

In 2016

How it felt to live in the Arab World
five years after the «Arab Spring»

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Themed section

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Gated Communities / Compounds

By STEPHAN GUTH¹

“First Settlement” ... “Third Settlement” ... “Fifth Settlement” (al-Tagammu‘ al-Awwal, ... al-Thālith, ... al-Khāmis) ... “Road 90”... Neither the names of the quarters nor the street names in the New Cairo district (al-Qāhira al-Jadīda) seem to originate from a particularly creative imagination. One eventually gets to New Cairo after a 25–30 km ride from Cairo’s old city centre, through the desert to the southeast of the Egyptian capital, on seemingly endless motorways, as boring and uninspired as the bureaucratic-pragmatic number-names of many of the quarters and streets. There are no architectural landmarks either and it is easy to get lost in this vast monotony that by now covers more than 30,000 hectares of the Greater Cairo area. Yet it is here—and in many other similar places in the country, mostly in the vicinity of the bigger cities—that they are situated, the “paradises on earth,” as ubiquitous advertisements praise them: the so-called *compounds*, including numerous gated communities, which in recent years have become the destination of a veritable “exodus” (ABAZA *b*, 425) [[↗Migration](#)]. The rich and upper middle class people who are settling in these new areas seem to find here—or at least hope to find—what they evidently feel is missing from other places in the city, values and a quality of life that also the billboards all along the roads and TV and Internet ads are eager to promote:

Enjoy the luxury of a full-service residential community away from the noise and bustle of the capital. Located in the heart of vast green spaces, fresh air and sunshine, the *Agadir Garden City Compound* means calm and peacefulness, in perfect harmony with nature combined with architectural beauty, uniting beauty and creativity with the highest standards of luxury. Special services and security as well as maintenance and cleaning services are provided for every unit separately, ensuring enjoyment, comfort and tranquility. (AGYAD MULTI PROJECTS)

In *Palm Hills* we dream of the return of love and beauty... and clear enjoyment... and the return of mercy to our heart... and the dream of the return of culture and the arts.... And enlightened thought.... *Palm Hills* for construction... the return of the Egyptian spirit. (Advertisement on ON TV channel, during Ramaḍān / June – ABAZA *a*, 234)

Grab the last place in heaven... Invest in the clean and beautiful life of the compounds of upscale New Cairo. We provide you with your dream villa and a swimming pool... All you need is to sign a down payment.... Pay a seven year-installment to be in paradise... Choose a worthy life in a gated compound... You deserve a more beautiful life... (unspecified source, said to occur “everywhere” – ABAZA *a*, 236)

¹ Inspired by ABAZA 2018.

From these and similar ads it is clear that the “endless merits” (ABAZA *b*, 425) with which these compounds try to attract new customers are envisioned as counter-spaces, spaces that are defined by the absence of what characterizes life in two other parts of the city [**Beautiful vs. Ugly**]⁷—the old city and the slums. With all their luxury, greenery, cleanliness, sporting facilities, etc., the compounds are presented, on the one hand, as the opposite of the **Ashwā'īyyāt**, the mushrooming slums which are areas of poverty and destitution [**Affluence vs. Destitution**], where even access to water is often difficult and basic sanitary requirements aren't met, where also prostitution and thuggery are frequent and drugs consumed regularly [**Hashish**]. On the other hand, life in the compounds is also constructed as the negation of life in (greater) Downtown Cairo [**Downtown/Centre-ville**]: whereas the old city centre suffers from nightmarish traffic jams [**ahma**] and you almost get suffocated from pollution and the smell of **Garbage** lying around, you will find in the compounds the “fresh air” you need to breathe; whereas old Cairo is decaying, everything is new and modern in New Cairo; and while Downtown has been the site of rebellious chaos and violent **Clashes** in the past, compounds are promoted as places of calm, harmony and peace, even dignity, love, mercy, culture and art, places where you can forget about the unpleasant aspects of life and enjoy nothing less than the “return of the Egyptian spirit,” as the *Palm Hills* ad has it. In the eyes of some, it is true, Downtown Cairo may have retained some of its previous charm, thanks to its still lively cultural scene, as a movie like “The Last Days of the City” (*Ākhir ayyām al-madīna*) suggests; but those who appreciate this are only a tiny minority—mainly artists and intellectuals. Most others feel repelled, or even “ejected,” by the dehumanized “hell” of Downtown, to the new satellite cities in the desert (ABAZA *b*, 425), and

