

GAZA'S LABOUR TRAP

By GARFIELD H. HORN

The Gaza Strip is an island in a sea of indifference and hostility. It seems to have been forgotten in the peace process, both by the West and by the Arabs. It is isolated by geography and politics, cut off from the rest of the Palestinian people and the Arab states by the might of Israel and by the course of history.

Since the "naksa", the occupation by Israel in the 1967 war, Gaza has increasingly become, in the American expression, a "bedroom community" for the Jewish state—simply a place for employees of Israeli businesses to live. The economy of Gaza has become more and more dependent on that of Israel, as the number of income-producing and wage-paying Palestinian industries decreases.

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Nearly half of Gaza's labour force of 90 000 works in Israel. The rest work in a few Israeli-owned businesses in Gaza and many small Palestinian-owned businesses. What this means is that, even if an accord were to be reached with Israel and Palestinian independence realized, the Gaza Strip would have lost most of its capacity to be independent.

Gaza has a population of 600 000 (expected to reach one million by the year 2000) and one of the highest population densities in the world. The living conditions of Palestinians in the Gaza are probably the worst of all displaced Palestinians. This situation needs to be improved and the Palestinians must be able to determine their own future, but first more knowledge is required.

Much has been written about the overall social and economic patterns in Gaza, but little is known of the labour motivations and perceptions of the individual families. That is why the Arab Study Center, a Jerusalem-based Palestinian research foundation, undertook a study funded by IDRC. Headed by Dr Faisal Abdul-Qadar Hussein, the study sought to determine which households were dependent on work in Israel and abroad, which derived their income from inside the Gaza, and which economic and social factors were behind the working and living decisions made by household members. The study consisted of intensive interviews with 143 families in Raffa, a city considered representative of the Gaza population as a whole.

What the study found is that the labour force is divided into two fairly distinct groups, fitting into what economists call the "dual labour market" model. Those in the first

group have jobs that offer good pay, benefits, opportunity for advancement, and security. Those in the second group, into which most of the Gaza labour force fits, have jobs with none of these qualities. Most of the first group is made up of families living in the Gaza area before the 1948 war, while the second group consists mainly of refugee and Bedouin families.

The study showed that these labour patterns tend to reinforce themselves. The workers in the second group, having little opportunity for meaningful or steady work now or in the future, tend to resign themselves to their lot in life and not seek higher education. Those in the first group, being better educated, are likely to seek employment in Israel or abroad where the pay and security are better. (According to 1983 figures, about one-third of Gaza's gross domestic income came from remittances of workers abroad.)

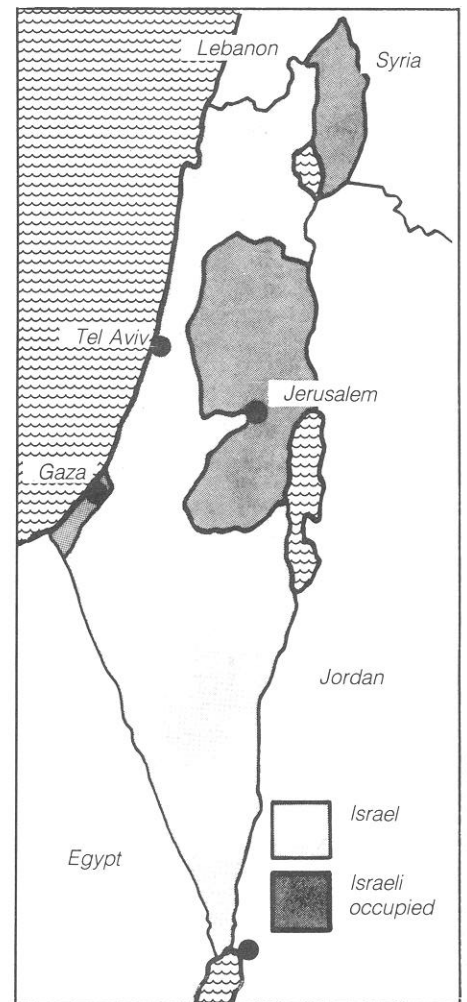
The lot of the workers commuting into Israel every day—they are not allowed to spend the night—is not good. Three-quarters of those sampled do not have health or retirement benefits, and nearly one-third reported spending 20 hours or more a week commuting to and from work. Still, the jobs are better than in Gaza.

OPPORTUNITY FOR ADVANCEMENT

The study also pointed out a changing education pattern in Raffa households. Whereas only 4 percent of heads of household that were interviewed had university degrees, 11 percent of all family members had degrees, suggesting that the next generation is better educated and thus more likely to work outside Gaza. Recent economic developments will, however, have a serious effect on their opportunities to do so. Israel itself is having economic difficulties and may have to reduce its work force. And the recent drop in oil prices means that many of the 25 000 Gaza residents working in the oil-producing states will be sent home and forced to seek menial jobs within the second group.

Within Gaza, there is little opportunity to advance to the first labour group, even if a worker has a capital base. The pattern of Israeli intrusion on the land, licencing and regulatory restrictions, the cutting off of export markets, and the flooding of Israeli imports into Gaza have practically eliminated all opportunities for Palestinians to establish large, modern employment-generating industries. And Gaza residents have little chance to form labour and commercial organizations because of Israeli restrictions.

The new generation, the study points out, has low expectations and poor chances for advancement in Gaza. Most of the respon-



Source: Gemini News Service

dents interviewed cited family and personal connections as the main way to gain access to jobs rather than training and educational factors. This will reinforce the existing dual labour structure.

"The Gaza is fully integrated into the Israeli economy. It is a major market for Israeli products. It is very unlikely that this pattern will change," says Dr Jan Abu-Shakra of the Arab Study Center.

It must be asked whether this is an advantage to Israel in the long term. The population of Gaza cannot be maintained indefinitely in second-order jobs. Gaza could become more than just a thorn in Israel's side if violence, bred through frustration, were to erupt. A combination of inside and outside forces must be used to improve life in Gaza, and this is what the Arab Study Center hopes to achieve. □

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