

8.2 The Gulf War Crisis of 1990-91

The first Gulf war resulted in vast migrations, mainly involving displaced foreign workers. Surprisingly, little migration was expected to result from the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. But this view proved wrong. In fact there were massive internal and external displacements, which have continued to this day. As shown in Chapter 10 of The Age of Migration, Iraq was the second-largest refugee-origin country in the world in 2011, with over 1.4 refugees.

After the oil-price rise of 1973, the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf recruited foreign workers from both Arab and Asian countries for construction and industrialization. At first most were men; later many female domestic servants were recruited from the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Resentments over the status accorded to various categories of aliens in Kuwait became a major factor in Iraq-Kuwait tensions. At the beginning of the Gulf Crisis in 1990 there were 1.1 million foreigners in Iraq, of whom 900 000 were Egyptians and 100 000 Sudanese. Kuwait had 1.5 million foreigners: two-thirds of the total population. The main countries of origin were Jordan/Palestine (510 000 people), Egypt (215 000), India (172 000), Sri Lanka (100 000), Pakistan (90 000) and Bangladesh (75 000).

The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the subsequent war led to mass departures of foreign workers. Most Egyptians left Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and other migrants fled Kuwait, and perhaps a million Yemenis were forced out of Saudi Arabia when their government sided with Iraq. An estimated 5 million persons were displaced, resulting in enormous losses in remittances and income for states from South-east Asia to North Africa.

The Gulf War suggested, as perhaps never before, the centrality of migration in contemporary international relations. Migrants were viewed as potentially subversive - a fifth column - by the major Arab protagonists, and became scapegoats for domestic and international tensions. Hundreds of migrants were killed in the outbreaks of violence. The political realignments occasioned by the conflict had major repercussions upon society and politics in the Arab region and beyond.

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