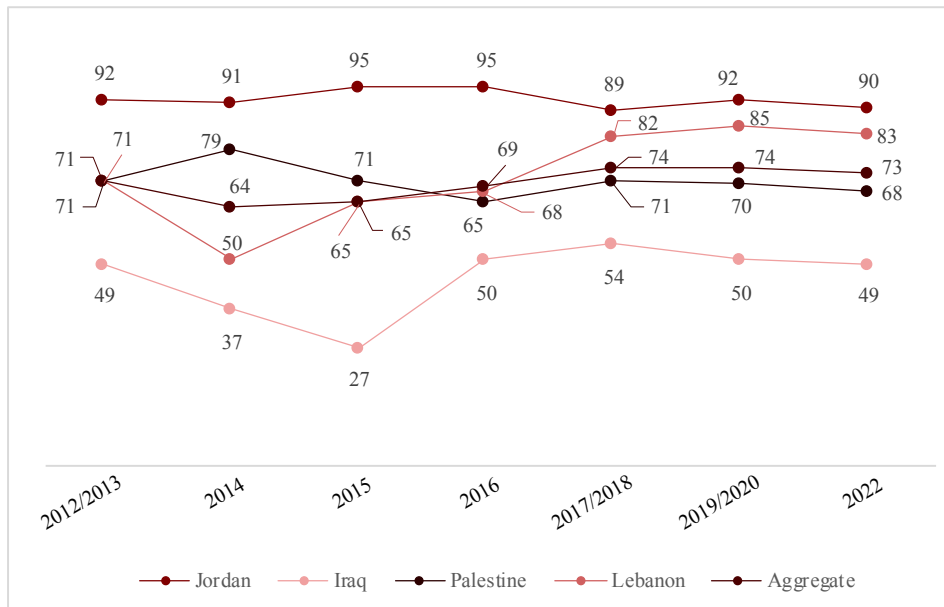
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<sup>5</sup> Majd Abuamer, "Palestinian Youth Migration from Gaza Strip to Turkey: From Crossing to (Un)Stable Existence," paper presented at Political Exile and Arab Migrations in Turkey Conference, The French Institute of Anatolian Studies (IFEA), Istanbul, 3-4/11/2022.

**Figure (5): Public Opinion Trends in the Desire to Emigrate in the Levant**



**Figure (6): Those Wishing to Emigrate for Economic Reasons in Countries of the Arab Levant**



Of those wishing to emigrate from the Mashreq, much like the greater percentage of citizens in Arab countries, a third consider European countries the ideal destination. Following Europe, the most popular destinations include the Gulf countries, Turkey, Canada, and the United States, at varying rates over the years. In 2022 and 2019/2020, Turkey ranked second after Europe, while Canada held the second spot in 2017/2018, the US in 2015 and 2016, and the Gulf countries from 2011 to 2014.

**Table (1): Preferred Destinations for Those Wishing to Migrate from the Arab Levant**

Destination	2011	2012/2013	2014	2015	2016	2017/2018	2019/2020	2022
<b>European countries</b>	32	33	29	36	37	37	32	32
<b>Gulf countries</b>	15	22	21	10	13	11	10	13
US	12	12	14	16	14	9	8	10
Canada	9	7	10	12	12	12	15	11
Turkey	-	-	4	6	5	8	16	14
Australia	-	-	7	6	5	5	4	3
<b>Other Arab countries</b>	9	5	4	3	4	4	2	5
<b>Other countries</b>	12	10	3	3	3	4	3	4
<b>African countries</b>	-	-	1	1	1	1	0	1
<b>Don't know</b>	8	10	6	5	6	3	10	7
<b>Refused to answer</b>	4	1	1	3	1	5	-	0

## Indicators of Contemplating Migration in the Nile Valley

In 2022, the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan) recorded the second-highest average percentage of citizens wishing to emigrate, at 36%, following the Mashreq. This marks a notable increase from 2019/2020, when the figure stood at 26%, placing the Nile Valley in third place. While the percentage of Egyptians wishing to emigrate remains relatively low, the overall trend is notable due to the consistently high emigration aspirations among Sudanese citizens, half of whom have expressed a desire to emigrate over the past years.

