IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MASTER'S THESIS

THE URBAN QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY: THE CASE OF EGYPT'S NAC

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THESIS ADVISOR
ASSIST. PROF. ÖMER BEHRAM ÖZDEMİR

ISTANBUL, 2025

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by
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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Art in Political Science and International Relations

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ÖZ

KENTSEL MEŞRUİYET ARAYIŞI: MISIR'IN YİB ÖRNEĞİ

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Son on yıl, Ortadoğu'nun en büyük ülkelerinden biri olan Mısır'da çok sayıda kentsel mega projenin hayata geçirildiği bir döneme işaret etmektedir. Cumhurbaşkanı Sisi'nin "Vizyon 2030" çerçevesinde şekillenen bu projeler, herhangi bir demokratik reform süreci başlatmaksızın modernleşmeyi hedeflemekte; bu yönüyle modernleşme teorisinin temel varsayımlarıyla çelişmektedir. Bu projeler arasında en dikkat çekici olanı ise Yeni İdari Başkent'tir (YİB). Sisi rejimi, YİB'yi Mısır ekonomisinin kalkınmasını hızlandıracak yeni bir başlangıç olarak tanımlamakta ve bu projeyi bugüne kadarki en iddialı ve stratejik girişimi olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Ekonomik göstergeler, vaat edilen gerçekçi sonuçları yansıtmamış; projenin neredeyse tüm teslim tarihlerinde gecikmeler yaşanmış ve başlangıçta belirlenen hedefler geri çekilmiştir. Öte yandan, Mısır ekonomisi yüksek enflasyon ve sert bir devalüasyon süreciyle karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Bu bağlamda tez, ekonomik krizin ortasında ciddi riskler barındırmasına rağmen Cumhurbaşkanı Sisi'nin YİB projesine neden öncelik vermeye devam ettiğini anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, Sisi'nin kentsel vizyonu ve buna eşlik eden siyasi söylem analiz edilmekte ve sonuçta bu yaklaşımın temelinde "performans temelli meşruiyet" arayışının yattığı ileri sürülmektedir. Demokratik yollarla iktidara gelmeyen, hatta bu anlamda "gayrimeşru" kabul edilebilecek bir yönetimin, siyasi meşruiyetini tesis etmek için alternatif stratejilere yöneldiği savunulmaktadır. Bu çerçevede Sisi, rejiminin kalıcı bir mirası olarak mekânsal düzlemde "Yeni Cumhuriyet"i inşa etmeyi hedeflemekte ve ekonomik maliyetlere rağmen bu projeye bağlılığını sürdürmektedir. Bu tez, YİB projesini

"meşruiyet" perspektifinden ele alarak, söz konusu kentsel mega projenin halkın ortak refahını artırmaktan ziyade rejimin istikrarını sağlamaya hizmet ettiğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kentsel Mega Projeler, Meşruiyet, Mısır, Otoriterlik, YİB.

ABSTRACT

THE URBAN QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY: THE CASE OF EGYPT'S NAC

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The past decade has witnessed the introduction of multiple urban mega-projects in one of the largest countries in the MENA region: Egypt. Under the umbrella of al-Sisi's "Vision 2030", these projects claim to bring modernity without the initiation of any democratic reforms for the people (which defies the modernization theory). The most outstanding of them all is the New Administrative Capital (NAC). Al-Sisi's regime has claimed on multiple occasions that NAC is the fresh start Egypt needs to boost its economic development, and it is regarded as his most important project to date. However, the economic indicators haven't provided the promised numbers. There have been delays in almost all of the project's deadlines, with a scaling back of the initial goals set. Not only that, but the Egyptian economy is drowning with a high inflation rate and a harsh currency devaluation. Thus, this thesis aims to understand why al-Sisi is still prioritizing the development of NAC, despite the high risk attached to it amidst an economic crisis. This will be understood through an analysis of the political discourse of al-Sisi's urban approach, which will eventually lead to one outcome: performance legitimacy. Since his regime did not reach its position of power through democratic means – if anything, one could argue it came through 'illegitimate' or unconventional means – it aspires to find alternative ways to gain legitimacy. As a result, al-Sisi aims to create a "New Republic" spatially as his regime's legacy, and he is determined to pursue it regardless of the economic consequences. Therefore, by examining NAC through the lens of "legitimacy" as the ultimate end, I argue that this

urban mega-project is al-Sisi's means to maintain the stability of his regime rather than the common well-being of the Egyptian people.

Keywords: Authoritarianism; Egypt; Legitimacy; NAC; Urban Mega-Projects.

DEDICATION

This humble achievement is dedicated first and foremost to my loving mother, Faten Hamed, who has supported me tirelessly and endlessly in achieving everything I have ever dreamed of. Thank you, Mama, for your love and support; I would not be where I am today without you. I love you.

I would also like to humbly dedicate this work to Uncle Mohammed Daoud, Aunt Duaa Hamed, and my beloved sisters – Dana and Noor – for their unconditional love and support during this period. I appreciate every single one of you, and your support means the world to me.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late Grandmother, Fatima Al-Bardaweel. While she did not get the chance to finish her education because of the 1948 Nakba, she encouraged everyone in her bloodline to pursue the highest levels of education and knowledge. May your beautiful soul rest in peace, Teta.

Shahd Qaid

Istanbul, 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to thank my valuable advisor, Dr. Ömer Behram Özdemir, who stepped in last minute and helped me overcome the obstacles that came with this research through his patience, knowledge, and experience. Additionally, I want to thank my valuable lecturer, Dr. Heba Ezzat, who inspired me to pursue this research and generously helped me with my literature research through her insights and knowledge.

I also want to thank my dearest friend, Abdullah Aly, for his support, knowledge, and resources, which helped me overcome the stress and obstacles that tagged along with this journey.

Lastly, I present my endless love and respect to my family and friends, who did not leave my side at any stage of my thesis. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Shahd Qaid

Istanbul, 2025

PREFACE

This is not the Egypt I remember. It was the first thing that crossed my mind when my eyes landed on the outline of Cairo from the plane in 2021. After living abroad as an international student for almost three years, I finally paid my family a much-needed visit. From above, the city looked eerily pale and yellow – almost as if it were decaying. There was no greenery, but rather dust in sight. It pained me to see this city, which I had learnt to call *home*, become unrecognizable, as if a wave of depression and sadness had hit it. I could not explain the feeling I got when I saw how the yellow-ish hue covered most of the city's surface, but it struck me then that so much could change in three years. I recall that the main thought I had back then was: could a city of considerable historical and cultural importance transform into a worse version of itself? With that question lingering, I left Cairo's International Airport to visit my family's house. My family lives in an area called 'Gardens of the Pyramids' (*Hadayek Al-Ahram)*, about an hour from the airport. Back then, the fastest route I remembered required us to pass by the infamous archery club (*Nadi El-Remaya)* to arrive at the first gate of the gardens (*Bawabet Khufu*). However, to my surprise, I discovered that the government removed the club entirely due to the construction of the 'Great Egyptian Museum'. According to the former Minister of Tourism and Antiquities of Egypt, Khaled al-Anani, they needed to remove the club so that "the museum connects to the club area and the pyramids, canceling the Fayoum road and making a tunnel" (Alnagar, 2019). It would be an understatement to say that I was shocked, for an entire road was being renovated for the sake of a museum. The highway leading to the Gardens of the Pyramids was also reconstructed and widened, allowing more cars to pass, while a pedestrian bridge was built over it. For a moment, it seemed like the view from the plane was just a false perception of what was happening on the ground. Was al-Sisi renovating/reforming Cairo for the better? However, that thought soon disappeared when the streets in the nearby neighborhoods came into the picture; they remained in dire need of reconstruction. Why didn't the government fix these roads, too? Moreover, why didn't they grow trees anywhere? The summers of Cairo have become unbearably hot. The least one could do is grow more trees in hopes that it will reduce the weather's heat.

Nevertheless, the number of public trees was declining while the construction of roads and buildings was on the rise. Some citizens took to different social media platforms to document the deliberate removal of the city's greenery, in an effort to bring awareness to this environmental disaster. According to Shaban (2024), Egypt has unfortunately lost 75% of its trees between 2010 and 2023, despite the government's *100 Million Trees* initiative to improve the air quality in the capital, along with its surrounding communities. The country has also found itself drowning in a 'foreign debt trap' (Al-Wali, 2022), reaching a high record of $138 billion by the third quarter of 2021 (Sayigh, 2022, p. 7). Meanwhile, the Egyptian regime has directed its efforts in full force towards urban mega-projects, like the establishment of a new capital. By then, six years have passed since President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi announced his plan of constructing the New Administrative Capital (NAC) as a part of the *Egypt Vision 2030* project, which he continues to promote as one of the most necessary projects for the national development of Egypt. His government justified this urban mega-project by claiming it is the best solution to alleviate Cairo from its decades-long urban problems, such as overpopulation, housing issues, poverty, etc.[1] However, is it built for the sake of Cairo and the national development of Egypt?

[1] To watch the complete speech of the prime minister, you can visit: Madbouly, Mostafa (2015). المؤتمر الإقتصادي - شرح تفاصيل مشروع العاصمة الإدارية الجديدة " مشروح سيعيد التاريخ ". Network's TV Alhayah [Video]. Channel on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCw3NULhCPo

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACUD	The Administrative Capital Company for Urban Development
CBD	The Central Business District
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
EEDC	The Egypt Economic Development Conference
EPI	The Environmental Performance Index
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NAC	New Administrative Capital
NSPO	The National Service Products Organization
NUCA	The New Urban Communities Authority
RFF	The Real Estate Future Forum
SOM	Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's
UN-Habitat	The United Nations Human Settlements Program
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

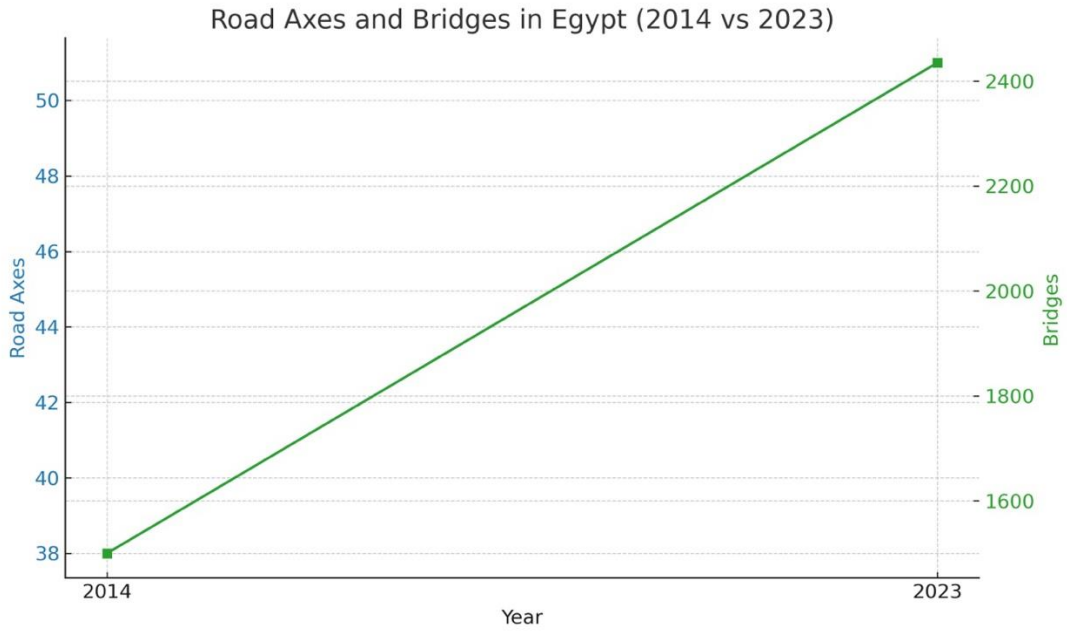
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK, AND METHODOLOGY

"We need a landmark, a new capital. We have the right to have a dream, and this is our dream." – *Khaled El-Husseiny*, the spokesman for NAC (Michaelson, 2018).

1.1. Introduction

The recent urban developments observed in Cairo since al-Sisi took power in 2013 have raised questions about the government's discourse on the reason behind its ambitious NAC project. For one, power outages became the norm during the summer in most Egyptian cities (except for tourist destinations, like the North Coast), as a part of the government's load-shedding plan. The government attributed this measurement to the decline in gas production amidst an increasing domestic demand for electricity and a shortage of foreign currency (Reuters, 2024). Two, due to the foreign currency shortage, the economy has drowned in debt, and a devaluation of the currency made the Egyptian pound float against the US dollar, which has resulted in a harsh increase in the prices of basic goods and commodities (Eltahir, 2024; Magdy, 2024). Three, the construction of roads and bridges in Cairo has resulted in the displacement of many people from affected neighborhoods, like the *Ezbet el-Hagana neighbourhood* (Ebrahim & Lewis, 2021), and the destruction of important historical sites, like the graves of Historic Cairo (Hussein & Knell, 2023; Rowaq Arabi, 2024, pp. 215-216). These roads are meant to connect Cairo to NAC easily, and government officials claimed that proper compensations were given to those affected by the plan (Hussein & Knell, 2023). As of 2023, al-Sisi's regime managed to build 13 new road axes and 935 bridges nationwide, as reported by Egyptian Minister of Transport Kamel Al Wazir (State Information Service, 2023). Figure 1.1 represents the increase that occurred in the period between 2014 and 2023. Al Wazir added that the government has spent EGP 530 million on constructing of 7,000 new main roads and will continue to build bridges that link the main roads to one another.



Note: Shows the increase in the total number of road axes and bridges built in Egypt between 2014 and 2023

Figure 1.1. Number of Road Axes and Bridges Built in Egypt between 2014 and 2023

Reference: State Information Service, 2023

The effect of these developments on Cairo and the Cairenes triggered a series of questions about the importance of the construction of NAC at the expense of the current capital city. Why is al-Sisi so persistent about NAC despite the worsening economic situation of the country? Why does it seem as if the government is intentionally deteriorating the conditions of Cairo, a city rich in heritage, which has served as the Egyptian capital since 972? Talks of creating a new capital in Egypt are not new or unique to al-Sisi; however, what is unique here is how NAC – along with other urban mega-projects – seems to be at the top of the current regime's agenda, bypassing the economic and social well-being of the country. Unlike the Gulf countries, Egypt is not a rentier state, and it does not have adequate resources to invest in such large-scale projects. Springborg (2022) described Egypt under al-Sisi as a 'beggar state', with a huge appetite for luxuries that is currently devouring state revenue at the expense of providing the basic necessities for the growing Egyptian population (pp. 1, 13). The state's role under al-Sisi has changed; a huge emphasis has been placed on the implementation of urban mega-projects, instead of the provision of public goods and services to the Egyptians – the very core of any social contract theory.

This is what inspired the pursuit of this research. The changing urban fabric of Cairo alongside the state's interest in the establishment of huge infrastructure and urban mega-projects – with NAC as the focus of this thesis – has pushed me to investigate the political motivations behind the construction of new cities, and what the urban plans and designs can tell us about those in power. Most of the time, political studies in the MENA region do not consider how urbanization can be used as a tool of power. Thus, this thesis will aim to answer the following questions: why is al-Sisi so determined to complete the construction of NAC, even if it was at the expense of the economic stability of Egypt? Why is he obsessed with implementing multiple urban and infrastructure mega-projects to the point where Cairo is being affected? The study aims to answer all of that through the analysis of the regime's political discourse along with the visual aspects of the government's urban plans and designs, which is essentially related to the regime's aspiration for legitimacy and power consolidation (I will reference this as "urban washing"). My proposed hypothesis will argue that by using urbanization in the name of development and economic reform suitable for the "New Republic", the regime is waging a somewhat silent war against most Egyptians to further its claims on political legitimacy and rewrite history according to its legacy, far away from the revolutionary city of Cairo. To do that, we must first see how the literature tried to understand and study urbanization in Egypt.

