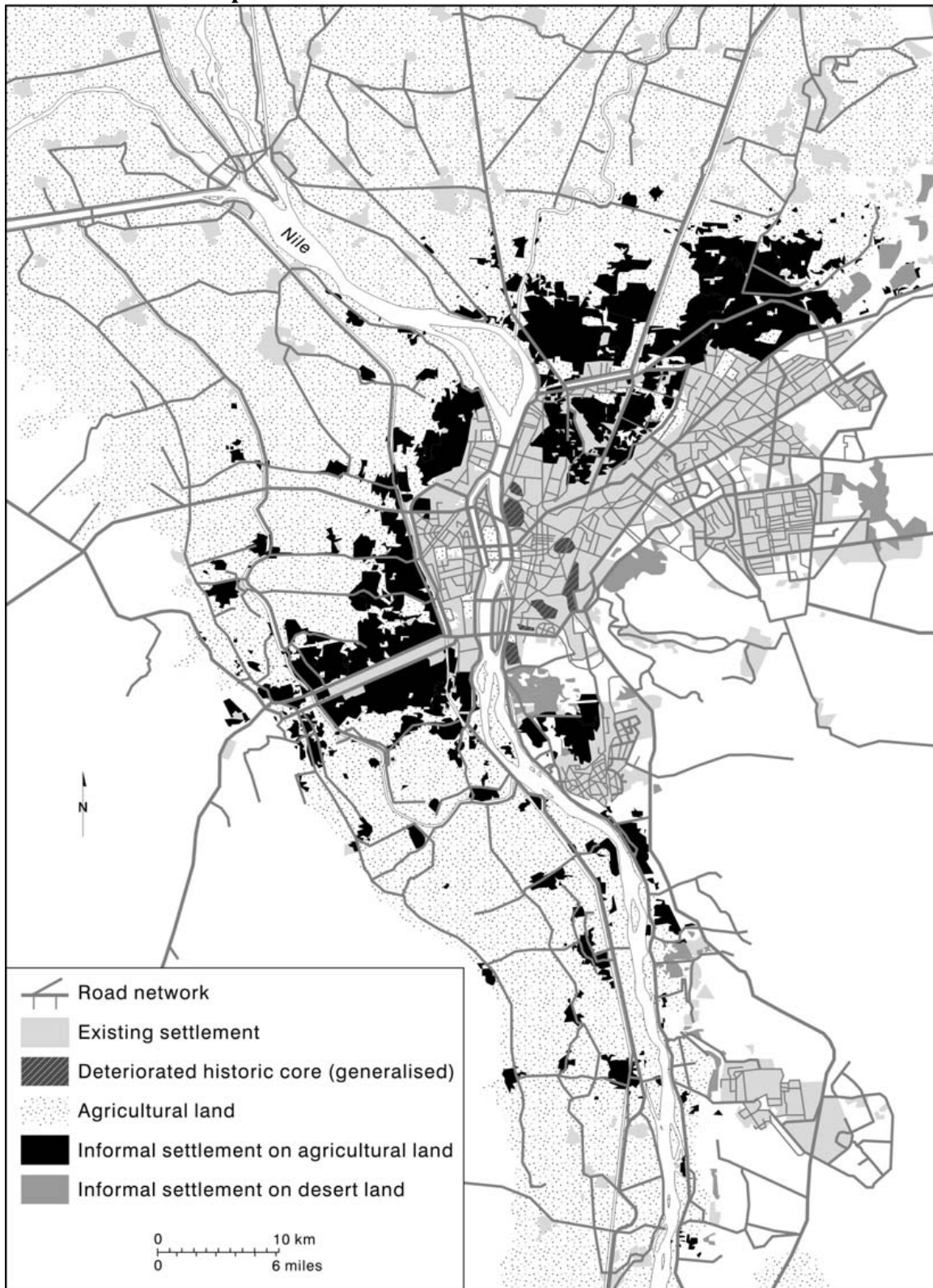


**Informal Housing in Cairo:  
Are *Ashwa'iyat* Really the Problem?**

**Shawn O'Donnell**

### A map of the informal settlements of Greater Cairo



Source: Sims (2003, p.5)

Informal settlements are widely viewed as a contemporary urban ‘problem’ in the Global South. Moreover, their production and proliferation, a widespread global phenomenon, has become *the* urban ‘problem’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be solved. Few recognize informal settlements as producing housing solutions for the vast majority of urban residents in the Global South or acknowledge the economic and social contributions, as well as participation, of those who live there. Furthermore, those who live in informal settlements, areas blamed for producing social ills, are commonly viewed as marginal to mainstream society and as unproductive citizens in a modern city.

Cairo is one city that has experienced tremendous urbanization in the form of informal settlements, labeled *ashwa’iyyat*; <sup>1</sup> over half of the city’s residents live in informal areas (70%).<sup>2</sup> Similar to informal settlements in other cities, the *ashwa’iyyat* in Cairo are commonly viewed by the state and non-settlement residents as a problem; in their view, these settlements produce social ills and violate the modern, cosmopolitan image they hold for Cairo.

Problems are solved based on how they are framed. Employing a new perception of informal housing, which relies on particular understandings of the ‘city,’ urbanization, and what it means to be ‘modern’ and ‘cosmopolitan,’ the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ashwa’iyyat* is the Arabic word used in Egypt for informal housing settlements or slums. It literally means ‘random’ or ‘haphazard.’ The Egyptian government uses the terms *aswha’iyyat*, informal settlements/areas, and slums interchangeably, and U.N. Habitat uses slums. While slum usually has the connotation of indecent housing or lack of infrastructure and basic services, informal usually refers to the extra-legality of the home due to lack of building permits or security of tenure. This lack of formality may be accompanied by a denial of service delivery. For the purpose of this paper, the terms *ashwa’iyyat*, informal settlements/areas, and slums will be used interchangeably to discuss housing within Cairo commonly identified as illegal. I will go into greater discussion of the use and meaning of the word *ashwa’iyyat* below.

<sup>2</sup> Regina Kipper, “Cairo: A Broader View,” in Regina Kipper and Marton Fischer, eds., *Cairo’s Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials*, (Portugal: Norprint SA, 2009), 15.

commonly identified 'problem' of urban informality is found not to be a problem in it of itself. The problem is actually one of value, recognition, and rights of the residents of informal settlements. The reconceptualization of these universal ideas affords a view of the *ashwa'iyyat* as a solution to a problem.

In this paper I will explore the complexities of the process of informal housing development in Cairo and the role of the state in its production. This exploration seeks to understand the spatial processes of urbanization and transformation that have taken place within Cairo and produced by its residents, yet under conditions not of their choosing. My analysis will consider the structural dimensions of the housing system as designed by the Egyptian state within which individuals have produced their own housing solutions which are not recognized by the formal, legal system and defined as a 'problem.'

This paper will be organized into four sections: first, an overview of the predominant themes in the literature covering both the topic of informal settlements and the role of the state in informal housing production, structured to communicate the complexity of the issue; second, an examination of how informal settlements first began and spread throughout Cairo and the role of the state in this process; third, the proposal of a new lens through which the issue of informal housing can be approached; finally, a concluding discussion on future possibilities for the newly defined problem.

