

Serenity soon: Palestinians buy into a modern oasis

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AT THE height of the second Palestinian intifada seven years ago, it seemed like several more rounds of bloodshed would take place before progress was made between Israelis and Palestinians.

In 2002, 410 Israelis living in the West Bank were killed in attacks by Palestinian militants.

But today, behind the international wrangling over settlement construction, things appear to be changing in ways few could have predicted.

Last year only four Israelis were killed as a result of Palestinian attacks in the West Bank, and two Israelis have been killed so far this year.

Clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians in the West Bank have led to the deaths of 13 Palestinians, a solid decline from previous years, and the number of Palestinians arrested by the Israeli Defence Forces has fallen by 40 per cent.

With less violence, foreign investors have begun to take more seriously the idea of sinking their money into the Palestinian West Bank economy.

One of the most striking projects is the first planned Palestinian city to be built on a vacant hilltop nine kilometres north of the West Bank city of Ramallah. Called Rawabi, its sparkling masterplan promises a life of middle-class comfort.

The vision of a developer, Bashar Masri, and the Bayti Real Estate Investment Company, it is expected to house at least 25,000 Palestinians in the first stage.

"At present we have financing to guarantee the construction of at least 5000 housing units," said Mr Masri. "But we have plans for additional residential and commercial units that will increase the population to around 40,000 people."

Life in Rawabi promises an urban serenity almost unknown in this part of the world. Apartment blocks and sparkling townhouses set amid manicured lawns and tree-lined walkways make for a thoroughly modern style of living.

With about \$400 million pledged by the Government of Qatar in a signed memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Authority, Mr Masri hopes to begin next year.

The project also has the blessing of the Middle East envoy Tony Blair, who said in July he believed it would create jobs and help to address an acute housing shortage in the West Bank.

Average apartments of 140 square metres are expected to sell for between \$85,000 and \$90,000, and thousands of potential homebuyers have already signed up, said Mr Masri.

There are some problems. Not all of the land has been acquired from Palestinian owners, and the Palestinian Authority is still to formally commit to providing the necessary infrastructure.

Israeli authorities are also yet to approve agreements on the provision of water and a road linking Rawabi with Ramallah that would go through land now under Israeli military control.

But a meeting between Israel's Minister for Regional Development, Silvan Shalom, and the Palestinian National Economy Minister, Bassem Khoury, last week in Jerusalem offered hope those obstacles can be cleared.

Source: [The Sydney Morning Herald](#)

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