

Fighting Digital and Financial Occupation



By Hani
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Years ago, Palestine decided to move forward and support entrepreneurship in order to develop new streams in technological coding. This new stream is able to generate new revenues and create new jobs, helping Palestinians resist the occupation and overcome its siege on Palestine. It is especially helpful given that Israel controls the borders and severely hampers the export and import of goods while simultaneously restricting the movement of goods and people between cities and confining Palestinians to ghettos. The international community quickly encouraged such developments because it believes that investing in this stream will improve economic conditions in Palestine where high numbers of recent graduates find themselves unemployed, having very limited job opportunities.

It is no secret that salaries in high tech and coding are among the highest in the international market. This situation would be similar in Palestine: With the huge demand for these skills, such a strategy has the potential to be an economic game changer. For this reason, we have witnessed massive efforts being made by the government, the

international community, local players, and recent graduates who are working together to help build this new ecosystem. Engaging all relevant partners in the ecosystem, enablers, accelerators, and incubators play a crucial role in supporting the growth of Palestinian startups and connecting them to global markets.

In a few years, when we assess what has been achieved, we will see huge success at the outsourcing level, especially because most of this outsourcing fills the gaps and responds to the needs of international firms with branches in Israel that desire to expand. This channel creates a win-win model for both parties. The Israelis responded to the demand and at the same time created a few thousand new outsourcing positions that generate good incomes. Unfortunately, this is the only track that has been developed and expanded, since Israel has resisted all other tracks. Outsourcing alone cannot build a

healthy ICT ecosystem. Palestinians and international sponsors aimed to encourage international tech companies to establish local offices in Palestine and strengthen research and development. But the occupation played its ugly role and destroyed any track that would benefit Palestinians alone, even adding digital occupation as a new feature of the game.

On the educational level, the occupation authorities work hard to paralyze the Palestinian education system and prevent international lecturers or university professors from staying in Palestine to contribute to research and development within universities and higher education institutions by refusing to grant them visas.

Every time we have come close to convincing one of the big-name firms to establish an office in Palestine, Israel has used its veto through the firm's local branches that operate in Israel. They argue





that such a small area cannot accommodate an additional office in Palestine and claim that political instability would affect the commercial model. At the same time, mega platforms such as PayPal have worked very hard from their Israeli branches to prevent any activities from taking place in Palestine. PayPal has disconnected the service for Palestinians and destroyed digital financial transactions, thereby preventing developers from working remotely given that most payment systems rely on this platform.

In addition, we have begun to see apps such as Google's Waze that promote and spread the racist spirit of hate and bias: any tourist who uses the app in order to visit a place inside Palestine will be welcomed with a pop-up alert that warns, "You are entering a dangerous zone."

Today, Palestinians are under siege by a digital and economic occupation. Israel insists on monopolizing the brand by calling itself the Startup Nation, while we continue to fight for our right to upgrade and become part of a Startup Region. As a result, there have been many casualties, such as unemployed persons who leave the country. Yet I believe that in the diaspora, these people will succeed and become our ambassadors, working to build bridges internationally. One day, they will return to establish their next startup in Palestine. We have no other option

than to keep looking for creative ways to make our technological contribution to the global community from our occupied land.

Hani Alami, a Palestinian Jerusalemite, is a telecommunications expert. He has established a number of telecommunications companies – first and foremost, Coolnet, an internet service provider that operates high-speed internet services. He has recently acquired Fusion and SMT, two Palestinian operators in the Gaza Strip, in order to develop broadband over fiber and microwave infrastructure. In 2020 he co-founded EziCodes in Egypt with Saudi Partners to respond to the coding developments in the Middle East and recently joined Maalchat, a new startup in the area of financial technology. A few years ago he established JEST (Jerusalem Entrepreneurs for Society and Technology), the first entrepreneurship center and hub for startups in East Jerusalem. He is also the founder of Yaboos, the first Palestinian radio station in Jerusalem.

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