### **Urbanization & Slums**

Over the course of the twentieth century, the world's population grew rapidly

from 1.65 billion to 6 billion.<sup>3</sup> This population boom has been accompanied by a noticeable increase in urbanization. The world's urban population increased from 220 million to 2.8 billion people over the last century, with growth expected to continue at a rapid rate in the twenty first century, particularly in the developing world.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, for the first time in history, 3.3 billion people, more than half of the world's population, were living in urban areas.<sup>5</sup> This trend is expected to continue with cities, arguably, accounting for nearly all population growth, which is expected to peak at 10 billion in 2050.<sup>6</sup> The majority of future population growth and urbanization will take place in the Global South; in 2030 less than 20% of the world's urban residents will reside in cities outside of those in the developing world.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, this dramatic increase in urbanization has created a huge demand in cities for housing.

The formal housing markets in cities of the developing world have not been the source of homes for the growing urban population. In the Global South the majority of recent urbanization has been in the form of slum growth.<sup>8</sup> Of those who live in the developing world, four out of ten inhabitants live in informal areas.<sup>9</sup> The International Labor Organization estimates that formal housing markets only supply

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<sup>3</sup> U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "The World at Six Billion." 12 October 1999. (ESA/P/WP.154), 1. <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/sixbillion/sixbilpart1.pdf> (accessed March, 18, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> U.N. Population Fund, "State of World Population 2007." 2007. Introduction. <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/introduction.html> (accessed March 18, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>7</sup> U.N. Population Fund.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, (New York: Verso, 2006), 17.

<sup>9</sup> U.N. Habitat, "Slums of the World: The face of urban poverty in the new millennium?" Nairobi: U.N. Human Settlements Programme, 2003, 54. <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/sixbillion/sixbilpart1.pdf> (accessed March, 18, 2010).

around 20% of new housing stock in the Global South, forcing people to produce housing solutions for themselves.<sup>10</sup> The formal system is unable to house the increasing population due to insufficient housing production or because it is pricing many out of the market. As a result, people are left to develop their own solutions which include, but are not limited to: building on privately owned land without proper permits, squatting on public land, or acquiring land ‘illegally’ at a cheaper price than within the formal market.

As urbanization and slum growth increased, so did the literature discussing the topics. The general discourse frames urban research around “First World ‘models’ and Third World ‘problems.’”<sup>11</sup> Within the Third World, the so-called megacities<sup>12</sup> and their slum growth are framed as ‘challenges’ or global catastrophes that need to be addressed, solved, or managed.<sup>13</sup> The issue of slum growth is posed as a problem instead of as a solution to the housing problems faced by the urban population. Moreover, many have generalized slums as solely housing the urban poor.<sup>14</sup> However, as many other scholars have illustrated, urban slums house a very heterogeneous group of people with varied incomes and labor types.<sup>15</sup> Hall and Pfeiffer attribute the perceived poverty as a result of isolation from global capitalism even though residents of informal areas produce products for global

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<sup>10</sup> Davis, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71:2 (Spring 2005): 147.

<sup>12</sup> According to Jennifer Robinson, as quoted in Roy (147), global cities are “First World command nodes of a global system of informational capitalism, models for the rest of the world,” whereas megacities are primarily located in the Third World and are “big but not powerful.”

<sup>13</sup> Mike Davis and Ananya Roy.

<sup>14</sup> De Soto, Stokes, and Wahba-Harris.

<sup>15</sup> Dorman, Elyachar, and Roy.

markets, as noted by Roy.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as Bayat points out, the formal sector depends on the services and products of the informal market; in essence, the formal reproduces the informal.<sup>17</sup> The binary relationship between the formal and informal labor markets is also articulated between the formal and informal housing sectors.

Yet, the divide between them is not as clear a distinction as some have argued. While Hernando de Soto, Sir Peter Hall, and Ulrich Pfeiffer have claimed that informal housing stands separate from formal housing, other academics, like Ananya Roy, envision a relationship between the two.<sup>18</sup> Hall and Pfeiffer believe the urban poor “built their own city without reference to the whole bureaucratic apparatus of planning and control in the formal city next door.”<sup>19</sup> De Soto, viewing those who live in slums as subject to a legal apartheid in which the poor are unable to trade their assets in the formal system, calls their housing “dead capital.”<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, Roy discusses the difficulties in distinguishing informal from formal housing, where the distinctions are often blurred, and describes how the impermeable lines described by the likes of Hall, Pfeiffer, and de Soto, are actually frequently transversed. Those who work in the formal sector, for example, may live in informal housing. Furthermore, informal housing can quickly become formal and vice versa depending on local laws and practices of inhabitants. Housing can also be a very fluid status, as pointed out by Ahmed Soliman’s description of one type of

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<sup>16</sup> Roy, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Asef Bayat “Slums, Informality, and Politics” interview by the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam, (The Hague, 27 November 2009). <http://www.iss.nl/DevISSues/Interviews/Slums-Informality-and-Politics.-An-interview-with-Professor-Asef-Bayat> (accessed March 15, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Roy, 148.

<sup>19</sup> Hall and Pfeiffer, as referenced by Roy in “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” 148.

<sup>20</sup> Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 16.

informal housing in Cairo as hybrid/exformal. Hybrid/exformal housing generally describes homes that have built additional rooms onto the initial structure without the proper building permits or in violation of the city's building codes. This type of housing is no longer formal, by definition, but it does not violate as many laws as squatter settlements so it is viewed as more socially and politically acceptable.<sup>21</sup>

Others have tried to create a typology or geography of urban slums by classifying slums into categories of 'slums of hope' versus 'slums of despair.'<sup>22</sup> This categorization was further developed to a specific geography with 'slums of despair' in the inner city and 'slums of hope' in the urban fringe areas.<sup>23</sup> This categorization divides slums into areas inhabited by those who have a "psychological response...to indicate their intentions to both better themselves and the probable outcome of such efforts," (i.e. those in slums of hope), and those who don't have such intention or the probable outcome to improve their status, (i.e. those who live in slums of despair).<sup>24</sup> Although many might find this typology a useful way to categorize different slum areas within a city, this kind of totalizing categorization has severe limitations in representative accuracy and only perpetuates false notions of slum areas as inhabited by those who do not contribute to society economically or socially. It obscures the heterogeneous realities of the individuals who populate informal settlement areas and denies their abilities to change their lives.

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<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Soliman, *A Possible Way Out*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Stokes in Richard Harris and Malak Wahba, "The Urban Geography of Low-Income Housing: Cairo Exemplifies a Model," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26:1 (March 2002), 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Charles J. Stokes, "A Theory of Slums," *Land Economics* 38 (August 1962): 189.



Academics and governments have utilized the stark classification of the informal housing sector as completely separate from the formal housing. This framework allows them to claim that slums, so neatly separate from the formal system, are the source of all social ills and areas of 'backward,' marginal citizens who have not embraced modernity. Their view of spatial disorder in the slums is conflated with social disorder.<sup>25</sup> Their modernist view of the city prioritizes the appearance or aesthetic of the city and what it indicates, rather than the social, political, and economic relations that are in fact taking place. There is no recognition of the system and order that have been created by individuals themselves that simply differ from the modern planning system. In this discourse informal areas are "cancers... [that] will destroy the city."<sup>26</sup>

### **The State & Informal Housing**

Although governments globally tend to adopt accusatory language towards urban slums, they are produced and exist within the boundaries of the state. As a result, one must question the role of the state in the development of informal settlement areas. Is informal housing a sign of the state's presence or the state's absence?

