



Background Paper

Roundtable (4)

Brain Drain from the Gaza Strip:

Repercussions and Possible Solutions

June 2019

Since the escalation of conflict in 2005, the Gaza Strip has suffered from a series of political and economic shocks that have aggravated adverse humanitarian and living conditions, which have reached unprecedented levels. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the unemployment rate there was 52% in 2018, with more than half of households below the poverty line. A UNRWA report¹ published in 2012 stated that living conditions in the Gaza Strip had by then already reached “disastrous levels” due to strains on access to basic services including electricity and potable water. The report concluded that by 2020, the Gaza Strip will not be fit for human habitation. The Israeli blockade and the continued Palestinian internal divide have further compounded the impact of these daunting challenges, which encouraged a large number of citizens to consider or attempt emigration as a way to end their suffering. At the end of 2018, Egyptian authorities opened the Rafah crossing point for several months. Seizing this opportunity, thousands of people emigrated abroad. This phenomenon, has entailed also a “brain drain”, characterized by the permanent departure of a large number of highly-skilled people, including qualified graduates and postgraduates.

This paper provides an account of the evolution of the brain drain from the Gaza Strip, to serve as a basis for discussion in this MAS Roundtable session. The paper also examines the effects of the brain drain on Palestinian society, especially in the Gaza Strip, and attempts to propose appropriate remedies for dealing with this problem under the current blockade and internal divide. Because of the lack of detailed data on the demographic characteristics of migrants and the absence of validated studies about actual or expected repercussions, the discussion will largely depend on the expertise of the Gaza Strip discussants who will participate in the Roundtable on this issue.

In 2005, without any coordination with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Israeli forces withdrew from the Gaza Strip and dismantled the settlements there. In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections with a majority of seats and formed the tenth Palestinian government. These events contributed to the escalation of political tensions between the Hamas and Fatah factions, leading to internal division following the Hamas military takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Since then, Israel imposed a blockade on the movement of people and goods to and from the Gaza Strip. Years before that, specifically after the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, Gaza Strip workers had been denied access to Israel’s labor market, which today employs around 16% of the Palestinian labor force (wholly from the West Bank).² These conditions have significantly contributed to the deterioration of the economic situation in the Gaza Strip, contributing to the conditions of economic recession there. As such, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted, and the unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip steadily

¹ <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/gaza-2020-liveable-place>

² West Banker workers were also denied access to the Israeli market during the second Intifada, however, with the end of the Intifada restrictions were lifted gradually.

increased, while that of the West Bank remained static at around 18% (see Figure 1 and 2 in the Annex).

Later in 2008, Israel launched the first of three invasions of the Gaza Strip (2008, 2012, and 2014). These invasions left Gaza's economic infrastructure in ruins: thousands of economic facilities and enterprises wrecked, agricultural lands destroyed, thousands of homes demolished, and tens of thousands of civilians killed or wounded. Furthermore, the invasions and the tight Israeli siege of the Strip wrought havoc to essential service facilities, especially electricity grid networks. In 2014, Egyptian authorities closed underground tunnels used for smuggling goods from Egyptian markets, which had partially and temporarily helped mitigate the Israeli siege, albeit with attendant distortions to markets. These shocks, in addition to the persistent internal division, have exacerbated the deteriorating economic and humanitarian conditions.

These conditions have prompted a broad segment of citizens to consider migrating abroad to flee this hardship. According to the PCBS's Palestinian Youth Survey 2015, the percentage of youth wishing to emigrate reached 37% in the Gaza Strip and 15% in the West Bank. A recent survey conducted by Al-Aqsa University in March-April 2019, shows that 51% of citizens aged 18 and above were ready to migrate, had they been given the opportunity to do so. The main driver was the economic factor, as reported by 83% of the surveyed sample.

It was only recently since November 2017 that the migration flux of Gazans began to garner attention, upon the reopening of the Rafah crossing point by Egyptian authorities and resumption of operation of the border for passage of people after years of closure and restricted movement. Over the past decade, the Rafah crossing point was opened selectively and exceptionally. In that period, the crossing point was the only point of entry and exit accessible to Gazans, and were accessible only for humanitarian cases or through special permits, and on a small-scale basis. The border's opening enabled thousands of citizens to leave the Gaza Strip and to many, it represented a one-time chance to seek better opportunities abroad.

