

# Building Bridges

with Diaspora Palestinians in Central and Latin America



By Haitham Yakhlef

I was most excited to visit Central and Latin America, for the first time in my life, during the summer of 2016. As an organizer of business events, my intent was to explore opportunities for the building of bridges with business communities of the Palestinian diaspora that is spread all over the South-American continent. I was hoping to be able to connect them with their counterparts in Palestine, the Middle East, and the Gulf. While geographical distance, economic differences, and social gaps complicate such an endeavor, the need to build such bridges is essential for all Palestinians. Locals are interested in enhancing their trade of goods and services beyond classic borders, whereas many businesspersons of Palestinian descent in Latin America are looking to reconnect with their roots.

As my destination, I chose three countries that represent three different geographical areas in the region: El Salvador in Central America, Peru in northern Latin America, and Chile in the South, the latter alone home to more than 500,000 persons with Palestinian origins, to explore possibilities of organizing such conferences. For months in advance, I had coordinated with Palestinian embassies, existing business connections, and some friends in these countries to arrange meetings with top notch businessmen, countries' officials, and Palestinian communities. The challenges were high, and so was the risk of failure.

El Salvador is a beautiful country that is home to a Palestinian community of around 30,000. I stayed in the capital San Salvador at the Sheraton Hotel that is owned by Toni Safieh, a Palestinian in his late 60's who has never been to Palestine because, as he says, all his time and energy has been devoted to the establishing

of his businesses that concentrate on hospitality, textile, and construction and were established with the help of his immediate family. We held a meeting that, thanks to the work of Palestinian activist Suhair Barake, went very well and gathered more than thirty-five top businessmen who came from as far as Guatemala, such as Maher Younes and Jamal Hadweh, and Colombia, such as Walid Zayed. The audience was interested to know all about investing in Palestine and expressed readiness to attend a potential follow-up conference in 2017, eager to learn more on what opportunities can be created.

On my last day in El Salvador, through the assistance of the ambassador of Palestine in El Salvador, Jorge Shafiq Handal, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador hosted an official meeting and introduced me to PROMESA, a local investment promotion agency that was represented by its president, Sigfrido Reyes. The meeting was furthermore attended

With over two million persons<sup>1</sup> with Palestinian heritage living in South America, the potential is there to forge powerful business ties between the diaspora and the homeland.

by the vice minister of economy, Dr. Luz Estrella Rodriguez, the president of the International Exhibitions Center, Marta Cecibel Lau Marquez, and Eduardo Palucho, the General Director of Economic Affairs in the ministry of foreign affairs. The Official speeches expressed a great desire to establish trade ties with Palestine in particular and the rest of the Arab world in general. I left El Salvador convinced that this

CHILE



Club Palestino.



With Patricio Nazal and Gabriela Salvador, Chile.



With Alexis Steir, Fundación Palestina Belén 2000, Chile.



With Daniel Daccarett-Vendomata, Chile.



Meeting with business people in Peru.



Club Palestino in Peru.



Meeting at Peru PromPeru in Lima, Peru.



At the Chamber of Commerce in Lima, Peru.



H.E. Mounir Makhoul Abudayeh, Palestinian Ambassador to Peru.



Meetings in Peru.

country offers many opportunities to initiate mutual trade and investment.

My next stop brought me to Peru, an industrial country and tourist destination within Latin American countries. No precise statistics on the number of Palestinians are available, but assumptions cite around sixty to seventy thousand. Walid Muaqqat, the Palestinian Ambassador to Peru arranged all official and unofficial meetings during my five-day visit to its capital Lima. We met with the president of Lima's chamber of commerce, Mario Mongilardi Fuchs, the president of the Association of Exporters, Juan Varillas Velasquez, and the CEO of the Agricultural Producers Association,

Alfonso Velasquez Tuesta, all of whom showed great interest in starting trade relations and opening up markets in Palestine and the Middle East. PromPeru, the official agency for the promotion of investment in Peru, expressed that they need assistance in forging ties with the Arab world, while Miguel Atala, the president of the Arab-Peruvian Chamber of Commerce explained that mutual visits are crucial to enhance trade with Arab countries.