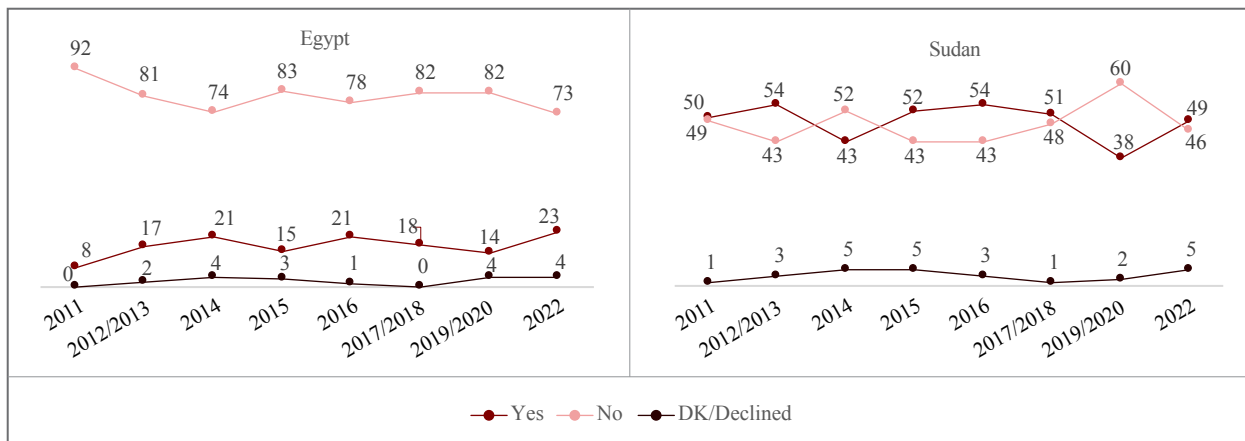
An analysis of the results shows that the percentage of Egyptians wishing to emigrate was relatively low (less than one-fifth) compared to other Arab countries. The figure was just 8% in 2011, gradually rising to 21% in 2015, before again declining to 14% in 2019/2020. However, it resurged in 2022, reaching its highest of 23%. While this percentage may seem modest, it is significant given Egypt's large population; a rate of 23% translates to over 20 million Egyptians considering emigration.

Sudan has consistently registered one of the highest and most persistent percentages of citizens wanting to emigrate over the past 12 years. In 2011, half of all Sudanese polled (50%) expressed their desire to emigrate, a rate which ranged from 51% to 54% in subsequent years. It then declined notably, to 38%, in 2019/2020 following the December 2018 revolution that brought down the regime of Omar al-Bashir and increased people's confidence in the country's future stability. Despite this drop, the rate rose again to 49% in 2022, and it is expected to rise further in response to the ongoing civil war that has plagued Sudan since April 2023.

