

Daily Newspaper published by Gulf Publishing & Printing Co. Doha, Qatar

[Homepage](#) \ [Opinion:](#)

Latest Update: Tuesday 15/9/2009 September, 2009, 11:40 PM Doha Time

GO[Advanced Search](#)[Send Article](#) [Print Article](#) [Qatar](#)[Gulf/Arab World](#)[Americas](#)[Britain/Ireland](#)[Europe/World](#)[India](#)[Pakistan/Afghanistan](#)[Sri Lanka/Bangladesh](#)[Philippines/East Asia](#)[Opinion](#)[Islam](#)[Finance & Business](#)[Sport](#)[Features](#)[Classifieds](#)[Anniversary Special](#)[Back Issues](#)[Feedback](#)[Contact Us](#)[Site Map](#)[About Us](#)

City of hope for Palestinians

The Rawabi city project is eventually intended to house 40,000 people and to create 5,000 permanent jobs

By Rory McCarthy/Ramallah

The artist sketches are striking. Sitting on a hilltop among the olive trees of the West Bank is a new town, carefully designed with tall apartment blocks, shaded pedestrian walkways, a concentric road network and abundant trees. This is not a new Israeli settlement but an image of what might soon be Rawabi, the first planned Palestinian city and a sign of fresh hope for economic recovery in the occupied West Bank.



Artist's sketches of the proposed new city, Rawabi

It is a project two years in the making, carefully marketed at young Palestinian professionals looking for affordable, modern homes, as well as much sought-after technology jobs in a town that would be only six miles north of the economic hub of Ramallah.

"Providing jobs for Palestine's educated but underemployed workforce," says one advertising slogan. Financed with money from the Qatari government, it is eventually intended to house 40,000 people and to create 5,000 permanent jobs.

Bashar Masri, a Palestinian businessman who is leading the project, said the first phase of the city's masterplan was complete and ready for construction, which may begin within months. Apartments will sell for about QR273,000-QR290,000 for an average-sized 140sq metres and, although homes will only go on sale once built, thousands of people have already registered an interest. Individual home ownership among Palestinians is still unusual and expensive.

Despite the obvious risks, Masri hopes it will encourage others to invest in the West Bank and will prepare for an eventual end to the Israeli occupation. "I would like to think of this project as part of building a Palestinian state," he said.

Although the political peace process between Israelis and Palestinians remains stalled for now, there have been some improvements economically, at least in the West Bank. Binyamin Netanyahu, who became Israeli prime minister in the spring, claims to be focused on a policy of "economic peace", and only briefly and reluctantly spoke about a political track ending in a Palestinian state.

About two dozen Israeli military checkpoints have recently been lifted, including the easing of the Hawara checkpoint at the entrance to Nablus, which Palestinians say has made a significant improvement in their lives. Last week, the Israelis and Palestinians had their first high-level meeting for months, which centred on the West Bank economy.

"Our objective is economic peace," said Silvan Shalom, the Israeli vice-prime minister. "That doesn't prevent political dialogue, but rather ... gives it momentum." His counterpart, Bassem Khoury, the Palestinian economics minister, said he was looking for actions on the ground, not just rhetoric.

In July, the International Monetary Fund said economic growth in the West Bank could reach 7% this year, if Israeli restrictions continued to be relaxed. That would make the first significant improvement in living standards for three years, although the economy is still a long way short of what it was before the second Intifada broke out in 2000.

In painfully stark contrast to all this is the Gaza Strip, which remains under a tight Israeli economic blockade. Gaza’s economy, said the IMF, is likely to continue to shrink this year, while poverty and unemployment continue to rise.

Most Palestinians are sceptical about Netanyahu’s political intentions. Masri insists he does not accept the status quo of occupation, but says it is hard not to see this as an opportunity to be seized.

“We are not going to shoot ourselves in the foot. We’re saying it’s not sufficient, but we’re not against it,” he said. The Palestinian problem was not simply a lack of economic prosperity. Without parallel political achievements, economic progress would be useless. “If the Palestinian people don’t see the potential of a political breakthrough, something will give in somewhere,” he said. “Unfortunately it’s almost always negative and violent.”

However, so far, the biggest Palestinian economic projects have yet to materialise. Rawabi still faces obstacles. About a quarter of the required land has not yet been bought from the individual owners and the Palestinian Authority, though it supports the city, has yet to commit itself to providing the necessary infrastructure.

More serious problems are awaiting Israeli approval. There is still no agreement on the provision of water, which will have to come from the Israeli water company. Also, Israel has yet to allow a road linking Rawabi to Ramallah because it would run through West Bank land still under Israeli military and administrative control.

Likewise, another major investment project, Wataniya, a second mobile telephone firm for the Palestinians, has been held up for years because Israel, despite its promises and a signed agreement, refuses to release the necessary frequencies. The firm has threatened to pull out if the frequencies are not allocated. Wataniya was to invest \$700mn (about QR2,550mn) over 10 years, creating 750 skilled jobs and another 2,000 indirect jobs.

Tony Blair, the Middle East envoy, has supported both projects and was last year personally promised by Israel that the Wataniya frequencies would be allocated. He said he believed it would happen soon. “It is an important indicator that the Palestinians are going to be allowed to run their own economy properly,” Blair said last week.

He said measures taken on the West Bank, improving law and order in West Bank towns by Palestinian security forces and lifting checkpoints by Israel, were making a difference. He believed Israel and the US would soon reach an agreement on settlement building that would allow political negotiations.

But he said the improvements were still vulnerable. “If we do get some of these big-ticket items, which I think is possible, we are going to support the political negotiations. We are not going to substitute the one for the other. If the political negotiations do not materialise then all this progress will be fragile for sure,” he said. “I think it is a mistake to think you can get a shelf agreement of an artificial construct of a state and then try and fit the reality around it.”

Masri, with his project for the new city of Rawabi, said many investors were rethinking their approach to the West Bank in the light of recent improvements, theorising that despite the risks there were growing possibilities of big rewards. But most had yet to put their money in, waiting first for a genuine peace process to begin.

“Economic development will help us with a Palestinian state,” said Masri. “But it is not the solution. An independent Palestinian state is definitely a must.” — Guardian News & Media

[Send Article](#)  [Print Article](#) 

[Top of page ▲](#)

[Feedback](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Add us to favourites](#) | [Make us your Home page](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Al-Raya newspaper](#) | [Home page](#)

All Rights Reserved for Gulf-Times.com © 2008- 2009 , [Site content usage](#) | Designed and Developed by: 