Rawabi: A City of Resistance and Unity or Defeat and Disjuncture?

Ava Klein
Edited by Aarim Khan and Sebastian Villegas

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper was written for a geography class on New Master Planned Cities, which are cities, particularly in formerly colonised countries in Asia and Africa, that are built from scratch, often with the goal of promoting a new political or economic vision. I found Rawabi a particularly interesting example of a new city built from scratch, as its geographic and political context is like no other. I wondered if in this unique context, trends of marginalisation and a sort of false vision of independence and nation building that are common in other new master-planned city projects, would emerge. I would like to thank professor Sarah Moser, who taught this geography class, for her phenomenal teaching and for sharing her expertise on this topic. I would also like to thank Sebastian Villegas and Aarim Khan who provided supportive and insightful guidance through the entire editing process. I hope you enjoy the paper!

Abstract

Rawabi is a new master-planned, privately-funded city in the West Bank of Palestine, touted as an example of economic success and an important tool for Palestinian nation-building and resistance against the Israeli occupation. Bashar Masri, a Palestinian entrepreneur and the founder of Rawabi, claims that the new Palestinian city acts as an emblem of national pride and asserts Palestinians' permanence on their land. This paper questions the effectiveness of Rawabi to assert these two goals. Drawing on both academic and grey literature, this paper concludes that many of the goals and promises Rawabi makes tend to fragment Palestinian national unity, while benefiting their colonial counterpart.

Introduction

Rawabi is Palestine's first master-planned city in more than 1,000 years (Whitaker 2019). Located nine km north of Ramallah, Palestine's de facto capital city, and twenty-five km north of Jerusalem, the city is composed of about 6,000 housing units, twenty-two neighbourhoods, and with the aspiration to house 40,000 residents ("Rawabi - Home" n.d.). It was founded by Bashar Masri, a Palestinian entrepreneur and the head of Bayti Real Estate Investment Company, who envisioned the idea of the new Palestinian city in 2008 and claims that this city is a "big step in building [their] nation" and "defying the occupation" (Whitaker 2019). Masri frames these goals as symbiotic: the act of building the Palestinian nation *is* an act of colonial defiance. According to Masri, as Rawabi prospers and grows, Palestinian nationhood develops in this land, pushing back against the colonial-oriental narrative that Palestinians are unable to modernize and succeed. Indeed, Western and Israeli media and fiction have for ages built an orientalist-colonial narrative in which Palestinians are a backwards people, against the portrayal of Israel as civilised and its expansionary project as a bringer of progress (Gerber 2003, 23). Therefore, Rawabi is regarded as a counter-narrative by demonstrating the capacity of Palestinians for material progress and success. However, much of the academic literature critiques the economic, social, and ideological approaches as reproducing the same issues it seeks to defy, in stark contrast to the huge advertisement machinery that celebrates these very features. This paper takes these two contrasting perspectives of Rawabi, using the academic literature to respond to and point out gaps in the claims Masri makes about Rawabi being a nation-building and anti-colonial project (Sherwood 2013; Startup Societies Foundation 2019). The first perspective is Masri's argument that Rawabi contests the colonial-oriental characterization of Palestinians by showing the success and prosperity that Palestine truly holds; the second is that Rawabi is a symbol of hope for a better Palestinian future which shows Palestinians' permanence on their land, in reaction to expanding Israeli occupations since the Six Day War in 1967. This paper scrutinizes these two claims and argues that many of the goals and promises Rawabi makes are either not true or not helpful for Palestinian national unity. In many ways, these goals not only hurt many Palestinians, but benefit their tenuous counterparts.

Literature Review

Despite Rawabi being a relatively new project, there is a sizable amount of literature that discusses this development, including academic journal articles, news articles, podcasts, websites, and YouTube videos. Some highly cited academic researchers on Rawabi include Tina Grandinetti, Shira Wilkof, Khalidi and Samour, and Arpan Roy (Grandinetti 2015; Khalidi and Samour 2011, 6–25; Roy 2016; Wilkof 2014). All of these individuals have a fairly critical stance on Rawabi, highlighting the dangers

of incorporating the private sector into city-building and of neoliberal urbanisation. Academic scholars on the broader themes of the middle class include John V. Ferreira, Sankaran Krishna, Jalal al-Husseini, and John Quigley (Ferreira 1952; Krishna 2015; al-Husseini 2011; Quigley 1998) who explore the history of Palestinian national ideologies, another important theme in Rawabi (Quigley 1998, 171–230; al-Husseini 2000, 51–64).

Compared to academic literature, grey literature and non-academic literature generally paint Rawabi as a vehicle of Palestinian resistance and a hopeful future. News publications tend to focus less on themes of neoliberalism, and few articles seem to mention worries of social and financial exclusion. Many sources, however, such as Business Insider, BBC News, and the New York Times have touched on clashes between the Israeli government and Rawabi (BBC News 2015; Schwartz 2016; Jacobs 2018; Kershner 2014), such as the water restrictions Israel has imposed on Rawabi. Regarding primary sources Rawabi puts out many promotional videos (رباور ةنيدم Rawabi City 2012), has a website ("Rawabi - Home" n.d.), and Masri has been interviewed several times in news, ads, and podcasts (e.g., Startup Societies Foundation 2019).

This paper builds off of many of the themes of Tina Grandinetti's work which critiques the use of the middle class in Rawabi as a tool to depoliticize the occupations through normalising relations and cooperation with Israel (Grandinetti 2015, 63–78). Additionally, Rashid Khalidi and Sabhi Samour's work critiques Rawabi's ability for economic independence under neoliberal policies (Khalidi and Samour 2011). In both, the scholars assert that a neoliberal urbanisation standpoint in Palestine ignores the larger political struggles of the occupation, making this approach ultimately incapable of achieving genuine governance. This paper places these academic texts in conversation with the optimistic advertising of Rawabi, mainly sourcing Rawabi's city website, Sherwood's 2013 BBC article, and Bill Whitaker's 2019 CBS 60 Minutes interview (Sherwood 2013; Whitaker 2019). Taking claims that Masri makes and using arguments explored in the academic literature, this paper responds to and assesses the validity of his claims.

"We are not what they are led to believe, a bunch of terrorists. We are ready to build our state. Here is the proof." **–Masri**

Against the Negative Stereotypes of Palestinians

Every standard advertisement of Rawabi features the city's high-tech, young, and modern infrastructure and population. The Rawabi website has a modernised design with tabs for 'Rawabi Tech Hub', 'Day-to-Day Life in Rawabi', and a myriad of pictures of happy families in a modern city ("Rawabi - Home" n.d.). This vision of Rawabi, described on their website as an "innovative approach to urban development" ("Rawabi - Home" n.d.), counters many of the stereotypes Western media has depicted of Palestine. The media tends to display Palestine as backwards, undemocratic, and weak (Gerber 2003, 23-24). As Masri describes in an interview with The Guardian: "Rawabi… sends a message to the international community. We are not what they are led to believe, a bunch of terrorists. We are ready to build our state. Here is the proof" (Sherwood 2013). However, while Masri claims that Rawabi reflects the true nature of Palestine, a nation that is educated, sophisticated, and ready for investment, the new city tends to economically and socially exclude certain segments of the population. Furthermore, they tend to distance their city image from other Palestinian cities, which does not promote the progressive and educated Rawabi as a reflection of Palestinian society, but as an exception.

The advertisements of Rawabi show young, English-speaking, middle-class Palestinian families who are looking to start a better life with their children in a city separated from the "chaotic and overcrowded West Bank cities" (Sherwood 2013). Indeed, Rawabi is trying to attract and advertise its city as a place for the

aspirational middle class of Palestine to move, stating in its first line on the 'day-to-day life in Rawabi' tab on the city's website, that "Rawabi's neighbourhoods are clean, green and perfect for raising a family" ("Rawabi - Home" n.d.). This method of using the rising middle class as a tool to promote state projects is not a new concept, as Krishna explains (Krishna 2015, 5–7). In fact, the middle class is often seen as the promoter of democracy, science, rationality, and the driver towards industrialisation, and economic prosperity, all traits that Rawabi planners aspire to showcase (Krishna 2015, 4). While the promotion of the middle class is seen as a contestation of the less educated, lower-income, "primitive" vision of Palestinians, Krishna explores how this depiction of the middle class is often a device to place people in a hierarchy and can often unmake nations (Krishna 2015, 3). Khalidi and Samour explain further that neoliberal policies, such as wide-scale private sector growth, often result in increased rates of poverty and unemployment (Khalidi and Samour 2011, 11). As the new elite is formed, the poor majority tends not only to be excluded from this social group but also suffers from increased housing prices. We have seen the consequences of this rising social hierarchy born out of neoliberal policy in Ramallah. The elite tends to buy up land, creating real estate bubbles (Grandinetti 2015, 67). As a result, the cost of living increases and, those who cannot afford to live in the city are segregated to the outskirts of the city, creating a deeper spatial separation between different Palestinian socioeconomic classes. This ultimately leads to a fragmentation of unity in society. This is important because while Palestine has been adopting neoliberal policies for decades and had a thriving middle class in cities such as Haifa and Jaffa before the occupation, creating a city from scratch which specifically caters towards a middle class creates a spatial division that literally separates the 'ideal' middle class, who are benefitting from these neoliberal policies, from the poor, who are suffering even more (Grandinetti 2015, 66–67). In fact, despite advertisements from Rawabi claiming to have housing options for "Palestinians of all walks of life" (رابي قنيدم Rawabi City 2012), Masri says that he is actively excluding low-income housing options in an effort to make Rawabi look more exclusive and high-end (Hattem 2015).

Another critique to this claim of attempting to refute the narrative of Palestine as backwards is that Masri's description of Rawabi and its design as a place for the middle-class nuclear family frames Rawabi as the exception to the 'overcrowded', mixed-income, perhaps even 'backwards' Palestinian cities. In fact, the second line under the 'day-to-day life in Rawabi' tab on their website states that "Parents are comfortable allowing children to play outdoors and explore the city's pedestrian-friendly streets, something rarely found in other local cities" ("Rawabi - Home" n.d.). While rejecting the primitive Palestinian image, in the same breath, they are somewhat using that argument as a way to advertise Rawabi as 'different', 'new', and 'desirable,' making it the exception that proves the stereotypical rule. In fact, some scholars have paralleled the design of Rawabi to American suburban design. Grandinetti parallels Rawabi's homes to suburban middle-class homes of Los Angeles and New York (Grandinetti 2015, 70). In an interview with 60 Minutes, correspondent Bill Whitaker even equates Rawabi to "the American dream on the West Bank" (Whitaker 2019), to which Masri responded, "If the American dream is a better life, definitely we deserve a better life" (Whitaker, 2019). By portraying Rawabi as a desirable modern city in contrast to other neighbouring cities, as a figurative oasis in the midst of an "uncivilized" Palestinian desert, Rawabi's advertisement is not only not effectively subverting the oriental-colonial stereotype, but reinforcing it. Not only is Rawabi the seeming antithesis of other Palestinian cities, but its marketing seems to ironically play into the westernized style of the cities of its occupier, Israel.

The construction of Rawabi, with a lack of low-income housing and an ad campaign that passionately draws in a very specific petty-bourgeois demographic,

is actively fragmenting Palestinian society both spatially and economically, glorifying class divisions in an effort to portray a 'modernized' Palestine to the globe. While there is not an intended mimicry of colonial power, as Grandinetti posits there is a catering towards colonial suburban ideals (Grandinetti 2015, 70),. As a result, despite the argument that Rawabi is resisting old oriental notions of Palestine, they are using this narrative to justify creating a new city, and as a result plucking out those deemed 'acceptable' for the city from the 'outdated' Palestine.

