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## Harvesting the Devil's Garden

**Ambitious development plans for the Northwest Coast run into a 65-year-old problem waiting beneath the sand**

*By Andrew Schurgott*

Looking out across the empty expanse of the Northwestern Desert, it is difficult to believe that this is where Egypt's future lies. In some ways it is easier to imagine the pounding of artillery and shouts of Allied soldiers, fighting to turn the tide of Rommel's Afrika Korps in 1942. Small towns clinging to the edge of the Mediterranean and industry, scattered across the desert like the Bedouin who live off the inhospitable terrain, give little indication of the big plans being hatched hundreds of miles away in Cairo. It is a land in which time has stood still, above and below the sand.

Change is coming though, heralded by the relentless march of tourist resorts snaking westwards along the coast from Alexandria and the ever-increasing forays of energy companies into the desolate interior. Driven by a burgeoning population, projected to reach 125.9 million by 2050, and the abundant economic opportunities in this neglected corner of the country, the Ministry of Planning has teamed up with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to create the North West Coast and Inland Desert Project (NWCID), an immense LE 60 billion (\$10.86 billion) plan to drag the Matrouh Governorate into the twenty-first century.

With a goal of stimulating growth and diversifying the regional economy, the NWCID aims to create 400,000 new jobs and improve living conditions for the local population as well as an anticipated 1.5 million new residents, while at the same time supporting the social, cultural and environmental heritage of the region. The area in question however is littered not with political landmines, as is often the case with a large development project, but real ones.

### Land of Plenty

No one argues about the potential of the Northwest Desert region. The rationale behind the NWCID is simple: 70 million people are crowded into the 5% of the country that makes up the Nile Delta and Valley. Around 600,000 new workers enter the employment market every year, while annual job creation hovers around 400,000, putting more pressure on an unemployment rate already sitting somewhere between 9 and 13% depending on whose figures are used. There is also a significant imbalance in income distribution and development within the country, with almost a fifth of the population living below the poverty line, and large differentials in the development level between regions.

Labor and space, now add demand: an increasingly moneyed middle-class looking to go beyond the traditional once-in-a-lifetime Alexandria holiday, visiting or even owning a little piece of paradise, whatever its resemblance to a transplanted Cairo suburb. Throw in the booming investment and revenue potentials of the international tourism sector and a saturation of development along the Red Sea coast, and it is easy to see why planners are focusing on the Northwest.

The nature of the Northwest makes it particularly attractive. Covering 16.6% of Egypt's landmass, Matrouh Governorate is one of the largest governorates, but it is also the smallest in terms of population, with around 250,000 people and a population density of only 1.18 persons per square kilometer — a far cry from densities of 867.8 in Lower Egypt and 97.8 in Upper Egypt.

Beside being sparsely populated, the region's natural resources are mostly unexploited. The government estimates extensive mineral reserves including limestone (100 million cubic meters), gypsum (100 million cubic meters), clay/bentonite (150 million cubic meters), dolomite (150 million cubic meters), silica sand (150

million cubic meters) and marble (2 million cubic meters) as well as crude oil and natural gas reserves amounting to some 4.8 billion barrels and 13.4 trillion cubic feet respectively.

Available water resources also remain untapped, meaning a large amount of potential agricultural land is lying fallow; approximately 354,060 hectares could be suitable for agriculture and 69,300 hectares for some types of crops and orchards, while around 1.2 million hectares of pastoral land remain underutilized. There is almost no fishing industry despite a lengthy coastline and an estimated potential for 25,000 tons per year of sea fishing and 20,000 tons of aquaculture.

All this has the suits rubbing their hands and gassing up Landcruisers in anticipation of the capital ready to flow into the region.

But there's a catch.

## **A Development Minefield**

Egypt is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, a silent partner alongside names more commonly associated with conflict and its aftereffects such as Bosnia, Angola and Afghanistan.

