

Impact of politics on the planning of the New Desert City of Toshka in Egypt

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Abstract:

Through the last few years, Egypt witnessed turbulent political changes in the form of two successive revolutions in 2011 and 2013. This was preceded by several decades of a strong central ruling culture. Although, wide aspirations and hope for a new decentralized governance system have prevailed following the recent revolutions, much of the traditional central system still prevails. Such environment is strongly evident within the city planning disciplines. When it comes to planning new cities in different regions, decisions are still taken in Cairo. Such decisions are not correct all the time, owing to the argument that most Heads of the different planning bodies, do not really have a final say in the planning decisions even if these are based on solid contextual studies. Many of them are concerned from the consequences of defying the upper heads of the physical planning authorities. This paper attempts to analyze the dynamics of the urban planning decision taking when it comes to new city planning, within a highly central and bureaucratic institutional environment. The analysis is done within the case study of the New Desert city of Toshka in the South West of Egypt, intended to be the main service center for a new rural community that had been initiated based on a national project in the 1990s to transfer the Nile water to the desert through an artificial canal. The cycle of this project passed through different periods of stagnation and activity within three successive regimes in Egypt.

1. Introduction

The population distribution since two decades earlier and until now in the Egyptian territories has been characterized by concentration of almost 93% of its size along the Nile Valley, which forms only 7% of the total area of the country, hence resulting in several problems of over crowdedness, shortages in services as well as environmental degradation (Serag, 2008). Accordingly several national projects had been launched in the attempt to create other inhabitable areas with good incentives to attract some of the Egyptian population. Such projects include but are not limited to the development of the North West coast in the 1980s, the development of the New Valley in the Western Desert in the 1960s, and the attempts to develop Sinai. Among such projects is the Toshka project which is a regional rural development project in the South West of Egypt that started in the second half of the 1990s and is still ongoing until 2015. The project aimed to establish new rural communities in the desert after transferring the Nile's water for cultivation activities. This paper attempts to analyze the flow and development of the project over the last two decades to examine the impacts of politics on the planning process especially after two successive revolutions in 2011 and 2013.

2. Methodology

This research work is based mainly on literature review to track down what happened in the earlier phases of the project and how it was initiated and perceived in the pre-revolution period and during the Mubarak reign. Since the author of the paper has been a member in the team responsible for the planning of the New city of Toshka since 2009 until early 2015, there is a strong reliance on the observation done during this period and the analysis of the process that took place during both the pre and post revolution period. In that sense a good insider perception and analysis is made. The research included also some interviews with involved planners and officials who would stay anonymous as per their request. The paper follows a straight forward chronological timeline with the main political events that took place through the duration of the project.

3. The Planning context In Egypt

Egypt has had a long tradition of comprehensive planning and top down decision making approach; this was coupled with the concept of the central government that prevailed in Egypt throughout most of the 20th century. This tradition drastically changed by the mid-2000s towards strategic planning and participatory planning approaches (Serag, 2008). However, this is argued to have been mostly applicable in the context of re-planning existing cities, where public participation is a key principle of the planning process. Through two main initiatives in the 2000s with the help of the UNHABITAT and the SIDA (Hassan et al, 2011), the shift towards strategic planning including citizen participation has been achieved.

Yet, when it comes to the spatial planning of new cities and regions, the top down approach is evident. This could be understandable as in many cases there are no inhabitants in the targeted areas especially if these areas are located in the desert, although in some cases some inhabitants may exist and might be neglected in the planning process. A recent interesting example on such a top-down approach is illustrated in the new capital for Egypt project, where the citizens were not consulted neither on the concept of having a new capital nor on the location, hence maintaining the long tradition of the top down decision as argued by Bhattacharya (2015). Within such context, the Toshka project was initiated in 1997 and continues until present. During the lifespan of the project it witnessed several phases of slow and rapid progress. This fluctuation depended mainly on the interests of the upper tiers of the government in most cases reaching the levels of the successive presidents and prime ministers, in such a way that the progress becomes rapid, if the upper tiers are interested in the project, and it slows down or even stops, if such tiers shift their interest.