Urban informality occurred long before economic liberalization took place in the Third World. Yet some, such as Bayat, claim economic liberalization and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that occurred in the Third World during the 1970s and 1980s at the hands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the

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<sup>25</sup> James Scott, as referenced by Ananya Roy in "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," 150.

<sup>26</sup> Stokes, 188.

World Bank (WB) greatly impacted the approach and scale of the state, including its method of dealing with informal settlements.<sup>27</sup> He argues that economic liberalization and the subsequent expansion of neoliberal economic policies, either through SAPs or otherwise, were processes that led to both integration and social exclusion or informalization.<sup>28</sup> Economic liberalization, or at least its foundational premise, did bring about a shift from the welfare state regimes to states with liberal economic policies. States presumably focused more on opening domestic economic markets and removing regulations, such as in housing and rental markets. While this argument does apply to overarching economic policies of states and the foundational economic theory, the reality sometimes proved to be the contrary, specifically in terms of housing. As Davis points out, state-run programs for housing provision prior to economic liberalization were already limited in nature.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the public housing that was constructed generally ended up housing the middle class rather than the urban poor, contrary to the programs' intent.

Therefore, the requirements imposed by the IMF and WB (or the role of the state as dictated by economic liberalization) should not be seen as having derailed state interventions that would have solved urban informal settlements in the developing world, nor can economic liberalization be proven to have caused an increase in informal housing directly. First, the appearance of informal housing predates the economic policy shifts. Moreover, as governments became subject to

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<sup>27</sup> Asef Bayat, "Politics of the Informals," in Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad, eds., *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, 62.

SAPs and shifted to economic liberalization, the pronounced housing policies of the state simply reinforced much of the housing policy that had already been taking place. Also, as we will see later in the case of Egypt, the period of economic liberalization was actually coupled with increased housing regulations as an attempt to solve the housing problem instead of deregulation.

Economic liberalization did, however, directly result in governments' increased focus on competing in the global economic competition and making their budget allocations according to the global system (i.e. investing in historical monuments to get the greatest economic returns and encouraging developers to build hotels or buildings).<sup>30</sup> Overall government spending was not reduced by economic policy shifts; governments were just spending less on social services. Additionally, the policies of economic liberalization, coupled with the state's failure to supply low-income housing, greatly impacted real estate markets. Land values increased due to incentives largely favoring housing creation for the upper class and the inflow of capital from the liberalization of the economy, pushing both middle and low-income citizens to derive their own informal housing solutions. China was the only country to construct large amounts of adequate housing during the 1980s and 1990s, but even there the number fell short of the needs of the vast number of peasants moving to the cities.<sup>31</sup>

There are two overarching tropes regarding where the state is located in respect to urban slums: either informal housing is a response to the state's inability

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<sup>30</sup> Farha Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 29.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, 62.

to provide for the masses,<sup>32</sup> or it is a product of the state itself.<sup>33</sup> However, the extent to which formality is seen as distinct from informality is subject to question. Hernando de Soto has argued that informal housing is the consequence of the state's inability to provide for the masses. De Soto responds to the poor's exclusion from the formal financial system by advocating for the granting of legal land titles, allowing them to resuscitate their dead capital into recognized, tradable assets. In this thread it is clear that the state is viewed as external and separate from informal housing.

However, the contrarian discourse is one of states' strict regulations that perpetuate the state of urban informality.<sup>34</sup> The state has the power to determine what is and is not formal or informal, as well as to define the categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy.<sup>35</sup> In this portrayal, the state is present in informal housing as the one who defines it as such. Moreover, in many cases, the state is found to encourage informal settlements of a certain type. Government policies have encouraged informal housing that services the upper class: promoting transnational investment in upscale housing, subsidizing expressways, and selling public land at low prices to developers.<sup>36</sup> In situations where the government is trying to reduce inner city density and encourage segregated communities on the urban periphery, the informal subdivisions which turn into gated communities are generally bestowed with premium infrastructure and granted security of tenure, unlike middle and low

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<sup>32</sup> Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path*, (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Roy, Agamben in Roy, and Dorman.

<sup>34</sup> Roy, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Timothy Mitchell, as referenced by Ananya Roy, and Ananya Roy in "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," 149.

income informal housing or squatter settlements, which are verbally condemned.<sup>37</sup>

Occasionally the state is found to be a squatter on state land itself, such as when one state unit is squatting on land owned by another division of the state.<sup>38</sup>

Recent projects conducted by international organizations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), have bypassed states and worked directly with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the issue of urban slums.<sup>39</sup> These organizations perceive the state as an insufficient intermediary and work directly with major NGOs that then provide training to local NGOs as a way to promote, “ ‘empowerment,’ ‘synergy,’ and ‘participatory governance.’ ”<sup>40</sup> Recognition of the state’s role in informal housing, both in its definition and production, makes the circumvention of the states by NGOs seem highly problematic. NGOs can avoid interacting with the state, but the state’s role and power in defining and producing informal housing will persist.

### **Cairo**

Cairo is no exception to the vast urbanization and slum growth that is occurring globally. There are over 100 informal housing communities in Greater Cairo,<sup>41</sup> which are said to house over 70%<sup>42</sup> of the city’s population and comprise 44% of the built area in the city.<sup>43</sup> However, as within any city, the particular ways

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<sup>37</sup> Roy, 149.

<sup>38</sup> Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*, (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Asef Bayat and Eric Denis, “Who is afraid of ashwaiyyat? Urban change and politics in Egypt,” *Environment and Urbanization* 12 (October 2000): 185.

<sup>42</sup> Kipper, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Denis and Séjourné, as referenced in Dominique Harre-Rogers, “Urban Update: Urban Studies in Cairo, Egypt,” *Comparative Urban Studies Project* 8 (April 2006): 2.

in which slum growth has taken place and the government's role in and response to their formation are unique to Cairo. The way in which slums have emerged and the subsequent government responses or lack thereof reflect both the city's and country's cultural specificities. In Latin America, politicization of urban informality was a means to advance interests of the communities. Conversely, the depoliticization of informal housing communities in Cairo has been key for securing housing for the majority of the urban poor and middle class.

Informal housing areas in Cairo are constructed and inhabited by a highly heterogeneous group of individuals. They are spread throughout Greater Cairo and are not located solely particular areas or on the urban fringe. However, despite the heterogeneity of their residents and the dramatic variance in housing quality, all informal communities in Cairo are referred to as *ashwa'iyyat*. *Ashwa'iyyat*, the plural for *ashwa'iyya*, literally means half-hazard.<sup>44</sup> Others have translated the word as 'random' or 'spontaneous.'<sup>45</sup> The term has taken on a pejorative connotation and has become synonymous with slum in UN official or popular language.<sup>46</sup> It evokes images of "black stains" and "*sha'abi*" or "*baladi*" culture.<sup>47</sup> The use of this term to describe all informal housing in Cairo shows the power of language and the images it can connote.

The use of one term, *ashwa'iyyat*, to describe all forms of informal areas in Cairo is highly problematic due to its inability to capture the differences among

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<sup>44</sup> Bayat and Denis, 185.

