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Tapping into Palestine's Diaspora

# The Ghost of Palestine's Diaspora



By Sam Bahour

**B**EWARE! Palestine has a hidden weapon of mass development: Its diaspora community. There is only one slight problem. We are unable to locate it.

This weapon holds vast potential. It can bridge the Palestinians living under occupation with those living abroad, inject foreign direct investment with a vested interest into our economy, and enrich our cultural scene with yet more patches of our fragmented quilt of a people. We know that this diaspora community is out there, but to date it has not fully been reachable. In fact, it is a prevailing understanding of many that our diaspora community is like a ghost. It's there but not there; ready to help, but not helping; part of us, but not really; and so on.

I beg to differ.

For starters, and like so much in our Palestinian reality, our diaspora community is not like your normal diaspora community. The bulk of, but not all Palestinians who live abroad have arrived at where they are not by their own desire. The dispossession of Palestine; the military occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip; and the systematic Israeli policy of forcing upon us a fragmented geographic reality have been the driving force behind our diaspora and have strongly influenced the places to which its members have relocated and how they have viewed their homeland.

So let us define what is meant by the diaspora. One scholar puts it simply as the part of a people that is dispersed in one or more countries, other than its homeland, and maintains a feeling of

transnational community with its homeland.<sup>1</sup> If we combine this definition with the insight cited above, namely that the lion's share of our diaspora – today's Palestinian refugee community of over 5 million – is politically displaced and waiting to return home, we can say with confidence that there is a feeling of transnational community among our people. However, because it is mainly a politically-motivated diaspora with many living in squalid refugee camps, frequently displaced more than once (such as Palestinian refugees in Syria and Lebanon), it would be misleading to think that they are in an ideal position to help the homeland. Rather, many of them look to the homeland for help, as can be seen in the various scholarship programs and development projects that are available for members of these communities and supported by Palestine. Not to be misunderstood, not every Palestinian refugee is unable

to contribute to the development of the homeland, many can, but I speak here of the larger portion of these communities.

As a member of Palestine's diaspora community, having relocated to Palestine after the signing of the Oslo Accords, I am frequently invited to workshops and meetings to discuss how to tap into the diaspora. For over twenty years now, most such meetings have started from scratch and were focused on the business potential that investment from the diaspora poses, or could pose, for Palestine. I believe that this is the wrong starting point – even though I as well am aware of the value of diaspora involvement in our business community – because from an investment vantage point this linkage is already well under way.

Actually, the ghost of the Palestinian diaspora is no ghost at all if we look at



Art work by Hazem Harb.



business and investment in Palestine. The driving institutional investment institutions in Palestine, such as the Arab Palestinian Investment Company (APIC), PADICO Holding, REACH Holding, and a firm that I established back in year 2000 but am no longer associated with, the Palestinian Diaspora Investment Company, are all efforts that were successfully initiated and put together by the Palestinian diaspora. Moreover, many individuals are engaged as well. Just last week, I had the pleasure of meeting in Ramallah the person who is running the Birzeit International Development Enterprise (BIDE Inc.), a new effort created by the Birzeit Society (USA) in order to foster investment into the town. And over the summer, while giving a talk in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I was approached by a businessperson from the Palestinian diaspora who is actively bringing Palestinian products into the US market. In fact, similar examples of business-related diaspora involvement are too numerous to list.

The missing link for increased tapping into the diaspora is not posed by a lack of investment opportunities but by everything else. The diaspora are not foreigners, they are part and parcel of our society-at-large, and they need to be addressed as such.

In 2011, the organization *Diaspora matters* published a booklet titled *Global Diaspora Strategies Toolkit*.<sup>ii</sup> It notes that countries sometimes try to engage as many members of the diaspora as they can and often do so through online portals. However, although many people may be considered statistically as members of the diaspora, not all of them resonate with or relate to their country of origin or have a strong sense of belonging. Many diaspora initiatives have failed because they did not identify the highly motivated individuals who are willing to stick with a project for a long time, battle against the odds and lend creditability to it. This is the

conundrum of mile-wide-inch-deep versus inch-wide-mile-deep. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but countries have to decide where to put the emphasis.

Thus, first we must know our diaspora. It is unacceptable that after all this time we still do not have a professionally-managed database of all our people. I've made the argument elsewhere that this would be an ideal task for the already well-equipped and -tested Central Elections Commission; however, the political leadership would need to expand its mandate. Then, we must be selective, as noted in the advice quoted above. Not every diaspora member or community will engage, nor is it necessary for them to do so. We must define which specific diaspora individuals and from what part of the world may add value to Palestine's development. We can already see how this added value is leaving its mark on business – I am not denying that there is room for further expansion here. But now we must facilitate the diaspora to leave its mark on our political, governance, education, healthcare, and cultural spheres, just to name a few.

Peekaboo! The diaspora sees us and continues to wait.

*Sam Bahour is managing partner at Applied Information Management (AIM) and the co-founder and chairman of Americans for a Vibrant Palestinian Economy (AVPE), which may be found at [www.a4vpe.org](http://www.a4vpe.org). Sam may be reached at [sbahour@gmail.com](mailto:sbahour@gmail.com) and blogs at [www.epalestine.com](http://www.epalestine.com).*

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<sup>i</sup> Anupam Chander, "Diaspora Bonds," *New York University Law Review*, Vol. 7, October 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Global Diaspora Strategies Toolkit*, Diaspora Matters, 2011, available at <http://diasporamatters.com/downloads/the-global-diaspora-strategies-toolkit/>.