1.2. Theoretical Review

The process of urbanization – in the broadest sense – refers to what makes a place 'urban' and what affects it in terms of the social, economic, political, and environmental transformations and vice versa. Before globalization, this process was defined through the increasing number of people moving from rural settings to urban centers, which led to the growth of cities and towns. Most of these people migrated to cities hoping for a better future. This trend that began to crystallize under the Industrial Revolution and then became a global reality with the advancement of capitalism. Urban sociologist Louis Wirth (1969 [1937]) identified three sociological characteristics defining an urban setting: population size, population density, and demographic heterogeneity. The higher these factors are in a particular place, the more urban it is. Wirth believed that the coexistence of these properties distinguished the urban settlement from other types of settlements, which required our attention to study

it; hence, the establishment of the field of urban studies (Brenner, 2013, p. 90). However, as of the 21st century, the clear characteristics set to define what is spatially urban gradually became blurry. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002, p. 1) illustrate this point by what is non-urban nowadays: the countryside? The village? Maybe, but even these areas have the 'footprints' of cities. It is then the case that "the traditional divide between the city and the countryside has been perforated" (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 1). This was something that Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) predicted in his work, when he referred to it as the 'urban revolution'. He hypothesized that the world is moving towards a complete urbanization process, where the line between the city and the village/rural gets blurry and lost in the analysis of urban studies (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]). As a result, we are currently in the "Urban Age" (UN-Habitat, 1996). Thus, defining what urbanization is or what is analyzed in urban studies has become a little complex with the development of capitalism and the rise of globalization, for it revolves and includes many aspects of the urban society. Yet, the city and its transformation processes are usually the main focus of urban studies.

Today, everyone can identify a city, which many consider 'urban', when they see one. However, they cannot produce a single definition that covers all cities across space and time (Knox & McCarthy, 2012, p. 20). It is rather too complex for us to trace back the main cause for the emergence and evolution of cities, for it is a combination of multiple social, economic, and political transformations that led to the emergence of the 'urban forms' (Wheatley, 1971, p. 318). Multiple theories have tried to explain the emergence of the city. Several scholars have claimed that cities emerged either due to agricultural surplus (Childe, 1950; Woolley, 1963, pp. 109-167), hydrological factors (Wittfogel, 1957), population pressures (Boserup, 1981), trading necessity (Jacobs, 1969), defense needs (Weber, 1958; Wittfogel, 1957), religion (Sjoberg, 1960), or a combination of all of these somewhat interrelated causes (Wheatley, 1971). Knox and McCarthy (2012) claimed that Wheatley's comprehensive understanding addresses how the rise of cities was the result of a gradual transformation rather than a sudden "urban revolution" (p. 23). The earliest evidence of cities and urbanization that scholars were able to trace back developed in five regions, with ancient Egypt being one of them. However, archaeological evidence of early Egyptian cities and their inhabitants is limited because people did not need to continuously occupy the same location due to the internal peace that prevailed at the time (Morris, 1994). Thus, the

capital city did not thrive in one place, and each pharaoh was able to choose his own capital based on the site of his tomb (Knox & McCarthy, 2012, p. 24). That is why the primary remnants of these cities today are their tombs and temples. Examples of early Egyptian capitals, which were considered the pharaoh's home and the royal court, include Thebes, Akhetaten (*Tell el-Amarna*), and Tanis. This part is important to mention, for it will later explain a part of al-Sisi's legitimacy in terms of building NAC.

1.2.1. Approaches in the Study of Urbanization

According to Knox and McCarthy (2012), the study of cities and urbanization – and its effect on the inhabitants and vice versa – is approached in the literature mainly through seven approaches. The first approach is the positivist, otherwise known as 'spatial analysis', which tries to define urbanization through the philosophy of natural sciences and the utilization of scientific methods to verify facts about the urban. The Chicago School represents this approach in understanding urbanization and cities, which was introduced through Robert E. Park's 1915 essay titled *"The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment"* (Shils, 1948; Hatt & Reiss, 1951; Sennett, 1969; Remy, 1989; Flanagan, 1999; Savage et al., 2003). Despite the contributions of positivism in our conceptions of cities, its overdependence on statistics, which does not take the human element much into consideration – has led to the emergence of the 'behavioral approach'. This second approach revolves around the study and analysis of human behavior in urban settings. Like the first approach, the behavioral approach also uses positivism in addition to the analytical techniques of social psychology and social philosophy to understand what makes individuals behave/act in a certain environment. It pays attention to the human behavior, needs, and impulses in a given setting. Kevin Lynch's theory of urban form, as presented in his book '*The Image of the City',* is an example of a behavioral approach. He managed to connect human psychology to the perception of cities and their performance (Lynch, 1981). However, the behavioral analysis focuses too much on the individual and neglects the cultural aspect of human actions and their meanings. Hence, a third approach was introduced: the humanistic approach. The focus here is placed more on the conduct of ethnography and participant observation to help us understand the subject experience of people in the urban environment. The work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), Edward Relph (1976), and Anne Buttimer (1983) falls under the

umbrella of this approach. Yet once again, because this approach neglects the economic and political structures that affect people's behaviors and decision-making, a fourth approach known as 'structuralism' is introduced. The structuralist approach studies urbanization through the observation of the historical or current economic, social, and political changes occurring in an urban society. This essentially includes the Marxist and neo-Marxist analysis of the urban setting (critical urban political economy) along with global urbanism, which addresses the effect of politics and class structure. Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Manuel Castells are among the foundational thinkers of this approach.

Based on the analysis of structuralism, three more approaches were also introduced in the analysis of urban studies: the feminist approach, the structure-agency approach, and the poststructuralist approach. From its name, the feminist approach focuses on the perception of urbanization and cities through the spatial analysis of gender inequalities. The work of Dolores Hayden (1995), Jane Jacobs (1961), and Liz Bondi (1998) represents the use of gender in urban studies. On the other hand, the structure-agency approach aims to unite the humanistic approach with the structuralist concerns with the social, economic, and political factors that either shape or constraint human decisions and actions. This helps us understand how colonialism and capitalism have increased the percentage of people migrating to the city, which offered more opportunities than any other place. Lastly, the poststructuralist approach – which includes the post-modern approach – believes that all previous approaches do not provide theories that properly explain urbanization and how people live and/or act in urban settings. The post-modern approach then understands that the world we live in is dynamic and continues to evolve with time, and instead focuses on the power of symbolism, images, and representation in a given urban environment. Thus, this approach helps widen our spectrum of analysis by taking into consideration the power that governments exercise in cities through their discourse, urban plans, and resources, which helps paint/construct a certain image of the city – or the urban – to the residents and potential investors.

Understanding the focus of each of these seven approaches helps us understand to a great extent how urbanization in Egypt was approached by different scholars, who tried to come up with various theories and methodologies to showcase the unique

historical, political, and socioeconomic context of the Egyptian urban landscape. This is not to say that these are the only approaches used to study urbanization, but they represent the main approaches used by scholars in the field. The following section discusses the main approaches and topics discussed within the literature of urbanization in Egypt, as well as the main gap that this thesis will try to address.

1.2.2. The Study of Urbanization in Egypt

Most of the work done on Egypt's urbanization process has focused on Cairo as the central point of study, given that the city has been the capital for many centuries now. One way to tackle Cairo's urban development is through the historical analysis of its rich and dynamic yet complex evolution. The Egyptian capital has experienced multiple transformations during different eras, from the Fatimid dynasty in 969, to the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras between the 12th and 16th centuries, the Ottoman rule between the 16th and 17th centuries, all the way to the British occupation. Then came the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, where Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970) introduced socialism, followed by the shift towards neoliberalism – *al-Infitah al-Iqtisadi* – under Anwar el-Sadat (1970-1981), which deepened under the leadership of Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (2014–present). Multiple studies were conducted to try to trace Cairo's urban evolution throughout these different historical phases, such as Janet Abu Lughod's infamous *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Abu Lughod, 1971), Andre Raymond's *Cairo: City of History* (Raymond, 2000), and Nezar AlSayyad's *Cairo: Histories of a City* (AlSayyad, 2011). The work of these urban historians contributed to the chronology of the city's urban development through the centuries, highlighting how Cairo's urbanism represented the various political ideologies and religious movements of its different ruling regimes. They made sense of why there is a hint of French and British architecture in downtown Cairo, in a city full of buildings with pharaonic, Islamic, and socialist themes. Hence, the complexity of Cairo's urban fabric.

Another way to disassemble the complex urban fabric of Cairo is through the analysis of its urban landscape. This includes the study of informal communities (*ashwaiyyat*) and the establishment of new settlements. David Sims provided a comprehensive account regarding informalities in *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of*

Control, where he regarded them not as an urban problem but as a natural consequence of the state housing policies (Sims, 2010). Similarly, the work of Asef Bayat and Eric Denis (2000), Diane Singerman (2009), and Yahia Shawkat (2020) helped put the spotlight on the unplanned part of Cairo's urbanization from a political-economic approach. Furthermore, numerous reports from international agencies such as the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have discussed the phenomenon of informality in Egypt, its effects on the exacerbation of inequalities among the population, and how the government can overcome them. for instance, since 2008, the UN-Habitat has tried to help Egypt address the issues associated with informal settlements by offering solutions in terms of housing policy, urban planning, and reforming land readjustment laws (UN-Habitat, 2023, p. 8). The World Bank has also provided suggestions on overcoming the informal economic sector, having estimated that 60% of Egypt's labor force is informal (Rahman, 2021, p. 1).



Note: This picture represents informal settlements in Cairo, showing houses in a cluster with residential towers seen in the horizon.

Figure 1.2. An Example of an Informal Settlement in Cairo
Reference: 8moments at Pixabay

On top of informalities, there is also the trend of building new cities to ‘conquer the desert’ (Sims, 2015, p. 78), which makes up about 98% of Egypt’s total area (Middle East Monitors, 2018). Sims (2015) criticized the new desert cities by examining the reasons behind their constructions, why they have failed so far, and what can be done to improve them. From Nasser to al-Sisi, there has been an ‘obsession with the desert’ and the construction of new cities around Cairo (Sims, 2015, p. 83). Al-Sisi’s NAC falls under this urban category, which ignited critical questions on its feasibility, its source of funding, and the lack of public consultation. Khaled Fahmy (2015) has directly questioned the project’s feasibility and what would have happened if the money placed on this project had been directed towards the development and reformation of the public services in the existing capital, Cairo. Similarly, Yasser Elsheshtawy (2023) described NAC as just another ‘desert folly’ that has exhausted the Egyptian economy while simultaneously boosting the military’s accounts and impoverishing Egypt's middle class. Meanwhile, Hassan Elmouelhi (2019) concluded that NAC is a manifestation of neoliberal urbanism that may increase social inequalities and prioritize economic gains over equitable urban development in Egypt.

Additionally, since history is repeating itself, Mirette Khorshed's (2017) master's thesis placed NAC in a comparative analysis with previous urban mega-projects – including Sadat City – and gave recommendations regarding the improvement of the project's plans and its sustainability.

Recently, more articles have emerged looking into the funding of NAC along with the claims regarding the project's inclusivity. Amira El Hakeh (2021) and Aly El Nady (2023) addressed NAC from a policy-oriented approach through the analysis of its social and economic dynamics. At the same time, Sarah Taweel (2023) described al-Sisi's NAC as a 'bubble in the desert' in the aftermath of her analysis regarding who is paying and profiting from this urban mega-project, while Rowaq Arabi (2024) tried to validate the government's narrative regarding the construction of the new capital and concluded that NAC neglects the social needs of the Egyptian society. So far, the contributions of these researchers have helped in the general understanding of NAC from the historical, economic, social, and policy aspects, yet little attention has been paid to the political analysis in this accumulated literature. Given that Egypt under al-Sisi is considered an authoritarian country due to its weak democratic performance (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024), NAC should be further addressed in the light of 'authoritarian urbanism'. According to Jeremy Wallace (2013), the survival of authoritarian regimes is always under threat when there is urban concentration (pp. 633-634). This is based on the notion that urban concentration enables collective action more easily, making any regime's collapse more likely to occur (Beissinger, 2022, p. 104; Huntington, 1968, pp. 210–13; Wallace, 2013, p.634). Beissinger (2022) stated that it is harder for regimes to crack down on large crowds, since that will cause them to appear illegitimate nationally and internationally (p. 104). The master's thesis of Arsany Medhat (2024) tried to analyze how al-Sisi's regime is using infrastructure to reshape the political landscape according to its interests. While his research contributes to the understanding of NAC through the concept of legitimacy, it failed to analyze the government's authoritarian tactics regarding the project critically. It also did not address the gap found in the literature of urban studies in Egypt, which neglects the analysis of urbanization as a political tool for legitimacy. Since the Arab Spring, the attention of political scientists in the MENA region has been influenced – to a great extent – by the nation-state paradigm (Ezzat, 2022, p. 373). Its focus on concepts of sovereignty, along with social movements, has limited our political imagination in

terms of the role of urbanization in the politics of the region (Ezzat, 2022, p. 373). Therefore, this thesis aims to address this gap by analyzing al-Sisi's NAC for what it really is: a political tool for legitimacy and power consolidation meant to rewrite history away from the urban concentration of Cairo. The following chapter explores the notion of legitimacy and its relation to urbanization, followed by an analysis of the urban mega-projects pursued by al-Sisi's predecessors. The fourth chapter addresses NAC and its function as a central political instrument for al-Sisi's legacy, enabling him to wage a war against urban concentrations in Cairo in the name of development and modernity, followed by a conclusion on the findings.

1.3. Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, post-modern approach to explore the relationship between urbanization and political legitimacy in the case of al-Sisi's NAC. The study examines how NAC serves as a tool for rewriting Egypt's history away from Cairo, reflecting the authoritarian nature of the current regime, whose eventual goal is the establishment of political legitimacy and the centralization of power.

The study approach followed here includes a combination of discourse analysis, visual analysis, and the analysis of archived documents and previous research done on NAC. The discourse analysis entails the critical examination of the government's rhetoric and official narrative regarding NAC, particularly how the regime represents NAC as a vital project for the establishment of a new developmental era in Egypt. This includes presidential speeches, government press releases, conference statements, policy documents, and media coverage. On the other hand, the visual analysis refers to the examination of the architectural and spatial design of NAC, which reflects the true nature of authoritarian governance. This includes completed structures and urban planning documents that identify elements/symbols of state power, hierarchy, and centralized control related to NAC. The study takes into consideration factors such as monumental architecture, surveillance-oriented urban planning, and the exclusion of organic urban growth, all of which contribute to the political messages embedded in the city's design. Lastly, the analysis of archived documents and previous research refers to the examination of what has already been established on the topic and builds upon it.

By combining discourse analysis with visual analysis and archive analysis, this research aims to offer a multidimensional perspective on how urbanization serves as a tool for political legitimacy. This approach allows us to understand NAC not as a mere spatial transformation of the capital, but as a political project aimed at redefining Egypt's national narrative. The findings will contribute to discussions on authoritarian urbanism, state-led historical revisionism, and the intersection of urban planning and political power.

1.4. Limitations of the Study

It is important to mention that everything we know about NAC and its development comes from the regime, the companies working on this project, and the state-controlled media. There is a clear lack of information and transparency in terms of the processes and plans. Since this research depends on the regime's official narrative, this may be a source of limitation in terms of the data provided.