<sup>45</sup> W.J. Dorman, "Informal Cairo: Between Islamist Insurgency and the Neglectful State?," *Security Dialogue* 40 (August/October 2009): 421.

<sup>46</sup> David Sims, "The case of Cairo, Egypt," *UN-Habitat Global Report on Human Settlements 2003: Slums and Poverty in the City*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Sha'abi* and *baladi* both have connotations of those who are poor and/or of rural origin.

informal housing structures, such as the quality of the building structures and the heterogeneity of their inhabitants. Yet it is a way for the government to frame all of society's ills into specific areas that can be cordoned off and representationally constructed by the state. Its conflation with slums in official documents proves to be an inaccurate description. As many academics will attest, many informal areas within Cairo are far from the common notion of slum, defined as an "area characterized by social and economic isolation, irregular land ownership, and low standard sanitary and environmental conditions."<sup>48</sup> David Sims has segmented *ashwa'iyyat* in Cairo into 4 types: 1) informal settlements on agricultural land, 2) informal settlements on former desert, state land 3) deteriorated historic core, and 4) deteriorated urban pockets. According to Sims' definitions, many contest the use of 'slum' to describe informal settlements on agricultural land.<sup>49</sup> Ahmed Soliman, on the other hand, divides *ashwa'iyyat* into three types: semi-formal, squatting, and hybrid/exformal and then twelve subtypes.<sup>50</sup> What is clear from these various categorizations of the *ashwa'iyyat* is an acknowledgement of the complexity within the *ashwa'iyyat* rather than one broad categorization of all informal housing. Informal areas, or in this case, the *ashwa'iyyat*, do not only house the urban poor, lodge rural migrants, or consist of dilapidated housing with no access to water or waste systems. To the contrary, the *ashwa'iyyat* are highly heterogeneous.

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<sup>48</sup> U.N. Slums of the World, 8

<sup>49</sup> Sims, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed Soliman, "Tilting at Sphinxes," in Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad, eds., *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004), 172.

## **The Egyptian State & The *Ashwa'iyyat***

The presence of the *ashwa'iyyat* has allowed the government to create and produce an internal 'other' it could instrumentalize as an antagonist to the state.<sup>51</sup> The *ashwa'iyyat* came to be understood as "havens for terrorists or a threat to Egypt's physical, moral, and political health," due to the government's discourse.<sup>52</sup> The government presented the *ashwa'iyyat* as 'centers of evil,' a representation that was then reproduced in the unofficial and social discourse.<sup>53</sup> The *ashwa'iyyat* have become popularly perceived as haven areas for terrorists or impediments to Cairo's cosmopolitanization, due to the ruralization of the urban capital. Those who aren't terrorists in the *ashwa'iyyat* are claimed to be backward, rural peasants living in insular communities. This prejudice can be confirmed through news articles and films such as '*Hiya Fawda*' (This is Chaos) and '*Heena Maysara*' (In Better Times) where informal areas are portrayed as chaotic, backward areas populated by *baladi* citizens (i.e. Adel, a thug, and Nahed, a private dancer, in *Heena Maysara* have a child out of wedlock and live in a slum that ends up getting taken over by Islamic fundamentalists) who are not cosmopolitan. This separation between the state or formal, per se, and the *ashwa'iyyat* allows the construction of the internal 'other.'

The state, society, and many academics claim Cairo is a dual city, one that is planned and regulated by the state and the other made up of the *ashwa'iyyat*. Those in the *ashwa'iyyat* are purported to be in opposition to the state. However, others

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<sup>51</sup> Diane Singerman, "The Siege of Imbaba, Egypt's Internal 'Other,' and the Criminalization of Politics," in Diane Singerman, ed., *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*, (New York: AUC Press, 2009), 118.

<sup>52</sup> Dorman, 421.

<sup>53</sup> Agnes Deboulet, "The Dictatorship of the Straight Line and the Myth of Social Disorder: Revisiting Informality in Cairo," in Diane Singerman, ed., *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*, (New York: AUC Press, 2009), 206.



have argued that Cairo is not a dual city, but rather a city where formal and informal distinctions within or outside state regulation cannot be applied so easily. Dorman, for example, has argued that the Egyptian state is in the informal, even in “the most seemingly forgotten informal neighborhoods.”<sup>54</sup> Dorman claims that the *ashwa’iyyat* are “both the consequence of an authoritarian political order and embedded in the informal control stratagems used by Egyptian governments to bolster rule.”<sup>55</sup> There are not only linkages between the state and the *ashwa’iyyat*, but Dorman claims the state can be found in *ashwa’iyyat*, such as the significant number of police stations located in informal areas.<sup>56</sup> The argument that the state cannot be so neatly located outside informality by Julia Elyachar supports Dorman’s argument.<sup>57</sup> Elyachar also found the state located in the informal as a squatter on public land.<sup>58</sup> A poultry farm owned and run by the army was squatting on state land it did not own or have rights over. Another perspective put forth by Asef Bayat proposes that it is not a binary of those who do and those who do not have power, such as power and counterpower argued by James Scott with his concept of ‘weapons of everyday resistance.’ Bayat, alternatively, develops Foucault’s concept that “power is everywhere, [and] that it, ‘circulates.’”<sup>59</sup> According to Bayat, however, the power that is everywhere circulates unevenly.<sup>60</sup> Bayat’s argument is one of the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary.”<sup>61</sup> He argues that, different from a coping or a defensive mechanism, advancement of

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<sup>54</sup> Dorman, 431.

<sup>55</sup> Dorman, 419.

<sup>56</sup> Dorman, 431-432.

<sup>57</sup> Elyachar, 69.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, as referenced in Bayat, “Politics of the Informals,” 89.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 90.

the ordinary in Cairo is a daily, silent means to redistribute social goods and opportunities, as well as secure autonomy from regulations, institutions, and discipline imposed by the state. Bayat does not perceive the ordinary as directly opposed or counter to the state, but that encroachment is one way for people to take a bit of power for themselves in relation to the state and the rich. Furthermore, the encroachment comes in various forms, such as claiming state land, building residences on agricultural land without proper permits, and informal additions on buildings.

Considering the vast expansion and prevalence of informal housing in Cairo, one must ask the role of the state in its production. Although perspectives on whether *ashwa'iyyat* stand in stark contrast to the so-called formal sector, *ashwa'iyyat* are widely regarded as a product of the state. However, the opinions concerning the way in which they are produced vary. While some see the *ashwa'iyyat* as exemplifying the state's inability to keep up with producing housing stock for the needs of low income groups and the middle class, others say it is the state's inability to keep up with transformation of the city and land speculation.<sup>62</sup> Dorman has argued that the *ashwa'iyyat* are the result of the authoritative state regime which excludes the majority of the Egyptian population. Bayat argues that with global restructuring, people were either integrated or socially excluded and informalized. Therefore, they resorted to their own practices to both survive and advance their lives while the state generally takes a policy of tolerance of the *ashwa'iyyat*.

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<sup>62</sup> Soliman and Harre-Rogers.

