



Professional Expatriate Palestinians Build Their Homeland ...

'In the mid-1990s, a clear sense of optimism prevailed among Palestinians; the signing of the Oslo Accords between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel was seen by both Palestinians inside the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and the expatriate community as a catalyst for positive change and the promise of a long-awaited era of peace, stability, and prosperity'. Rami Bathish, TOKTEN -Miftah.



The fragile period between 1994 and 2000 witnessed a significant boost in foreign investment in the Palestinian private sector, a concerted effort aimed at public institution-building, and above all, the influx of educated and skilled Palestinian expatriate professionals into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. After all, this was the beginning of a desperately needed nation-building process, a noble cause in which all wanted to take part.



Today, hundreds of educated and skilled Palestinian expatriate professionals live, work, and choose to settle abroad permanently. This brain drain has deprived the West Bank and Gaza of the expertise of thousands of its most talented people at a time when their skills are desperately needed. This phenomenon reduces the quantity and quality of human capital available towards sustainable development. Fortunately, nature has endowed Palestinians with a strong homing instinct. The desire to return to the oPt to give something back of the knowledge they have gained is what motivates such educated and skilled Palestinian expatriate professionals.



Serious steps have been taken by a few international organizations to counteract the brain-drain phenomena and to involve expatriate national professionals in development projects, or at least to devise mechanisms for their eventual participation. The most successful example of this is

UNDP's programme, 'Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals' (TOKTEN).

TOKTEN is a unique form of technical assistance that builds on the cultural affinity of expatriates to their countries of origin. Whereas experts in traditional technical assistance are typically foreigners, the TOKTEN consultants (volunteers) are expatriates. TOKTEN is based on the notion that highly educated and skilled expatriates are often better positioned and qualified to provide technical support than foreign consultants because of their language, cultural affinity, education, and familiarity with local conditions. Another TOKTEN belief is that many highly skilled and educated expatriates are eager to render short-term services to their home countries on a voluntary basis under the UN umbrella.

Since its inception in the oPt 1994, the TOKTEN Palestinian programme has been successful in sponsoring short- to mid-term consultancy missions for expatriate experts, attracting more than 500 female and male professionals to serve in senior advisory and planning positions in various key PA ministries and other leading institutions throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

We are delighted to note that approximately 12 percent of the TOKTEN participants (volunteer consultants) have chosen to resettle in the oPt, a fact that signals the success of the programme in contributing to the positive trend of brain-gain. The TOKTEN Palestinian programme has become a leading example of the reversal and remedying of the brain-drain phenomenon, albeit temporarily, and is considered one of the most successful modalities around the world.

Many Palestinian expatriates are keen to volunteer their services, even for a short period, and by doing so, provide an opportunity not only to respond to needs identified with specific Palestinian institutions, but also to assess the situation for a longer period of service or even a permanent relocation to the oPt. More important, Palestinians living in the Diaspora have the advantage of not living under the chaos and turmoil of occupation, which clouds vision and judgment; thus, they are more capable of evolving a clear vision and strategy for Palestinian development and nation-building. Furthermore, TOKTEN consultants are capable of linking this vision to a more global vision that resides in advancing human rights, international legitimacy, and the rule of law.

Many Palestinian Diaspora groups are located in the United States and Europe. Even though these members have established new lives in new locations, they still feel a close affinity and allegiance to everything that is Palestinian. This sense of pride and affinity to a cause is key to envisioning a Diaspora role in the rehabilitation and development of the oPt.

Travel to the oPt to participate in its development introduces a host of logistical difficulties, including security concerns, visa issues, and the challenges posed by the restriction of mobility to and within the area. The TOKTEN Palestinian programme provides an important service that counteracts the development effects of the entry/re-entry policy since it can facilitate the coming of TOKTEN experts who aim to contribute to the development in their country of origin. The TOKTEN's small-scale advocacy effort should be continued and expanded and used as a modality for the future.

The TOKTEN Palestinian programme aims to ensure a needs-based approach to the use of TOKTEN experts and the mainstreaming of TOKTEN into regular project-development activities at a national level. The creation of a database will provide specific knowledge of the capacities within the Diaspora and assessment of the most urgent needs of the potential beneficiary organizations in order to make appropriate matches.

TOKTEN has thus developed a technologically advanced database/portal that maximizes the potential of the TOKTEN programme. The newly revamped TOKTEN website will ensure the widest possible choice of TOKTEN candidates for every position and the ability to recruit overseas Palestinians for any project or organization by providing useful, up-to-date information. The database, which is part of the TOKTEN website (www.toktenpalestine.org), will be extensive and updated regularly in line with the availability of candidates and the changing national needs. Additionally, the TOKTEN website will create an easily accessible online management system that allows tracking, updating, and follow-up of the TOKTEN database. The website is easy to navigate and contains all the information one needs in order to apply to become a TOKTEN expert or TOKTEN host institution.

In short, since the inception of the TOKTEN Palestinian programme, TOKTEN has become a vital building block for Palestinian economic, social, and political development. Many success stories will attest that the TOKTEN Palestinian programme is literally empowerment in motion.

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