

Shopping and live performances: a glimpse of the city for Palestinian singles

By Avi Issacharoff

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25 thousand people will live in Rawabi, "Ten minutes away from Ramallah". Gyms and Amphitheater are available there, but the "occupation" makes it difficult to access the city. And: Israel continues to spit in the face of Mahmoud Abbas.

So many times this week, the week where both Israeli and Palestinian media used expressions such as "explosion " and "crisis" to describe the conduct of the negotiations between Israel and the PLO, as if it was a gang war of Abergel and Domrani, spinning so much air on peace negotiations between Israel and the PA, so that it would shame the Harpaz affair involved. Reports, on top of reports, statements and interviews with Israeli officials (such as Meretz Chairman Zahava Gal-On, a pillar of the peace camp, who was strangely chosen to run and tell the media about secret American moves weaved in private) , along with false messages of Palestinian officials resignation .



Intensive negotiations. Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah with John Kerry this week (Photo: AP)

Bottom line, last week another negotiations meeting was held between the teams. Moreover, contrary to the approach of "negotiations close to an explosion," implemented by Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, several more meetings continued. I should admit at this point, most of the negotiations were held discretely in private, rather than openly, which will be

attributed in favor of the negotiators. However, multi reports in recent days can attest course of two possible directions: one -1- Progress that causes both parties to sweat, causing myriad factors, Palestinians and Israelis, to torpedo the talks, second -2- Stalled talks and real crisis.

The natural inclination is to suspect the second direction is correct. Just a few days ago, Israeli officials leaked that the Palestinians have hardened their positions; Abbas announced that talks had no actual results. Palestinians said that at a meeting this week there was exchange of "shouting" in the room and the conversation ended in a blast" and even Sa'eb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator, announced his resignation last week. Could be indeed the case. , But in the same breath to emphasize a few things good conversations happen precisely as possible away from the media suggest something positive happens in negotiations.

Sense of a real crisis, in part, is looming. Not because of the explosion that took place during the talks, but because of the feeling on the Palestinian side that the Israeli government does everything humanly possible to make the Palestinians quit the talks and stop the negotiation. The Israeli Government's intention to build settlements following the release of the prisoners was interpreted by the Palestinians as spit in the face of Abu Mazen.

True, an agreement between the two parties on July 19, said nothing about stopping the construction, but only referred to the release of 104 prisoners in exchange for freezing the UN appeal. But the Palestinians never expected Netanyahu to publicly announce - almost bragging forcefully - about the construction, which led to a strong Hamas accusations against Mahmoud Abbas that he agreed to permit the construction in the settlements against the release of prisoners.

To some extent, it seems that the suspicion among Palestinians is not baseless or an imagination. Someone, specifically on the Israeli side, was trying to embarrass Abbas and publish (at every opportunity since the release of 26 prisoners) that it was already decided to build more apartments in a manner that will torpedo the talks. Palestinian leadership was accused again to have hit the interests of the people; and here came the great rage of senior PA and Erekat's spin.

Palestinian chief negotiator is considered a central address for criticism due to his stance, so he or one of his men, bothered to leak the "resignation " as a result following Israeli settlement construction. Erekat also wanted to say to the Palestinian public "It is not my fault". Here, you have to say a word to the media.

Countless times Erekat resigned from his post in the past, and always "President Abbas did not accept the resignation." Still, for some of the media in Israel and the Palestinian side, it was cause for celebration for creating "pseudo crisis", even though they knew that no such resignation was in the air. If anyone is still wondering, let me tell him that Erekat also attended the meeting this week. In addition, opponents of Erekat within the Palestinian Authority (not part of the negotiating team) for their part do not hesitate to criticize him and deliberately leak details of the calls, to embarrass him in front of Secretary of State John Kerry. Well, that only added Abbas sense of distrust of Netanyahu, and all his efforts for the failure of the talks.

During a conversation with senior Fatah members on Sunday, Abbas said that the negotiations did not achieve any results on the ground, even though things may not be accurate, to say the least.

So did Netanyahu's hints of his intention to introduce "PLAN B", if and when the talks fail. The PA suspected that Netanyahu's plan B, will be launched towards the end of April and will include a proposal to establish a Palestinian state with provisional borders in the A, B area, and even some parts of Area C, as well as some villages that are considered part of "East Jerusalem" (like Anata and Kufur Akab). For Israel it of this however, may hopefully lead to force the Palestinian side to say a big "no" to the proposal, which permits Israel to accuse it of sabotaging the talks.

And it is doubtful, if at all possible, that the current coalition which Netanyahu has with Avigdor Lieberman, can attain a layout of a Palestinian state with provisional outline "of any kind", even with temporary borders

Again, all the evidence suggests that the talks will either fail or explode. But if for a moment we clean the background noise and stop mutual accusations, we may find surprising facts that emanate during the negotiations, even very surprising ones. According to senior Israeli officials who are involved at one level or other, the Palestinian team exhibited surprising seriousness and positive attitude. But is this enough to reach an agreement? Maybe not, but here we also need an Israeli partner and are not sure how serious he could be.

Narrow road, in the city of bachelorette

The first pre planned Palestinian city is coming to reality. A lot has been said about Rawabi in recent years, but this time it is really happening. In the first quarter of 2014, some 650 apartments will be populated in the first two neighborhoods of the city. Almost all apartments offered for sale, have been sold at this point, and the buildings are ready to welcome its new occupants.

