

From Social Networking to Political and Physical Impacts

Some lessons from the Egyptian lotus revolution

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1- Introduction

The recent Lotus Revolution in Egypt (January 2011) aimed for a nationwide development seeking to eradicate corruption and to reduce disparities within the different strata of the Egyptian society as well as creating a better and prosperous lifestyle. The revolution was sparked by a group of young urban middle class intellectuals using the power of digital social networking across the different regions of Egypt.

The social networking led to an organized action against the ruling political system in Egypt, this action was transformed into a physical action by going on protests and holding positions in the main Egyptian squares. To encounter such protests, clashes sparked with the security bodies of the government, ending by a total retreat of the police forces from most of the cities and villages in Egypt, followed by a military intervention to protect the people and public properties from criminal acts, while the revolution continued for 18 days before achieving its main political goal.

The paper aims mainly to investigate the relation between the digital social networking that led to the revolution and its political impacts, and the immediate physical spatial impacts either temporary, lasting and tangible impacts and the expected future spatial impacts on different levels.

It starts by defining social networking and identifying its relationship with the Egyptian revolution explaining how this activity prior to the revolution has transformed into physical actions on the ground on the local, regional and national levels that ended up by toppling the government and the regime as its main political goal, hence starting a new era. The paper then establishes a reference for analysis to which it relates the social networking with its political and spatial impacts. It then focuses on identifying the spatial impacts and categorizing them into the above mentioned categories, and their subcategories while identifying the flow between such spatial impacts with the political impacts of the revolution.

It is important to stress that the analysis in this paper is based on several eye witnessing experiences, simply by living in Cairo, following the daily events on satellite channels, attending some events in person as well as to other written material from online activists, digital newspapers and social networking sites, to meet up with the techniques of the digital revolution.

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2-Social Networking

According to the online encyclopedia what is.com, "social networking is the practice of expanding the number of one's business and/or social contacts by making connections through individuals". They argue that the concept has existed as long as societies themselves have existed; yet, the unparalleled potential of the Internet to promote such connections is only now being fully recognized and exploited, through Web-based groups established for that purpose. Such groups help people make contacts that would be good for them to know, but that they would be unlikely to have met otherwise¹.

It is also important to stress that in some cases social networking sites help to promote democracy by giving a channel for free speech in virtual reality that sometimes could be hardly achieved in real life, as was the case in Egypt to a certain extent.

3-Social networking and the Egyptian Revolution

Social networking was the driving force for the Egyptian revolution, with the facebook and twitter websites as the hosts for the social networks formed for this purpose. The revolution is known in many media sources as the "headless revolution", since there was no specific individual who stood up as the leader of such an action, unlike the previous Egyptian revolutions, the lotus revolution was sparked through the virtual activities of activist groups that later were transformed into physical actions.

In an attempt to track down the link between the groups formed by the social networking websites and the revolution, Abdel Rahman (2011), shows that the initial spark of such events actually started in 2008, with a facebook group that called for a general strike on April 6th 2008 to protest on corruption, poverty and the mediocre living standards that many Egyptians live. Although the strike failed, as it was only tangible in one Egyptian city, the concept proved to be practical and open for development. Another facebook page "We are all Khaled Said " was created in June 2010 in protest to the brutal torture and murder of an Alexandrian man by local police, who obtained a video showing police corruption.

The call for the revolution mainly started from this page, by calling for mass mobilization to a day of anger on January 25th, which later transformed into a revolution.

According to Abdel Rahman (2011), about 50000 members of the mentioned facebook page, met the call and went for the day of anger, in addition to many others who received the call through different manners². The coordination was mainly done via the internet's facebook and twitter, perhaps this explains why the protestors in the first day of the revolution were mostly well educated, middle class Egyptians, before other strata of the society joined the revolution.

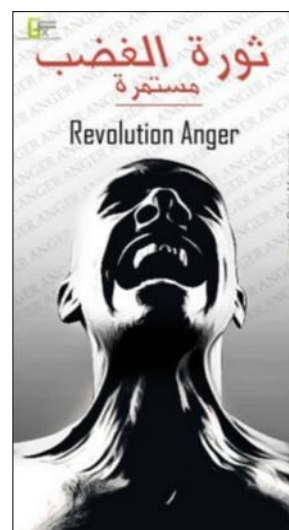


Fig.1: One of the many graphic calls for the revolution that were spread over the facebook groups.

