



Herbs, Dates, and Olives

Palestinian Agricultural Products Enrich World Markets



By Adnan Jaber

The agricultural sector is one of the most important sources of economic growth and employment in Palestine. The crucial infrastructure required for agricultural production – water and land – is available. The sector offers high value and has a comparative advantage to other sectors of the Palestinian economy. Currently, however, agriculture-related revenue generates only 6 percent of the Palestinian gross domestic product (GDP), whereas it amounted to around 12 percent in 1994; 73 percent of sector workers are self-employed, and the rest are workers who obtain wages. The investment size of the agricultural sector in Palestine is around US\$ 400 million.

Palestine owns the required resources that could make it the agricultural leader in the region, and they include excellent soil fertility, sufficient water,* suitable weather (allowing plantation 12 months a year), and a highly qualified labor force. It provides a large variety of agricultural products that include, on the one hand, perishable goods such as fresh herbs, vegetables (cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, capsicum, etc.), fruits (Medjool dates, grapes, peaches, bananas, strawberries, etc.), olive oil, and other products, and on the other hand, nonperishable goods (agro-industrial products) that include pickles (cucumbers, olives, eggplants, etc.) and canned food (sweet corn, peas, beans, etc.). However, the fact that the agricultural sector's contribution to the GDP is decreasing indicates that this sector is facing obstacles and challenges.

The Jordan Valley (JV) is considered Palestine's agricultural basket. Reaching from the northern Dead Sea in the south to Lake Tiberias in the north, it is 120 kilometers long and 15 kilometers wide, and the entire area is used for farming. While the JV is officially part of the West Bank, most of it falls under Area C, which means that Palestinians have little control over its resources and infrastructure. Around 17,500 Israelis live in Israeli collective communities (kibbutzim) and in 26 settlements, which together with their agricultural lands occupy 1,200 square kilometers, two-thirds of the JV. Around 52,000 Palestinians live in the JV in about 20 local communities. Many Palestinian farmers in the JV have acceptable basic production skills, but they lack the opportunity to access high-value international markets and export their produce, and are thus required to sell their products locally. This constitutes a missed opportunity, as the JV forms a unique microclimate that allows for year-round agricultural production, particularly in the winter season (November through April), a time when products are in greatest demand but in lowest supply and therefore bring the highest prices from international markets.

Palestine exports mainly the goods that bring in the most income, as they face less competition worldwide, either because they are now grown or available only in Palestine during off-

Palestinian exports decreased by 19.8 percent in September 2017 compared to the previous month, and by 2.5 percent compared to September 2016, reaching US\$73.5 million.

seasons in other parts of the world. Thus, the sector focuses mostly on fresh herbs, Medjool dates, and olive oil.

The fresh-herbs business was established in early 2007. Herbs are the most perishable and sensitive product when it comes to the traceability system used in planting and the temperature used in storage and transportation. As herbs are eaten fresh and their shelf life is short, they are ranked at the top of the list of perishable goods. In Palestine, more than 20 kinds of fresh herbs (including mint, sage, chives, rosemary, arugula, basil, and others) are planted and exported according to international standards and specifications. All farms are internationally certified through the application of the quality and control systems of GLOBALGAP, BRC, SA8000, and other certificates.

Many olive trees in Palestine are hundreds, even thousands of years old.



With Palestine's climate varying between the JV and the surrounding areas (Semi Jordan Valley), fresh herbs can be produced during all 12 months of a year, depending on the place of planting. This possibility enables Palestinian farmers to better compete in the international markets, as herbs can be supplied throughout the year, including during the off-season in other countries, where there is high demand and less supply. The different varieties of fresh herbs are planted according to a special annual calendar that considers the suitable time for their growth and harvest. In order to be able to produce numerous varieties continuously, many farmers own farms in different areas between the Jordan Valley and Semi Jordan Valley.

Fresh herbs are planted in well-controlled greenhouses and irrigated by sweet water, and workers are dressed and trained well to be able to work inside the greenhouses and the packinghouses. If any residues or chemicals are found when the fresh herbs are received by the governmental food-regulatory agencies of the destination countries, the shipment would be rejected – and

if such an incident is repeated, both the export company and the farmer would be blacklisted. Therefore, strict rules are in place for workers, visitors, and all others working on farms and in packinghouses, as well as for agricultural practices of agronomists.

Fresh herbs are normally packed in one-kilogram cartons; they are covered with a special plastic bag and then separated into packages of ten or fewer bunches. Each bunch weighs around 100 grams. This packing is required by clients, as it meets their market needs and consumer desires.

Palestinian fresh herbs are exported to various places throughout the world, such as the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the Gulf States. Even though Palestine does not have an airport, Palestinian exporters can deliver their shipments to these markets within 24 hours of harvesting. Of course, delivery would be much easier, less costly, and made within a shorter time if Palestine had its own airport.

Red basil.



