

## Commentary

# Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolution Egypt

ALI ALRAOUF

In 2011 the world's eyes were on Egypt as revolution swept across the country. However, the promise of the January 25 revolution was squashed in July 2013, when the Egyptian military engineered a coup to remove the country's first elected civilian president. This article critically narrates the political facets of the emerging urbanism in the country since then. Specifically, it addresses how the built environment has been shaped by the present regime to advance fabricated political and economic positions, and it explores how a tradition of heroic leadership has been deployed to justify and support prospective imaginations of the urban that are integral to situated political-economic projects. The article concludes by suggesting that this strategy has been deliberately adopted to create a charismatic image for a new authoritarian leader — but, more significantly, to justify a continuing ambiguity about the future of the country and the legitimacy of questioning its fate.

In 2011 Egyptians of all sects, ages, and social classes shook off millennia of autocracy and took to the streets to protest the country's continuing practices of authoritarian government. The uprising, part of what came to be known as the Arab Spring, ultimately led to the removal of the country's longtime president, Hosni Mubarak, the suspension of its constitution, and the dissolution of both houses of Parliament.

After a period of interim rule under the direction of the Egyptian Supreme Council for Army Forces (SCAF), the Egyptian populace then elected the country's first-ever civilian president, Mohamed Morsi, who took power in June 2012. Morsi, who had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, however, failed to gain support for a controversial new Islamist constitution, and his government faced mass public protests at the end of June 2013. Then, after he issued a constitutional declaration giving himself special powers to assure its passage, he, too, was removed by a military coup on July 3, 2013. By their action, Egypt's military officers also suspended the new constitution and installed a new interim president, the minister of defense, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

*Ali Raouf is an architect and scholar who consults with the Ministry of Municipality and Environment in Qatar.*

The failure of democracy to take root in Egypt and in the region following the popular uprisings of 2011–2012 has been discussed by the *New York Times* journalist David Kirkpatrick, among others. In a 2018 book, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers*, he interrogated the coup that ousted Morsi, and described how the new strongman, al-Sisi, cracked down on dissent and opposition with a degree of ferocity that former President Mubarak never dared employ.<sup>1</sup> The beneficiary rather than the coordinator of a popularly supported coup, al-Sisi initially also promised not to run for president. But he changed his mind almost immediately, and was elected Egyptian president in June 2014. Then, when his first term came to an end, he eliminated all serious rivals for the job, going so far as to jail a former chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces who planned to challenge him in the election, to engineer his nearly uncontested reelection in 2018.

Since his initial appointment as president, al-Sisi has worked hard to create the illusion of progress and development in Egypt based on the exploitation of an exciting series of urban images. But by interrogating several major projects that have been lavishly promoted in recent years this commentary will seek to provide an alternative interpretation of these often strange projects. It will argue that the current regime is not interested in replicating the top-down approach to urban development that historically characterized other Egyptian leaders, including Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and Mubarak. Their former regimes sought to establish legitimacy in the public mind by trumpeting building accomplishments in the different economic sectors. At the present moment, al-Sisi's focus is rather on impressing Egyptians with kaleidoscopic fantasies depicted in computer-generated models.

This article examines the pretenses of several of these mega-projects: “the New Capital,” “the New Nile Island” (al-Warraq), and “the New al-Alamein City.” It will examine these fantastical designs to show how an illusory urbanism is being employed to manufacture legitimacy for the present governing regime. It will also scrutinize the impact of al-Sisi's “Tahya Masi” campaign (roughly translatable as “Viva Egypt”), which now serves as a tool to delegitimize any opposing view of state-sponsored urban development.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, critical voices are being labeled as unpatriotic, even traitorous, and linked to foreign agendas supposedly aiming to destroy the regime.

One of the main ideas here is to elucidate how a dictatorship may operate using the notion of a “society of the spectacle,” inventing symbols, rituals, and a cult of leadership to validate itself. In the Egyptian context, this will involve tracing the narrative path that has accompanied the establishment of the present regime and the construction of al-Sisi's image. Other influential studies, such as that by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, have examined how myths, rituals, images, and speeches may serve as tools to advance such authoritarian, even fascist, political projects.<sup>3</sup> It is in this vein that the

focus here will be on architecture and urban planning as tools for making and shaping political identity.

To understand this project it is worth referencing Michel-Rolph Trouillot's exploration of the construction of history and the manipulation of public memory by authoritarian governments. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot made a distinction between “what happened” and “what was said to have happened.”<sup>4</sup> As he wrote, “the value of a historical product cannot be debated without considering both the context of its production and the context of its consumption.” He thus observed that power may be exerted in the historical process at several points: during the creation of primary sources, during the archival processes, during the initial interpretation of events, and during subsequent reinterpretations of events. I argue that much of this has happened in al-Sisi's Egypt.

This type of examination must also consider the social production of architecture and urbanism, especially within the present neoliberal phase of capitalism. Fundamentally, this involves questioning who has the right to make space, and likewise to explore the kinds of social relations produced as a consequence. It was in this context that Henri Lefebvre first understood the production of space as a civic right.<sup>5</sup> In a recent edited volume, the architects Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal reiterated this view and attempted to frame the production of space in a matrix of social movements, politics, and values.<sup>6</sup> It is with these ideas in mind that this commentary seeks to describe and analyze the previously mentioned mega-projects as embedded in complex and diverse historical, political, cultural and spatial circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

Another voice in these matters is that of Lisa Findley, who has stressed the role of architecture as an engaged cultural and spatial practice, and described how the voices of suppressed cultures may become empowered through it.<sup>8</sup> Her arguments are relevant to contemporary Egypt, because for the first time in its modern history, after the January 25, 2011, revolution, loud voices called for a right by all citizens to the city, to its public spaces and waterfronts, and to decent housing. Yet, after the coup of July 3, 2013, all such voices were silenced through the creation of a culture of fear, driven by threats to severely punish any form of dissent. And since then, the whole focus of the military regime, with all its apparatuses, including the media, has been to transform the image of its leader, al-Sisi, into that of a heroic national figure who saved the country from ruin at the hands of Islamists.

