

## **Palestinians begin to build the first new city in modern times**

While Sharia law becomes more deeply entrenched in Gaza, in the West Bank, a new city for yuppies is being built. Fans of the project say that a new state will be founded on this initiative and others like it.

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The first Palestinian city of the modern era is already under construction -- on the computers of the real estate development firm managed by Bashar Masri. This October, bulldozers are in place and ready to begin to build the new city of Rawabi, which means "hills" in Arabic, located nine kilometers northwest of Ramallah.

### **Wishes for Success**

The true bulldozer of the project, however, is Amir Dajani, 38, who graduated with a degree in Business Administration from a London university and is the personification of the new Palestinian: cosmopolitan, efficient, educated, cultured, dressed in a \$2,000 suit and dreaming of a Palestine proud to be both open to the West and her neighbors -- as well as her historic enemies- including Israel.

"With \$800 million in capital from investors in Palestine and Qatar, in the first phase we will build 6,000 high quality homes in a city that will ultimately be home to 40,000 people," he says with a twinkle in his eye. "So stop complaining." Dajani refers to what he perceives as an arrogance among the activists who began the Palestinian Intifada of 2000. "They don't understand that our Palestinian state is going to be built through initiatives like Rawabi, which will create thousands of jobs for people in the nine villages that surround the new city and forcing the Israelis to cooperate with us in achieving our dreams."

The first planned city in Palestine's history targets its growing class of young couples, college students, laymen and other moderate income earners. The city is going to feature cafes, restaurants, pedestrian areas, fitness centers and, for children, schools and kindergartens. Dajani adds with a little irony, anticipating my question about the mosques: "Yes, of course, we will also have three mosques, and at least one church. This area we're looking at right now will be the city center, the heart of Rawabi, where there will be a modern shopping mall, a movie theatre and office towers," says Dajani, standing on a panoramic hillside where now there is only dirt and rocks.

Managing Director Bashar Masri is a Palestinian businessman who has always believed in the new class of young Palestinian with a positive perception of the western world. Until today, Rawabi was just a utopian dream. Now, just as the Islamist governments in Gaza and Iran are imposing dictates for women to wear headscarves, Masri, with the support of the government of Qatar, is making plans for his city designed for modern young men and women in the West Bank.

"This city is going to bring Palestine into the 21<sup>st</sup> century," said Zakarias, one of dozens of architects and engineers working on the project. The teams are currently led by American Ken D'Angelo, a man

who has spent his career constructing 5 cities like Rawabi around the world and most recently, in Indonesia. "It's a huge challenge, but with the very capable people around us, I know we will have Rawabi II, III and IV," he says.

Establishment of a Palestinian state does not seem imminent, but the entire West Bank is experiencing a construction and infrastructure boom. The Israeli government is implementing the policy of its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who believes strongly in an "economic peace". The Rawabi masterplanners have already agreed with Israel on technical arrangements for the supply of water and electricity. What remains unresolved at this moment is the construction of a primary access artery running between Rawabi and the main Palestinian city of Ramallah. For this to happen, the Israeli Government will have to remove its military presence from a settlement area close to the area of the new Palestinian city.

Even now, construction of a new urban center, amidst a situation fraught with confrontation and tension appeared to be a fantasy. the construction of an urban center in a situation of confrontation and occupation seemed a fantasy. Almost everyone in Ramallah doubted it was possible to build a modern city in a West Bank where Palestinian areas are dotted with scores of Israeli settlements (like Rawabi's neighbor, Ateret) and military checkpoints and amidst announcements from Hamas in Gaza that it plans to make its presence felt in the West Bank. "Ateret will eventually be evacuated – there are only 400 people living there", states Dajani with confidence, looking at the roofs of Ateret from the construction site on the neighboring hilltop. Israel, under pressure from the Obama Administration has removed about 30 military checkpoints that prevented travel between Palestinian towns and slowly strangled the economy. During the early years of the intifada, in order to travel from Nablus to Ramallah wealthy Palestinians hired ambulances. They paid 400 shekels (\$100, a fortune by local standards) and pretended to be ill. Only then could cross the checkpoint. Now, Palestinians can move relatively freely between their cities in their own cars. Although the area still occupied by Israel, Israeli soldiers are rarely seen in Palestinian towns and village in daylight and the atmosphere within cities is peaceful. "I'm tired of living in a country at war. I want my children to grow up in a peaceful place, with a good quality of life and clean air," said Rana Asfour, an economist and mother of two children, who plans to purchase a flat in the new city of Rawabi.

The new atmosphere is also attracting Western and Arab investors, and in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jenin and Nablus new banks, financial services and high-tech firms are springing up.

It is a silent, slow revolution, but unfortunately, still reversible.

A sudden explosion of violence may dash the hopes of many dreamers. Previous summers have seen the flare up of problems but this year, in downtown Ramallah, 12 new restaurants and a number of new shopping areas opened their doors to the public.

In January 2010 legislative elections and elections for the Palestinian president will be held. Hamas and Islamists are likely to do everything they can to prevent the spread of ideas like the new

city of Rawabi. In spite of this, tens of thousands of Palestinians are eagerly supporting the effort to build the “city of hills”, which they hope will become the Palestinian reality and the reference point for the future of Palestine.