THE MEIR AMIT INTELLIGENCE AND TERRORISM INFORMATION CENTER
AT THE ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE HERITAGE AND COMMEMORATION CENTER

The mass exodus of young men from the Gaza Strip

September 21, 2023

Overview

In recent years, the desire to emigrate from the Gaza Strip, with the overwhelming majority of the émigrés' being young men, has increased; it is difficult to estimate its scope because Hamas does not publish exact numbers. However, according to several reports, **since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007, between about 250,000 and 350,000 young adults have left and gone abroad**. Their initial destination is Turkey, from where their intention is to continue to other countries, primarily European countries and Canada.

The issue recently made headlines after on September 9, 2023, there were violent clashes between hundreds of young Gazans and the security guards of a travel agency in Gaza City which had received a monopoly for issuing visas to Turkey. A number of people were injured and the company's offices were damaged. As a result, issuing visas to Turkey was suspended and only renewed on September 17, 2023.

Apparently the exodus is increasing and the events at the travel agency's offices was a manifestation of the growing demand for visas. For example, according to reports, **in one week 18,000 applications for visas to Turkey were submitted and there was a waiting list of 83,000 to leave the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing**. In addition, Internet data showed a significant increase in searches for the word "emigration" by Palestinian surfers.

The most prominent causes are the lack of hope and employment possibilities, especially among Gaza's hundreds of thousands of university graduates, the collapse of the private sector following the destruction of factories and companies, the high cost of living, the lack of social welfare policies and the low level of services, especially mental health services, as well as the restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel.

Hamas tries to minimize and obscure the extent of emigration by asserting there has been no change in the number of people who leave the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing, claiming the number of people entering is even slightly higher. Hamas' stance is that the reports are an attempt by Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces to discredit the Hamas

administration, present it as failing to correctly administer Gaza and thereby incite the Gazans against it.

- Currently, more people are being born in the Gaza Strip than are leaving it, **but the mass emigration of the specific age group in question may affect its social and economic structure**. In addition, for the most part, the military wings of the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip are composed of operatives belonging to the demographic, therefore it is unclear if mass emigration will affect them and their activities.

Further Information

General data

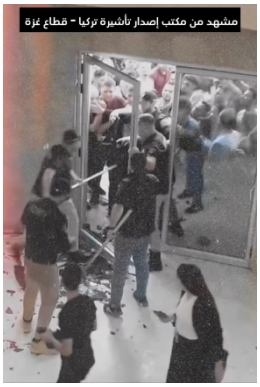
- According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, as of 2023 the population of the Gaza Strip stands at 2.2 million. According to UNRWA, there are 2.1 million people, 1.7 million of whom are "refugees" (UNRWA website in Arabic, September 21, 2023). According to the Hamas administration's ministry of the interior, at the end of 2022 the population stood at 2.375 million (ministry of the interior in Gaza website, January 4, 2023). All of the above numbers are estimates because there has not been an organized census in Gaza for 15 years. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, as of the first half of 2023, the 19-29 demographic made up 21% of the total population, that is, about 466,000 (al-Quds, August 10, 2023).

Violent clashes near a travel office in Gaza

- After several days during which dozens of young people had crowded the office of the Passport travel agency in Gaza, which had recently received the monopoly for issuing travel visas to Turkey, on September 9, 2023 clashes broke out with the involvement of the company's security guards, and several people were injured. Following the events, Passport announced the Turkish consulate had decided to suspend the submission of applications as of September 10, 2023, with exceptions only for businessmen, students and family reunification; issuing visas was renewed on September 17, 2023.
- The board of directors of the association of travel and tourist agents in Gaza called on the government monitoring committee to settle the matter and make arrangements for other travel agencies to coordinate with Passport to process Turkish vias submissions in order to save time, effort and money for the applicants. The association accused Passport of exploiting

its monopoly to raise prices (SND website, September 9, 2023; Dunia al-Watan, September 9, 2023; Ultra Palestine website, September 10, 2023).

The crowd in front of the Passport office (@fateh__1965 Twitter account, September 7, 2023)

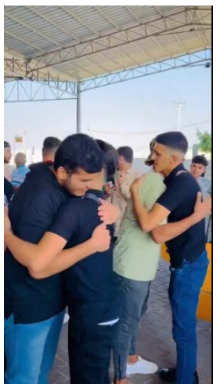


Right: Confrontation at the entrance to the Passport office @Hakeam_ps Twitter account, September 9, 2023). Left: Palestinians wounded in the clash (al-Mushraq News, September 9, 2023)

Scope of the emigration

- According to an article published in al-Ayam, **in the last seven months there has been a significant increase in the number of young people emigrating from Gaza, mainly wanting to leave for European countries and Canada**. The first stop on their journey is submitting applications at offices which can provide them with entrance visas for Turkey, and there are thousands of Gazans in Turkey waiting to continue on to Greece (al-Ayam, September 1, 2023).