The article will seek to explain how fantastic urban imagery is being used to confuse the short-term memory of an oppressed population. Thus an ever-changing series of images of al-Sisi inaugurating one important project after another have been used in a deliberate effort to transform his image from that of the army general who helped squash democratic reform to that of the national hero who is building a new country and who will usher in a future of unparalleled prosperity.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR A NEW NATIONAL HERO

Since the revolution of July 1952, considered a coup by many, the country's leaders without exception have been military officers, principally army generals.<sup>9</sup> And from that time through its present resurgence after 2013, the Egyptian military has been in full control of the country. Indeed, its leaders have repeatedly shown that they are willing to go to almost any length to maintain a complete grip on the country's political and economic life. An important reference here is Paul Hirst's scholarly account of the various ways in which space is configured by power, and in which space becomes a resource for power.<sup>10</sup> But Zeinab Abul-Magd has also provided an excellent book offering a specific, detailed account of the Egyptian military's penetration, since the 1980s, of the country's economy and political administration and the causes and consequences of that penetration.<sup>11</sup>

To bolster their legitimacy, Egyptian military leaders in the past have invested heavily in developing heroic images of themselves in the eyes of the masses. The first of these, Gamal Abdel Nasser, a key member of the Free Officers Group that displaced King Farouk in 1952, constructed such a heroic narrative in part on the basis of tangible achievements, including the building of the Aswan High Dam — which, among other things, secured a reliable supply of electricity for the country. His approach to internal challenges like agricultural land ownership and his position as a populist and architect of nationalism within the Middle East likewise helped him maintain local and regional popularity.<sup>12</sup> Yet, in addition to boasting about his questionable achievements, Nasser was also responsible for the country's principal modern military defeat, in 1967, which had a grave impact on the Egyptian psyche.<sup>13</sup>

During Nasser's time in office, Egyptians were punished harshly if they dared oppose his regime or expose its manipulations. Such tactics reached their apex on June 9 and 10, 1967, when thousands of Egyptians were organized to pour into Cairo's streets to ask Nasser to withdraw the resignation he had submitted following the country's humiliating defeat in the Six Day War with Israel on June 5, 1967.<sup>14</sup> Initially, Egyptians read in newspapers and heard from official government sources that their army was approaching the gates of Tel Aviv and that hundreds of Israeli warplanes had been destroyed. Yet three days later they were confronted with the truth: that the Egyptian Army had been defeated in six hours and that the Air Force had been decimated, with nearly all its warplanes destroyed on the ground. These events presented a clear milestone in Egypt's history. Instead of demanding answers, the people were manipulated into begging Nasser to withdraw his resignation, thus relieving him of any accountability for the damage done to the state, the army, and the people. In effect, the people were coerced into chanting "Don't go!" while their brothers, sons and fathers had either been killed, captured, or were being forced to walk barefoot

back to Cairo from the Sinai and the Suez Canal cities to escape Israeli advances.<sup>15</sup>

Anwar al-Sadat, another member of the Free Officers Group, who had served as Nasser's vice president, succeeded Nasser after his sudden death in 1970. He subsequently received great acclaim for leading the Egyptian military to victory in the early days of the October 6, 1973, Yom Kippur War. Later, however, he used this triumph to claim that the country should gain the fruits of its victory. And he subsequently signed the Camp David Peace Accords, which returned the entire region of the Sinai to Egypt and secured him the deserved title of "Man of War and Peace."

Early in his presidency, however, Sadat had befriended some Islamic political factions to help remove Nasserists opposed to his rule. And, as he sought to develop the country's private economy, his Open-Door policies led to Egypt's first food riots in 1977. Sadat was also known for initiating the country's move away from its former alliance with the Soviet Union, which had supported Nasser. He also sought to become more aligned with the West, particularly the U.S., and it was under Sadat that USAID resumed military and economic aid to Egypt. Yet, as international financial organizations such as the IMF and World Bank became more involved in internal Egyptian affairs, the gap between those who owned assets in the country and those who did not started to widen. Sadat also lost the support of the Arab states following the Camp David peace agreement in 1978.

During his time in office, Sadat permitted the formation of political parties, which allowed Islamists, who had been suppressed during the Nasser years, to gain power in syndicates, local administrations, and Parliament. But in the end he could not tolerate open political opposition. In September 1981 he thus jailed most leaders of the opposition, be they Islamist, leftist, or even liberals — an act that may have precipitated his assassination by a group of fundamentalist army officers in 1981 as he was celebrating the anniversary of Egypt's victory in the October 6, 1973, war.

During Sadat's time in power his government constructed a new image of a relaxed, prosperous, and swiftly developing country. In Cairo, in particular, new urban and architectural interventions sought to proclaim this new identity. Sadat, himself, used the model of Hong Kong in televised interviews as a way to share his vision for a prosperous capital. A similar emphasis on vertical development was manifested in Cairo's urban fabric, as a number of skyscrapers appeared during his presidency, particularly along the Nile. Sadat also initiated a program of "New Cities" on Cairo's desert outskirts, many of which were named to glorify Egypt's victories in the 1973 war, like 6th of October City and 10th of Ramadan City. One such new city was also named after Sadat, with the intent that it become the country's new administrative and education capital.

Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat, had been Sadat's vice president and a high-ranking leader of the country's air

force. In the early hours of the 1973 war he was credited with leading the successful attack against Israeli forces along the Suez Canal, and he subsequently served nearly thirty years in power, making him the longest-serving ruler of Egypt since Muhammad Ali at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unlike Sadat, however, Mubarak was never able to formulate a clear vision of the country's urbanity. Instead, decades after coming to power, and particularly starting from 2007, he delegated full authority over development decisions to his son Gamal, who operated with the support of a group of business friends.

Under the direction of Gamal Mubarak, Dubai became the model for a future Cairo. Indeed, a 2007 master plan for the city, titled *Cairo 2050*, can be interpreted as little more than an attempt to re-create Dubai by the Nile. The observer might be surprised, in a context like Egypt with all its history and tradition, that the placeless urbanism of Dubai would be selected for emulation. But more importantly, the question must be asked whether the Dubai experience could ever be applied in such physically layered and complex social circumstances. As Mimi Kirk has pointed out, "no matter how attractive such a vision may have been, it would mean displacing hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of people from their neighborhoods, many of them Cairo's poorer residents, who typically live in informal areas, or *ashwa'iyat*."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, *Cairo 2050* imagined using the Dubai model to convert the Egyptian capital into a cosmopolitan and global city. Existing residents would simply be moved from central areas to the city's desert outskirts. Kirk thus suggested that *Cairo 2050* was another in an ongoing series of attempts by rich and powerful Egyptians to manipulate people into accepting a heroic vision that would, in effect, displace them to create profits for elite investors.<sup>17</sup>

In point of fact, *Cairo 2050* may also be seen as the logical outcome of a prevailing neoliberal approach to development. Since its establishment in 1945, one of the World Bank's primary strategies for achieving structural economic reform in developing countries has been to encourage the creation of real estate markets. From the World Bank's point of view, local and foreign investment in building projects can act as a powerful engine for general development. And under Mubarak, with the cooperation of "the national party's policies committee" organized by his son Gamal and his group of friends, it appeared that Egypt was following these instructions.

But leading an investment and policy planning body is something very different from leading the country. And despite Hosni Mubarak's ambitions that his son might succeed him as president, signs suggested that the Egyptian military would never abandon one of its existential principles: that Egypt's president should always originate from within the military.<sup>18</sup>

As the *Cairo 2050* proposal indicates, one commonality between the regimes of all military-educated Egyptian presidents is what may be called a culture of national propaganda. In such a culture, no concern is given to the logic of the lie, how people are to be convinced of it, or more significantly,

who will be held accountable when it is discovered. Lies are simply allowed to stand. Thus, early in his term of office, Nasser famously declared that Egypt had discovered a supply of oil that would make it richer than Saudi Arabia (although total silence engulfed the whole story months later). Nasser also once attended a celebration of a new line of missiles (called *al-Zafer* and *al-Qaher* [the Victorious and the Terminator], respectively), which were heralded as being able to reach the Israeli capital of Tel Aviv. But it was later discovered that what had been presented were mockups of missiles made of steel and aluminum sheets; and, of course, within a few years, in 1967, the Egyptian army was humiliatingly defeated in a matter of hours.