The *ashwa'iyyat* serve the government in two ways: a reduced reliance on the state with self-help housing for the poor and middle class and as areas the government can blame for societal problems. Yet, the pervasive government discourse regarding *ashwa'iyyat* has been one of problematization. Government language perpetually frames the *ashwa'iyyat* as the source of social ills and as impediments to the creation of a cosmopolitan and modern Cairo. The government has been able to construct an image of the *ashwa'iyyat* in social discourse as the scapegoat for all political, social, and health problems within Cairo. The 'internal 'other'<sup>63</sup> created by the state, has allowed for society to stand in opposition to the *ashwa'iyyat* instead of the state. However, in spite of government discourse, state actions are either neglectful or confrontational. The threatening discourse might be predicted to indicate increased government action on slums, yet the government's actions and policies reveal the opposite. Policies of the Egyptian government for the most part have been absent and only issued to deal with issues in the *ashwa'iyyat* at moments it deems necessary and imperative. However, government intervention has proven to be rather infrequent.

### **Greater Cairo & Development of the *Ashwa'iyyat***

Greater Cairo is made up of five governates: Cairo, Giza, and Qalyoubia and two recently announced independent governates as of May 2008, 6<sup>th</sup> of October and Helwan.<sup>64</sup> Cairo is classified as an exclusively 'urban' governate, while Giza and

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<sup>63</sup> Singerman, 118.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Sabry, "Poverty Lines in Greater Cairo: Underestimating and Misrepresenting Poverty," Working Paper: International Institute for Environment and Development, May 2009, 11.

Qalyoubia are considered to include both 'rural' and 'urban' areas.<sup>65</sup> Governates in Egypt do enjoy significant local executive powers, but they have virtually no source of revenues, relying predominantly on the central government budget as a source of funds. Additionally, their powers are challenged by the dual executive system mandated by the state that requires directorates from the national ministry at the governate level through which budget flows run.<sup>66</sup> In essence, governates are largely executive bodies, where important officials are appointed by the central government.<sup>67</sup> A parallel system of governance has been in place since 1979, with elected popular councils at the district and governate levels. These councils are responsible for approving all development and budget plans. While there is no greater macro-administrative unit for the entire metropolitan region, at the national level the General Organization for Physical Planning facilitates planning in Greater Cairo.<sup>68</sup>

The appearance of *ashwa'iyat* areas can be traced back to just after World War II. During the 1940s, Cairo was not governed by an independent entity and its urban affairs were controlled by central ministries and utilities concessions. One can say that prior to 1952 there was no urban planning mechanism or guiding master plan for Greater Cairo.<sup>69</sup> Urban development was governed by a Subdivision Law (52 of 1940) that had high European standards for lots that required the presence of infrastructure prior to plot sales.<sup>70</sup> However, the subsequent periods of various

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<sup>65</sup> Ragui Assaad. Comments on earlier draft. 29 April 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Sims, 3-4.

<sup>69</sup> Sims, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

government rules can generally be categorized by overregulation in housing policy and inadequate solutions to the *ashwa'yyat* 'problem.' Moreover, legality appears to have been a privilege only afforded to certain classes and in particular social spaces.<sup>71</sup>

The 1952 military coup in Egypt brought Gamal Abdel Nasser into power and the period of Nasserism. Nasser pursued populist policies where a social contract was created between the state and popular classes; the state provided basic necessities and the populace promised social peace and demobilization.<sup>72</sup> Housing policy under Nasser can be categorized by extensive intervention<sup>73</sup> with the government playing a role in housing provision (through housing construction), albeit limited, and policy. Under Nasser, economic development plans and massive industrialization projects centered primarily in Cairo led to a huge influx of migrants. This large population inflow placed significant pressure on the city and led to land development around Cairo by city officials to try to keep up with housing demands. The state created its first public housing plan in 1956 as part of its Master Plan for Cairo. Throughout the 1950s the state had minimal populist housing policies and created housing for low-income groups and middle class workers in small numbers.<sup>74</sup> The state began building *masaakin sha'biyya*, public housing, to create shelter for low-income families and migrants coming to Cairo. The government also launched the Nasr City project in 1958, designed to provide

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<sup>71</sup> Deboulet, 206.

<sup>72</sup> Asef Bayat, "Cairo's Poor: Dilemmas of Survival and Solidarity," *Middle East Report* 202 (Winter 1996): 4.

<sup>73</sup> Soliman, "Tilting at Sphinxes," 176.

<sup>74</sup> Soliman, *A Possible Way Out*, 74.

housing for middle class public servants on state desert land, and the first public housing project in Imbaba, where the state continued until it had produced 15,000 units for low-income families by 1965.<sup>75</sup> Although the state built public housing, the number of units it constructed were negligible in relation to the number of units demanded.

During the 1960s, the government implemented housing projects and was the sole party responsible for housing for low and middle-income groups. The first 5 Year Plan for 1960-65 allocated significant amounts of money to housing development. The Ministry of Housing was concerned with the allocation of public housing and the state constructed 38 units per 1,000 people between 1961 and 1964, with the number only dropping slightly to 32 per 1,000 between 1965 and 1970.<sup>76</sup> This decrease has been attributed to introduction of a rent control act, restrictive housing regulations, and a decline in the construction industry.<sup>77</sup> In spite of the government's effort at housing provision, the number of migrants to Cairo left the government unable to keep up with housing demands. It was during the 1960s that the *ashwa'iyyat* began to appear and flourish. The informal housing sector became the dominant mode of urbanization in Cairo due to the state's strict legal codes and its inability to meet housing demands of the low and middle class. Rents were codified at specific levels and rent levels in new buildings highly favored tenants while also making eviction nearly impossible.<sup>78</sup> Specifically, Law No. 46 instituted in 1962 froze rent levels at half the existing rents and granted indefinite

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<sup>75</sup> Sims, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Soliman, *A Possible Way Out*, 75-76.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

occupancy rights to tenants. This created a disincentive for the construction of new rental units and brought about a practice that required prospective renters to have, 'key money.'<sup>79</sup> Key money forced the potential renter to pay a significant lump sum to the landlord before being able to secure the residential unit, effectively requiring the renter to have a significant amount of capital up front (like home buyers).<sup>80</sup> This system left many Cairenes unable to afford formal rental units. This law would be amended later and referred to as the 'new' rent law. The new law changed the system, allowing landlords to increase rent levels, though it only applied to new contracts and existing contracts could be 'grandfathered' to members of the family.<sup>81</sup> Although the intent was to increase the rental housing stock while still protecting renters, the effect was encouraging those with units under rent control to hold onto the contract even if leaving the apartment for long periods of time.<sup>82</sup>

The *ashwa'iyyat* occurred primarily on privately owned agricultural land, mostly in the west on Cairo's urban fringe during this expansion phase (e.g. the areas of Boulaq al Dakrur, Waraq al-Hadr, Waraq al-Arab, Munira and Shubra al-Kheima and Matariya in the North).<sup>83</sup> Those who could not afford the purchase of agricultural land resorted to squatting on state land, called '*wada' al-yed'* or 'putting their hand on it,' effectively a form of land seizure.<sup>84</sup> Yet, informal areas which

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<sup>79</sup> Ragui Assaad and Mohamed Ramadan, "Did Housing Policy Reforms Curb the Delay in Marriage Among Young Men in Egypt?" *Middle East Youth Initiative Policy Outlook*, Wolfensohn Center for Development at Brookings, (November 2008), 2.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Marion Séjourné, "The History of Informal Settlements," Regina Kipper and Marton Fischer, eds., *Cairo's Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials*, (Portugal: Norprint SA, 2009), 17.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 18.

occurred in the form of squatting on state owned desert land were minimal in number. Rural housing went unregulated in Egypt, and the development of *ashwa'iyyat* in rural areas was largely overlooked until they became significant in number. When the government noticed the large number of *ashwa'iyyat* being built on valuable agricultural land, it reinforced legislation forbidding informal construction on agricultural land (Law 59) in 1966. This law was subsequently amended several times, yet proved ineffective as the monetary gains to the land owner for subdivision and sale for housing production far exceeded the monetary gains in agricultural production.

