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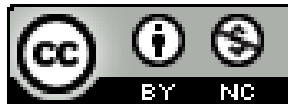
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The New Administrative Capital: Authority and the Erosion of Rights in the Egyptian City

Rowaq Arabi

Abstract

The New Administrative Capital (NAC) has emerged as a symbol of the strength of Egypt's 'new republic' and a marker of its political and economic stability. Yet, its development has so far faced significant challenges, raising questions about its capacity to deliver on its grand promises. This article examines the economic, social, and urban impacts of the new capital on Cairo and other Egyptian cities, while placing at the centre of this discussion an assessment of the state's official narrative surrounding the project. The article is grounded in the hypothesis that the project has yielded both direct and indirect impacts on Egyptian citizens' rights to urbanisation and urban development. It also explores the adverse interplay between the new city and pre-existing urban centres in Egypt. The analysis draws primarily on official statements as articulated by key figures responsible for the new capital's political, economic, and administrative development. It also incorporates press reporting of the city's relationship with Egypt's broader economy. The findings suggest that the New Administrative Capital is not merely an urban development initiative but a project with profound implications for the social fabric of Cairo and other Egyptian regions. These outcomes necessitate a comprehensive reassessment of the urbanisation strategies and financial policies tied to the new city.

Keywords: Egypt; New Administrative Capital; Authoritarianism; Neoliberalism; Human Rights

Introduction

The state's narrative surrounding the New Administrative Capital appears largely idealistic. It has asserted that building a new city on such a vast area would require no funding from the state treasury, nor lead to any structural disruptions of the national economy. Moreover, it claims the project will resolve Cairo's long-standing urban challenges—issues inherited over centuries

without resolution. According to this vision, the new capital would achieve a ‘comprehensive urban renaissance’ for Egyptian cities and initiate a radical shift in its approach to urbanisation.

Conversely, Cairo represents a substantial burden on the Egyptian state due to chronic issues in dire need of addressing such as overpopulation and overcrowding, issues that stem from inconsistent policies across historical periods. Yet, today’s proposed solution—a ‘new administrative capital’—raises questions about feasibility, particularly against the backdrop of rapid economic changes in Egypt over the past decade, changes driven by state policies, which have contributed to profound administrative disarray. Ultimately, resolving Cairo’s problems necessitates direct engagement within the city’s borders. The notion that creating a new city would itself address the old city’s challenges demands deeper analysis and scrutiny.

This article critically examines the state’s narrative and investigates the extent to which the construction of the New Administrative Capital has structural impacts over of the Egyptian economy, the development of other cities, and the rights of Egyptian citizens more broadly. Such rights include urbanisation and access to the city, public spaces, adequate housing, urban justice, and equitable participation in new urban centres being developed by the state.

Analysis of the government’s discourse serves as the primary methodology of this article. This approach involves testing the veracity of the state’s narrative by comparing it to the lived realities of the New Administrative Capital. Field visits, complemented by multiple interviews, form a key component of this analysis. These interviews were conducted with public servants and workers in the city, focusing on the nature of their work, the challenges they face, and the extent to which the city’s expansive architecture addresses their needs. Additionally, discussions were held with brokers and intermediaries working in the real estate sector. These conversations explored the types of companies involved in the city’s development, community responses to the housing units, and the socio-economic classes targeted by these developments. Academic and newspaper articles addressing the New Administrative Capital, particularly in economic and urban contexts, also form a foundational part of the analysis. The article begins by engaging with the state’s official discourse and then tests its authenticity, questioning whether it reflects reality or warrants scepticism. It further addresses the broader question of the primary objective behind this state narrative.

In understanding the New Administrative Capital, the state’s rhetoric is central as it represents the sole narrative for the project—a national initiative presented as beyond reproach. Therefore, analysing urbanisation in this context requires serious engagement with the state’s narrative. This methodology was deemed essential for several reasons. First, the state’s discourse, promoted heavily by its media apparatus, profoundly influences large segments of Egyptian society. Second, the state is the primary—and often the sole—source of information about the nature and progress of urbanisation in the new capital. Finally, the state underpins the project’s implementation. The Capital is the product of a powerful state authority capable of executing transformative decisions, making its narrative integral to any in-depth examination.

Through this methodology, the article proposes two hypotheses. The first concerns the urbanisation of the New Capital itself, an exclusionary process that caters to a single social class whose economic and political interests align with the state’s public policies. This can be observed

in the city's urban design and the spatial distribution of specific facilities within its borders. The second hypothesis posits a negative relationship between the New Administrative Capital and other Egyptian cities, wherein the development—or decline—of these cities has become dependent on the capital. This dynamic is evident in the economic repercussions of the capital's emergence and the diversion of resources to its growth, often at the expense of other urban centres.

It is very challenging to examining with any accuracy the nature and development of urbanisation in Cairo, due to its historical and social complexity. Thus, it remains difficult to study the city's historical evolution, its modern urban development, and its socioeconomic dynamics. Cairo's urban history is immensely complex, spanning from Ismaili Cairo founded by Khedive Ismail to the neighbourhoods developed during the presidency of Mohamed Hosni Mubarak. Urban historians have extensively documented Cairo's development. Janet Abu Lughod, in *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*,¹ Andre Raymond in *Cairo: City of History*,² and Nezar AlSayyad in *Cairo: Histories of a City*,³ have chronicled the city's urban growth across different historical periods. These works narrate the evolution of Cairo as a millennium city and examine the characteristics of urbanisation specific to each era.