CHAPTER II

LEGITIMACY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO NAC

What makes a ruler legitimate in the eyes of the ruled? This is one of the many questions scholars and academics alike have tried to answer in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests of 2011, which managed to topple long-standing regimes in a matter of days. Zine El Abidine in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and most recently, Bashar al-Assad in Syria. What seemed to be the puzzle here is how these Arab leaders enjoyed international recognition as the legitimate rulers of their respective countries, regardless of how autocratic they were, before the drastic tides of the Arab Spring hit them (Rubin, 2019, p. 11). It was then deemed necessary to understand what changed; what led to the precipitous downfall of these leaders (except for Al-Assad, who was overthrown in 2024) and their regimes? According to the late Iranian political scientist G. Hossein Razi, the presence or loss of legitimacy explains why people may either obey a regime or revolt against it (Razi, 1990). Furthermore, Michael Hudson (1979) has also claimed that the Arab world's central problem remains political legitimacy (p. 2). As a result, the study of political legitimacy seemed to come to the forefront of the political analysis of the MENA region. It became important to understand whether a certain regime has political legitimacy and how that affects the people's perception of their leaders. More importantly, what is political legitimacy? Where is it derived from? What causes it to rise or fall, and how can we understand urbanization in the light of it? This chapter will aim to answer these questions and showcase how the construction of NAC can achieve al-Sisi's quest for political legitimacy.

2.1. What is Political Legitimacy?

Legitimacy is a very complex term to define, for scholars from various fields have come up with different ways and methods to analyze it. Hudson (1979) and Al-Awadi (2004) claimed it is rather difficult to come up with a unified definition for legitimacy

due to the complexity of the different components of its analysis. Similarly, Weatherford (1991) stated that the contributions to the literature of legitimacy analyzed the term by breaking it into smaller components and elements, hence the lack of a universal agreement on its definition. Additionally, legitimacy is not static; rather, it shifts based on the regime's claim on the type of legitimacy it pursues. Christian von Haldenwang (2016) pointed out that some scholars in the field use legitimacy to explain the reasons behind the stability or transformation of political regimes. Yet generally, the definitions of legitimacy seem to revolve around three things: 1) who has the right to exercise it, 2) the source of this legitimacy, and 3) to what extent it can be exercised (Rubin, 2019, p. 12).

The word itself originates from the Latin term '*legitimare*', which means 'to make lawful'. Hence, the word 'legitimacy' initially referred to what is 'lawful', and was later used to refer to traditional procedures, constitutional principles, and adherence to tradition. That was until the German philosopher Max Weber – the 'godfather of legitimacy studies' – who managed to transform the concept of legitimacy into a universal one by adding to it the element of 'consent' (as cited in Shahin, 2017, p. 28). According to Weber, legitimacy can be understood in relation to political authority, for it helps us explain why people choose to obey a certain authority or political regime willingly. In a way, he contributed to the discussion of the social contract theory, which explains how society and governments came into existence (check Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls for discussions on the social contract theory). Weber stated that a political regime is considered legitimate, or 'morally right', when its subjects obey it based on their beliefs to do so. He wrote:

"The basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber, 1947, p.382).

Weber's contribution to the definition of political legitimacy was foundational to the point where every subsequent effort to define it was built upon it, creating what some called the 'Weberian tradition'. Following the steps of his predecessor, Lipset seemed to define political legitimacy as the ability of the regime to maintain the belief among its citizens that it is the most appropriate option available for the society (Lipset, 1963,

p. 77). Linz (1998) also contributed to this understanding by adding a new element to the analysis of legitimacy: comparison with alternative political regimes. His theory takes into consideration people's perception of a regime based on their perception of potential alternatives. Meanwhile, Alagappa referred to legitimacy as the political regime's "right to rule" (Alagappa, 1995, p. 2). Despite the differences in how they defined legitimacy, these scholars based their theories on the concept of 'consent' that Weber introduced through his work. Easton, along with Weber, made sure to differentiate between two types of consent to understand the different forms of legitimacy better: 1) consent based on the belief that a certain regime is legitimate, and 2) consent based on the reception of material reward in exchange for obedience (Weber, 1947; Easton, 1965). Using this categorization, Dahl furthered the discussion on legitimacy by introducing the element of stability. He argued that the stability of legitimacy for any regime could be measured through three sources of power: 1) people's unconditional consent, 2) people's conditional consent, and 3) lack of consent and the use of coercion (as cited in Shahin, 2017, p. 29). The first refers to the people's belief that they must obey the regime, and this is where legitimacy is most stable. The second one refers to the people's obedience in exchange for material benefits (like the provision of goods), and here there is a deficiency in legitimacy due to its fragility and dependence on this 'bargain model'. The third and last source of power is coercion, and this comes when the people do not give their consent to the regime willingly, which forces the regime to resort to violence and threats to exert their obedience. These varying levels of consent help explain how certain authoritarian regimes can rule with or without the consent of the people.

Thus, in the simplest sense, one can comprehend that political legitimacy refers to the regime's right to rule, which in turn makes the people obedient to its rule. Whether consent is a pillar for legitimacy or not is another matter, for scholars like David Copp have argued that the consent of the ruled is not necessary for the regime's legitimacy (as cited in Rubin, 2019, pp. 12-13). Yet according to Al-Awadi (2004), even the most authoritarian regimes seek a certain degree of legitimacy and consent from the people for their stability. They may rule through fear and coercion, but they need to acquire a level of legitimacy and consent from the people to justify their rule (Al-Awadi, 2004; Dogan, 1992; Gilley, 2009; Schlumberger, 2010; Sedgwick, 2010; Valbjørn & Bank, 2010). This can be observed through the political discourse of the governments (Al-

Awadi, 2004). The question then becomes, what are the ruler's sources of legitimacy? Answering this will illustrate why the study of urbanization in light of legitimacy is an important gap to be addressed, especially in the case of Egypt under al-Sisi.

2.2. Sources of Legitimacy

Going back to Weber, he specified three types of legitimacy based on three different sources: traditional legitimacy, charismatic legitimacy, and rational legal legitimacy (Weber, 1947). The traditional legitimacy refers to authority derived from traditional means such as customs, religion, or even cultural norms, whereas charismatic legitimacy refers to the charisma and extraordinary personality of the ruler as the source that justifies their authority. Lastly, rational legal legitimacy depends more on the rule of law and legal procedures, which puts the ruler in a position of power – this is mostly found in democracies. It is based on these three sources of legitimacy that people choose to obey a certain political authority. Weber believed that the third type was the most ideal for modern bureaucratic societies; however, he also recognized that it could co-exist with the traditional or charismatic legitimacies in a regime. Similarly, Easton (1965) introduced three types of legitimacy based on three sources: ideological legitimacy, personal legitimacy, and structural legitimacy. The ideological legitimacy refers to the power of the ruling regime's ideology, which is a set of ideas that allows citizens to analyze and interpret their past, present, and future (Easton, 1965). For personal legitimacy, it is argued that it is similar to Weber's charismatic one but on a broader scale (Al-Awadi, 2004). Structural legitimacy, on the other hand, revolves around the structure of the political system, including the institutions that make it function in a legal manner.

Christian von Haldenwang (2016) also contributed to the discussion by adding his own five categories of legitimacy. The first is 'procedural legitimation', which refers to the institutionalization of decision-making patterns and implementation. The second is 'role-based legitimation', and that revolves around the people's belief and trust in specific institutions, such as the military. The third is 'charismatic legitimation', which is about the people's belief and trust in the superior quality of the ruler. The fourth is 'value-based legitimation', where the source of legitimacy comes from the government's reflection of the values of its people. Lastly, the fifth type is called

‘content-based legitimation’, which depends on a regime’s material and performance indicators. In other words, performance legitimacy. This form of legitimacy depends on the performance of governments in delivering goods and services to the public, such as electricity, education, roads, and security, in exchange for their obedience (Dagher, 2018, p. 91). Levi (2018) argued that providing these goods can be interpreted as effective governance, thus evoking compliance from the citizens (pp. 603-604). This can be observed in the legitimacy of non-democratic regimes, like the Chinese Communist Party government (CCP) in China, who are considered legitimate despite the lack of democratic processes such as elections and political rights (Zhu, 2011, p. 127). Since the CCP cannot gain legitimacy through democratic means, it has resorted to the utilization of economic development and modernization as their source of legitimacy. Therefore, just like its various definitions, the sources of legitimacy also have different forms that attend to various political models of authority, whether they are democratic or not. This is especially true for the MENA region.

Due to the unique historical experience that the region went through, which varied from colonialism and all the way to the establishment of nation-states, it was generally assumed that the MENA countries lacked political legitimacy. That is a fatal mistake. Just because the experience of this region did not conform with that of the West, it does not mean that they do not have political legitimacy because no regime can survive and be sovereign without a degree of legitimacy (Al-Awadi, 2004; Rubin, 2019). However, because the history of this region is diverse and not uniform, it is not easy to discuss legitimacy since its definition shifts depending on the time and space of a particular country (Rubin, 2019, p. 11). This is true, for not all countries in the region have had the same colonial experience, nor do they have the same political systems. As a result, their different histories produced multiple methods of governance, along with various notions of legitimacy. Yet, maintaining legitimacy is central and important to all governments, because without it, the nightmare of any regime will come to life: public unrest and protests that will inevitably lead to their downfall. Thus, Rubin (2019) wrote:

“It would be a mistake to dismiss the states of the Middle East today as simply artificial constructs.” (Rubin, 2019, p. 14).

2.3. The Sources of Legitimacy in Egypt

The most comprehensive work done on Egypt's sources of legitimacy from Nasser's time all the way to Mubarak's must be Ahmed Shahin's PHD thesis titled: '*The Quest for Legitimacy: The Egyptian State from Nasser to Sisi*'. Shahin (2017) tried his best to understand how Mubarak's regime survived for three decades, yet it was toppled in a matter of a couple of days. His research concluded that it was the loss of the legitimacy he once enjoyed that led to his inevitable downfall. Thus, Shahin's thesis aimed to analyze and compare the different forms of legitimacy that the Egyptian leaders enjoyed, as well as what their sources were. His research findings concluded that the main factor determining the level of legitimacy for any ruler depends on how successful they are at mobilizing public support by serving two of their interests: economic development and national independence (Shahin, 2017).

It is generally assumed that Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime was very popular among the Egyptians. His charisma and rhetoric, which advocated for the unity of all Arabs under the banner of Pan-Arabism and a socialist welfare state, helped legitimize his regime in the eyes of the people (Dawisha, 2003; Dekmejian, 1971; Hinnebusch, 1988; Podeh & Wincler, 2004; Vatikiotis, 1978). In a way, they saw themselves and their interests in him: he looked like them, talked like them, and cared about their interests and worries (McDermott, 1988). Thus, his regime is usually categorized as a model of charismatic legitimacy. For Sadat, the situation was more complicated. Unlike Nasser, he did not possess a charisma that was popular with the people. If anything, he is mostly known for his economic policy (*infitah*) that made Egypt move away from the Soviet Union and closer to the Western camp. According to Hinnebusch (1988), Sadat derived his legitimacy from a combination of three modes: traditional, patrimonial, and rational-legal legitimacy (pp. 83-85). This makes his source of legitimacy somewhat hybrid. Al-Awadi (2004) argued that the main driver for legitimacy in Egypt is economic achievement, and that is especially true in the case of Mubarak. His regime sought legitimacy through the provision of modernity in the form of economic achievements (Al-Awadi, 2004). However, that all came crashing down the moment the public sensed that he wanted to place his son as the next ruler of Egypt, which led to the toppling of his regime in a matter of 18 days after the eruption of the Arab Spring

protests. It is then for this reason that the study of legitimacy is important in understanding the political and social developments of the MENA region.

After the Arab Spring, one would expect that the source of legitimacy would finally be democracy. The January 25 revolution seemed to ignite hopes of democracy within the Egyptians, who managed to overthrow Mubarak's reign of 30 years. Mubarak's resignation on February 11 sounded like a dream come true for the people. "We did it! We did it!" was all they chanted after hearing the news (El-Terk, 2021). Hopes were high because the youth were the main force behind this revolution. Many have predicted that the introduction of fair elections to the Egyptian political arena was going to be successful and even historic. Indeed, it was historical, but all for the wrong reasons. In 2012, Egyptians managed to choose their first democratically elected president: Mohammed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood party. The people made their choice, yet they were not very patient when it came to the implementation of the economic and political reforms by the new president and his cabinet. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not delve into why the people turned against Morsi because it is not within the scope of the topic. However, it is important to know that during the public's discontent with Morsi's rule, the army took its chance in 2013 and enacted a military coup to overthrow the first democratically elected president of Egypt (Khan, 2014; Hamzawy, 2017, pp. 20, 22). While some may see the rise of the military as illegitimate, many Egyptians at the time cheered on for the coup as the only way to save a socially/ideologically fragmented population from the mess they were in (Hamzawy, 2017; Shahin, 2017).

Right after the coup, Egypt started to struggle with issues of terrorism and state-sponsored violence (Hamzawy, 2017, p. 4). President al-Sisi, who was Morsi's Minister of Defense, claimed that his rise to power was the only way to save Egypt from drowning in terrorism, which he blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood. So, in a way, it can be said that he initially derived his source of political legitimacy from that; the military, the establishment that is backing him, as the guarantor of stability and peace in the country, or, like Hamzawy (2017) referred to it, "a savior in uniform" (p. 4). Since 2013, the Egyptian military has been in control of almost all public and private sectors in society, from constructing social houses, bridges, and roads, all the way to owning factories and enterprises such as hotels and luxurious sea resorts (Ezzat,

2022, p. 377). Not only that, but retired generals were given access to the state's top bureaucratic positions, which enabled the armed forces to control sectors such as public transportation, land allocation, housing projects, security companies, etc. (Sayigh, 2012, pp. 11, 16, 17; Sayigh, 2019, p. 28; Transparency International Report, 2018). To justify their control of these sectors and avoid any public unrest, the regime resorted to promoting a nationalistic discourse about saving the nation from internal and external threats as the moral reason to why they need to centralize their control of all these sectors (Abul-Magd, 2017). Furthermore, the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates made sure to support al-Sisi financially to help him diminish the existence of the Muslim Brotherhood from the political scene in Egypt (Werr, 2013; Hamzawy, 2017; Butter, 2020; Taweel, 2023; Küçük, 2024). This was mainly because they were afraid of the spillover of the Arab Spring effect to their countries; they wanted to keep the status quo, and the way to do that was through the financial support of al-Sisi's regime. The combination of these factors has enabled the Egyptian military to rise to power once again, despite a prior revolution asking for the implementation of democratic reforms under civilian rule.

Since he came to power, al-Sisi has ruled mostly through a combination of desire, fear, and gut instinct rather than the actual needs of the Egyptian people (Sallam, 2024, p. 87). However, as was stated earlier, regimes cannot survive long through the exploitation of fear and coercion alone. Wallace (2013) claimed that military regimes are usually 'short-lived' compared to other authoritarian regime types, since it is assumed that military leaders care more about their institution's integrity than the preservation of power (p. 8). Yet, the case of Egypt contradicts this statement because it has remained under the leadership of military leaders since 1952. Mubarak alone remained in power for three decades. Thus, al-Sisi needed to establish a legacy of his own to justify his right to rule, and what better way than to focus on the generation of economic growth?

2.4. Urbanization as a Tool of Legitimacy

In his early presidency years, al-Sisi focused primarily on the generation of quick economic growth to combat the economic crisis that Mubarak left behind, instead of looking for the root cause of the problem to eliminate it altogether (on top of his fight

against terrorism). Al-Sisi saw that the ultimate way to stimulate growth is through the promotion of state-led infrastructure mega-projects such as building new cities, huge roads and bridges, a new Suez Canal, and even a new capital for the country. Two years into his presidency, al-Sisi announced his aspiration to build NAC on the outskirts of Cairo, which became a part of his 2030 Vision (The Sustainable Development Strategy, 2016). This initiative, among other mega-projects, gained a lot of publicity and helped attach terms like "modernity" and "reform" to al-Sisi's regime, which helped enhance and legitimize his image in the public's eyes as the "national savior" who will take Egypt out of its economic nightmare through development (Sallam, 2024, p. 87).

