

A new hill-top Palestinian city faces a hump

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There's some pre-bust-Dubai-style construction happening in the heart of the West Bank. Fifteen minutes from downtown in Ramallah, tractors are cutting into a bucolic hilltop to make way for Rawabi — the first planned Palestinian city. The roughly \$500m (€370m) project is the brainchild of local businessman Bashar Masri, who along with his Bayti Real Estate Investment Company and the Qatari-government owned Qatari Diar, have devised a master plan that will eventually house up to 40,000 middle-class Palestinians. By 2013, Rawabi (which means “the hills” in Arabic) will include hotels, restaurants, schools, offices, cinemas and over 5,000 residences.

“Rawabi addresses three pillars: live, work and grow,” says deputy director of Bayti, Amir Dajani, from his ultra-modern office brimming with high-end furniture and plenty of fluorescent light. Yet, perhaps indicative of the problems facing most Palestinian entrepreneurs, Bayti's offices are not located in a commercial tower but in a former family home. Still the company sees their predicament as transitory — or rather one they hope will disappear once construction of Rawabi's multi-tower, business district is completed. “The economic angle is very critical to us. This is a place where start-ups will be completely integrated into the city. In Rawabi both the middle class and entrepreneurs can grow.”

The development promises to address the nearly 16 per cent unemployment rate here by offering to create up to 10,000 jobs. Better still, Rawabi's apartments will alleviate a housing shortage, estimated by the United Nations at around 200,000 units, which has plagued the West Bank for some time. And although apartments will reportedly cost around \$85,000 (€63,000), an American-style mortgage plan has been introduced by the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation and the Middle East Investment Initiative to ensure the hefty price tag does not prevent families from making Rawabi home. Together the two entities, along with the Palestinian Authority (PA), are creating a half-a-billion dollar fund that will enable future homeowners to put just 30 per cent down and receive 25-year mortgages.

Still, with all the ambition and capital behind them, just driving to Rawabi's construction site is a serious reminder of the challenges that lie ahead. The road to the burgeoning city can barely accommodate two mid-size vehicles, much less the big trucks required to facilitate construction. Those living off Rawabi's thoroughfare have already seen some of their telephone poles and second-floor residential balconies removed to make way for trucks.

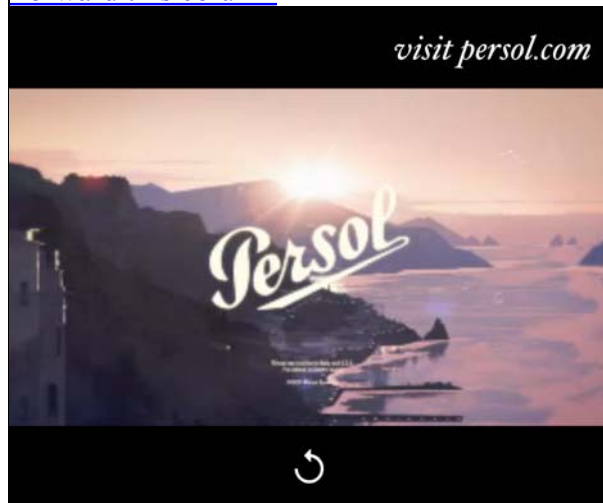
Any plans for enlarging the road, unfortunately for Rawabi, lies with the Israelis. That is because it runs through a patch of West Bank land known as Area C — a term coined during the Oslo Accords that indicates complete Israeli control. This is also where all settlements are located.

Requests by Bayti have been made to the PA who have then gone on to ask the Israelis to change the area's classification and place it under Palestinian jurisdiction. “Let the [Israelis] call it ‘b plus’ or whatever, but we want the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibility,” says Dajani. “We consider

this an artery for growth and sustainability.” And although the Israeli’s have publicly backed the Rawabi concept, they have not responded to the Palestinian Authority’s requests for control.

Yet the Rawabi team remains undeterred. So far over 6,000 speculative homeowners have registered. Palestinian native George Rafidi came back to Ramallah after living and working for a Fortune 500 company in Texas to manage business development initiatives for Rawabi. Much of his day involves shuttling prospective buyers to Rawabi to have them stand on the hilltop and envision a future of wide roads snaking around alabaster residential towers. Rafidi says how much he is looking forward to becoming one of Rawabi’s first residents. And even though it will be years before he and his family move in, Rafidi doesn’t regret his decision to leave the US for the often tumultuous life here. “I came back to build the country,” says Rafidi. “There is opportunity here.”

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