



Thursday, Feb. 25, 2010

Renewal in the West Bank: A Little Noticed Success

By Joe Klein

Sometimes the prosaic can be breathtaking. I am standing in the new showroom of a company that manufactures plumbing supplies in Hebron, in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. Mansour Izgayer, one of three brothers who own the factory, is giving me a tour of his business and his life. He and his brothers were living in the U.S. when peace seemed to break out in the Middle East after the 1993 Oslo accords. They decided to return home, as did many other members of the Palestinian diaspora. They built their company, Royal Industries & Trading, persistently, even after the prospects for peace shattered in the second *intifadeh* and it became near impossible to do business in the midst of a war zone, near impossible to move their products through Israeli checkpoints. It still isn't very easy, but the past few years have been much better. A new Palestinian government quietly began to restore order and emphasize economic growth. Israel removed many, but not all, checkpoints. Royal now has 360 employees, new product lines — fireplaces, welcome mats — and a new wing, complete with an assembly hall. It has an on-site mosque and a cafeteria. The Izgayer brothers' story is at the heart of the new optimism and old frustrations that mark the West Bank territory of Palestine.

A young woman enters the showroom, walking confidently toward us and smiling. "Very nice to meet you," she says. "I'm new here." She does not shake my hand; she is religious, dressed in a hijab and bulky overcoat. Her name is Samiya abu-Rayyan, and she is a bit of a miracle as well — a graduate of a new program, Education for Employment (EFE), that trains young Palestinians in how to get and keep jobs. She is a graduate of Hebron University, but she was entirely unprepared for the workplace. "I had many interviews, but I didn't know how to introduce myself," she says. EFE taught her everything from how to fill out a job application to how to deal with an angry boss — and how to look someone in the eye and smile, even though that ran counter to the tradition in which she was raised. She learned some business English and marketing as well. After several months of training, she interviewed with a bank and the plumbing company and received offers from both. She chose Royal because the Izgayer brothers offered a religiously conservative working environment and because of the company mosque.

And here is another odd, but inspiring, thing: Samiya would not have her new skills if it were not for the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. On that day, a Jewish American real estate magnate named Ronald Bruder was desperately searching for his daughter, who worked in downtown New York City, near ground zero. His daughter turned up safe, but the shock and panic stirred him. "I started reading and thinking about the Middle East," Bruder told me recently. "And what I came to was this: if people were gainfully employed, maybe they wouldn't be so angry at us." Bruder began to travel the region, asking questions. "It was the Minister of Education in Jordan who told me, 'If you really want to help, what we need is soft skills.' I didn't know what soft

skills were," Bruder said. "Now they're my life." In fact, they are the sort of skills that Samiya abu-Rayyan has acquired.

Bruder started EFE's first program in Jordan in 2006, but he quickly expanded to Morocco, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, plus Gaza and the West Bank. EFE's graduates number only in the dozens in the West Bank, but more classes are about to begin in Hebron and Ramallah. "We can expand pretty rapidly," he said, "if there are jobs for the people we graduate."

The West Bank GDP grew at around 8% in 2009, although that was an improvement on practically no economic activity at all. "We started from utter lawlessness, virtual disintegration in 2007," says Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Prime Minister — an economist who graduated from the University of Texas and spent much of his career at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The Palestinian Authority had been sundered by the Hamas coup in Gaza; Fayyad — a technocrat's technocrat — freely admits that governance in the West Bank had long been marked by corruption and ineptitude. "The only way to gain Palestinian statehood," Fayyad says, "was to start building the institutions of a credible state."

The first job was to regain control of the streets, which were in the hands of criminal gangs and radical militias. With the help of U.S. General Keith Dayton, the Palestinians trained five brigades (2,500 troops) of a new national-security force — with two more in the pipeline — and began training local police. "We started with Nablus, the most lawless city," says Fayyad. "Our policy was zero tolerance. Anyone who committed a crime was an outlaw, regardless of party affiliation." It seems to have worked. Nell Derick Debevoise, an American woman who works with an excellent pre- and after-school program in Nablus called Tomorrow's Youth, told me, "When I first got here, you couldn't walk the streets or go to the Old City. Now you can. In fact, there are some good restaurants opening there."

Security, Fayyad assumed, was one prerequisite of economic development. Another was transparent governance. "We're firing incompetents and thieves in the government. You can't be taken seriously unless you fire people," Fayyad says. As a result, "we're beginning to see some economic growth. Cement consumption is up 30%." Part of the growth has been funded by aid from the U.S., Europe and the Islamic world, which helps pay the salaries of government workers and funds new infrastructure projects. In 2008, Fayyad held a conference in Bethlehem, looking to begin the next phase — private development — and got some takers, including a Palestinian developer named Bashar Masri who is building an entire new city for 50,000 just outside Ramallah. "We could not have done this without Fayyad's reforms," Masri told me. "I mean, you deal with the police or with bureaucrats. They don't ask for a bribe. That never happened in Palestine before."

But the progress is taking place in the context of repression: the West Bank still has many aspects of a low-security prison. Israel controls the borders, the airspace, the water supply and the electricity. As you drive from Ramallah north to Nablus, illegal Israeli settlements and outposts command the tops of many hills — an infestation that most Palestinians, rightly, consider a continuing invasion of their land. Even the most optimistic Palestinians assume that the real Israeli plan is to wait them out, keep building settlements and force as many Palestinians into the diaspora as they can. Benjamin Netanyahu's recent decision to declare sites in the Arab cities of Hebron and Bethlehem Jewish historical landmarks seemed a provocation intended to cause the

sort of mass violence that has destroyed the hopes of responsible Palestinians in the past. Fayyad's progress is as fragile as plate glass; the next rock thrown could shatter it.

"We are working hard. In fact, we have met every one of the obligations that we were assigned by the road map," says Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President, referring to the peace process instituted by George W. Bush. Many Israelis, including members of the Netanyahu government, privately agree that the West Bank Palestinians, who had famously kicked away every good chance for peace they were offered, have finally gotten their act together. There has been no significant violence directed at Israel from the West Bank. Even the Hamas-controlled border with Gaza has been quiet. "On the other hand, what have the Israelis done to meet their road-map obligations?" Abbas continues. "What have they done with regard to stopping illegal settlement on our land?"

That is a very good question. Abbas and Fayyad plan to have all the components of a functioning Palestinian state in place in the West Bank by the summer of 2011. At that point, a different question arises — not just for Israel but for the U.S.: What obstacles are there to recognizing a legitimate state of Palestine? What excuses do we have left?

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