¹ http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0.,sid9_gci942884.00.html , February 2011.

² Abdel Rahman, Hesham (2011), Egypt revolution-Social networking Again, on <http://ezinearticles.com/?Egypt-Revolution---Social-Networking-Again&id=6092769>

In that sense, what started in the virtual social networking domain was transformed into physical real life actions in several Egyptian cities, which eventually led to the toppling of the regime and the beginning of a new era, hence the main political impact of the social networking initiative.

4-Social Networking and Spatial Impacts

There have been several spatial impacts that are directly caused by the socially networked revolution that affected the built environment in some aspects as well as the logic for the future national urban development scheme. Such spatial impacts were either direct causes or results of achieved political impacts as shown in the opposite figure.

Based on some tangible observations on the current situation in Egypt (February-March 2011), these impacts could be categorized into temporary spatial impacts, which directly led to topple the regime, lasting tangible spatial impacts, shaping the new political reconstruction, and expected spatial impacts inspired from the new policies. These are discussed as follows:

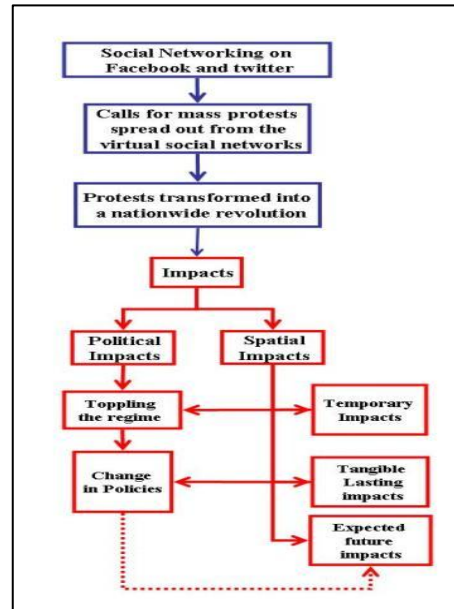


Fig.2: Social networking causing political and spatial impacts

4-1 Temporary Spatial Impacts

These impacts could be defined as the changes in spatial settings and functions that took place in the urban spaces in terms of squares and streets on the national level in most Egyptian governorates. The impacts lasted through the duration of the revolution between the 25th of January and the 11th of February 2011, when the previous Egyptian regime toppled. These temporary impacts could be classified into: temporary functions, and temporary spatial reorganization. These impacts are discussed within the scope of Tahrir square as the most famous square in the Egyptian revolution:

4-1-1- Temporary Functions

A general strike was the main theme of the protest movement that soon was transformed into a full scale revolution. Large number of protesters flooded the square and marched in demonstrations calling for change initially and later for the removal of the ruling president, party and the whole regime. Hence, the temporary function for the square that lasted for 18 days was a *protest and strike ground*, replacing the square's main function as a traffic node and transportation.



Fig.3: Tahrir square as a traffic node in a normal day.

A **battle ground** was the second temporary function that took place in the square in the clashes between the protesters and the security forces at the beginning and later with the so called beneficiaries of the late regime. By holding the battleground the protesters conveyed a message that they will not give up until their demands are met.



Fig.4 : The infamous Battle of camels and horses on February 2nd 2011, followed later by the Molotov night

4-1-2- Temporary Spatial reorganization

During the revolution, several urban spaces have been transformed into places. People occupy space and, as Camm and Irwin (1984) state, at places within it, they make their settlements and organize their activities. Harrison and Dourish (1996) argue that a place is a space which is *invested with understandings* of behavioural appropriateness, cultural expectations, and so forth. People are *located* in space but *they act* in place where they use space to consume, to have, to produce and to move around. So a place is more specific than a space, places largely exist within spaces; a place is generally a space with something added: e.g. social meaning, convention, cultural understandings about role, function and nature and so on.

Relating the above idea of transforming the space into place with the Egyptian revolution, many of the public squares in most cities were reshaped. They became places of specific daily activities reaching for one goal that is the toppling of the regime. This was very evident in the case of Tahrir square, and could be further highlighted by using an interesting photo analysis under the title "*The camp that toppled a president*" by the BBC correspondent in Cairo during the revolution³.

From figure 5, the new spatial reorganization is clear setting different zones of activities that would change the square into an urban place. For example, places for praying emerged, others for giving speeches, others for field clinics and campsite and even a place for exhibiting some revolution related art works. Such settings in the Tahrir square were developed through the 18 days of revolution, changing the square into a temporary living, protesting, and creativity place. Such settings were soon gone after their main political impact that is the fall of the regime.