At another level, analyses of Cairo's urban landscape, including informal settlements and new cities, have been instrumental in unpacking the complexities of its urban fabric. David Sims, in *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of Control*, introduced a unique political perspective on Cairo's urbanisation. He critiqued state housing policies and examined informal housing as part of a broader urban dynamic.⁴ Sims' additional work on desert cities, which examines Egypt's strategies for desert reconstruction, offers valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying such ambitious projects.⁵ The New Administrative Capital, as a desert city, aligns with this broader context of Egypt's urban ambitions. Its location and development reflect the state's vision for large-scale urban reconstruction, making it a critical case study within the framework of Egypt's urban policies. A significant challenge associated with the New Administrative Capital lies in the absence of information and lack of transparency surrounding its establishment and development. This opacity has hindered research and analysis. Despite these limitations, various studies and writings have emerged, differing in their depth and approach. These range from journalistic opinion pieces to more academically grounded studies.

Since 2015, the year the New Administrative Capital project was announced, researchers and journalists have published articles raising critical questions. These writings, often functioning as a one-sided dialogue, focused on issues such as spending priorities, the feasibility of urbanisation in the desert, and Cairo's previous urban failures resulting from mismanagement and lack of community engagement. Among the most prominent contributors is Egyptian historian Khaled Fahmy, whose work posed questions directly to Egyptian authorities about the nature of the project.⁶ Similarly, Mada Masr⁷ and AlManassa⁸ published critiques by several writers questioning the rationale for establishing a new desert city. Yasser El-Sheshtawy notably described the project as 'another desert folly'.⁹ International media also contributed to the debate, often emphasising the economic implications. Articles in the foreign press linked the project to the collapse of the Egyptian currency, attributing it to ongoing debt accumulation.¹⁰

Academic studies, though limited in number, have provided valuable insights into the urbanisation of the New Administrative Capital. A study by Hassan Elmouelhi stands out for analysing Cairo's urban development through the lens of neoliberal urbanism, though it largely overlooks the political and social dynamics.¹¹ Mirette Khorshed's master's thesis examined the New Administrative Capital in a historical and comparative framework, particularly in relation to previous urban projects such as Sadat City.¹²

Other notable contributions include the work of Patrick Loewert and Christian Steiner, whose study approached urbanisation in the capital through a bold, analytical lens.¹³ Their methodology raised important questions about the nature of urbanisation in the New Administrative Capital, offering a distinctive perspective on the project. What is striking about these studies is their relatively early publication dates, ranging from 2017 to 2020. This timing renders any judgment on the New Administrative Capital incomplete, given the rapid changes driven by Egypt's volatile economic and political conditions. Assessing the project during such an early phase may lead to premature conclusions. Most studies approached the New Administrative Capital within the historical framework of Cairo's urban development, without giving due attention to its current political context, which is exceptional and demands a more focused analysis. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the capital within its unique contemporary circumstances.

In a related context, it is important to highlight studies that adopted a more policy-oriented approach. For instance, the Centre for Alternative Policy Solutions at the American University in Cairo published relevant contributions, including articles by Amira El Hakeh¹⁴ and Aly ElNady,¹⁵ which analysed the social and economic dimensions of the New Administrative Capital. The new city is heavily tied to a political narrative that frames it as a national project. However, its establishment did not result from a comprehensive societal decision or a consultative process to examine Cairo's urbanisation needs. Instead, it was a sovereign decision executed without sufficient consideration of Cairo's existing urban fabric. This lack of inclusivity has created a sense of antagonism between ordinary Egyptians and the capital project, a tension that can be observed both in public discourse and in the state's messaging. The state's narrative emphasises the necessity of the capital's establishment, asserting that it does not adversely affect citizens' economic lives or incomes.

This research addresses three intersecting themes. The first focuses on the economic dimension, the cornerstone of the establishment and development of the New Administrative Capital. As the backbone of the state, the economy plays a critical role in shaping the city's trajectory. This section examines the concealed costs of construction and the broader economic impact on citizens living outside the capital, highlighting the inseparable relationship between the two. The second theme analyses the city's urbanisation, emphasising its adherence—or lack thereof—to social and demographic diversity. This includes an evaluation of urban facilities and residential neighbourhoods, alongside a detailed examination of the large-scale projects designated as national initiatives within the city. The third theme explores the ripple effects of the new city's establishment on Cairo's neighbourhoods and other Egyptian cities. This includes assessing the extent to which urbanisation and social life in these areas have been influenced by the economic

and urban relationship between the capital and the rest of the country. A key component of this analysis is the role of the New Urban Communities Authority and its impact, alongside other societal factors that naturally intersect with this dynamic.

A Vision for the Future of Egypt: The New Republic

At the Egypt Economic Development Conference (EEDC), held in Sharm El-Sheikh in March 2015, a contract was announced with the United Arab Emirates for the establishment of a new city to serve as Egypt's administrative capital. Subsequently, the city, temporarily named the New Administrative Capital, was officially initiated in 2016 under Decree No. 57. This decision altered the geographical boundaries of Cairo and Suez governorates, with parts of the Suez Governorate reassigned to Cairo. This adjustment ensured compliance with the constitutional requirement for parliament to be situated within the Egyptian capital.

