

Palestinian agriculture lacks planning

by Ahmed Abdul Qader

ACCORDING to a study prepared by two United Nations organizations, the Food and Agricultural Organization and the Economic and Social Committee for West Asia, Palestinian agriculture, considered to be the backbone of the Palestinian economy, lacks planning and basic infrastructure. Israeli administration of the occupied territories was found to have hampered or neglected the development and organization of the Palestinian agricultural sector.

Palestinian land in the occupied territories totals 6,650 square-kilometers; 6,300 in the West Bank and 350 in the Gaza Strip. A third of this is agriculture land; 1,980 square-kilometers in the West Bank, and 188 in the Gaza Strip. Two thousand square-kilometers of Palestinian land is used for raising sheep. This land is highly vulnerable to confiscation for settlement or transformation into military camps.

The study states that services

for administration of agriculture, and veterinarian services in the West Bank are nearly paralyzed. The number of technicians and employees working in these fields has decreased sharply due to a lack of funds since the Israeli authorities unilaterally canceled all budgets for the development of agriculture. It also found that restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities had sharply curtailed agricultural research.

Since 1967, the number of experts providing guidance on agriculture has drastically dropped. Currently only the universities conduct agricultural studies in the occupied territories. Prior to the occupation, the Khadoury Agriculture Institute in Tulkarm did research on regional agricultural. Under the Israelis it deteriorated and was transformed into a visual arts center. Meanwhile, the agriculture programs of the Palestinian universities have not expanded. Finally, there are no local or Palestinian institutes to offer short or long-term training courses in for agriculture.

There are a number of agriculture cooperative societies in the West Bank but most of them suffer from poor organization and mismanagement. These societies act without supervision. The non-governmental organizations in the West Bank suffer from a similar lack of funds, appropriate equipment and experienced employees.

Agriculture markets in the occupied territories are very limited and lack appropriate equipment for storage, wrapping, and packaging, as well as qualified supervision of the quality of produce. The study listed various obstacles to Palestinian produce marketing. Among them were a lack of funds for storing produce, difficulties transporting produce across the borders, and the high cost of transportation. Other difficulties are high taxes imposed by the Israeli authorities on Palestinian farmers, and the restrictions on exportation of Palestinian produce.

The study states that any visitor to the Palestinian occupied territories can easily see that while Israel has provided a comprehensive infrastructure to its settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, the Arab villages and towns are still underdeveloped. It noted that Israel controls all natural resources, most significantly water, in the occupied territories and this has inhibited agricultural development. Furthermore, the Israeli Civil Administration's

measures were found to have created a situation in which there are not equal opportunities for free marketing of produce between Israelis and Palestinians.

Finally, the study calculated that the Israeli authorities have confiscated more than 60 percent of cultivated Palestinian lands in the West Bank and 30 percent of these lands in the Gaza Strip. The Israelis claim that security reasons justify such action for building new Jewish settlements and roads.

In order to improve the Palestinian agriculture situation, the study suggests an increased agricultural labor force to lessen dependency on Israel. It said that in order to improve the situation, farmers should be supported and discouraged to emigrate to the cities. It also called for increasing the share of agriculture in local Palestinian production and for improvement of the commercial balance of trade with neighboring countries.

Bank officials and observers agree that an active monetary authority is essential to supervising the operation of banks.



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