

Palestine's Billion-Dollar City Can Finally Open

By [Jack Moore](#) 2/27/15 at 12:34 PM



An aerial view of Palestinian city of Rawabi in January 2015. Massar International

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Seven years after construction began, and after five years of Israeli-Palestinian politicking, a new city in the rolling hills of the West Bank can finally open its doors, following the Israeli government's decision to authorise the flow of water to the largest building project in Palestinian history.

The billion-dollar city of Rawabi, which translates to 'hills' in Arabic, promises a football stadium, a Roman amphitheatre and homes that could hold up to 40,000 Palestinians. Despite being years behind schedule due to the disagreements over Israeli water servicing the city, the project is now on the verge of occupying its first batch of homes for the 650 families, amounting to approximately 3,000 people, who have been waiting to inhabit their new homes.

Last night, the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that water from Israel's grid would finally be connected to the aspiring city by the country's Water Authority.

The move comes after infighting within the Israeli government over the servicing of water to the fledgling Palestinian project. Israeli defense minister Moshe Yaalon attempted to circumvent the dormant JWC earlier this month by ordering the Israeli Water Authority to begin delivery of water to the city, but Shalom dismissed the order.

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Despite construction beginning in 2008 and the fact the city is located in Areas A and B of the West Bank, which fall under the control of Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority, the first Rawabi homeowners have not been able to move in as the city has been without a water supply due to the politics of the ongoing conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC), which was created in the 1993 Oslo Accords and holds the authority to sanction the required water supply to Rawabi, has not convened for five years.



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Artist's impression of Rawabi city. Massar International

Israeli infrastructure minister Silvan Shalom had [blamed Palestinians](#) for their failure to convene the JWC but Palestinians argued that they did not wish to convene the committee because of [fears](#) that accepting Israeli water would lead to the Palestinian city servicing nearby Israeli settlements, [defined](#) as illegal by international law.

The man behind the project, Palestinian entrepreneur and managing director of Rawabi, Bashar Masri, has touted the benefits that the construction project will bring to Palestinians. It features schools, hotels, restaurants, a technological park, office complexes and a cinema all being built entirely by Palestinian workers, and will provide a home for the Palestinian middle classes.

Masri, speaking from London today, lauds the Israeli government's decision to finally provide the city with water without concession. "I called the Palestinian Authority [from London] and they confirmed that they heard from the Israeli side," he says. "Now we have our universal right of our water without being pressured for any concessions.

“It will take about two to three months for the water to be connected. We should be in business and delivering homes by May. I am very excited. For the first time in more than a year I can go to a meeting without having to worry about the water. Now I can go in and say ‘I’ve got the water, what’s next?’”



An artist's impression of the aerial view of Rawabi city. Massar International

The Palestinian businessman confirmed to Newsweek that the water provided will not supply Israeli settlements, a key sticking point in the negotiations over the city’s development.

“No, this is an unconditional approval. This has nothing to do with the settlements,” he adds. “There are no conditions whatsoever relating to settlements in the approval of the water to Rawabi, nothing whatsoever, no relationship.”

However, some say that the project, [lauded](#) as a sign of Palestinian potential, masks the reality on the ground in the West Bank and gives the impression that Palestinians can live in economic prosperity despite the presence of an Israeli military occupation.

“The project creates this illusion that there is this happy space in Palestine that is independent of the military occupation which governs many aspects of Palestinian life,” says Yousef Munayyer, Palestinian-American analyst and former executive director of the Washington-based Palestine Center.

Lisa Goldman, director of the Israel-Palestine Initiative at New America, agrees that the construction of the complex, which has seen \$1 billion dollar invested by Masri’s Massar International and Qatari backers, distracts from the essential issue of the Israeli occupation and its effect on Palestinians.

“I think this is more of a publicity stunt in many ways. There are so many pressing problems in Palestine,” she adds. “Masri says let’s put all of that aside and build a small-plan community for middle class couples who have increments about 20 times the average Palestinian income.”

Masri counters these claims, saying the project “defies the occupation” as a symbol of “nation building” for a future Palestinian state. “It saves Palestinian land from confiscation to build more settlements; it supports the crippled economy and creates badly needed jobs; it offers better living conditions despite the brutal occupation; and it helps prevent further brain drain,” he retorts.

“Critics argue that this is making the occupation look good, maybe we should live in tents, maybe we should all freeze to death. I don’t know what will make the occupation look bad.”

For all the criticism of Rawabi, many West Bank Palestinians who have had their lives on hold because of the ongoing water dispute are jubilant at the development. Khaled Khader, ATM manager at the Arab Bank in the West Bank city of Ramallah, spoke of his glee at the news that the city will finally have access to water, after months of waiting to move into his new home.

“I feel so happy. It is very good news. I think about it day and night,” the father of four says excitedly. “It is a new life in Rawabi for me.”

Representatives from the Israeli Ministry of Infrastructure - which oversees the Israeli Water Authority - and the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) - the body which implements the Israeli government’s policies in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip - were not available for comment when requested.

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