

Preface to the Paperback Edition

Introduction

This paperback edition is being put to press almost four years after the hard-cover version of *Egypt's Desert Dreams* was written. While only a short time in the saga of Egypt's desert dreams, much has happened and even more has been said of the desert imperative, especially by government and its cheerleaders. Thus it is worth giving a quick summary of the continuing discourse on Egypt's desert potential and also the reality of concrete achievements—as much as hard facts are available. Does what has been said in the first edition still stand? Are some of the innumerable desert schemes and grand projects launched by the state actually beginning to pay off? Are plans to shift tens of millions of people out of the crowded Nile Valley—Egypt's new population map—actually coming to fruition? Are the government and its elites calming down their rhetoric and beginning to strike a more rational approach to populating the desert and managing public land? And finally, are at least some voices of reason beginning to emerge about reliance on a desert trajectory as the underpinning of Egypt's development?

One decidedly new element to appear is the scheme for a gigantic new administrative capital on what had been blank desert east of Cairo. The plan immediately captured enormous interest when it was announced at an economic investment conference in Sharm al-Sheikh in March 2015. The first edition of *Egypt's Desert Dreams* had just come out a couple months earlier, and we were inundated with calls from journalists desperate for comments about the new scheme, for which there was little information other than superlatives. Now, almost three years later, it is worth investigating just how this concept has developed, and what this says about government posturing and legitimacy.

It is not only the new administrative capital that has ramped up the preoccupation with mega schemes in the desert. As we proceed to review Egypt's various desert components, it will be clear that exploiting state-controlled desert lands has become, more than ever, the fulcrum around which Egypt's future promise is perceived. In chapter two of the first edition we concluded that "such a fixation with conquering the desert is a recurring theme, even necessity, and it seems that there will be yet more and more of it to come" (p. 63). Looking from today's vantage point (December 2017), it seems this prediction has already proven to be very true.

The government has ratcheted up ever higher the imperative for desert development as part of national plans. In September 2017 the minister of planning extolled Egypt's main Strategy for Sustainable Development, "Vision 2030," talking about inclusive growth and economic development for future generations. Heading the list of concrete steps were various mega projects underway or planned—the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCEZ), the new administrative capital, the Four Million Feddan Land Reclamation Project, the North Coast development zone, the Golden Triangle, New al-Alamein, the One Million Unit Social Housing Program, a "furniture city" in Damietta, new industrial zones across the nation, and New Galala City—all of which are being built on state desert land. The minister goes on to describe other "pillars" of Vision 2030—the energy, social inclusion, education, and health pillars—but the implication is clear: Egypt's development strategy for the next fifteen years is led and symbolized by a simplistic spatial construct, one that sees the future of the economy and its citizens as being out there in the desert.¹ Such a fixation with desert development is constantly reinforced by regime stalwarts and pundits, and it is as if conquering the desert will perform any number of miracles for the ills facing the nation. For example, Abdel-Moniem Said, writing an opinion piece in December 2014, affirmed that "spreading out and developing new cities is the future of Egypt" and managed to equate this with achieving "a definitive victory over terrorism and over the psychological and propaganda war that the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters are waging at home and abroad."² Not to be outdone, in September 2017 Mohamed al-Fikki, editorialist and the recently appointed director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, focused on Egypt's long-ignored population time bomb, concluding that this fundamental and even existential challenge will disappear once the national policy of "shifting people out into the desert" becomes a reality. Who needs family planning?³

In the following pages of this preface we take the reader through what has been happening in Egypt's desert over the last four years. We first look at the new administrative capital, then take up the expansion efforts in the existing new towns, the launching of *new* new towns, the greening of the desert, industry and mining in the desert, coastal tourism, and the issue of management of state lands. To the extent that data is available from the results of the 2017 Census, we also measure the degree to which the government's overriding policy to move people out into the desert has been successful over the last decade. Finally, we present a conclusion that tries to summarize the main recent trends in the eternal quest to make desert dreams come true.