Gated communities spread vastly in the Egyptian real estate market especially among the rich due to privacy, prestige, quality of life, segregation [...]. Soon their demands became a target model for less economic [*sic*] classes as well. (EL SAYED)

It feels different indeed to live in a compound. Given that a Ramaḍān series (*musalsal*) like “Beyond Suspicion” (*Fawqa mustawā al-shubuhāt*) is shot in a real compound (*Palm Hills*), we have no reason to doubt that we get a rather fair picture of the essentials of compound life from such fictional representations (which are so frequent—apart from the *musalsal* there are also feature films like *Nawwāra*, *Mawlānā*, or *The Nile Hilton Incident*, larger parts of which take place in compounds—that some observers get the impression that compound life itself is the real protagonist of many of them—ABAZA *b*, 429). Moreover, the movies also underline those aspects of compound life that obviously are most striking for spectators who are *not* living there (and probably will never have the means to do so), i.e., the vast majority of the country's population. From the films it appears that the most important markers of difference—and thus also of class difference [**Affluence vs. Destitution**, **Inferiority vs. Superiority**]⁸—are:

- kitschy (= ugly?) entrance portals—meaning: as an inhabitant of a gated community, you know who you are and that you have achieved something, so why not give your self-confidence some kind of monumental expression and show off;
- gardens and swimming pools = as an inhabitant of a compound, you have some leisure time and can afford to relax and refresh yourself whenever you like;

moreover, you have access to water in abundance although you are in the middle of the desert;

- clean toilets = you can enjoy amenable living conditions and hygiene and are not exposed to unpleasant smells;
- paintings on the walls = you don't have to struggle for survival but have plenty of time and money left to deal with lofty culture and the more sublime things in life;
- black four-wheel-driven Landrovers = you are rich and own this expensive and 'strong' type of car, the car of men of action and adventure...
- ... which is always spotlessly clean because it is regularly washed by some servant = you are not only rich but also the 'lord' of some 'slaves'; among these feature also:
- waiters, butlers, and (often Philippine) maids = you don't have to do cumbersome household chores but can pay others to work for you;
- guards and video surveillance = you are so rich and important that you need protection; a gated community like El Amn Elaam (*al-Amn al-'Āmm*) even chooses this purpose as its name (EL SAYED) [[↗Security vs. Fear](#)];
- dogs, preferably 'wild' and 'scary' ones = you are civilized enough not to carry a gun but can afford to keep a pit bull, German shepherd, or bulldog as a kind of weapon for your protection, and boast a bit of the animal's strength, symbolically representing your own; unlike the majority of the people who rather detest dogs—they only know those emaciated dirty creatures that are living in the streets—your dog has a health certificate and lives in conditions that many an ordinary citizen can only dream of; moreover, the dog also contributes to mark your western lifestyle, which is also copied in
- recreation facilities like spacious public gardens with a lot of water, greenery and pleasant shade; sporting grounds and gyms, golf courses, jogging courses, clubs, food courts, cineplexes, and so on; it is not surprising therefore to find that even a 'typically Western' profession like the psychiatrist [[↗Psychiatrists](#)] seems to have become a common, even fashionable phenomenon of everyday life in luxury in the compounds (*Fawqa mustawà al-shubuhāt*);
- the 'anonymity' of the uninspired place and street names and the uniform city landscape do not seem to matter for the inhabitants of the compounds: obviously, for them these are, if at all, only minor flaws that are more than balanced by the 'civilized,' modern and chic forms of social life (bars, discos, skating halls, stylish cafes, children's playgrounds, clubs, sushi bars, ...) and many high-end amenities and other pleasant aspects, made possible among other things by a functioning infrastructure, including banks and many other kinds of services that make life so easy here and evidently also let you forget the long distances that have to be covered in a car between home and workplace; once here, you can do great shopping in one of the giant air-conditioned malls, those temples of consumerism that give you the illusion of being somewhere else, in the West or, rather, in the Arab Gulf—to some outsiders, the malls are strong indications of a "Gulfification" (*khaljana*) of life in Egypt (cf. ABAZA *b*, 441).

With all these features, the new cities on the periphery are to a large degree independent and self-sufficient, so that many inhabitants only rarely feel a need to go to the old parts of

the city; the younger among them may not even have been there once [**Center vs. Periphery**].

