



The Jewish Daily Forward

Gleaming Billion-Dollar Palestinian City Finally Sees Water on Horizon

Is Israeli Red Tape About To Part for Rawabi?



Rawabi

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Published March 01, 2015, issue of [March 06, 2015](#).

Rawabi, West Bank — Rawabi, the sparkling new — but still empty — Palestinian city in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, has announced that the crucial element keeping its streets and high-rises desolate and devoid of residents may finally be addressed.

“At Last Universal Rights to Water Realized at Rawabi,” reads the headline in the project’s winter newsletter, which was distributed on the morning of March 1: “Pipeline Construction to Immediately Commence.”

For over a year, Rawabi has been awaiting Israeli permission to build a water pipeline, the last crucial component needed to open the development for occupancy. The billion dollar city is the most ambitious Palestinian real estate venture in recent history. Though it is a private endeavor, it has been billed as a key state building initiative.

On Thursday night, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave the water pipeline the go-ahead. The announcement was first made in a press briefing with Israeli journalists.

“I am happy, I am excited and now there is a lot of pressure of things coming into place, and we are determined to make them come into place and move on,” said Bashar Masri, Rawabi’s founder.

The news of Rawabi’s water hookup, which will take about three months to complete, follows a month of intense political wrangling inside Israel over the development’s fate. In late January, the civil administration, the Israeli body that administers the West Bank, gave its permission for the water pipeline, prompting Rawabi to print its celebratory newsletter. But then the Israeli ministry of national infrastructure, energy and water resources clamped down on the faucet.

“I had been anticipating the water every single day,” said Masri. “Hope was starting to fade a bit.”

For several weeks, the newsletters gathered dust in a trailer park at Rawabi’s construction site, about six miles north of Ramallah. The issue came to a head late last week at a meeting between Israel’s national security apparatus and the civil administration.

“A solution was found,” said an official with the prime minister’s office, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “And hopefully that puts it behind us.”

Over the past year, Rawabi’s search for water has become an international issue. Headlines on the topic have resounded from The New York Times, Foreign Policy and the British Broadcasting Corporation. It also became a political talking point inside Israel. Reuven Rivlin, Israel’s new president, recently deemed the opening up of Rawabi a “clear Israeli and Zionist interest.” The statement made Masri cringe, but it also gave him hope.

“Such statements are hurting us in the Palestinian community. People say, ‘Ah, look, Rawabi is a bad project. It is what Israel wants. It is normalizing the occupation,’” he said in an interview before Netanyahu’s order. “I can take the heat from my people if I can get the water. If I am not going to get the water and I have to take the heat, then we are about to collapse.”

Masri has sunk eight years and millions of dollars into Rawabi, the culmination of a life long ambition to execute a bold project that would impact the Palestinian economy.

The rationale behind Rawabi is threefold, he said: for Palestinians to prove to themselves that they could build a new city in spite of the occupation, to show the world in the post-intifada era that Palestinians are “about state building and development and not about destruction” and to jumpstart economic development in the West Bank. “This particular project had so many positives, it was worth the risk,” he said.

So far, 639 families have already bought in to the Rawabi dream, purchasing apartments in the towering beige buildings on a West Bank hilltop from which Tel Aviv, Ramallah and — on a clear day — the port of Ashdod are visible.

Rawabi is an official Palestinian municipality and even has a mayor. When it is completed, the city will house some 40,000 Palestinians in apartment buildings and luxury villas built with “smart” infrastructure that includes high speed Internet, solar power and rainwater collection. Rawabi — which means “hills” in Arabic — will have a town square with a movie theater, a hotel and a convention center. There will be a Roman style amphitheater, a mosque, a Greek Orthodox church and three schools.



Getty Images

Development Town: French Finance Minister Pierre Moscovici, right, stands with Masri in 2013.

But today, Rawabi is a ghost town. Though all of the 639 purchased units are ready to go — outfitted with kitchen tiles and doors picked out by buyers in Rawabi’s sunlit showroom — nobody lives in them. Masri said that it will be another three months before the buyers will be able to move in.

Just 1% of Rawabi’s homeowners backed out because of the water issue, though at one point Masri feared that as many as 40% would leave. But Masri said that the water delay has harmed the development in other ways. He said that he lost between \$70 and \$80 million in overhead costs such as salaries while construction stalled. Over the past eight months, 1,500 workers have been laid off.

“It ruined the euphoria of Rawabi,” he said. “People were very excited, they were coming in the tens every day to buy. The last few months this has been dampened.”

Even now, Masri said that he is cautious about the viability of the prime minister’s announcement.