Planning divided the city into several neighbourhoods, including government and private districts, areas designated for the Egyptian presidency and the newly established headquarters of the Egyptian army. Key features of the city include a new presidential palace, parliamentary and ministerial headquarters, government agencies, embassies, private sector offices, and a new headquarters for the Central Bank of Egypt. Residential neighbourhoods were developed in the form of gated compounds or open areas with distinctive urban designs. Spanning over 166,000 acres, the city's establishment was entrusted to a joint company formed by the New Urban Communities Authority (affiliated with the Ministry of Housing), the National Service Projects Organisation (NSPO), and the Armed Forces Land Projects Agency (AFLPA).¹⁶

While this urban initiative is not the first of its kind in Egypt—preceded by projects like Nasr City under President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Sadat City during President Anwar Sadat's era—the New Administrative Capital stands apart due to its exceptional political and social context and its unprecedented scale. The Egyptian state envisioned this ambitious project as a solution to Cairo's persistent urban and traffic problems, aiming to create a city with modern infrastructure that addresses the deficiencies of Greater Cairo's historical development.

At its core, the project symbolised the foundation of what the Egyptian state dubbed the 'New Republic'. Media coverage surrounding the city was extensive, often emphasising its superlative qualities: the largest towers, mosques, churches, and green spaces. Official and semi-official outlets frequently portrayed the New Administrative Capital as the most significant urban development in Cairo's history—a radical solution to the challenges of the old city and a fitting representation of Egypt's stature as a historical power and a vital regional hub.¹⁷

Promises of self-financing, and hidden debt burdens

During the National Youth Conference held in Alexandria Governorate in January 2023, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi asserted that the New Administrative Capital had not cost the state a single pound. Repeating this claim, he swore three times in the same speech that the project had incurred no expenses from the state budget.¹⁸ President El-Sisi framed the project's financing

around the concept of ‘selling the idea’, explaining that the initiative transformed ‘dust into money’ by converting land of negligible value into high-demand real estate. Two months earlier, President El-Sisi had made similar remarks, emphasising the state’s capacity to build ten cities like the Administrative Capital without burdening its budget, citing the high demand for housing in Egypt.¹⁹ This narrative had been reiterated in earlier speeches, including his address during the education development strategy session at Cairo University in July 2018. On that occasion, he declared, ‘I swear to God, the capital did not cost the government a single pound’,²⁰ and elaborated on the premise that the project would generate its own funds without drawing from state resources.

This narrative of self-financing has been consistently promoted by state officials over the years. Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, a key figure in the project’s implementation,²¹ and Khaled Abbas, chairman of the Administrative Capital For Urban Development (ACUD), have both affirmed in public statements that the project requires no funding from the state budget.²² According to these officials, the ACUD generates revenue by selling land within the city, using the proceeds to develop infrastructure and establish a transportation network to serve the city’s residents. As a result, the value of the city’s land and real estate increases, purportedly benefiting both the state and its citizens without imposing any economic burden.

This narrative presents an idealised vision of the capital’s development, devoid of any economic, social, or urban complexities. It suggests that the infrastructure—typically a costly undertaking requiring billions of dollars—would be built without state expenditure. Moreover, it implies that the rise in land and property values will continue unimpeded and contribute to the urban development effort without any unintended consequences. Critical questions are thus raised: How accurate is the official state narrative? What can be revealed about the relationship between the New Administrative Capital Company and the state? Perhaps most importantly, how does the construction of this new capital affect the rights of citizens in other cities?

Financing the Administrative Capital: A zero-cost model?

The financing strategy behind the New Administrative Capital became clearer in 2019 when Finance Minister Mohamed Maait, in a televised interview, stressed that the project was not funded by the state’s treasury. Maait outlined the approach as a simple equation: creating value for land. He explained that if a piece of land is provided for free, and a loan is secured to develop its infrastructure, the value of this land would increase significantly. The land can then be sold to repay the loan and generate additional profit. Maait further argued that the presence of central state agencies in the new city will increase its appeal, thus driving up land value. In addressing what benefits citizens might derive from this model, he linked the project to Egypt’s Vision 2030, stating that reducing the national deficit and debt would free resources to invest in healthcare, education, and wages, ultimately improving citizens’ lives.²³

The state, through its finance minister, framed this financial strategy as ultimately serving the public. However, this study critically examines the viability and implications of the strategy, regardless of the intentions behind these official statements. What stands out in official discourse is the assumption that opposition to the project stems not from its execution but from

misunderstandings of its projected outcomes. The rhetoric is carefully crafted to reassure citizens that the capital's development has no negative impact on their lives. Simultaneously, official and semi-official media have denied the existence of public opposition to the project. Instead, promotional films and advertisements frequently feature citizens, workers, and engineers celebrating the capital as an essential national achievement.²⁴

Finance and debt in the NAC's development: A critical approach

In May 2018, during the inauguration of the Administrative Capital's power station alongside other national projects, Minister of Electricity Mohamed Shaker revealed key details about the project's financing. Speaking in the presence of the President of the Republic and representatives of the German company Siemens, Shaker stated: 'All the money we took, we took it by borrowing from banks and from international financing bodies'. He further noted that the Ministry of Finance played a significant role in providing financial guarantees and partial funding for certain aspects of the project.²⁵

The Administrative Capital power station, one of the largest in Egypt, boasts a capacity of 4,800 megawatts. According to the Presidency's official website, the project cost \$2.041 billion, along with an additional EGP 51.34 million.²⁶ Financing was arranged through a consortium comprising Siemens, El Sewedy, and Orascom, which collectively raised the necessary funds.²⁷ The power station became a cornerstone of the state's promotional narrative, symbolising the energy and infrastructure backbone of the massive urban development.

