



Feature Article

| Bader Alzaharna

In Search of Hope: Gaza's Youth Face Death and Row the Boat in Uncertain Waters

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Facts and Numbers

In the scorching summer of 2023, hundreds of Gaza youths driven by depression and despair queued to submit their applications to obtain Turkish visas. In search of a better life, those youths have made the tough decision to travel to Turkey. However, the story does not end at this point. After landing at Turkey, many will attempt illegal migration to Europe using dangerous boats.

Since 2007, local reports have confirmed that over 250,000 youths migrated from the Gaza Strip in pursuit of a thriving life in Europe. In August 2023, alone, there were over 16,700 Turkish visa applications submitted by young adults living in the Gaza Strip's five governates. Interviews with applicants revealed that the most travelled destination is Turkey through which they can migrate to Europe. Young citizens, aged 18 to 30, emphasised that the already deteriorating economic environment in Gaza has created a space for higher immigration rates.



Emigration Occupying the Young's Minds, Gaza, @ 2023 Bader Alzaharna

Migration from the Gaza Strip has been increasing in recent years. As a result of stagnating economic situation, prospective migrant youth have highlighted that migration is not a voluntary choice but a consequence of prolonged economic hardships.

Several research papers have shown that there are no accurate statistics on the people's number who left Gaza, however, in May 2019 it was cited that more than 40,000 emigrants left Gaza as of the same time in 2018. While the United Nations estimated about 20,000 people left and according to human rights experts in Gaza, 70,000 people left from the period of 2014 until 2020. Although this is just an approximate estimate, these numbers suggest a high percentage of youth migrating from Gaza. According to UNHCR data, close to 150,000 people made their way into the EU this way in 2022 alone.

Reasons to Leave

In this article, the writer investigates some reasons behind the high demand of Turkish visas and the abrupt increase in the number of Gaza migrants.

Prospective migrants articulated some words characterized by sadness and revolt, stressing that it was a poignant scene that many people desired to leave, but it was a necessity. They added that, "Gaza youth should enjoy the right of movement. Though exile means being far away from home, it may be a life-rescuing decision".

Traumatized by the repercussions of the intra-Palestinian division, other prospective migrants found it disappointing to stay home, believing that they had been wasting their youth years in the embrace of hopelessness, risk, and uncertainty.

They agreed that the Palestinian divided house was nothing, but another catalyst to leave home. Other conversations with youth unveiled their crying need for a better educational system and an improved quality of life. Some visa applicants signalled that their main reason of migration is to receive

better education opportunities or scholarship. While others said it was all about job opportunities. A smaller number of citizens talked about the psychological motives.

“What motivates me to migrate is related to psychological factors. I do not feel well going through all these traumas along the years. My unstable psychological health incarcerates me in four walls, and motivates me to be hard on myself. I do not want to hurt myself. I want to enjoy living, but not here” a prospective migrant sadly said.

A common story narrated amongst the citizens willing to migrate from Gaza is Mohammad's, 27, who succumbed to depression and took his own life. Prior to his death, he published a heart-cracking post on his personal Facebook account, which swiftly gained much attention on social media. In his post, Mohammad apologized to his mother and sisters that he decided to stop living. “It's painful that Mohammad has passed away. It's always sad to remember his Facebook post” a young prospective migrant said. “But we still have a chance to live. There's still hope, but outside Gaza” With tears kissing his cheeks, a young man said.

The other citizens stressed that the primary goal of their emigration was to help their families in having a better life. “I borrowed money from my friends to apply for the visa, and to cover the travelling expenses. Usually, I do not ask anyone for money, especially when I have no way to repay. But, this time, I felt extremely hopeless. I have nothing to lose. I want to go out to secure a job and help my seven little siblings have a decent life” With eyes full of tears, a visa applicant said.

Desperation, But Dreams

These quick interviews and conversations reflected on how the structural conditions of

the Gaza context were experienced. Many stories manifested the Gaza youth's aspiration and courage to face a rollercoaster life, in the sake to turn their fantasy into a reality.