The New Administrative Capital

“Forget the numbers. They're not important, and not fixed. We have a dream, and we're building our dreams now.”

—Khalid al-Husseini, spokesman for the Administrative Capital Company for Urban Development, 24 October 2017⁴

In March 2015 a much-promoted economic development conference got underway in Sharm al-Sheikh, aimed at promoting Egypt's many investment possibilities to foreign investors, particularly those from the Gulf. Along with the SCEZ and other mega projects, the concept of a new administrative and financial capital was slickly presented with superlatives galore. The city, to be located approximately halfway between Cairo and Suez, is set to be a 700-square-kilometer urban hub, with twenty-one residential districts to accommodate 6.5 million people. It is said to feature 1,250 mosques and churches, nearly 2,000 schools and colleges, over 600 medical facilities, 40,000 hotel rooms, an amusement/theme park four times the size of Disneyland, a public park over twice the size of New York's Central Park, an airport as large as Heathrow, and a business/finance center with the tallest building in Africa. Other superlatives: artificial lakes and a green river over an area of 6,000 feddans, solar energy farms stretching over 91 square kilometers, and at least six foreign universities.⁵ As the new center of government, it will also include a Government District (*al-bayy al-bukumi*) which will accommodate over thirty ministries, the cabinet, Parliament, a Justice City, a huge conference center, and the presidency (itself on no less than 17 square kilometers or

4,000 feddans). Next to it will be a diplomatic quarter capable of housing over 110 embassies as well as two exclusive villa areas.

At the Sharm al-Sheikh conference the international media certainly took notice, both because of the bold, brave-new-world design concept and graphics produced by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill,⁶ and especially because the concept had been a well-kept secret until the launch.⁷ There had been earlier plans for the relocation of administrative buildings outside Cairo under Sadat in the late 1970s and again in 2007 as part of the Cairo Vision 2050, but the project displayed in Sharm al-Sheikh was, in its scale and intent, completely unprecedented.⁸

At the conference the idea was that the development of the new capital would be led by Capital City Partners, a privately owned property vehicle founded by Mohamed Alabbar, chairman of Emaar Properties of Dubai and the man behind Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. Even though an MOU to that effect was signed, the deal fell through some six months later. At this point reports began to circulate that the China State Construction Engineering Corporation and the China Fortune Land Development Company were to develop parts of the new city in partnership with the Egyptian government, but by the end of 2016 this formula also collapsed. Finally it was decided that Egypt was to go it alone, at least for the initial phase. Thus in May 2016 the Administrative Capital Company for Urban Development (Sharikat al-‘Asima al-Idariya li-l-Tanmiya al-‘Umrianiya) was set up, a joint share company with 51 percent ownership by the armed forces and 49 percent by the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA).⁹

Groundbreaking for the main highways of the first phase started in early 2016 and since then the pace of construction has been very impressive. Scores of Egyptian public and private contractors are doing all the work, supervised by the Armed Forces Engineering Authority and NUCA. By the end of 2017 the first residential quarter (Number 3, with 25,000 units) was more than half finished; the 900-room al-Masah Hotel had been built, complete with conference hall, mall, lake area, and a strange black megalithic sculpture;¹⁰ and foundation work had been started for some of the new ministry sites. A raised VIP viewing platform overlooking the new city, replete with helipads, had been quickly finished by early 2017.

Outside investors have been reported to be creeping back in a big way. From mid-2016 to mid-2017 several reports, somewhat confusing, mention that the China Fortune Land Development Company is still looking

to invest some \$4 billion over five years in various projects in the new capital and a total of \$13.5 billion over the next ten years, undertaking the development of 14,000 feddans of Phase One mainly to create the business and finance center, replete with lots of glass and steel skyscrapers. Other investments are said to include a smart city, a residential project, infrastructure projects and educational-cum-entertainment services, and a rapid rail link.¹¹ At the same time the UAE businessman Mohamed Alabbar has resurfaced, mentioning in September 2017 that he plans to implement projects in the new administrative capital, though as usual details are scarce.¹²

When talking about the new administrative capital, even almost three years after it was announced, it remains difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, and pronouncements are often vague, even contradictory. Yet it is certain that the commitment and perseverance of the Egyptian government in moving ahead is impressive, and the backing and even goading by the president for more rapid progress is ever-present. However, such a commitment cannot mask several problems that loom, and we analyze some of these in the following paragraphs.