In addition to the power station, the state heavily promoted transportation projects to address the capital's geographic isolation. Located approximately fifty-five kilometres from Cairo in a desert area devoid of residents and urban facilities, the Administrative Capital required extensive connectivity solutions to make it accessible to its target population. These transportation projects were divided into two tiers. The first focused on developing a network of roads, bridges, and highways to facilitate private vehicle access to the city. The second involved creating advanced public transit systems, including a monorail, a 'sky train', a light rail transit (LRT) system, and an express train linking the capital to other major Egyptian cities.²⁸

The monorail project, connecting Old Cairo to the New Administrative Capital, is a cornerstone of the state's transportation infrastructure for the new city. The contract, valued at over \$4.5 billion, was awarded to a consortium of Bombardier (Canada), Orascom, and Arab Contractors.²⁹ According to the state narrative, this monorail system is a key means of transportation for employees commuting to the new city. Workers can travel via the metro, starting from Adly Mansour station (the final stop on the metro's third line), then transfer to the light rail transit (LRT) system to reach the Arts and Culture station, and finally use designated buses to government departments. This extensive transportation system comes with significant financial implications. The monorail project itself cost \$1.2 billion, financed through a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China.³⁰ Additionally, a \$4.5 billion contract was signed with a consortium of Orascom, Siemens, and Arab Contractors for the construction of a high-speed train linking the New Administrative Capital with coastal cities.³¹

Other large-scale projects also add to the financial burden. For example, the Financial District towers in the New Administrative Capital cost \$3 billion, financed through loans secured by the Ministry of Housing from a consortium of Chinese banks, led by ICBC Bank.³² The state has also heavily invested in a public transportation network for the capital, developing numerous axes and bridges to connect Old Cairo with the Administrative Capital. However, the exact costs of these infrastructure developments remain undisclosed. Adding to the ambiguity, the funding for certain projects, such as the presidential palace in the northeast of the city, is unknown.³³ In 2019, controversy arose after allegations by Egyptian contractor Mohamed Ali regarding the palace's cost. In response, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi defended the construction of presidential palaces, stating: 'Yes, I am building presidential palaces, and I will continue to build them. They are not for me personally, but for Egypt—there is nothing under my name. It is all in the name of Egypt'.³⁴

The state, through the New Administrative Capital Company and the Urban Communities Authority, has also assumed the role of a real estate developer within the new city. Several residential neighbourhoods were constructed to increase the city's value and attract investment.³⁵ Notably, the Financial District towers cost \$3 billion, funded through loans,³⁶ while the government district was constructed at a cost of \$3.18 billion, financed through land sales to investors.³⁷

Hidden financial burdens

A closer examination of the financing strategy behind the New Administrative Capital reveals significant deviations from the state's proclaimed zero-cost model. The government has borrowed tens of billions of dollars to develop infrastructure services in the arid environment of the new city, aiming to increase its value. This reality suggests that the equation promoted by authorities—of creating value through land sales—operated on a much narrower scale than the scope of these projects required. The establishment of roads, transportation networks, and utilities, along with infrastructure projects for the Capital Company itself, was essential to make the land suitable for development. However, investor interest in the project has been tepid, exemplified by the withdrawal of Emirati partners only months after the Administrative Capital was announced.³⁸ This highlights a deeper challenge: The project is not merely a residential neighbourhood that can be managed through the logic of a real estate developer but is instead a political and economic capital with far greater complexities.

Although the state itself has not directly borrowed funds, institutions tasked with developing Administrative Capital projects have taken on substantial loans under state guarantees. These financial guarantees, provided by the Ministry of Finance, effectively tie the debt to the state and exerting pressure on the national budget.³⁹ This dynamic was evident in the Minister of Electricity's 2018 remarks on financing energy projects through such guarantees, as discussed earlier. The implications of these guarantees are starkly outlined in the Ministry of Finance's financial statement for the 2023–2024 draft general budget. The Ministry explicitly acknowledges the risks posed by these guarantees, stating:

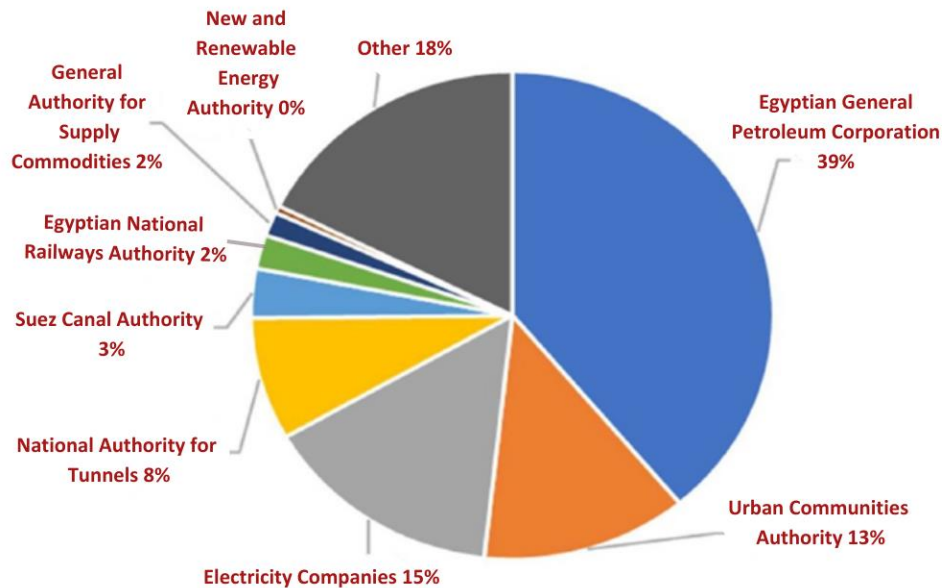
The facilities and debts guaranteed by the public treasury are among the most significant sources of risk to public finances, and their increase is observed year after year. This is due to the growing number of guaranteed entities, their value, and their concentration among a specific few. This indicates that the Ministry of Finance will likely be compelled to service loans on behalf of future borrowers.⁴⁰