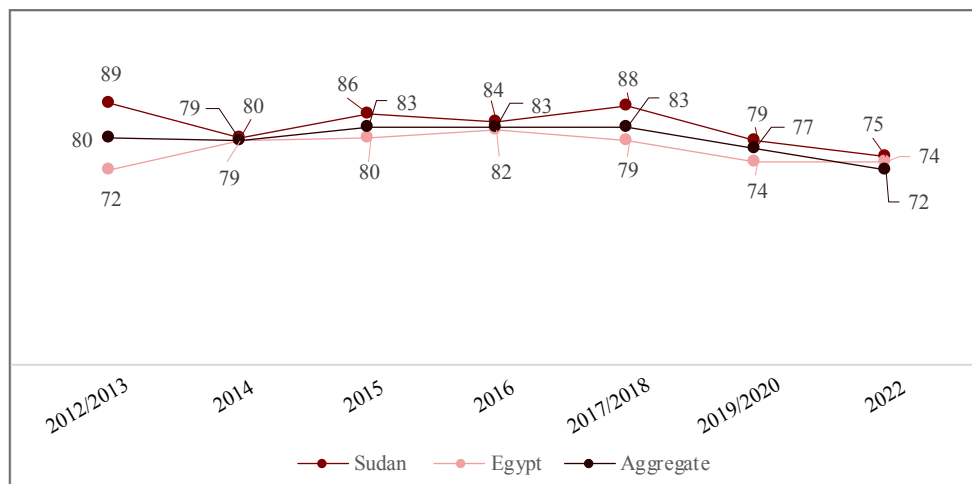
Despite the disparity between Egypt and Sudan with respect to the percentage of citizens wishing to emigrate, economic reasons remain the primary motivation for most Egyptians and Sudanese considering emigration. In recent years, the percentage of Egyptians wishing to emigrate for economic reasons has ranged between 72% and 82%, while in Sudan, it has ranged between 75% and 89%. The second most common reason in both is instability, with a percentage of Egyptians citing this factor ranging from 3% and 18%, and Sudanese ranging between 3% and 9%. A third motivation to emigrate in both countries has been political conditions: between 4% and 6% in Egypt and between 3% and 5% in Sudan.



**Figure (7): Public Opinion Trends vis-à-vis the Desire to Migrate in the Nile Valley**



**Figure (8): Those Wishing to Emigrate for Economic Reasons in Nile Delta Countries**



Those wishing to migrate from the Nile Valley primarily choose the Gulf States as their preferred destination, with around 50% of all respondents, consistently selecting this option. European countries rank second, with approximately 20%, followed by the US, Canada, and Turkey. These figures suggest that respondents are not thinking of permanent relocation so much as they are thinking of going abroad temporarily to work and improve their financial situation, given that the Gulf states do not offer a path to citizenship.

**Table (2): Preferred Destinations of Those Wishing to Emigrate from the Nile Valley Region**

Destination	2011	2012/2013	2014	2015	2016	2017/2018	2019/2020	2022
Gulf countries	55	46	44	45	51	50	39	46
European countries	11	11	18	22	21	20	24	20
US	13	10	9	9	7	6	9	10
Canada	3	2	2	3	3	6	5	4
Turkey	-	-	0	3	2	2	3	5
Australia	-	-	3	2	2	2	1	1
Arab countries	4	8	6	5	6	3	6	6
Other countries	4	7	5	2	2	2	4	3



<b>African countries</b>	-	-	0	0	0	0	-	0
<b>Don't know</b>	8	15	9	6	4	5	9	6
<b>Refused to answer</b>	0	1	4	2	1	2	-	1

## Indicators of Contemplating Migration in the Maghreb

Migration from the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya) has surged over the past two decades, surpassing six million migrants in 2020. Of these, 86% went to Europe, with 49% specifically heading to France,<sup>6</sup> a trend rooted in historical colonial ties, language accessibility, geographical proximity, and the presence of well-established communities. According to the AOI, the percentage of those wishing to migrate from the Maghreb has remained relatively stable. The overall migration aspiration rate increased slightly from 27% in 2019/2020 to 28% in 2022.

In Morocco, public opinion regarding the desire to emigrate has fluctuated in the past decade. The proportion of Moroccans wanting to migrate declined from 29% in 2011 to 25% in 2013, likely reflecting a sense of optimism generated by political reforms following the 2011 protests. However, the percentage rose again to 36% in 2015, peaking at 41% in 2017/2018 after the Rif Movement (October 2016) and the Jerada protests (December 2017), which left many disillusioned about the prospects for meaningful change and reform. Subsequently, the proportion of Moroccans wanting to migrate declined once more, settling at 30% in 2022.

Meanwhile Algeria witnessed the largest decline in the number of citizens wanting to emigrate. In the 2022 survey only 10% of Algerians expressed a desire to leave. The rate was 22% in 2019/2020, which may be indirectly linked to the Hirak protest movement, which began on 22 February 2019.<sup>7</sup>

In Tunisia, the number of citizens wishing to emigrate gradually declined following the Tunisian revolution from 33% in 2011 to 23% in 2015. However, this trend reversed in subsequent years, surging to 44%, the highest among Arab countries, in 2022. The AOI results on related issues show that this increase coincided with a growing distrust in political parties, which grew from 69% in 2015 to 82% in 2022, as well as an increase in the number of Tunisians uninterested in political affairs, from 30% in 2015 to 46% in 2022.