"The mine situation is different in Egypt from other countries," says Amin El Sharkawi, assistant resident representative at the UNDP. "There is no immediate population movement back into a recent conflict zone." In fact the majority of the land mine problem is not the result of recent conflict, nor even one in which Egypt partook. It is largely the result of the Second World War, a conflict existing only as a chapter in history for all but a handful of those alive today, fought between foreign powers on Egyptian soil 65 years ago.

It was into that soil that the Devil's Garden was sown: 248,000 hectares of the Western Desert — from Alexandria to the Libyan border, sown with an estimated 16.7 million explosive remnants of war (ERW), and across which lie the zones targeted for NWCID development. This official government figure, although somewhat contentious, is based on estimates after two decades of military clearance operations. During the 1980s and 90s, some 2.976 million ERW were cleared from 38,730 hectares, at a cost of around \$27 million. Based on those figures, officials estimate it will take another \$250 million to finish the job — not a small chunk of money to simply render land usable for further development.

"To make any development, we have to have [mine] clearance," says Samy Abada, the chairman of the Landmines Struggle Center, a Cairo-based NGO. "So far the only two activities which have been able to clear mines are oil and tourism. [This is] because their profits can cover the costs of this mine clearance." Developers in these industries conduct mine clearing operations, mostly utilizing civil contractors under military supervision, on small areas of privately owned land, where the anticipated return on investment is high enough to justify the clearance costs.

For activities such as urban development or agriculture — both sectors of critical importance given that the majority of the regional labor force is employed in agriculture or agro-based industries — the area of land required and hence clearance costs incurred, are significantly larger, particularly relative to returns.

So why are the mines still here after 65 years?

For one, there had been no need to develop the region while other areas of the country still had so much potential. Now, as investment opportunities in other areas dry up, and the government starts looking for space and jobs, the mine issue is rising to the surface. Secondly, and perhaps of equal importance, has been the blame game. The government has always been aware of, and quite vocal about, the mine issue in international fora, demanding that the countries responsible for laying the mines come back and get them.

It has been to little avail. Erik Tollefsen, a mine action specialist at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining points out, "it is a touchy issue," not only because Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom have been reluctant to accept blame, but "because these countries have proved quite reluctant to fund the Egyptian military directly." The issue has been at an impasse as long as only the military has been involved in mine clearance.

## Clearing a Path

Perhaps motivated by the UN Mine Action Assessment Mission of February 2000, Prime Minister Atef Abeid issued decree No. 750/2000, creating an inter-ministerial committee to supervise mine clearance under the direction of the ministries of planning and international cooperation. Shortly thereafter, the committee initiated the comprehensively named Support to the North West Coast Development Plan and Mine Action Program in coordination with the UNDP.

The program has two phases, with phase one, budgeted at just over \$3 million, running for 18 months from the start of 2007. As a first step, the committee created a permanent civilian secretariat to address the issue of mines, under the leadership of former Ambassador Fathy El Shazly.

Tollefsen, who attended recent mine detector trials in Egypt as an international observer, describes Shazly as a “charismatic character, with a big engine and lots of plans and initiative.”

Sitting in his Downtown Cairo office, El Shazly is certainly bursting with energy as he ticks off the goals of the secretariat, a large selection of landmines and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) on the display stand opposite his desk. “By the end of phase one, we will have cleared 35,000 acres of land” he says, adding that the phase will also include the completion of a database of victims, building public awareness, completing the staffing of the secretariat and bringing in a consultant to finalize plans for phase two of the program.

Reality however, has not kept pace with El Shazly’s enthusiasm and ambitious goals. The plan was to staff and train the secretariat, identify areas for clearance and purchase equipment within three months of the program’s start. Nearly a year later staffing is almost complete and mine clearance equipment has been field tested, but it has yet to be purchased and the process for identifying priority areas for clearance is just getting started.

This prioritization process is a political minefield, one that could slow the building momentum of the secretariat.

