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Informal Areas and Cairo's Silent Urban Revolution

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The vast unplanned neighborhoods of Egypt's capital have always had a complex relationship with the government.

by Mimi Kirk

A 2009 map published by an Egyptian-German NGO shows a Cairo that official maps do not. Huge swathes of the city, mainly on its immediate outskirts, are denoted in a stark red color. These scarlet areas represent Cairo's *ashwa'iyyat*, or informal areas, which often feature concrete apartment buildings with red brick infill and narrow, dusty streets. Such neighborhoods house approximately 70 percent of Cairenes. Built illegally, often on agricultural land, they are unrecognized by the state and do not receive the services that formally recognized areas do, such as public schools and hospitals.

Informal areas have been providing affordable housing for residents of Cairo for decades. Occupants hail from both poor and more well-to-do backgrounds, depending on the neighborhood. The Egyptian government has both tolerated and targeted the areas, either allowing residents to make improvements to the spaces out of their own pockets or cracking down on building and other activities, such as street vending. Crackdowns were particularly common when certain neighborhoods, such as Imbaba, became known for being populated by Islamists.

Since the 2011 uprising, due to less government supervision, building in these areas has risen dramatically. Experts such as urbanist David Sims estimate a two to threefold increase in informal construction.

But recently Egypt's military-backed interim government has begun to make noises about regaining a larger role in these areas—though through improvements rather than force. In January, shortly before the country's new constitution was put to referendum, the government announced its intention to inject 350 million Egyptian pounds (about $50 million) into 30 informal areas in the Cairo and Giza governorates for projects like road paving. And the new constitution
addresses informal areas for the first time in Egypt's history, mandating that the state provide "infrastructure and facilities and improve quality of life and public health" in them. ="#.uuwxkax0ab0">

"Does this mean that the government will follow these new policies?" asks Kareem Ibrahim, one of the project leaders of Tadamun, an initiative that encourages Cairenes to take an active role in claiming their rights to the city. "We won't know it until we see it."

Ibrahim's skepticism is well-founded. Aside from either ignoring or suppressing activities in these areas, governmental policies for the past forty years have focused on relocating residents from these more central neighborhoods to fringe areas outside the city. The strategy particularly took off with President Anwar Sadat, who initiated his *infitah*, or "open door," policy in the 1970s. Sadat's economic plan, which aimed to align

Egypt with global capitalism, opened the country to foreign capital and private sector development—and sought to move the poorer inhabitants of the central Nile Valley to outer desert locales, creating a quiescent and isolated working class. In contrast, the heart of Cairo, in Sadat's vision, would become a kind of glittering business district.

While Sadat's plans failed, the Mubarak regime—and then the Muslim Brothers—continued the quest. Under Mubarak, housing developments in the desert, called satellite cities, with names like Beverly Hills, Dreamland, and Utopia, proliferated. Crony capitalism as practiced by the state meant that the land was sold cheaply to certain developers—often those who had connections to government elites. The developers made money, but the resulting communities have been too expensive for average citizens. Moreover, there are few jobs in these outlying areas, and residents have to commute back into the city to work; travel to and from work with or without a car adds hours to a workday (and only around 14 percent of Cairenes own a car). ="#.uu0f-avf5uq">

Under Muslim Brother Mohamed Morsi, plans for desert building scarcely diverged from those of Mubarak, though there was some talk of trying to make the cities more independent and self-contained—not simply "dormitory outskirts for the rich."

"Most of these new towns are complete disasters," Sims told me. "The total population [of Cairo] in them is hardly 4 percent." Deen Sharp has also pointed out that when the government has succeeded in forcing residents of informal areas to move to satellite cities, "the victory is often short lived." People soon return to the center.

Many experts feel that the goal post-2011 is to learn from Cairo's informal areas and use those findings to improve urban life. Activists, researchers, and planners have seen the last three years as a rare opportunity to study what informal activities Cairenes engage in when given more freedom to do so, from apartment construction to street vending. "We look at such activities as an extreme version of what informal practices were before the

uprising," says Omar Nagati, co-founder of the urban research studio Cluster in Cairo.

Part of the idea is that within the seeming anarchy of Cairene informality lies a kind of structure that fosters what Sims calls "the heterogeneous elements of urban life." Indeed, despite their lack of services, these neighborhoods often feature coveted elements of city living, such as walkability, ground-floor businesses and workplaces, and a sense of community hard to come by in the sparse desert developments.

Nagati explains that he and his colleagues are "trying to distill out of this seemingly random, chaotic space rules and regulations for planners." Sims also recommends studying the informal dynamic and "trying to replicate it in the formal sector."

Diane Singerman, a professor at American University and, with Ibrahim, a project leader of Tadamun, adds that the only way that informal areas will receive their fair share of services and recognition is if citizens call for them. "The government doesn't decide to be altruistic unless there's a demand," she says. "Some of [Tadamun's goals] are to facilitate access to information and participation in decision-making processes." Singerman points out that weak, executive-driven local governance in Egypt exacerbates the government's autocratic urban planning policies.

But could the new regime be starting to hear the people's demands, with its novel focus on aiding informal areas? Ibrahim notes that officials at public meetings in January "stated that informal areas have been a part of our cities for a long time and that now is the time to recognize them." He mentions another "huge shift" in that the officials also acknowledged that relocation is destructive for the social and economic networks of the neighborhoods, expressing the intention to move residents within the same area if they must be relocated for safety reasons.

Yet Ibrahim says that though these overtures of aid and inclusion sound positive, real change can only come from structural shifts in how resources

such as land are appropriated and distributed in Cairo. "The current Ministry of Housing is following similar plans as under Mubarak and Morsi," he explains. "More housing units in the desert are still planned. Meanwhile, almost 30 percent of existing housing in cities is either vacant or underused, and many other existing housing areas are lacking basic services. The solution is not to build new housing, but to handle existing housing."

And indeed, the structural conditions that led to Egypt's revolution have not changed. The state has remained more or less intact—perhaps more so now with the military-backed government and all its networks back in full swing. But Singerman points out that Cairo finds itself in a "contradictory time." "While people are being arrested and repressed and the media has lost its independence, there are still local initiatives mobilizing to demand urban change," she says. "The revolution made people more aware of these problems that have been ignored for so long."

For Nagati, informal building will continue apace, along with pressure on the government. Like Singerman, he points to continued mobilization. "In the short term, things will seem more orderly and stable, but under the surface they are still bubbling," he says. "After all, this has been 40 years in the making. Informality is the silent revolution."

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