“Nothing can guarantee it even if I have a piece of paper,” he said, noting that Israel recently cut electricity to several West Bank cities due to the Palestinian Authority’s outstanding debts. (The two parties have since come to an agreement and electricity has been restored.) “We are under military occupation. Anything can be canceled.”

Rawabi’s water delay is the result of several tangled forces: Israeli bureaucracy, the West Bank occupation, past agreements between Israelis and Palestinians and the long unresolved conflict between the two peoples.

Read more: <http://forward.com/articles/215492/gleaming-billion-dollar-palestinian-city-finally-s/?p=all#ixzz3TsIJzBrU>

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Foremost, Rawabi’s water problems are linked to the way the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization sliced up the land. Most of Rawabi is built in Area A, which is under Palestinian civil and security control. But Masri’s plans also involve building a water pipeline through Area C, for which he needs Israeli permission.

According to Masri’s lawyer, Dov Weissglass, a former adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel assured Masri that he would be able to build his pipeline through Area C several years back. But about 8 months ago, as the project was entering its final stages, Israel’s military administration in the West Bank changed course, saying that Rawabi must be approved by the Joint Water Committee, a group of Israelis and Palestinians tasked with allocating water resources per the Oslo Accords.

There was just one problem: The JWC has not met in five years. According to Ihab Barghouti, an adviser with the Palestinian Water Authority, the Palestinians refused to convene the committee when Israel asked them to green light water projects for exclusively Jewish West Bank settlements, which most of the international community views as illegal. “Because Palestinians are not discussing and approving these projects, Israel is not approving Palestinian projects,” he said.

Last year, the PWA’s new head, Mazen Ghnaim, [told the New York Times](#) that he expected the JWC to reconvene “soon.” But Barghouti said that efforts to that end once again failed over the topic of settlements.

Meanwhile, Israel continues to connect Jewish settlements to water without the JWC.

In January, General Yoav Mordechai, the head of the military administration in the West Bank, bypassed the JWC and approved Rawabi’s water line as well as an Israeli settlement project that had also stalled.

“These projects are fully ready, merely awaiting implementation, and will serve the population of Judea and Samaria,” a COGAT spokesperson said in a statement.

But then, the government intervened. Silvan Shalom, Israel’s minister of national infrastructure, energy and water resources, said that Rawabi must still appear before the JWC. Shalom declined an interview for this article, but provided a statement through the ministry spokesperson: “The State of Israel fully adheres to the Joint Water Agreement and regards its full implementation as highly important.”

In late February, Netanyahu overrode Shalom’s objection to allow COGAT to approve the water projects. “We see the development in the P.A. as a win-win,” said the anonymous official with the prime minister’s office. “It is good for the Palestinians and good for Israel. It creates, we hope, an infrastructure that supports moderation and a more pragmatic approach.”

Sitting in his office wearing a Prada-brand parka and snacking on a plate of carrots and lettuce, Masri, who is 54, spoke about the origins of the project.

His childhood in Nablus was spent organizing demonstrations against the Israeli occupation, a pastime for which he said he was jailed on three separate occasions. (Masri said that he clashed with the IDF then “but I was not a good rock thrower, and violence is not exactly my style.”) When he was 17, Masri moved with his family to the United States and went to college at Virginia Tech. After the Oslo Accords, he returned to Ramallah as part of a cohort of foreign-trained professionals eager to build the new Palestinian state.

In the ensuing years, Masri’s holding company, Massar International, took him abroad to work on real estate projects across the Middle East and North Africa. But in 2007, he set his sights locally. “We decided, well, if we could do it in Morocco maybe we could do it in Palestine,” he said of Rawabi. “It’s not like I dreamed about building a city.”

Masri invested millions of his own dollars in Rawabi. Most of the financing, however, came from Qatar. The Gulf State has [sought more influence](#) in the Arab-Israeli conflict in recent years. Masri wouldn’t say how much Qatar invested, only that it was in the hundreds of millions of dollars. References to the Gulf monarchy are located throughout Rawabi, from the pedestrian mall called the “Q center” (shaped like the English letter “Q”) to a stone archway named the Doha Gate, which faces in the direction of Doha, to Rawabi’s mosque, which is built to a Qatari designer’s specifications.

Rawabi’s Qatar funding has made it a target of activists on the Israeli right. Last September, a group called “Cities of Israel” initiated a letter writing campaign to Shalom saying that Qatar’s support for Hamas had not been sufficiently considered in Israel’s approval of the water pipe. The cause was [taken up](#) by a columnist on Israel’s Arutz Sheva web site in an article entitled “Qatar Funded City to Arise in Israel. More Terror Tunnels, Anyone?”