In Mauritania, the proportion of the citizens wishing to emigrate fluctuates from year to year, generally remaining at about 20%. However, there were notable spikes in 2017/2018 and 2022, when the percentage exceeded 25%. An analysis of other survey results reveals that this increase coincided with growing pessimism about the country's economic and political conditions. In 2017/2018, 45% of Mauritians described the economic situation as bleak, up from 29% in 2016, and in 2022, the figure rose to 53% compared to 39% in 2019/2020. Similarly, concerns about the political situation also grew, with 46% in 2017/2018 describing it as bad, up from 38% in 2016, and 54% in 2022, compared with 33% in 2019/2020.

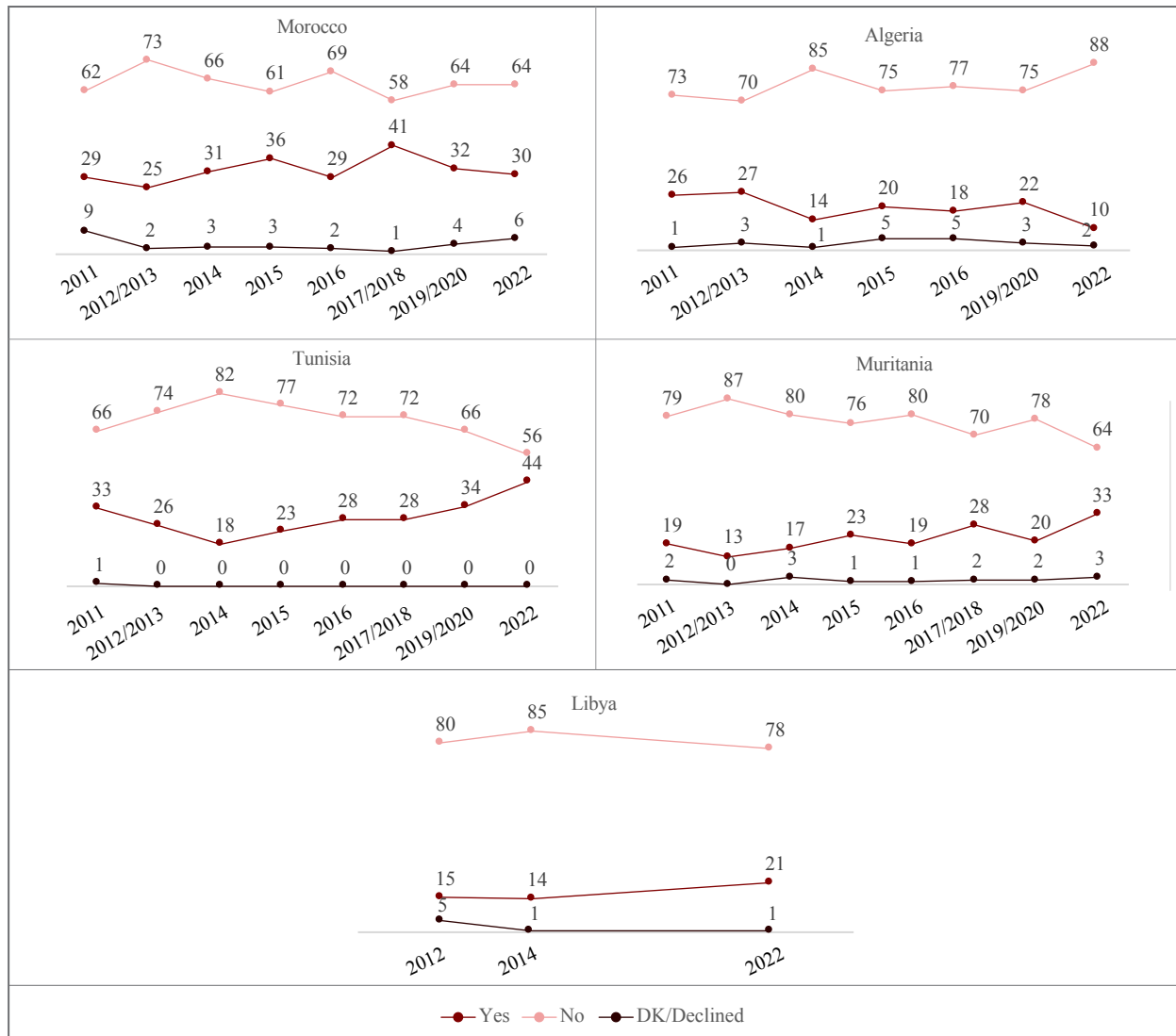
Finally, there is insufficient data on Libya to track changes in public opinion regarding the desire to emigrate. However, available figures suggest that it has remained relatively stable, generally not exceeding 20% of respondents. The percentage was 15% in 2012/2013, 14% in 2014, and 21% in 2022. This is backed up by ESCWA data, which shows no significant changes in the number of migrants from Libya, with the annual total consistently staying below 190,000 between 1990 and 2020. Similarly, the percentage of Libyans residing abroad remained low, at just 3% in 2020, the smallest share of any country in the Maghreb.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ESCWA, pp. 38-41.

