

Hashem DAJANI,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of Palestine to Ukraine*

‘WE WORK IN A FRIENDLY COUNTRY AND DEAL WITH KIND PEOPLE’

– *Your Excellency, you have already performed duties as Ambassador of Palestine to Ukraine for more than a year. It was a tough year for all people in the world, taking into account the pandemic and restrictions regarding coronavirus. Please share the main achievements that the Embassy gained this year.*

– It is obvious that the epidemic period has caused a lot of difficulties and is still posing challenges to everyone. During this period, I as Head of the Mission and the embassy staff have not been able to perform our duties in a regular mode to implement the planned work programme for achieving defined goals aimed at strengthening bilateral relations between Palestine and Ukraine. Most of us have gotten over the disease. Moreover, we have lost Deputy Head of Mission, First Counselor of the Embassy, our dear brother Mr Nidal Alqottob. Despite all of that, we have managed to maintain a minimum level of communication and work, hoping that these tragic events will end soon, life will return to normal pace, and we will be able to serve our state and people to the fullest extent in this friendly country.

– *What are the main prospects of the embassy’s work for the nearest future?*

– There are a lot of tasks ahead of us in the coming period aimed at strengthening bilateral relations between the two friendly countries, especially in the areas of trade, economy, higher education, culture, and, of course, pilgrimage.

– *Mr Ambassador, you have been a friend of Ukraine for many years, as you have graduated from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Nowadays, many young Palestinians get their higher education in Ukraine. Mr Dajani, what fields of study are the most popular among Palestinian youth in Ukraine? What are the prospects of exchange programmes?*

– Personally, I consider myself extremely happy and lucky to be one of the graduates of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and proud to serve my state and people in your friendly country. I also express our great gratitude to Ukraine, where a large number of Palestinian specialists have graduated from universities and scientific institutions and currently occupy prestigious positions in the public and private sectors. They also work in the countries where the Palestinian diaspora resides, while some of them have created joint Ukrainian-Palestinian families after they married Ukrainian citizens. Further-



more, we truly cherish our esteemed Palestinian community in Ukraine that establishes a communication bridge with the Ukrainian society, namely in the cultural sphere. It is also worth mentioning that a remarkable number of Palestinian doctors, engineers and businessmen are working successfully in Ukraine.

Nowadays, there are at least 1,000 Palestinian students in Ukrainian universities, and most of them are studying in medical faculties, gaining the most desirable specialty for Palestinians. Another preferable choice for Palestinian students are engineering specialties. We look forward to strengthening our relations with Ukraine in the sphere of higher education and realise the necessity to sign an agreement of understanding between the ministries of higher education in the two countries and to encourage universities to sign memoranda of understanding and cooperation in the area of sharing scientific expertise and students exchanges.

– *Despite the difficult circumstances, the level of bilateral trade relations between Palestine and Ukraine remains high. What are the prospects of trade relations for the nearest years? What spheres are the most promising for diversifying trade relations between Ukraine and Palestine?*

– As you are aware, unfortunately, Palestine is still under the occupation of Israel that pursues colonial policies, particularly by taking measures that put restrictions on the national Palestinian economy and hinder the achievement of real economic development.

Nevertheless, despite the numerous challenges we are facing in our homeland, in addition to the challenge of the Corona virus pandemic that all the

world is currently facing, we keep working to strengthen bilateral relations with Ukraine, especially in the fields of trade, agriculture, higher education, tourism, and health care field. In fact, we also aspire to establish the Palestinian-Ukrainian Business Council to strengthen trade relations between the two countries.

Palestine imports various essential products from Ukraine, such as wood, iron, flour, oils, etc., and some products are exported from Palestine as well. Although our country is under occupation, we have investment opportunities and favourable economic environment.

Without a doubt, in order to develop and enhance cooperation, some kind of assistance is needed from the Ukrainian government, the most important of which is visa facilitation for Palestinian business people and the recognition of Palestinian bank accreditations. We are endeavouring to arrange a visit of a Palestinian trade delegation to Ukraine during this year, and we are ready to receive similar Ukrainian delegations in Palestine.

– *In 2018, Kyiv hosted a delegation of the Hebron Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the first Palestine-Ukraine business forum took place. What role does the embassy play in promoting cooperation between Ukrainian and Palestinian business communities? Does the embassy cooperate with the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry?*

– We are proud of the long-standing relations between the Palestinian side and the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which were established in 2002 with the signing of a memorandum on cooperation. Regardless of the difficult circumstances, both countries are keen to develop bilateral relations and increase commercial exchange. Speaking about the embassy, we would like to emphasise that it plays a very essential and significant role in the realisation of common interests of our two countries in various fields.

As was mentioned in your question, the first Palestine-Ukraine business forum was held in Kyiv in 2018, with the participation of representatives of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and business people from both sides.

In January 2021, I personally visited the UCCI and met with its President, Mr Hennadii Chyzhykov. Within the framework of the meeting, we discussed ways to develop and strengthen relations between Palestine and Ukraine in trade and industry as well as methods to increase the volume of trade turnover between the two friendly countries. It is worth mentioning that we verbally agreed to exchange official visits and hold business forums between the UCCI and representatives of the chambers of all Palestinian cities in the future.

– *Mr Ambassador, Palestine is a place with a long and majestic history, home to holy relics that are breath-taking for millions of people around the world, including Ukrainian tourists. Your Excellency, how do you assess the tourist links between Ukraine and Palestine?*

– Palestine has always been a centre of political, cultural, social, and spiritual life. Palestine is a Holy Land and a place of great importance for all three of the world's major religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is a cradle where those religions are developing, prospering, and attracting pilgrims from all over the world. Palestine is a Land of Peace, as it should be.

