

“The Green Suburb of Egypt”: Tree Cutting, Global Warming, and Sustainable Development in Egypt’s Maadi Neighborhood

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On June 6, 2021, the Egyptian Ministry of Transport announced the development of a new highway, Al Gazaer Axis (Algeria Axis), to reduce traffic jams. However, this project could lead to the deforestation of areas of the Maadi district in Cairo. One of the district’s most affected areas would be [Street 250](#), which is lined with trees that are more than one hundred years old. This street has also been home to flower and plant vendors for nearly thirty years and is regularly visited by residents from all over Cairo. These vendors report that they were told they needed to [“make way for the project.”](#) In response, Maadi residents have utilized social media to rally against the project with the hashtag [#MaadiRefusestheAxis](#).

Although [the Ministry of Environment](#) has been working to address climate change—including by using electric buses, increasing renewable energy usage, and involving women as leaders in community work to raise environmental awareness—Egypt’s carbon emissions are still considered to be [high](#) in relation to the country’s GDP and population. [Contributing factors](#) include Egypt’s strained water supply (97% of the country’s water comes from the Nile River) and reliance on food imports (more than 40% of the total food supply is imported). This [high emissions rate has negative consequences](#) for natural resources (e.g., [declining crop yields](#)), environmental preservation, and human health and deepens social and gender inequalities.

Another factor that contributes to high emissions is deforestation. This has led [Ragia Al-Gerzawi](#), a researcher on environmental affairs at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), to assert that it is vital for the Egyptian government to examine the potential environmental impacts of large-scale infrastructure and investment projects. [Cutting down trees](#) contributes to global warming by releasing the carbon stored by the trees into the air as carbon dioxide and preventing the trees from absorbing carbon dioxide that is already in the atmosphere. Moreover, cutting down trees and developing former green spaces raises temperatures, increasing dependency on [air conditioning](#). This problem is particularly acute for those living in congested areas without greenery who cannot afford air conditioning.

Maadi is often described as [“the green suburb of Egypt”](#) because it contains many of Egypt’s oldest trees. It was also categorized as a national “architectural landmark” [by the National Organization for Urban Harmony](#) in 2011. While Maadi is currently divided into [three major zones](#) (A, B, and C), according to the social media page “Save Maadi,” the Al Gazaer project will divide zone A into two parts. This breaches [Article 2 \(1\) of Law 119 of 2008](#), which states:

It is prohibited to implement any construction in public and open spaces, streets, and squares inside the area, which interfere with the visual image of building facades, such as pedestrian bridges and overhead roads for cars or advertisements and directional signs that cut off streets and squares.

The law also emphasizes the importance of preserving the “urban fabric” of the area. Maadi residents have used these provisions to argue that dividing the district’s zones is prohibited because of their “monumental importance” to the urban fabric of Maadi. Moreover, even if the project achieves its goal of reducing traffic congestion across Cairo, it will likely increase congestion in Maadi because its roads are narrow and already have dense traffic. The project has raised other concerns in the Sarayat and Degla areas of Maadi, which are connected via Street 250. By running [a new highway across Street 250](#), the project will disturb pedestrians, including students and their parents walking to school. This could worsen safety and elevate pollution.

The Al Gazaer project has also already had negative socioeconomic impacts, as several vendors have reduced their prices by as much as half [to sell as much as possible](#) before being forcefully evicted. Some vendors have [expressed their sadness to residents via videos](#) on Instagram. While some vendors have received official eviction notifications, [many have not received any](#), as stated in the Facebook group [Maadi Refuses the Axis](#) (*Al Maadi Tarfod Al Mehwar*). Other residents have also turned to online activism. In June 2021, for example, an [online petition](#) was launched in opposition to the project to preserve the greenery of Street 250.

In response to the social media uproar, the Ministry of Transport [released a statement in July 2021](#) reiterating that the project’s aim is to reduce traffic density and increase public safety by stopping pedestrians from “trespassing on the route of the railway.” The statement further underlined that the initial phase will [eliminate “trespassers and illegally occupied land”](#) in some areas, though this component of the project is still under review. The ministry guaranteed Maadi residents that it will not cut any trees in the El Nawadi El Gedeed Street and Torra bridge areas and promised to relocate some of the flower and plant vendors displaced by the project.

Nevertheless, in its call to preserve Maadi’s urban fabric and heritage, the grassroots civil society organization [Gameyat Mohebee Ashgar](#) (Tree Lovers Association) has attempted to contact government officials with alternatives to Al Gazaer Axis that have been drafted by [engineers](#). For instance, one alternative could be to [build a bridge](#) that connects the existing Al Saed El Gharbi Road with the road that connects Al-Autostrad and the Nile Corniche Road without dividing the Maadi neighborhood. Another [alternative](#) could be to improve public transportation to reduce traffic congestion.

Past development projects that similarly cut down trees for development and road construction have altered the visual identity of neighborhoods and failed to significantly reduce traffic congestion. In fact, [some believe](#) that they have *increased* traffic collisions. Nevertheless, these projects continue to be conducted in districts such as [Heliopolis and Nasr City](#). Most recently, some green spaces in Heliopolis’s [Merryland Park](#) are to be razed to make way for a memorial, shopping mall, and food court.

Cutting trees for building roads contributes to deforestation and contributes to global warming. It also threatens urban environmental aesthetics, streetscapes, and the livelihoods of residents. Yet the national and local governments continue to exclude the concerns and perspectives of those affected from decision-making processes. Instead, they should work with affected communities to come up with solutions that are attentive to the environmental and human dimensions of infrastructure projects.

Moreover, projects with potential environmental repercussions should be the collective responsibility of all relevant ministerial bodies, including [the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Water Resources, Irrigation, and Agriculture, and the Ministry of Local Development](#). These ministries should also collaborate with [reforestation specialists](#) in pursuing these types of projects. In the case of Al Gazaer Axis, this could have encouraged the government to give more serious consideration to less harmful alternatives.

Going forward, national and local governments should account for local knowledge generated by the communities that will be most affected by major infrastructure projects. In the case of Maadi, residents and plant and flowers vendors are experts because of their lived realities on the ground. Consulting and collaborating with these affected communities and civil society groups through a decentralized approach would open space for more environmentally conscious alternatives. Such an approach would help address the local concerns of Maadi residents and vendors while also addressing the global climate crisis by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.