As an alternative to such a tradition of military government, Limor Lavie recently examined how the concept of the civil state is understood in Arab political discourse.<sup>19</sup> She described it as an attempt to forge a middle ground between theocratic and secular rule, and as a solution to tensions created by global modernization and democratization. After the January 25, 2011, revolution, the demand to establish a civil state was shared by all political factions in Egypt. But when these factions sought to write the basic guidelines for Egypt's future, the difficulties soon became clear. Indeed, the struggle over the very concept of the civil state was a principal reason for the turbulence the country experienced in the immediate post-Mubarak era. Ultimately, it led to the ouster of the country's first elected civilian president by a popularly supported military coup. The coup leaders subsequently claimed that they only aspired to save Egypt from religious fascism. But in the process they returned the country to military autocracy. Thus was an insidious connection between saving and militarizing the nation used to justify an almost complete nullification of the democratic gains of 2011.

#### AL-SISI'S ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH A POST-COUP HEROIC IMAGE

With its return to military dictatorship, Egypt has witnessed such human rights violations as torture and politically motivated killings, the imposition of severe restrictions on the press, and the continuous persecution of human-rights defenders.<sup>20</sup> To compensate for these harsh conditions, a number of attempts have been made to establish narratives elevating al-Sisi to the status of national hero, including attempts to portray him as the savior of the nation who personally put his life on the line to prevent its takeover by radical Islamists.

In point of fact, reports since the 2013 coup reveal that President Morsi and his team were helpless in the face of a well-organized deep state commanded by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Neil Ketchley has illustrated how the old regime engineered a return to authoritarian rule by means of elite-facilitated contention of the revolutionary process, counter-revolutionary action, and a deliberate effort to suffocate revolutionary energy.<sup>21</sup> The journalist Peter Hes-

sler has likewise exposed, in a historical social context, what lay below the surface of events — from the protests in Tahrir Square, to Egypt's first democratic elections, to subsequent massacres, to the coup and its aftermath.<sup>22</sup> Such accounts raise suspicions that the revolution could ever have led to real social change.

Using al-Sisi's terminology, the strong arms of the SCAF were working from day one inside the state to undermine the legitimacy of Egypt's new civilian president. These not only included the security apparatus of the police and army but extended to the media, prominent intellectuals, and the judicial system. Yet, once in power, al-Sisi faced another challenge: to engineer a competition-free election to a second term. And, when the constructed spectacle of him as a national savior proved unconvincing, he was forced to engage in a harsh campaign to sideline all other viable candidates, including another prominent member of the SCAF.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, the first heroic image that al-Sisi attempted to construct for himself was that of a new Nasser. Despite his failings, Nasser is today remembered with a certain nostalgia as a strong leader who saved Egypt and led a revolution against the monarchy. After the 2013 coup, talk that al-Sisi's would bring Nasserism out of hibernation included attempts to link him to old Nasserist songs and slogans. But in current-day Egypt it soon proved futile to present al-Sisi as "an immortal leader," because neither he, nor anyone else, could make good on Nasser's boasts. That al-Sisi dared evoke Nasser's memory instead suggested two things. First was that al-Sisi sought to derive legitimacy from a historical era also initiated by a military coup — an approach that all but dismissed the meaning of the January 25 revolution. Second was that his use of Nasserism was never more than a means to an end. As both Falasca-Zamponi and Trouillot have observed, the use of a collective memory often bears little resemblance to historical reality, because nostalgia for past glory may seem more real to a population than the actual events of the past.<sup>24</sup> Thus, memories like that of Nasser among Egyptians may be (and have been) used by leaders to pursue a variety of unrelated political goals, including the suppression of opponents, the validation of power, and the creation of a new sense of national identity.

However, al-Sisi's attempts at bold Nasserist initiatives, such as his call for a joint Arab military force to fight "terrorism" from Islamist groups soon devolved into attacks on any person or movement even vaguely opposed to his rule — from political parties and journalists to activists and even Facebook bloggers. Indeed, the main purpose of the proposed military force seemed to be to act against any challenge to the counter-revolutionary campaign he was spearheading.<sup>25</sup> And when his efforts to head up an "Arab NATO" to guarantee regional order came to naught, his subsequent attempts to create a heroic image of himself began to morph back and forth to accommodate references to Muhammed Ali (the founder of modern Egypt), Nasser (the pan-Arab nationalist), and Sadat (the victorious war hero) (FIG. 1). But Muhammed



FIGURE 1. Al-Sisi's confused image-making attempts included grouping him with Nasser and Sadat on a plate that was distributed by the SCAF in Tahrir Square. The image includes the Arabic words "Heroes of the Arab World." Source: Al-Ahram archive.

Ali was too remote; references to Nasser proved hollow in the face of a changed world; and it was soon pointed out that al-Sisi had never served in an actual war.

In the face of such a complicated situation, a new strategy had to be found, one that offered a different model than that of his predecessors. This soon came to be based on portraying al-Sisi as the initiator of great development projects that would bring Egypt new wealth in a miraculously short time. As described above, within the tradition of Egyptian military governance it was not relevant or essential to examine the reality of these projects. To represent al-Sisi as a national hero, all that mattered was the image of him presenting them to the nation. Thus, no one needed to follow through by examining their economic rationale, social relevance, claimed benefit, or even feasibility. Before such questions could arise the nation would simply be redirected to a new photo of him cutting another colored ribbon surrounded by officers in uniform.

Since the military coup of July 3, 2013, great efforts have thus been made in state-controlled media to create an aura of joy in the face of legendary triumphs to come. But this new national narrative is based on false suggestions of superiority, leadership skill, and local, regional and global success. And the regime's claims of overwhelming greatness go beyond any possible projection of national capacity that may be derived from modern Egyptian history.

Due, in part, to the lack of any form of accountability, Egyptian society is thus once again being victimized by dreams of a better future. After a series of promises about prosperity to come, nothing will be realized, and no one will be held responsible. Al-Sisi has thus promised that Egypt will be "as big as the world" [*ad al-dounia*]. Yet, apart from accusations of treason against anyone who might question these claims, government agencies have failed to document completion of any of his announced ventures.<sup>26</sup>

## EVOLVING TRENDS IN THE RESHAPING OF CAIRO

An observer of contemporary Egyptian urbanism might be intrigued by the recent shift in attitudes as a result of this new proposed urbanism. No longer are urban images from elsewhere imitated as a way to rationalize an elite development agenda; it seems that fantastic urbanism is now being presented for public consumption for mere propaganda purposes.

