

CORNERSTONE

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Good & Faithful Servant

Sabeel Bible Study Reflection

"Well done good and faithful servant... come share in your master's happiness" (Matthew 25:21).

The Parable of the Bags of Gold (Matthew 25: 14-25), or "talents" as it is sometimes called, is a well-known story for those who are familiar with the bible. The parable has been used to promote good stewardship and to encourage us to use our gifts from God rather than hide them. *Don't be like the servant who buried his single bag of gold, and was chastised for not investing it wisely, we've been told. Rather, be like the two servants who doubled their gold bags and were given more in return.* In this popular interpretation, the parable becomes a tale of productivity.



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Palestinians wait at the agricultural gate in the village of Zeita in the West Bank in order to access their land and livelihoods.

Israel's Addiction to Palestine's Economy

by Sam Bahour

Israel's planned and systematic actions to maintain full control of the Palestinian economy for over five decades has become a major hurdle in getting Israel to realize that its military occupation of Palestinians must come to an end. Like recovery from other addictions, this one will require external support. That support needs to be third states holding Israel accountable to save Israel from itself. Dumping more humanitarian and developmental funds into Palestinian coffers will not solve the conflict.

The Palestinian private sector knows only too well, today, that for Palestinian economic development to gain traction it does not require billions, or even millions. For Palestine's economy to stand on its own two feet and serve the emerging Palestinian state, what is required is that third states, the U.S. at the forefront, have the political will to act in holding Israel accountable for its daily violations of international law. Here, in addition to human rights, we speak of economic

rights too: our rights to our economic assets and the ability to employ them within a Palestinian-defined economic development plan, free from Israeli or donor agendas.

Structural dependency

From the start of the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip 48 years ago, Israel systematically linked the occupied territory's economy to its own. Before the Oslo Peace Accords, this forced linkage was most apparent in Israel's restriction of Palestinian business and its control of the freedom of movement of Palestinian labor. For nearly a decade prior to Oslo, Israel issued work permits to tens of thousands of Palestinian workers to allow them to enter Israel to find work. Palestinian labor was found in Israeli construction, agriculture, hotels and the like.

Dealt with as a second class labor force, Palestinian laborers were exposed to working conditions that allowed Israeli businesses to benefit from offering lower wages without having to stringently apply Israeli Labor Law. Many Palestinian workers even found themselves building the illegal Israeli settlements that were threatening the sheer existence of Palestinian communities. For Palestinians, being able to work, anywhere, while under Israeli occupation, was a matter of survival. For many, it still is.

The Israeli occupation authorities also levied taxes on the occupied people and used a portion of these taxes to flood the Palestinian areas with Israeli made infrastructure and goods. This created further Palestinian dependence on the occupier's economy.

Contrary to the obligations embedded in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, the signatories of this key Convention - the U.S., U.K. and Russia (previously the U.S.S.R.) included - allowed Israel, the occupying force, to create a structural economic Palestinian dependency, while at the same time applying a maze of restrictions on the Palestinian ability to become economically viable. Instead of demanding that Israel apply international law, these countries and others continued only reporting, year after year, these Israeli violations of international law, while simultaneously footing most of the costs of occupation.

Underwriting occupation

When the Oslo Peace Accords were signed in 1993, an economic arrangement followed called the Paris Economic Protocol (signed in Paris on 4th May 1994 and later incorporated into the Oslo II Accords, formally known as the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip of 28th September 1995). Just as the Oslo agreement itself

kept intact the ultimate Israeli control over all key aspects of Palestinian life, the Paris Economic Protocol institutionalized the occupier's economic interest in this bilateral agreement with the Palestinians.

After the Oslo agreements, state donors' role in funding Palestinians' "development" turned into an international underwriting of the Israeli occupation, reducing, and many times removing, the financial costs of military occupation from Israel. In short, knowingly or not, donor funding had an accomplice-type role in allowing the situation to reach the place it is in today.

Separation

Although donor money fuelled the Palestinian economy, at no time did donors view the development of the private sector as the highest priority in building a viable Palestinian society. Donors assisted in the creation of sector associations and provided a certain level of assistance, but a strategic approach to the private sector never materialized.

Many in the international community were quick to criticize the growing number of Palestinian public sector workers, but few, if any, had the foresight to see that a strong Palestinian private sector was the only way to provide an alternative to public employment. Those who did realize this ignored it for the most part, since it would mean challenging the Israeli occupation and the restrictions placed on the Palestinian economy that come with it.

All the while Israel was going forward with its unilateral separation plans and illegal settlement enterprise, which damaged the Palestinian private sector severely. Being, for the most part, dealt out of the developmental paradigm, the Palestinian private sector was left on its own to deal with the Israeli restrictions on Palestinian society.

After being structurally linked to the Israeli market for decades, Israel's decision to unilaterally separate, or 'disengage' as it was called, from the Palestinians came at a time of instability. The elimination of Palestinian labor that was employed in Israel increased the unemployment rate in the West Bank and Gaza overnight. The Separation Wall's land grab separated farmers from their lands, causing great strain on Palestinian agriculture. The Israeli military and political actions to weaken the nascent Palestinian central 'government' left the economy in freefall.

Viability

The viability of any future Palestinian economy must come within the context of a sustainable private sector, one that can



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Shehada Street in Hebron's Old City was previously a busy center for Palestinian trade. Now, it stands quiet, closed to Palestinian pedestrians.

create sustainable job opportunities and develop competitive products and services for the local market first, and then for the export market. The Palestinian private sector must be able to absorb Palestinian university graduates in a knowledge-based thrust in our economy, while also absorbing the tens of thousands of construction workers that Israel dumped into unemployment after forcing them to be linked to the Israeli economy for decades. Similarly, a viable Palestinian economy must be able to feed itself, which requires land and water resources to be free from Israel's control.

Gaza is a horrific story of its own. In a report by the United Nations Country Team in the occupied Palestinian territory in August 2012 entitled, "Gaza in 2020: A Liveable Place?" the UN describes the horrible situation of Gaza's economy and environment under the siege and questions if Gaza will even be livable by 2020! In other words, deep structural damage is being wrought on the Palestinian economy by maintaining the status quo.

Unfortunately however, internal Palestinian politics are often being put in the limelight as if the continued Israeli

military occupation is an innocent bystander in creating the conditions for Palestinian social collapse.

The international community has a historic responsibility to Palestinians, especially after so many years of observing the Israeli occupation from afar and a decade of footing the bill as Israeli violations continue unabated. The challenge today is to remove Israeli military occupation and allow the Palestinian private sector to assume its natural role of becoming the foundation of a future state.

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