4. The initial phases of the Toshka project 1990s – 2000s

The main objective of this project is to create another spine of water in the Western desert parallel to the Nile, starting near the Aswan dam lake and ending in the Fafra Oasis, which is foreseen to promote spatial regional development in this area. This is done through the construction of the South Valley Canal of Toshka, with Emirati and Saudi investments (Merdan, 1999). This canal would transfer the sufficient water to start a new rural development intervention in the desert, which will be the economic base to start

a tangible regional development in such location. This intended development was supposed to provide incentives and pull factors for job seekers from all around the country. A settlements pattern was introduced in that area to include a hierarchy of villages with the New city of Toshka on top of that hierarchy as the main service center in the region.

The construction of the canal finished during the reign of former president Hosny Mubarak, and few rural development interventions were realized and introduced. The target was to cultivate half a million Feddans¹, moreover, Mubarak saw the project as a new social contract with the Egyptian youth as he targeted that 20 percent of the Egyptian population will move to this region, however, corruption and mismanagement led to the crippling and slowing down of the project (Nelson, 2012).



Figure 1: Location of the Toshka Project
Credit: Kevin Uhrmacher/NPR, 2012

However, the project was and is still considered controversial. Some academic and professional opinions, on one hand, questioned the feasibility of this project in starting new communities in such a harsh desert environment from scratch and whether people will find enough incentives to go there or not, they also questioned that the project is based on political decisions, regardless the difficulties of conducting such a large scale construction (Serag, 2008).

On the other hand, some opinions were in favor of the project and advocating it as both a mean to expand the populated area of Egypt and to help in its national economic development, substantiating this by the fact that the experimental farm established by a Saudi prince is already functioning and exporting abroad as well as other thriving individual farms that started over there. Perhaps some logistical problems and constraints exist; however, the thriving of those farms remains an evidence of success (Nelson, 2012). The project had a fast momentum during its first few years starting from circa 1997, when Prime Minister Ganzouri was in

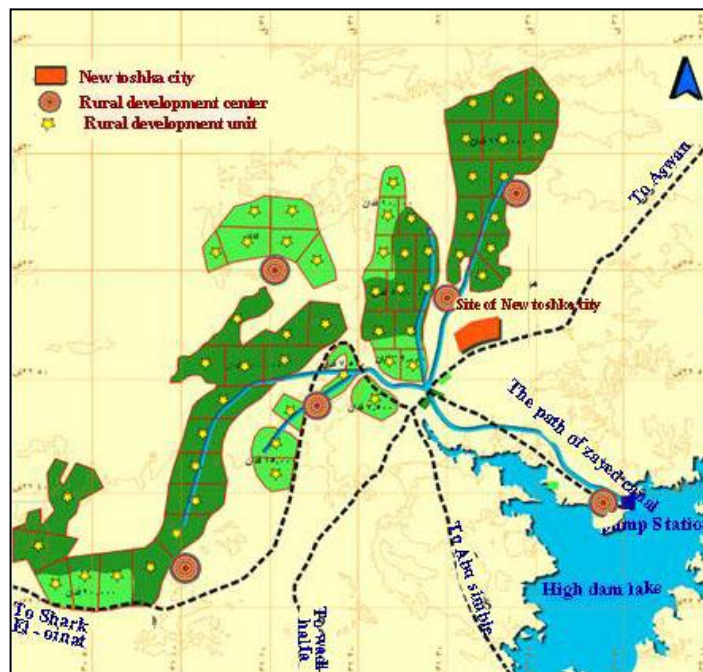


Fig. 2: The settlements pattern of the Toshka project
Source: GOPP, 2001

¹ A feddan = 4200 m², an Egyptian unit for measuring large areas.

office and was the key supporter of the project, the momentum lasted until the PM was replaced in 1999 and the project slowed down afterwards (*ibid*).