Historically, imported imagery has played an important role in Cairo's development. The first significant expansion of the city outside its ancient walls was based on an image of modern Paris adopted by the nineteenth-century ruler Khedive Ismail. After visiting Paris to attend the 1889 World Expo, Ismail attempted to re-create the changes Baron Haussmann had brought to the French capital in the new districts of Cairo. As mentioned, more than a century later, the image of Dubai was likewise imported to guide its expansion and redesign as part of the Cairo 2050 proposal.

**FIGURE 2.** *The most famous street in Dubai, Sheikh Zayed Road, and surrounding skyscrapers has provided a development template for the future of Cairo. Photo by author.*



**FIGURE 3.** *The Cairo 2050 project adopts the Dubai model as an image of its future urbanity. Public photo by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.*

The urban image embraced in Cairo 2050 is still the favored vision for the city's future. It imagines a massive transformation of the city based on wide new avenues, green spaces, and new or revamped tourist sites, such as near the Pyramids (FIGS. 2–4). But since al-Sisi came to power a fundamental rupture has taken place in the use of Dubai as a blueprint for Cairo's future. It appears that once Egyptians were prepared to accept and then forget the essence of their existence, the reality of the proposed changes became irrelevant. In effect, the current situation relies more on “disposable images” than actual development proposals.

While the regime's rhetoric has suggested giving new priority to Cairo's poor and needy, its acts have likewise proven the exact opposite. As Kirk has pointed out, the Egyptian government's urban planning policies for the past forty years have mainly been concerned with creating spaces and housing for the elites.<sup>27</sup> Low-income housing is difficult, if not impossible, to come by, and almost 70 percent of Cairenes



**FIGURE 4.** *The fantasy of Cairo 2050 envisions the Nile riverfront occupied by giant skyscrapers. Likewise, it envisions displacing hundreds of thousands of people to create a Parisian-like boulevard leading to the Pyramids in Giza. Public photo by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.*



**FIGURE 5.** The Egyptian regime's propaganda campaign extended to Times Square in New York. Here a billboard suggests that the New Suez Canal is Egypt's gift to the world. Source: Al-Ahram archive.

live in cheap *ashwa'iyyat* (illegally built housing, much of it on converted agricultural land). However, shortly after coming to power al-Sisi's regime established a new Ministry of State for Urban Renewal and Informal Settlements, whose direction it assigned, in June 2014, to the grassroots social organizer Laila Iskander.

The new ministry soon set out to redesign the derelict Maspero Triangle, a downtown area dominated by slums. Iskander heralded the effort as a way to provide new residential, commercial and retail spaces while preserving the neighborhood's unique character and spatial attributes. She further expressed confidence that existing low-income residents could be rehoused on site. Yet, as part of a political bait-and-switch, her whole ministry was dismantled and removed from the cabinet in September 2015 — a decision made after the British architectural firm Foster + Partners was selected for the project. The Maspero redevelopment was subsequently reassigned to the housing minister, Mostafa Madbouly, who had served as an executive in charge of Cairo 2050, and was subsequently named prime minister.<sup>28</sup>

Despite early claims that he had no intention to become Egypt's next military ruler for life, in a speech on January 19, 2018, entitled "A Tale of a Country" ["Hikayat Watan"], al-Sisi declared his intention to run for a second term as president. Part of the speech consisted of recounting all his supposed achievements in less than four years in power. Indeed, the list was so extensive that critics pointed out that it implied he had completed three projects every day since coming to power. At the same time, the list lacked any attempt to address the domains of education or health care, or to develop the Sinai or Upper Egypt — relatively bypassed regions that have provided fertile ground for radical Islamist groups.

One of the mega-projects on al-Sisi's list was the "New Suez Canal" — in reality a publicly funded expansion of the historic waterway to increase its capacity. Al-Sisi initially heralded the \$9 billion effort as "a gift to the world" (FIG. 5).

And at its inauguration in August 2015 he had sailed up the canal in full military ceremonial dress, accompanied by a young boy in military fatigues waving an Egyptian flag (FIG. 6).<sup>29</sup> Yet, despite glowing predictions that it would provide an economic windfall to the nation, traffic through the improved waterway has not met expectations.<sup>30</sup> And, in confirmation of the opinion of experts who suggested it was "wishful thinking," the project has since largely proven to be an economic failure.

In the following sections, I will provide a critical narrative of three other controversial mega-projects that have been promoted by the regime to convince Egyptians that al-Sisi is a long-awaited national hero who can perform development miracles.



**FIGURE 6.** The opening of the New Suez Canal. Source: Al-Ahram archive.

“NEW CAIRO,” A.K.A. THE “NEW CAPITAL,” A.K.A. THE “ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL”

During a conference held in the resort city of Sharm al-Sheikh on March 13, 2015, which was intended to lure foreign investors back to Egypt after they had fled in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, the Egyptian government detailed its \$45 billion proposal to construct a “New Capital.” In terms of design, the project continued the strategy of the Cairo 2050 proposal to exploit the dazzling placeless urbanity of Dubai.<sup>31</sup> Repeatedly described in the media as “Dubai in Egypt,” the nameless city was envisioned as a home for five million people and the site of a new presidential palace, a new Parliament building, government ministries, universities, and a theme park four times the size of Disneyland.

To be located east of Cairo, outside the city’s second ring road, the “New Capital” would occupy 700 sq.km., a space almost as big as Singapore. Images and models showed high-rises and residential buildings as well as a “government district” all surrounding a central “green river” — a combination of open water and planted greenery twice the size of New York’s Central Park. As announced, it would be developed from scratch by the Emirati Mohamed al-Abbar, previously the developer of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world’s tallest building (FIG. 7).

As housing minister, Mostafa Madbouly unveiled the project in front of al-Sisi and thirty visiting emirs, kings and presidents, including Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Dubai’s ruler.<sup>32</sup> He estimated that it would take from five to seven years to complete.<sup>33</sup> His estimate, however, was almost immediately challenged by al-Sisi. When the crowd, which included hundreds of would-be investors, moved on to view the main model, al-Sisi interrupted Madbouly and angrily claimed the project would actually take only three years to build (FIG. 8).<sup>34</sup>

Not only were al-Sisi’s specific comments later subject to cynical critique, but it was observed more generally that in interviews he tends to arbitrarily reduce the accepted timeframe for completion of projects by as much as 60 or 70 percent. In this case, however, his wildly infeasible estimate and a subsequent meeting with army representatives who attempted to assert control over the project led the Dubai developers to abandon the project. Now, three years after its inauguration, conflicting reports stress the project’s ambiguity, including its continuous change of name, scope, objectives, and target market. After the withdrawal of the U.A.E.-based investors and the hesitation of Chinese construction companies to partner on their own with the Egyptian army, the new administrative capital is now a joint stock company between the military land-sale authority, local real estate interests, and the state agency for new urban communities.

In media interviews, General Ahmed Zaki Abdien, the head of the company established by the Egyptian Army to manage the project, has also used a new name for the project: “The Administrative Capital.”<sup>35</sup> The name of his agency, the Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD), likewise implies its changed status. And, ironically, the very first project opened there is a hotel owned and operated by the army called The Diamond [Al Massa] — a structure that takes its name from a huge, black, diamond-shaped glass box that serves as the central element of a mediocre, confused design.

