


Web9
is a new search engine


Residents move into Rawabi, the first Palestinian town to be built in generations

By: Robert Tait

Published: 2 January 2016

Category: [United Kingdom](#)

It has all the hallmarks of the archetypal Israeli settlement. High-rise bleached stone buildings in neatly carved streets rise skywards from a spectacular hill top site. Verdant landscapes are adorned with freshly planted trees. Outside a state-of-the-art office serving as a salesroom for the newly built homes, flies a typically outsize national flag – visible to Israeli army patrols and neighbouring West Bank settlements. Developers boast of enviable vistas of distant Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean Sea afforded by the commanding location. Yet that may be the closest most inhabitants will get to the Israeli coastline. For the burgeoning new township taking shape in the hills of the central West Bank will be home not to more Jewish settlers – hundreds of thousands of whom already dwell in physically similar developments – but to Palestinians, who need a permit to visit Israel. Accordingly, the giant emblem flying at its temporary headquarters is not the blue-and-white Israeli Star of David seen so commonly in such sites, but the the black, red, green and white standard of Palestine. the black, red, green and white standard of Palestine flies in place of the more commonly seen blue-and-white Israeli Star of

Web9
**is a new
search
engine**
Web9
**is a new
search
engine**

David Photo: ROBER TAIT This is Rawabi, a £773 million project feted as the first new Palestinian town in modern times and as a landmark symbol of national pride. After more than five years of building and multiple delays – most recently a dispute with Israel over the water supply that caused several would-be buyers to cancel – the first residents are moving in after receiving the keys to the first completed homes. Eventually, planners say, it will be home to 40,000 Palestinians. Eventually, planners say, it will be home to 40,000 Palestinians The first residents are exclusively middle and upper middle-class in line with developer Bashar Masri's aim of first wooing an affluent clientele before later building for the less prosperous, but to the chagrin of Left-wing critics, who have denounced Rawabi as a moneymaking scheme that ignores the broad mass of poorer Palestinians. Typical of the new inhabitants is Talal Shahwan, 47, a chemistry professor at Bir Zeit university, near Ramallah, who paid £90,000 – a price well beyond the means of most Palestinians – for a spacious three-bedroom flat that will be home to him, his wife and their three children Mr Shahwan said he had been attracted by the prospect of a sea view, adding that he had not visited the Israeli coast since 1987. Rawabi, a £773 million project feted as the first Palestinian new town in modern times and as a landmark symbol of national pride But he cited more important reasons. "First of all, there's the national aspect. This land is ours and we believe that we have the right to build anywhere we want," said Mr Shahwan, acknowledging that he was choosing to live near Israeli settlers, most closely in the neighbouring settlement of Ateret. "The second reason is the beauty of Rawabi – it offers a promising and modern style of living." Critics have complained that Rawabi – funded jointly by Mr Masri's company, Massar International Real Estate and the Qatari Diar Real Estate Company – effectively "normalises" Israel's military occupation of the West Bank, territory the Palestinians claim as part of a future state. Talal Shahwan, 47, a chemistry lecturer at Bir Zeit University, poses outside his new home with his 15-year-old daughter, Rania Photo: ROBERT TAIT Israeli cooperation has been essential for the water supply and a future road link between the town and Ramallah, the West Bank's de facto capital, that must pass through Area C, the 60 per cent of the West Bank under Israeli civil and military control. Sceptics have questioned the city's "un-Palestinian" design, for which an Israeli architect, Moshe



Safdie, who planned neighbourhoods in Modi'in – a city that straddles the pre-1967 Green Line border between Israel and the West Bank – was reportedly consulted for advice. There was also criticism after it was emerged that the Jewish National Fund, founded more than a century ago to promote Zionist development, had donated 3,000 trees to the project - prompting Mr Masri to pledge in 2011 to uproot them and replace them with indigenous Palestinian olive trees. A grandiose Greek-style amphitheatre – overlooking a valley and designed to seat 12,000 to 15,000 people – seems to epitomise the supposed cultural dislocation. Arched windows are filled in with portraits of popular Western icons such as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Roy Orbison and George Harrison, alongside famous Middle Eastern cultural figures. Rawabi's new Greek amphitheatre... Photo: ROBERT TAIT Developers counter that they are building a sustainable, ecologically friendly living environment that will eventually provide 3,000-5,000 permanent jobs. Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority has vocally supported Rawabi – while failing to deliver promised infrastructural funding, according to Mr Masri – yet some officials privately voice disquiet. "No one can deny that the Palestinian government did its best to promote the project but there are many things that have made many people doubt the true intentions of Rawabi," said one official. "The Israelis love Rawabi and the fact that they do is a matter of concern for us. [But] no one in any position of responsibility is going to say anything against it." Complete with its portraits of Elvis... Photo: ROBERT TAIT Mr Masri, 54, a US-educated multi-millionaire property developer born in the West Bank city of Nablus, dismisses Rawabi's critics as "yuppie radicals" while proudly accepting that the project currently serves a Palestinian economic and social elite. "They sit in cafés, sipping cappuccinos, espressos, being sophisticated and criticising everything," he said of his detractors. "The good news is that until today, in a highly politicised area, not a single political faction has criticised the project." Addressing accusations of "normalising" the Israeli occupation, Mr Masri added: "I don't see normalisation as a bad thing for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. "We are still under occupation. We did not build the project predicting that a peace agreement would be signed and everything would be lovey, lovey. But if I don't talk to my occupier, how can I complete the project? We hate occupation and would love to see it go. Meanwhile we don't stop life, we continue and we will do

the best we can to build our lives and to build our nation and build our economy." ...and Marilyn Monroe Photo: ROBERT TAIT Rawabi's true achievement, Mr Masri said, would not be in ending the occupation but in acting as a catalyst for a future "Rawabi II" project, either elsewhere in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, something he forecast would happen within two years. That may encounter Palestinian resistance. "I don't think this is a model that should be repeated," said Moustafa Barghouti, an influential Palestinian activist and general secretary of the Palestine National Council. "Obviously it's positive in that it can provide cheaper housing for young couples. [But] this building style isn't compatible with how Palestinians build their homes and concentrating too many houses close together like this isn't very good in our situation. There are many people who would prefer to build on their own land and not move to another site. But they struggle to get building licenses, especially if they live in Area C." Construction work continues in Rawabi Photo: ROBERT TAIT

Advertising voucher for Your Business

Dear business owner,

Did you know that you can have the greatest business in the world but if nobody knows about it you won't make any money? **Web9** is a powerful new search engine very much like Google, Ananzi, Yahoo, Bing, Baidu and DuckDuckGo.

This is a complimentary **\$ 10.00** advertising voucher for **Your Business**

1. Visit web9.co.za to create a free account

2. When logged in, click **Create New Advert**

Your advert can have a title, two lines of text, a website address and a picture.