Access to the new capital

Media reports about the new capital usually start off by mentioning that it is located some 30 or 45 kilometers from Cairo. Actually, measured from Tahrir Square along major road corridors, the distance is 62 kilometers to the new capital's Government District (*al-hayy al-bukumi*) via Road 90 in New Cairo, or 71 kilometers via the Suez Desert Highway. And from there one will still have to traverse as much as 20 kilometers to reach other parts of the city. Such access will be by surface road transport, either by bus, private car, or taxi. As anyone who works at the AUC campus in New Cairo can attest, getting there from downtown Cairo already takes well over an hour, and the traffic will only get worse. It is then another 30 kilometers to reach the new capital's government city. The alternative, along the Suez Road, is no quicker, and with the burgeoning developments along this axis (Shorouk, al-Badr New Town, Madinaty, etc.), traffic can only become heavier. Of course, were one to live in nearby New Cairo or Madinaty, commuting by car would be much simpler, but how many of those who work in the new capital will be living in these enclaves?¹³

Although none of the available plans of the new capital indicate any land reserves for rail transport lines, several statements made by government officials show that planning for a rapid-rail passenger link from

Madinat al-Salam (east of Cairo at the start of the Ismailiya desert road) to the new capital is well advanced. In fact, ground-breaking for the project is supposed to start at the end of 2017, costing \$1.2 billion, and to be built by the Chinese firm AVIC backed by a loan from the Chinese Import Export Bank.¹⁴ However, it seems that the Ministry of Transport is having difficulties raising its financing share, and proclamations of the imminent realization of this and other rail projects have proven either premature or downright wrong in the past.¹⁵

The scheme intends to use the right-of-way of the old Cairo–Suez single-track railway for most of its length, plus some 25 kilometers of new track, to arrive at the new capital. This scheme will have 11 stations, including stops at al-Shorouk and al-Badr New Town. Its terminus at Madinat al-Salam is to connect to the still-to-be-built Phase 4 of the third metro line. The eastern section of this third line will have 16 stations starting from Ataba in downtown Cairo. Thus, when and if the rapid transit connector is built, anyone coming from central Cairo to the New Capital will face at least 28 stops plus at least one transfer. Hardly a ‘rapid’ transit solution. And, as has been the case with other rail connectors planned for the new towns around Cairo, there is the troublesome fare issue. To recover the huge investment plus operating costs, any private operator will need to charge fares that will be unaffordable to the majority of potential commuters, and those who can easily pay will probably prefer their private cars. Thus, for the scheme to work, massive state construction subsidies will be required as well as continuing subsidies for operating costs.

To further confuse the transport issue, in July 2017 an MOU was signed between NUCA and Canadian Bombardier for a monorail line from Madinat Nasr through the Mushir Tantawi Corridor and New Cairo’s Road 90 to the new capital, with a projected ridership of 1.5 million passengers.¹⁶ This project would be in direct competition with the proposed Chinese light rail, and in any event achieving even a fraction of the estimated ridership will be extremely difficult. At least a feasibility study is being conducted first.

