

Port Said: A Cosmopolitan Heritage Under Threat

Dalila ElKerdany

Introduction

The origin of Port Said as a city is unique in the Egyptian condition at that time. It was the first city to be planned and constructed on an idle soil. The Suez Canal Company (SCC), mainly French and British, determined the planning concept and the architectural style of the city, which followed the character given to the French colonies, especially in India and Senegal.¹

During its early times and until the mid of the twentieth century, its original planning concept as a *dual city* led to a segregated and classified life style. However, through multiple waves of double directional immigration, especially during and after wars, the city along with its inhabitants' divergence could reconcile. Today, each of the historic quarters reflect certain economic and culture qualities, but a harmonious life manifests itself throughout.

While this paper takes a hypothesis that the city's valuable heritage deserves a World Culture Heritage (WHC) status, it gives a brief account of the following factors that put threat and pressure on heritage:

1. Port Said multiple sociopolitical and economic changes since its inception until today. The social class, who created and maintained the rich quarters and their life quality—namely the cosmopolitan elite either foreigners or high class Egyptians—has left. These were replaced by other groups of Egyptians, either coming from the city's poorer quarters or from near by towns and villages.

¹Marie-Laure Crosnier-Leconte, *Historire, Architectures: 5–67. In Port Said, Architectures of the XIXe-XXe siecles*. Institute Francais d'archeologie oriantale, Bibliotheque Generale 26, (Le Caire: 2006).

D. ElKerdany (✉)
Faculty of Engineering, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt
e-mail: dalila.elkerdany@gmail.com

2. Together with the geographical limitation and the scarce land extensions, the growing population affected the real estate value. This has put immense pressure on the heritage buildings with low financial returns.

The author believes that Port Said, with its major geographical, economic, political, historical significance, and heritage value deserves a World Culture Heritage status. However, within this publication, Prof. Inken Baller, deals with this topic in another contribution, titled: Strategies for the Preservation of Port Said as World heritage site. The question would be: Would a WHC status contribute to safeguarding its heritage in addition to providing the city with a much needed new economic activities? And who would be responsible in preparing the file to be presented to UNESCO? Who would be the stakeholders responsible for its management and what would be the management process?

Port Said Planning Concept

A Dual City

Planning Port Said as a dual city followed a segregation concept that was decided by the foreign rule of Egypt then, and was manifested in its master planning. Consequently, directly and indirectly the inhabitants' lives were influenced in all their aspects: physical, cultural, social, economic, and religious.

This segregation concept, with no doubt, was undetected and inconspicuous powerful method of management and control. As known in the literature on colonization, these types of methods were central for enforcing power and foreign policies.²

The city master plan was conducted on three levels, these are planning, urban, and architecture.

Throughout the planning of the city, one notices two concepts characterized by amputation, exclusion, and segregation.

On the city's external level the original plan did not allow for free easy access to and from Port Said and the rest of the country. The foreign government almost amputated the city from the rest of Egypt by not incorporating a major road to link Port Said with the rest of the state. The present access road and railway were constructed at a later date, about 1936. On another way, this artery even contributed to the inner city division by connecting with the Mohamed Aly Street, which is the dividing road between the *Arab* (Natives) and *Afrang* (colloquial *Arabic* meaning Foreigners) quarters.³ The city was like an island with no bridges or possible links

²Semus Deane, "Introduction", in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, (The University of Minnesota Press, 1990) pp. 3–22.

³*Arab* and *Afrang* are the traditional popular names that refer to the old parts of the city. They mean the native and foreign consequently. Still used by the public until today.



Fig. 1 Port Said Map 1936 showing the city maturing to its main three quarters, private archive Dalila El Kerdany

to the mainland, except through the Suez Canal to the East, the Mediterranean Sea to the West, and the Menzalah Lake to the South (Fig. 1).

Internally the city was clearly segregated into two main quarters—the *Arab* for the locals who are either directly affiliated to the Suez Canal Company (SCC) or working in the general services of the city, and the *Afrang* for the foreigners, and the few upper class Egyptians working for/with the SCC.

