

# YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) was inaugurated in 2006 to harness the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty and other scholars, in order to contribute positively to Arab policy-making and international relations. IFI is a neutral, dynamic, civil, and open space that brings together people representing all viewpoints in society. It aims to: raise the quality of public policy-related debate and decision-making in the Arab World and abroad; enhance the Arab World's input into international affairs; and, enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in the Middle East and abroad.

Research and Policy Memo #2

## Public sector can reduce push factors that drive youth emigration

Young men and women prefer to leave Lebanon either temporarily or permanently to work abroad, leading to a decline in the country's human capital and welfare. While the factors that attract youth abroad cannot be altered, the onus rests on public institutions in Lebanon to reduce the internal "push" factors that drive youth away.

"The Lebanese population's age pyramid shows a shrinking trend in the 20-35 age categories," said Jad Chaaban, a leading economist and researcher on Arab youth, at a recent seminar at the American University of Beirut.

Most of the youth who migrate to North America and Europe are high-skilled and have been through more than 13 years of schooling, constituting the widespread "brain drain" phenomenon.

"Brain drain is a Lebanese fact," he said.

The "Brain Drain Seminar: Causes and Solutions" was organized by the AUB Alumni Association Mount Lebanon Chapter. Representing AUB President Peter Doorman at the seminar, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences Iman Nuwayhid pointed out three types of brain drain: the emigration of young educated Arabs out of their countries, the alienation of young educated Arabs from the social and political issues within their countries and the failure of states to provide sufficient basic public services like education.

Chaaban is currently leading a research project to address the linkages between higher education and employment in Lebanon. The project, which is cosponsored by the Alumni Relations Office at the American University of Beirut and affiliated to the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), will survey graduates of four major Lebanese universities on the study-to-work transition, including work motivation and job satisfaction.

The Research and Policy Forum on Youth in the Arab World Program at IFI generates research and acts as a meeting point, catalyst and central repository for regional and international research and policy on Arab youth. One of the three programs launched in 2008, the youth program aims to engage researchers and policymakers alike with the multiple realities of youth in the region. Chaaban heads the youth program's faculty advisory committee.

### Policy Recommendations

- Public and private institutions should form a study group to produce local and official information on the extent of migration and its patterns
- Public institutions should enact reforms that reduce living costs and encourage cheaper and more accessible housing loans for young graduates
- Public institutions should invest more in skilled public sector jobs
- Public institutions should make it easier for businesses to operate, by reducing telecommunications costs and the cost of starting a business

**Research and Policy Forum on Youth in the Arab World** produces research as well as acts as a catalyst and clearing-house among regional and international research and policy on Arab youth. It aims to publish and exchange policy-relevant findings, with a focus on shared experiences and lessons learned; and identify gaps in the global knowledge base on Arab youth-related issues, including education, governance, public health, and civic engagement.

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## Net effect of brain drain is negative

Youth migration in Lebanon, a “chronic migratory phenomenon,” is fuelled by both push and pull factors. Pull factors are the external conditions that draw youth abroad, like high salaries in Arab petrodollar-rich countries and more rewarding work environments and business cultures. Established networks of Lebanese abroad further ease the transition for youth out of the country.

“Pull factors coming from abroad cannot be reversed,” insists Chaaban.

The negative effects of brain drain outweigh the positive effects, requiring immediate policy attention. Lebanese families are paying for an education that generates its returns abroad. The country is losing its human capital and the largest share of its workforce. While it receives almost \$4.5 billion per year in remittances, these remittances mainly finance high consumption spending. The potential long-term reduction in welfare and economic growth due to migration is real.

## Migration should be an option, not a goal

Surveys of youth employment and migration suggest direct policy implications for reducing the push

factors that drive youth out of the country. More than one third of university graduates wish to emigrate or leave the country for a certain period of time, according to a 2003 survey conducted by Saint Joseph University. Engineering graduates, medical students and information technology students are among those who are most likely to work abroad.

Push factors are internal conditions that induce youth to migrate. Due to the political instability that has marked Lebanon since 1975 and the high cost of living, migration is often a goal for young graduates. A mismatch between education and market needs pushes youth to look abroad for career development. Youth are encouraged to enter professional fields that are fully saturated such as medicine and engineering, while demand exists for professionals in other fields such as health management and operations, as well as agribusiness.

Young entrepreneurs for their part are deterred by the steep cost of doing business, in addition to the inefficient regulations for starting and operating a business.

“Government needs to provide incentives for skilled Lebanese youth to stay because it is a constitutional right - migration should be an option, not a goal,” Chaaban concluded. ■

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