Whatever its final name, the project is still intended to serve as a site for most of the Egyptian government’s administrative buildings, as well as for those occupied by the Egyptian president. Yet, despite al-Sisi’s boast that all the work would be done in three years, the project is nowhere near completion. Nevertheless, attempts are ongoing to encourage foreign embassies to relocate to it and to lure businesses to a central district of twenty Chinese-built skyscrapers. The

**FIGURE 7.** A model of the planned new capital, as displayed at the Egypt Economic Development Conference in March 2015. Promotional photo by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.





**FIGURE 8.** A photo documenting the famous dialogue between Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and the Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. When al-Sisi was informed about the time required to build the New Capital, he replied, “We can’t do our work like that. Three years only.” Source: Al-Masry Al-Youm, March 14, 2015.

entire effort can thus be seen as part of what Abul-Magd has described as the larger transformation of urban milieus in Egypt into ever-expanding military camps (FIG. 9). These spaces now host a permanent armed presence that exercises continuous surveillance over everyday life. Meanwhile, Egypt’s military business enterprises have tapped into the consumer habits of the rich and poor alike, reaping uncountable profits and optimizing social command.<sup>36</sup>

For the government, the New Administrative Capital represents the chance for a fresh start free from the chaos and congestion of central Cairo.<sup>37</sup> But its planning ignores the impact on areas of Cairo that previously housed these facilities. If seen through to completion, the project will draw wealth from the existing capital and leave behind a network of empty buildings — all also owned by ACUD. Khaled el-Husseiny, a former major general, who serves as ACUD’s

spokesman, told *The Guardian* in May 2018 that ACUD will establish a new company to control the old vacated buildings. Trying to sketch a future for such vast holdings in central Cairo, he added, “We have no plan as to how to invest in these buildings, but we will fix it and figure it out. Maybe we can make them into hotels.” According to el-Husseiny, the matter is simple: “We have a dream, and we’re building our dreams now. We need a landmark, a new capital. We have the right to have a dream and this is our dream.”<sup>38</sup>

Such a fantasy of urbanization has only been amplified during the last five years via billboards along highways in central Cairo and by television commercials promising a better way of life. Yet the imagined escape from the congestion of central Cairo to a new life on the city’s outskirts will likely only be available to those who can afford it. There are few guarantees the high cost of housing will allow anyone other than the upper crust of Cairenes to populate the new capital; indeed, the project risks becoming a lucrative but empty mirage.

There is no doubt that Cairo’s rapidly expanding population desperately needs housing. Greater Cairo, now a megalopolis, was home to 22.9 million people as of mid-2018, and it is projected to contain 40 million inhabitants by 2050. However, the city is already ringed by a collection of other half-empty planned towns, each a failed monument to their developers’ inability to draw the bulk of the population away from the central city. In the same way the government envisions benefitting from selling off Cairo’s central spaces, it has sold off peripheral public lands to private investors who have built unaffordable enclaves with names like “Beverly Hills” and “Dreamland.” The new capital, with all its promises of excellent planning, has so far failed to learn from these previous failures. Indeed, as David Sims, a Cairo-based urban planner, has argued, it is now evident that the desert is becoming a receptacle for dreams. And some fear that Egypt’s new capital, if it ever gets built, will be just as exclusive and private an enclave as was the original al-Qahera when it was founded as a Fatimid royal precinct in 969.<sup>39</sup>



**FIGURE 9.** The main feature of the New Capital, a green river, was later abolished and the land allocated to subdivisions controlled by the army. Promotional photo by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.

When Mubarak was toppled following the mass uprisings of 2011's Arab Spring, many hoped that the protesters' calls for social justice would lead to advances in the realm of urban planning and housing. But due to its conceptual failure and the loss of financial, administrative and marketing support following the withdrawal of its primary Emirati investor, it now appears that the once-rosy dream of a sparkling new Egyptian capital lies in tatters.<sup>40</sup> The project has been assigned to a confused coalition of Egyptian or Chinese companies, and its scope has been squeezed down first to an administrative capital, and now an administrative district. Three years since its inauguration, support for the project has also thinned, and some have openly wondered at its continued relevance. Nevertheless, Egyptians and other Arabs have bought land in the new capital, and banks have been ordered to build branches there.

#### AL-WARRAQ ISLAND: FROM FISHING HUTS TO SKYSCRAPERS

Almost overnight, in 2017, as reported by *The Guardian*, the Nile island of al-Warraq went from being an impoverished oasis in the center of Cairo to being the site of a fierce redevelopment battle.<sup>41</sup> Home to roughly 90,000 people, the island has long been connected to the rest of the city by ferries, which transport residents to the nearby "mainland" districts of Warraq or Shobra al-Kheima. But efforts to connect it to the city by means of a new highway bridge and to demolish its houses have now prompted residents to fight back.

Plans to redevelop the island go back at least to April 2009, when the Cairo 2050 proposal articulated the intensive development of the Nile waterfront. The plan alluded to the necessity of evicting the residents of the islands of al-Warraq and al-Dahab to make way for a new financial center and headquarters district for international companies. As part of

this effort, in 2010 the Egyptian architectural firm Cube Consultants submitted a "conceptual masterplan" to the General Organization for Physical Planning to transform al-Warraq Island into "Horus Island," an upscale urban district complete with glossy towers, wide boulevards, and a marina (FIG. 10).

Initially, the project of transforming the island was part of the Cairo 2050 proposal. Yet, while Cairo 2050 faded with the end of the Mubarak regime in 2011, plans to radically reinvent areas along the Nile in central Cairo continue to be a top priority for Egyptian authorities. Indeed, a second proposal for the island was submitted in March 2013 from the Singaporean architectural firm RSP, which imagined it as the site of a glass skyscraper, a glistening glass pyramid, and manicured riverside walkways.<sup>42</sup>

Since 2009 a variety of official explanations have been offered for the need to evict the island's residents. These have ranged from claims that the island lacks proper sanitation to suggestions that it is in fact a state nature reserve or protectorate. It was based on this last rationale that the former prime minister, Sherif Ismail, repeatedly accused residents of squatting illegally on state-owned land. And under Ismail the official gazette *Al-Jareeda Al-Rasmiya* published a government decision to convert the island from a nature reserve/protectorate and assign responsibility for it to an urban communities authority. At the same time, published plans for its future emphasized its new identity as a financial and recreational center to be planned, owned and designed by U.A.E. companies.

As *The Guardian* reported, Deen Sharp, of the Terreform Center for Advanced Urban Research, in New York, wrote that the situation indicates how, "like many states around the world, the Egyptian government is focused on constructing its cities around the needs of financial capital and the powerful rather than those of its citizens."<sup>43</sup> And, as mentioned earlier, this has been the policy followed by Mostafa Madbouly first as head of the General Authority for Urban Planning, then as Minister of Housing, and now as Prime Minister.