It is interesting that most plans and images of the new capital show it to be a stand-alone agglomeration surrounded by clean desert on all sides. However, this is far from reality, and already virtually every bit of land abutting its western edges is reserved for yet more upscale residential and grandiose mixed developments, and even remaining desert on its northern edge is rapidly being planned. Many such projects have already started,

with ground having been broken for Arab Contractors' huge Future City directly to the north (7,500 feddans, *madinat al-mustaqbal*) and with work well underway in a super-compound on 10,000 feddans for the Ministry of Defense directly to the south.¹⁷ And every last feddan of the desert on the eastern extreme of New Cairo is already being subdivided for gated communities and villas. In other words, one can soon expect a continuous landscape of sparse and sprawling development bounded by the Suez and Ain Sukhna highways and stretching 56 kilometers from the old Ring Road through New Cairo and the new capital to the east. All together, within this mega quadrant one is talking about 1,300 square kilometers of low-density, car-oriented cityscape and suburbs, most of it to be perpetually underutilized. Talk about urban sprawl! For comparison, the size of this quadrant exceeds that of the whole of the City of Los Angeles (1,215 km²) and is much bigger than the five boroughs of New York City (790 km²).¹⁸ Also, to this area should be added desert lands across the Suez Highway directly to the north, rapidly filling up with the sprawling new towns of al-Badr New Town, Shorouk, and New Heliopolis and with other sundry projects such as the expanding Robiki Leather City.¹⁹

Design of the new capital

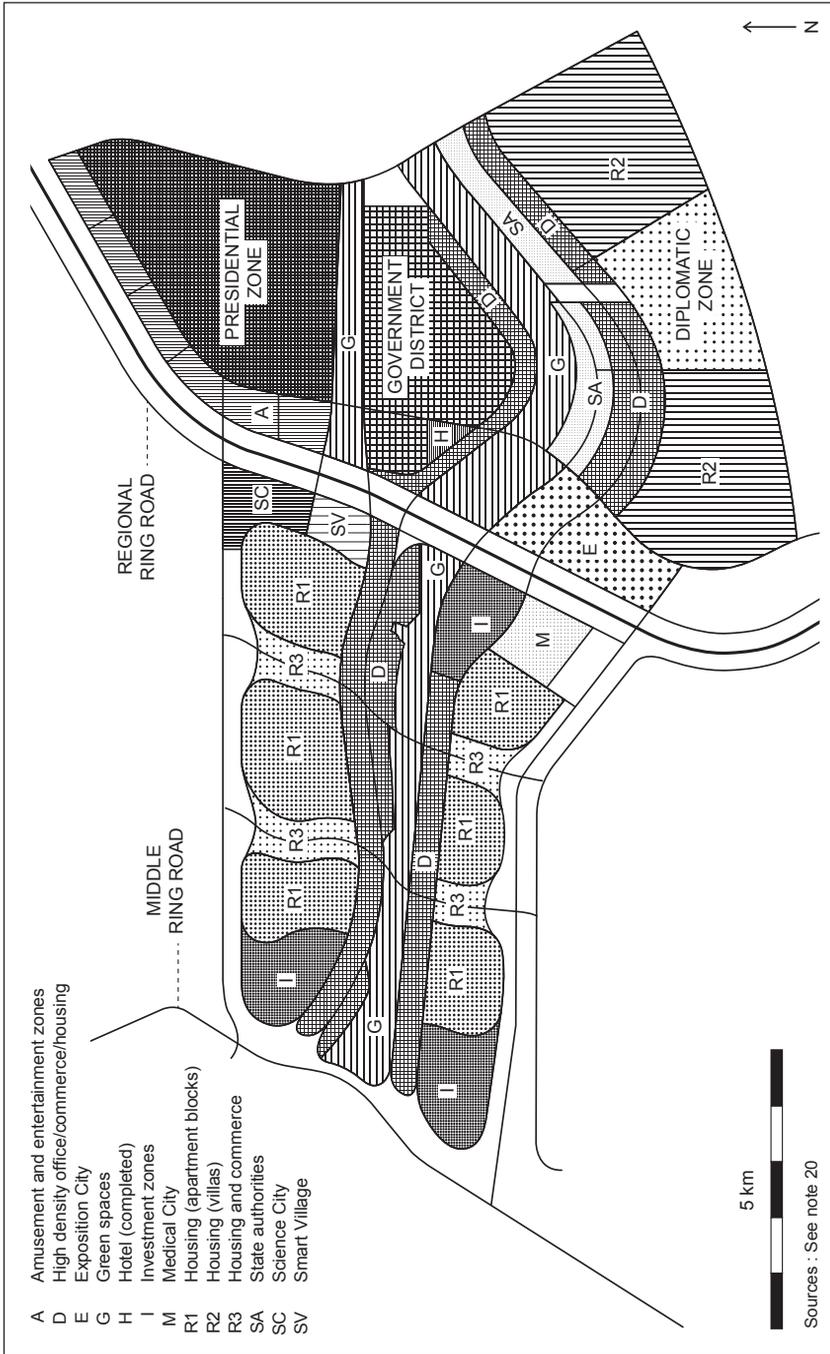
The layout of the new city is structured around a serpentine central green spine covering 40 square kilometers, bound by two huge east-west motorways (Mohamed Bin Zeid Avenue South and Mohamed Bin Zeid North, each of which is 125 meters wide, not counting slip roads).²⁰ Off of this spine are to be twenty residential districts, each with its own service center and green space, plus the main government city (said to be a mixture of pharaonic and Islamic architectural styles), the diplomatic quarter, and various specialized zones for higher education, business, banking, and offices, a 'justice city' with courthouses, a culture and arts center, a huge presidential palace and grounds, and so on. The plan calls for abundant open spaces, greenery, a segregation of uses, and vast distances between everything that will require a near-total reliance on private cars. Somehow this reliance on the automobile has been dissimulated away with passing references to an electric train from Cairo, bus and bike lanes, and ample, wide pedestrian walkways. In fact, the CEO of the new capital company, during an interview on the project's sustainable development, was quoted as saying that the system of transport is so well conceived that inhabitants will in principle be able to avoid using cars.²¹