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12434787>, February 2011. The analysis also contains some clickable images to show the activities as they happened.



Fig.5: The photo analysis of Tahrir Square as presented by Knell in February 2011.

4-2- Tangible and lasting Spatial Impacts

The tangible lasting spatial impacts are those impacts that already took place on the ground and exist physically at present time. Some of them could be identified as follows:

4-2-1- *New Functions for urban spaces*

As discussed earlier, some main public squares and streets were the melting pot for those participating in the revolution, causing temporary spatial reorganization in many of them as shown in the case of Tahrir square. However, despite the end of the protests, these places acquired new functions affecting their spatial organization, even if these functions take place in specific times and not on daily bases. Taking the example of Tahrir square, in addition to its function as a host for several administrative and residential buildings and a key traffic node in Cairo, in post revolution time, it gained two more functions, a political arena and a festival ground.

- *A political arena*

There has been several events that took place in the square, the two most notable events that stressed on the square's political role, were: victory Friday on the 18th of February, and the speech of the new Prime Minister.

In the first event thousands of Egyptians prayed and celebrated the fall of the regime of former President



Fig.6: Victory Friday in Tahrir square on the 18th of Feb. 2011

Hosni Mubarak, maintaining pressure on the military rulers to fulfill the demands of the Egyptian revolution. The event also sparked a political discussion on the role of the different political and ideological groups in Egypt in the post revolution era. The second event took place on the 4th of March, when the newly appointed Prime Minister vowed to meet the demands of the revolution, and asked for his legitimacy from the people, in what was known later as the legitimacy of the square. The square also became the symbol of protests and setting demands.

Moreover, the square witnessed a new interesting activity, that is publicity for the newly formed and being formed political parties. On Fridays, where there are either celebrations or political events, representatives of the new parties are present with their banners to explain their political agendas call for political mobilization and invite more people to join their parties.

Such interesting new function for the square resembles that of the famous Hyde Park in London.



Fig.7: Political mobilization for the newly formed parties in Tahrir square

- A Festival Ground

The square in addition to its political function became a place for free festivities and celebrations. This phenomenon started during the revolution itself in which several people showed their talents, to the extent that some held their weddings in the square. In almost all the political events post revolution, they were coupled with an atmosphere of festivities with performances, music, street vendors and souvenirs. At a certain point it became an outing in itself to go and visit the square during Fridays.

4-2-2- Impacts on the Built environment

Spatial impacts on the built environment are tangible in several aspects, however, the two most tangible aspects are: the illegal urbanization on agricultural lands and the enhancement of public spaces and streets.

- Illegal Urbanization on agricultural lands

This is considered an unintentional spatial impact of the social networking that led to the revolution. It is well known that the agricultural lands in Egypt are under continuous threat of being run by the urban expansion and sprawl. Therefore, to protect these lands there had been several laws and regulations to protect the depletion of such valuable lands. Since the beginning of the third millennium, there has been a special focus from the planning authorities in Egypt, i.e. the ministry of housing and the General Organization for Physical planning, in producing strategic plans for the villages and cities of Egypt, according to which, the urban expansion on agricultural lands is limited to specific cases in previously defined spaces with special conditions.

In principle, the law enforcing authorities were, assumingly, enforcing these regulations and plans, until the revolution broke out on the 25th of January 2011. As the police force withdrew from most of the Egyptian cities and villages, thousands of violations were reported across Egypt of building on agricultural lands.

These actions usually start by building a house on part of the land, if there is no action taken against it, there is usually a strong possibility of building more houses and selling them; in some countries this could be considered normal, however in Egypt, this is strictly considered a violation on the nation's limited agricultural land, a process that could threaten Egypt's food security on the medium and long terms.

An example to this phenomenon is shown in the figure, by following the development of the built up mass of one of the villages in Dakahleya governorate between 2003 and 2011. Note that this took place in presence of some control from the local authorities, however with the absence of such authorities; the agricultural land run became an evident threat that might reshape the Egyptian national landscape.