**FIGURE 10.** An illustration of the al-Warraq Island conceptual master plan, submitted to the Giza government. Source: Cube Consultants, promotional photo.

To date, clashes between citizens and police and the resistance of local people have forced the state to delay the evacuation of the island's existing inhabitants. But under the al-Sisi government, service delivery to islanders has diminished and there has been no effort to improve underlying conditions of poverty there. Thus, no matter how fanciful plans for the island may be, it is likely only a matter of time until the islanders are forced to move.

#### THE NEW AL-ALAMEIN CITY

Even considering the repeated failure of development proposals for the three previously described projects — Cairo 2050, the New Capital, and al-Warraq Island — Prime Minister Madbouly has persisted in promoting a Dubai model for yet another massive development, New al-Alamein City, on Egypt's northwestern coast (FIG. 11).

Although the idea for the city preceded Madbouly's tenure, its profile was recently raised by the screening of a film that highlighted its main components. The film itself provides an excellent representation of the paradigm of weaving fantasies and creating myths. Prepared by the Ministry of Housing, one of its most striking elements was its portrayal of future residents. In every single shot of its roads, shops, residences, pools and parks these were shown to be blond-haired men, women and children. Yet the ministry and its consultants never indicated why such a foreign population would be tempted to abandon other investment opportunities, facilities, and services in Turkey, Cyprus, Greece, southern Italy, Spain, and other Mediterranean-basin countries (not to mention Dubai) to come to al-Alamein.

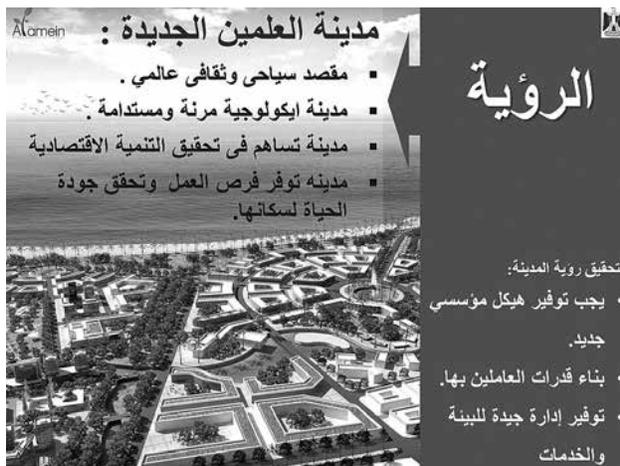


FIGURE 11. The development vision for New al-Alamein aimed to transform the city into a global tourist destination within a sustainable ecological framework. But there was never any conception of the mechanisms needed to achieve this vision. Source: Report by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.

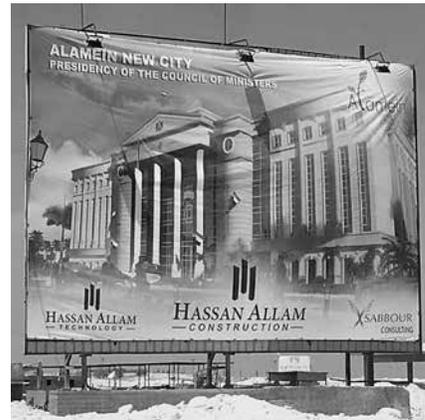


FIGURE 12. A wave of shock followed the announcement of priority projects in New al-Alamein, which included a summer presidential palace and a new summer headquarters for the presidency of the council of ministers. Photos by author.

The film begins on board a plane as an elegant European woman taps her fingers on a tablet to reveal the name al-Alamein in English with the logo “Realizing sustainable urban development.” This is followed by scenes of the major attractions of the future city, including a luxury hotel, golden-sand beach, and artificial lakes. Accelerated footage then showed other city components, most notably an opera, museum, library, art galleries, university, research centers, malls, and a commercial and business center. For the city center, the movie actually uses realistic footage of streets and inhabitants shot in the U.S. It then ends with the blue-eyed, golden-haired European woman returning to her home country, looking out the window, as if to say the city is a nice place to visit and enjoy, but it can never be her home.

Such a promotional film, in which Egyptians are completely absent, begs the question whether the existing city was even considered in developing the new vision. Where is the local community, especially the tribal people who live in and around the existing al-Alamein? In fact, once they realized that plans for the project were underway, a resistance movement quickly resurfaced among local Bedouins and community activists (FIG. 12). Such a struggle actually goes back to 2012, when the tribes first objected to major city planning projects that disregarded their needs and longstanding relationship to the land.<sup>44</sup> This included rejecting housing projects that failed to reflect their lifestyle and aspirations (FIG. 13).



**FIGURE 13.** Apartment buildings built previously in outlying areas of al-Alamein were not provided with needed facilities, particularly water and electricity. The local community likewise rejected an architecture and urbanism that did not accommodate the local way of life. Public photo from the al-Alamein office of the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.

Opposition from the local community ultimately forced representatives from the Egyptian Parliament's Housing Committee to travel to al-Alamein to discuss the ramifications of setting up a new city there. According to published reports, the delegation met with local chieftains to discuss the impact of the project on Bedouin life and dwelling traditions. At the time, one local Bedouin representative, Sheikh Mohamed Quieh, was quoted in a news report, saying "The divide of the al-Alamein city as prepared in the new plans by the Housing Ministry if implemented would separate the city dwellers from life. The new plan proposed did not consider the nomadic nature and will change life to a level that local residents can't encompass."<sup>245</sup>

A number of crucial questions have been left without answers both by the movie and by reports from the Ministry of Housing. If this is the new al-Alamein city, what will become

of the old one, with its heritage of special places? What is to become its inhabitants and their families? Will they be allocated space in the new city? What is the relationship between the two cities? Will residents of the old one be welcomed in the new city? What are its sustainable urban development features if no mention is made of the local community? What will provide its economic basis?

For decades the ministries of housing and planning in Egypt have failed in attempts to make Egypt's northwest coast a tourist destination, locally, regionally or globally. Most importantly, they have failed to extend its usability beyond its limited local use for six weeks in the summer. But if the goal of the new city of al-Alamein was only to add one more fantastic image to the many scenes of false development success promoted by the al-Sisi government, then the film certainly achieved its objective (FIG. 14).

#### MEGAPROJECTS, FAKE UTOPIA, AND COLLATERAL URBAN DAMAGE

The current Egyptian regime has become obsessed with maintaining full authority and control over the development of real estate in the country. In doing so, it is seeking to act as broker, regulator, developer and owner. This reflects a progressive change toward becoming an ever more aggressive investor in urban real estate. And today Al-Hiaah Al-Handasiyah, the engineering arm of the armed forces, is responsible for much of this work.

And beyond the developments described here, its proposed mega-projects now extend to building the biggest and most luxurious resort in Africa and the Middle East — as advertised on numerous billboards on land allocated for it and along a highway recently paved exclusively to serve it. These billboards inform passers-by that the resort will feature the largest water park and the highest aerial tramway in Africa and the Middle East.



