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# Trends

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*In this issue . . .*

- East German political turmoil
- Steps toward Yugoslav multiparty system
- USSR anniversary slogans
- Progress on USSR press law
- Beijing on Soviet ties
- Jordan election results
- Egyptian workers leaving Iraq

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## Egypt-Iraq

### Iraqi Treatment of Egyptian Workers Sours Ties

*Egyptian media have stepped up their criticism of Iraq for its reported financial and physical harassment of Egyptian workers and their consequent mass departures in recent months. At the same time, however, Cairo's restrained official statements, combined with the government-owned media's limited coverage of the most sensational allegation—about the shooting deaths of more than a hundred Egyptians in Iraq—suggest an effort to prevent the issue from seriously damaging bilateral ties. Official restraint notwithstanding, the crisis seems to strip the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) of much of the substance that Egypt had hoped it would have and imposes on Egypt's already overburdened economy the additional strains of newly returned unemployed workers.*

A spate of recent press accounts indicates that the Egyptian workers in Iraq are returning home in increasing numbers,<sup>1</sup> reportedly because Iraqi obstacles make it difficult for them to obtain their legitimate earnings and transfer them back to Egypt. The international edition of the government-owned *Al-Ahram* on 7 November claimed that 10,000 workers are returning to Egypt every week. While the figures are less than reliable (the same report claimed that a million workers had already returned since June—representing a far higher rate than 10,000 a week), the reports indicate that a massive influx has been taking place.

This migration, which has apparently been continuing for some months, appears to have reached massive proportions more recently with the implementation of new Iraqi regulations that severely limit the amount of money that can be transferred out of the country (*Al-Ahram* international edition, 7 November; *Al-Jumhuriyah*, 11 November). The new regulations come on top of longstanding but apparently growing delays by the Iraqis in implementing permitted transfers of funds to Egypt. Taken together, the delays

<sup>1</sup>Published figures on the number of Egyptians employed in Iraq vary: a report in *Al-Ahram* on 20 August put the figure at about a million, while another in the paper's international edition on 7 November claimed there were twice that many.

and the new restrictions seem designed to encourage Egyptian workers to return home without issuing a formal expulsion order that would fly in the face of recent efforts to facilitate economic movement and other aspects of relations between ACC member countries.<sup>2</sup>

A report in the government-owned daily *Al-Jumhuriyah* on 5 September cited the head of the Arab-African Development Bank in Egypt, one of several banks engaged in processing remittances from Iraq, as saying that Iraqi authorities had attributed the nearly year-long delays to depletion of hard currency needed for postwar reconstruction projects. In any event, the return of hundreds of thousands of demobilized Iraqi troops to a now glutted labor market gives Iraq a strong reason for inducing Egyptian workers to leave.

Reports on the bleak situation for Egyptian workers in Iraq have recently expanded to allege other forms of abuse, ranging from mass dismissals without notice or proper compensation to a sensational accusation in the 8 November issue of the government-owned daily *Al-Akhabar* that 102 bodies of Egyptian workers—most of them bearing bullet wounds—had arrived in Egypt in October. While no government-owned media other than *Al-Akhabar* have been observed to report the allegations of shooting deaths, neither have they been denied by the media or through official statements.

#### Public Airing of Tensions

While some of the problems being cited—such as delays in the transfer of workers' remittances—have existed for some time and have been reported in the press, Cairo recently stepped up pressure on Baghdad with an unusual airing of grievances in the government-controlled media. The move is a departure from Egypt's usual practice of glossing over such tensions with Iraq in public and portraying instead only the positive aspects of their relationship. The official Middle East News Agency (MENA) on 3 November reported at length on comments by the chairman of Egypt's official trade union federation, who said he had appealed to the Foreign Ministry "to quickly intervene with the Iraqi authorities" over the plight of Egyptian workers. Still more unusual was an editorial in the 6 November *Al-Ahram*—generally considered the most representative of official policy among the government dailies—that called on Iraq for an "urgent" solution to the problems facing Egyptian workers there. The editorial appeared to pave the way for the subsequent blitz in media

<sup>2</sup>The ACC, comprising Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and North Yemen, was founded in February 1988 primarily to bolster economic relations.