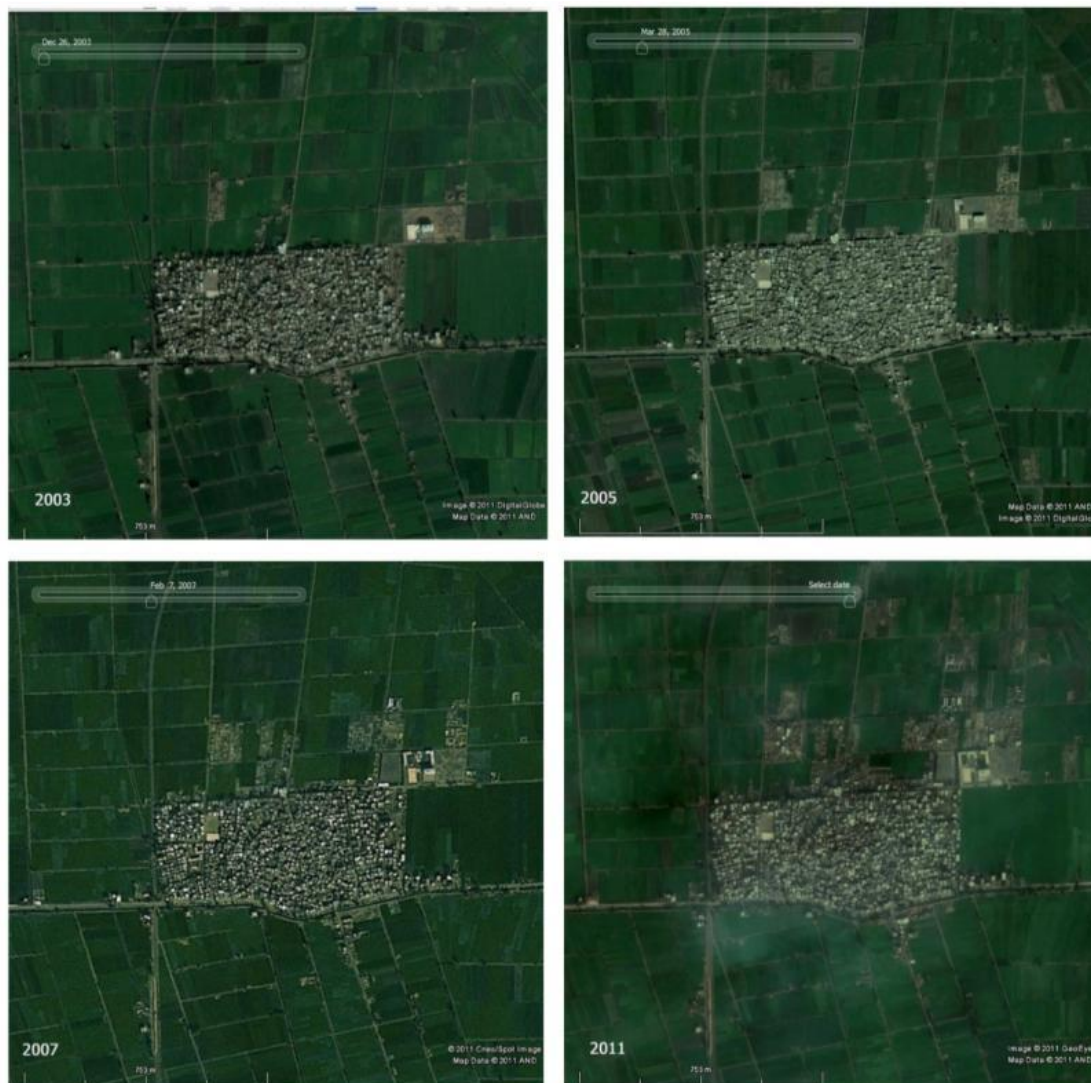


Fig.8: Tracking the settlement's expansion on agricultural land of a village in Dakahleya governorate (Egyptian Delta) between 2003 and 2011.

As time passed, attempts by the governing military council in Egypt⁴, are made to stop such violations, nevertheless, such violations are still tangible in strength.

In a report published by the Ministry of Agriculture it is shown that the number of violations during the days of the revolution, in the period between the 25th of January and the 8th of February, reached 32000 violations⁵. This number increased to 97000 cases according to a spokesman from the Ministry of Agriculture towards the end of March⁶.

