

Cairo's New Normal: Protests Spawn a World of Walls and Barricades

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Egyptian army engineers and soldiers build a third line of concrete blocks outside of the Egyptian presidential palace in Cairo, Dec. 9, 2012

Ramadan Romih, the heavysset manager of the White House Net, an Internet café up the street from the U.S. embassy in Cairo, sat on a chair on the sidewalk outside his shop, [smoking](#) a large tobacco water pipe. He hasn't had many customers recently, he says, because of the high concrete wall blocking the street next to his shop. The wall was built by the Egyptian government this past November to ward off demonstrators from nearby Tahrir Square away from the embassy.

Romih, 41, commutes downtown from a working-class neighborhood near the pyramids. His shop ordinarily depends on foot traffic from the bustling business districts surrounding Tahrir Square, but now because of an elaborate system of walls and barbed-wire roadblocks built by the authorities, the area near the embassy has been cut off from the core of the downtown.

As a result, he said, his business is "at zero." By late afternoon that day his revenue was only 20 Egyptian pounds, or a little over \$3. "People should dig tunnels like they do in Gaza," he said, waving his water-pipe hose at the unsightly wall.

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Two of the storefronts adjacent to White House Net were gutted, Romih said, during recent clashes between demonstrators and police. The burned-out shell of a car still lies upside down in the road in front of the shop. Across the street, men in business suits were hoisting themselves over a tall iron fence in order to get home from work, handing briefcases to one another over the top of the barrier. Armed security men stationed at a checkpoint leading to the embassy looked on.

Because of the government's walls, scenes like this one are the new normal in the upscale neighborhood of Garden City and other areas south of Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the winter 2011 uprising that ended the 30-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. On one recent afternoon, at the same intersection near the embassy I saw a young woman hand a pink plastic carrier containing a fluffy white cat to a man, her husband or fiancé, before hopping over the fence. The two then strolled, arm in arm, cat in tow, in the direction of Tahrir.

With the second anniversary of the uprising now approaching and unrest simmering in the wake of Islamist President [Mohamed Morsi's](#) November 2012 power grab, the walls have become a symbol of the political crisis in Egypt. According to architect and urban planner Omar Nagati, the walls are indicative of the postrevolutionary renegotiation of the "rules of the game between the people and the authorities. The people are setting the terms and the authorities are just responding by building walls."

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The massive policing apparatus set up by Mubarak was temporarily paralyzed by fierce protests during the revolution, but it did not disappear completely. Nor did the grievances that preceded the revolution: poverty, police brutality and a lack of democracy in civic institutions. What has changed is Egyptians' attitude toward authority. The government can no longer prevent protests, even violent ones, resorting instead to physically separating the protesters now perpetually encamped in Tahrir Square from the government installations and embassies to the south.

"The walls are a total evasion of dealing with the issues," says Mohamed Elshahed, a doctoral candidate at New York University who studies urban planning in Cairo. "There was a stronger security apparatus [under Mubarak] that quieted things before they turned into a protest. Now since protests are just a matter of life — they just happen — the walls seem to be the solution for the moment."

There is nothing new about the use of such obstructive tactics by governments to contain insurrection. As Elshahed points out, the French authorities built walls in Algiers to stifle the anticolonial movement there in the 1950s. Israel's separation barrier runs through the length of the West Bank, carving through East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other cities. The [U.S. military](#) divided Baghdad with concrete blast walls. Egypt's own government, Elshahed observes, began using perimeter walls and metal barricades to protect government buildings from outbursts of public anger in the late 1970s, caused in part by then President Anwar Sadat's unpopular economic reforms.

The 2011 uprising brought a new intensity to the struggle over public space in Egypt. The military and security forces began building walls, consisting of large concrete cubes reinforced with metal straps, across streets leading to the widely hated Interior Ministry and the headquarters of the security forces, after five days of street battles in November 2011. A few of those walls came down over the subsequent months, some unilaterally dismantled by the government, some torn down by demonstrators using ropes.

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But before long, new rounds of protest prompted the authorities to build new walls, including one of the walls near the U.S. embassy, built during the demonstrations over an anti-Islamic YouTube clip on Sept. 11 last year. In November 2012, Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated President Morsi issued a set of decrees giving himself sweeping powers, triggering some of the largest demonstrations since the uprising against Mubarak. Amid ongoing fighting between riot police and stone-throwing demonstrators, the antigovernment forces re-established a protest camp in Tahrir Square and the security forces rebuilt the wall across Qasr al-Aini Street, the main boulevard leading south from the city center. The physical separation between the revolutionary camp in Tahrir and a sort of Green Zone around government buildings was now complete.

As a part of an ever evolving geography of protest, anti–Muslim Brotherhood demonstrators then shifted their focus from Tahrir Square to the presidential palace, inherited by Morsi from Mubarak, in the suburban neighborhood of Heliopolis. The government responded by building yet another wall outside the palace, this one cutting across a four-lane road and a set of railroad tracks, with one narrow gap for cars to trickle through.

The cumulative result of all this construction has been the mangling of a portion of Cairo's urban landscape. Cairo's notoriously snarled traffic has been rerouted to avoid the whole vicinity of Tahrir Square, causing even more gridlock. In quieter times, the walk from the elite Garden City neighborhood (home to the U.S., British and other embassies) to Tahrir was a five-minute stroll along Qasr al-Aini Street. Now that same journey is as much as a mile-long trek, winding around walls, barbed-wire roadblocks, armored security trucks and burned-out cars.

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In stark contrast to the rest of Cairo's downtown, which remains vibrant long into the night, the streets near the Interior Ministry and the parliament building are deserted by dusk, except for the bored-looking, black-clad troops of the Central Security Forces, their riot shields, helmets, and batons stacked in the middle of a street. As Elshahed of New York University puts it, "It feels completely like a military garrison town."

Still, a number of pedestrians puzzling over the strangled routes in and out of Garden City approached the obstacles with a bit of Zen. For all their appearance of permanence, the walls and the political crisis they represent simply cannot remain indefinitely. Waiting in line to hop the fence near the U.S. embassy on his way home from work last Thursday, mechanical engineer Ahmad Baghat, 24, shrugged. "Sure, the walls are better than the problems," he said, referring euphemistically to the rioting at the embassy, "but they can't stay forever."

Lawyer Khaled Zenhom, who stopped at the Qasr al-Aini wall on his way home from the Saudi consulate, where he was applying for a visa, was even more expansive. "The barriers don't bother us," he said. "All of Egypt is full of doors."