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coverage of the issue in the government-owned media, as well as in the opposition press.

This public airing of the problem probably reflects Egyptian officials' heightened fears of the potential social, economic, and political impact not only of delaying remittances but also of the increasing numbers of newly unemployed workers arriving back in the country. The timing may also reflect Cairo's frustration over the failure of past efforts to prod Baghdad through private channels.

Moreover, the deteriorating situation depicted in media accounts has already subjected the government to criticism—albeit primarily in the opposition press—for inaction on the issue. A columnist in the government-owned *Al-Ahram* on the 11th claimed that “a veil of silence” surrounding the issue “is not appropriate” and called on “the responsible authorities in Egypt” to take up the matter with Iraq. Media coverage has undoubtedly helped to heighten both popular resentment against the Iraqis and pressure on the Mubarak government to solve the problem. The opposition newspaper *Al-Wafd*, for example, has stepped into the issue with scathing accounts of Iraqi mistreatment of workers and combined criticism of both the Cairo and Baghdad governments. An editorial by *Al-Wafd*'s chief editor Jamal Badawi on the 6th concluded: “If political and diplomatic restrictions prevent the 'Atif Sidqi government from raising the issue, the democratic institutions in Egypt . . . should raise their voice against the wave of racist persecution of Egyptian workers in Iraq.”

**Official Restraint** Even while publicizing the issue, however, Cairo has taken a measured approach in an apparent effort to prod the Iraqis without allowing the matter to undermine bilateral relations. Accordingly, the initial allegations of mass shooting deaths—the kind of development that might be expected to draw extensive media coverage and certainly far more than the remittance issue—have since been virtually ignored in the government-owned media, with the exception of a followup *Al-Akhbar* report that the embassy in Baghdad has received instructions to investigate the matter (MENA, 10 November).

Moreover, an *Al-Jumhuriyah* report on the 9th cited Minister of Manpower and Training 'Abd-al-Haqq as calling the problem of Egyptian workers a “transient one” that “will not affect the close brotherly relations between the two countries.” Numerous press reports have cited contacts currently under

way to resolve the problem, and Egyptian Foreign Minister 'Abd-al-Majid has stated that the issue will be discussed in a previously scheduled meeting in Cairo on the 18th of the Higher Joint Egyptian-Iraqi Committee, cochaired by Egyptian Prime Minister Sidqi and Iraq's First Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan (MENA, 14 November).

#### Implications

Although the labor issue has soured the atmosphere of the Egyptian-Iraqi relationship, Cairo's handling of the problem and its continued stress on good relations clearly represent an effort to contain the crisis and prevent it from seriously damaging bilateral ties. The Egyptian Government has prided itself on having restored and maintained close relations with almost all Arab states and on the central role these relations have afforded it in the inter-Arab and international arenas, and it probably continues to value the benefit of military and economic cooperation with Baghdad. Nonetheless, the crisis undermines one of Cairo's primary objectives in forging close ties with Iraq both bilaterally and through the ACC—namely, preservation of its role in the Iraqi labor market.

Perhaps more significant are the social and economic burdens facing Egypt as a result of the diminishing labor market in Iraq and the accompanying constriction of the flow of foreign currency. Cairo appears intent on pressing the Iraqis to resolve the labor problem in some fashion, but it is probably resigned to a less than ideal solution—such as arrangements to expedite remittance transfers and compensation plans for the dismissed workers—that will not stem significantly the continued flow of returnees. Accordingly, the *Al-Ahram* editorial on the 6th, as well as other press reports and commentaries, focused less on the displacement of workers than on the long delays in making permitted transfers of funds and qualified their grievances with recognition of Iraq's circumstances in the aftermath of the Gulf war.

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