I was honestly amazed by the successes achieved by most of the many businessmen of Palestinian origin I was able to meet unofficially. Omar Mazraawi (known as Omar Dan) is one of the most important real estate

# PERU

investors in Peru; Munir Makhoul Abudayeh's construction company is one of the largest in the country; Mazen Tubbeh Wir owns the Pima Kinz textile factory that is manufacturing all kind of fabrics for North and Latin America; and Samir Mitri is among the largest suppliers of sewing materials in Peru, to name just a few. Club Palestino is a socio-cultural club, its area sized 70,000 m<sup>2</sup>, where consistently, Palestinians get together on weekends to keep ties and learn news about back home. I felt the warmth of Palestinian hospitality during my stay there, and its board expressed the willingness to host a potential conference in Latin America.

My last destination, Santiago in Chile, proved a challenge even in the seven days I had planned to assess opportunities. The most influential Palestinian bodies here are the Club Palestino, established in the 1920's, and Belen 2000, an NGO that supports projects in Palestine. I was not able to meet big Palestinian billionaires, either because they were not able

to free themselves from their busy schedules at short notice, or possibly because, as senior assistants claimed, they were "fed up with requests for donations." That did not hold my horses, however, and I insisted on presenting my purely professional aim of soliciting their commitment to attend a potential business conference for Palestinians. Alexis Sfeir, General Secretary of Belen 2000, wrote an extensive report of our hour-long meeting for the company's board of trustees. Daniel Daccarett Imbarack, Vice President of Vendomatica, one of the biggest companies producing vending machines in Chile, was among the most pessimistic Belen members I met. Nevertheless, he liked the idea of a conference for Palestinian businessmen from Latin America and the Middle East and expressed his support to include Belen 2000 as a partner. This might prove important as he is close to Jose Said, the chairman of Belen 2000 and one of the wealthiest billionaires in Latin America.

# EL SALVADOR



Ministry Meeting, El Salvador.



Meetings in El Salvador.



Meetings in El Salvador.



With Toni Safieh, owner of Sheraton Hotel in El Salvador.



*Mazen TUBEH Wir Textile company in Lima, Peru.*

Patricio Nazal and his wife Gabriela Salvador, both of Palestinian origin and owners of the financial brokerage company VanTrust Capital, have business ties with Bank of Palestine and were very careful to learn every detail regarding investment approaches. They promised to help attract quality businessmen to the potential conference and may suggest a joint-venture fund to be run by their respected company. In general, the meetings in Chile were tough and unpromising as no one had previously considered investment into Palestine, not even as an issue for discussion. Even Jorge Daccarett, the representative of Bank of Palestine in Chile made it very clear that “the road is not covered with roses.” Bank of Palestine began making contacts with Palestinians in Chile five years ago and still needs more time to attract investors.

In summary, I would say that there are many opportunities waiting for Palestinians in Latin America. For these opportunities to translate into actual business transactions, discussions should take place between Palestinians in Latin America and in Palestine (and the Middle East and Gulf). Both sides have not only well-established businesses with connections that could serve to build bridges but also expert know-how that can bring real investment to Palestine, possibly through joint-venture

projects. Social and touristic trips to Palestine for Palestinians living in the diaspora will enhance ties and eventually attract investment. And the promotion in Latin America of Palestinian goods and (online) services can be established with minimum investment, as there is a real market and need for such items – with more than two million Palestinians living in Central and Latin America. As this issue of TWiP becomes available, the Bethlehem District Diaspora Convention 2016 is taking place as a step in the right direction, hoping to enhance trade, help the economies of both sides, and offer opportunities for profitable exchange to Palestinians living on both continents.

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<sup>i</sup> This number is cited by South American activists, while the PCBS cites 685,000 Palestinians living in countries outside the Arab region.