

The Dream City of the Palestinians in the West Bank

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15/9/09



Image: Animated images of the future city center of Rawabi, West Bank. The white buildings are concentrated around the commercial, administrative, and religious center.

One businessman wants to create a new metropolis north of Ramallah. Waiting only to get the green light from Israel.

One Palestinian businessman wants to construct a new city in the West Bank. With the new, well-planned white buildings encircling the commercial and administrative center, his project may be mistaken for a Israeli settlement in the West Bank. Rawabi (the Hills) does not exist yet, it exists only in the luxurious brochures which give the impression of a good quality of life for this future metropolis.

Work is expected to begin on the site on the hills 10 kilometers north of Ramallah. They have not begun yet but Bashar Masri, the director of Massar company, is confident about the future.

“We are ready to start the first stage of work. The target is to construct a new planned community for 5,000 residents, the first in Palestine,” said this Nablus-born businessman. After he studied in Egypt and the United States, and after he became one of the biggest developers for residential housing projects in Morocco, he wanted to invest in the West Bank, his homeland.

“There is an acute shortage of housing in Palestine. Rather than expanding on existing cities, we want to create a whole new city,” he said.

Taking into consideration Netanyahu’s ‘Economic Peace’

It is supported by hundreds of millions of dollars from a Qatari company, as they formed a joint venture. Approval from the Palestinian Authority has already been assured. “We needed the involvement of the Palestinian government for construction of infrastructure such as schools, police stations and fire stations. They have agreed in principle.”

What is needed now is to obtain also authorization from Israel, which controls all mobility in the West Bank. Starting with the case of Mr. Masri, who lost his residency card in 1988 and, like many Palestinians in the Diaspora, returned with a tourist visa. "It's actually a big problem for me as for all investors in Palestine"

The government of Netanyahu promotes "economic peace" with the Palestinians, which depends on the development and improved mobility for the people and products in the West Bank and removal of some of the checkpoints. "We need to be very careful about rejecting or accepting Israeli politics," said Bashar Masri. "Netanyahu's objective for economic peace to replace political peace is not possible. But we don't want to shoot ourselves in the foot and miss this opportunity to launch this project which benefits our people. We are in a prison, it's true, but we also have to live."

There is no state without development

Whereas the Israeli authorities resist to tooth and nail international pressure demanding a freeze of new construction in West Bank settlements, Bashar Masri's project to construct a new city seems a little bit like utopia. "Whoever invests in Palestine takes a big risk, this is the reality," said Bashar Masri, apparently aware of the difficulties that surround the project. "But we have to take it. A Palestinian state is in the process of being built. This will not exist without economic development and I like to think that our project is participating in the creation of a viable state."