El Shazly’s task is unenviable. As is often the case with planning processes involving a large number of stakeholders, everything becomes a priority. El-Sharkawi sees the main challenge as “identifying the development priority — the one option — where to start.” Not only do the ‘economic priority catalysts’ — geographical sections of the northwest identified by the project — cover nearly the entire region, the list of priority projects is just as extensive.

To start, El Shazly has contacted 10 ministries and asked each to select 10,000 acres of land that they see as a priority for clearance. This will then go to the Cabinet for approval and back to the secretariat to be whittled down to 35,000 acres, based on the five-year national plan, before going to the military for operational planning. Given the number of parties involved, El Shazly will need to call upon all of his previous diplomatic experience and energy to keep the process moving forward.

## Finding Funds

The other major challenge is, of course, money. The reluctance of the international community to be involved in financing military-led clearance seems to at last be dissipating. This is partly a result of the civilian nature of the secretariat, although foreign governments have previously engaged in direct military-to-military assistance. Perhaps of more importance though has been the role of the UNDP, whose involvement brings a clear developmental focus to the issue.

“Hopefully donors see that there is trust, credibility, seriousness... so they are more comfortable with funding,” El Sharkawi says, adding that because of its independence, the UN is best placed for involvement in projects such as these. “The advantage is neutrality. If this was a bilateral project it might not take off. The government doesn’t feel interference in its national security, and the involvement of the UN also gives credibility to the government in the eyes of donors, it increases transparency [and] builds confidence and trust on all sides.”

To date, the program has secured just over \$2 million in funding, albeit in trickles. The Egyptian government has put up \$261,730; UNDP \$375,000; UNDP's Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery \$200,533; the UN Mine Action Service \$150,000; British Embassy \$19,632; and the United Kingdom Department for International Development \$490,400. The United States Agency for International Development is the top single donor with a commitment of \$750,000. The ministries and Armed Forces are providing in-kind support. This still leaves the program around \$1 million short of phase one's required \$3 million.

Of more importance, though, is long-term funding. With a shortfall chasing just \$3 million for the first phase, where will the estimated \$250 million required to clear the entire area come from? Ulrich Tietze, the UNDP's chief technical advisor for mine action, believes that this figure may be too high. "I am not 100% convinced that each and every mine will be removed. There will be a priority found, and I expect the total amount will be lower than \$250 million."

Abada, however, thinks the figure is too conservative. "The [Landmine Struggle] Center estimates cost of removal based on UN figures of \$300 to \$1,000 per mine." This would put removal costs significantly higher than the military estimates, although it will be the military, with soldiers supplying a form of subsidized labor, conducting clearance operations.

The actual amount, a very large one, regardless of who calculates it, may be moot, given there have been no funding commitments — not even from the UNDP — beyond phase one of the project. The LE 60 billion NWCID does mention clearance activities, but only the housing expansion sector's budget appears to factor it into the costs. Apart from this, only LE 85 million (approximately \$15 million) has been allocated directly to cover both mine clearance and awareness programs. Given that the goals for the mine action program's phase two have not been set, much less its budget, there are reasons for concern.

Despite this, El Shazly remains optimistic. "I'm not concerned about funding. We will get money from the sectoral budgets [of the NWCID]," he asserts, although at the same time acknowledging the lack of funds allocated specifically to clearance activities. He prefers instead to focus on progress made thus far, such as the creation of the secretariat and the confirmed funding. And while things are behind schedule, the secretariat itself is a big step forward. "I have worked in other countries where high level backing [of mine action] is not as impressive," Tietze points out. "This in itself is a big achievement — there is an entity which will continue regardless of international funding."

### **Trailing Behind the International Bandwagon**

The Landmine Monitor Report 2007, an annual publication released in November by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, recorded international funding for mine action at \$475 million, an increase of \$100 million from the previous year and the highest level of funding to date. The majority of this funding, however, is out of reach for Egypt as long as the country remains a non-signatory to the 1997 Landmine Convention.