President al-Sīsī is said to detest films about **ʾAshwāʾiyyāt** because, as he sees it, they foul the Egyptian nest, depicting the country as “a big shanty.” Would he like the other Egypt then, the Egypt of the compounds and gated communities as it emerges from the many movies and *musalsalāt*? Probably not either. For although the compounds fit almost ideally into the picture of a modern, developed Egypt that official propaganda is eager to spread [**The Voice from Above**], and although the façades of this world probably appear even more beautiful, modern and developed in fiction than in real life, yet the compounds are mostly shown to be populated by dubious, false and criminal inhabitants, often close to the regime and/or involved in politics, who accumulated their wealth through theft, corruption, and even murder. In *The Nile Hilton Incident* (a movie based on real events!), the rich entrepreneur Shafīq Bek whom we meet once on a golf course, once in his luxurious villa with spacious, splendid, ultra-clean toilets at which the hero, a petty policeman-detective, only can marvel, is both a member of parliament, connected to the (Mubārak) regime, and behind the murder of a prostitute; in *Nawwāra*, the owner of the impressive gated palace where the eponymous heroine is employed as a housemaid, belongs to a super-rich family and is eager to transfer his assets to some bank account in the West immediately on hearing that there may be some kind of redistribution of illegally acquired capital shortly after the Revolution; and in the Ramaḍān series “Beyond Suspicion” we meet a devilish psychopath, member of parliament she too, but also a scrupulous murderer, and holder of a fake PhD. The overall message: the dazzling external beauty and perfection of the artificial new desert cities conceals crimes committed by “those on top” against the toiling innocent man in the street [**True vs. False**, **The System” vs. “The People”**].

To mark the villainy of the false and criminal compound-inhabiting elite, popular productions can play on widespread misogyny and xenophobia—quite significantly, Raḥma, the arrant villain in “Beyond Suspicion,” is a woman [**Male vs. Female**] and blond, i.e., Westernized [**The Suspect Foreigner**]. Less lurid productions refrain from such bluntly stereotypical characterizations. But also, they are eager to underline the enormous divide that is gaping between the rich and the poor in today’s society [**Affluence vs. Destitution**]. Both *Nawwāra* and *The Nile Hilton Incident*, for example, draw their dramatic dynamics from the opposition between representatives of the lower and lowest classes, on the one hand, and exponents of the rich and influential—compound-inhabiting—elite, on the other. In *The Nile Hilton Incident*, a petty policeman-detective becomes the ‘attorney’ of a murdered prostitute as well as the protector of a Sudanese room-maid, an innocent migrant worker, representing those on the utter margins of society, who happened to see the murderer leave the scene after committing the crime and who, as an eyewitness, is now in danger of being killed by Shafīq Bek’s henchman. In *Nawwāra*, the social chasm is underlined through a juxtaposition of scenes from the heroine’s life at home, in the popular quarter or slum, and the giant villa to and from which she commutes on a daily basis. As if to make the spectator feel the enormous gap that separates ‘those on top’ from ‘the people,’ the movie follows Nawwāra several times on her way from home to the villa and back, each way a trip of up to two hours or more on which she also has to change means of transportation two or three times, from **Tuk-tuk** to microbus to ordinary

bus to compound-internal connecting services, etc. Moreover, the social chasm is not only expressed spatially but also with the help of the masters' dog: Nawwāra has to feed "Butch" (!) with five kilos of high-quality meat per day, while for ordinary Egyptians, including her own family, meat is unaffordable, except perhaps on holidays. Thus, the fact that the animal is shown to actually lead a better life than a subordinate and enjoy more privileges than the vast majority of the population quite literally turns the non-compound-dwellers into 'underdogs.'

There is probably a lot of truth to the picture that popular productions paint of life in the compound districts as compared to other parts of the city. Massive social inequality is an undeniable fact, which is why it is a recurring theme also in cartoons. Similar to its often lachrymose dramatization in cinema or soap operas, the witty, pointed representation in cartoons, too, mostly seeks to reclaim moral superiority while the artist knows all too well that, materially, s/he is on the side of the losers [**↑Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)**]. On a few occasions, however, such sketches are used, somehow cynically, by the compound agencies themselves. A cartoon showing half of the city occupied by a dense agglomeration of shanty-like buildings, inhabited by a large amount of desperate-looking people, and the other half taken by only one luxurious villa and its surrounding gardens, with two happily smiling men relaxing on deck-chairs at the side of a swimming pool, one of them praising God "for the grace of living in such a safe, developed and humane place," is used by Beverly Hills Egypt to promote their own compound on Facebook. (After many comments filled with outrage and indignation, this "worst ad at the closing of 2016" is removed from the web the same day—ABBAS).