This segregation suggests the planning intention found in similar colonial cities that is defining the oppression relationship between natives and imperialism powers.⁴ The Arab was to be planned into compartmented blocks with highly systemic, almost sterile environment, where the spaces could barely accommodate or

⁴Edward Said, “Yeats and Decolonization, in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, (The University of Minnesota Press, 1990) p. 82.

encourage social interaction and cultural expression. A sharp contrast lied on the other side of Mohamed Aly St., where governing offices and higher class quarter, characterized by rich buildings and houses on spacious plots through wide boulevards and greenery.

The Arab

The *Arab* quarter was originally the area where the workers who came from different parts of Egypt, mainly south, barracked while digging the Suez Canal. Later on, it was decided by the SCC to be the neighborhood for the natives who stayed after construction work of the canal was accomplished. They mainly worked in the lower ladder of labor, like services, manual work, and small merchandise, especially *bambouties* trading goods with passing ships. However, the *Bambouty* character was often used as a cartoon to symbolize the Port Said inhabitant, with all its positive and negative components and character.⁵ The *Arab* was planned according to a simple gridiron system with relatively small building plots. The area lacked any open space, *sahat* or squares for gathering or practicing popular activities. The grid distinguished between two road widths, ten meters for the main roads, and three meters for the secondary service *harats*. The main roads are flanked with wooden arcades, *bawaki*, while the narrow are considered back or service streets. The main streets are named after Arab and Egyptian towns or heroes.⁶ This act of naming could be interpreted as an attempt at incorporating cultural identity and patriotic aspects into the sector.

Although there were two mosques in Port Said at the time, they were located in the *Arab* fringes with the *Afrang*. This leads to the assumption that the urban morphology in the *Arab* was intended to be more sterile and discouraging of the practice of religious and cultural practices. Despite the urban space constraints, the inhabitants' colorful social dispositions were difficult to suppress and the *Arab* quarter was far more lively and throbbing. Local inhabitants utilized whatever channels they had to express their identities, regardless of their appropriateness, through cultural and religious ceremonies and political stands. During oppressive times, people found a way to demonstrate through interesting and inspiring performances. These were and still held as ways for concealed political demonstration.

The streets were always crowded with shoppers, peddlers, and passers by (Fig. 2). Although, the *Bawaki* were meant to protect pedestrians from sunrays, heat, and/or rain; streets were used by mélange of bicycles, cars, peddlers, and shoppers. As in most Islamic typical traditional quarters, commerce and residential

⁵The *Bambouty* is a characteristic merchant who has a special traditional marine custom and a small felouka (boat). He paddles with his boat into the canal and trades small goods with the passing by larger ships.

⁶Philippe Arnaud, *Les Villes du Canal De Suez*. (le Caire: CEDEJ, 1989) pp. 14–16.



Fig. 2 Local life style in a commerce St. in Arab quarter (mid twentieth century, date un-known post card, private archive Dalila El Kerdany)

activities were mixed, however segregated on the different levels of buildings. The ground floors open to the streets with shops, while the upper floors were residential. The main streets were colorful with all kinds of goods. Usually each street or a portion is specialized in a certain commodity.

Sterile systematic planning, eventually could not suppress the inhabitants' freedom of cultural expression. However, in several occasions, self-identity exploded into revolt and hatred.

The Afrang

The *Afrang* was mainly inhabited by foreigners and few high collar Egyptians, working for the SCC, or large trade corporations. Although the *Afrang* was planned according to an iron grid system, radial main roads that lead to squares make it seem more complex. The building plots were distinctly larger than those in the *Arab*, giving a sense of spaciousness. A different quality of life is apparent in its urban planning, where one notices multiple opportunities for recreation, social gathering, and cultural expressions. This is witnessed in the presence of large boulevards with trees and arcades, public gardens, and sporting clubs. Main streets are named after Egyptian rulers, and some important foreign figures like: King Fouad, De Lesseps, the founder of the Suez Canal execution plan; and Empress



Fig. 3 Street Café European Style, Eastern Exchange Hotel Terrace (mid twentieth century, date un-known post card, private archive Dalila El Kerdany)

Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, who was a friend of Khedive Ismael and was invited to the canal inauguration.

The urban environment created in the *Afrang* was far more inviting and humanistic, accommodating cultural activities and gatherings as well as religious practice. Each Christian faith had its own beautifully designed and erected monumental church. The first large mosque in the *Afrang* was built at a later date, after the patriotic rejection of this religiously biased quarter began to surface.

