

**The “Brain Drain” of the Palestinian  
Society: with an Exploratory Study of the  
Health and Higher Education Sectors**

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Ibrahim Abu Hantash  
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**PALESTINE ECONOMIC POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

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**The “Brain Drain” in the Palestinian Society: with an Exploratory Study of the Health and Higher Education Sectors**

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## Foreword

The term ‘migration’ could be the most important word in a national Palestinian dictionary. Jewish migration from all parts of the world to Palestine has taken place before and after 1948, continuing in various volumes and at various times. There has also been Palestinian migration from cities and villages of origin in 1948 and further migration in 1967. In the aftermath of the first gulf war 1990/1991, the West Bank and Gaza Strip witnessed a reverse phenomenon; some Palestinians who had have been working in the Gulf States moved back to Palestine.

There is a substantial discussion in development economics literature about the phenomenon of migration and its role in the development process. The literature addresses migrating outside the national borders of a country as well as internal migration- within the national borders: rural-urban migration, urban-urban migration, etc... Within the context of migration in Palestine, MAS conducted two simultaneous studies regarding Palestinian labor migration. The first explores Palestinian labor migration to Ramallah and Al-Bireh Governorate whilst the second examines the Palestinian brain drain to outside of Palestine.

The study at hand explores the later phenomenon and analyzes its major aspects, with a special emphasis on the higher education and health sectors. The study examines the opinions of labor migrants working in both these sectors. The study also focuses on a number of migrants living abroad. In addition, families in the Ramallah and al-Biereh Governorate surveyed on their views about such phenomenon. The study concludes with policy recommendations that, if employed, will help deal with this phenomenon.

I would also like to thank the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics, (PCBS) which contributed generously to the cost of the survey, and conducted it with great professionalism and quality. Their outstanding personnel had a noteworthy role in acquiring the necessary data for the analysis process and for reaching the results the study concluded with.

On the occasion of its publication, I would like to conclude by expressing my gratitude towards the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, for their generous support in financing this study. If it were not for this generous support, it

would not have been possible to conduct this study. I hope that this cooperation continues in the future, so that we are able to conduct further studies of mutual concern.

**Dr. Fathi Srouji**  
**Research Coordinator**

# Executive Summary

## **Introduction:**

The term “Brain Drain” is used to describe the out-migration of people with technical and intellectual expertise from developing, or less economically-developed countries, to those characterized by better professional, economic or advantaged geographical features. The increased mobility of human expertise worldwide has enhanced the movement of professionals belonging to the health and higher education sectors. The economic impact of migration, in general, and that of the “Brain Drain”, in particular, remains the most obvious amongst other consequences. Available data on the West Bank and Gaza Strip indicates that Palestine is ranked third amongst all Middle East and North Africa countries in term of external migration rates. This study aims to explore the phenomenon of “Brain Drain” in the two sectors of Health and Higher Education in Palestine.

## **Methodology:**

An extensive literature review was used to determine a number of questions related to external migration and developed into two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was addressed to the human resources currently present in Palestine (in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), and the second one aimed at expertise residing outside the country. The first questionnaire was administered on a sample of medical doctors and university academics working at universities and research centers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; while the second questionnaire was administered on a sample of Palestinian expertise from outside Palestine, using an email survey. In addition, a survey of a representative sample of Palestinian households residing in the cities of Ramallah, Al-Bireh and Betunia was conducted to question household members about their views and perceptions vis-à-vis migration and the experience of migration of any of their members. Finally, a series of interviews were conducted with decision-makers and responsible individuals from the Ministry of Labor, Education and Higher Education, Planning, and Foreign Affaires, to investigate their views about the phenomenon of external migration in the Palestinian society and its evolution.

## **Results:**

### *Results from health and higher education sectors' employees:*

Results were obtained from 90 questionnaires filled from the higher education sector and 95 questionnaires from the health sector. 82.2% of the respondents held Masters and Ph.D. degrees. The average number of schooling years that the individual followed inside the Palestinian territory ranged between 12 and 18 years. The number of years of work experience that the individuals acquired from inside the Palestinian territory was, on average, 4 years, and from outside, 16 years. On the other hand, 8.6% of the study sample reported facing a bad economic situation, where they are unable to fulfill their basic needs, with a worse situation in the West Bank compared to the Gaza Strip. Respondents from the higher education sector found their situation better than their counterparts in the health sector.