According to the financial statement for the 2023/2024 general budget, loans guaranteed by the Ministry of Finance account for approximately twenty-nine per cent of Egypt’s gross domestic product (GDP). A closer analysis of the financial statement reveals the distribution of these guarantees among key entities. The Urban Communities Authority—the primary entity overseeing the construction of the Administrative Capital—ranks third among the beneficiaries of Ministry of Finance guarantees, receiving thirteen per cent of the total. The National Authority for Tunnels, responsible for transportation projects within the New Administrative Capital, follows with eight per cent of the guarantees (see Figure 1).

This evidence contradicts the state’s repeated claims that the Administrative Capital project ‘did not cost the state a single pound.’ Instead, the project has been financed through billions of dollars in loans at high interest rates. As Mohamed Gad aptly described, the state has ‘played with words’ to mask the true financial burden, as was similarly noted regarding the 2022 budget.⁴¹ Furthermore, some projects associated with the Administrative Capital have been directly financed from the state budget. For instance, the national road network serving the route to the New Administrative Capital is funded by public resources, which challenges the state’s claims of a self-financing model even further.

[Figure 1]

Total value of guarantees (domestic and foreign) distributed across various authorities



Source: Egyptian Ministry of Finance financial statement for the 2023–2024 draft general budget.

The proliferation of debt-financed projects has significantly harmed the Egyptian economy over the past four years and contributed to the repeated devaluations of the Egyptian pound. By 2024, the dollar's value had risen to approximately forty-eight Egyptian pounds, reflecting the consequences of unstable economic policies, mounting debt, and the burden of repayment schedules. These challenges have directly impacted Egyptian citizens, whose purchasing power and living standards have deteriorated. This reality starkly contrasts with statements from the Minister of Finance, who claimed that the expenses of establishing the New Administrative Capital did not burden the state or adversely affect citizens.⁴² In practice, however, the economic fallout from these projects has placed considerable strain on individuals, contradicting the official narrative of a cost-free initiative.

Smart Cutting-Edge City or Exclusionary Urban Experiment?

Official and semi-official state narratives portray the New Administrative Capital as a visionary project embodying urban standards vastly different from those of Old Cairo. Framed as a city of the twenty-first century, it is described as a modern, next-generation urban space, equipped with robust infrastructure and efficient services to cater to contemporary Egyptians.⁴³ However, a critical question arises: To what extent does the New Administrative Capital adhere to the principles of equitable urbanism? Equitable urbanism refers to an urban structure designed to serve lower social classes with the same effectiveness as upper classes, addressing the unique needs of each group. This analysis challenges the official portrayal, questioning whether the city's design truly fulfils its promise of inclusivity or represents an exclusionary urban model that prioritises one social class over others.

Militarising the future of urban planning in Egypt

In their study on the New Administrative Capital, Patrick Loewert and Christian Steiner argue that the geographical positioning of key government facilities and the presidential palace reveals a deliberate security rationale. The presidential palace, originally expected to occupy a central location within the city, was instead built in the northern part of the capital.⁴⁴ According to their interpretation, this shift reflects an effort by the Egyptian state to shield the residence of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi from potential security threats, including uprisings similar to the January 25 Revolution, which exposed vulnerabilities in Old Cairo. This historical experience has contributed to a pervasive crisis of confidence within the current regime, as indicated by President Sisi's repeated references to January 25 in his speeches.⁴⁵

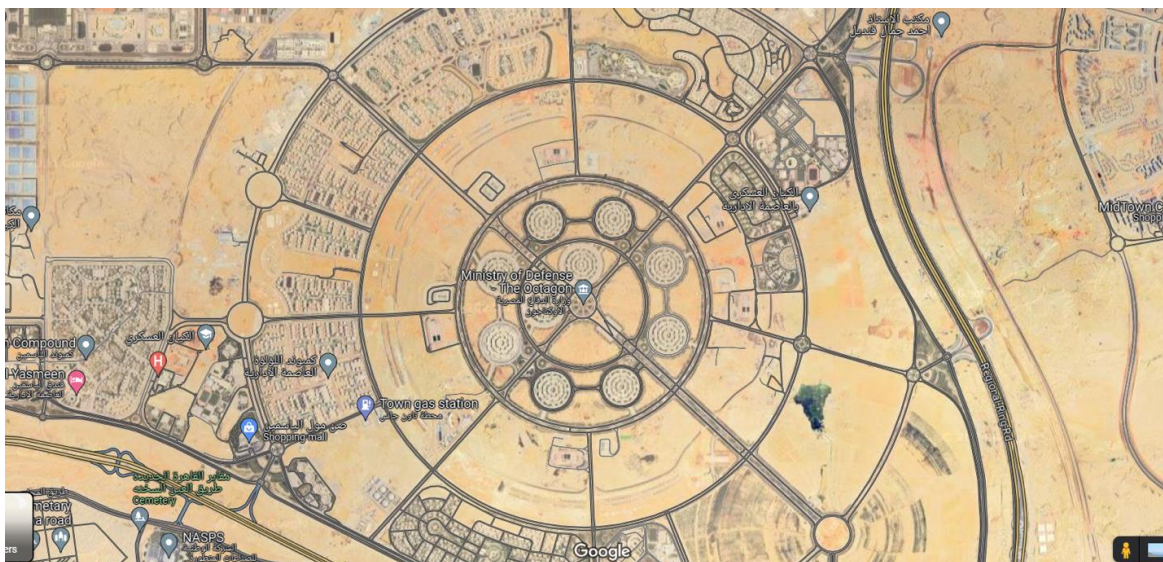
David Harvey, in his book *Rebel Cities*, similarly highlights the architectural transformations of Tahrir Square—symbolic of Egypt's revolutionary spirit—arguing that these changes were designed to enhance security control.⁴⁶ A comparable hypothesis can be applied to the urban planning of the New Administrative Capital, particularly in the selection of military installations and residences for senior military leaders, which appear strategically designed to protect the state's key power structures.

