



Bethlehem Conference for the Diaspora: Nation-building from abroad

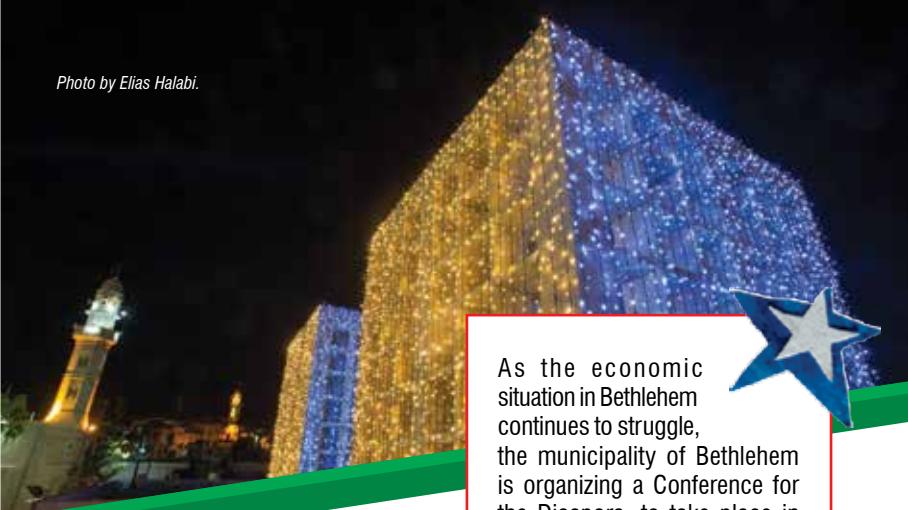
By Paola Handal-Michael



After growing up in countries in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States as a third generation émigrée of Bethlehem, I returned to Palestine as an adult - which has given me a unique outlook on life. I am a descendant of one of the Bethlehem families who emigrated to Latin America and the Caribbean in search of better economic prospects. The hardships that my grandparents' generation faced not only under the Ottoman rule but also later during the British Mandate prompted them to partake in an ongoing wave of emigration. Many who had left previously had been able to accumulate wealth and had returned prosperously to their hometowns in Palestine, which encouraged members of my family to follow in their footsteps. This increasingly successful economic activity, unsurprisingly, led to an increase of permanent settlement in different countries around the world.

My grandparents and others were not only looking for more prosperous opportunities and freedom abroad. The creation of Israel and the dispossession of Palestinians further strengthened in many emigrants the idea of non-return to the homeland. Those who had skills helped develop the countries into which they immigrated; and it is well known that many Bethlehemites in Latin America did not only very well financially but also held successful political posts. Over time, the older generation of Palestinians abroad established themselves in different parts of the world, and generation by generation, their knowledge of Palestinian culture and their sense of identity and belonging to Bethlehem slowly dissipated. The new generation embraced the cultures in which they were immersed, spoke the language of their

Photo by Elias Halabi.



As the economic situation in Bethlehem continues to struggle, the municipality of Bethlehem is organizing a Conference for the Diaspora, to take place in 2016, with the aim to enable fruitful connections between Palestinian investors locally and in the diaspora. It hopes for a successful outcome, as such investment will allow members of the diaspora not only to benefit financially but also to reconnect culturally with their homeland.

host countries, and adopted the values of their new environment while keeping only minimal ties to their country of origin. The capacity to read and write in Arabic often vanished and most kept only a loose connection with Palestine, be it by family name, old family photographs, or some fondness of Middle Eastern food. Others were keener to uphold a connection to their roots, speaking Arabic at home and visiting sporadically, or regularly, if they were able and allowed to do so by the Israeli occupation.

This depopulation of Bethlehem has continued until today as the young generation is leaving in order to raise their standards of living and to avoid the difficult circumstances of living under occupation. The more talented, qualified, and unemployed Palestinians are looking and willing to emigrate and will continue to seek opportunities abroad. This poses a problem to the local community and to the country as a whole.

However, and on a positive note: why should it not be possible that families who are successful in a foreign country think of the possibility of investing back here? Why shouldn't Palestinians in the diaspora remain abroad but still invest in their homeland? There is a growing recognition by governments and the

international community at large of the importance and often underutilized contribution of the diaspora to trade, economic growth, and the reduction of poverty. Palestinians abroad can be viewed as important agents of economic and social development in Bethlehem, but the local government may often lack the capacity of engaging them effectively. Despite the steps and strides towards development that Bethlehem has taken in the past decade, it is unlikely that the economy will grow fast enough to provide jobs for hundreds of educated and unemployed Palestinians: Bethlehem currently holds an unemployment rate of twenty-four percent, the highest in the West Bank. Thus, an immediate return of Palestinians from abroad seems unlikely given this current state of the economy and high rate of unemployment. Yet, within the global economic context and with all the



Panoramic view of Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of CCHP.

advantages of modern communications and travel technologies, the Palestinian diaspora could have a crucial contribution to nation-building.

All this has made the Bethlehem Municipality eager to organize, in mid-2016, an economic conference for Palestinians in the diaspora. The current crisis facing Bethlehem and Palestine as a whole makes such a conference important now more than ever. But not only can such a conference attract Palestinians abroad to play a role in the economic development of their homeland, it can also provide them with an opportunity to reconnect with the local community through cultural exchange. The three-day event is planning to organize a range of activities that will enable productive relationships between Palestinians residing abroad and living here, with a particular focus on economic contacts and investment. Activities will include presentations by local businessmen from sectors such as tourism, arts and crafts, catering, agriculture, and transportation. The activities shall

also include a range of cultural events with the hope of fostering pride in our Palestinian heritage and increasing a sense of belonging. The purpose of this ambitious conference is to benefit both, the diaspora and the local community that is in dire need of positive prospects for future development.

Bethlehem Municipality hopes that this conference will provide a strong framework to facilitate productive linkages between Palestinian investors at home and in the diaspora. A successful outcome will consolidate the positive political and economic changes that need to take place in Palestine, promising fruitful opportunities for a struggling local community.

For more information about this conference, contact info@bethlehem-city.org.

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