Also, 66.0% and 75.9% of the study sample described the performance of security institutions inside the country and the political body, respectively, as acceptable or bad. Finally, 57.8% of the study sample reported having been subject, themselves or other members of their households, to oppressive measures from the Israeli occupation. Around 30.8% of the respondents declared a desire to out-migrate (7.0% permanent migration and 23.8% temporary migration), with the main reasons being the current local political and security situation (in 79.7% of cases), and the desire for self-development (77.2% of cases). Those thinking of migrating to Europe represented the highest percentage (34.5%) followed by migration to Gulf countries (20.7% of cases).

### *Results from case studies of Palestinian out-migrants:*

The study summarized the cases of eight Palestinian out-migrants living in the US, Europe and other Arab countries. The participants in the case studies reported about the difficulties they were facing to find a suitable job that corresponds to their qualifications and expertise inside Palestine; in addition to the low remuneration and the lack of job security. In some cases, people had been subject to Israeli oppressive measures before leaving the country. All the case studies expressed that they had accomplished the original aim behind their migration, but are continuously considering returning to the country, mainly for patriotic reasons – and especially if the political and administrative structures improve. In cases where the migrants had returned, the respondents reported that they intend to work in research, academia and voluntary activities. Some actually attempt to help in the development process of Palestine from abroad, by sending some money and donations, and by promoting the Palestine question.



*Results from the household survey:*

850 households (2730 individuals) were surveyed in Ramallah, Al-Bireh and Bitunia Governorates. Results revealed that 7.3% of the surveyed household members (15 years old and above) consider out-migrating, generally to improve their financial situation (72.9%) or due to the political and security situation (21.1%). Amongst those, 50% desire to out-migrate to the United States, and 24.2% to Europe and Canada. Results also revealed that 138 individuals belonging to the interviewed households had effectively out-migrated (61.6% of them after the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000); and mainly to the United States (71% of them). On the other hand, interviewed households mentioned that the main reason behind the out-migration of their household-members was to improve their financial situation (in 52.9% of the cases). In 55.8% of the time, individuals out-migrated after having acquired their high school degree and today, 12.9% of them hold a Masters degree or a Ph.D. from abroad. Also, while the economic status of those who had out-migrated used, before migrating, to be sufficient only to fulfill their basic needs in 62% of the cases and 32.1% faced difficulties to find jobs, the households reported that in 32.8% of the cases, the main reason behind their household relatives' out-migration were the obstacles imposed by the Israeli occupation. In 42% of the cases, these individuals are transferring some money to their families inside Palestine.

**Recommendations:**

The responsibility for out-migration, in general, and the "Brain Drain" in particular remains one of the State, which has to work out how to limit the negative consequences of the phenomenon on the society and individuals, and benefit from its potential advantages. In spite of the fact that the absence of effective sovereignty remains the main hindrance limiting the capacity of the Palestinian Authority and its Ministries to effectively play their organizing and supervisory role, still things can be done to help keep Palestinian expertise and resources inside the country, and attract those currently living outside to come back. Some of the possible measures consist of continuously attempting to create an enabled economic, social, academic, and health environment inside the country. On the other hand, a big room for improvement is related to redefining the role of national university and their contribution in the development process, with regards to the type of programs run and their performance. This will help universities to become a real engine towards producing human capital in the quantity and quality needed to respond to the demand from the labor market. In addition to this, the study recommends establishing specialized

departments at the level of concerned Ministries and Embassies, Consulates and Representative bodies of the Palestinian Authority worldwide, to follow up on Palestinian expatriates and provide a comprehensive database of their status. Another recommendation concerns international and other organizations working in the country, to encourage them to make use of the available expertise in implementing their programs and activities, in a way to alleviate unemployment and its negative consequences. Finally, it is the responsibility of society as a whole to create a new social contract that encourages these human capacities to stay in the country and limit the continuous thinking to out-migrate.