A tour over all parts of the city which is built some "Ten minutes from Ramallah", reveals of a place where any Palestinian family (or Israeli, for that matter) would like to live in this high quality construction, successful and ambitious town planning by all standards, were you find apartments that cost between 65-180 thousand dollars (with sizes starting from 80 sqm to 200 sqm). In short, with a view like the one from here, and with such prices, who would not want to live in Rawabi?



Rawabi infrastructure works. Ten minutes from Ramallah, building like Mamilla mall in Jerusalem.
(Photo: Yotam Ronen)

The company that launched the project, "Bayti Real Estate and Investment Co.", belongs to Bashar Masri, a famous Palestinian real estate mogul and businessman. It has focused its business plans on small families - a couple with three children - middle-class and up, with an average income of 2000 dollars.

But developers were surprised to find that close to 13% of the buyers are single, and most of them (80% of the 13%) are bachelorette, in general. That means, 9% of the first buyers are Palestinian educated and unmarried women).

Homebuyers come mainly from the cities of the West Bank, as well as from East Jerusalem and Israeli Arab cities. It's worth noting that this is one of the apparently few cities in the world that has a mayor appointed by the Palestinian Authority before even one resident moved in.

There was an understanding between "Bayti Real Estate and Development Company" with the Palestinian Authority that after accommodating 500 families in the city, mayoral elections will be held. At any rate, the town hall has been built here in March, alongside a huge commercial center, which reminds us anyway, and not just for nothing, by the Mamilla shopping center in Jerusalem.



Building homes for 25 thousand people (Photo: Yotam Ronen)

Victoria's Secret education

Along with the cafes and restaurants, there will also be here famous commercial networks, Mango and H&M, perhaps also a branch of Victoria's Secret. Moreover, they are also building gyms, swimming pools, an amphitheater for live performances and a football field. As befits a city with an international flavor, next to the mosque, the cornerstone for the first church was laid here last week.

Bashar Masri, who seems for a moment as if just removed from a fashion magazine photograph, explains that the city's target population is young families, educated and university graduates. "The potential target for us in the West Bank, is currently about 30 thousand families, and we are planning 6,000 units," he says. "Overall, some 25 thousand people are supposed to live here", he added.

At the mountain slopes, they are being paving the new industrial area, which is being built on an area, designated B, which is under Israeli security control. The one in charge of this project is Ghadeer Khoury who graduated with an MBA from Tel Aviv University, and who lived there at the time. Needless to say that she too, looks as if taken from a fashion magazine, exactly like her boss Bashar Masri. But not surprisingly, this extraordinary project is related to quite a few problems that of course are related to the Israeli side, or to put it bluntly and less delicately, to the occupation.



The issue of expanding the access road is well-known and is under examination.
(Photo: Yotam Ronen)

The city is built on the PA areas designated as (A), which is under Palestinian, but the access road to Rawabi, goes through Area C. So far Israel has approved a road six meters wide, where barely two cars can go side by side at the main entrance of the city. So why does not Israel approve widening the access road for such a positive project? According to the coordinator's office in the occupied territories "the issue of expanding the access road is well-known and is under review, but for the purpose of advancing the issue, Bashar Masri was required to purchase private plots adjacent to the road or otherwise, obtain the consent of the land owners," he added.

But according to Masri the matter is almost settled. "The problem is totally different, and I cannot figure it out. One Israeli official once told me recently. "What is it that you want more from us? He then added "we are working hard to solve the problem of the road". At this point I had to answer him back: "For five years you have been telling me this, and yet, you found no solution"

"Please understand, this way I have to get it re-approved every year, whereby instead, instead of allowing me to widening it, and that will be the end of the game. 75% of people who buy apartments here express real concern with regard to the problem of the access road to the city and are not willing to pay the full price until the case is finally resolved.

But this is not all, yet. Although occupancy of buyers is scheduled for only few months to come, the new city does not receive water supply neither from the Palestinian Authority nor from Israel yet. Bashar Masri found a temporary solution, by establishing huge water tanks. But why is Rawabi not connected to water pipes that Israel makes sure to connect the cities of the West Bank with?

Here we are engaging in political and civilian issues. According to the Coordination office in the West Bank “the sole responsibility for diverting water quota is that of the Palestinian Authority and hers only (in accordance with the Interim Agreements, of course). Recently Israel increased the quota of water transferred to the Palestinian Authority with emphasis on the Ramallah area, but the decision on diverting water to Rawabi is as mentioned that of the PA’s. Nevertheless, we are examining additional ways for water allocation to Rawabi, against the background of populating the field.

Here too, Masri contradicts Israeli claims. “They are wrong in theory and practice. According to the Oslo Accords, the control of water in the West Bank is in their hand. Although Rawabi falls in area A, but to get a water pipe from Ramallah, for example, that pipe has to go through Area C which requires Israeli approval.

By the way, they will not say that they will not approve. They say OK, but here we are few months before moving our customers to their new homes, and nothing has happened. We've thought of a solution by connecting to water pipes close to us, and this will include payment of the PA due to Israel for water supply, but so far we have not received approval to connect to the subject water pipe, and I am telling you, unless water connection approval is obtained within 45 days, we will have to delay the project and postpone the occupancy. I will never cheat people and bring them to live in a city without running water”.

Google translation revised and edited by Kameel Jafar/Rawabi