Ties between the two countries and friendly relations between the Ukrainian and Palestinian peoples have deep historical roots. The cornerstone of relations between them was laid when Rus has adopted Christianity. Since then, the main form of tourism that has developed and existed to the present day is pilgrimage. Over the centuries, Ukrainian pilgrims visited the Holy Land, namely the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. But surely, there is a great number of cities that are also worth visiting, such as Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus, Nazareth, Jenin, and Hebron, particularly in order to learn more about the traditions of Christian communities and the lifestyle of Palestinian Christians – the people who maintain and preserve sacred places.

Unfortunately, over the entire course of world history, our Land of Peace has not witnessed a real, sustainable, and lasting peace. There is no doubt that this Land must be safe and open for the pilgrims of all religions and visitors from all countries of the world with unimpeded access to their holy sites. We are always glad to welcome every pilgrim.

We wish that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories ended as soon as possible, so that pilgrims, business people, and guests would be able to visit Palestine without obstacles.

– Ukraine supports the Two States Solution and calls for peace and security in the Middle East with respect to UN resolutions and international legitimacy. How significant is the position of Ukraine and the vote of our state in international organisations in resolving the conflict in the Middle East?

– Ukraine is a civilised country, and the Ukrainian people is kind and peace-loving. Ukraine enjoys friendly relations with all countries and peoples of the Middle East and has a high level of cooperation with those countries in various fields, the most important of which are commerce, culture, science, and economy. This distinguished position gives Ukraine the ability to play a constructive role in order to contribute to supporting international efforts aimed at creating an environment favourable for peace, security and stability in the region, realization of the Two State Solution in a way that serves peaceful coexistence and global security, as well as strengthening bilateral relations in the interest of Ukraine and the interests of the countries of the region.

From this standpoint and in these difficult circumstances that the Middle East is going through, we appeal to the Ukrainian government to continue supporting the UN resolutions and resolutions adopted by other international organisations on the observance of human rights of the Palestinian people under occu-

pation. We also urge members of the Ukrainian parliament to contribute to international efforts to achieve justice for the Palestinian people who have been subjected to historical injustice caused by British colonialism and the inhumane Israeli occupation of Palestine for many decades, which have resulted in great pain and long-lasting human suffering for our people, who aspire to freedom and life in security and peace with their neighbours.

– *Ukraine is home to a large Palestinian diaspora. During the escalation of the Middle East conflict, the diaspora organised the raising of the Palestinian flag in Kyiv, Poltava, etc. How is cooperation between the embassy and the diaspora going? Are there any upcoming projects that you would like to share with our readers?*

– The Palestinian community in Ukraine amounts up to approximately 6,000 people, taking into account students who pursue their studies at Ukrainian universities. Most of the community members reside in the main Ukrainian cities, forming a bridge for cultural, commercial, and economic contacts between their motherland, Palestine, and the host country, Ukraine. Members of our community also play an effective role in organising events and participating in all kinds of activities that serve the goal of developing and promoting bilateral relations between our two countries. Palestine lives in the minds and hearts of its sons and daughters in diaspora, and they are very sentimental about our Palestinian issue. They keep performing the activities to defend their people and draw the attention of the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people to the suffering of our people under the Israeli occupation. The members of Palestinian community in Ukraine do their best to protect our legitimate national right to freedom from occupation, the right to return to our motherland, as well as sovereignty of our land. Each of them has felt a measure of the suffering that our people undergo and a measure of the historical injustice that has happened to us in the conditions of expulsion from our homeland with the use of force, oppression, and persecution. The sacrifices that our people make for the sake of liberty are still substantial. Our Palestinian community in Ukraine deserves all the respect and appreciation, as each of its representatives is an ambassador of their state and people.

– *Does the embassy cooperate with the Muslim community in Ukraine, for example, with Islamic cultural centres in various Ukrainian cities? What are the formats of cooperation?*

– Of course, the embassy has strong and broad ties with the Arab and Islamic community in Ukraine. We have relations with the Ukrainian church as well, as Palestinian Christians are an integral part of our Palestinian people amounting up to 21 percent of the population. Therefore, our relations with the church here in Ukraine are very friendly. In this context, I would like to mention that in October 2020 I paid a visit to Patriarch Filaret. It is also worth noting that we have contacts with cultural centres and are on good terms with them, we partic-

ipate in events to which we are invited, seeking to develop and strengthen these important relations.

– *Intercultural cooperation between different countries and peoples is becoming extremely topical. Cultural diplomacy provides an ever-increasing number opportunities to promote the country's image, history, and traditions. Does Palestine use the means of cultural diplomacy in its foreign policy? What cultural diplomacy projects has the embassy implemented or what events organised by the Ukrainian side has it joined?*

– Personally, I consider cultural diplomacy to be one of the most effective diplomatic tools. It is also a communication bridge, by means of which different peoples can get to know each other. I started my mission in Ukraine at the beginning of the critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had a lot of cultural events in our programme, but, unfortunately, they were canceled and we were not able to fulfill them. We hope that the epidemiological conditions will improve to give us an opportunity to organise cultural event on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People at the end of this year.

Indeed, over the past years our embassy played an active role in organising successful cultural events in a number of Ukrainian cities, especially in those cities where members of our community reside, who also contribute to the success of such events. An exchange of cultural visits took place as well. We gladly participate in the cultural events that we are invited to.

– *What were the most complicated challenges besetting the embassy?*

– We work in a friendly country and deal with kind people. We are also surrounded with an appropriate working environment. There are no significant obstacles for us to complain about, except for the challenging situation caused by the coronavirus that the whole world is going through. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly obstructed our work and prevented us from fulfilling our programmes. It has also claimed the lives of a large number of people, while also drastically influencing humanity as a whole. We pray to God for mercy and a speedy recovery to all of the affected people.