It should be added that, in the design of the urban form for the new capital, architects have made a ‘courageous’ break with the past. For decades the many new towns in Egypt have been subject to the same out-of-the-drawer rectilinear patterns, with lots of 30-degree angles thrown in for relief. In contrast, in the new capital urban arterials and neighborhoods are to be entirely curvilinear, and it seems that straight streets and highways have been studiously avoided (except in the Government District).

One prominent design feature—some would say impediment—of the new capital is the north–south regional ring road that bisects Phase One of the new town just west of the central government city. Considered an anathema in traditional town planning, this artery is designated to have a whopping 800-meter reserve that will represent a cordon sanitaire between the western and eastern sections of Phase One. Evidently this has not bothered planners.

Nearly all of the layout is to be located on flat, featureless desert.²² The master plan designers, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, made much of the scheme fitting into the landscape and expressing natural features to advantage, but only at the far eastern end of the site is there anything like true wadis and ridges. In effect, almost every landscape feature will need to be artificially created, including water bodies.

Phase One is to be constructed on an area of 40,000 feddans or 168 square kilometers, representing about 25 percent of the total new city. (See Map 0.) According to plans made available in the media, this first phase will include all the main government buildings, the presidential palace, the diplomatic quarter, and most of the central spine. It will also include eight residential zones and numerous blocks designated high-density “commerce and offices,” or “office and residential,” or “tourism and amusement,” which are found along the green spine and are intended to be the location of most high-rise development. There are areas labeled as medical, convention, and amusement zones, and there are also many areas sprinkled all over Phase One that are only designated as “investment zones”—in other words, awaiting some mega investor who has a real estate concept. In fact, the layout of all of Phase One looks more like an investment map than a master plan, and it seems this was intentional. School sites in residential areas are being heavily marketed for private language and international schools to set up branches.²³ Even foreign missions in Cairo are being pressured to buy up plots in the diplomatic



Map 0 : Indicative land use for Phase One of the administrative capital