

Tunisian migration and brain drain

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For centuries, Tunisia had been a country of destination, mainly for other from southern Europe, the reversal started after the second World war and intensified starting in the 1960s. More than one million Tunisian out of eleven million, or 10% of the population, live abroad, mostly in Europe. For a historical and linguistic reason France comes first. 60% are in France; while 20% are in Belgium, 15% in Italy, a little less in Switzerland and only about 9% in Germany. Culture and history are indeed important factors for the choice of the destination. More generally, the pull factors have been very strong determinants of the Tunisian migration to Europe, and, overall, European countries will remain the most attractive countries for them. Average salaries and working conditions are by far, up to ten times, better in Europe than in Tunisia, and there is a wide consensus that in the long run Europe's demand for foreign labor is going to increase. The current strong restrictions imposed by these European countries have slowed down but not stopped migration. Yearly, around 25000 Tunisian still manage to migrate. Among them, there are more and more skilled and well trained young people. It is natural that tens of thousands of young Tunisians would be willing to leave their home and their country in order to look for better work and life opportunity. Centuries of human history show that such a push factor is so strong that it cannot be stopped.

Brain drain is a real concern, but skilled labor migration may also generate positive effects, not only in terms of remittances but also in terms of human capital accumulation. Migration may offer learning and training opportunities, and the access to well paid jobs for skilled migrants creates an incentive for investing more in human capital at home. Higher and better education increases the likelihood of finding a better job abroad. The brain gain effect may be substantial, and higher when migration is temporary and migrants decide to return and to bring back home the knowledge and knowhow they have accumulated abroad.

The idea of brain gain is not new. Many studies were devoted to testing it in different ways and contexts. The debate is more about the net effect: do the losses outweigh the gains or the opposite? Some studies conclude that migration causes a net reduction in the growth

rate of human capital and GDP, but some argue the opposite. Actually, it depends on the country and on the probability of return of the migrants. Income and employment opportunities are always viewed as important factors with this regard, but other important non-financial factors, such as cultural and social integration, could matter.

In the case of Tunisia, our investigations show first that expatriates would be more likely to return if they had a relatively better situation before migrating, those who used to be unemployed or never had a decent job at home think less of returning. The quality and the availability of employment opportunities at home is the most important determinant regardless of the employment status during migration.

Second, people indeed care about how well they are accepted in the foreign country: culture and integration are highly important factors.

Moreover, those who have invested abroad are less interested in returning. Finally, and most importantly, the more expatriates acquire skills and obtain higher degrees, especially graduate level degrees, the less likely they want to return. This finding is particularly important and implies the brain gain has been weak in the case of Tunisia since more and more skilled people are the most likely to leave the country and not return. Actually, the best trained and most capable young people are first to leave as they face much less entry barriers, The number of Tunisian students in Europe has also been increasing fast; it has almost doubled in just five years, and the number of those who decide to settle and seek work in Europe after finishing school is also increasing. Quite often, these students are the cream and the most talented of the country. They settle abroad and contribute little to their home country development, even in terms of remittances.

Remittances remain nevertheless the main gain from migration for Tunisia. Remittances are important and continue to grow. The less skilled migrants often leave their family at home and have to send them part of their income. Total remittances have significantly contributed to incomes and growth and have accounted for about 11% of total foreign resources.

Migration out of Tunisia is also caused by push factors. Unemployment is certainly the most important one. Structural unemployment has been persistently higher than 14% (14.2% in 2008). It is much higher, larger than 30%, for youth, more so for the more educated, especially the university graduates. The least educated and less skilled may find

jobs more rapidly but in the informal sector where working conditions and wages are below their expectations.

In the current Tunisian situation characterized by high educated youth unemployment migration may alleviate social tension, bring revenues and may generate an incentive to continue to invest in human capital accumulation. However, in the long run, the benefits of migration may be outweighed by the losses in terms of brain drain. The probability that those who have migrated will someday return and bring back the fruit of their experience and their skills depends in the first place on the availability of decent employment at home. This also means that higher benefits from migration and from skilled returnees depends on good policies and higher growth at home.