Al-Sisi's version of economic growth based on the construction of urban mega-projects follows a theory in the literature that posits urbanization as a driver of economic prosperity, rather than a consequence of it. Scholars such as Gallup, Sacks, and Mellinger (1999) supported such an idea, and Flyvbjerg (2014) also claimed that urban mega-projects may introduce economic benefits if successfully completed. Thus, since the main source of legitimacy for previous Egyptian regimes is the achievement of economic development (Al-Awadi, 2004), urbanization is then seen as the fastest way to generate speedy economic growth. However, there is no tangible evidence that suggests that urbanization brings about economic growth. Henderson (2003) found that there is no actual evidence that countries increasing their urbanization efforts have, in return, grown economically faster (p. 280). He claimed that the 'econo-metric' evidence does not support the linkage between increased urbanization and economic growth, and that is due to either one of two reasons: either the data is problematic or the urbanization efforts in the Sub-Saharan Africa for the past three decades has been correlated with negative economic growth (Henderson, 2003, p. 280). Unfortunately for al-Sisi, that is also the case with Egypt. Since 2015, the Egyptian economy has not shown any signs of growth or prosperity; if anything, the economic situation of the country has been going downhill with a horrendous devaluation of the local currency and high inflation rates, the highest being 38.0% in September 2023 (Reuters, 2025). According to Al-Anani (2022), the amount of money that the government spent – and continues to spend – on extravagant urban mega-projects is among the factors that led to the piling up of economic hardships. So, in the case of Egypt, al-Sisi's urban mega-projects – specifically NAC – did not lead to

economic growth. Then why is he investing in them so lavishly while promoting them as the modern solution to Egypt's decades-long troubles?

When it comes to the decisions of the state, it is important to understand where they are coming from; hence, it is important to analyze everything the state does from its perspective, using the 'top-down' approach. James Scott tried to do this in his book, *Seeing Like a State*, where he argued that state decisions and actions are based on securing social legibility. This can be attained from multiple things, including city designs (Scott, 1998, p. 2). The design of cities reflects the power of their ruling regimes and how the ruled perceive them, which essentially contributes to the concept of legitimacy (Scott, 1998, pp. 53-85). Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality supports this claim too, as he provided a critical framework to illustrate the "government's mentality" in terms of power and control (Foucault, 1977-78). He used it as the common denominator for his political analysis of concepts related to government and sovereignty (Foucault, 1977-78, p. 18). For Foucault, governments practice their sovereignty and security over a territory with its population, where the city acts as the instrument to ensure their control (Foucault, 1977-78, p. 19). For instance, the construction of wide boulevards and huge buildings helps to reflect a powerful image of the regime in control visually, and this is especially crucial in the context of upheavals. In the case of Egypt, al-Sisi's regime needed to attain legitimacy to be able to control the situation after the Arab Spring, and NAC provided just that. In other words, the crisis of legitimacy in Egypt produced its 'own city' (Di Giovanni, 2017). Medhat (2024) argued that the source of legitimacy that NAC provides is "the Weberian rational source of legitimacy and the Eastin structural source of legitimacy" (p. 36). However, that is not the case given the slow yet urgent pace of the project's implementation, its effect on Cairo's urban fabric, disregard for historical sites, the displacement of the people, and the lack of the public's involvement in the decision-making process. There is no structure. If anything, the Egyptian regime sees the urban concentration in Cairo as a threat to its survival (Wallace, 2013). Thus, it needs to deconcentrate the overpopulated Cairo. The state needs to be in control of the population in a given city in order to collect taxes efficiently, gather data, and prevent future rebellions (Scott, 1998, pp. 29-30). Not only that, but authoritarian neoliberal regimes seem to be less interested today than ever before in offering democratic reforms or concessions to maintain their legitimacy (Bruff, 2014, pp. 113–12;

Hendrikse, 2018, pp. 169–172). Therefore, I argue that the source of legitimacy in NAC's case is rather the success of its performance, which will visually portray the regime's legacy as the 'reformer' of the New Republic.

CHAPTER III

DESERT CITIES IN EGYPT: UNLEARNT MISTAKES?

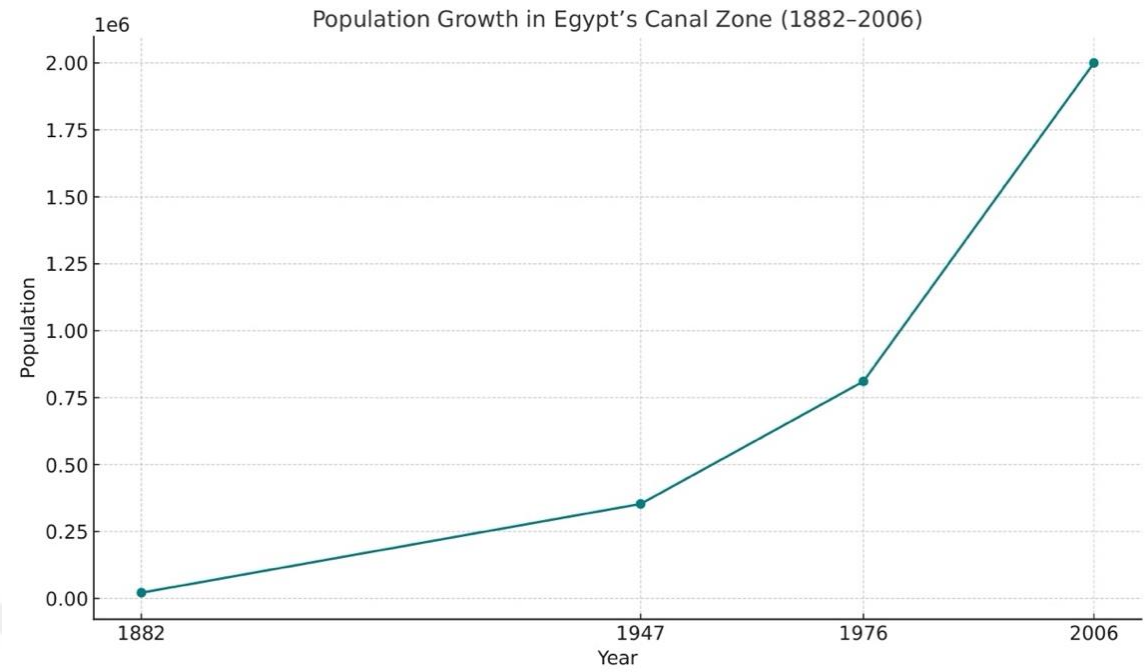
The concept of 'conquering the desert' with new towns/cities is not new nor unique to al-Sisi's regime. Egypt has been suffering for a long time from a particular issue that has obstructed its development path: overpopulation. It is a well-known fact that 96% of the population lives on only 4% of the Egyptian land area (Sims, 2015, p. 19), and earlier governments were trying to find ways to alleviate some of the congestion in the Nile Valley and Delta (Mitchell, 2002). On the other hand, the desert constitutes about 96% of the country's total land area. Thus, it was deemed somewhat necessary to exploit this neglected zone for the nation's benefit, or that is what al-Sisi and his predecessors claimed to be the solution for Egypt's seemingly eternal dilemma. Mubarak made sure to mention that in a speech in 1996, where he emphasized the necessity to leave the "narrow" valley in a "planned and organized manner" (as cited in Sims, 2015, p. 19). This does not seem like a crazy idea, since the desert can be found around large metropolis areas like Cairo and Alexandria. According to Sims (2015), the government presented the move into the desert as a vision for the future of Egypt due to the various opportunities it offers in terms of the vast land bank, decongestion of the population, agricultural development, and economic prosperity. Due to this symbolism of a better future, urban development in the desert became among the government's top priorities, from Nasser's time to al-Sisi's current unfolding reign.

Despite its importance in the government's national discourse and urban development plans, the literature on Egypt's desert cities was rather neglected in urban studies (Sims, 2015, p. 23). There was some work done on the positive technicalities of invading the Egyptian desert, but close to nothing was written about the overall analysis of this phenomenon, and whether it has worked for Egypt over the past six decades or not. As a result, Sims' book titled '*Egypt's Desert Dreams: Development or Disaster?'* represents a very comprehensive and detailed account of Egypt's overall

efforts to expand in the desert, and what could be learnt from the mistakes made in its previous urban mega-projects. This chapter aims to give an overview of the construction of new cities in the desert (from Nasser's time till Mubarak's), what they have achieved, and why they failed to realize their envisioned goals.

3.1. Pre-Nasser Era Projects

According to Sims (2015), the oldest attempt in the modern era to build new cities outside the borders of the Valley in Egypt dates back to Khedive Ismail (1863-1879). The construction of the Suez Canal (1860-1869), a 160 km passage connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, was deemed important for the improvement of international navigation back in the time (p. 142). As a result, the canal required the establishment of new cities (known as the Canal Zone), such as Port Said, Suez, and Ismailiya – the latter being named after the Khedive. These new cities were needed to provide logistics, services, and industries close to the canal, and for them to operate well and attract people to live in them, the government also needed to bring fresh water into this deserted location. Thus, the government also built a 120 km canal that would naturally carry freshwater from the Nile River to the Canal Zone (the water flow was constructed to go downhill, making it unnecessary to install pumps). Consequently, the flow of water made the land fertile, which enabled the growth of agriculture in these new towns. It also enabled the gradual growth of smaller towns such as Qassasin, al-Fayid, al-Qantara, and others. This provides an early example of an integrated regional development, in which the canal led to the establishment of new cities from scratch (Sims, 2015, p. 142). While it took more than a century, the Canal Zone transformed from a sparsely populated region in the desert into a region with major cities. Figure 3.1 represents the gradual population growth that occurred between 1882 and 2006.



Note: The population of the Canal Zone grew from a mere 21,300 inhabitants to nearly 2 million in the span of a century.

Figure 3.1. The Gradual Population Growth between 1882 and 2006
Reference: Egypt's Census as cited in Sims, 2015, p. 142

It was expected that if the later governments followed up with the pace of development in the Canal Zone in the 1970s, the region would have transformed into the "industriallogistics-transport spine of Egypt" by the year 2000, with a population exceeding 3 million (Sims, 2015, p. 142). Unfortunately, the later governments preferred to divert their attention establishing of new cities in the desert from scratch, making it a priority in the national agenda for Egypt's development.

Another example of a somewhat successful construction of a new city in the desert during this era was the creation of Heliopolis (*Masr el-Gedida*), located 8 km away from Cairo's center. The establishment of a streetcar system that connected Heliopolis to downtown Cairo was the main reason behind the success of this urban project, since it provided an easy pathway for the daily movements of the inhabitants (Sims, 2015, p. 143). Heliopolis also included luxurious landmarks and urban aesthetics, which contributed to its marketing as a modern location to attract new residents. As of 2022, the population of Heliopolis was estimated to be around 142,017 (State Census, 2022). Simultaneously with the development of Heliopolis, other desert suburbs were also being constructed, such as Helwan (south of Cairo) and Maadi (next to the Nile). The

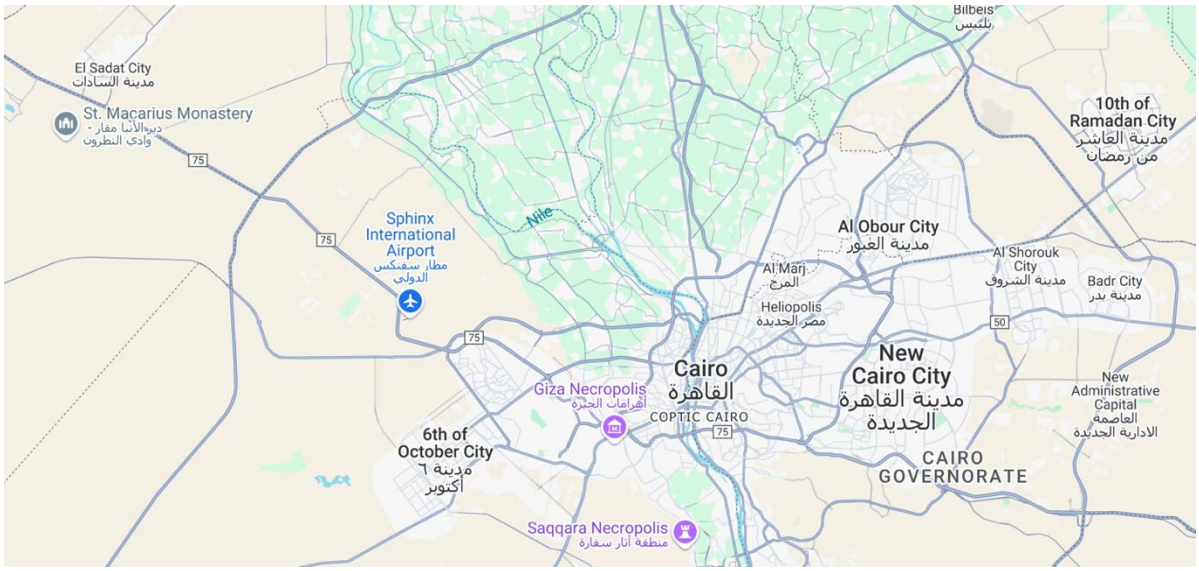
success of these new satellite cities also depended on the construction of the Helwan railway in 1903. It is then clear that the development of a good transportation network helped these suburbs thrive, transforming them today into areas for the urban elite in Cairo.

3.2. Nasser's Projects

After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Nasser aimed to establish economic independence for Egypt through heavy industrialization. Since his focus was placed on advancing socialist policies to improve the living standards of Egyptians, creating cities from scratch in the deserts was not at the top of his agenda. Instead, he focused more on establishing urban projects that contributed to the advancement of the agricultural sector and the expansion of cultivation into the desert (Sims, 2015). Hence, the construction of the Aswan High Dam. He also paid attention to the construction of factories and housing blocks for the workers on the outskirts of established cities. Sims (2015) mentioned three prominent examples illustrating Nasser's urban plans: Aswan, Nag Hammadi, and Helwan (p. 144). Aswan became a site for the chemical and iron ore industries, while Nag' Hammadi was selected for the aluminum melting industry, and Helwan was chosen for the cement, iron, and steel industries (Sims, 2015, p. 144). Furthermore, in addition to those industrial locations, Nasr City (*Madinat Nasr*) was also introduced as an extension into the desert, south of Heliopolis, in 1958. However, due to the wars between 1967 and 1973, the construction of Nasr City started in the late 1970s, after Nasser's death. By the early 2000s, significant tracts of desert land within the original concession of Nasr City remained undeveloped, underscoring the grand scale of the original plan. Nasser also carried out ambitious land reclamation schemes in the desert in multiple locations, where several villages were being constructed, such as "Village Number 6" and "Workers' Village". It is important to mention here that none of these villages were intended to transform into new cities, so they remained as rural settlements. As it may have been guessed by now, the leaders liked to name their urban projects either after themselves or after their achievements; in Nasser's case, the names included nationalist or pan-Arab names.