“Yes, we all will die. But first, let us live” A young man shouted, bearing a grudge against the idea of living like a dead man – as he described.

“Even if it might be death, we want to continue rowing the boat until we are there” another prospective migrant persisted.

“We know about those who sank and died. May they rest in peace, but now, it's our turn to try. We are alive and we have high hopes that it will work. We have big dreams that are possible to achieve” another 24-year-old university graduate declared.

Tragedies of the Past

Giving a blind eye to the past stories of the lost in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and the capsized boats, young adults still have a shimmer of hope that a settled life awaits abroad. Last week, the social media was filled with reels and videos of young citizens who said their last goodbye to their relatives, weeping as if they would never meet again.



The Independent @ 2016

Believing in the little chance of survival, migrants communicate with brokers who are the primary individuals guiding the prospective migrants and introducing them to the intermediaries and smugglers. Despite the compelling illegal immigration circumstances in open seas and oceans, and the high risk of drowning and dying, young people has jeopardized and lost their lives many times. They have chased far-fetched dreams holding a belief that they will come true.

These individuals, while representing only a small sample, exhibit the frustration experienced by thousands of youths due to economic and social challenges at home.

An Emigration Motivated by a Harsh Reality

Understanding some factors coaxing the young to migrate, it is evident that reality in the Gaza Strip is draconian. “Thinking about life here makes me more depressed. I tend not to think of what may be next” a potential migrant expressed about living in Gaza.

Dozens of social media influencers and human rights activists published pictures of young people lining up and patiently waiting to give their biometrics in the hope that they will be granted a tourist visa to Turkey.

As if “that would be the gateway to heaven” said an applicant with much remorse, but not regret. These individuals are almost motivated by their relatives or friends living outside Gaza. Overstated excitement to leave transcends what logic may look like to these people, ignoring explicit dangers and consequences of such an illegal action.

“The only way to have a peaceful life is to migrate to Belgium, Greece, or Cyprus. In a

couple of years, I can have a permanent residency allowing me to freely fly anywhere” a prospective migrant asserted with hope and joy.

According to a country policy and information note released by the UK Government in 2022, Gazans face chronic economic difficulties and shortages of electricity and safe drinking water. The economic situation has exponentially exacerbated, especially after the COVID-19 had slowed down economic activities, and disrupted people’s life aspects. Coupled with an uncertain security and political situation, the Gaza Strip has primarily become dependent on international humanitarian aid, and donations from the European Union, US Agency for International Development, and some Arab states.

In the first quarter of 2023, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) stated that unemployment rate was the highest among youth graduates; about 46% is the unemployment rate among youth graduates (aged 19-29 years) who hold Associate Diploma Certificate and higher (29% in the West Bank compared to 68% in Gaza Strip).

These numbers depict the harsh reality that Palestinians, especially youth in the Gaza Strip, live. Some youth applicants for the visa declared that they only have one option, which was immigrating.

With so much melancholy, some young university graduates highlighted “We are filled with love for life, youthfulness, and energy. These are our prime years. We devoted much effort to secure jobs, and establish ourselves. In vain. It is soul-piercing that we have a severe scarcity of employment opportunities and high poverty rates”.

A Heart-Breaking Conclusion

Some other stories have a more melancholic ending. We see grief-stricken mothers still mourning the loss of their sons who attempted illegal migration to Europe. Through Turkey and Greece, they thought they would easily arrive at Europe and would be met with smiles and cash. However, their boats have thrown them to the distant shores of disappointment and hopelessness – that was the case of the lucky. The other unlucky have not even made it. Instead of bringing a settled life to themselves and their families, hundreds of young people have brought excruciating realities to their parents, opened wounds, and left scars in the hearts of their beloved ones back home.

Though the journey of migration is gripped with dangers, it is becoming the only pathway for the young people. More stories are told by those who survived. However, there are countless buried ones.

In a paradox of embracing and rejecting life, Gaza youth are caught in a moment of depression, knowing that it may be death lurking around the corner, but a glimmer of hope may still be found on their risky journey.