Although highlighting important aspects of social, economic and political reality, fiction and satire are certainly also partial misrepresentations. For it is not only the uppermost echelons of society who choose, and can afford, to live in New Cairo. There is also a significant group of upper middle-class, for example AUC students. Usually these live in 4–5 storey buildings rather than in large villas, as the super-rich do. And there seems to be a general tendency to attract more and more of these than of the super-rich. Many, if not most Egyptians seem to have given up hope that living conditions may have a real chance to change significantly in the older parts of the cities [**↑Present = Past (Stuck)**]. Therefore, there are only two ways out [**↑Hope vs. Hell**]: either leave the country [**↑Migration**] or leave the old cities for an essentially different, somehow utopian ground. Who would blame those who choose this option if they have the means to do so? Flowery official propaganda about all kinds of achievements and the nation's progress notwithstanding [**↑The Voice from Above**], even the State seems to share the feeling of having reached a dead end and therefore starts to move out itself: On April 27, President al-Sisi inaugurates the new headquarters of the Ministry of Interior in New Cairo (YOUSSEF), a measure that precipitates the complete removal, planned for 2022, of all ministries to the new administrative city—"Sicity"—that is under construction in the Eastern Desert (AMJAHID). With this, the government follows dozens of factories that already have their headquarters or major plants in New Cairo (General Electrics, Siemens, El Sewedy Electric), as well as prestigious international schools and colleges which have major campuses here: British International College (BIC), The American International School in Egypt (AIS), the New Cairo British International School (NCBIS), the Lycée Français, and many more. Important universities, too, have moved to, or been newly founded in, New Cairo: The American University

(AUC), the German University (GUC), the Future University in Egypt (FUE), the Canadian International College (CIC), the New Cairo Academy.

Earlier projects of satellite cities in the Western and Eastern Deserts which have been promoted ever since Sadat but which, with the exception perhaps of 6th of October City, have never been really successful (due to poor planning—scarcity of water!—remoteness, speculation, corruption). New Cairo, by contrast, seems to have the potential of becoming a success story. Although, it is true, the estimated 1.5 million people who are currently living here are far from the 4–5 million for which New Cairo is designed, the area is still attracting more inhabitants, and apartments and villas are “rented out at faster rate in New Cairo than in 6th of October City” (al-AEES). It is no longer only the super-rich who are living here, the compound community has begun to differentiate: alongside with the very luxurious gated communities there are also “moderate, low high and post-enclosed” ones, “based on residents’ economic status” (EL SAYED). The area is not connected to the metro system yet; but there is a vast network of bus lines operating between here and other cities in the country (*Cairo360*), and there are taxis, micro-buses, and even public buses from/to Taḥrīr Sq. (CHITI). It may take some more years for the new districts to further develop their infrastructure, facilities and cultural activities. However, the more people they attract the broader and more varied the spectrum can be expected to become. For the moment, an event like the Book Fair in al-Shaykh Zāyid City (in the Western Desert) is far from able to compete with the traditional big Cairo Book Fair in ‘Abbāsiyya: interesting publishers, yes, but almost no customers, poor infrastructure, everything arranged a bit sloppily and without perceivable commitment, as if the organizers themselves did not believe in the meaningfulness of exhibiting here... (*ibid.*). However, as polls among the compound dwellers show, many are pretty satisfied already now (EL SAYED)—not to speak of the many ↗ **Tourist Resorts** that are organized as gated communities and where you can find “everything” you may desire “at the seaside” (*kulluh ‘a l-baḥr*), in immediate vicinity of where you spent your vacation, without having to contact the outside world (*The Shore*). Moreover, “[i]nvesting in properties within a gated community is one of the most profitable investments in Egypt especially in time of unrest” (*ibid.*).

Related Entries

ARRAYS – *Ashwā’iyyāt* ♦ Clash ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Hashish ♦ Garbage ♦ Migration ♦ Psychiatrists ♦ The Suspect Foreigner ♦ Tourist Resorts ♦ Tuk-tuk ♦ The Voice from Above ♦ *aḥma*

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Center vs. Periphery ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ True vs. False

CODES COLLAPSED – Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ Present = Past (Stuck)

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