3.3. Sadat's Projects

We can safely assume that the emergence of new desert cities in Egypt, as they are seen and understood today, was first introduced in the government's national agenda under Sadat, through the October Working Paper (*Waraqat October*). In this policy paper, Sadat presented his futuristic vision of Egypt's development, which included adopting a new economic policy known as the infitah. This marked a radical departure from Sadat's predecessor's socialist policies to more neoliberal policies. The focus then shifted from state-driven national development efforts to the introduction of privatization and foreign direct investments (FDIs) as the new source of development. This infitah policy not only focus on opening up the economy but also had a spatial dimension. Sadat called for the creation of a "new map of Egypt", where urban developments would not be restricted to the traditional Nile Valley and Delta but would extend beyond that to relieve the population density from existing cities– sounds familiar? Nevertheless, Sadat's vision led to the establishment of higher planning authorities, like the Ministry of Reconstruction in 1974 (Sims, 2015, p. 145). Two years later, the site of the first desert city was chosen. Located on Cairo–Ismailiya Desert Road, Tenth of Ramadan City was planned as a self-sustaining industrial hub that would engulf half a million people. The name of the city is in reference to the 1973 War, which occurred on the 10th of Ramadan. Simultaneously, the government also worked on the planning of another desert city: Sadat City (*Madinat al-Sadat*). Sadat City was set to encompass 500,000 inhabitants in a desert site on the Cairo–Alexandria Desert Road and was also meant to be a self-sufficient industrial city. If you are familiar with the map of Egypt, you would know that these locations are isolated desert zones. Without a proper transportation system to connect these locations to Central Cairo, the migration of people to the new cities would prove to be rather difficult. Figure 3.2 shows the location of the new desert cities with regard to their distance from Cairo.



Note: Cairo is centrally located along the Nile River. Sadat City lies further northwest, along the Cairo–Alexandria Desert Road, whereas the Tenth of Ramadan City lies further northeast, along the Cairo–Ismailiya Desert Road.

Figure 3.2. Location of New Desert Cities with Respect to Cairo
Reference: Google Maps, 2025

There is also the Fifteenth of May City, located to the east of Helwan, which was supposed to host 250,000 people and function as an urban extension for the people. The name commemorated Sadat's so-called "corrective revolution" of May 1972, which reoriented Egypt's developmental direction away from Nasser's socialist policies. Compared to all the new desert cities, Fifteenth of May City managed to be integrated into the urban fabric of Cairo, and its social housing filled up at a successful rate (Sims, 2015, pp. 148, 154). In contrast, the fourth new city returned to the independent industrial city model in the desert, and the plan for it was constructed in 1979. This is the city of the Sixth of October, named after the 1973 War, located on a remote desert plateau around 40 km west of Cairo, and it was expected to house between 300,000 and 500,000 people. Furthermore, the government adopted Law 59 in 1979, which institutionalized the state-driven urban planning of new cities. The law created the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA) as an economic body within the Ministry of Reconstruction, giving it the authority to develop and sell lands in designated areas in the desert and maintain the revenue from these sales to finance

other urban developments.[2] In other words, NUCA can be described as the state's real estate agent.

While these urban mega-projects were being built, plans for another bunch of new cities were announced between 1979 and 1982 (Sims, 2015, p. 149), such as al-Amririya al-Gadida, New Damietta, al-Ubur City, al-Badr New Town, and Salihiya.[3] These new cities were built either on the outskirts of Cairo or Alexandria, and combined with the older new cities, they became known as the "first-generation new towns" (Sims, 2015, p. 150). They were supposedly independent cities with an economic base of their own, and in a way, they were supposed to help relieve some of the population pressures on the major Egyptian cities. The government claimed that the urban plans were done on a scientific basis, considering the population ratio, the location, and the type of infrastructure/services that need to be built to attract the people. The general discourse of the government assumed – wrongfully – that building the "urban ideal" would attract the number of people they targeted. However, that could not be any further from the truth; if anything, it soon became clear that the targeted number of populations for these new cities was barely fulfilled.

3.4. Mubarak's Projects

In 1982, USAID financed an urban study titled "*The National Urban Policy Study*" to analyze the urban efforts in Egypt and provide recommendations on how to develop its urban strategy in a better light (PADCO Inc., 1982). The study discovered, over the span of two years, that it was more effective and efficient for the government to pursue urban developments in existing cities to meet its national economic and social goals. Not once did the study recommend the creation of further new cities in the desert due to the enormous cost, which places a burden on the government's financial resources and the national economy. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Reconstruction did not listen to the recommendations, nor did it aim to spread the findings of this study (Sims, 2015,

[2] For more information on Law 59/1979 on NUCA's functions, check the following link: http://www.newcities.gov.eg/english/aboutUs/About_Authority/default.aspx

[3] Sims mentioned in his book that there was another city called "al-Amal city" in the books on new towns, and it was mentioned in them for years, but was never even started. However, the New Urban Communities Authority Portal no longer lists it as such. Check http://www.newcities.gov.eg/english/New_Communities/default.aspx

pp. 150-151). On the contrary, Mubarak's government decided to push forward the urban development of further new towns despite the lack of proper financial resources. It is during this period that the concept of "satellite settlements" around Cairo was promoted, which led to the announcement of nine satellite cities. However, only five of these urban settlements were constructed into what we know today as "New Cairo" in the east and "Sheikh Zayed City" in the west (Sims, 2015). Furthermore, new twin cities of provinces in the desert, such as New Beni Suef and New Minya, were announced in 1986.

By the 1990s, Egypt witnessed a shift in the government's urbanization approach towards a more "capitalist" model, especially in terms of the new cities that were being developed in the desert. Under the Minister of Housing, Mohamed Ibrahim Suleiman, the private real estate developers became a part of the urban equation in Egypt. NUCA played an important role in this equation – and continues to do so until today – by selling a massive amount of land to these developers at low prices to build gated communities and luxurious compounds filled with amenities that could classify them as small cities within themselves. These new cities targeted the upper-middle class, which marked the departure from the previous approach that aimed to build cities on the basis of "equitable urban expansion". Instead of the general focus on establishing industrial hubs, these new city models were meant to be purely residential. Examples of these new city projects include Sheikh Zayed City, el-Shuruq City, and New Cairo. With time, NUCA became even more ambitious and started to play with the concept of cities that would attract millions of the population, known as "mudun el-milyuniya" (Sims, 2015, p. 154). In a plan set in 1997, NUCA produced a list of at least 44 new towns to be built all over the Egyptian desert, and they were expected to contain around 6 million inhabitants.[4] As of 2014, only the city of New Fayoum was being constructed out of the 44 new towns suggested in 1997 (Sims, 2015, p. 382). This illustrated the disconnect between the government's urban utopian fantasies and its implementation capabilities, which the current government under al-Sisi seems to be turning a blind eye to. Table 1 presents the years in which the construction of the new desert cities around Cairo started.

[4] According to Sims (2015), the list is found in "Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, National Water Resources Plan for Egypt—2017 (Cairo: January 2005), Supporting Information, page B-3. The source is given as "Ministry of Planning, 1997."

City Name	Construction Year
6th of October City	1982
15th of May City	1984
10th of Ramadan City	1988
Al-Ubur	1989
Al-Badr New Town	1989
El-Shuruq	1995
Sheikh Zayed City	1996
New Cairo	2000

Note: Shows the years when the Egyptian government started the construction of these new cities.

Table 3.1. The Construction Years of New Cities
Reference: Ashraf et al, 2016

3.5. The Mistakes of the Past

Several studies have shown that the new desert cities in Egypt have failed to attract the targeted population numbers, which has caused the efforts of different governments to decongest the major cities to go down the drain. If anything, the new towns built around Cairo – like Sixth of October – seemed to integrate into the urban fabric of the city, categorizing it as an overspill from Greater Cairo (Sims, 2015, p. 170). By 2006, the total population of all new cities did not even exceed 800,000, whereas Cairo's inhabitants exceeded 1.75 million people.[5] The question then becomes, what went wrong? Why did these urban mega-projects, with their enormous economic and environmental costs, fail to decongest the Nile Valley and Delta? Sims (2015) believed there are three main reasons behind the failures of the new towns. One, the residential blocks and the housing in these new cities are expensive for the average citizen, making it unaffordable for most Egyptians. The new cities do not take into consideration the needs of the locals, and instead impose strict building standards (Wahish, 1999; Sims, 2015). For instance, inhabitants are not allowed to open retail shops or offices, along with street kiosks and stalls. In Cairo, most people's livelihoods depend on these types of businesses, and their prohibition means their exclusion from

[5] This information was retrieved from CAMPAS's following website: https://www.cedejcapmas.org/adws/app/4d5b52dc-669d-11e9-b6a6-975656a88994/index.html

the urban equation in new towns. This resulted from the exclusion of the citizens from the decision-making process; the government neglected the consultation of the citizens and their demands in each settlement. Thus, the implemented projects were not built to suit the citizens and their needs but were rather implemented to fulfill the dreams of the regimes of developing Egypt into modernity.

Two, there is a lack of a proper and affordable transportation network between the new cities and the major existing ones. The distance between these cities and the major centers is significant, and so intercity public transit is a must. The current available means of public transportation to the new desert towns found in the major cities is the informal minibuses, which are not convenient to those who may consider living in these areas. Furthermore, the average Egyptian does not own a private car (Kamel, Sims & Solomon: 2008), so investing only in the construction of roads without proper and affordable means of public transport neglects once again the needs of the inhabitants (Sims, 2015). Even private car owners would think twice about moving out due to the distance between the centers and the locations of these new cities, which would add more cost to them. Lastly, bad land management. Unlike the successful and sequenced implementation of Heliopolis, the land allocations in the new cities were rushed and placed in the most random locations. The land allocation wholesale scheme treated the new cities as business ventures, disregarding proper urban planning. It also did not help that the previous regimes insisted on building more and more towns, while disregarding the opportunity of successfully developing existing cities (for more on this, see Sims, 2015). As we will see in the next chapter, al-Sisi did not learn from the failure of these urban projects. If anything, he is enhancing them to further his own legacy at the expense of existing cities.

CHAPTER IV

SISI'S NAC

"Egypt has more wonders in it than any other country in the world and provides more works that defy description than any other…" – Herodotus, 425 BC.

NAC was first introduced to the public in March 2015, during the Egypt Economic Development Conference (EEDC), a three-day event held in Sharm El Shiekh under the slogan of "Egypt the Future". The conference was initiated by a suggestion from the late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who wanted to help Egypt overcome its economic hardship following the successive events of the military coup against Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi (Ghoneim, 2015). On the first day of the event, Egyptian Housing Minister Mostafa Madbouly, who has been serving as Egypt's Prime Minister since 2018, announced to the guests and the world Egypt's upcoming urban mega-project: the futuristic smart city of NAC. He started his speech by referencing a quote from Herodotus, where the latter talked about his amusement with the beauty of Egypt. Madbouly stated that Cairo reflected Herodotus' description of Egypt. He also addressed how Cairo's architecture is rich in history, and how that richness has imprinted a certain "mental image of Cairo" for Egyptian citizens and tourists alike. It is then precisely due to this historically rich architecture that it became rather crucial for the current Egyptian generation to "contribute to the enrichment of this image and add to it something that our grandchildren will look upon and say that our generation built something new for Cairo".[6] Hence, the idea of NAC. The minister claimed that NAC is the perfect "scientific" solution to Cairo's housing and overpopulation issue, which the country has battled with for decades now. It was expected to house around 5 million residents. In terms of the location, NAC was placed in the middle between Greater Cairo, the Suez Canal, and the rest of the urban projects

[6] To watch the complete speech of the prime minister, you can visit: Madbouly, Mostafa (2015). المؤتمر الإقتصادي - شرح تفاصيل مشروع العاصمة الإدارية الجديدة " مشروح سيعيد التاريخ " [Video]. Alhayah TV Network's Channel on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCw3NULhCPo

that the government planned to implement (e.g., The New Alamein City). This was decided based on "scientific research", which explored how Greater Cairo expanded since the 1960s. The research then discovered that Greater Cairo was expanding eastward, which is why they located NAC 45 km east of central Cairo. Scott (1998) referred to this as the "modernist" approach to city planning, where urban planners depend more on scientific knowledge than on the needs of the locals when designing cities (pp. 4-7). Moreover, to further enhance the audience's imagination, Madbouly emphasized that the goal behind NAC – the face of al-Sisi's "New Egyptian Republic" – is the improvement of the quality of life for all Egyptians. Not only that, but this plan was supposed to take only 5 to 7 years to complete, and its cost was set at $45 billion. Supposedly, Capital City Partners – a real estate investment fund that was founded by Emirati real estate developer Mohamed Alabbar for the sole purpose of developing the new city – was going to be the constructor of NAC (BBC, 2015; Ahram Online, 2015). Fun fact: Alabbar is the same man who built the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa. So far, NAC sounds like a well-planned utopia for the Egyptian people.

Unfortunately for Madbouly, his words could not have been any further from reality. By the year 2023, only phase one of NAC is partially built – around 60% – out of the three phases set for the urban mega-project (Taweel, 2023, p. 9). According to the government's plan, phase one is supposed to include the Government District, the Presidential Palace complex, the General Intelligence Service residential compounds and headquarters, the Banking District, the Central Business District, the Diplomatic District, the Knowledge City, The "Green River" central park, Arts and Culture City, Islamic Cultural Center, Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, Olympic City, the New Capital Airport, the Medical City, and finally the Expo City (Taweel, 2023, p. 9). Some newer reports claimed that the entirety of the first phase has been completed (Hundeyin, 2024; Sky News, 2024). Nevertheless, while NAC should have been constructed within "5 to 7 years", the groundwork shows otherwise. In terms of construction, the project is still far behind and might not even be completed by the year 2030, despite Khaled Abbas, Chairman and Managing Director of the Administrative Capital Company for Urban Development (ACUD), claiming that the second phase of NAC will be done by 2027.[7] As one would have guessed by now, Capital City Partners

[7] To watch the complete interview, you can visit: Abbas, Khaled (2024). م. خالد محمود عباس: انتهاء ما يقرب من 95% من المرحلة الأولى للعاصمة الإدارية. [Video]. ON E's Account on Facebook. https://rb.gy/68ojm6

is no longer NAC's constructor; negotiations between Alabbar and the Egyptian government ultimately fell apart early on in 2015 because of disagreements on how the project should be funded and how shares were going to be divided among the contributors (Darwish, 2015; Georgy & Noueihed, 2015; Middle East Monitor, 2015). Not only that, but with the death of King Abdullah in 2015, the relationship between al-Sisi and his Gulf allies has changed; they no longer wanted to invest in businesses that were poorly managed (Taweel, 2023, p. 13). Rather than spending lavishly on useless projects, the Gulf countries changed their strategy; they began to eye the assets that belonged to the Egyptian state rather than giving condition-free money. On the other hand, China seemed interested in stepping in after the Emiratis left the project; however, that also failed to go through when the Chinese realized how the projects made little economic sense two years later (Ahram Online, 2017; MEE, 2017; GCR, 2018; Magdy, 2018). Subsequently, the Egyptian government decided to take over the project, with the armed forces being in control of almost all aspects of the new capital.

In terms of the finances, al-Sisi and his government have tried to soothe the worry of the Egyptian public by claiming that the mega-project was not going to cost the state a "single penny" on multiple occasions (Abdul-Tawab, 2019; Saeed, 2021; Alhurra, 2023; Taweel, 2023). If anything, al-Sisi even claimed during the National Youth Conference that was held in Alexandria in 2023 that he is building NAC to "turn dust into money".[8] He swore three times in the same speech that the state budget has not funded the new capital, for it can generate its own funds without any interventions from the state. Madbouly and Abbas have further promoted these claims through public statements (Rowaq Arabi, 2024, p. 206). However, the economic turmoil that the country is going through tells a different story. As of January 2025, the inflation rate stands at 23.2% (CAMPAS, 2025). While this may be good news, given that Egypt has reached a peak of 38% in 2023, the Egyptian inflation rate remains well above the optimum rate, which most central banks agree is around 2% (Ball, 2013; Gnan & Holzmann, 2023; Adam & Weber, 2024). Poverty is estimated to have reached a 29.7% rate due to the high inflation rate of 2023, along with the continuous devaluation of the Egyptian pound – courtesy of the latest IMF loan (World Bank, 2024). Couple

[8] To watch the related quote, you can visit: Al-Sisi, Abdel Fatah (2023). الرئيس السيسي: فكرة العاصمة الإدارية "تحويل التراب لفلوس..والله ما أخدنا فلوس ليها من موازنة الدولة". [Video]. Extra News Channel on Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcDFqVLaVZ4

this with rising consumer prices that challenge most Egyptian households (check Egypt's CPI for further information), and you have a recipe for a disastrous economy. Additionally, in the summer of 2023, Egyptians had to endure electricity cuts amidst scorching heatwaves, while the government was justifying why it was spending money on NAC instead of securing an adequate gas supply for the power plants (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Madbouly defended the government's funding of a brand-new city in the desert, rather than securing electricity for the Egyptians during two of the hottest recorded summers on Earth, by claiming that they were "necessary for the development of the Egyptian economy" or else the economy would have collapsed (Qaid, 2023). This was outrageous to hear, for the government preferred to invest in NAC, which could have been paused for a while, instead of saving the citizens from the heat. It seemed as if the government was not there for the citizens, and this is where the proposed research question comes into the picture: why is the regime so obsessed with investing in NAC, even if it was at the expense of the citizens? Why is there an obsession with this urban mega-project, to the point where Cairo itself is being affected, with its urban fabric facing enormous transformations, for this seemingly unnecessary desert-city?