There is no official data about the number of migrants or departures, yet based on statements from the United Nations relief organizations, about 61 thousand citizens left the Gaza Strip in 2018, while some 37 thousand returned.³ Moreover, there is no official data about the demographic characteristics or the type of occupations held by those who left and did not return. However, local news reports state that a number of well-qualified and educated Palestinians, holding different disciplinary degrees, left the Gaza Strip, most of whom were working in the health sector and were highly-needed specialists, as well as in the educational and business sectors.⁴ Unlike the vast majority of the Gazan population, this group of the population were

³ [https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-35-000-palestinians-left-gaza-in-2018-
hamas-blocking-doctors-from-leaving-1.7254747](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-35-000-palestinians-left-gaza-in-2018-?hpid=hp-top-news-story%3Ahaaretz-com&hpid=hp-top-news-story%3Ahaaretz-com)

⁴ <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5446415,00.htm>

financially capable of sustaining the costs related to traveling to Turkey and Western European countries in search of better lives.

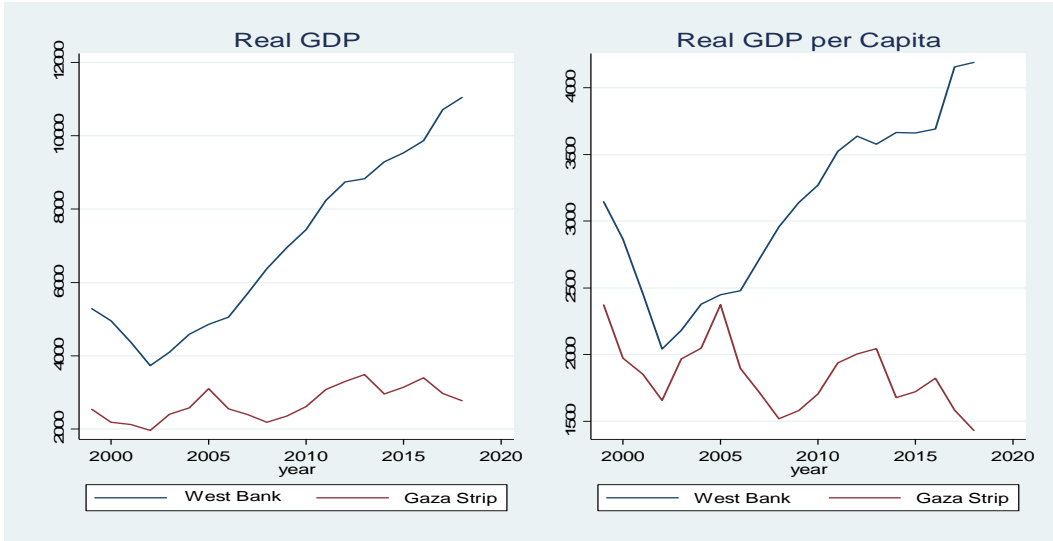
The catastrophic circumstances in the Gaza Strip may accelerate the pace of brain drain in the future if a window of opportunity opens. This issue poses numerous challenges, especially regarding the shortage of skilled workers, which leads to a deficient provision of basic services in various sectors, including the health, education, and business sectors.

Subsequent to this brief presentation on the main drivers of brain drain, the following two questions are raised to initiate discussion among speakers and participants in the round-table session:

- 1) Does the brain drain phenomenon have any impact on the economic and humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip? How?
- 2)
1. 2)What policies are needed for addressing this issue considering the continuing Israeli blockade?

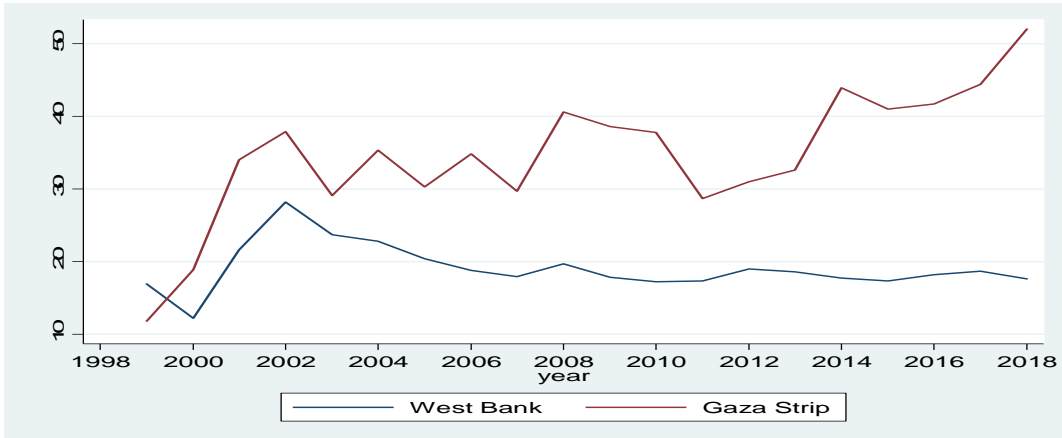
Annex I

Figure (1): GDP Change in West Bank and Gaza Strip, 1999-2018



Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS).

Figure (1): Change in the Unemployment Rate in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 1999-2018



Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS).