

US green cards come back in fashion for global investors

With door closed on Canadian alternatives focus shifts to south

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There are few things as lucrative and supposedly unattainable as a green card. The prospect of residency in the United States is so alluring that thousands of people from Latin America are willing to risk their lives each year to make it across the border.

But for those with US\$500,000 to spend, things are easier. The country's EB-5 visa investor programme

provides a green card to any foreigner investing at least \$500,000 and creating at least 10 jobs in the US.

The suspension of the Canadian Federal Investor Programme and a cap on the Quebec Immigrant scheme has given rise to demand for the EB-5 visa, and now investment banks are looking to cash in.

US Freedom Capital, an EB-5 investment bank specialising in property projects, is holding seminars across the Middle East to inform attendees of the best ways to obtain permanent residency by suggesting possible investments.

"Based on our research, the Middle East is already the second-big-

gest source of the EB-5 immigrant, entrepreneur or investor visa category," said David Gunderson, the principal and executive vice-president at the bank.

"For foreigners, the EB-5 presents a relatively safe and attractive investment model and at the same time provides the means to a passport over a five-year period."

Applications for EB-5 from the region have grown about 20 per cent every year for the past three to four years, according to Arton Capital, a financial advisory firm.

"No other part of the world is that aggressive towards it. The main explanation for the growth in the last three to four years is due to the Ca-

nadian investor programme closing down, so the focus has moved to the green card," said Armand Arton, the company's president and chief executive.

The EB-5 visa is also one of the cheapest of its kind. The United Kingdom requires at least three times as much investment, while France demands almost Dh50 million worth.

Last year, 1,867 applications were submitted for the EB-5 from the Middle East, mostly from applicants in the UAE hailing from Iran, the Palestinian Territories, Egypt, Lebanon and Pakistan, according to Arton Capital.

"In general, the success rate is higher than Canada - about 50

per cent of applications to Canada were being rejected; in the US less than 20 per cent are rejected," said Mr Arton.

It can take up to two years to secure a green card, but US Freedom Capital claims investors can get their residency in 13 months.

"Investing through a regional centre like ours, we get to count indirect jobs," said Mr Gunderson. "It is a quicker process, some of our smaller construction projects take 12-18 months and so as soon as the construction is completed, jobs have been created the investor is no longer at risk that the investment has failed."

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