4.1. The Debate on NAC

The construction of a new capital is not a new idea for Egypt. If anything, Egypt's history is full of instances where the capital city had to be reintroduced or relocated due to various reasons (Serag, 2017, p. 2). It is estimated that Egypt moved its capital 28 times before settling on Cairo in 969 A.D (as per the quota cited in Serag, 2017). The reasons for the relocation varied from one period to another, either due to political, ideological (like Aketaton city), or colonial reasons (like Alexandria or Fustat). However, since the 1970s, Cairo's overpopulation and traffic congestion have become the driving force behind the discussion of a new Egyptian capital (Sims, 2015; Serag, 2017; Shawkat, 2020). Hence, Sadat attempted to construct a new capital in the desert in 1978 (Serag, 2017, pp. 2-3). According to the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies, Sadat attempted to build an administrative capital – Sadat City – to depopulate Cairo, but the project failed to take off due to his assassination in 1981. Similarly, Mubarak developed a plan to relocate the ministries from downtown Cairo, but that too was never implemented (Zain, 2022). Mubarak had no sense of urgency to relocate the

government, as his legitimacy was not under threat – at least not until the final months before his downfall. Additionally, due to the tense political climate in the region at the time, none of the presidents was able to actualize the goal of relocating the capital city. Instead, they were preoccupied with the multiple wars that occurred in the region throughout the past century (e.g., the Arab-Israeli Wars, the Gulf Wars, the Cold War, etc). That is, until al-Sisi, who is keen to do everything in his power to bring his vision of NAC to life. As of 2023, 14 ministries and governmental entities have moved to NAC, according to the Presidential Spokesperson Ahmed Fahmy, and more are expected to move under the directives of al-Sisi (Ahram Online, 2023). After 1,150 years, Cairo's role as the beating heart of the Egyptian government has come to an end (Hassan, 2024).

When NAC was first announced, multiple opinions emerged, either in support or in opposition of the mega-project. According to Serag (2017), the opinions mainly followeed three lines of thought that appeared in what he called the "planning and development society". The first line is in total support of the project, which believes in the achievability of the "Dubai Model" for the betterment and development of Egypt. Those following this line of thought believe that Dubai made a successful brand for itself through the construction of tall and large buildings, even racing to create the tallest tower in the world and the largest airport in the region. This – from their perspective – ensured the economic success of Dubai at a global scale. Their ideas do not seem far off from those of government, given that the NAC model revealed at the EEDC closely resembled that of Dubai. Serag stated that since many view Dubai as a symbol of success, it then makes sense to them that its replica somewhere else will work. Now, if that is the case, will NAC really succeed like Dubai? This view claims that yes, it will succeed due to three reasons: its location (which brings it closer to the Suez Canal and its investments), the potential donations of the gulf countries, and the fact that creating a new capital is not a brand-new idea (other countries like Brazil have done it and succeeded with it). As a result, the supporters of this perspective are in total support of NAC and its symbolism of development.

The second line of thought semi-supports the construction of NAC; it generally believes that although Egypt is in dire need of a new capital, the location of NAC is not ideal for its success. The supporters of this line of thought claim that the best

solution to relieve Cairo from its problems is to create a new center for development and growth. Having NAC close to Cairo – 45 km east of its center – might risk the infusion of the new capital with the old one (Serag, 2017). This scenario would not come as a surprise, since many of the satellite cities of Greater Cairo, which were supposed to be independent cities to help with the overpopulation issue, ended up fusing with the old agglomeration. This view was reinforced by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's (SOM) data (check Serag, 2017, p. 6), which showed the potential fusion of NAC with the suburbs of Cairo in the future. It is then deemed necessary to locate NAC further away from Cairo to avoid such a risk, which will then act as a magnet that will attract and deconcentrate the overly crowded population from the congested centers. Two urban experts at least have observed that most of the global experiences of moving the national capital chose to locate the new city at least 500 km away from the first capital, like the successful cases of Brazil and Nigeria (Serag, 2017, p. 6). Thus, they supported the idea of relocating NAC from its current location to somewhere further south. A professor of geography has also claimed that the current location risks the threat of potential floods due to its proximity to the Gulf of Suez. Furthermore, another crucial reason for the need to relocate NAC is related with national defense; Serag stated that a former military expert has brought attention to a possible nuclear threat by neighboring countries (assuming he was referring to Israel in this case due to its closeness to the Egyptian borders), and how that would lead to devastating results in case NAC was to come under attack. As a solution to such a threat, the expert suggested the distribution and decentralization of the population in smaller settlements rather than concentrating them in the east. Additionally, some consultants have also claimed that the current location of NAC is troubling because it will negatively obscure the development of the infrastructure network, like the securing of the water supply (Serag, 2017). Transferring water to the new city will cost the government too much of its resources, especially since Egypt is also facing the threat of water scarcity due to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). It is then feared that NAC will not only have problems securing its inhabitants' water supply but will also be a threat to the supply of other settlements.

Lastly, the third line of thought rejects the entirety of building NAC altogether. The advocates of this line base their perspective on the increasing inequality across the Egyptian governorates and the need to focus on diminishing the widening gap between

the rich and the poor (Serag, 2017, p. 8). They believe that by investing in NAC, the government is not putting the country's resources to the benefit of the general welfare of the people. Instead of providing better public services and more job opportunities for the youth in different cities and regions within the country, the government prefers to use its resources to build a new capital in the desert and advertises it as the perfect plan to improve the lives and future of Egyptians. This is best seen in the regime's official rhetoric, which continues to claim that NAC has helped bring revenue to the Egyptian state and is then deemed necessary for the 'national development' of the country. The experts supporting this view assume that it will take a long time before the government reaps the fruits of its mega-urban project, which will make migration to NAC less appealing (Serag, 2017, p. 9). Prominent experts in the field of urban planning, like Fahmy and el-Sheshtawy, fall under this line of thought since they have criticized the feasibility of NAC and urban mega-projects in the desert. Not to mention, the failure of the previous new city projects discussed in chapter 3 should have rung bells for al-Sisi, that it is about time the government changed its urban strategy in the desert. Clearly, it did not.

4.2. Problems with Al-Sisi's NAC

Initially, the Gulf countries were expected to fund the mega-project entirely, thanks to their earlier support of the regime. Or that is what al-Sisi thought was going to happen. This could be captured in a leaked tape from one of his private conversations, where he allegedly said that the Gulf states have "money like rice" (Alabbasi, 2015; Al Jazeera, 2015; BBC, 2015; Daragahi, 2015). However, after the death of King Abdullah in 2015, the financial support coming from the Gulf countries started to decline (Hamzawy, 2017, p. 5). The threat of an Islamist insurgency or countercoup has gradually faded away, and al-Sisi's incapability to spend wisely, along with his extensive external borrowing and no tangible development on the ground, has encouraged the Gulf leaders to divert their focus away from Egypt (Hamzawy, 2017; Sallam, 2024). Thus, for the lack of a better foreign alternative, the regime took things into its own hands to further its legacy of creating the "New Republic", even though Egypt is not a rentier state, and acquiring the necessary means to fund such a huge-scale project could bankrupt the country if not handled properly. As a result, al-Sisi's regime entrusted the ACUD with the task of developing the capital city (State

Information Service, 2017). The ACUD is a joint company between NUCA, the National Service Products Organization (NSPO), and Armed Forces National Lands Projects Agency. Such an announcement has led many to speculate that the state budget is going to be the main funding source for the mega-project; however, al-Sisi and his government have reassured the public on multiple occasions that this project will create its own source of revenue – its land sales – which will help fund its ambitious top-down urban plan (Abdel Aleem, 2024; Hosni, 2023). For instance, Madbouly stated in 2023 that the ACUD follows the laws of corporations in the private sector system and has an independent budget that "did not cost the state a single pound… the land was made available to the private sector to develop the Administrative Capital Company so that it would have revenue and resources." (Alaa, 2023; Hosni, 2023; Reda, 2023). The government has claimed that revenue from land sales will be used to develop the infrastructure – including a large transportation network – which, in turn, will increase the value of land and property. Thus, the state and its citizens will not have any economic burden to worry about regarding the costs of NAC. Sounds like a terrific plan, except that it lacks any understanding of the economic, social, and urban complexities of reality (Rowaq Arabi, 2024, p. 206). Basically, the plan assumes that the value of the land and the real estate will continuously increase with no foreseen disruptions, which could perhaps result in the discontinuation of the project. This "zero-cost" model sounds too perfect to be true, and many reports did indeed prove the faults in it (Taweel, 2023; Rowaq Arabi, 2024; Malek, 2024). The government's rhetoric itself has been contradicted when it allocated $641 million in 2015 to begin the construction process of NAC (Hamza, 2015). Furthermore, in 2022, al-Sisi signed a presidential decree that designated 45,500 feddans to the ACUD, which increased the latter's land bank to 215,500 feddans (Taweel, 2023, p. 16). The revenue of these land sales – which were originally public property – goes automatically into the pocket of the military-controlled ACUD, a courtesy from al-Sisi. Such an arrangement transforms what is originally a public resource into an independent one that belongs to the ACUD and not the Egyptian state, making it its "own source of funding". The Ministry of Housing and its affiliates (including NUCA) also contribute to this by buying land from the ACUD, which essentially transfers public money to the company while putting the risks of this project on the treasury (Taweel, 2023, p. 17). As if that is not enough, the government is also expected to pay rent to the ACUD – an estimated $203 million a year – for the

ministries and other official offices in NAC (Walsh & Yee, 2022). Taweel concluded in her report that the state has created loopholes to redirect public resources to fund NAC at the expense of the Egyptian people, whether through government debt, direct budget allocation, or even loans from the Central Bank of Egypt. Not only that, but the government has continuously reduced or cut subsidies and social spending (Ezzat, 2022, p. 382), while claiming that the state does not have enough resources to provide something as simple as public education – a basic human right. Later that year, the government borrowed money from the IMF for the fourth time since al-Sisi's military regime came to power in 2013, putting the external debt at $155.7 billion in 2022 (International Monetary Fund, 2023). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the economy has also faced turbulence marked by a high inflation rate and a huge devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which put unbearable pressures on the average citizen whose minimum wage does not extend beyond 7000 EGP.[9] Meanwhile, al-Sisi is pursuing NAC and other mega infrastructure projects rather than finding solutions for the rising poverty rates and the declining social spending (Mandour, 2020).

Speaking of the citizens, the official government narrative states that NAC is being built for everyone based on inclusivity and sustainability (El Hakeh, 2021; Elmouelhi, 2019; Malek, 2024). General Ahmed Zaki Abdeen, ACUD's chairman from 2017 to 2022, claimed in a 2018 interview that there would be a place for "everybody" in NAC (Elmouelhi, 2019, p. 12). However, a quick search on the internet for the apartment prices will reveal to you that NAC is too expensive for the average Egyptian. As of 2025, the price per meter in NAC ranges from 30,000 EGP per meter up to 58,000 EGP (Better House Property, 2025). These figures contradict the average income of Egyptians per year, and so how could they ever afford it? Someone from the middle class will surely avoid NAC altogether since they would not be able to afford its housing units. As a solution for this, the government offered an alternative for those who could not afford to buy a house in NAC, Badr City, which is adjacent to NAC. However, Badr City has some issues that make it an inconvenient alternative. There is no adequate transportation network that connects Badr City to NAC, and the average price per meter there is around 6,000 EGP, which is expected to increase along with the inflation rates (Aqarmap, 2024; Malek, 2024). Furthermore, El Hakeh (2021)

[9] As of the time this thesis was written, the exchange rate is as follows: $1 is worth 51 EGP. This makes 7000 EGP equivalent to around $137.

pointed out that the government's efforts in NAC revolve around the attraction of investments and money while setting aside what she called "people-centered policies". These policies include the construction of transportation and affordable infrastructure to ensure the inclusion of all citizens. The absence of public universities in NAC and the presence of private ones that target high social classes can only be interpreted in an investment context, where the regime seeks to make a profit instead of providing public services (Malek, 2024). Another thing that is worth paying attention to is how some of the promotional videos for NAC are made in English, especially the ones on the Central Business District (CBD). In one of these videos, the narrator said:

"Since 2014, and we are developing the infrastructure, establishing fourth generation cities across the country to help you start your success story."

Whose stories are we talking about here? Is it the story of the average Egyptian citizen, who is struggling every day to live with the harsh economic conditions? If so, why is the video narrated in English and not Arabic? It then becomes clear that the CBD was not constructed with the average Egyptian in mind, but rather the wealthy foreign investors who are looking for the "perfect destination for every business."[10] Since the city is designed to accommodate the needs of a particular social class, NAC faces a higher risk of becoming an unsustainable urban project.

Additionally, the decision-making process of NAC did not include the public's participation at any stage, known otherwise as "participatory urbanism". Fahmy (2015) criticized this, arguing that the residents of Cairo were not even consulted on whether they needed a new city or not. The project could have been much more successful if it had included the participation of the different social classes in Egypt, which would eventually lead to social inclusiveness and equity (Harvey, 1996; Elmouelhi, 2019). Unfortunately, it does not seem that the government would change its stance on this matter any time soon. Furthermore, there is also the issue of the Green River in NAC. During the Real Estate Future Forum (RFF) that occurred in Riyadh last year, Abbas claimed that NAC aims to provide 15 square meters of green space

[10] iv. To watch the promotional video, you can visit: Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities (2024). مشروعات العاصمة الإدارية الجديدة والعلمين الجديدة. [Video]. YouTube. http://youtube.com/watch?v=W7QQCKEza8w

per capita, the highest rate in Egypt (Abu Ali, 2024). In a country that is suffering from water scarcity, growing a green space proves to be a difficult challenge since it will require a significant amount of water, energy to transfer it, and chemicals (Bolleter & Cameron, 2021). The new capital alone is expected to consume more than five hundred million cubic meters of water per year, and that would effectively put pressure on the availability of water in other cities (Sayigh, 2019, p. 257).



Note: This picture is the perfect representation of how dystopian it is to turn a part of the desert into a green space, in a country that suffers from water scarcity.