Situated approximately eight kilometres south of the iconic tower—the capital’s most recognisable landmark—is the ‘Military Entity’, a sprawling complex featuring the new headquarters for the Egyptian Ministry of Defence, nicknamed ‘The Octagon’ due to its shape. Built in the style of ancient Egyptian architecture, the Octagon spans a larger area than comparable facilities worldwide and includes ten main buildings, each representing a sector of the Ministry of Defence. Encircling the Octagon is a nine-hundred-meter-deep ring containing several exclusive residential compounds. Among them is the so-called ‘Senior Leaders Villas Compound’, which boasts thirty expansive villas, recreational facilities such as playgrounds, a swimming pool, and a central park surrounded by green spaces. Adjacent to this compound is the ‘Palaces of Senior Leaders’, featuring five palatial residences, sports facilities, and a fruit garden. The identities and roles of the occupants of these luxurious compounds remain unclear, but they appear to be designed for high-ranking officials of the Egyptian Armed Forces.

Expanding further, a second ring extends one kilometre outward, containing additional villa compounds and high-rise residential buildings. These facilities cater to mid- to high-ranking army officers, offering parks, mosques, schools, and sports facilities. This southern zone of the city serves as a dedicated hub for military leaders, institutions, and families, reinforcing the perception of the capital as a militarised urban environment. In contrast to the southern military zone, the northern part of the city features eight residential neighbourhoods labelled R1 to R8.

These neighbourhoods primarily accommodate lower-ranking officers and workers from outside the capital. They are bisected by the Green River, a landscaped park stretching thirty-five kilometres across 6,200 acres, and the Mohammed bin Zayed Axis, a key transportation corridor connecting the city’s entrance to prominent landmarks such as the Al-Fattah Al-Aleem Mosque and the cathedral at the northern border of the first phase of development. The northern region also hosts the complex of ministries, government institutions, the financial district with its iconic tower, and the largest presidential palace in Egypt, located in the city’s northeast.⁴⁷

[Figure 2]



Source: The military establishment as seen from Google Earth, 1 July 2024.

Among the numerous grand architectural projects in the New Administrative Capital, the Al-Fattah Al-Aleem Mosque stands out as a symbolic centrepiece. Located at the city's entrance, its massive domes and towering minarets convey a sense of grandeur, yet its architectural style appears disproportionate to its religious function. The mosque seems specifically designed to serve the ceremonial needs of the Egyptian state, a conclusion supported by the inclusion of special-purpose units and an official funerary corridor extending approximately half a kilometre within its grounds.

Promoted as one of the world's largest mosques, Al-Fattah Al-Aleem quickly became a point of national pride—until it was overshadowed by the Grand Mosque of Egypt, situated nearby. The mosque houses feature such as the world's largest pulpit and a colossal chandelier, both of which underscore its symbolic importance. According to field observations, it frequently hosts official state events, including prayers attended by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi alongside military leaders and officers. Notably, Al-Fattah Al-Aleem Mosque, which is prominently featured on Egypt's ten-pound currency, is not open to the general public for daily prayers. Instead, it is reserved for official occasions and only opens for Friday prayers attended by armed forces leaders.

From urban planning to social reality

The urban structure of the New Administrative Capital differs markedly from the planning and development patterns of other Egyptian cities, including those established during the Republic era (1952–present). This divergence highlights the exceptional nature of the Administrative Capital's construction in Egypt's urban history. The city was designed with unique political objectives and construction standards, creating a distinct departure from traditional urban models. This section critically examines these differences.

Muhammad Gad, in his chapter 'What Made the Administrative Capital Valuable' from the book *Useless Accumulation*, observes the scarcity of stock-market-listed companies among the 422 real estate development firms operating in the Administrative Capital. These companies include government-owned enterprises such as City Edge and Al-Nasr Housing and Development, private housing associations serving government entities, and firms subcontracted to work with the military and other state-affiliated bodies. Gad notes that many of these companies were founded recently, suggesting their creation was driven by specific political and economic objectives.⁴⁸

This evidence shows the selective nature of the city's development, targeting a specific social segment. The residential neighbourhoods in the Administrative Capital primarily cater to army officers, a group pivotal to the current regime's management of political and economic affairs, as well as business elites who frequently subcontract with the military. This social class has witnessed rapid and significant wealth accumulation over the past decade.