Anwar Sadat became president of Egypt in 1970 after the death of Nasser during a freeze of formal housing development. Between 1967 and 1973, due to the two wars Egypt waged during this period, governmental public funds were devoted to war costs and all urban infrastructure plans were halted. While formal urban development stopped, housing demands and demographic growth only grew. In this case, where the formal housing could not meet demand, the *ashwa'iyyat* could.

The period of Sadat's rule can be characterized by Westernization and economic liberalization. Sadat was extremely focused on 'modernizing' Egypt and securing the capital needed to do so. The state's emphasis was on promoting private investment, foreign capital, and attracting tourists.<sup>85</sup> As the state worked to present an 'image friendly Cairo,' the government discourse toward the *ashwa'iyyat* became accusatory, calling them "source[s] of disorder."<sup>86</sup> Modernity's 'privileging of the visual' explains the state's focus on the image and face of Cairo, rather than the

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<sup>85</sup> Ghannam, 29.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 173.



sources of problems.<sup>87</sup> According to Farha Ghannam, the state either focused on integration in areas of significance, notably those with monuments visited by tourists, or ridding the city of less desirable areas, such as in the old quarters.<sup>88</sup>

Official government housing policy under Sadat focused on three areas: private housing development for middle, upper middle, and upper class; free market within the formal housing sector; and the development of new towns.<sup>89</sup> Sadat launched the Open Door Policy (*Infitah*) in 1974, opening Egypt to foreign capital and allowing Egyptians to travel more freely, such as to work in oil producing Gulf states. This represented a significant political and economic transition as the Egyptian state shifted from a welfare state to a neoliberal regime. The state's populist protection measures were mostly withdrawn and popular sectors, such as peasants, workers, and the urban poor, no longer had a safety net.<sup>90</sup> Upon announcing the Open Door Policy, Sadat articulated the state's responsibility only to construct housing for low-income groups. Thus, the private sector would be responsible for providing housing for the middle and upper classes. The state also disengaged from the production of rental housing and predominantly maintained its former rent control policy and pro-tenant legislation. Not only did the rent control policy decrease landlord care in buildings, but it also led to both private and public leaving the rental market. Therefore, those seeking rentals were left out of the formal sector. The development of new towns created large public units for various social classes and the goal was to stimulate individual home ownership and help

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<sup>87</sup> Lefebvre, Massey, and Scott in Ghannam, 31.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>89</sup> Soliman, *A Possible Way Out*, 77.

<sup>90</sup> Bayat, "Cairo's Poor: Dilemmas of Survival and Solidarity," 3.

reduce urban density. However, these new towns failed to attract the target populations, such as in 10<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan and Sixth of October cities. These towns are built on the outskirts of Cairo and are difficult to access without a private car; furthermore, they lack public space and basic social and educational services. Finally, these new towns are not convivial cities.<sup>91</sup> As Harre-Roger notes, participation of low-income groups in the development of these cities was left out. At the same time, Egyptian workers were bearing the fruits of the oil booms with increased incomes from working in nearby Arab oil producing countries. The oil booms of 1973 and 1979 dramatically increased labor remittances to Egypt. Increased remittances led to a spike in land prices, as those working in the Gulf invested their earnings in land and housing back in Egypt, and land in the *ashwa'iyat* became increasingly costly.<sup>92</sup> The remittances also greatly increased levels of urbanization. During the 1970s, 84% of newly built units in Cairo were said to be illegal.<sup>93</sup>

As the number and size of the *ashwa'iyat* grew in Cairo, the government began to take direct policy actions in an attempt to slow the growth and manage the housing problem. The government imposed a new law in 1978 that made it even more illegal to build on agricultural land than it had been before.<sup>94</sup> This law was coupled with the government's proclaimed commitment to adequate housing for all through public and private initiatives and a national housing plan to overcome the city's housing problem. The state committed to building 3.6 million units by 2000 or

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<sup>91</sup> Harre-Rogers, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Ghannam, 29.

<sup>93</sup> Séjourné, 18.

<sup>94</sup> Sims, 12-13.

around 180,000 new units a year.<sup>95</sup> The government's policies during this period constituted a shift from completely subsidized housing to provide other means for low-income groups to acquire shelter. The state offered to provide goods or services as a way to encourage self-help housing means for the poor where they produce adequate and cheap housing with infrastructure on their own.<sup>96</sup> The government's policies in the period under Sadat were designed to limit the government's role in providing solutions; the state could facilitate either for the market to provide housing or for the poor to provide housing for themselves. Additionally, the government's reliance on new towns as a solution to the prevalence of *ashwa'iyat*, officially adopted in 1977, still dominates government discourse and budget allocations today.<sup>97</sup>

Although Hosni Mubarak stepped up from his role as Vice President to become President of Egypt after Anwar el-Sadat's assassination in 1981, government housing policy and discourse towards the *ashwa'iyat* in Cairo has not changed significantly, at least up until 2005. The government has predominantly focused on the new town strategy as a way to curb the growth of *ashwa'iyat* by providing an alternative housing location to those who currently live there or would live there.<sup>98</sup> The growth of *ashwa'iyat* has slowed since the 1980s, compared to previous periods, due to the reduction of oil prices and restriction on Egyptian workers in Gulf countries. Additionally, a demographic shift with slowed growth rates and a virtual ceasing of in-migration to Cairo caused the slowing of *ashwa'iyat*

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<sup>95</sup> Soliman, *A Possible Way Out*, 77.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Sims, 13.

<sup>98</sup> Sims, 13.

growth. The Mubarak government continues to respond only reactively to issues concerning the *ashwa'iyat* when they arise. For example, beginning in the mid-1980s the government 'discovered' the growing phenomenon of the *ashwa'iyat* while Islamist movements had established themselves in these areas filling the vacuums that the government left vacant.<sup>99</sup> Islamist groups provided welfare services that the government could not or did not provide. The social services that neoliberal state policies limit or which are restricted by SAPs create the space for this possibility.

As a result, the 1990s were a period of demonization of *ashwa'iyat* areas in Cairo and, thus, a period of increased focus on them, both politically and socially.<sup>100</sup> Whereas previous government's had identified the *ashwa'iyat* as sources of impediments to modernity, they were now seen as sources of Islamic fundamentalism and as threats to Egypt as a whole. Over the course of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Islamic group Gama'a Islamiyya had established itself in Munira Gharbiyya in Cairo's Imbaba district. Late 1992, the Gama'a Islamiyya declared its establishment of The Islamic Republic of Imbaba to a Reuters reporter. Shortly thereafter, in early December of 1992, the state ordered 18,000 paramilitary police in armored cars and bulldozers to surround Islamic militants in Munira Gharbiyya or Imbaba. Over the course of six weeks, local residents were randomly harassed, arrested, or imprisoned and several were killed. The Gama'a Islamiyya's declaration also came just after the Egyptian state had been portrayed as unable to provide for those who had suffered from the October 1992 earthquake that killed

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<sup>99</sup> Singerman, 115.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 117.