<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed by some press reports. See, for example: "Since the launch of the popular movement in Algeria, the rate of illegal migration has dropped to zero!," *France24*, 2/4/2019, accessed on 18/11/2024, at <https://tinyurl.com/bden3sy5>

<sup>8</sup> ESCWA, pp. 38-39.

**Figure (9): Trends in Public Opinion Regarding Migration in the Arab Maghreb**

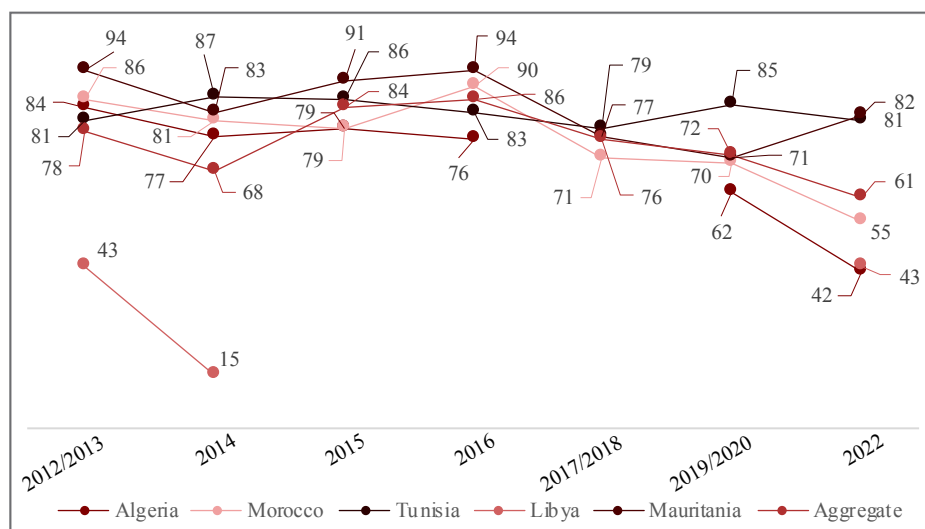


Like their counterparts in the Mashreq and the Nile Valley, citizens of the Maghreb are primarily motivated to emigrate due to economic considerations. The highest proportion of citizens motivated by economic reasons is found in Mauritania, with nearly 75% of respondents, while the lowest is in Libya, where no more than 50% cite economic reasons. In Morocco, the percentage of people wishing to migrate for economic reasons declined from 86% in 2012/2013 to 55% in 2022, while the percentage of those wishing to emigrate for other reasons (political, educational, familial) has increased. Similarly, in Algeria, the percentage of those wishing to migrate for economic factors gradually declined from 84% in 2012/2013 to 44% in 2022, with an increase in the percentage of those wishing to migrate for purposes such as education, which increased to 39% in 2022.