Figure 4.1. The Dystopian Reality of Greenery in NAC
Reference: NAC's official page on Facebook

4.3. The Changes in Cairo

Another set of problems that emerges from the construction of NAC has to do with Cairo. For the past decade, many have observed that Cairo is going through a transformation, and not in a good way (Rowaq Arabi, 2024, p. 202). The first of these problems is the intentional displacement of many Egyptians, under the excuse of the development of the "New Republic". According to the government's discourse, NAC is supposed to address the issues found in Cairo, which include population congestion,

informal settlements, and inadequate infrastructure. However, there are around 750,000 housing units in the new desert cities and about one million units in Greater Cairo that are mostly vacant and unoccupied (Shawkat, 2015). This essentially means that there is a surplus in the housing units; thus, no additional cities are required to be built in the desert. If anything, the current government should have been working on schemes to transfer the people to these units and invest in the improvement of the public services there. Instead, al-Sisi chose to pursue NAC at the expense of people, some of whom are getting displaced over his infrastructural projects related to the new capital. For instance, the construction of al-Firdaws Axis in 2020 has resulted in the removal of many cemeteries in Tarab al-Ghafir and the displacement of numerous people who worked and lived there (Rowaq Arabi, 2024, p. 215). More recently, al-Sisi's regime came under fire when the sound of bulldozers began to echo in the Imam al-Shafi'i neighborhood, demolishing hundreds of graves dating back hundreds of years (Al-Kafrawi, 2024). Many families were forced to relocate the remains of their loved ones to different areas, while thousands took to different social media platforms to express their outrage with the government's actions. The authorities had demolished a historic mausoleum belonging to the lady who gave birth to Muhammad Ali Pasha's second son and the heir to his throne, and another one belonging to poet Mahmoud Sami al-Baroudi (Al-Kafrawi, 2024). Figure 4.2 shows the damage that was inflicted on the historic mausoleum.



Note: The picture on the left shows the historic mausoleum before the demolition, and the picture on the right shows the aftermath of the bulldozing.

Figure 4.2. The Destruction of the Historical Mausoleum
Reference: Mostafa El Sadek's post on Facebook

Unfortunately, this has become a recurring scene over the past four years, as the authorities in Egypt extend and expand the roads and axes that connect Cairo to NAC (Abdel Nasser, 2024). Ironically, the World Bank had warned against the construction of more roads and bridges in Greater Cairo back in 2014. The report stated that building roads and bridges will not solve Cairo's traffic congestion, and recommended instead investing in the creation of an effective mass transit network (World Bank, 2014, p. 11). Despite the warning, al-Sisi's priority remained well-confined in the expansion of the roads as a source of his legacy of achievements. The governorates of the Greater Cairo region have received hundreds of axes, roads, and bridges as part of the national infrastructural project; Cairo's share reached 349 projects, Giza received 11 traffic axes, while Qalyubia got several axes and traffic roads (Areej & Awad, 2024). Moreover, al-Sisi's government upgraded the infamous Ring Road, which connects old urban areas to Greater Cairo, for more than 7 billion EGP. It demolished 2,000 properties adjacent to the road to achieve the required traffic flow, which the government promoted in videos depicting traffic on the Ring Road. According to Professor Hassan Elsady, the government chose the most expensive alternative to fixing the congestion issue, even though it does not address the root cause (Areej & Awad, 2024). It is also true that al-Sisi will continue to implement these mega infrastructure projects, even if it is at the cost of destroying historical sites and displacing people from their properties.

The second problem facing Cairo is the destruction of its greenery, despite the city's pressing need to plant more trees. As of 2024, the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) by Yale University has ranked Egypt 122nd globally for air quality. It then does not come as a surprise that Cairo's air pollution level is sky high (Shaban, 2024). However, that did not make the cut to the top priorities of the state. On the contrary, Egypt's Grand Mufti justified the cutting of trees back in 2022, as "permissible for the public's interest". Throughout the decades, urban developments in Egypt have failed to recognize the people's rights to green spaces and have instead focused on diminishing what remains of them – especially under al-Sisi. The environment and the people do not really matter to the regime, which is obsessed with accumulating wealth through urbanization (Shaban, 2024). NAC furthers this issue for Cairo since the government is investing money and resources in the greenery in the new capital, while completely neglecting the need for greenery in the current one. Cairo has become

unbearably hot during the summers, and cutting trees creates even worse conditions for the inhabitants. Instead of directing the efforts to make it green again, the government has deliberately cut down the trees throughout Cairo (Shaban, 2024). Not to mention, NAC's expected water consumption threatens the access of Cairenes, who are experiencing shortages in their water supply as it is (Abotera & Ashoub, 2017; Kirk, 2016). The lack of an effective parliament and local councils disconnects the government from the people, making it almost impossible to reach any environmental or societal justice. Authoritarian regimes – such as Egypt's military-led government, as classified by much of the political science literature – tend to prioritize their own interests over the well-being of their citizens.

This brings us to our third problem, which is the selling of publicly owned property to foreign investors. Since some of the ministries in Downtown Cairo were transferred to NAC in 2024, there have been talks about the government's plan to sell Downtown Cairo to the Emirati company *Emaar* earlier this year. Alabbar, the founder of Emaar, intends to take over the downtown area and turn it into a new version of "Downtown Dubai" (Watan News, 2025). This has raised some concerns among Egyptians and urban experts, who are worried that this move may represent the UAE's attempt at reshaping Cairo's historically rich identity and heritage. Galila El Kadi, professor of Urban Planning, stated that the government gave evacuation orders to the residents in the Khedivial buildings, which are amongst the most valuable and oldest buildings in the area.[11] This has ignited the anger of the public, who view these displacements as an "urban crime" aimed at destroying Cairo's urban fabric. It is worth mentioning that Downtown Cairo is adjacent to Tahrir Square, an urban space that has become a symbol of freedom and revolution. After the 2011 uprising, the military regime has deliberately sought to suppress the square's revolutionary identity and erase any memories related to the hope it offered to the Egyptians (Elhadidy, 2025). For instance, in 2020, the Cairo Governorate made an agreement with Falcon Group – Egypt's most prominent security company – "to secure and guard the square and decisively address any violations to preserve the development work." (Elhadidy, 2025). This measurement, along with the ongoing urban reforms in the area and the relocation of government buildings to NAC, has transformed Tahrir Square into an area that is

[11] To watch the news report, you can visit: Rassd (2025). ماذا نعرف عن خطة السيسي بيع وسط القاهرة لشركة "إعمار" الإماراتية؟ [Video]. Facebook. https://short-link.me/Zqpx

devoid of any political or social significance. It then does not come as a surprise that the government is trying to sell off Downtown Cairo to reconstruct the people's imagination away from the vision of revolution that the area symbolized. What better way than to transform it under the excuse of modernity and development? It becomes evident then that Cairo's urban fabric is being negatively affected by the construction of NAC; it no longer represents hope for a better future.

4.4. NAC as a Tool for Legitimacy

Urban designs are a representation of the amount of power a regime holds. Every detail may not seem significant to ordinary citizens, but they are to the system. The most important thing for a regime in an urban settlement is the ability to control, monitor, and govern the inhabitants. This ensures that the regime can arrange the population and carry out classical functions such as taxation, conscription, and most importantly, the prevention of downfall (Scott, 1998, p. 2). According to Mark Beissinger (2022), cities act as the "nerve centers" of the state, where it is strongest and simultaneously the most vulnerable (p. 43). It is also contended that regimes, regardless of how democratic or authoritarian they may be, use urban mega-projects to capture the public imagination by branding them as the "nation's dream" (Dorman, 2013, p. 1587; Sangvai, 1994, p. 537). In return, this acts as a legitimizing force for the sitting leader and his regime. In Egypt's case, the Arab Spring has created a legitimacy crisis for the megalomaniacal military regime. Witnessing the quick fall of Mubarak, al-Sisi's regime became aware of its own fragility in an uncontrolled capital like Cairo. Paranoid of losing power after gaining it back from a popularly elected president, al-Sisi decided to build a new capital from scratch based on his conditions and designs to secure the survivability of his regime. He is determined to never repeat the events of the Arab Spring, and he made that clear in the inauguration of the Zohr gas field in 2018:

"The things that happened seven or eight years ago will not be repeated in Egypt." – Al-Sisi, referring to the 2011 protests when addressing his critics (El-Tablawy, 2018).

One of the ways to prevent further rebellions against a regime, especially an authoritarian one, is to suppress the opposition. Al-Sisi made sure to crack down on

his opponents, either by arresting them if they were in Egypt (Hamzawy, 2017; Sallam, 2024) or revoking their citizenship if they were abroad (Abdeen, 2024). This resulted in the active destruction of any opposition that threatens al-Sisi's throne. However, as we have established earlier, leaders cannot rule through fear alone. They must gain some source of legitimacy to maintain their control and consolidate their power. Thus, the regime's focus was immediately directed at the generation of quick economic growth through state-led infrastructure projects (Sallam, 2024). This is where the second way to prevent further rebellions comes into the picture: the construction of NAC. Al-Sisi placed the Egyptian Armed Forces in control of building his "New Republic", thereby enhancing their role and influence in the economy. If there is one thing to understand about the military as an institution, it is that its strategies are often reminiscent of warfare tactics; either they attack, defend, or surrender. They are not politicians, so they do not address things from the perspective of diplomacy or bureaucracy. For the Egyptian army, their urban strategy for NAC combines the elements of "attack" and "defend".

In terms of 'attack', the construction of NAC has forced the displacement of numerous Egyptians in the name of creating a new republic. The regime justified the forced evictions by claiming that residents were living in informal settlements that needed to be cleared to make way for connecting roads between Cairo and the New Capital. During the "World Government Summit 2023", al-Sisi made sure to emphasize the fact that Cairo has become "environmentally harmful" when he was asked about the philosophy behind NAC.[12] He claimed that since 40% to 50% of the population live in informal settlements, there is a need to build 24 new smart cities – including NAC – to develop those areas and overcome the challenge of traffic congestion. Thus, the government has worked as a "strategic developer" to bring "urban development" to Egypt. In another instance, he warned the Egyptians that if "construction, development, and progress come at the price of hunger and deprivation," then they had better be ready to make that sacrifice (Bower, 2023). With this logic in action, it is unsurprising that he is displacing the people for the sake of his infrastructure projects. There is also a disregard for the historical urban fabric of Cairo, where historical sites

[12] To watch the interview at the summit, you can visit: Al-Sisi, Abdel Fatah (2023). الرئيس السيسي يتحدث عن العاصمة الإدارية الجديدة. [Video]. ON's account on YouTube. http://youtube.com/watch?v=NyZa--vEdAg&list=TLPQMTcwNDIwMjVLDhaEiLRKag&index=4

are being demolished in the name of "development" and "modernity". It is as if the military regime is waging a war on the people who dared to dream of getting rid of it, and the city that allowed it to happen. The construction of NAC functions as a tool for the military to wage a silent war on the people and the city. Under al-Sisi's regime, it has become clear that there is no 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968) for the Egyptians since development is given priority over that. Losing your house, losing your history, and even losing your city has become the norm under al-Sisi's "New Republic". This is where the concept of "urban washing" comes into the picture. To justify the loss of the inhabitants' right to a city and the crackdown on those who dare to oppose it, the regime is using the veil of urban modernism as an excuse for its tough decisions. Not only that, but there is an apparent attempt at erasing the identity of Cairo as the city of revolutions through urbanism. Instead of preserving historical sites – like the City of the Dead, one of the oldest in the world – and national locations that have a deep connection to the Egyptians – like the Tahrir Square – the regime is transforming them in a way that changes their meaning and importance to the people. By restricting access and freedoms in the city, the importance of such areas will be lost with time. This is what is meant by "rewriting history"; the regime is separating itself from Cairo, destroying its urban fabric in the process, to promote a better vision – the vision of the New Republic through NAC.

In terms of 'defend', the design of NAC represents, at its core, the fear of the military regime and its desire to secure itself. Looking at the map of NAC, it can be observed that al-Sisi is trying his best to stay out of the public's reach. For instance, the Presidential Palace Complex is in the northeast of the city – instead of its original location in the center – close to the New Capital Airport, the General Intelligence Service residential compounds, and the Government District. In contrast, the residential districts are scattered away from the complex, either in the south or west of the city. Al-Sisi is also planning to install a mass surveillance system, made up of around six thousand cameras, to keep track of the inhabitants and their activities (Taweel, 2023, p. 4). Beissinger (2022) stated that the facial recognition feature provided through the surveillance technology in places like Russia and China has had a "chilling effect" on the potential participation of citizens in urban civic revolutions, since it weakens the power confined in "large numbers" against the state's repressions (p. 411). This essentially means that surveillance technology can shift the balance of

power in favor of the regimes, giving them the upper hand over the people, for it has become easier to identify the opposition and hunt them down. Turning cities into "surveillance cities" then raises concerns regarding the direct impact of this technology on the ability of the people to express their discontent with the political elite or even seek means to challenge its power (Beissinger, 2022, p. 411). Furthermore, the roads in the city are wide and could take hours or even days for people to gather in them. This essentially ensures that no revolution will take place to overthrow the regime, which is the actual reason behind the construction of NAC. The new capital offers what the old one does not: security and control. The concentration of the population in Cairo, especially in informal settlements, has always been a source of fear for the military regime in Egypt, which tried for many decades to decentralize the people by building new cities in the desert. Al-Sisi's NAC is a product of a seemingly historical struggle for the state, and a representation of its mentality of centralizing its power in an enclosed empire, far away from the masses that dared to revolt and shut down the government and businesses for weeks (El Rashidi, 2024).

Speaking of history, al-Sisi is also using NAC to advance his legacy as a descendant of the pharaohs. Observers who visited the new capital described the architecture as "neo-pharaonic and futuristic" but in a brutalist way (Ravenscroft, 2025). Photographer Johan Blasberg said in an interview that understanding NAC is impossible without considering the political context in Egypt, since the entire city design radiates power and a sense of authoritarianism (Ravenscroft, 2025). It was clear to him that the design of the city was done with "security and control in mind". Furthermore, Blasberg stated that the buildings in NAC are huge and imposing, meant to make you feel small and insignificant, as if the urban planning did not take into consideration the human scale of construction. This is not a surprise since the government made its obsession with the Dubai model obvious. Dubai is a city with huge buildings and is home to the world's tallest tower. Similarly, NAC also has gigantic, monumental structures and is home to Africa's tallest skyscraper – the Iconic Tower – along with the largest money printer and cathedral in the MENA region (check figure 4.3 for a visual representation of the Iconic Tower). There are also the pharaonic designs and inscriptions on the buildings, which are meant to beautify a brutally dull capital. Figure 4.4 shows an example of the pharaonic designs found on the buildings in NAC. Additionally, al-Sisi's regime has also used some verses from

the Quran on one of the new palace walls' inscriptions, which depicts that his right to rule is legit according to the divine words of God. Figure 4.5 shows the wall on which following verses used in:

"O my people, does not the kingdom of Egypt belong to me, and these rivers flowing beneath me..." – The Quran, Surah Az-Zukhruf, [43;51].

"And We inspired to Moses and his brother, 'Settle your people in Egypt in houses'" – The Quran, Surah Yunus, [10:87]

These inscriptions first appeared during al-Sisi's inauguration ceremony, which saw his procession through NAC. According to Hassan (2024), Egypt has never experienced a ceremony like that throughout its republican era. For previous regimes, their inauguration ceremonies were much simpler than al-Sisi's. Nevertheless, the ceremony triggered the public's disapproval, especially since it came only days after al-Sisi asked the people to practice austerity (Hassan, 2024). While Egyptians were suffering with high prices on basic commodities like sugar, al-Sisi was seen walking down a luxurious hall in the presidential palace in NAC, featuring inscriptions of Quranic verses referencing the power of the pharaoh in Egypt. The first verse alone illustrates how al-Sisi is using the religious discourse – out of its original context – to legitimize himself as the rightful descendant of the Egyptian pharaohs. Moreover, this is not the first time al-Sisi has used Quranic verses to justify and legitimize his regime's sovereignty in the eyes of the public. Hassan (2024) mentioned a couple of incidents in his article where al-Sisi used religious discourse that refers to sovereignty and power. The inscriptions are then seen as a mere reflection of his quest for legitimacy.