Life style in the *Afrang* was more European and cosmopolitan in character. Residential streets were quite and lined with trees. Shopping streets were with arcades; coffee shops had extensions to the pavements (Fig. 3).

Port Fouad

Port Fouad was planned at a later date on the Eastern side of the Canal (Fig. 4). It was needed to plan workshops and housing for the SCC employees. This neighborhood has wider streets, and more green areas. Two kinds of housing with different morphologies were planned; the engineers or high rank employees, and the workers quarters. The high rank employees had a garden city like housing with large villas adorned with private vast gardens. Between the houses there is a private park for the mingling of the neighborhood children. As for the workers, the houses were much smaller with courtyards or small intimate gardens. Both kinds of



Fig. 4 Port Fouad from the air, showing Tribunal Court and SCC workers courtyard houses (Photo Waleed Montaser 2010)

housing carried a humane and lovely architecture with simple ornaments and details.

In general, the architecture in Port Said is of a highly hybrid nature, be it that of the *Arab*, *Afrang*, *Port Fouad*, or the SCC buildings. The design seems to retain European influence in the general morphology; balance and symmetry are characteristics observed throughout the masses and plans. This morphology is screened accordingly and the detailing and façade treatments vary relative to the location—*Arab* or *Afrang*—and the projected users. Its almost as if the buildings wear an outer skin with oriental face or filter (Fig. 5). This outside skin defiantly gives the city its special character and charm; it helps in cooling the walls and interiors; in addition it meets privacy preferences of the local users, wither in the *Arab* or in the few located in the *Afrang*. However, most elevations retain their European faces in the *Afrang* quarter. Later on, this outer skin constituted a medium for evolving cultural expression and changes were made whenever possible.

In the *Arab*, attempts were made to provide for more privacy, with the use of *mushrabeya*-like lattices, which provided the flexibility of exposure or enclosure with varying degrees (Fig. 6). The detailing itself, although superficial, has clear graphic roots in the Turkish and Mediterranean cultures, which seem to be synonymous to that of Egypt in the eyes of the foreign planners.

This was not the case in most of the *Afrang* buildings, where open space and greenery were allowed to infiltrate the built mass. The architecture told the colonial story; neoclassic style, neo Greco–Roman style, neo Byzantine, neo Gothic, neo



Fig. 5 Shaftsbury building, side street Façade wooden balconies with simple, yet delightful design (Photo Dalila El Kerdany 2007)

Rococo, ... are just some examples which are spread all over the *Afrang* architecture.

The area was pleasant and airy yet lacked the colloquial vitality of indigenous Egyptian urban areas. However, the wooden Mediterranean and Turkish buildings, similar to the buildings in the *Arab*, which were scattered around the city, mainly along the canal waterfront, dominated the character of the city in a beautifully unifying mode. They were more delicate in ornamentation, and open to the street



Fig. 6 Building in the Arab quarter, Inhabitants added extra features similar to Ottoman mashrabeyas for privacy and shade (Photo Dalila El Kerdany 2007)

than their counterparts. This might be due to the difference in the economic level and social value system of their inhabitants that is more open.

As witnessed in other cities of Egypt, the neoclassical style itself is usually used in the aid of dominance over, and control of cities.



Fig. 7 Suez Canal Administration Historical Headquarter, a symbol for Port Said and the Suez Canal (Photo Dalila El Kerdany 1996)

The style, although detailed with pseudo-Egyptian or Islamic elements; utilized masses of monumental scale, with obvious balance and symmetry. This is especially clear in the administrative buildings, for example: SCC head quarters, port workshops, the Post Office, the Police Station by port, among others demonstrated a strong sense of sovereignty, government, and control (Fig. 7). This is in addition to the tribunal court building, and some commercial buildings like department stores, and corporate covered markets (Fig. 8). This paper assumes that the oriental and pseudo Islamic ornamentation decorating some governmental buildings was deliberately done to make it more appealing to the natives in a style that is similar to what Janet Abu Lughod calls “colonial traditionalism”.⁷

Although the urban atmosphere and level of greenery are the same in all different types of SCC employees housing, they maintain an obvious classification from their very architectural styles. The European single-family houses and multistory buildings are for the high level employees who were mainly foreigners. The semi-attached courtyard houses with their pseudo-Moorish style were for the lower rank workers of the company.