**FIGURE 14.** Luxurious towers, reflecting the Dubaiification of al-Alamein, would likely raise the price of local real estate to unprecedented levels. Promotional photo by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.

Such an obsession with the tallest, the largest, the biggest, and the most luxurious is radically new within the patterns of development adopted by previous Egyptian leaders. Yet even if Egypt could build such fantasies as skyscrapers, golf courses, yacht marinas, and seven-star hotels, why should this be considered progress? The Dubai model has been heavily criticized, and the simple presence of such urban features cannot signify First World status, much less the presence of progressive values in a country with a valuable contribution to make to the world.

A more crucial critique thus stems from the perception of development and progress. Is having skyscrapers and luxurious hotels more important than addressing the needs of a population with access to some of the world's lowest standards of health care, education and housing? Does progress really consist of satisfying the needs of the rich and politically privileged without providing any form of development for a majority of the people?

The promotion of distorted images of phantasmagoric urbanism also creates urban collateral damage. Most obviously, it unleashes forces of gentrification, which can typically only be accommodated through harsh evacuation procedures. Often these require use of the police and the military, as in the cases of the Maspero Triangle and al-Warraq Island. Such gentrification has two additional alarming dimensions. One is the ambiguous fate of forcefully evicted communities; the other is the eradication of irreplaceable architectural and urban heritage to pave the way for anonymous glittering skyscrapers.

One outcome of these projects is a distorted, confused and unstable real estate market. When the government announced the cost for housing in the New Capital and New al-Alamein, it created an entirely new tier of prices that rippled downward through the market, emphasizing that these were neighborhoods attainable only by the rich and upper-class. In an otherwise poor country such projects must furthermore be well secured behind walls and gates to guarantee the safety of residents from the angry people outside, some of whom may have been evicted from territories their families have resided in for generations.

Another aspect of the collateral damage caused by such projects is that anyone who might contest them, question their feasibility, or seek to know who benefits from them may now be considered a traitor to the cause of national development. According to a new media-control law approved by al-Sisi, any form of professional invitation for experts to discuss the need for them in a country with severe economic problems may be classified as a conspiracy to spread rumors and decrease morale.

Additional collateral damage is related to the fate of old Cairo, which presently suffers from physical deterioration, collapsing services, traffic jams, and environmental degradation. And this condition is even gloomier in the rest of the country, where many towns, villages and settlements lack the most basic modern services, including regular access to electricity, clean water, and sewerage systems.

Egypt's army portrays itself as a faithful guardian "saving the nation." Yet as Abul-Magd has shown, this has meant militarizing the city through both visible and invisible efforts to hegemonize the country's politics, economy and society.<sup>46</sup> For six decades the Egyptian army has adapted to and benefited from crucial moments of change by enhancing its political supremacy and expanding a mammoth business empire. Most recently, the military has fought back two popular uprisings, retained full power in the wake of the Arab Spring, and increased its wealth. Indeed, an examination of the role of the military in Egyptian history since the 1952 coup leads to the conclusion that its leaders will never see there is more to governing than the consolidation of money, power, and political control in the hands of a narrow elite.

This perception of Egypt was brilliantly depicted by Yezid Sayigh in *Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt [Juomhuriat Al Zubat]*.<sup>47</sup> Estimates vary on the scale of the military's role in the national economy. But the applicability of the metaphor of the "officers' republic" has only been intensified by the way the building process is now prioritized. According to a recent Reuter's exposé, the military owns 51 percent of a firm that is developing the New Capital city; another military-owned company is building Egypt's biggest cement plant; and other business interests of the military range from fish farms to holiday resorts.<sup>48</sup> And a recent report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace cited the findings of this report in questioning the effect of military domination on the country's private sector.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, efforts by the state to promote megaprojects like the New Capital and the New al-Alamein City have proven to be major failures, exacerbating social divides and amplifying the need for informal urban development. Thus, around the edges of Cairo, informal areas have mushroomed to accommodate unprivileged and marginalized communities. For more than four decades, consecutive governments have pretended to serve the needs of the majority of Cairo's residents while encouraging construction of isolated, empty desert cities affordable only by the wealthy.

Ahmed Khaled Tawfik, in his 2008 novel *Utopia*, envisioned an Egypt in 2023 in which leaders of state, businessmen, and the rich retreat to a city in the desert called Utopia to enjoy a lavish lifestyle away from the vulgar and the poor.<sup>50</sup> The novel depicted this city as a place of high towers, palaces, and lavish gardens, all surrounded by walls and protected by high-caliber security forces and state-of-the-art technology. Meanwhile, the rest of the country's population was pushed into slums where they struggled to stay alive in swamps of poverty, disease and ignorance.

This article has argued that the military regime that came to power in Egypt 2013 has adopted a fascist-like approach to the task of governing, based largely on portraying a new dictator as the savior and only hope for a desperate nation aspiring to a prosperous future. To do so the regime has created an unprecedented culture of fear and largely eliminated any form of accountability for state actions. Such a strategy

has been underpinned by the use of images that convey short-time messages about the promise of spectacular new developments and the progress that will result. With critics no longer able to oppose, raise questions, or hold anyone accountable for its actions, the regime is thus able to present a long list of illusionary achievements. And in each successive photo, the president is always seen cutting a colored ribbon. No matter if everything fades away afterwards, the purpose of the photo is achieved.

The analysis here hints at a paradigm shift in strategic thinking. Unlike its predecessors, the current regime is not interested in using urban development as a catalyst to secure legitimacy. Rather, it is interested only in images and illusions, which are heralded briefly, then swiftly replaced. The strategy may deceive the people of Egypt for a while, but it will ultimately be proven to be hollow and self-defeating as a way to address the country's real urban problems.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

Accurate information about the projects discussed in this article is difficult to obtain from the Egyptian government. Planners and government officials often shy away from participating in interviews or ethnographic engagements out of concern for their own welfare. Papers discussing such topics thus rely largely on information gathered from newspapers, websites, and other government propaganda sources.

1. D.D. Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East* (New York: Viking, 2018).
2. Al-Sisi has called on Egyptians to embrace the slogan "Tahya Masr" as an expression of patriotism and nationalism. Initially, he repeated the slogan three times at the end of all of his speeches. Later the slogan became an essential component of formal government statements through the media or otherwise. Al-Sisi has also now established the "Tahya Masr Fund," and urged citizens to donate to it to help finance his development vision for the country.
3. S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
4. M.R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
5. H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
6. D. Petrescu and K. Trogal, eds., *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2017).
7. In *Into the Hands of Soldiers*, Kirkpatrick argued that Americans fail to understand the dynamic of the uprising, the hidden story of its failure, and Washington's part in that tragedy. He traced how authoritarianism, with the support of the Obama administration, was allowed to reclaim Egypt after thirty months of turmoil. Another important voice in this regard is that of the former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Drawing on her own experiences, she has examined how the rise of authoritarian governments

across the world in the second decade of the twenty-first century is akin to the rise of fascist dictatorships in the 1930s. See M. Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: Harper, 2018).

