

EAST JERUSALEM'S INNOVATIVE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

By
Hani
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No one disputes the centrality of East Jerusalem in Palestinian life. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and even in exile talk of Jerusalem and yearn to visit the holy city. This centrality, however, due to Israeli measures and the shackles of a dead peace process, has unfortunately become a figure of speech where Jerusalem's economic, social, and political status has diminished in favor of more vibrant localities in the West Bank. One of the aspects that has suffered during the past few years is East Jerusalem's innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Palestine's entrepreneurial ecosystem was primarily nurtured in Ramallah and, to some extent, Gaza. This is due to many factors that include the presence of donors in both locations and the fact that the headquarters of all Palestinian corporates and the seat of the Palestinian government are in the city of Ramallah. While we lament the fact that East Jerusalem was left behind, we recognize the importance of Ramallah and Gaza finding a place on the map of innovation and entrepreneurship, attracting the attention of global technology companies and venture capital (VC) funds.



Despite its spiritual glamour and physical beauty, East Jerusalem suffers from an acute poverty rate of 72.9 percent and an unemployment rate of 73 percent among women. Yet, the high literacy rate and educational excellence of its youth cannot be exaggerated. In fact, the city suffers from a troubling brain drain; its brightest talents are grabbed by other cities and countries. This has prompted me and other colleagues from the entrepreneurial community in East Jerusalem to work harder to create and sustain a vibrant, innovative ecosystem in Jerusalem. What encouraged us to revitalize the city in this way is the wealth of human talent, its excellent geographic location, and the mobility and exposure of its youth to the global community. We started by creating a simple physical reality that was missing from the city and provided a national alternative to other less-

accepted locations. We established Jerusalem Entrepreneurial Society and Technology (JEST), the city's first incubator and working space for young entrepreneurs. The JEST community has grown year after year, as we have been able to provide mentorship, training, coaching, and networking. Today, JEST counts more than a thousand entrepreneurs. Some of its early members are now successful start-up companies. The physical space was not the only building block for this embryonic ecosystem. What has made the difference is the network we created beyond the space – a network that spans the West Bank and Gaza and includes Palestinians across the Green Line, Palestinians in the diaspora, international technology companies and entrepreneurs, and most important, the networking of entrepreneurs with their peers and mentors inside the city itself.

Graduation ceremony, Jerusalem Entrepreneurship Training, JEST program. (شباب القدس الريادي)





Ameer Abu Laban, JEST-hosted entrepreneur – *حسن*. Read more about the DAAD Center on page 48.

It was only inevitable that with the revitalization of the innovative spirit, East Jerusalemites rediscovered their innate values, their internal strengths; they regained their self-motivation and their ability to excel, innovate, and even compete with the globe's best innovators. Today, East Jerusalem features a glowing hub of Global Shapers* of the World Economic Forum, and the small ecosystem that was once sidestepped is confident and growing. We are proud of this Palestinian ecosystem in East Jerusalem and are now focused on sustaining this effort and introducing new angles and contacts. Our work is not over. We look forward to the day when we will celebrate the city's innovative spirit and growing community of entrepreneurs. We invite every innovation enthusiast to network with the innovative community in East Jerusalem.

Hani Alami is a Palestinian telecommunications tycoon who established a number of telecommunications companies. Born and living in Jerusalem, Hani is an experienced enthusiast who excels at creating blue oceans and the kind of added value that triggers markets. With multiple acquisitions and mergers in the telecom sector, he leverages his experience and network to mentor and support emerging entrepreneurs and promising ideas. A career of successful business exits in the technology sector grants Hani the ability to see the big picture and steer management through difficulties and challenging crises.

Article photos by Omar Amireh.

*For more information, please visit the website of the East Jerusalem Hub of the Global Shapers Community at <https://www.globalshapers.org/hubs/east-jerusalem-hub>.

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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year