While the treaty does not dictate official funding support, participating states assist other signatory countries that have mine problems in meeting the convention deadlines for mine clearance and stockpile destruction. As a result, signatory countries such as Jordan receive a large amount of financial assistance, allowing faster clearance operations. As Tollefsen phrases it; "There is some kind of [informal] punishing regime for non-signatories [to the Convention] by donors."

Egypt's absence from the treaty seems counterintuitive, given the extensiveness of its mine problem. In a press release issued in 2000, then-Foreign Minister Amr Moussa outlined the government's position: "[The] convention has many shortcomings, first among which, the convention ignores the responsibility of the states that implanted mines on others' territory to clear them, and it does not state providing aid, in addition to totally ignoring the state's right and responsibility to securing their borders and self-defense."

This view is held consistently across the different parties involved with Egypt's mine issue. Even Abada, who is quite critical of the government's work, agrees with its stance on the Landmine Convention. "The treaty does not state that the countries that planted the mines have to remove them." He also raises the unspoken issue when words like national security are voiced: "Israel has not signed," nor has the United States.

According to the national security argument, landmines play a role in border security and prevent trafficking and smuggling. The problem is, these arguments are groundless. There is no evidence to suggest that trafficking and smuggling are in any way reduced by landmines, and as recent conflicts have shown, “landmines play a minor, if any, role [ ]” says Tollefsen “A modern army can go straight through a minefield.”

In fact, materials from old landmines were reportedly used in terrorist incidents in the Sinai — not exactly a contribution to national security, although it did reinforce the army’s intention to retain control of mine clearance operations.

“Egypt will eventually sign the convention [ ] we are already honoring it in spirit,” El Shazly predicts. The government has stated several times that it has not exported mines since 1984 or produced them since 1988, one of the treaty’s requirements. “There are countries that have signed and receive funding, yet still produce or use [landmines]. I could name names,” the former ambassador asserts.

Feisty talk, but he has a point. The Landmine Monitor Report lists at least 15 countries that are unlikely to meet their rapidly approaching 10-year deadlines for clearance; four countries with 2009 deadlines “have failed to initiate formal clearance operations,” including big names like France (in Djibouti) and the United Kingdom (in the Falkland Islands).

Then there are cases like Ethiopia. A state signatory to the Convention, Ethiopia has no national legislation for implementation and has not submitted any reports to the UN regarding stockpiles, clearance or even mined areas. Add to this the fact that Ethiopia was reported by the UN for transferring landmines to a Somali warlord, and is believed to still be planting mines in the Temporary Security Zone along the Eritrean border. Despite this, Ethiopia received nearly \$8 million in international funding last year.

In Cairo’s halls of power, there is a hint of a policy change in the air. An Egyptian delegation attended the Eighth Meeting of State Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty last month in Jordan. Tollefsen describes this as “a watershed,” noting that the visit may signal a shift in the government’s stance. “Don’t underestimate the importance of this visit. Previously Egypt has been reluctant to join the international process [...] Now there seems to be a dialogue.”

## **A One-Legged Race**

Amid the high-level discussions and macroeconomic juggling, something seems to have been forgotten — the human element. There is certainly much talk on paper and in press conferences about improving people’s lives, economic growth, job opportunities, better social services and the support of communities. The people in the spotlight are not as convinced. The Northwest desert region is a picture of benign neglect: low literacy levels, less than one fifth of the population completing high school, lack of social services and infrastructure, and an economy dependent on seasonal domestic tourism and unpredictable agriculture (employing the majority of labor but contributing only 0.9% to national GDP), all highlight the large gap between reality and the government’s future.

As the last billboards proclaiming tourist developments full of greenery, golf courses and smiling families fade away behind, and before the hotels of Matrouh appear on the horizon, lies Dabaa. New streetlights on the left and a string of struggling saplings in the median strip hint at development to come. Just off the coastal highway, however, it is a different story. Paved roads quickly give way to tracks worn in the sandy soil by countless pickups. Scattered houses cluster around covered wells, and large families depend on animal grazing or crops from unreliable winter rains to survive.