Unlike Morocco and Algeria, the rate of Tunisians wishing to migrate for economic reasons has remained nearly constant over the years, consistently exceeding 80%. The second most common motivation has varied, depending on the year, between security instability or political reasons. In Mauritania, economic reasons continue to be the primary motivation for emigration, with over two-thirds of respondents. Additionally, the desire to study abroad constitutes another significant factor. While the desire to improve one’s economic conditions was the main motive among Libyans in 2012/2013, at a rate of 43%, lack of security ranked second at 24%. By 2014, lack of security became the dominant motivation, with 65% of respondents citing

it, followed by economic reasons at 15%. Despite gaps in the data, the trends remained similar in 2022, with economic reasons again being the main motive at 43%, followed by lack of security at 31%.

**Figure (10): Those Wishing to Migrate for Economic Reasons from Countries in the Arab Maghreb**



In terms of preferred destinations, European countries, particularly France,<sup>9</sup> topped the list for Moroccans, with around half of respondents between 2011 and 2022. This was followed by the Arab Gulf countries, the US, and Canada. When analysing the results, a notable trend emerges with the steady rise in the rate of Moroccan respondents considering migration without having a specific destination in mind. While the rate fluctuated between 2% and 6% from 2011 to 2018, it rose to 12% in 2019/2020, and reached 17% in 2022. This shift suggests that either these individuals have not yet seriously considered migrating, or that they view migration as a form of escape, believing life abroad offers better prospects than staying in Morocco.

**Table (3): Preferred Destinations of Those Wishing to Migrate from the Arab Maghreb**

Destination	2011	2012/2013	2014	2015	2016	2017/2018	2019/2020	2022
European countries	54	44	53	54	50	53	50	47
Gulf countries	10	13	11	9	9	10	9	7
US	8	9	9	10	13	6	7	10
Canada	11	8	7	11	10	8	9	7
Turkey	-	-	3	3	2	3	5	4
Australia	-	-	1	1	1	0	0	0
Arab countries	3	4	4	2	2	4	2	3
Other countries	4	7	6	1	1	2	6	2
African countries	-	11	0	4	5	8	0	1
Don't know	6	3	5	3	6	2	12	17
Refused to answer	4	1	1	3	1	5	0	1