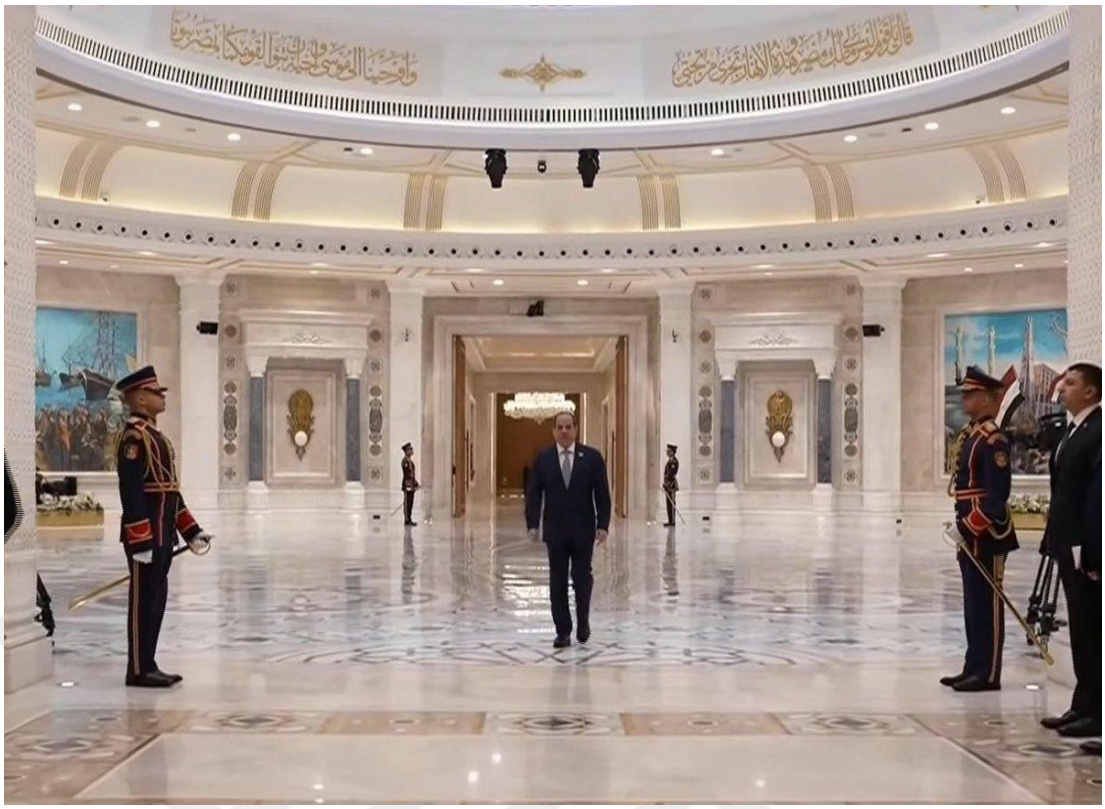
Note: The Iconic Tower is in the CBD and is the tallest building found on the continent of Africa.

Figure 4.3. Iconic Tower
Reference: The China State Construction Engineering Company (CSCEC)



Note: Pharaonic inscriptions are found on a concrete structure, close to the Egyptian New Parliament in NAC.

Figure 4.4. Example of Pharaonic Inscriptions in NAC
Reference: NAC's official page on Facebook



Note: The wall inscriptions are found in the presidential palace, with the Quranic verse [43:51] being on the right and the [10:87] verse on the left

Figure 4.5. Wall Inscriptions in the Presidential Palace
Reference: DOAM's account on Twitter

According to Scott (1998), city designs portray the type of power a state has, which contributes to the legitimacy of the regime. Egypt has been experiencing turmoil since 2011, and therefore, the regime wants to prove to the nation that it is powerful enough to save them from the chaos (Medhat, 2024, p. 36). One way to do that is through the construction of a new city from scratch, in the middle of the desert. Al-Sisi is trying to do what his predecessors failed to do, and that is the creation of a new capital in the desert, like the pharaohs before them. However, he is doing it at an unprecedented level. NAC marks the departure from the "Old Republic", with its limitations and obstacles that led to the Arab Spring, to the "New Republic", with its promise of a developed and modern future under the leadership of the Egyptian military. Moreover, to sell this future to the Egyptians, al-Sisi needs to make NAC a relatable dream for all Egyptians. Hence, the pharaonic designs of the buildings. Egyptians are proud of their history, and they are especially proud of the pyramids. So, constructing a city that resembles the times of the pharaohs, in its structure and size, paints a certain image in

the minds of the people: the golden age is back under al-Sisi's leadership. Furthermore, the gigantic size of the buildings in NAC reinforces the true power of the military regime in the minds of the people. On the other hand, Cairo represents everything the regime loathes: concentration of the population, informal housing, narrow streets, and a history of previous regimes that the city outlived. Cairo is a city that has defeated colonial powers and authoritarian regimes, and the urban changes occurring in it can only be understood from this lens. This is the true definition of military urbanism, where urbanization is used in the name of "development" to create a spatially undemocratic new capital while waging a silent war against the poor and the unfortunate inhabitants of the old capital – enemies of the state. It is then the case that NAC is not built for the sake of the people but for the sake of the regime, which is in desperate need of consolidating its power and rewriting history according to its legacy of "infrastructural modernity". Unfortunately for Cairo, its decay is a direct result of this quest for legitimacy.



Note: A photo taken by Johan Blasberg shows the gigantic scale of the buildings found in NAC.

Figure 4.6. The Gigantic Scale of NAC's Buildings

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis studied the political implications of NAC in relation to al-Sisi's quest for legitimacy and its direct relation to the decaying status of the current capital, Cairo. It aimed, through the analysis of the government's discourse, the political context, and the urban designs, to bring about a political understanding of the reasons behind the current urban transformations that are occurring in Egypt. The suggested hypothesis argues that since the Arab Spring created a legitimacy crisis for the regime, coupled with a constant fear of an upcoming revolution, the military needed to establish its own legacy in a way that guarantees power consolidation for it, and secures a new legacy for itself. While the literature on legitimacy – especially in the Middle East – tends to focus more on the civil-military relations, religion, or state matters, there is a general neglect of understanding urbanization through this lens. This is unfortunate since cities are quite literally the visual representation of how politics operate within a system (Scott, 1998; Beissinger, 2022). They are the product of the state's vision in terms of power and freedom: the width of roads, the height of buildings, the length of bridges, the placement of barricades, or even the distribution of shops. This is why I conducted this research, in hopes of inspiring more people to research and understand the true meaning behind the architecture and urbanization of cities around the globe.

Since my hypothesis focuses on how urbanization is used as a tool to enhance legitimacy, through its visual element of achievement, I started my introduction by addressing the changes that were occurring in Cairo. If we take NAC out of the equation, it becomes hard to understand why the current capital is in a state of urban decay. Thus, I introduce my question regarding NAC in light of the differences observed in Cairo. Then, I elaborate on what is meant by urbanization and cities, how they have been approached, and what has been written about urbanization in Egypt, specifically on Cairo and NAC. The literature largely overlooks the political understanding behind the motivation of al-Sisi's NAC, in terms of legitimacy,

revealing a significant analytical gap. It is almost impossible to understand NAC without the political context of Egypt. That is why, in the second chapter, I addressed what is meant by legitimacy, its sources, and how it is related to urbanization in the Egyptian case. In the third chapter, I addressed the new desert cities that were constructed by the former presidents and why they failed to achieve or attract their targeted population. The issue has always been that urban planning in Egypt does not include the citizens, who are the inhabitants of the cities. The neglect of their needs is among the reasons why these urban projects failed to achieve their goals of decongesting Cairo into the desert. It is also concluded in the chapter that al-Sisi did not learn from the mistakes of the past and has been promoting his own new desert cities, with NAC as the main case in this study. He is spending millions on NAC, instead of providing public services, while asking the people to bear the economic and social consequences of his ambitious projects. Under al-Sisi, the state became a real estate agent concerned with mega infrastructure projects, rather than the provider of services to the people. Meanwhile, the economy is in a crisis and poverty is on the rise, with people struggling to meet their basic needs. Chapter four addressed this matter, trying to understand why NAC is a priority for al-Sisi and his regime. The answer is simple: survivability. The military regime is afraid of getting ousted yet again, and to avoid that, NAC needs to be built to provide a much-needed centralization and security. This provides a strong motivation for the current regime to pursue the construction of NAC, because unlike the previous regimes, al-Sisi came to power after the overthrow of a democratically elected president. It is then his regime's way of departing from Cairo and the past, towards the legacy of a "New Republic" where they are in full control. The fourth chapter then discusses the problems of NAC and the transformations that took place in Cairo in relation to this urban mega-project. It addresses how NAC serves as a political tool for the regime to gain legitimacy and "urban wash" its violations in the city of Cairo. Thus, al-Sisi is using urbanization to rewrite history according to his regime's legacy and achievements, while reshaping the urban fabric of the revolutionary city of Cairo, once and forever.

5.1. Further Implications and Future Recommendations

When Beissenger (2022) was trying to study the development of revolutions throughout the centuries, he did not initially realize that his research would lead him

to the study of cities and their development (p. 16). He inevitably discovered that control over the city has always served as the ultimate end to the means of revolutions. Thus, he deemed it important for political scientists to study cities and include them as a part of their analyses of events, especially those related to rebellions and protests (Beissenger, 2022, pp. 53-60). He concluded that revolutions have changed in shape and form over time; they have transitioned from the urban setting to the rural setting and then back again to the urban one, all while managing to become less violent in the 21st century. For instance, the Arab Spring revolutions were protests that utilized the large numbers of urban inhabitants to overthrow the regime. This was important to note, according to Beissenger (2022), because it helped us understand the central role of cities today in the political mobilization of large crowds. In the previous century, it was noted that revolutions mainly occurred in rural settings. However, with the emergence of neoliberalism, the role of cities has expanded to engulf the rapid growth of the urban middle-class populations, who were dissatisfied with political corruption and the gradual contraction of public goods and subsidies that they once enjoyed (Beissenger, 2022, p. 30). Couple that with the development of the internet, and it suddenly became easier to mobilize large crowds in a quick manner to overthrow a regime at the heart of its system (Beissenger, 2022, p. 30). Thus, the power of numbers became the dominant force for political change rather than armed struggle, and the prominent source of threat for any regime in the world. Hence, the term "revolutionary cities".

Regimes have tried for decades to tackle this threat by changing the structure of cities – mostly the capital cities since they are their centers of power – in a way that diminishes the power of numbers that the citizens enjoy against it. They either tried to restructure the capital cities, just like in the case of Paris, or they tried to relocate them, just like in the case of Saint Petersburg – formerly known as Petrograd – in Russia and Cairo in Egypt. In the writings of De Tocqueville, it appeared that Paris was the center of political power since the 18th century, and so it does not come as a surprise that it has witnessed many of the crucial events of the French Revolution (Tocqueville, 2011). In Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's own words, he described Paris as:

"… the Capital of the Empire, the collective property of the entire Nation, the 'city of all the French." – Haussmann (1893, p. 196).

Haussmann supported the vision of Napoléon III to transform the city of Paris into the "greatest city in the world" while suppressing any local aspirations for democracy in it (Kirkland, 2013, p. 33). This explains why the design of a city like Paris has shifted from narrow streets to the construction of large squares and wide boulevards (e.g., Boulevard Haussmann); in other words, the "Haussmannization" of Paris, which refers to the process of rebuilding the city under the directives of Haussmann between 1853 and 1870 (Beissenger, 2022, p. 104). For Napoléon III, the vision would "beautify" Paris in accordance with the principles of modernity and order (Kirkland, 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, just like in the case of NAC, this process of urban renewal necessitated the displacement of people and sometimes even artifacts (e.g., the Palmier fountain) to rebuild the city center (Kirkland, 2013, pp. 63-64). There was also the transformation of Bois de Boulogne into a green landscape that would act as a public park (Kirkland, 2013, p. 19). These developments essentially acted as a "veil" of modernity that concealed the true reason why they were pursued in the first place by the last Emperor of France: the prevention of revolutions. Coincidentally, the rise of modernism and industrialization has reinforced this "Haussmannization" of cities at a global scale. Today, Haussmann's Paris is treated as a legacy worldwide; a model for what modern city planning looks like. However, despite its aim at preventing local protests, the nature of revolutions managed to adapt to the modernization of cities and transform into a mostly successful unarmed struggle against the state (Beissenger, 2022).

In the case of Russia, Petrograd was described as an "ideal city", for it operated as an industrial, cultural, and administrative center for the Russian Empire (Jahn, 1990, p. 212). Initially, Moscow was the capital city from the 15th century until the beginning of the 18th century (Gritsia & Wusten, 2001). However, because Peter the Great deemed it crucial to have a proper external political function in the capital city for his empire, he decided to transfer it to a city in the western periphery, close to Europe. Hence, Petrograd became the capital city of the Russian Empire (Gritsia & Wusten, 2001, p. 35). Peter I then became the first tsar who utilized urbanization and architecture to indirectly immortalize and legitimize himself (Gritsia & Wusten, 2001, p. 36). Throughout the following years, the differences between both cities became visible; Petrograd was flourishing, whereas Moscow was in stagnation – similar to what is happening in the case of NAC and Cairo. In a way, one would assume that the

design of Petrograd, which was built and realized at a speedy pace, symbolized the era of the tsarist regime. Thus, when the Bolsheviks took control in 1917, one of their first immediate actions was to move the capital city back to Moscow (Gritsia & Wusten, 2001, p. 39). The relocation symbolized the break of the new regime from the old Tsarist one. Initially, the general plan for the Russian city was meant to introduce architecture that preserved the old heritage while incorporating the concept of "garden-cities". However, the Soviets realized that they needed to change how Moscow looked in order to erase its old image, with its churches and merchant quarters (Gritsia & Wusten, 2001, p. 40). As a result, Moscow was reformed to represent the proletarian nature of the regime at the expense of preserving its old buildings, including churches and cathedrals. According to Gritsia and Wusten (2001), there were two general plans for Moscow: the first revolved around the creation of a new image for the city, while the second focused more on ensuring control for a rapidly growing capital. Similar to NAC and Paris, Moscow also adopted a city design that included wide roads – even though most citizens did not own a car until recently – and open squares that were initially meant to prevent revolutions by allowing surveillance, crowd control, and military parades. The scale of some of the buildings, like the Seven Sisters skyscrapers, also reflected and conveyed the power of the Soviet state at the time, which can also be related to what is observed in the case of NAC today.

The historical examples of Paris and Moscow have represented how regimes utilize urban planning to reflect and protect their power according to their interests. Generally speaking, and like Beissenger demonstrated in his work, regimes tend to build cities in a way that solidifies their control on the nation with almost one goal in mind: the prevention of an overthrow. As has been emphasized throughout this thesis, modernization has always provided the perfect veil for many of the developments that occurred in cities worldwide – it is not a new phenomenon. However, the most eye-opening finding is that of Beissenger, which highlighted the pivotal role cities play in the transformation of revolutions. Ironically, states aim to develop cities for their own security and to exert greater control on their people, only for the people to adapt to these changes and create new conditions for rebellion. No matter how much regimes try to control the people or legitimize their own power/authority through urban developments, those same conditions will inevitably turn against them. It is then recommended that governments start pursuing urban planning with their people's

needs in mind for the actual development of their countries, rather than excluding them from the matter altogether. The inclusion of the citizens in the decision-making process is a must not only for the welfare of the people, but also for the survivability of the regime.

This thesis then brings to the table a discussion related to the importance of cities in the analysis of political events and power, with hopes of inspiring other political thinkers to pursue research that brings back the analysis of urbanization as a tool for securing political legitimacy and power consolidation. Cities, whether we realize it or not, play a dominant role in the way we express our freedoms and live our lives. Thus, understanding the different developments occurring in these urban centers from a political perspective helps uncover a lot about the reasons behind the adoption of these transformations in the first place, and their effects on our lives. After all, the city is all but a spatial reflection of humans and their greed for power.

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