

Nation Building Done Right

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The Palestinian Arabs believe they must build a state separate from Israel in the ancient Jewish lands of Judea and Samaria. Sadly, most have been taught that to build that state they should kill as many Jews as possible until the world hands them a ready-made country with perpetual international financial backing. But some Palestinians, like Bashar Masri, know that if their nationalistic goals are to be realized in any meaningful way, they, like the Jews of Israel, will have to work for it.

Thanks to a top Western education and a keen business sense, Masri has built up a veritable empire since returning to the Palestinian-controlled territories following the peace treaty with Israel in 1994. Now he is looking to give back by building an entire city. **Israel Today** spoke to Masri about progress on the planned city of Rawabi, and the cooperation and support he has gotten from Israel.

Israel Today: Rawabi has been in the planning stage for some time. Where are you at now?

Masri: We have received all needed approval from the Palestinian Authority, the master plan is done, the designs have been completed, and in 2010 we started excavating the mountain. It's a very steep mountain, so that's a huge job. In the last six months we started on the roads and the infrastructure. We are ready to go full blast with the construction of the buildings now.

Israel Today: How many people will live in Rawabi?

Masri: Our target is to build more than 5,000 units that will house 25,000 people in the core of the city. There are other parts of the city that will be owned by other companies that will be building also. We predict that in 7-8 years we will have between 30-40,000 people living in the city. We envision the first 1,000 families (5,000 people) will move into the city one to two years from today.

Israel Today: And your target population?

Masri: Obviously we are targeting all of the population, anyone is welcome, and anyone can buy. But the design is targeting the young professionals, the people who are planning to get married, or recently married and have some kids, young professionals rising in their careers.

Israel Today: How will you attract such a sought-after demographic?

Masri: An integral part of the project is to focus on job creation for the inhabitants of Rawabi. We are building a state-of-the-art town center, very technologically advanced, and we are hoping to attract international companies, and new local companies that are expanding. We are already talking to a number that have projects that require a high technological infrastructure to move to Rawabi and create jobs here.

Israel Today: It has been difficult to attract investment to the Palestinian areas. Why will Rawabi be different?

Masri: We don't have any illusions about companies flooding in and working in Rawabi, but we do know that there are some companies whose heart is in the area and they want to do something good; they want to see the Palestinians do well, and they want to create jobs. Sometimes this is because they love the Palestinians, and sometimes it is because they love Israel and they want to support having a better Palestine to protect Israel. Whatever their reason is, we are going to go after them, and we are going to facilitate them.

Israel Today: Have you faced opposition?

Masri: It's usually the radicals, and the radicals are very loud, on both sides. We've been criticized by the Israeli radicals from left and right who want to punish companies that work with us because we decided not to use products from the Israeli settlements. Some Palestinians say that this is a city for refugees. But, when you talk to people involved it is very clear that this is not a political project.

Israel Today: What about support?

Masri: The majority is for Rawabi. On the Palestinian side we have thousands lining up to buy houses. Reasonable people realize that this project is about building our nation. We also see support in Israel from the Israeli masses. When we appear in the Israeli media we receive hundreds of emails from people who want to volunteer to help or otherwise support Rawabi.

Israel Today: How has Israel helped you to build Rawabi?

Masri: We have been monitoring and watching different projects, [the planned Israeli city of] Modiin being one of them. When you have a whole city being built next to you, just 30 minutes from Rawabi, you learn a lot. We visited Modiin, and the architects and planners of Modiin opened up to us and offered to help us. They gave us private tours, helped us to understand what worked and what didn't work.

This project is above our head. But every day we bridge the gap and make it smaller. We are coming up to the project, but it remains above our head and we can use all the help we can get.

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