Groups from Beit Lahia newly arrived at the airport in Cairo (The Palestinian House Facebook page, September 1, 2023)



Daily scenes in the Rafah Crossing, where young Gazans say goodbye to family before leaving (@fateh__1965 Twitter account, September 7, 2023)

- On September 19, 2023, Palestinian TV broadcast a program called "Emigration from Gaza – what no one talks about." In it, young Gazans talk about their desire to emigrate because of the economic situation and the high rate of employment, saying there is no future in Gaza. The broadcast claimed that **in the past 15 years about a quarter of a million young Gazans had left for abroad** (Palestinian TV channel, September 19, 2023).
- **Muhammad Abu Jayab, an economic researcher from Gaza, said that during the past decade record numbers of Gazans had emigrated, and many more wanted to.** He said that despite the dangers of the journey and the haziness of the future in their destination countries, **they were determined to leave the Gaza Strip in search of opportunity**. He referred to the increase in unemployment, the lack of jobs and imitation as causes of the increase in emigration.
- Abu Jayab added that if the relevant authorities wanted to fight the trend they had to deal with its causes by creating jobs and hope for the future, and by formulating plans and strategies that would address the problems of young people and find solutions for the increasing number of university graduates who could not find employment. He added that

efforts should be made to create and finance small and large projects which contribute to strengthening the economy and creating jobs, since in his opinion, most of the young emigrants, if not all, would not leave if they found employment that would guarantee them a future and respect (al-Ayam, September 1, 2023) .

- Several young Gazans and their parents who were interviewed for the article had the following to say (al-Ayam, September 1, 2023):
  - **Ibrahim Abdullah, a young man from the southern Gaza Strip**, said he had been planning to emigrate for two years but his family prevented it because they feared for his fate. He tried to please them and looked unsuccessfully for work in the Gaza Strip, and eventually felt he had no choice. He convinced his family to allow him to leave and joined 16 of his friends, neighbors and acquaintances who had already left. He said he had applied for a visa to Turkey, and from there would go to someplace in either Europe or Canada. He said wanted to live in a country where he could work and have a future, after seven fruitless years in the Gaza Strip.
  - **Fadi Musbah, a young man from the Khan Yunis district**, said it was considered one of the districts with the largest number of émigrés, claiming there were so many people from Khan Yunis in Belgium that some of streets in Belgium began to be named after Gazan families. He **said he felt emigration had become contagious: the first groups who left between 2010-2014 had primed the pump and encouraged many to leave, a trend continuing to this day, with the number of people seeking to emigrate only increasing**.
  - **Yusuf Iyad, whose son emigrated Greece after six attempts**, said he hoped he would be lucky enough to go to Belgium, where dozens of his relatives and neighbors lived, and obtain a visa, work and have opportunities for a better life. He said he was considering sending his second son as well, since the future in the Gaza Strip was bleak, and there were few jobs.

Young men leave the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing
(Facebook page of Muhammad Abu Usama, September 10, 2023)

▶ **The rising trend of emigration from the Gaza Strip began because of the increase in poverty and unemployment, especially among young university graduates people, in addition to the loss of hope for the future, the lack of a political and economic horizon, and the authorities' denial of the situation**. According to reports, the number of emigrant individuals and families rose to the point where a search of the names of those who emigrated would reveal they had all lived in the same neighborhood and were related by blood, and there were entire families who had sold everything and left Gaza with no intention of returning. The trend, according to reports, is especially widespread in Beit Lahia and the Khan Yunis district. It was also noted that the current relative ease of leaving the Strip,[1] which was difficult in the past, made many of them think seriously about emigrating, taking a loan for travel expenses, and leaving the Strip (Khabar, September 10, 2023).

▶ **Human rights activist Mustafa Ibrahim confirmed that the rates of emigration from the Gaza Strip were on the rise, adding there was serious disregard or lack of interest on the part of senior Palestinian figures**. He noted that no official Palestinian statistics existed regarding the number of emigrants. However, unofficial data recently circulated on social media indicated that approximately 19,000 Palestinians had applied for travel visas to Turkey in just one week, and more than 83,000 people were on the waiting list (Khabar, September 10, 2023).

▶ According to human rights organizations in Gaza, more than 18,000 young Gazans requested visas for Turkey in order to reach Greece and then Europe. They cited reasons such as the lack

[1] Since 2018, in the wake of the return marches and the understandings reached with Islamic Revolution and Egypt, the Rafah Crossing is open in both directions to the daily passage of several hundred Palestinians in and out of the Gaza Strip virtually every day of the year.

of hope and jobs, especially for the hundreds of thousands of university graduates, the increase in unemployment and poverty, the collapse of the private sector, rising prices, the absence of social welfare policies, the low level of civilian services, especially mental health services, and the Israeli restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip, as motivating them to leave in search of a better life, even if the price was death [sic] (al-Quds al-Arabi, September 9, 2023).

