

'Closer to Atara'

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11/11/2010 11:52

Al-Rawabi, the first modern city in the West Bank, augurs a cultural transformation in how Palestinians live.

AS A YOUNG BOY IN Jerusalem in the early days of the Jewish state, I learned to speak Arabic from the textbook written by Dr. Yisrael Ben-Zeev. This textbook, first published in 1945, was used by many a teacher of spoken Arabic.

It contains entertaining children's stories, among them a story we all knew by heart. Its first lines go: "Between Bir Zeit and Atara, closer to Atara, is the entrance to a famous tzadik's [holy man's] tomb." The story goes on to tell how angels carried the tzadik from his village in Gaza to the mountains of Bir Zeit, where he died and was buried.

Many years later, as I was travelling along the road north from Ramallah to Bir Zeit, I recalled the tale of this famous tzadik. In Arabic there is a well-known saying: "What you learn in your youth is engraved in stone; what you learn as an adult is etched on water" – and I remembered that the tomb of the tzadik must be "closer to Atara." And indeed, close to the nearby village of Atara, I saw an old building with two domes surrounded by old oak trees and the remains of the pillars of a church, apparently Byzantine.

But it is the magnificent view that looks out upon the entire coastal region of Israel that was most thrilling to me. The site is called Sheikh Qatrawani, since this righteous sheikh from the large most likely came from the Arab village of Qatra, which was once located near the Israeli city of Gedera and was included in the Gaza district.

Over the last few weeks, I have visited the area a number of times because of the construction nearby of the enormous Palestinian project, al-Rawabi (the hills), which will be the first modern city in the West Bank. It is the flagship project of the Palestinian Authority and Salam Fayyad's government. Dozens of bulldozers,

trucks and heavy equipment are laying down the infrastructure along the ridge of hills near Atara and Sheikh Qatrawani so that building can begin on 6,000 housing units, which will house some 40,000 residents in the first stage of the project.

I was taken to the building site – which lies some 9 kilometers north of Ramallah, 21 kilometers south of Nablus – by the developer, entrepreneur Bashar al-Masri. A native of Nablus, al-Masri comes from a distinguished and extremely wealthy family. His grandfather, Hikmat al-Masri, served as head of the Jordanian parliament after 1948. Bashar completed high school in Nablus, and then went on to study chemical engineering in the US. After his studies, he settled in America and entered the business world.

When the Palestinian Authority was formed, Bashar returned to Ramallah. He founded the daily newspaper, Al-Ayyam, and also became a partner in several hightech ventures.

The cost of the al-Rawabi project, with its thousands of apartments, is approximately \$850 million. In construction deals, it is standard practice to begin marketing the apartments as soon as work on a project begins: The developer and contractors raise most of the money for the venture from people who intend to purchase apartments and who hand over their savings, or take out a loan or mortgage.

But not in al-Rawabi. Although the developers are currently spending millions of dollars in infrastructure, and although most of the building plans have been completed, they haven't sold even a single apartment. Some 7,000 applicants have already registered on al-Rawabi's website to purchase apartments, and the project managers are checking the social and economic profiles of the applicants – and yet, the applicants haven't been asked for a penny. Why? "Because we are not in need of money," says al-Masri who works together with the PA. All the initial funding for the work comes from the company "Qatari Diar" Real Estate, one of the largest building companies in the Arab world, which is owned by the princes who rule the oil-rich principality of Qatar, in the Persian Gulf.

THE ENORMOUS FINANCIAL investment in al-Rawabi by the Qatari princes is not based strictly on economics. "Who would want to invest so much in the West Bank when no one knows its political future and where personal safety is so shaky?" project manager Amir Dajania asks rhetorically. And indeed, the Israeli settlers in the vicinity have made things difficult for the venture at the outset. They have challenged the paving of the access road to the new city; a section of the route runs close to the nearby settlement of Ateret. In a demonstration by settlers against this large Palestinian project a few weeks ago, MK Yaacov Katz of the National Union party (a right-wing party that did not join the Netanyahu government) said that perhaps the settlers shouldn't hinder the construction.

Why? So that the Arabs will build beautiful homes, said Katz, and then they will be evicted as they were evicted from Jaffa, Ramle and Lod, and the settlers will take over the beautiful homes to house the many Jews who will come to settle the Shomron. Katz's statements were broadcast in the media, on Arutz- 7 (Channel 7), whose audience is composed primarily of settlers and their supporters, but didn't make waves in the general media or even get much public attention.