The project slowed down; however, it did not fully stop, as the canal in Toshka was constructed as well as the giant water pumping station that would pump the water from Lake Naser to the Canal's level, as well as some farms. As early as 1999 the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP), affiliated to the Ministry of Housing, assigned urban planning consultants to prepare the structural plan for the city of Toshka which is said to be the main service center in the region (GOPP, 2002). In 2007, the attention towards the project was revived from government back then and once more was put on top of the agenda. The Ministry of Housing announced for a project tender to make the detailed plans for the city . The tender was announced by a different planning agency affiliated to the Ministry that is the New Urban Communities Agency, the project was to still be cosupervised by the GOPP. The Engineering Consultant Office for Planning and Architecture (ECOPA) was the consultancy firm that got the bid.

In the period between the end of 2007 and early 2010, the detailed planning of the city was almost finalized including the infrastructure networks, road networks and housing patterns. The project witnessed the second phase of its rapid momentum ending with presenting the project to the Minister of Housing and the upper tiers of the government. At that time, it was argued that President Mubarak revived his attention and support towards the project. However, because of the bureaucratic procedure and mismanagement the project momentum was crippled.

5. Politics and Planning in Egypt Post January 2011

In order to be able to understand and analyze the impact of politics on the planning of the New City of Toshka, in the post January 2011 revolution period and the pre June 2013 revolution period, a general background on the impact of the political situation on the planning process is given.

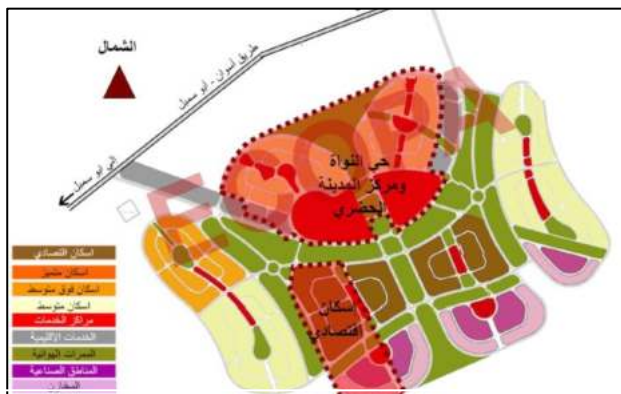


Figure 3: The Master Plan for the New City of Toshka
Source: ECOPA, 2014



Figure 4: Part of the detailed plan of the city
Source: ECOPA, 2014

Following the ousting of President Mubarak in February 2011, Egypt was administrated and governed by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). In that period there were no plans set to introduce new cities, however, there had been some promises made by the government to resolve the housing problem in Egypt by introducing 1 million residential units, as a consequence, the Ministry of Housing, whose Minister was once more replaced by an interim Minister, called for a competition to provide affordable housing prototypes in the form of housing neighbourhoods with the designs of apartment buildings (MOH, 2011). Despite that the competition was concluded by announcing the winners, the initiative was never realized and described by some critics that it had opaque results (Selim, 2011).

It is argued by some critics that the governmental announcement of building the million units and the competition were both launched for political reasons to gain public support for the interim government by demonstrating to the people that it is working on the ground for the people, in other words, the initiatives that were introduced are argued to be providing a **placebo effect** for the people to appease the Egyptian masses.

6. Toshka Project and the Inter-Revolutions Years 2011-2013

In the first few months of that period the Toshka project almost came to a complete stop. Perhaps the reason for this was that the Ministers and the government at that time did not want to take any crucial decision as they were considered an interim and temporary government that would leave office once a new president was elected. This period in 2011 after the revolution witnessed a strong situation of political instability with continuous changes in the government that was formed three times at least with a new prime minister each time. The last prime minister to rule during the SCAF was Dr. Ganzoury, who was the Prime Minister when the Toshka project was initiated during his office time in the late 1990s. The PM believing in the project and its importance to achieve economic development by providing job opportunities, once more advocated for the project and brought it back to the highlights (Nelson, 2012). Despite his beliefs in the project to the extent that he mentioned it as a reminder to the people in a public speech, nothing serious was done at this period as it was merely an indecisive period where no decision was taken because of the fear of responsibility during a transitional phase.

7. The one year rule of Morsi and the Toshka Project

Dr. Ganzoury continued in office until the new presidential elections were concluded in June 2012 and a new president was elected. Following the elections and after the new president resumed office, a new government headed by a new Prime Minister was formed who appointed a new Minister of housing. The Ministry of Housing during this period with its agencies perhaps were introducing new urban visions, and launching new calls concerning the development of the new Suez Canal corridor, deviated once more away from the Toshka project and other similar projects. During this period between June 2012 and June 2013², the tendency of the Ministry of Housing was to announce new initiatives for urban development; however, most initiatives did not go beyond media announcements. Nelson (2012) argues that during the rule of Morsi and because of his affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood, there was no desire or tendency to revive the Toshka project, so as to avoid any remembrance to the Mubarak rule.

² The period between June 2012 and June 2013 witnessed the rise of the Muslim brotherhood group to power with President Morsi as the upper tier of the government.

8. Politics and Planning in Egypt post June 2013 revolution until June 2014

During the one year of the Muslim brotherhood reign in power, public anger and internal divisions built up in a very rapid way, as a result of the failed strategies and ideologies at that time. Egypt was suffering from striking economic conditions, as well as other internal social crises, together. A series of consequent events led to the second revolution of June 2013 when the president and his government were toppled (Friedman, 2013), and an interim government with an interim president and prime minister were set to power.

During the this interim period that lasted for one year, the interim government focused mainly into tackling the critical issues of the plunging economy, the deteriorated safety and security conditions, international diplomacy as well as confronting terrorism, while the other aspects took further priorities on the agenda. Due to the fact the Minister of Housing (Mr. I. Mehleb) of this period was a dynamic professional person who led an Egyptian contracting company that is considered among the largest in Africa and the Middle East, he aimed to reactivate and motivate the completion of several halted projects³.

The Ministry of Housing at that period focused on *reactivating the already ongoing projects* mainly those concerned with the strategic planning of the “already existing” Egyptian cities that focused mainly on urban renewal attempts. However, the attention to establishing new cities or embarking on new mega national urban development projects had a low priority. It is to be mentioned that usually in Egypt, the commencement of new large scale projects should get an approval from the upper tiers of the government. And as the government at that period had an interim status, no such approvals could be obtained or given, especially when it was known that there will be presidential elections within a year that will be followed by forming a new government. In February 2014 a new government was formed with the then Minister of Housing as its PM, hence appointing a new Minister of Housing to fill in for his position.

During this period the Toshka project, was still being revised by the technical departments of the New Urban Communities Agency, which applied many red tape in this revision process. In some cases conflicts took place between the different governmental bodies with the main conflict was to find a source of power supply. This conflict took place between the public electricity company, and another Ministry, to the extent that the project continued in a stand still situation. The almost complete halt of the project continued with no desire to take firm actions.

9. Urban and Regional Development in post June 2014 onwards

Following the presidential elections of June 2014, president Sisi kept the Prime Minister who in turns kept most of his ministers, although in a later phase he made a partial change in the government, but the current Minister of Housing, kept his position.

³ <https://www.egyptthefuture.com/speaker/excellency-mr-ibrahim-mahlab/> , May, 2015.

The newly appointed president wanted to sustain his popular support, in doing so he wanted to achieve tangible actions on the ground. The government in return attempted to adopt a policy of materializing, different services, infrastructure, economic development and housing projects.