8. L. Findley, *Building Change: Architecture, Politics and Cultural Agency* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
9. On July 22, 1952, the Free Officers group chaired by Nasser, realized that Egypt's King Farouk might be preparing to move against them. They decided to strike and seize power the next morning.
10. P. Hirst, *Space and Power: Politics, War and Architecture* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2005).
11. Z. Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation: The Army, Business, and Revolution in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
12. Actually, it was the Wafed Party, in the late 1950s, that prepared legislation setting a ceiling on land ownership and offering the prospect of basic education for all. But it was Nasser who used these interventions to gain popularity within rural areas and erode the political power of traditional landlords. Despite his military losses, Nasser also remained able to present himself as a champion of resistance, which gained him political clout and gave him the power and authority to introduce socialist reforms.
13. One might consider adding other failures to his record, such as the breakup of the United Arab Republic after Syria's withdrawal, international misadventures in Yemen and Congo, and the declaration of complete independence by Sudan (despite King Farouk having been known before his removal as the "King of Egypt and Sudan").
14. Some argue they were driven to do so by the political apparatus, mainly the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), which was the only political party at that time.
15. For more on these events, see M. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); and G. Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

16. M. Kirk, "Improving Cairo for the Many, Not the Few," first published in *The Atlantic*, February 12, 2015. Available at <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2015/02/improving-cairo-for-the-many-not-the-few/385416/>.
17. Ibid.
18. See Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation*.
19. L. Lavie, *The Battle over a Civil State: Egypt's Road to June 30, 2013* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018).
20. See <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/egypt>.
21. N. Ketchley, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution: Contentious Politics and the Arab Spring* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
22. P. Hessler, *The Buried: Life, Death and Revolution in Egypt* (London: Profile Books, 2019).
23. Sami Anan, a former member of Egypt's Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF), was accused of incitement against the military after declaring his intention to run in the presidential elections of 2018.
24. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; and Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.
25. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/3/27/isis-nato-like-pan-arab-force-would-fail>.
26. These have so far included claims that the military discovered a treatment for hepatitis and AIDS; that the government would soon build a new Suez Canal and a new capital; that vast new sources of international investment capital had been secured; that millions of new acres of farmland had been reclaimed; that more wheat had been harvested than ever before; and even that the largest fish farms in the world had been constructed. Typically, the primary reason claimed for the remarkable success of all these fake projects is reliance on the army to plan and execute them.
27. Kirk, "Improving Cairo for the Many, Not the Few."
28. When al-Sisi appointed Madbouly prime minister on June 7, 2018, the decision was celebrated in Egyptian state media because Madbouly was supposedly a man of projects and achievements, not words and slogans.

29. The event was widely covered by international media. See E. Knecht, "Egypt's Sisi Opens New Suez Canal, Says to Defeat Terrorists," *Reuters*, August 6, 2015. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-suezcanal/egypts-sisi-opens-new-suez-canal-says-to-defeat-terrorists-idUSKCN0QB1MB20150806>.
30. See, for example, "Egypt's Suez Canal Profits Sink after Completion of \$9bn Mega-Project," *MIDDLEEASTEYE*, October 28, 2015. Available at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypts-suez-canal-profits-down-after-completion-9bn-mega-project-422795078>.
31. For more on the impact of Dubai on this project, see S. Magdi and I. Ayad, "Design of the New Capital of Egypt Is Challenging Dubai," first published February 14, 2015, on the Arab-language web portal *Massrawy*.
32. Madbouly, who had previously served as head of the general authority for urban planning and the main coordinator for the Cairo 2050 project, had been appointed minister for housing and new communities by al-Sisi in February 2014.
33. Madbouly's remarks and official statements were published in Egyptian newspapers (*Al-Massry Al-Youm*, *Al-Sherouq*, and *Al-Alhram*) on March 13 and 14, 2015.
34. See al-Sisi's documented statement in Esaa Ali's essay published in Egypt's *Al-Massry Al-Youm* newspaper on March 14, 2015. When asked if the project would take ten years to build, al-Sisi was quoted as replying "Ten years, what? I am talking seriously here. We don't do our work like that. No, no, no. . . . Not ten years, and not seven years, I am talking very seriously."
35. Interview with the chief editor of the Middle East News Agency published on February 20, 2018.
36. Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation*.
37. "A New New Cairo: Egypt plans £30bn Purpose-Built Capital in Desert," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2015. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/16/new-cairo-egypt-plans-capital-city-desert>.
38. R. Michaelson, "'Cairo Has Started to Become Ugly': Why Egypt Is Building a New Capital City," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2018. Available at [https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/may/08/cairo-why-egypt-build-new-capital-city-desert?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/may/08/cairo-why-egypt-build-new-capital-city-desert?CMP=share_btn_link).
39. D. Sims, *Egypt's Desert Dreams: Development or Disaster?* (Cairo: American University Press 2015).
40. See Middle East Eye, "Confusion Regarding Egypt's New Capital after Sisi Announces Lack of Funds," April 9, 2015. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/confusion-regarding-egypts-new-capital-after-sisi-announces-lack-funds>.
41. R. Michaelson, "Island v Megacity: The Cairo Islanders Fighting Violent State Evictions," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2017. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/21/island-v-megacity-cairo-islanders-violent-state-evictions-warraq>.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. On October 3, 2012, Egypt's *Al-Watan* newspaper published an article explaining that the urban planning authority was considering amending the proposed plan for a major city in the region to create Bedouin-style neighborhoods, where the state allocates lands for inhabitants of clans and tribes to build houses according to their customs and traditions.
45. See Shima Saleh's essay published August 12, 2016, at <http://www.egynews.net> (in Arabic).
46. Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation*.
47. Y. Sayigh, *Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).
48. "From War Room to Boardroom: Military Firms Flourish in Sisi's Egypt," May 16, 2018. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/egypt-economy-military/>.
49. B. Meighan, "Egypt's Shaky Investment Climate," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 11, 2018. Available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76567?mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiTodZNVkyUmpZVEZsTkdwaiIsInQiOiI3b3UyanlyRldyandpOWdtdWVjaGhsRjFBZFF3TDJyUoV3ZGJocnVFUrwvNUNXQyt3boM5elVPaDBZZ3RTRHNCsVayVnB3VXlPalpaZFZtTVl6ZmZJS1NrMndLSllBek52Wmd6TEtZRmxHbVNYSHZMZlJRR3lyditZVFRBMGdTZoYifQ%3D%3D](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76567?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTodZNVkyUmpZVEZsTkdwaiIsInQiOiI3b3UyanlyRldyandpOWdtdWVjaGhsRjFBZFF3TDJyUoV3ZGJocnVFUrwvNUNXQyt3boM5elVPaDBZZ3RTRHNCsVayVnB3VXlPalpaZFZtTVl6ZmZJS1NrMndLSllBek52Wmd6TEtZRmxHbVNYSHZMZlJRR3lyditZVFRBMGdTZoYifQ%3D%3D).
50. A.K. Tawfik, *Utopia* (Cairo: Dar Merit, 2008).