According to Ilbert, and Volait, the colonial style was a continuation or an echo of the national movement that took place in the late nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Both movements borrowed Islamic or Arabic elements, like stalactites on

⁷Janet Abu Lughod, “Creating One’s Future from One’s Past: Nondefensively,” TDSR (Volume VII no. 1, 1995), pp. 7–11.



Fig. 8 Covered Vegetable market *bazaar*, a prototype that was repeated in each quarter. It dated back to the mid twentieth century (Photo Dalila El Kerdany 1996)

the corners, borders around windows, and crenellation along rooftops, balconies enclosed with wood, minarets, and Arabic decorative motifs among other elements. The National movement in architecture that started mainly in Cairo was the material manifestation of the values of one social class: a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, essentially Egyptians, these people “wanted to be noticed” through this style, which was an expression of social change, a slow collective reappropriation that parallels a political movement of Egyptian renaissance. It is precisely the depth of this movement that has contributed to certain forms of continuity.⁸

The hypothesis here is that the colonial style in its essence was an attempt to flirt with the national sentiments of the intellectual elite and the bourgeoisie. These individuals, who led the nationalist struggle were partly formed, and to some degree

⁸Robert Ilbert, and Mercedes Volait, “Neo-Arabic Renaissance in Egypt,” *Mimar Architecture in Development*, (13-1984) pp. 26–34.

produced, by the colonial power. Indeed, dominating the national leaders was a classic method to dissimilate ideas and achieve a more efficient colonization.⁹

However, the covered marketplace, and some industrial workshops designed like *wekalas* were among the few attempts made to accommodate local Islamic morphologies. Although an attribute to a certain level of social awareness, the morphology of the marketplace itself and its urban relations were not quite appropriate. It was received as an attempt at controlling and formalizing one of the few social informal interactions allowed. Eventually it was abandoned and the colloquial street peddlers and sidewalk shops, indigenous to the popular nature of Egyptians, returned.

Outbursts of Disputes in Urban Life

The oppressive planning and sterile morphology of the *Arab* did not prevent the populace from practicing political demonstrations and acts of aggression. There is a tradition in Port Said, which probably started during World War I, carried out to this day by its inhabitants. It involves the maiming, hanging, and burning of life-size mock up of foreign individuals who embody certain symbols of hatred to the Port Said People. This mock execution is accompanied by folkloric ballads and chants, voicing the local inhabitants' contempt in words and music. These mainly took place during *Sham El Nessim*, a spring feast when all Egyptians go out to the gardens regardless of social class, religious affiliation, gender, or age. Until today, this practice is still performed with lots of innovation in choosing characters of tyrants and aggressors (Fig. 9).

Anti colonization feelings were concurrent with those harbored by patriots across the nation, but reached their zenith in Port Said, one of the few residential regions in the country, which was homogeneously governed by the colonial power, and where face-to-face confrontation was an everyday occurrence and a way of life. These emotions were permitted to be fully manifested after Nasser's 1952 revolution. The single most symbolic manifestation of this hatred is the demolition and obliteration of the De Lesseps statue, which was placed by the SCC in the visual vista of the canal for all those approaching to meet.

To the patriots and the populace, De Lesseps was and still is a symbol of colonial exploitation and suppression, in spite of the fact that he was the engineer who devoted himself to reviving the project of linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. The reason was that it is believed that he imposed conditions upon Khedive Said during the Suez Canal negotiations, with obvious intent to control aspects with scope far greater than the mere physical digging of the canal. The first condition had to do with the SCC ownership of land. The Second, however, had to do with the

⁹Ivan Illich, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the popular Mind*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), and: *Shadow Work*, (Boston: M. Boyars, 1981).