Is this the region of which Matrouh Governor Mohammed El Shahat speaks, in his enthusiastic and well-practiced spiel on investment? Yes and no.

Like El Shazly, El Shahat has ambitious aims, of which he sees tourism and agriculture as the “two great priorities for the area.” Sitting in his office overlooking the blue-green Mediterranean Sea, he talks of his plans for tourism, focusing on big hotels and international guests, and the benefits they will bring to the community. “We hope to make something good of it, not the traditional way of investing [ ] hotels will establish schools and training facilities.”

El Shahat has a two-pronged approach to agriculture, “the first of which is the expansion of olives and palms in Siwa. The other side is completion of the reclamation of 500,000 feddans around the Hammam Canal.”

Here he acknowledges the mine problem, although he believes the biggest factor holding back investment is “the ownership of land; it is distributed between different government bodies.” But the governor is ready to go; “We have an assembly of investors, they have taken the initiative to clear the land of mines [] we are just waiting for the prime minister’s approval.”

How this scales with El Shazly’s stance that “private development is a red light, for the moment at least,” remains to be seen.

Bumping along a dusty track in his pickup, Hag Saber Attaia, who has been living in the region his whole life, has his own ideas about priorities. “Agriculture, because this is the simple way for [the people],” he says. “People are working in agriculture and for this they don’t need too much experience.”

Looking out across the barren expanse, low rises and stunted bushes extending endlessly in every direction, Attaia sees only opportunity. “With water this place would be perfect. If there is water, I’d leave Dabaa and start to live here, to cultivate the land.”

Clambering into the back of Attaia’s truck, Amm Mufta agrees. At 82, he is old enough to remember when the Germans and Italians were here. “The most important thing is water,” Amm Mufta says. “God made everything alive from water.”

Attaia is aware of the government’s plans for the region. “The future of the region is very positive as long as irrigation water gets here. [It] is contingent on two things; irrigation and the demining of fields.” However he does have some reservations; “It is very good to develop the area, except if the government is unfair. This happened before in 1984 when the government cleared the area for the [yet to be built] nuclear plant. It kicked off the people with minor compensation; they lost their land for very little money.”

Some residents have lost much more than money, Rachid Fadl Shaeben lost his leg to a landmine in 1972, while shepherding.

“I was making tea when it went off,” Shaeben recalls, reclining against the wall of his compound at the back of Dabaa town. Attaia comments that this is how most accidents with mines occur, as the heat from the fire sets off mines buried beneath the surface.

Shaeben continues, “I was in a coma [...] Some people saw the explosion and came to find me [...] It was 17 kilometers to the hospital and I spent three months there.”

He displays his prosthetic leg, provided by the government just three years ago; until then he got by on a homemade one. Now with eight children and a pension of LE 70 a month, Shaeben is skeptical about the government’s job creation plans. “What work? Where do I go? Even for healthy people there are no jobs,” he says with a note of despair in his voice. “The canal is useless. I can’t farm. The best way is to increase the pension.”

El Shahat stresses that “like all over Egypt, all job opportunities will have 5% [of positions set aside] for the handicapped,” referring to stipulations in Labor Law No. 91 of 1982.

No one is even sure how many people like Shaeben there are. The Landmine Monitor Report estimates that across Egypt, 697 people have been killed and 7,617 injured, 5,017 of these civilians. Based on army statistics, these figures are contentious: The military’s figures are not revised upwards despite regular reports in the local media of new incidents. Those in the field think the numbers are low because people are not reporting incidents, particularly those among the Bedouin community.

The Landmine Struggle Center collects information from hospitals on new cases. “We see approximately 10 to 15 new cases every month [ but] the number is larger,” Abada says, noting that in this remote area, when someone is killed by a landmine, “they don’t speak about it, they don’t write to the government [] so we don’t have accurate numbers.”

