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While peace prospects seem iffy, Rawabi is a towering certainty

In Rawabi, the brand-new Palestinian city, both sides win

Projects like this bring our peoples closer together, says Bashar al-Masri, the entrepreneur behind an unprecedented construction project that is changing the West Bank landscape

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Civil engineer Shadia Jaradat (center) poses with two colleagues in one of Rawabi's model apartments. A third of the project's engineers are women (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



A model of Rawabi in the project's visitors' center (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



Palestinian flags encircle Rawabi's visitors' center (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



A view from the balcony of a ninth-floor Rawabi apartment (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



The living room in Rawabi's model apartment (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



A view from the kitchen in Rawabi's model apartment (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



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RAWABI, West Bank — If all goes according to plan, this summer 600 middle-class families will begin moving into their new apartments in Rawabi, the largest construction project in recorded Palestinian history.

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The city slopes down a hill 9 kilometers (5.6 miles) north of Ramallah, directly between Nablus and Jerusalem, and the Israeli coastline is clearly visible from the balconies of its higher apartments. Rawabi, which is Arabic for hills, is entirely funded by private investment — a joint venture of Palestinian company Massar International and Qatari real estate developer Diar — estimated to surpass \$1 billion. When phase A is done, it will be home to more than 25,000 residents seeking to escape the disarray of traditional Palestinian cities.

While the prospects of a positive outcome to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians seem iffy, Rawabi is a towering certainty. But the shiny new city on the hill is not only a model of Palestinian entrepreneurship, it is also a little-known exemplar of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

Bashar Al-Masri, managing director of Rawabi, said that though no Israeli companies have been involved in constructing the city, hundreds of Israeli

suppliers provide it with raw materials such as cement, sand, electric components and plumbing. He estimated that Israeli businesses benefit from the Rawabi project to the tune of tens of millions of dollars a month. The only political principle Rawabi holds with relation to Israel is no cooperation with businesses in the settlements.

“We buy from whoever gives us the lowest price,” Al-Masri said. “It makes no difference to us if the company is Israeli, Italian or German.”

“We have no choice but to cooperate with Israel and Israelis, but we also want to do so,” he added. “It is a mistake to separate our economy from Israel’s. Projects like this bring our peoples closer together: Israelis come to the site, they are exposed to Palestinians, and they realize there’s no risk in coming here. There is a sense of comfort.”

These positions have placed Masri — a native of Nablus who spent much of his adult life living in the US, the UK and Saudi Arabia — under fire in his own society. In 2012, the Palestinian National BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) Committee condemned him for normalization with Israel, accusing him of “advancing personal interests and profit making at the expense of Palestinian rights.”

But despite the BDS efforts, the ambitious project is already a huge blessing for the Palestinian economy. Providing 8,000-10,000 jobs in construction, Rawabi is by far the largest private employer in the West Bank. Once complete, the city is expected to employ 3,000-5,000 people in its commercial and cultural center, said Amir Dajani, the project’s deputy managing director.



A model of Rawabi's mosque in the visitors' center (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/times of Israel)

Rawabi materialized remarkably fast; its planning began five years ago and construction just two. Situated in area A, Rawabi lies within full Palestinian jurisdiction, where planning and construction bureaucracy are far less obstructive than in neighboring Israel. A local quarry feeds an on-site stone-cutting factory active 24 hours a day, six days a week. The city will eventually emerge complete with three schools, two mosques, a church, a commercial center including restaurants and cinemas, and an amphitheater that can seat 15,000. With no residents yet, Rawabi already has an appointed mayor, Majed Abdul Fattah.

But cooperation with Israeli authorities has not always been easy. The Civil Administration, an IDF organ entrusted with the civilian governing of the West Bank, objected to the widening of a local road leading up to the city and passing through area C, which lies under Israeli administrative control. And Israel's national water company, Mekorot, has still not guaranteed a water supply to Rawabi.

Dov Weisglass, an Israeli lawyer and former bureau chief for prime minister Ariel Sharon, serves as the legal and regulatory adviser to Rawabi in its dealings with the Israeli government. He said that while some officials in the Civil Administration place hurdles before Rawabi since they are “no big supporters of the vision of Palestinian development,” the Israeli government has gradually changed its attitude toward the new city.

“A few years ago, when Rawabi was just getting started, the Israeli attitude was harsher and more suspicious,” Weisglass said. “However, today I can state with satisfaction that most Israeli authorities willingly cooperate based on a deep understanding that history is being made here before our eyes, both domestically and — to a certain extent — with relation to Israel.”

Weisglass asserted that the new middle-class city will be the antithesis of violence and extremism.

“Does this project not contribute to normalization, to co-existence and to peace?” Weisglass wondered. “We are doing something tremendous for the State of Israel.”

A new Palestinian concept: The mortgage

Rawabi looks remarkably different from the typical Palestinian community. The city, which markets itself as environmentally sustainable, will have no water tanks on its roofs and will enjoy a centralized TV service to replace the ubiquitous satellite dishes of Arab urban centers. All of its infrastructure is being laid underground.

When planning began for the city, Masri met with renowned Israeli-born architect Moshe Safdie, who took him on a tour of nearby Modi'in.



Bashar Masri at Rawabi's construction site (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)

“When searching for a model, we first looked at cities next door,” Masri recalled. “Modi'in has similar topography and a similar climate to Rawabi.”

Rawabi's planners also learned from Modi'in's mistakes. The planned Israeli city is still widely viewed as a commuter town due a lack of local businesses, a planning mistake Masri said he was determined to avoid with Rawabi. Rawabi's center is therefore designed as a commercial hotspot built to attract Palestinians from the surrounding areas.

“Today many Israelis come here to learn from Rawabi,” Masri noted. “Just last week we hosted a group from the Israeli association of planners.”

But Rawabi has also challenged the conventional attitude toward home ownership in the West Bank.

Traditionally, Palestinians build their homes on family land, expanding the house as money becomes available. The Rawabi project has introduced a new concept: the long-term mortgage.

Before Rawabi set up a mortgage company granting 25-year loans, the typical Palestinian loan would entail a five- to eight-year payback period. The Palestinian Monetary Authority used to require a down payment of 20 percent of the property's value, a rate Rawabi successfully lobbied to lower to 15%.

One beneficiary of Rawabi's financing system is Shadia Jaradat, a 26-year-old civil engineer who has been working for Rawabi for the past four years (a third of Rawabi's 300 engineers are women). Through an assistance program in which the project helps its employees on their down payment, the Hebron native recently purchased a four-bedroom ninth-floor apartment for \$120,000, a price she said was affordable. Eleven percent of home-buyers in Rawabi are single, like Jaradat.

"I plan to move in as soon as they fit the windows," she told The Times of Israel.