Masri said the Palestinian Authority has given Rawabi its stamp of approval as an official municipality. But the P.A. has not helped with funding for roads or infrastructure, he added; nor will it build schools on the site, leaving Masri to look to private operators. Still, the P.A. has heralded Rawabi as a national project. The largest Palestinian flag in the West Bank hangs from a flagpole in Rawabi, which is surrounded at its base by a sculpture of Palestinian family that is “guarding” the banner.

Masri also worked with Israel on the project, buying \$60 million to \$80 million dollars of construction material such as cement, bricks and dry wall yearly from Israeli companies for the past three to four years. Masri stressed that he would not buy products from the settlements — “not even if they gave it to us for

free.” But he said he had no qualms about doing business with Israel. “Why would I buy British and not buy Israeli? To me it is all the same. Once I go international it is who has the best quality.” Masri also met with Israeli architect Moshe Safdie, who designed the massive Jerusalem suburb of Modiin — itself partly over the Green Line — to understand what worked and what didn’t in a large-scale development. Modiin’s failure to provide employment opportunities to Israelis was a lesson for Rawabi, which will include an office park.

Masri’s purchases of Israeli goods have come under scrutiny by some Palestinians. The ant-Zionist website Electronic Intifada [said that Masri](#) “appears to be actively helping Israel deepen its hold on the Palestinian economy” in violation of Palestinian civil society’s call for boycott, divestment and sanction in 2005.

Masri also raised ire in 2011 when he planned to plant trees at Rawabi with representatives of the Jewish National Fund, the not-for-profit that buys and develops lands for Jewish use both in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Masri said the move was a political tactic to force the civil administration to allow him to plant trees in the part of Rawabi that is in Area C and exclusively controlled by Israel. But it backfired with the Palestinian public. “The move was super unpopular,” he said. “We got what we wanted, but hell, people freaked out.”

Masri issued a statement that the trees had been uprooted, but he would not confirm when or how this actually occurred. “I am not going to tell you that we went and said, ‘Damn trees’ and beat the heck out of them because they were Jewish trees, that’s ridiculous,” he said. “The bottom line is that the JNF trees are dead. What difference does it make?”

Rawabi’s construction site has become a favorite tour stop for Jewish groups interested in the two-state solution — of which Masri is an eager proponent.

Last year, Mark Rosenblum, a co-founder of Americans for Peace Now, accompanied the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to Rawabi as part of its Israel itinerary. Malcom Hoenlein, the group’s executive vice president was “very impressed,” said Rosenblum. But that wasn’t the case for many other members of the group, which has grown increasingly hawkish in recent years.

“They said, ‘This is not good news,’ Rosenblum said. “‘The Palestinian state is not under-the-ground-dead and buried. ’”

Rosenblum added, “The Palestinians can never be accused of sitting on their victimology. They have done something here that is clearly not complaining. It is building facts on the ground in the old Zionist way.”

Inside the showroom in Rawabi, the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict couldn’t feel more distant. Prospective homeowners are guided through a miniature simulation of Rawabi’s apartments, where tiny video screens in the windows play scenes of women cooking or men smoking hookah. Customers are then ushered into a small-scale replica of the amphitheater and handed a pair of 3-D glasses to watch an introductory video about the city. The film opens with a shot of a Palestinian family picnicking on a hilltop when they are interrupted by a low rumble. They look down the hill and see Rawabi — their new home — emerging from the ground. Back outside the theater, customers can pick out the colors for their kitchen tiles and even acquire a loan at one of four on-site banks.

Apartments in Rawabi range from \$65,000 to \$85,000 — a price out of reach for most Palestinians on the West Bank, where the per capital GDP is about \$2,800.

Rawabi's only reference to Palestinian adversity is in the form of a traffic circle called the "Hope Roundabout." A giant block, meant to represent the Israeli occupation, is smashed into the center of a concrete disk, creating several jagged cracks from which green plants grow.

In the meantime, Rawabi's buyers — at least those who haven't backed out yet — are waiting to move in.

Aiman Ayad, a 39-year-old father of three, bought a home in Rawabi after his son saw an advertisement in Ramallah. Originally from Bitunia in the West Bank, Ayad lives in Abu Ghosh, an Arab village near Jerusalem, and works at a deli in Jerusalem's tony German Colony. The Rawabi apartment will be the family's vacation home. Work is scarce in the West Bank — otherwise he would consider living there full time.

Ayad said that he understood that there was a delay on the Israeli side, but that he would wait it out instead of bailing on the project, like some other Palestinians did.

He said of Rawabi: "You know it will be something big."

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