Mainly the Ministry of Planning (economic planning) as well as the Ministry of Housing introduced a spatial development vision to Egypt aiming the year 2030. Among the Vision for Egypt of 2030 is to work on developing the different Egyptian regions, including the marginal and desert regions, in such a way so as to introduce new urban communities with different economic bases (GOPP, 2014), in a way similar to that proposed almost 40 years ago in the New Map of Egypt during the Sadat Era (Attia, 1999). The development projects in this vision included *Toshka*, Sinai, the Halayeb region close to the borders with Sudan, and the New Valley region in the Western Desert of Egypt. Parallel to this initiative, there was another initiative by the president to redraw the borders of the Egyptian provinces to enhance investment opportunities (Mada Masr, 2014). This is justified by the fact that the current borders of the Egyptian provinces included in some cases vast desert areas that are difficult to manage and develop or in other cases smaller areas with no desert or sea hinterlands.

As such several versions of the new administrative borders were discussed and the initiative was announced in the media. Although this initiative had been announced in the second half of 2014, a final official decision on the division has not been taken yet. It is to be mentioned that one of the versions for the new provincial borders introduced the Toshka region as a new Province (governorate) in the South of Egypt. The introduction of this new entity coincided with the new official will to

continue the development in the *Toshka project*. However, in later versions, the idea of having Toshka as a province of its own was abandoned.

10. Mega Projects as Flag Ship projects

As mentioned earlier, it is argued that the new president wanted to realize development achievements on the ground, to sustain national support. The adopted development strategy is then characterized by its speed and tangible effects. Accordingly, it could be argued that one of the components of the strategy is large scale (mega) projects that are considered as flag ship projects in the development process to generate jobs and tangible economic revenues. The main projects since August 2014 until March 2015 could be summarized as follows according to their sequence of appearance:

- 1- *The New Suez Canal project*, which was inaugurated in August 2014. The idea is to use the existing asset of the Suez Canal and its capacity by adding to its naval passages and digging an extra canal to



Figure 5: A version of the new proposed borders of the Egyptian governorates, with Toshka as being one of them.

Source: www.madamasr.com, May 2015

increase its capacity in both ways⁴. The project duration initially was estimated to several years, however, the Egyptian administration and presidency asked for the completion of this project in one year by August 2015. The project is coupled with another development dimension that is the “Development of the Suez Canal Corridor”, this tackles the urban development dimension, that includes the construction of new urban communities based on new economic, logistic and industrial projects

- 2- ***The Toshka rural development project***, which is considered as a continuation of the old project that has been crippling for the last few years. The idea is to go forward in land reclamation and rural development and to proceed with the establishment of villages and their new service centre, the new city of Toshka. In this case the government will gain benefit from an already started project with most of its studies and plans ready for execution, as well as the already existing infrastructure that was build in the last decade (Ayyad, 2015). The continuation of this project was announced in August/September 2014. As part of the urgent phase of the project, the construction of the main district of Toshka city together with the main service facilities was considered a priority, to host the first wave of migrants from the Nile valley who would work in the project. A period of one year was initially given for this phase, however, it is said that it was later shortened to six months.
- 3- ***The reclamation of 1 million feddan (Feddan =4200m²)***; this project aims to reclaim 1 million feddans of desert land and transform them into agricultural fields. The project was announced also in 2014, promising to reclaim the Million Feddans by December 2014. The project would focus on reclaiming lands in the Western Desert of Egypt as well as Sinai to increase the agricultural production. It is to be mentioned that the area to be reclaimed in the Toshka project is counted among the Million Feddans. However, according to the Media only 50% of the objective has been realized (Alaa, 2015).
- 4- ***The New Administrative Capital of Egypt (CAPITAL CAIRO)***; in March 2015 and during the Egypt Economic Development Conference, the project for constructing a new Capital of Egypt was revealed. The intention of doing was announced earlier in 2014, however, the exact details of the project were blurred until the announcement date. The project aims to establish a new capital to the East from Cairo and about 60 kms from the cities of Suez and Sokhna (Williams, 2015). The announced aim is to integrate the new city with the development projects of the Suez Canal Corridor, to transfer most of the governmental buildings and facilities there, hence easing the pressure on Cairo⁵. The announced plans and perspectives of the new city, show a modern city with skyscrapers in a Dubai like image. Many argue that such an image gives a new branding to the city, hence attracting investments, with aspirations to several spin off projects that increase the economic competitiveness of the city. The