This is particularly challenging for the new mine action secretariat, which hopes to establish an official database of victims. “Many victims are not recorded, especially in Matrouh, given the special nature of that governorate being mainly populated by Bedouin,” El Shazly acknowledges.

Even without distrust of the government, the existing data on landmine casualties is flawed. “This official database is different from the victims, the real victims, El Shazly admits. “The number of victims on the ground is greater than what is recorded in the books of the government, and the difference is due to legal and definitional aspects. “Prior to the year 2000, [landmine] victims were not legally defined as victims of war. There was legalistic argumentation between different institutions about them. Some people claimed that that war, the Second World War, was not an Egyptian war, it was not fought by Egyptians nor for the sake of Egypt... so how could we find a legal definition for the victims in order to finance whatever compensation or assistance would be given to them from the public budget?”

Compensation was a big issue, with responsibility being shared between the central government and governorates. Inconsistent policies meant some victims received compensation, some a pension and others nothing at all. The solution was proposed by a former Governor of Matrouh.

“[He] came to an agreement with the Minister of Social Affairs at the time, that there should be a window of one month,” El Shazly explains. “During one month the victims would be invited to fill in the formalities in order to be considered victims of war, and be treated equally with the victims of [the] 1967 war [] so 474 people were able to apply and fill in the formalities, go to a police station, file a report and then have a medical exam.”

That’s 474 out of an estimated 7,500. Even taking into account attrition from old age and other natural causes of death, that’s is a huge discrepancy — one not explained away by ‘definitional issues.’

For one, it was a very short window of opportunity, word of which may not have reached the remote communities of the Northwest; even Landmine Struggle’s Abada wasn’t aware of the government’s outreach effort. Waving away this gap in knowledge he talks about the difficulty in accessing the victims and the paltry amount of compensation, “if you [can] consider paying a man 50 pounds a month compensation.”

Getting victims to come to police stations to register is “not a practical solution [] they don’t like to go to the government,” Abada says, noting that costs, distance and disability may limit Bedouin’s access. His solution: “Go to the place and look at them one by one, and help them. Don’t collect them, why collect them? They are victims. [The government] needs to go area by area and see on the land, how they are living, what they are eating [] To collect them, to ask them [to come to you] is not the human approach, they are victims, they have to have special treatment.”

The people on the land itself do not seem to agree with Abada’s assessment of the problem. Attaia’s knowledge of the region somewhat contradicts the military’s large landmine casualty figures and leans more towards the count in El Shazly’s database. Attaia estimates that there are one to two cases a year in Dabaa, and around 50 people with landmine injuries living in the area. He also believes that fear of the police or of involvement with the government is not an issue: “There is sympathy between the police and such people.” Shaeben confirms his neighbor’s view, saying he has not had a problem with either the government or police.

Naturally, the locals are well aware of the landmine issue. Back in the capital, El Shazly acknowledges this, saying, “the local population [] know where the mines and UXOs are, they even mark the area infected and they try their best to avoid getting in direct touch with them.” UNDP’s El-Sharkawi knows this too. “Bedouin communities are knowledgeable about the mined areas,” he says. “The problem comes with increasing development.”

Trying to head this latter issue off before it becomes a major problem, El Shazly’s secretariat is developing education and awareness plans. At the moment a French publication is being translated and “Egyptianized” for use in education, and El Shazly has big plans for the use of radio and celebrity-endorsed television campaigns.

While the outreach may be particularly relevant for future migrants to the Northwest, it seems once again to be missing the people most affected by the issue — those living amid the minefields. Abada is harsh in his

criticism: "If you are serious about assisting the people, you need a practical solution... to find a way to clear the mines, to protect their lives, to make something useful and to avoid more victims. But to make propaganda [] what is the purpose?"

As the development plans roll ahead, the LE 60 billion question remains, can El Shazly guide the plan through a minefield of ministries and funding, or will the residents of the Northwest be left harvesting the legacy of the Devil's Garden.