561 people and caused \$1.2 Billion in damages.<sup>101</sup> While the state did not seem capable of providing relief services to earthquake victims, many Islamic relief organizations effectively provided relief for many of those who were impacted.<sup>102</sup>

Similar to the focus and funding of *ashwa'iyyat* areas that followed the 1977 riots, funding and projects followed the Siege of Imbaba. The government announced the National Fund for Urban Upgrading in 1993, which designated \$563 Million for the project. The Fund only targeted half of all *ashwa'iyyat* areas and designated 63 areas for upgrading (provision of electricity, water, sanitation drainage, road paving) and 18 areas for demolition. Surprisingly, after the large media and governmental attack of areas like Imbaba, the areas on the list for demolition did not include any areas that had been identified as having established Islamic groups, but rather focused on areas that had been damaged by the earthquake of 1992.<sup>103</sup> The Fund did not address social services at all and, ultimately, focused primarily on large-scale infrastructure projects, such as roads and bridges, which largely ended up benefiting richer neighborhoods and bypassing *ashwa'iyyat* areas.<sup>104</sup> In general, the government's upgrading efforts were ambiguous in efforts and largely dependent on foreign aid. The articulated 'model' for *ashwa'iyyat* upgrading in Cairo was the rebuilding efforts that took place in Munira Gharbiyya. A total of \$90 million had been paid for sewerage, water connections, street lighting, paved and improved sanitation, and provision of

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<sup>101</sup> Dorman, 426.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Dorman, 427.

<sup>104</sup> Sims, 20.

schools, a youth center, and a clinic.<sup>105</sup> The project even attracted a visit from Britain's Prince Charles when the state declared the project as the 'model' for how Egypt should deal with the *ashwa'yyat*.<sup>106</sup> Yet, misleading project specific success, what wasn't revealed was a long term USAID project that had been underway in the area on water and wastewater service provision. Further scrutiny also came as many critiqued this one project as exemplary of the state's superficial and nominal upgrading efforts.<sup>107</sup> While Munira had been 'upgraded,' other local settlements remained without basic utilities.<sup>108</sup>

In 2005 there was a shift in public government discourse with the release of Egypt's UN Human Development Report (EHDR), a report issued jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Egypt and the Ministries of Planning and Local Development. The main focus of the report of 2005 was the establishment of a new 'social contract' and a shift from Egypt's previous 'business as usual.' The new 'social contract' intended to afford greater participation of citizens in reform projects and to be included as part of the process.<sup>109</sup> The intent was to establish a relationship between the state and its citizens, as well as create spaces for public involvement, a notable difference from previous practices. This was to be facilitated by a reduction of central control to promote further political, social and economic participation from all members of Egyptian society.<sup>110</sup> The

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<sup>105</sup> Dorman, 429.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> U.N. Development Programme, "Egypt Human Development Report." 2005, vii.

[http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Egypt/Egypt\\_HDR%202005\\_en.pdf](http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Egypt/Egypt_HDR%202005_en.pdf) (accessed March, 18, 2010).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 4.

report also discusses Cabinet proposals towards “formalization of the poor’s assets into capital”<sup>111</sup> and pro-poor policies instead of handouts,<sup>112</sup> indicating the government’s new ‘vision,’ but avoiding responsibilities as provider. The government announced a series of budget allocations and planned projects as a result of the 2005 EHDR. The projects included the following: provide sanitation facilities for households (Program 7.1), provision of infrastructure for 2 million low income families (1 million urban and 1 million rural) out of a total of 3.7 million units (Program 8.1), provide long term credit for the building of 2 million housing units (Program 8.2), attract families from densely populated governates to form nucleus of villages (Program 8.3), and slum upgrading (demolition or rehabilitation) of 300,000 units (Program 8.5).<sup>113</sup> The report includes specifics regarding what slum upgrading entails, land alternatives the government can provide to the poor in lieu of *ashwa’iyyat* areas, and the focus on the development of new cities. In the report, land regularization is recommended as a means to upgrading, arguing that land titles lead to improved physical and structural improvements on the part of the owner.<sup>114</sup> However, Roy argues that security of tenure more so than legalization and formalization to bring physical upgrading by the home’s owner.<sup>115</sup> Also, the regular payment structure that comes with land titling and formalization can be more insecure for the poor than more flexible security of tenure policies.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 18-9.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 142

<sup>115</sup> Roy, 154.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

The Egyptian government articulated numerous plans and budget allocations based on the EHDR of 2005 to promote the new 'social contract' and *ashwa'iyat* solutions. The Social Contract Center was established in May 2007 by the Information and Decision Support Center of Egypt in cooperation with UNDP in order to track the implementation and progress of recommendations of the 2005 EHDR. In reviewing the website of The Social Contract Center, there are several updates to highlight outstanding or newly discovered issues, but little information about what projects the government has undertaken. However, since 2005 the government has identified other projects and 'problem' issues in informal settlements on which they can focus. One such project is to develop the neighborhood of Imbaba, one of the most densely populated areas in Egypt, by 2012.<sup>117</sup> Also, in 2008, the president issued a decree that established funds to develop informal areas, a first of its kind. International aid organizations, such as USAID and GTZ, have intermittently worked on various housing projects to either build public housing or upgrade existing informal areas. However, due to a recent USAID audit, the organization has since ceased all housing initiatives in Egypt. The policies and projects by the state thus far have not provided real solutions. Moreover, the various views from within the state and from citizens all articulate

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<sup>117</sup> Jurgen Styrjak, "The Planning Authority in the Ministry of Housing," in Regina Kipper and Marton Fischer, eds., *Cairo's Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials*, (Portugal: Norprint SA, 2009), 156.



different ideas on what the solution should look like (from resettlement to complete planning of all areas that could be potential sites for future informal settlements).<sup>118</sup>

The lasting effects of rental laws and grandfather clauses, the government's continued system of cumbersome procedures for building permits and high building codes, and the government's opposition to accepting the existing residential units on agricultural land by legal recognition, are the primary reasons that vacancy rates in Cairo remain high (around 2 million in the Greater Cairo area),<sup>119</sup> formal housing production is almost exclusively for the upper middle class, informal housing production expands and becomes more dense, and over half of the city's residents live in 'illegal' areas.

### **Case Study: Tora**

Although land regularization is not the norm in Cairo for those who live in the *ashwa'iyyat*, there have been instances where it has occurred, such as for the community of *zabbaleen*<sup>120</sup> who currently live in the community of Tora. In 1970 the *zabbaleen* were a community of about 2,500 informal garbage collectors who had been squatting on state land on the urban fringe of Northwest Cairo. Similar to many other *ashwa'iyyat* residents of Cairo, the *zabbaleen* were subject to forced eviction in 1970 when residents woke up to the sound of bulldozers in the middle of the

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<sup>118</sup> Manal El-Jesri, "Egyptian Partners' Expectations: Visions for the Future," in Regina Kipper and Marton Fischer, eds., *Cairo's Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials*, (Portugal: Norprint SA, 2009), 201-205.

