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West Bank: Palestinians' first planned city will offer modern space

Palestinians are used to uneven roads and ramshackle houses. But the first planned city, Rawabi – geared toward young, upwardly mobile Palestinians – is in the works near Ramallah.

By Daniella Cheslow | Correspondent 11.04.09

• *A local, slice-of-life story from a Monitor correspondent.*

RAMALLAH, WEST BANK – For most Palestinians, roughly paved asphalt, smoggy downtowns, and ramshackle expansion are a part of city life. But entrepreneur Bashar Masri thinks otherwise. On what is now just a scrubby hilltop, a new 40,000-person metropolis five miles north of Ramallah, Rawabi, Arabic for “hills,” may be the first Palestinian city built to a master plan, and it offers a tidy alternative for upwardly mobile young professionals.

As the Nablus-born nephew of Palestinian billionaire Munib Masri, Bashar is no stranger to big ideas. “Palestinians right now – young people – want to move to the city,” Mr. Masri explained as he leaned over a yellow glass desk in his Ramallah office. “The people we’re after are educated and employed. They studied in English and Arabic, they watch TV, they have traveled, and most of them have Facebook. They understand a different world than their parents.”

For them, Masri offers a revolutionary city. Qatari financing will provide the first large-scale Palestinian mortgage option for home buyers. Downtown will include apartments, offices, day care, and theaters. Neighborhoods will enjoy generous open space and greenery. Masri hopes to break ground in March.

Rami Nasrallah, an urban planner based in East Jerusalem, said Rawabi reflects changing values. “It’s moving the Palestinians from being restricted to their villages to going to modern spaces,” he says.

Ramallah Mayor Janet Michael says Rawabi offers young couples a quiet home away from the mayhem of the booming cultural capital of the West Bank. It also addresses the gaping housing shortage in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which the World Bank put at 65,000 units last year.

The project still faces big hurdles, such as gaining Israeli permission for an access road and water allocation. But if it succeeds, Masri says, Rawabi can be a model for the country. “Having an independent Palestinian state is not just a gimmick. We want a strong and economically viable state.”

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