The cost of housing in the Administrative Capital reflects its exclusivity. According to the latest data, the average price per square meter for residential apartments is approximately \$505.⁴⁹ Given the average annual income of Egyptians and the severe inflation the country has experienced in recent years,⁵⁰ these prices render the city unaffordable for the vast majority of Egyptians. Amira El-Hakeh notes that the Administrative Capital has failed to create job opportunities accessible to

all social classes. This failure has significantly influenced the city's demographic character, and thus detracted from its social sustainability as an urban model.⁵¹

Some public service employees have been relocated to the New Administrative Capital, as the state justifies this move as a step toward addressing social disparities within the city. However, opinion polls conducted with employees working in the capital reveal significant dissatisfaction with the transportation system. Many avoid using the state-provided transportation due to its high cost and impractical scheduling. Instead, they rely on private, informal arrangements, such as renting vans that pick them up from their homes and take them directly to their workplaces. While the state provides transportation allowances to these employees, this alternative system proves more time- and cost-efficient.

This reliance on private transportation reflects a spontaneous social response to the inefficiencies of a state-funded transportation network that cost billions of pounds and required foreign loans. It also highlights the system's failure to serve middle-income citizens effectively, despite the state's claims of inclusivity.

In response, the state promoted Badr City as a residential alternative for middle-income citizens working in the New Administrative Capital. Located fifteen kilometres away, Badr City requires a commute of twenty-one to twenty-five minutes by car. However, this solution has not achieved the intended goal of fostering a diverse social environment.

From 2015 to 2024, the average price per square meter in Badr City increased dramatically from 1,000 EGP to 6,000 EGP—a sixfold rise.⁵² Moreover, the city's infrastructure and services remain inadequate to support a large population. These issues, combined with the persistent transportation challenges, have rendered Badr City an unattractive and unsuitable residential option for many Egyptians.

In addition to these challenges, the New Administrative Capital, like many new cities in Egypt, relies heavily on private cars for transportation. This reliance makes it difficult to foster diverse social lifestyles and exacerbates existing inequalities. Further evidence of this exclusionary trend is the proliferation of private universities and schools in the neighbourhoods of the New Administrative Capital. These institutions primarily cater to a specific, high-income social class.⁵³ Notably, the capital lacks public schools entirely. Instead, all educational institutions in the city are either semi-governmental or fully private, with prohibitively high tuition fees that exclude working-class, middle-income, and low-income families. Similarly, the universities that have opened branches in the capital target wealthy students, further reinforcing the city's exclusivity.

The result is an urban experience rooted in demographic segregation. The city's design accommodates a specific social class while forcing government employees to relocate to the New Administrative Capital through the transfer of ministries and government departments, often disregarding the humanitarian and social conditions of these workers. Cities are built on the foundation of diverse demographics, with opportunities for all societal classes to live and thrive. By neglecting this principle, the New Administrative Capital risks becoming an unsustainable urban experiment in the years to come.

Compounding the Burden on Cairo and its Residents

The state's narrative surrounding the New Administrative Capital frames it as a comprehensive solution to Old Cairo's longstanding challenges. According to this discourse, the new capital is designed to address the deficiencies of Old Cairo, such as overpopulation, slums, and inadequate infrastructure, creating a city that does not burden the state. The project is presented as a visionary step toward resolving Cairo's problems without directly addressing the relationship between building a new city and leaving the old one entrenched in its issues of urban decay and neglected infrastructure.⁵⁴

However, the relationship between the new and old cities appears to be defined more by negative impacts than positive ones. The Administrative Capital, with its exclusive design and standards, fails to alleviate population overcrowding in Cairo as it primarily caters to a specific social class. Instead, the development of the capital has exacerbated Cairo's urban challenges. Resources and efforts are redirected to serve the new city, often at the expense of Old Cairo's needs. For example, the state has altered Cairo's natural and urban environment to prioritise the new capital, constructing roads, bridges, and axes while displacing several neighbourhoods in the process. Additionally, water resource allocation and infrastructure maintenance have been skewed in favour of the Administrative Capital, undermining the support available to Cairo's neighbourhoods and other Egyptian cities.

This diversion of resources and neglect of the old city of Cairo has deepened its urban struggles rather than providing relief, as originally promised. The study will explore these issues in greater detail, highlighting the imbalance between the new city's aspirations and the growing burdens imposed on Cairo and its residents.

The Urban Communities Authority and crisis of unequal distribution

In 2015, then-Minister of Housing Mostafa Madbouly allocated \$641 million to initiate the construction of the New Administrative Capital.⁵⁵ This allocation contradicted his earlier claims that the capital would not cost the state any money. While the amount was not directly deducted from the state budget, it came from the budget of the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA), a strategic reallocation that many analysts viewed as a rhetorical manoeuvre. These funds were used to kick-start infrastructure development in the barren area, enabling private and government companies to begin operations.

The New Urban Communities Authority, established in 1979 under Law No. 59, is affiliated with the Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities.⁵⁶ Its original mandate was to develop new cities and urban communities in desert areas to reduce pressure on Cairo, aligning with then-President Anwar Sadat's vision to decentralise urbanisation.⁵⁷ Over the years, NUCA developed numerous neighbourhoods and cities, but it largely failed to address Cairo's urban challenges or alleviate the issues faced by other cities across the Republic.