***"Addressing the needs of Palestine today by building the foundation of the Palestine of tomorrow"* –Rawabi Promotional Video**

The neoliberal focus of Rawabi not only divide Palestinian society by socioeconomic and social class but also wedges Palestinians along ideological lines, advertising Rawabi as a permanent space to 'build a better future for Palestine' (Grandinetti 2015, 69). However, this ideological foundation has the potential to further fragment national unity as it is antithetical to key beliefs of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Indeed, the term 'sumud', the discouragement of flaunting wealth and denouncement of an attitude of normalcy while in the occupation, is a culture of resistance that many Palestinians have adopted (Roy 2016, 369). Grandinetti touches on this concept, arguing that the neoliberal and foreign investment focus of Rawabi, one that frames Rawabi as a flourishing city under the occupation, is not a form of resistance against the occupation, as Masri claims (Grandinetti 2015, 74–75). Rather, showing a 'flourishing' economy within the occupation tends to downplay the negative effects of the occupation that affect so many Palestinians, and risks depoliticizing the real issues of the occupation. This is not to say that Palestinian urban development, in general, cannot be beneficial, but Rawabi's messaging casts Palestinians' suffering as merely a development problem rather than one that is intrinsically political. An effective development plan must necessarily avoid undermining Palestine's position in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Grandinetti even goes as far as to say that neoliberal capitalism of Rawabi makes little room for alternative economic models, making "the occupation less costly, or even profitable, to Israeli and Palestinian government" (Grandinetti 2015, 64). Fostering a neoliberal, individualised culture of a city erodes the community-centred, sacrificial values foundational for resistance. Once again, it needs to be examined who is benefitting from this modernising, depoliticizing narrative of Rawabi.

For Israel, the ideal would be for Palestine to be passive about the presence of the occupation, settling into this geographic power relation as to decrease breeding grounds for discontent and violence/resistance (Grandinetti 2015, 72–73). Israel would rather invest in Palestinian infrastructure that solidified Palestinians into this geographic mode. From the British "New Villages" in Malaysia to the French "Douars" in Algeria, to the US "Strategic Hamlets" in Vietnam, a promotion of domesticity and infrastructural stability has been a common counter-revolutionary tool used by colonial powers (Weizman 2017, 229). While perhaps in the short-term it appears to show prosperity and economic success for some Palestinians, in the long-run, this process of infrastructural development and depoliticization normalises the occupation and secures it.

Many Palestinians understand the dangers of permanence in the occupation, and this is the fuel for the Palestinian national movement. At the beginning of the Israeli occupation, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) became an important body for refugee relief and helped crystallise the Palestinian national identity bred from refugee communities (al-Husseini 2000, 61). This national identity was predicated on the concept of the 'right to return', essentially a concept in international law which argues that stateless persons (such as refugees) have a human right to return to their country of origin (Quigley 1998, 171–230). However, a condition to this

right to return is that any place that they are living right now is temporary. Therefore, many Palestinian refugees resist resettlement policies and embrace refugee camp status to justify their right to return to what is now the State of Israel. For many years, these refugee communities and this concept of the right to return was seen as the "backbone" of Palestinian resistance towards Israel, contingent on this concept central in international law (al-Husseini 2000, 60).

This concept of the right to return versus resettlement is a topic highly contested throughout Palestine, but the creation of a new city, on occupied territory, that depoliticizes the process and advertises the permanence of the occupation is not as popular as Masri would suggest. While some refugees are less supportive of socioeconomic rehabilitation strategies, the concept of permanent resettlement and a complete rejection of the hope for returning to their homeland is not only widely contested, but further dismantles an ideological basis that shaped national identity for many years in Palestine. Indeed, Rawabi's promotional video further proves this sort of permanence of the occupation. A main idea in the video is that Rawabi is a "model for future development in Palestine… addressing the needs of Palestine today by building the foundation of the Palestine of tomorrow" (رواب تنيدم Rawabi City 2012). Past national identity was predicated on the notions of impermanence – that the State of Palestine right now is not forever, which is why the culture of the refugee camps was so important. However, Rawabi completely rejects this notion, justifying the building of a new city as a step in the direction of building the State of Palestine under occupation.