The opposite table shows the number of violations in the seven rural governorates of the Egyptian Delta according to the above mentioned report.

| Governorate name | Number of Violations | Area of the Violations |
|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Dakahleya | 15000 | Not available |
| Gharbeia | 12000 | 140 Feddans |
| Sharkeia | 7000 | 437 Feddans |
| Qalyoubia | 1276 | 165 Feddans |
| Kafr ElSheikh | Not available | 165 Feddans |
| Damietta | 1000 | Not available |
| Behaira | 15000 | 120 Feddans |

In an attempt to document the violation process, a field report was made by Moheet news agency (www.moheet.com) in March 2011 covering some villages in Dakahleya governorate, in which they found that the first step is to assemble the bricks on the piece of agricultural land intended for construction. The second step is to construct the walls, but using mud mortar to allow for tearing down the walls in case there are any prohibiting actions by the authorities, hence minimizing the possible losses and reusing the bricks again. According to the report, people tend to do these violations because of the housing problem and the increase in rent values and also because of the profit gained by some from selling these houses later⁷. Consequently, several attempts and campaigns by the interim military council to counter face these violations have been taken.



Fig.9: Building on agricultural lands in the village of Meet Yaeish – Dakahleya

- Enhancement of public spaces and streets

Following the spirit of the revolution, there have been many calls in the media, and on the social networking websites, e.g. the Face book, to enhance and "clean up" the public spaces and streets. These calls started directly after the clean up the Tahrir square⁸.



Fig.10. The Cleanup of Tahrir square, February 12th 2011

⁴ The Supreme Military council is the ruling power in Egypt until the holding of new presidential elections in late 2011. At the time this paper was written in February-March 2011, the council was still in power.

⁵ <http://sootalmwatermagazine.maatpeace.org/index.php/>, March 2011

⁶ http://www.moheet.com/show_files.aspx?fid=458152, April 2011

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gallery/2011/feb/13/tahrir-square-cleanup-egypt-pictures#/?picture=371694074&index=11>, March 2011

It was followed by many calls to clean up the Egyptian streets and squares on the social networking sites, mainly Face book and twitter, which ended up with tangible physical impacts on the Egyptian built environment. The impacts might be simple, as they included the cleaning up of streets and squares, painting the street pavements and decorating the street fences by wall paintings.

However, the uniqueness of these actions to the Egyptian context is that they have been carried out for the first time based on a full volunteer work.



Fig.11: Top right: One of the calls sponsored by Persil-Egypt on facebook, with the slogan "the country is ours" .
 Top Left: A wall painting in Alexandria in the wake of the clean up calls

4-3 Expected Spatial Impacts

The impacts are expected to take place on the long term as a result of the socially networked revolution and its aftermath. A clear paradigm shift in terms of policies could be clearly sensed⁹, especially when it comes to regional planning and development, and the housing question in Egypt. These aspects are discussed as follows:

4-3-1 Regional planning and development

The main problem in Egypt in terms of human settlements is that the population is concentrated on only 7% of the country's total surface area, mainly the Nile Valley and Delta, thus leading to several problems such as the settlements expansion on agricultural lands, concentration of high population densities in urban centers and the inequality and imbalance in investments (Serag, 2008). It is important to stress that there had been several regional planning attempts made in the pre-revolution era to increase the inhabited areas and redistribute the population in Egypt with some mega projects to realize these plans, however, due to many reasons including the inconsistency of implementation, the increase in inhabited areas was intangible (*ibid*).



Fig.12: Only 7% of Egypt's area is populated, with a clear imbalance of population distribution

⁹ Since the Author is a registered expert at the General Organization for Physical Planning – Ministry of Housing, and based on the meetings held with some key persons in the organization, it was possible to get informed of some of the future intentions related to the future regional development and urbanization of Egypt after the revolution.

The two succeeding governments in the post revolution period through several meetings with key scientists, planners and related persons, showed a clear interest in reviving the regional planning projects aiming to redistribute the population.

Among those projects was the development and urbanization corridor initiated by Prof. Farouk El Baz, where the intention was to construct a national road spanning from the west of Alexandria in the North to the southern borders of Egypt with transverse roads linking this corridor with existing settlements in the Nile Valley, and initiating the establishment of new human settlements close to the intersection of these transverse roads with the corridor, along with the establishment of new industrial areas¹⁰.