Urban analyst David Sims highlights NUCA's shortcomings: by 2006, it had created twenty-three cities and towns with a combined population of only 783,000, falling far short of its target of

20.6 million residents.⁵⁸ Moreover, NUCA's mission included providing low-income housing as an alternative to informal settlements and developing infrastructure and services for slum areas.⁵⁹ In the New Administrative Capital, NUCA played a central role, partnering with military bodies to establish the Administrative Capital Company. According to Yazid Sayigh, retired military commanders significantly influence NUCA's operations, often deriving financial benefits.⁶⁰ This alignment with military institutions underscores its role in the broader political and economic framework of the Administrative Capital project.

The New Administrative Capital is NUCA's largest undertaking to date, further expanding its scope and responsibilities. Although NUCA's budget is technically independent of the state's general budget, it has received direct funding from the Ministry of Finance. Primarily, NUCA finances its projects by selling public lands to investors—a strategy employed in the Administrative Capital. This practice raises questions about the misuse of public assets, as lands designated for the collective benefit of all citizens were instead sold to fund the capital's development, undermining the principle of public ownership.⁶¹

The critical question remains: How does this urban strategy affect citizens in other cities and neighbourhoods? In 2015, the government approved a one hundred per cent increase in the New Urban Communities Authority's budget, raising it to approximately \$3.59 billion. By contrast, only \$64.1 million was allocated to slum development—a stark imbalance that neglects the needs of residents in poor urban areas facing significant challenges.⁶² This disparity reflects a prioritisation of the wealthy and high-income classes, leaving low-income citizens and residents of older neighbourhoods in Cairo disproportionately impacted by construction operations serving the New Administrative Capital.

Yahya Shawkat, in a research study, revealed that government spending during the fiscal year 2016–2017 on new cities in Cairo, Giza, and Al-Qalyubia ('Greater Cairo') exceeded what was spent on existing urban areas in the same governorates. The gap widens further with data from the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics, which indicates that approximately 750,000 housing units in the new cities and over one million units in Greater Cairo remain vacant.⁶³ This suggests that new cities do not require additional construction; rather, they face a surplus of unoccupied housing. Such statistics underscore the inequity of prioritising the development of new urban centres over addressing the urgent needs of existing cities and neighbourhoods.

The repercussions of this strategy extend beyond the unfair allocation of resources to the deterioration of infrastructure in existing cities. Numerous construction projects in recent years have been aimed at supporting the New Administrative Capital, often at the expense of urban neighbourhoods in Cairo. Since 2016, the state has focused on developing road networks and transportation infrastructure to connect Cairo with the New Administrative Capital. These projects have displaced residents from their homes in historic neighbourhoods, pushing them to areas far from their workplaces and social networks.⁶⁴

One prominent example is the construction of the Al-Firdaws Axis in 2020, which facilitates access to New Cairo. This project resulted in the removal of numerous cemeteries in Tarab Al-Ghafir and the displacement of residents who had lived and worked in the area. Similarly, the

Imam al-Shafi'i neighbourhood is undergoing one of the most disruptive urban transformations in its history. Extensive residential areas and cemeteries are being demolished to make way for new roads and axes designed to improve transportation to the New Administrative Capital.⁶⁵

The impact of this new capital extends far beyond the urbanisation of Old Cairo, influencing critical resources like water and green spaces across Egypt. David Sims highlights the inherent challenges of greening desert cities, particularly in a country grappling with severe water scarcity. This issue has worsened following the completion and filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).⁶⁶ The Central Park in the New Administrative Capital exemplifies these challenges; its vast area requires enormous water resources, further straining an already overburdened water supply. The capital is projected to consume over five hundred million cubic meters of water annually once completed, including the withdrawal of approximately two hundred thousand cubic meters daily, a diversion of resources that would affect the availability of water for residents in other Egyptian cities.⁶⁷

Simultaneously, over the past decade, Cairo has undergone a systematic reduction in trees and green spaces to accommodate the construction of roads and axes connecting the city to new urban centres east of Cairo. This campaign has drastically reduced Cairo's per capita share of green space to just fifteen centimetres—essentially one tree per person.⁶⁸ In stark contrast, the New Administrative Capital aims to provide a per capita green space of fifteen square meters.⁶⁹

This imbalance deprives residents of Old Cairo of their right to clean air, adversely affecting both public and individual health. The stark contrast between the state's focus on enhancing living standards in the New Administrative Capital and its neglect of existing cities underscores a broader inequity. The Egyptian government's prioritisation of the new city comes at the expense of the quality of life in other regions, raising questions about fairness and sustainability in national urban planning.

Conclusion

The state's official narrative about the New Administrative Capital appears increasingly to falter under scrutiny. This study applied a specific methodology to test the validity of the state's claims, analysing official and semi-official discourses over the years of the city's development. The central research question—whether the state's narrative about the capital is accurate economically, urbanistically, and politically—has been answered. The findings indicate that the narrative is not truthful for several reasons.

The construction of the new city has strained the national economy, negatively affecting citizens' incomes, which are tied to the local currency. The New Administrative Capital has emerged as a competitor for Egypt's annual national income, as highlighted through analyses of Ministry of Finance reports and speeches. In terms of urbanism, the project has exacerbated Cairo's existing challenges, urban problems, and the plight of its residents.

The study also examined the city's urbanism and architectural planning, concluding that the New Administrative Capital is fundamentally exclusionary, catering to a single social class while

neglecting others. This narrow focus threatens the city's long-term sustainability. The project fails to consider the lessons of Egypt's past urban developments and neglects the diverse social needs of Egyptian society. Ultimately, the New Administrative Capital represents an ambitious but risky venture. Its design and implementation overlook critical aspects of urban planning and prior experiences, turning the capital itself into one of the greatest challenges facing Cairo and its residents.

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