Conclusion

Rawabi, to Masri, shows pride in Palestine and is therefore an important symbolic device for Palestinian nation-building. The economic success that comes out of Rawabi and the investment and modern image of Rawabi is perceived by Masri and supporters of Rawabi as something Palestinians can point to with national pride, as proof that Western colonial-oriental visions of Palestine are false and Israel's dominance over the West Bank is threatened. However, this paper underscored that Rawabi's financial and ideological foundation appears to be compliant towards Israeli occupations, not defiant. This paper positions the non-academic Rawabi propaganda against critical academic literature to gain a deeper understanding of the city's nation-building and colonial-defiance functions. These are only two of several claims Masri has made about national unity and Israeli resistance. Future research could benefit from an exploration of Masri's claim about 'taking back the West Bank' and how Israel's ultimate control over mobility and water supply challenges this claim. As well, Rawabi's commitment to tech similarly relates to themes of occupation normalisation discussed in this paper. Through examination of multiple scales of literature, this piece offers a starting point in revealing the gaps in Rawabi's promises, leading to doubt about Masri's optimistic nationalist and anti-colonial vision.

References

BBC News. 2015. "The New Palestinian City That Lacks Only One Thing," February 7, 2015, sec. Magazine. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31154138.

Ferreira, John V. 1952. "The Middle Class." *Sociological Bulletin* 1 (1): 60–70.

Gerber, Haim. 2003. "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33 (1): 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2003.33.1.23.

Grandinetti, Tina. 2015. "The Palestinian Middle Class in Rawabi: Depoliticizing the Occupation." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 40 (1): 63–78.

Hattem, Ben. 2015. "Palestine's Other Land War." Middle East Eye. 2015. http://www.middleeasteye.net/features/palestines-other-land-war.

al-Husseini, Jalal. 2000. "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29 (2): 51–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/2676536.

Jacobs, Harrison. 2018. "A Palestinian-American Billionaire Says the Biggest Challenge Facing His $1.4 Billion Luxury City in the Heart of Palestine Nearly Bankrupted the Project — and It's Still Not Over." Business Insider. 2018. https://www.businessinsider.com/rawabi-palestine-bashar-masri-biggest-challenge-water-2018-10.

Kershner, Isabel. 2014. "New Palestinian Town in West Bank Awaits Israel's Approval for Water - The New York Times." 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/middleeast/rawabi-west-bank-palestinians-israel.html.

Khalidi, Raja, and Sobhi Samour. 2011. "Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40 (2): 6–25. https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2011.XL.2.6.

Krishna, Sankaran. 2015. "Notes on the Dramatic Career of a Concept: The Middle Class, Democracy, and the Anthropocene." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 40 (1): 3–14.

Quigley, John. 1998. "Displaced Palestinians and a Right of Return." *Harvard International Law Journal* 39 (1): 171–230.

"Rawabi - Home." n.d. Accessed March 7, 2022. https://www.rawabi.ps/.

Roy, Arpan. 2016. "Reimagining Resilience." *City* 20 (3): 368–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2016.1142220.

Schwartz, Yardena. 2016. "In New Palestinian City, Few Residents and Charges of Collusion with Israel | The Times of Israel." 2016. https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-new-palestinian-city-few-residents-and-charges-of-collusion-with-israel/.

Sherwood, Harriet. 2013. "Rawabi Rises: New West Bank City Symbolises Palestine's Potential." *The Guardian*, August 8, 2013, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/08/rawabi-west-bank-city-palestine.

Startup Societies Foundation. 2019. *Startup Societies Podcast - Bashar Masri - Rawabi City*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIyxHHojQs4.

Weizman, Eyal. 2017. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. New edition. London New York: Verso.

Whitaker, Bill. 2019. "Inside Rawabi: A New West Bank City Built by a Palestinian for Palestinians." CBS News. 2019. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/inside-rawabi-a-new-west-bank-city-built-by-bashar-masri-for-palestinians-60-minutes-2019-12-08/.

Wilkof, Shira. 2014. "The Power of Urban Construction; Investing a Palestinian Tradition in Rawabi?" *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 26 (1): 41–42.

Rawabi City. 2012. *Rawabi - A City to Live, Work and Grow - 2011*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQvcr7XAX9Q.