Medjool dates have been planted, produced, and exported by Palestinian farmers since 2008. Initially, overall production amounted to less than 800 tons a year, but in 2017 more than 6,000 tons were produced due to active promotion and distribution in markets all over the world; demand is very high and increases each year. In fact, Medjool dates are considered premium among the more than 300 varieties of dates available in the world. They are characterized by their shape, taste, weight, and nutrition facts. This increase in demand is a result of a successful overall process that starts at the farm and reaches all the way to the destination market. It includes the commitment of supplying the required quality, quantity, and packing, as well as on-time delivery.

In Palestine, the season for Medjool dates starts at the beginning of September and lasts until the end of November. However, farmers and exporters can store them for around 12 to 24 months. Their shelf life is

The Palestinian agricultural sector shows definite points of strength due to Palestine's diverse climatic conditions, the large number of crops planted, and the potential for increasing irrigated lands. The sector is suitable for adopting mostly modern production methods and post-harvest technologies, promising the potential for improvement and development.

sufficiently long, provided that they are processed well on the farm, in the packinghouse, and in storage. Each of these phases must be carried out accurately and according to specific instructions in order to ensure the long shelf life of Medjool dates. There are different kinds of packaging that range from 180 grams up to 5 kilograms, as packaging is carried out according to market needs and client demand. It is important to note that Palestinian exporters are able to comply with market requirements and compete with other exporters who are supplying from various countries such as the United States, Israel, and Jordan.

Medjool dates, like other agricultural products, face obstacles in competitiveness in the international markets. The cost in Palestine is relatively high compared to suppliers from other countries, which is a result of being denied permission to access raw materials and services.

The potential to expand the agricultural sector exists. In order to increase self-sufficiency and to generate more revenue from export, farmers must be trained well, and all efforts should be extended to promoting the entry of more Palestinian agricultural products into the export markets.





Date palms have been cultivated in Palestine for several thousand years.

The farming of olive trees in Palestine is considered the origin of all olive farming in the world. In Palestine, there are olive trees that are around 5,000 years old. Olives are considered the golden treasure of Palestinian farmers, and nearly each family owns at least one olive tree. Palestinian olive oil, moreover, is considered the world's premium olive oil due to its high quality and characteristic specifications. Traditional farming and pressing processes help to give the olives this distinctive feature.

Olive oil is sold in various types of packaging that include stainless steel, glass, PET plastic, and tin. Palestinian exporters are able to locate their brand names in many countries in the world by their small fancy packages on shelves. However, similar to the situation of other products in Palestine, the sale of olive oil faces various obstacles such as higher prices than those of other competitors. Of course, there are many reasons for these high prices that include, as stated above, limited control over resources and logistics.

An overall look at the agricultural sector reveals that the marketing of agricultural products from Palestine in international markets is hindered by problems that are related to seasonal farming and production; the prevailing lack of direct control over resources, raw materials, and logistics services; and a lack of know-how among many farmers and companies regarding international standards and specifications. These factors increase the cost per unit.

The agricultural sector is crucial to secure income for Palestinian farmers and to raise the GDP in general. Therefore, the promotion and marketing of Palestinian agricultural goods must tackle a number of internally generated obstacles.

1. Assuring and further increasing the quality of produced goods through quality monitoring and training of producers
2. Improving administrative practices by offering more training for farmers interested in exporting their products

3. Supporting the business development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

4. Preparing studies about international markets and identifying competitors, quantities of imported goods, new varieties introduced, and their shelf prices

5. Adapting to the specifications and requirements of individual markets worldwide

6. Making available suitable storage in order to secure the high quality of goods and extend their shelf life

A number of companies are working on exporting agricultural products from Palestine, among them is the Palestinian Company for Exports (EXPORTCIRCLESS), established in 2014, a leader in exporting and marketing Palestinian products in world markets. The company is run and managed by competent, highly

qualified experts whose ambition is to serve Palestinian producers and to position their products on international markets. As company experts are familiar with the needs of the agricultural sector and know how to match Palestinian products with international markets, the company focuses mostly on cooperating with farmers, SMEs, micro enterprises, cooperative societies, and women's organizations. EXPORTCIRCLESS endeavors to empower Palestinian producers and to enable the enterprises that are unable to export their products to reach international markets. Thus, more individuals are now able to launch their products in international markets via the company's exporting services. Ultimately, this service contributes to the expansion of production, increases revenues, and leads to profit growth. This opportunity consequently fortifies the capacities of enterprises to cope with the changes that are taking place in the local market and helps them grow and expand both horizontally and vertically.

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*This applies to areas where Palestinian farmers have full access to water resources. The political aspect of Israel's denying Palestinians access to water has been sufficiently documented, for example, in Amnesty International's reports: "Water is a Human Right," Amnesty International, October 2009, available at http://www.amnesty.eu/static/Water_report_digest.pdf; and "The Occupation of Water," Amnesty International, November 2017, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/11/the-occupation-of-water/>.