Fig. 9 Burning figures in effigy (Photo Waleed Montaser 2011)

Egyptian government's provision of labor. The workers were supplied by the system of the *corvee* (forced labor) in an obligatory fashion similar to that of slavery. They were paid minimal wages, and provides with inhuman and almost unbearable living conditions. The images of young strong *fellaheen* (Arabic for peasants), withering with fatigue and suffering numerous epidemics, is an image which grew and fed upon the blood of those unfortunate enough to die, to haunt and torment those who survived, to this very day.¹⁰

In 1956, Nasser's act of nationalizing the Suez Canal fired the imagination of the nation, and filled it with pride. Few events have had such far-reaching consequences. In an act of retaliation, the cheering crowd had demolished the last icon of colonialism in Egypt; the populace took down the De Lesseps statue in an event of exaltation¹¹ (Fig. 10).

Many attempts have been made by the French government to have the statue replaced, but to this day the inhabitants, as well as the revolution government, maintain a refusing stand.¹²

¹⁰*Al ahram Weekly*, (Cairo, 25–31 July 1996).

¹¹Mohamed H. Heikal, *Gutting the Lion's Tail: Suze through Egyptian Eyes*, (London: Andre Deutsh Limited, 1986).

¹²A proposal was given by the authors' office jointly with the De Lessepse' Friends a French organization in 1996, to the local governor in order to put back the statue to its original position and add another monument that tells the story of the suffering Egyptians during digging the canal and defending it against colonialism. The project was rejected.



Fig. 10 Base remains bare without the De Linceps Statue until today, in spite of the efforts exerted by the French to convince the Egyptian Government to put it back. Memory of domination and unjust conditions for Egyptians digging the Canal is still existing within the common mind of the inhabitants (Photo Dalila El Kerdany 1998)

Waves of Immigration

From reviewing the physical attributes, life, and social manifestations of the city, one can see clearly the concept of planning the dual city that was sharply created since the beginning of its existence. The city had passed through at least 4 wars since its initiation, which were accompanied with waves of change in its demographic, sociocultural, political, and economic characteristics.

The first wave came after WWI, when some Egyptian families capitalized enough wealth to afford moving to the *Afrang*, without abandoning their roots in the *Arab*. They were few and the mood of segregation and unseen barriers maintained.

The second wave was after the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company in 1956 to become purely Egyptian owned and operated. Most foreigners connected with the SCC returned back to their home country. The few foreigners stayed were mostly Greeks and Italians who owned and/or worked in services especially hotels, restaurants, clubs, and bars. The act of exploding and turning down the De Lesseps statue scared the Brits and the French. Naturally, new rising bourgeoisie connected or allying with Nasser's revolution quickly occupied the vacant businesses and buildings.

The Third wave of immigration came with the 5 days war in 1967, when the city was completely evacuated from its inhabitants. Old capitalist Egyptian families immigrated mainly to Cairo or Alexandria, comfortably settled, and mostly did not return back. However, some families maintained their homes as second or weekend houses that were mainly used during the summer or for short trips. The less fortunate were helped by the government to find refuge in near by cities and villages. Those were to return, in addition to other adventurers, after the war of 1973 and the open door policy in 1975. Port Said was declared a free zone, which invited activities of smuggling, illegal trades, and consequently fast wealth.¹³

Today, with an overwhelming Egyptian Muslim majority, sharp political conflicts had softened, and many social stratifications are reconciled. However, memories of segregation, patriotic anti colonization sentiments, and hatred for foreign hegemony are embedded deeply in the subconscious of original inhabitants, which occasionally bursts whenever triggered.

Since most keepers of city traditions, culture and heritage, whether foreigners, middle and/or upper class Egyptians, had already dispersed; the special cosmopolitan culture of the city has lost its strongest allies. Tangible heritage of the urban tissue and the building stock suffered the most. The new capitalist class neither has much appreciation of heritage, nor the imagination to find suitable ways for conservation and rehabilitation. The rocketing value of land, which is coupled with flourishing real state investments, is thriving at the expense of demolishing

¹³Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction. Advisory committee for reconstruction & United Nations Development Program, *Master Plan for Port Said, Arab Republic of Egypt: VI Planning and Policy* (a non—published report, Cairo, March 1976).

large amount of valuable buildings in central areas. These are replaced by ugly commercial high rises.

As Suha Ozkan had rightly put:

Architectural idioms can only be preserved when corresponding social, economic, and cultural activities are sustained and developed.¹⁴

Continuity and Discontinuity in City Quality

Naturally, certain permanence is noticed in the continuity of the urban fabric of the traditional quarters; *Afrang*, *Arab*, and Port Foad. Local building codes pertain to some urban and architectural elements; such as: the colonnades *bawaki*. However, these keep changing in dimensions, form, and style.