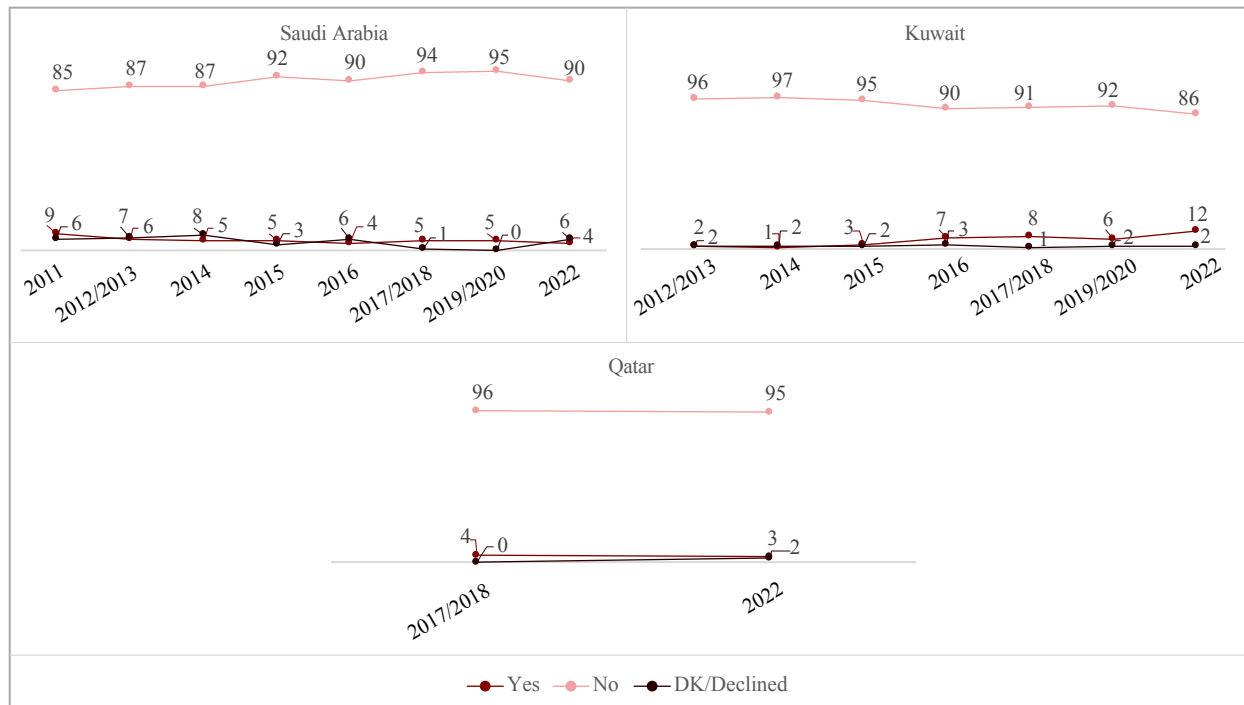
<sup>9</sup> A study issued by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies in March 2023 showed that the percentage of immigrants in France from three Arab Maghreb countries (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) has been stable since the 1980s at about 30% of the total number of immigrants annually. See: *Immigrés et descendants d'immigrés en France*, Insee Références (Paris: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2023).

## Indicators of Contemplating Migration in Arab Gulf Countries

In recent decades, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have become one of the primary destinations for global migration, particularly from Asia and the Arab region. In 2020, the GCC states received nearly 30.8 million migrants from Arab countries, accounting for 74% of all Arab migrants worldwide.<sup>10</sup> However, the issue of migration itself seems to be of lesser concern in the Gulf compared to the demographic imbalance created by the large influx of migrants and expatriate workers, which significantly outnumbers the number of citizens in Arab Gulf countries.

Saudi Arabia received the largest number of immigrants in the Arab region, with 13.5 million people in 2020. It ranks as the third-largest migrant destination in the world, behind Germany and the US.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the proportion of Saudis wishing to emigrate is low and has gradually declined over the years, from 9% in 2011 to just 4% in 2022. Similarly, in Kuwait, the percentage of citizens wishing to emigrate is low, being consistently around 10%. However, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, the number of Kuwaitis wishing to emigrate has shown a slight, gradual increase, rising from 2% in 2012/2013 to 8% in 2017/2018, and reaching 12% in 2022. As for Qatar, data on emigration intentions is limited, but it appears that the desire to emigrate among Qataris is notably low. At just 4%, Qatar has the lowest emigration aspirations among GCC and Arab countries. This can be attributed to the small size of the Qatari population, as well as Qatar’s exceptional quality of life and economic conditions.

Figure (11): Public Opinion Trends in the Desire to Emigrate in the Arab Gulf



The aspiration to improve one’s economic conditions is a key driver of migration for GCC citizens, although the proportion of Saudis and Qataris wishing to emigrate remains relatively low. Despite this, the overall average of those wishing to emigrate from GCC countries for economic reasons typically hovers at 60% than the nearly constant 60% in the Maghreb, 70% in the Levant, and 80% in the Nile Valley.

