

National Investment into our Human Capital

Palestine and the Diaspora



By Yahya Al-Salqan

I am fully aware of the fact that our national and political cause is far beyond complicated and controlled by the balance of powers over which we have little control. But I also know that there are many tracks that affect our lives and economy that are not controlled by these powers - and that many of them are as of yet untapped. Had we exploited and invested into these untapped resources, we would be better off today. One important cornerstone of these aspects is our human capital and the Palestinian diaspora constitutes an essential, economic and political part of it. Only our human capital can transcend the paralyzed political complexity and we need to better invest in it.

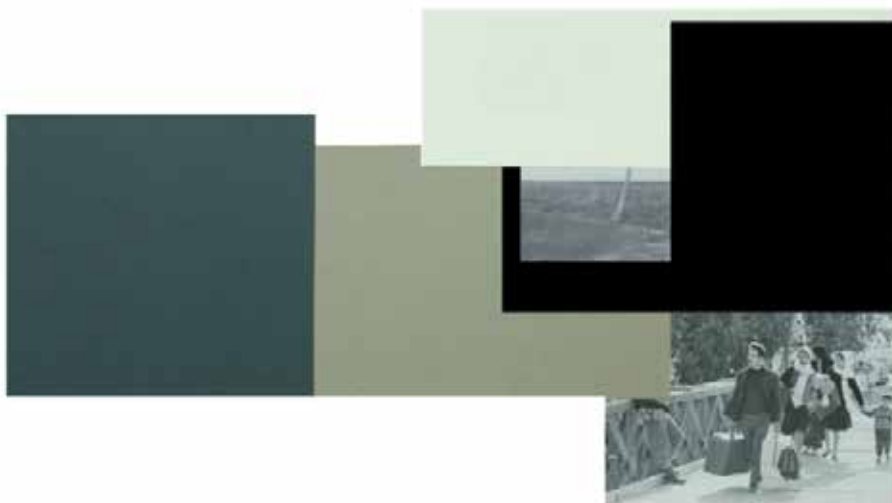
The Palestinian diaspora, largely born in 1948 as a result of forced displacement, is uniquely different from any other diaspora in the recent history of mankind. It is important to note, however, that the second and third generations of migrants and exiles are very different from their diaspora parents. As time passes, the younger generations tend to become more assimilated in their adopted surroundings - unless they are Palestinians living in the refugee camps. Consequently, the young generations of the Palestinian diaspora are somewhat similar in nature to other diaspora communities worldwide. This article focuses on these younger generations of our diaspora, as they constitute the potential for a path into a better future for all of us, in Palestine and abroad. It will explore the economic impact that engagement of the diaspora, or lack thereof, can exert on the Palestinian homeland.

Our relationship with the diaspora may seem to be easy, naturally so - but in reality it is not easy at all. In order to build a productive connection that goes beyond sympathy and affinity, the bond must create a win-win situation, there must exist a bidirectional path. It is not so much about what the diaspora can

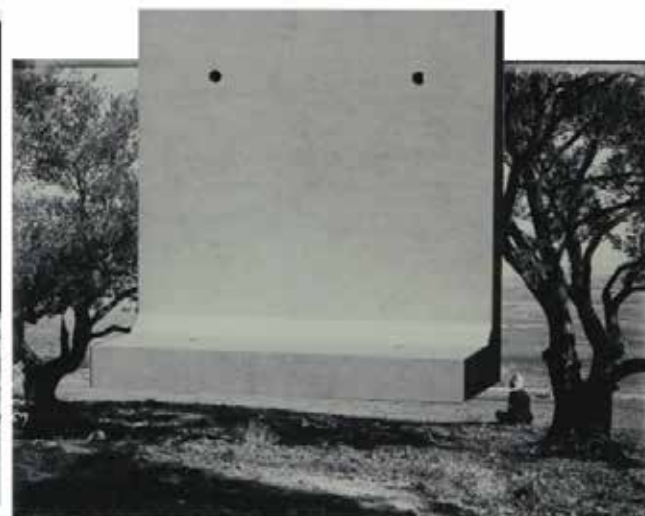
The Palestinian diaspora can be described as an 'exported' (in fact mostly exiled) national talent, an untapped resource, yet present nevertheless.

do for Palestine, we should start by finding out what we can do for them as well, aiming to meet part of their needs and provide some of the services they require.

The Irish experience is an important example to study. The key factor in Ireland's success in tapping into its diaspora, fruitfully engaging it in building up a failing economy, was the establishing of a semi-governmental company that as its first step aimed to build a database of the diaspora. When initial efforts had failed to collect data by inviting Irish diaspora members to make themselves known by calling or writing from abroad to offer their services, researchers actually went door-to-door in almost every city and village to



Art work by artist Hazem Harb.



gather and collect data on the diaspora and document contact information of individuals living abroad. Next, came the realization that only a win-win type of relationship would be able to help develop the economy. Therefore, the Irish diaspora effort employed a new and innovative method that focused on creating new jobs at home. Wherever any Irish person was, if he or she created a job at home, that person received financial compensation – and thus, both sides won. Several years later and with further help through tax and investment incentives, Northern Ireland had succeeded in becoming a business hub within Europe.