Discontinuity and change are more noticeable and visible, conspicuous in their divergence. The *Arab* has become from the previous marginal and subordinate to the present focal and pivotal in trade and commerce due to its geographical, economic, and social importance.

After liberation in 1954, the architectural trends of the city went through three phases. The first (1950s and 1960s) was an attempt to be modern, international, and contemporary. The second (mid 1970s to late 1980s) was searching for Islamic and/or Arabic character through the superficial borrowing of archaic elements either from the colonial style itself, or from traditional periods. This period is characterized by scattered arches and obscured *mushrebeyas* throughout the facades of the city. The third (2000 until today) is one that seeks maximum densification and exploitation of the land that often comes at the expense of heritage. Valuable buildings would be demolished and lost, hence replaced by disfigured and unharmonious new massive constructions.

However, a movement that was lead by experts and scholars of architecture and urbanism started calling at the save guarding of the nation's nineteenth and early twentieth century urban heritage. It all started after 1992 big earthquake and the threat it posed for losing many of these buildings.¹⁵ A ministerial decree followed forbidding the demolition of such buildings and calling for their restoration. Then, the movement succeeded to urge the founding of the current laws (No. 144/year 2006 and No. 119/year 2008), which determine the safe guard and forbids demolition, change and/or additions to any listed or registered building.

¹⁴Suha Ozkan, "Cycles of Sustenance in Traditional Architecture," *TDRS VII no. 1*, (Berkeley: Fall, 1995) pp. 40–46.

¹⁵Galila El Kadi and Dalila El Kerdany, *Belle-epoque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business Destrict*, in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Face in New Globalized Midle East*, edited by: Diane Singerman and Paul Amar. AUC Press (Cairo 2006) (345–375).

Nevertheless, avaricious developers, contractors, and building owners seek illusive and sometimes illegal methods to destroy heritage buildings. High-rise buildings, in mostly poor esthetic qualities; either replace, overwhelm, or hide monuments and beautiful buildings.

Should these modes of change continue, Port Said will certainly lose its identity and character as a unique case among Egyptian architecture and town planning.

Conclusion

Although anti colonial sentiment that still exists in the subconscious of Port Said citizens might call for erasing testimonies of the oppressed past, they are so much proud of their city, its special life quality, its urban character, and its unique architecture styles. In many occasions they demonstrate their affection and attachment to it. Most common people share appreciating and cherishing their city; because they find it environmentally friendly, visually harmonious, and unique in life style among other Egyptian cities. In many incidents, they are reaffirming the necessity of its conservation and safeguarding. Past outbursts and disputes that lead to the demolition of the De Lecipse statue are certainly something to remember, but not a position to maintain especially after the nationalization, Arabization, and Islamization most aspects of city life.

On the other hand, current heritage protecting laws stand short to the economic and business pressures. These laws need to be strengthened with executive applications. After about 9 years since the law 144/year 2006 was declared, a revision is needed in order to find practical amendments and/or empowering rules.

Although current civil society and parallel initiatives play an important role in raising awareness, these groups need to be empowered, institutionalized, and enabled to achieve concrete sustainable results (Fig. 11).

Governmental bodies are exerting efforts in forbidding heritage building demolitions, and giving permissions for restoration and/or rehabilitation. However, there should be an independent formation of a specialized institution for the safeguard of city heritage; not only its physical tangible side, but also its intangible qualities, including the life quality and the arts.

Heritage economy is an important course of research and action. As business, logistic functions, and housing threatens the heritage qualities of the city center. The new national project of the Suez Canal Zone Development will certainly put an immense pressure on the existed cities and towns until future planned expansions would be realized.

Heritage management of the historic quarters needs a practical structure that should be composed of the following bodies: an independent heritage council or advisory board, an executive authority, planning consultations bureau, and heritage fund. Each should have its legislative function, while the executive authority should act as the synchronize body between the different organs.



Fig. 11 Ala adimah “As old as it is” initiative organizes heritage awareness events since 2012 (ala adimoh initiative 2014 Photo Waleed Montaser)

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