⁴ <http://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/sc.aspx?show=69> , May 2015

⁵ The majority of the urban planning society learned about the details of the project after it was announced during the conference. To the dismay of many planners, the project was awarded to an International American firm SOM, hence, unfamiliar to the context.

project stirred several discussions about its pros and cons, however it is not the scope of this paper to discuss that in details.

There are of course other projects that the government is pushing for in present time, for example the 1 million residential units' project. And while having these projects as the main flagship projects in the development process, the government is also investing largely in infrastructure projects mainly in road networks and accessibility (Ayyad, 2015).

As seen from the discussion, the government is pushing for the flagship projects to push forward the economic development in Egypt. This of course is reflected in the spatial interventions of new cities, settlements and reclaimed lands. It is argued that despite the fact that some of these projects are economically sound, there is still the trend of announcing large numbers (i.e. million Feddans, million units, etc.) to make a sound propaganda effect. It is also argued that sometimes the announced time frame of some of the projects might sound unrealistic in terms of making the sufficient studies and applying the necessary works.

It is evident that the upper tier of the government and the presidency intend to realize swift results on the ground, which is welcomed by many segments of the society, owing to previous long periods of failed attempts. However, sometimes, high government officials who might also include the ministers fail to warn the upper tiers of the real time needed to carry on the projects and the consequences that might result from a hasty decision. In a recent discussion with a member of the presidential advisory council, it was obvious that not all the ministers, only few, would be frank enough with the upper tier of the government and the president. In many cases the advisory council would advise against the scopes of some of the intended projects. Accordingly it is argued that in some cases, some members of the government, i.e. ministers, tend to appease the upper tiers of the government and the president and attempt to realize the intended projects with their large scopes and scales within a proportionate timing or settings.

This section gave a brief overview of the general mechanism of spatial development in Egypt. The following section will focus once more on the last and most recent phase of the Toshka city project, to discuss how such settings were reflected on the decisions taken for the project.

11. Continuing the Detailed Planning of the Toshka City- September 2014 – January 2015

As mentioned earlier, the re-initiation and continuation of the Toshka project once again made it to the priority list of the development projects. The project became among the priorities of the president. The Toshka project lies among the responsibilities of at least three ministries, the Ministry of irrigation and water resources, to ensure the sufficient water supply for irrigation and living, the Ministry of agriculture to set policies for land reclamation and the Ministry of housing to provide the new settlements that will host the new migrants to this area. As such the Minister of Housing asked the New Urban Communities Agency to continue with the project, which in their turn asked the consultants (ECOPA) who finished the first phase of the project to finalize the remaining work of the infrastructure networks.

Despite that the remaining parts of the infrastructure works, mainly power supply was not among the responsibility of the consultants, they almost managed to reach a compromise to resolve the pending issues. While this stage has been going on, the consultants were informed by the agency that the Minister would like to set one of the districts ready for the construction process, as this comes in-line with the priority projects. The agency also asked the consultants to make the architectural design for the housing prototypes with its different levels as well as the designs for the main service and governmental buildings in the city centre. At this point the consultants were told that the time frame for this project is set for a year, after which preliminary constructions and buildings should have been realized.

Planning under pressure⁶

The detailed plan for Toshka city was already finished in 2009. The consultants at that time prepared the designs for the residential prototypes and introduced a general image of how the city centre should look like. The consultants also defined the different housing levels, and got an approval at that point from the agency. With the new revival of interest in the project in 2015 and because of the Minister's urge to start the construction process and the receiving of the migrants from the Nile valley, he asked for structural modifications in the master plan that critically differs from the one that was initially approved. The Minister is very familiar with the project since he was the chief of the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP) which was co-supervising the project.