Let me focus now on Palestine and highlight some potential strengths and venues that are worth exploring. The high-tech sector, for example, has already made strides and set up software outsourcing services that can be leveraged and easily expanded by increasing the number of companies that are providing this kind of service. This sector, especially with regards to software, is the least influenced by either the prevailing political numbness or the restrictions imposed by the occupation authorities. Moreover, many diaspora Palestinians are very successful in this field. Therefore, we should embrace this endeavor and generate a development engine that initiates processes with the aim to strengthen this successful pillar of our economy. The Palestinian IT Association (PITA) has included the strengthening of ties with the diaspora in its strategy for the past four years. However, while PITA's embrace is a pioneering strategic move, we must realize that its efforts alone are not enough; we need a nationwide diaspora strategy to put us en route for economic development.

The Palestinian diaspora in the Gulf is a good example of our 'exported' national talent. A good majority of its members work as educators, teachers, or business managers. This

highly educated, well-off segment of the Palestinian nation can boost our struggling economy. During and after the First Gulf War in Iraq, we all witnessed the impact of the Palestinian diaspora on the development of the Jordanian economy. Had we formed well-established channels of investment at the time, we would have received dividends. But it is never too late. Luckily, nowadays the Palestinian business communities in these countries are well organized and

(PIPA) participated in MedGeneration (2013-2015), a regional diaspora-engagement endeavor that was funded by the European Union. Working with partners from Europe, most prominently among them France, this project studied methods and models for the mobilization and engagement of the respective diasporas in the economic development of the region (Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon). PICTI mainly focused on linking successful Palestinians in Europe to Palestinian

Our national strategy for engaging the Palestinian diaspora needs to first ask how we can accommodate their interests and needs. Only then can we create two-way mechanisms that will enable to setting up of enterprises that constitute win-win opportunities.

Art work by artist Taisir Batniji.




one of their major goals is to help the growth of our economy. Chile alone, on the other hand, hosts more than half a million Palestinians and perhaps they are one of the most influential and successful communities in Chile. Let us ask ourselves: What have we done to help them help us? Have we embraced our duties first?

Recognizing the importance of the Palestinian diaspora, the Palestine ICT Incubator (PICTI) in partnership with the Palestine Investment Promotion Agency

entrepreneurs and local businesses in Palestine. Having witnessed the progress made in MedGeneration, I am ready to assert that the opportunity for the engagement of the Palestinian diaspora is ripe and that the two-way road can be a highway of success towards Palestinian economic development. To this end, in early 2016, a National Diaspora Task force was established. It includes PICTI, the Palestinian Information Technology Association (PITA), Paltel Group, Bank

of Palestine, the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PIPA, Rawabi (a newly-developed city near Ramallah), the Higher Council of Innovation and Excellence, and the Palestinian Market Development Programme (PMDP), all Palestinian organizations that expressed the interest and willingness to work on the objective of strengthening the ties with our diaspora.

An engagement of the Palestinian diaspora worth spotlighting is the Joint Master Degree Program in



Electrical Engineering (JMEE) offered in cooperation by Birzeit University (near Ramallah) and Palestine Polytechnic University (Hebron). This program is the result of persistent efforts extended by a Palestinian professor who lives and works in the UK and managed to obtain the necessary funds from the European Union. Her proposal was rejected two times before she finally succeeded in her third attempt. Today, at both universities the JMEE has all the equipment necessary to run the labs required for such a specialization. Furthermore, Palestinian JMEE degree students will have the chance to spend up to three months to carry out part of their research at European universities in France, the UK, Romania, and Bulgaria. Professors from these countries are participating in the teaching of the first and second classes of JMEE students, and PITA contributes to the consortium by offering exposure to Palestinian market needs as part of the program. The JMEE program is up and running, teaching around 30 students.

While Palestine largely lacks natural resources, its wealth lies in its human capital and educated talent: We have 'exported' talented educators and teachers to almost every country in the region, and Palestine is recognized as a highly educated nation worldwide. Our economy needs to utilize and build on this human capital, and in such a situation, the Palestinian diaspora can constitute one of our economy's cornerstones. Imagine that members of the Palestinian diaspora were to deposit part of their wealth in Palestinian banks that have a high degree of stability and credibility, as is happening in Lebanon. Wouldn't it be nice if many of the successful Palestinian businessmen and -women who live in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere would seed-fund an entrepreneurial startup with equity in return? What if part of the diaspora Zaka (the yearly obligation to give part of one's wealth that is required in

Islam) were to support the Palestinian education system and needy students? Let us expand the offshore business sector and build on the successes of our high-tech companies that have established many research and development (R&D) projects with major international companies such as Intel, Microsoft, Cisco, and Fujitsu, to name just a few. Would it not be nice if Palestinian embassies and consulates were to receive the assistance required to enable them to increase their efforts in working on our economic development? And the list goes on. I believe a more comprehensive national strategy for diaspora engagement is overdue. And we need to strengthen the knowledge-based economy in Palestine! The question is: Who is willing to help empower our human capital and link our 'exported' talents to the homeland? Will we have our own "economic" resolution 194?

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