

On Sunday, members of the Palestinian business community received invitations from U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin to attend a workshop at the end of June in Bahrain dubbed “Peace to Prosperity,” with the aim of “unleashing the economic potential of the Palestinian private sector.” Once again, the Trump administration has decided to postpone the release of its political vision and is leading instead with an economic plan.

As private sector associations representing approximately 80% of the GDP of Palestine, we know very well what is the measure of Palestine’s potential. We also know that the way to unleash that potential requires that Israel unshackle Palestinians from the system of control that has been part and parcel of the half-century old military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. Economic peace—regardless of how repackaged—has been tried by successive US administrations and has failed every time precisely because freedom and sovereignty for Palestinians was lacking.

In 1994, after the launch of the Oslo peace process, many Palestinian business leaders and investors returned to the homeland from the diaspora to join with the private sector in the occupied territories to build the future state of Palestine. Some of us were refugees from 1948 who had been forced out of our homes when the state of Israel was established. We built successful businesses and lives abroad. We were the lucky ones. Inspired by love of country and a sense of responsibility for future generations, we returned to the homeland to help build a free and prosperous Palestine where a person is only limited by the extent of his or her dreams.

Between 2004 and 2014 alone, the Palestinian private sector mobilized \$30 billion in development projects in the occupied territories, more than twice as much as the combined efforts of the international donor community. Today, seventy percent of the jobs in Palestine come from the private sector. Still, the unemployment rate is an astronomical 30% (Israel’s is at an historic low of 3%) because of the persistence of the Israeli occupation and the increasingly onerous movement and access restrictions imposed on Palestinians. How can Palestinian entrepreneurs export and import to and from international markets when shipments are held up for days or months in Israeli warehouses? How is the Palestinian tech sector supposed to flourish when Israel denies Palestinians access to 3G and now 4G technology? How can businesspersons obtain proper training for their employees when Israel inhibits travel abroad and denies visas for internationals coming to Palestine? How can farmers maintain their livelihoods when their land is taken and their water is diverted to Israeli settlements?

Despite these and many other challenges, we have not been deterred. We have worked hand-in-hand with international and Arab partners and with every U.S. administration since President Clinton’s to develop visionary plans to spur economic growth and create jobs. We have worked with USAID, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation and the U.S.-sponsored Middle East Investment Initiative.

Our efforts have been stymied however by obstacles imposed by Israel to further future Israeli settlement in the West Bank and to isolate Gaza from the rest of Palestine. The Palestinian economy will never grow to its full potential without a comprehensive political solution that resolves all outstanding issues between Israelis and Palestinians in accordance with international law and UN resolutions. Any U.S. plan that does not include sovereignty for Palestinians will not only fail but will condemn Israelis and Palestinians to a perpetual conflict in which Palestinians live under Israeli rule without equality or the right to vote.

The elements of a durable solution have been well known: an independent, sovereign and viable state of Palestine based on the June 4, 1967 green line, with East Jerusalem as its capital, a just solution for the plight of Palestinian refugees based on relevant U.N. resolutions, equitable allocation of shared water and other natural resources and release of prisoners. A political plan must be unveiled first so Palestinians can determine whether these basic requirements have been met. More practically, Palestinians need to know the borders within which economic development is to take place. The address for the U.S. peace plan remains the Palestine Liberation Organization, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian private sector is ready to engage on the U.S. economic proposal once an agreement is reached on political parameters aimed at restoring our fundamental rights and respecting our human dignity. We would be happy to host international partners in Palestine for a development conference at that time. We thank the international community for the consistent support they have shown us and especially the Arab states for their repeated reaffirmation of the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative, which recognized that an end of occupation and Palestinian statehood are a prerequisite to a comprehensive Mideast peace. Only with such a political horizon is true peace and prosperity possible.

Signed,

Federation of Palestinian Businessmen Associations  
Palestinian Federation of Industries  
Palestinian Trade Center—Pal Trade  
Palestinian Union of Chambers of Commerce & Industry  
US-Palestinian Chamber of Commerce