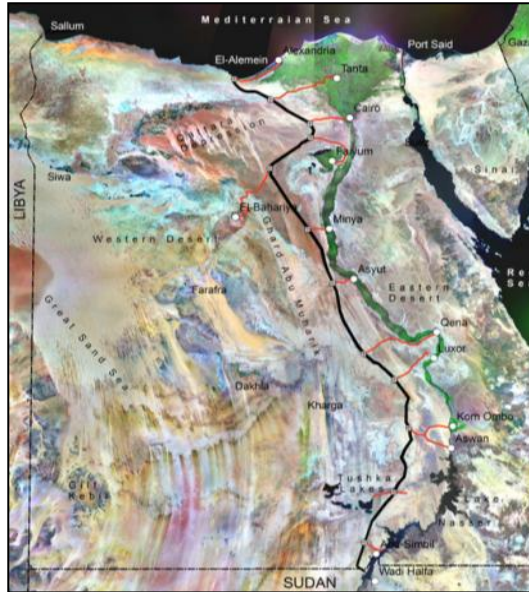


Fig.13: The Development corridor showing the transverse roads as links with the Nile Valley.

Source:

http://faroukelbaz.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=34, March, 2011

Following a meeting and a press conference between the Prime Minister and the Prof. El Baz, several actions are being taken by the Ministry of housing to realize the project, hence reshaping the Egyptian populated landscape. At the same time, several official and unofficial forums (some on the virtual world) are discussing the details of this project and the proper implementation phases. This indeed would be a direct spatial impact on the regional and national levels, in terms of establishing new settlements, new roads and new industrial areas. At the same time, there is currently a growing attention among the leaderships of the Ministry of Housing and the General organization for physical planning in projects similar to that of the development corridor, for example the urbanization and development of the South East of Egypt with its long shores on the Red Sea and development projects in the Western Desert of Egypt.

4-3-2 The housing question

Abdel Wahab and Sheta (2008) state that almost 15.5 million people are living in informal settlements meaning that 25% of Egypt's Population is living in slums according to Egypt's population census 2006; 8 million of them are living in Cairo's informal settlements¹¹.



Fig.14: Slum areas in Cairo became a main spatial structuring

¹⁰ El Baz, F. (2007), The pathway of development and reconstruction: A means to ensure the future of coming generations in Egypt, El Ain publishing, Cairo.

¹¹ Abdel Wahab, S. & Sheta, A. (2008), Slum Dwellers Development: Policies and Administration, PARC, Cairo.

This problem has been growing over the last few decades; in fact it became evident in the spatial structure of Egyptian cities, as an informal solution to the housing problem question in Egypt. During the pre-revolution era, there had been several attempts by the successive governments to solve this problem by focusing on providing public sector housing affordable to large sectors of the society to meet the housing demands.

Despite that it is not the scope of this paper to discuss the reasons of this dilemma, however, perhaps because of corruption and ill designed policies, the problem continued, in some cases leaving several public housing units closed and inaccessible to those in need. Consequently,



Fig.15: Vacant housing units in a new city

during the revolution and with the disappearance of law enforcement authorities, several slum dwellers managed to take by force about 4000 housing units in the new cities¹², some of which were later retaken by the military council others remained in hand of those who snatched them from the government, as a direct reaction to their housing demands.

With the success of the revolution, and with the current interim government aiming to improve the situation among the different critical sectors in Egypt including the housing sector, the Minister of Housing announced for a project to construct one million housing units within the next five years¹³. The units are to be constructed along 14 governorates and to be strictly distributed over the slum dwellers, so as to address the problem in a comprehensive way. This is considered in itself a challenging task for the spatial planners as they will be asked to find proper locations within the Egyptian cities to host the new housing units.

Conclusion

This paper tried to highlight how virtual social networking can lead to tangible physical impacts affecting a whole nation. The paper identified a sequence of chain reactions starting from the online calls on the social networks sites for mass protests, later transformed into actual protests, causing several temporary spatial impacts in many main squares in several Egyptian cities transforming them into battle grounds and campsites for protestors, leading to a tangible political impact that is the toppling of the whole regime. With the main goal of the revolution accomplished, temporary spatial impacts disappeared; however, some lasting tangible spatial impacts could still be detected. Such impacts vary in levels, from the emergence of new functions in some urban squares, to a negative impact that is agricultural land run in most of the Egyptian governorates. Moreover, further spatial impacts on the national levels are expected to take place in terms of the changing ideologies towards a comprehensive urbanization of more Egyptian desert lands to expand away from the Nile Valley and Delta. The expected impacts can also take place on the regional level in terms of requisitioning the housing

¹² <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=357891&> , March 2011.

¹³ http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/april/1/eskan_mini.aspx , April 2011.

and slums problems, with most of urban areas across Egypt. *Such impacts were simply sparked by an act of Social Networking.*

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