



How to Move Forward Based on Past Experience



By Nicola Stefan
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From the first day of being away from home, one starts yearning and thinking how to keep the connection alive with one's origins and sense of belonging, beyond the place, but within one's self. Diaspora communities strive between integrating into their new countries of residence and keeping their connection to their places of origin alive. For this reason, everyone in the diaspora has a story: a story of reaching out to relatives and long-lost families, stories of returns and of giving back.

In Chile resides the largest community of Palestinians outside the Arab world - this being probably the most iconic phrase about Palestinians in Chile. But this community is also one of the oldest, traced back to the late 1800s.

Our work, over the past years, to strengthen the relations between Palestine and its diaspora, through business and investment, has changed our perspective regarding the level of connections that have already been established between them. We had been oblivious to the thousands of stories that took place and continue to take place daily: of diaspora youth going back, seeing their ancestors' homes for the first time, and meeting family members they did not even know existed; but also stories of those who never stopped writing and calling their relatives, of those who always go back to check on their families, of those who keep sending aid and contributing what they can. Palestinians in Chile, even up to five generations, have found ways to connect and to keep the bridges alive, despite all barriers: of language and distance, of culture, and of course of discrimination and apartheid.

But among all those beautiful stories, we also find stories of disappointment, rejection, and closed doors; stories of people who extended their arms and found no one to embrace; of those who knocked on doors that remained locked; and of many who aided and contributed, but found that all their giving was lost. With the passing of time, generation after generation, those negative stories also traveled among the diaspora. Their impact was mainly on those who were farther from home and lacked the means to connect, which led some of them to develop fear of rejection, lack of faith, and mistrust. The connection to home started to seem farther away, but was never lost.

Thus, Chilean-Palestinians worked over the years, by every means available to them, to send aid and to support localities, and educational and health causes. The results of these contributions can be easily seen in Palestine, as new requests, ideas, and projects constantly reach the Palestinian community in Chile through different channels, and expectations on them continue to grow.

We can easily understand why the Palestinian diaspora in Chile has always focused on reconnecting and giving back. The Palestinian diaspora yearns, we dare say, more than any other diaspora in the world. Unfortunately, only a handful of the diaspora can actually connect and get a chance to give back, due to the long distance from Chile to Palestine, the burden of cost and travel, the restrictions on arrival, and the lost language and connection to Palestine after up to five generations.

The first Palestinians who, along with Syrians and Lebanese, arrived in the Americas, from the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, initially suffered the rejection of their host societies, as a result of the global spread of Orientalism. Nonetheless, by the mid-1950s, their participation in commerce and industry, mainly textiles, was well-known in the Chilean society and market. Many families jumped from there to the banking sector and, some decades later, to retail. Today, although some derogative expressions are still heard, Palestinians in Chile are mostly thought of in positive terms as hard workers, family-oriented people, and welcoming hosts.

We, therefore, asked ourselves what we can do, what we can give to the diaspora, in order to help them reconnect and give back. The answer came in multiple forms, but in one spirit: create

more bridges by eliminating the barriers and by using technology, education, and expertise, to enable as many diaspora members to connect. With this in mind, we started Invest Palestine as a Chilean-Palestinian advisory firm aimed at promoting ties between Palestine and Latin America, by working with impact investment and entrepreneurship, so as to facilitate the financing of projects and businesses of Palestinian entrepreneurs in Palestine.

Through Invest Palestine, investors have the opportunity to connect and build projects with Palestinian entrepreneurs, in order to develop local enterprises, to produce locally, to promote products that are not yet found in the Palestinian market, to find a substitute to imported products, to increase employment and ultimately to create a network of companies and factories that can strengthen the Palestinian economy. Most recently, Invest Palestine has been part of the pilot Development Impact Bond (DIB) model in Palestine, by which a social impact goal is met through private investment and the strategic and financial support of global outcome funders.

One of the biggest obstacles we tackled was to maintain the sustainability and continuity of the human and business connections that we wanted to promote. Consequently, our work focuses on connecting people, building relationships to support their businesses, and sustaining them by studied and strong investments.

If we get an idea of how much our diaspora has contributed so far, we will be able to determine to what degree they can still help, and this leads us to the sustainability issue. Our past experience as a diaspora is that of many cases of interaction and collaboration, but of only a few with continuous impact, as our efforts have been somehow erratic, disconnected, and perhaps somewhat unstructured. In other words, our work is not sustainable over time.

That is why we believe in contributing to an environment of sustainable support, of partnerships and investments, and of mutual projects and joint ventures. We can no longer think of the diaspora as only a source of giving back. The key to the future is to think how we can enable each other - Palestinians in Chile and in Palestine - to grow together and to use our passions, abilities, and knowledge to contribute to Palestine.

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This was our message to the diaspora: let us give back, but through partnerships and investments; by building with our families back home; by forming new ventures that are sustainable, create jobs, grow in time and become sources of funding for other ventures. And the diaspora couldn't have wanted more than for this bridge to be built. The challenge was to overcome the distance, the different business cultures, timings, and languages, and to break the old stories of mistrust, by establishing communications, and building on the mutual interests and experiences of the diaspora with its home.

Of course, this work with the diaspora cannot be limited to certain entities, nor to certain ambitions or objectives. There are ultimately thousands of stories that are waiting to be told - not only the big stories, where impact is measurable in one big instance, but also stories where every member of the diaspora has a chance to contribute and to keep the connection to their homeland alive in their hearts, whether it is through art, music, or writing, through business or humanitarian work, or even through a simple re-encounter with where we come from.

We created Invest Palestine to build bridges, to help the diaspora gain their trust and faith back, and to let them know that it is worthwhile to invest in their homeland. We advocate investing not strictly in business ideas, but also in our people; not solely with returns on investment, but also with measurable and sustainable impact; and not only to help our community, but also to create more stories of the diaspora, building and sustaining their relationship with their Palestinian homeland.

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