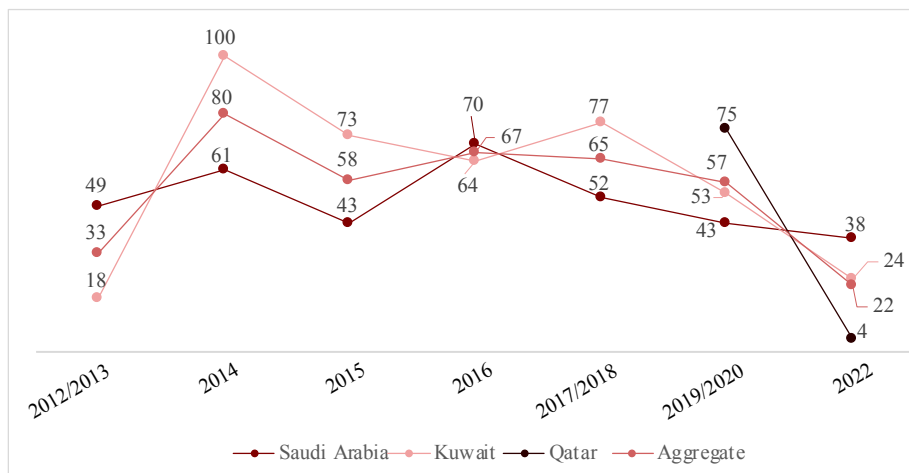
<sup>10</sup> ESCWA, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Other factors, such as educational, social, familial, and political motivations, also contribute to migration aspirations in the GCC countries.

In Saudi Arabia, the desire to complete education is a second major motivator, with over 25% of potential emigrants citing this reason. Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab country of origin for students pursuing higher education abroad, accounting for 16% of the total Arab student population abroad in 2018 – equivalent to 73,000 Saudi students.<sup>12</sup> Kuwait and Qatar also send large numbers of students overseas. In Saudi Arabia, political considerations and lack of security serve as a third motivation for migration, while social and familial considerations constitute a third motivation for Kuwaitis and Qataris.

**Figure (12): Those Wishing to Emigrate for Economic Reasons in the Arab Gulf**



European countries have been the preferred destination for approximately one-third of those wishing to emigrate from the GCC countries over the years, followed by the US, Canada, and other Gulf countries. There has also been a rise in the number of those who would like to emigrate but have not yet decided on a specific destination. The size of this group peaked in 2019/2020 at 32%.

**Table (4): Preferred Destinations for Those Wishing to Migrate from the Arab Gulf**

Destination	2011	2012/2013	2014	2015	2016	2017/2018	2019/2020	2022
European countries	24	23	30	44	29	39	27	33
US	2	28	23	26	17	22	13	12
Canada	5	8	7	5	10	6	2	16
Gulf countries	-	3	13	9	2	1	16	1
Turkey	-	-	0	1	7	4	0	9
Australia	-	-	1	4	7	0	3	0
Arab countries	8	0	0	-	-	3	6	8
Other countries	27	6	0	5	1	5	0	9
African countries	-	-	0	-	-	3	-	0
Don't know	26	29	19	2	16	11	32	5
Refused to answer	8	1	7	3	11	6	-	7

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

## Conclusion

What do Arabs think about when they think about migration? An analysis of the AOI results shows that about a quarter of the citizens in the Arab region have consistently thought about emigration over the past 12 years. The desire to migrate is most pronounced among youth, men, and those with at least a secondary education, shaping a typical profile of the Arab migrant as a young, educated male.

The primary reason for considering migration is the desire to improve economic conditions. Economic hardships drive people to seek better living opportunities and improved quality of life abroad. Thoughts of migration are also affected by inflation, financial crises, and general economic instability in their home countries.

Political stability and the enjoyment of political rights reduce individuals' inclination to migrate. Conversely, escaping violence and security instability becomes a priority for many individuals during periods of political unrest or armed conflicts. In most cases examined, the percentage of those desiring to migrate decreased after the outbreak of popular movements and uprisings. These events often restore confidence in the possibility of change and reform, providing citizens with political hope, unlike situations where such movements were met with repression by ruling regimes and/or devolve into internal wars.

Other reasons for considering migration include the pursuit of higher education or family reasons. As for the destination, almost half of the Arab citizens wanting to migrate consider European countries or the Arab Gulf states. The remainder are looking at the US, Canada, Turkey, and Australia. This trend suggests that the majority of potential migrants are thinking of permanent or long-term migration, as opposed to temporary migration.

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