Thus, the investment by the Qatari princes and initiative of the Palestinian Authority, and of businessman Bashar al-Masri, is not primarily economic and has important political and social aspects as well. It is an attempt to bolster the structure of Palestinian society in the West Bank and prepare it for the longedfor realization of building a modern state.

Al-Rawabi augurs a cultural transformation in how Palestinians live. To this day, family traditions dictate a specific living setup of most of the Palestinian public. A married son brings his wife to his house, and the parents, together with the brothers and uncles, build the young couple a home right next to, or nearby, the family. That's the way, through the generations, that family neighborhoods evolved into Palestinian villages, towns and cities.

The shift from villages to cities – urbanization – has also taken place in Palestinian society, and in West Bank towns; for example, one can see multi-storey buildings with dozens of apartments and no family connection between the residents. This is particularly noticeable in Ramallah, which serves as a kind of capital for the Palestinian Authority.

All the Palestinian government offices are centered in Ramallah, as well as the parliament, the presidential office, which Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) heads and public institutions.

Ramallah is also where commercial life is concentrated, and where – or close by – are the educational and cultural institutions: large colleges like Bir Zeit University, health institutes, and important Palestinian hospitals.

Given this setting, Ramallah has greatly expanded of late. In the last few years, thousands from the rural districts around Jerusalem, Nablus and Hebron have settled in Ramallah. Also among the migrants to the city are many Fatah activists who left the Gaza Strip when Hamas took over Gaza.

Up until a few years ago, every Thursday hundreds of vehicles with young families would make their way from Ramallah to their home villages for the weekend – “to eat the food mother prepared,” as all used to say.

Nowadays you barely see those Thursday convoys. That's because travel on the roads is difficult, there are IDF roadblocks and onerous security checks. So

people remain in their apartments in the big city, and a serious housing problem has emerged. Property prices in Ramallah and its environs have hit sky-high.

So Bashar al-Masri decided to move a little further away from Ramallah, and began buying up land north of the city some years back. This is the area of al-Rawabi. The largest residential project prior to Rawabi was made up of only 300 apartments – Rawabi will have nearly 6,000. All of the spacious units are built in high-rises, and have been planned for young families with two or three children. The apartments will go for \$80,000- \$120,000 (at least 30 percent cheaper than the rate for similar units in Ramallah).

This new city will have an efficient transportation system, easy parking, commercial zones and public areas suited to the residents' needs.

The developer and his team have gone to considerable lengths to research the hopes and aspirations of those who have registered for apartments through the al-Rawabi website.

The registrants are asked what kind of homes and apartments they wish to buy. Bashar al- Masri says one of the most popular requests is that the Palestinians do not want to live in a house or locale where the buildings resemble those of the nearby Israeli settlements. They request there be no fences or walls around the city, no red-tiled roofs, and no standardized building, all common to Israeli settlements.

Al-Masri was surprised at these responses.

In the project, building has already begun on a first demo house, preparing sample designs for doors and windows as well as the stone masonry. Also being checked are possible water sources – the Israeli government exercises very tight control over the water system in the West Bank. The roads leading in and out of the city are being prepared; currently, vehicles traveling to the site barely make it through the narrow alleys of Atara. At one point along the narrow streets, part of a house had to be demolished and compensation paid to its owner, since it was simply impossible to pass by.

When I left al-Rawabi, I stopped, of course, by the tomb of the tzadik, the righteous Sheikh Qatrawani. The place has changed little. The Palestinian Office of Tourism and Antiquities has set aside a small leisure park among the old oak trees, and enclosed it with a marble fence whose gate was locked, to my great disappointment.

What hasn't changed a bit is the spectacular view – perhaps the greatest asset of the first Palestinian city to go up in the West Bank. On a clear day, the towers of the power station in Hadera are clearly visible, and south of them, the high-rises of Herzilya, and right opposite, the Azrieli skyscrapers. Southwards, one can see

almost to Ashdod, and beyond Tel Aviv's coastal perimeter, one can even make out the ocean.

It is doubtful Israel can boast a mountain promontory with such a magnificent vista. [Subscribe to our Newsletter to receive news updates directly to your email](#)

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