In Egypt, it is argued that throughout most of the planning projects, the planning consultants are always in the backstage. The relationship with the Minister or any other upper tiers of the government is usually through the top management of the governmental planning agency, which in this case is the New Urban Communities Agency. As such, the consultants never get the chance, in most cases, to have an open discussion with the Minister to explain their point of views or object to any top-down decisions. Accordingly at this incident, the minister is under pressure from the president who set this project among the priority list. The planning agency is in its turn under great pressure from the Minister with its chiefs mainly working to appease their upper tier. Finally the agency would in its turn exert pressure on the consultants to do the modifications and to work in general under pressure to meet the set deadlines by the upper tiers, even if there are other constraints that should be considered when doing and finalizing the modifications for the city plan.

At this point the consultants decided to fulfil the demand of the Minister and the agency, as they are anyhow not represented with any of the discussions with the minister. The consultants were asked afterwards to prepare the designs for the main residential and service buildings. The consultants indeed did that. However, they wanted to examine more the building material in such a very hot arid zone in the South of Egypt in the Western desert as the temperature might reach 50 Celsius hence would need specific treatments as well as climate friendly designs, otherwise the project might turn into a total failure if the conventional concrete blocks were used.

⁶ This section is based mainly on the personal involvement of the author with the consultancy firm ECOPA.

At this point, the time frame set for the project was even made shorter, causing a situation of panic among the planning agency and possibly the Minister who wanted to meet the deadline. A proposal was conveyed to the consultants to use a prototype of building that was used in another region in Egypt in South Sinai which is almost 550 Kms North to the given position, hence climatically unsuitable. The consultants at that point argued to the planning agency that negative consequences might result from this, making the buildings of the city uninhabitable. However, as the planning system in such cases leans more to the top-down settings, the consultants were asked to stop working in the designs, and the task was reinstated and given to another consultant who would accept to apply the other prototype. Ironically the original consultants spent almost 4 months in addition to the initial phase of the project working on such prototypes, as they restarted in September 2014 and were asked to stop in January 2015.



Figure 6: The consultants' vision and design for the housing district in Toshka.

Source: ECOPA, 2014

It is argued that the decisions made here were to catch the deadlines to start constructing the buildings of the city, despite the fact that these would be inadequate so as to appease the upper tier of the government and the presidency apart from being scientifically correct or wrong. The project continued to echo more in the media for three more months, after which the frequency of the project news, started to fade away, as if the priority given to the project is also fading away. As such the progress in such a mega project is argued to have been tied to the interests of the upper tiers of the government apart from being important to the regional and economic development of the country. Thus, a strong top-down decision was made in the project against the advice of its consultants.

12. Finding and Conclusions

This paper attempted to look at the impact of politics on the planning process in Egypt through analysing the New Toshka project. From the discussion it is evident that the planning process is directly affected by the top-down approach from the government, at least within the scope of new city planning and regional planning. The planning process within the scope of the New City of Toshka gained and lost momentum in accordance with the priorities set by the presidents and their governments. In most cases the performance of the responsible planning agencies fluctuated according to the pressure level and interest from their upper tiers. The momentum of the project was also subject to the will of appeasing a specific audience. This is evident during the 1990s and the 2000s when the line ministries were appeasing the president, then later during the inter-revolution years when they were appeasing the people to gain support and finally in the post 2013 revolution, when they are appeasing the new president who was interested in the project.

Unfortunately, it seems that the Mega projects in Egypt are affiliated with the interests of the presidents and the upper tiers of the government. Even if the project is strategically important and crucial, it proceeds according to the level of interest of the upper tiers. This attitude should be changed aiming to establish a more scientific and strategic planning approach in Egypt.

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