

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 3, 2012 at 11:51am

Occupation, not 'cultural' differences, fuel economic divide in Israel/Palestine

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NCR Today

Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's remarks in Jerusalem on Monday, in which he attributed the disparity between Israel's economic achievements and Palestinian poverty to 'cultural' differences and the 'hand of Providence,' provoked a slew of commentary this week.

There was a witty skit on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and an editorial in *The Washington Post* from Palestinian-American businessman and development consultant Sam Bahour.

Born and raised in Ohio, Bahour moved to the Israeli-Occupied West Bank after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 to help develop the economy of a future Palestinian state. The task has proved to be Sisyphean. Here's an excerpt from Bahour's piece:

[Romney] totally ignored the principal reason for the huge discrepancy between the Israeli and Palestinian economies: Israel's military occupation of Palestinian territory and total micromanagement of that economy.

I suspect Bain Capital would not have succeeded had the Israeli government restrained its every effort. Furthermore, Israel's economy is subsidized with over \$3 billion in U.S. military aid every year. That military aid helps repress Palestinians.

Over the years, not only has Israel prohibited the emergence of a new Palestinian economy -- but it has structurally and systematically made certain that even the buds of such a productive economy would never see the light of day.

Anyone who scratches the surface of all the political spin can see for themselves what the World Bank now repeats: that Israel's "apparatus of control" has "become more sophisticated and effective in its ability to interfere in and affect every aspect of Palestinian life, including job opportunities, work, and earnings ... (turning) the West Bank into a fragmented set of social and economic islands or enclaves cut off from one another."

Besieged Gaza is in far worse shape than the West Bank. The International Monetary Fund and the European Union are making similar points.

Earlier this week, Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP) launched an open letter to Romney asking him to apologize to the Palestinian people for remarks that JVP Executive Director Rebecca Vilkomerson called "prejudiced," "ignorant," and "wrong."

Romney inaccurately described Israel's GDP per capita as twice that of the Occupied Territories. The CIA Factbook estimates the difference as ten times greater: \$31,400 vs. \$2,900.

JVP's online appeal for signatures to their Romney letter includes details on how the Israeli Occupation prohibits Palestinian development:

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- Resources: Only 6 per cent of the land in the Jordan Valley is currently available for Palestinian use and development. Palestinian farmers and communities in the Jordan Valley are largely dependent on tinkered water, which they have to pay for at up to five times more than regular water available to illegal Israeli settlements.
- Labor: While the minimum wage in Israel is currently \$6.00 per hour, Palestinians working on Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley are paid only an average of \$2.00-\$4.80 per hour. Palestinian workers do not receive the benefits that Israeli workers are entitled to by law, including holidays, overtime pay, transportation costs, health insurance, sick pay, or payments from a provident fund.
- Imports: The Palestinian pharmaceutical manufacturers must receive an import license from the Israeli authorities for all raw materials imported from abroad, regardless of their origin or possible usage. This demand is unique to Palestinian manufacturers, whereas Israeli exports are exempt from it.
- Exports: With the exception of two shipments of date bar snacks, for the past five years there has been a complete ban on the sale of Gaza-made products in the West Bank and Israel.

According to an article in today's *Boston Globe*, Romney has long believed that "cultural" differences account for disparities in adjacent economies, not only in Israel/Palestine but in Chile and Ecuador, the U.S. and Mexico, to name a few.

But Romney's remarks at the fundraiser in Jerusalem were probably inspired by something more than a desire to articulate his economic philosophy.

Present at Monday's \$25,000-a-plate breakfast was pro-Israel advocate Sheldon Adelson, an American billionaire who has indicated his willingness to contribute \$100 million to Romney's campaign.

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