▶ **Human rights activist Salah Abd al-'Ati** said the increasing tendency of young Gazans to emigrate and of some even to commit suicide was fraught with danger. He added that if the relevant government agencies did not pay attention to the issue and ignored it, the crisis would worsen and lead to a rise in crime because people who wanted to emigrate but could not afford it [would look for ways to find the money]. He called on the government to develop permanent employment programs for young people so they could support themselves adequately and to prevent them from thinking about emigration or suicide (al-Quds al-Arabi, September 9, 2023).

Criticism against the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip

▶ The events were exploited by the PA and its affiliates to harshly criticize the Hamas administration in Gaza and glorify the PA's achievements. The editor-in-chief of the government-sponsored al-Hayat al-Jadeeda wrote suicide was on the rise in the Gaza Strip, calling emigration a different type of suicide. There were young Gazans, according to the paper, who without hesitation, embarked on a dangerous sea voyage which might perhaps end in a secure life and respectable employment. Life in the Gaza Strip under Hamas rule was not just difficult, it was hopeless. "Death," wrote the paper, "has never been and will never be a Palestinian option, and Islam forbids suicide [sic]." Thus, al-Hayat al-Jadeeda continued, Hamas had not succeeded in education, which it claimed was its main mission, neither in moral nor ideological education. **The Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip had brought security and living conditions to the brink of collapse**. Given such a painful and unhappy situation, a comprehensive national policy had to be initiated before the Gaza Strip reached a state that would make the enemy happy and hurt "[our] Palestinian brothers, relatives and friends" (al-Hayat al-Jadeeda, September 4, 2023).

Right: Cartoon about the emigration of young Gazans. Left: Infographic comparing the PA's achievements to Hamas' failures: 200,000 Palestinians returned to their homeland [in the PA] through family reunification agreements, 350,000 Palestinians forced to emigrate from the Gaza Strip since 2007 (Awda channel of Fatah's media information and cultural commission's Telegram channel, September 10, 2023)

Hamas reactions

- To counter the events and reports, the Hamas-controlled crossings and borders commission in the Gaza Strip issued a statement claiming that in response to attempts to mislead public opinion regarding activity at the Rafah Crossing, according to the data, the number people leaving and returning to the Gaza Strip was consistent with the annual average with no significant change. In addition, the pictures published of Palestinians waiting to receive Turkish visas were related to the Passport monopoly on issuing visas at only one location for the entire Gaza Strip, after in previous years it had been possible for all travel agents in all districts to issue them. The commission warned against spreading incorrect information and the either accidental or deliberate mistaken assumption that everyone who left the Gaza Strip was an emigrant. It emphasized that the overwhelming majority of people who left were either humanitarian cases, such as those seeking medical treatment, or people leaving to take advantage of scholarships, or for employment or commercial purposes, or to visit relatives, or were Palestinians who lived abroad (Sama, September 8, 2023).
- **Salama Maarouf, head of the government information office in Gaza**, said in an interview that they understood young Gazans would want to emigrate to look for work or improve living conditions because of the Israeli "siege" which had continued for more than 17 years. He claimed they were constantly working to provide jobs for young people and the very large number of university graduates. He also claimed that they were looking for jobs for them in Israel and abroad, and were "knocking on every door" in an effort to reduce the unemployment rate.

- Maarouf claimed that about 10,000 Gazans between the ages of 18 and 30 had left the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the year, of whom "about" 2,855 went to Turkey. Regarding the incident at the Passport office, he said there had been administrative problems in processing the applications for visas to Turkey because it was the only company authorized by the Turkish consulate to issue them and could not handle more than 150 requests per day (Telegram channel of Gazan journalist Safinaz al-Loh, reporter for the Amad website in the Gaza Strip, September 10, 2023).
- The writer of an op-ed piece on the Hamas-affiliated Filastin al-A'an website wondered where the rumors started regarding the clashes and the issue of emigration. He claimed there were PA activists whose mission was to represent Gaza as an unbearable hell and its rulers as failures to scare the youth of Judea and Samaria and keep them from emulating the path of the "resistance" [anti-Israeli terrorism] in Gaza, and they did not hesitate to lie. The PA activists, claimed the writer, created the "trend" in Gaza out of whole cloth, claiming there was a massive emigration of young Gazans who wanted to escape a bad situation, which was a lie. Many, he said, had joined the trend and began to encourage emigration and support "emigrants." He also stated that data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs - OCHA, which was neutral, indicated the number of people entering the Gaza Strip [through the Rafah crossing] this year was higher than those who left it (allegedly 98,500 allegedly and 91,000 left) (Filastin al-A'an, September 10, 2023).