<sup>119</sup> Elena Piffero, "Beyond Rules and Regulations: The Growth of Informal Cairo," in Regina Kipper and Marton Fischer, eds., *Cairo's Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials*, (Portugal: Norprint SA, 2009), 23.

<sup>120</sup> *Zabbaleen* translates directly as 'garbage collectors.'

night.<sup>121</sup> The *zabbaleen* relocated to an area called Tora, a dusty area located next to a quarry in the desert, which had no infrastructure in place (water, sewage disposal or electricity).<sup>122</sup> Lacking legal tenure and fearful of another eviction, the *zabbaleen* did not invest in major household improvements and remained in overall poor living conditions. As the surrounding area of the Tora community was developed into housing for the upper middle class, real estate values of their land rose and neighboring residents began to complain of the pollution produced by the garbage collection activities and the unsightliness of the community's housing. At the same time, municipal authorities wanted to turn the *zabbaleen's* squatter settlement into housing for the middle class to profit from the increased land values. Ultimately, in the fall of 1995, the *zabbaleen* were faced once again with the possibility of eviction. As word spread of the government's eviction plans, the *zabbaleen* sought the help of the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE), a local non-governmental organization (NGO), to prevent the impending eviction. The Egyptian government historically had proven its unwillingness to recognize those who lived in *ashwa'yyat* as citizens deserving of public services and recognition, exemplified by its lack of service provision to those who live in the areas. As noted above, Egypt's vision of Cairo as a modern city did not include *ashwa'yyat* areas. Therefore, in order to mediate a solution to prevent their eviction, the *zabbaleen* realized the necessity of an intermediary to act on their behalf with the government. The government had proven historically that it was "ill equipped to deal directly with

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<sup>121</sup> Gia Pionek and Ragui Assaad, Planning Despite the State." World Planning Schools Congress. Shanghai, China, July 11-15, 2001, 15.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 2 & 9.

the complex web of norms, rights, and obligations that characterizes informal social fields.”<sup>123</sup> Therefore the necessity of the third party was evident.

Eventually, APE was able to negotiate with the government to allow the *zabbaleen* to remain in Tora and acquire legal tenure by purchasing the land at the 1970 market price. APE’s pre-existing knowledge and relationships with the *zabbaleen*, as well as their existing government connections, enabled them to reach an agreement that was amenable to both the *zabbaleen* and the government. The agreement allowed the *zabbaleen* to achieve security in their homes, leaving them safe from eviction. It also granted the *zabbaleen* financial gain of the increased land value that occurred between 1970 and the date of the purchase. The only stipulation of the agreement was for the *zabbaleen* to relocate their garbage activities to the remote site of Qattameya, far from the middle class preferences and complaints of their neighbors in Maadi.

The ability of APE to negotiate a settlement on behalf of the *zabbaleen*, residents of the *ashwa’iyyat* area of Tora, illustrates the possibility for third parties to act as a bridge between the Egyptian state and so-called marginal communities.<sup>124</sup> The ultimate success in APE’s negotiation was due to its ability to keep the formal rules of the bureaucracy and the informal networks and norms in mind.<sup>125</sup> The final solution did not impose top-down systems on the *zabbaleen*, but

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<sup>123</sup> Ragui Assaad, “Formalizing the Informal? The Transformation of Cairo’s Refuse Collection System,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 16 (1996):125.

<sup>124</sup> Pionek and Assaad, 34.

<sup>125</sup> Pionek and Assaad, 23.

rather utilized existing networks present in the community and incorporated them into the final programming.<sup>126</sup>

However, the plight of the *zabbaleen* community became an issue the government would recognize and address largely due to the actions of the president of APE, Yousriya Sawiris. Yousriya Sawiris is the wife of a wealthy, influential Egyptian industrialist and played a key role in the negotiations with the government. Yousriya spent ten years pleading the case of the *zabbaleen* and, when she was nominated to a seat in the Egyptian parliament during this time, she used her influence as a member to draw attention to the issue of the *zabbaleen*.<sup>127</sup> It was due to both her personal and professional actions that negotiations took place and resulted in the land tenure for the Tora community. Her commitment to the case of the *zabbaleen* and her influence in and understanding of the Egyptian state's administration allowed for the negotiation to result favorably for the *zabbaleen* in gaining land titles. The Tora case indicates the possibility for titling of *ashwa'yyat* areas in unique circumstances, while also highlighting the limitations for its replicability. The commitment and efforts required by APE and its president to achieve land titles for the community of Tora are not scalable to create broad policy reforms for all of Cairo's *ashwa'yyat* areas.

### **Rethinking the 'Problem'**

What is clear from looking at the literature on urban informality and the case of Cairo is that one cannot neatly define 'formal' and 'informal.' Definitions are limiting and exclusionary by nature. Therefore, I believe the issue of informal

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<sup>126</sup> Pionek and Assaad, 22.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

settlements should be approached by challenging the common conceptions of the 'city,' urbanization, and modern or cosmopolitan. By reframing the issue of the *ashwa'iyyat* through re-conceptualizations of the three aforementioned areas, the underlying processes that produce and sustain the *ashwa'iyyat* are revealed.

Rather than viewed as processes, cities are generally viewed as bordered spaces where geography is limited to the confines of the mapped city, and by ascribing the label of global mutually excludes the local. But it is not possible to bind places within such limited geographies and restrictive connections. Cities are not static. Although we tend to identify places as stagnant and bounded, places are much more "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings."<sup>128</sup> Cities are the expressions of processes that are continuously at work—from both the global and local levels. The dialectic between the local and the global is constantly reshaping cities. They are always in a process of evolving and changing and, thus, require a flexible understanding of what constitutes the 'city.' Furthermore, cities cannot be understood solely by analyzing their physical structures, spaces are also socially constructed. The making of a city is also much more than the physical production of space by capital or a government's planning policies confined to the formal sector. A city is also constructed by the creation of meaning and value through social relations, encompassed within the informal, and the daily lives and practices of its inhabitants.

Planning and formal production generally comes to mind when one thinks of urbanization, leaving "informality as a state of exception from the formal order of

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<sup>128</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 154.

urbanization.”<sup>129</sup> Globally, the majority of urban development is occurring within the so-called informal sector and, in Cairo, over half of the city lives in ‘illegal’ areas. Urbanization, or the process of, can be one that is not pre-planned or designed by the state. Residential structures that precede infrastructure can in fact be seen as urbanized areas. Moreover, this mode of urbanization does not make the city any less ‘cosmopolitan’ in nature.

The cosmopolitan nature of its cities is a priority of states today. The modern image of the state, as displayed by its important cities, is key. However, the common understanding of ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘modern’ is rather narrow, leaving no room for anything beyond the scope of their definitions. Yet, informal housing is not ‘backward’ or opposed to modernity as many have come to believe. Nor does it house unproductive members of society. Rather, it is a creation of productive members of society when the formal sector cannot or does not provide housing for them.

Having these flexible definitions and understandings allows for a rethinking of informal housing. The issue at hand is not one of the ‘problem’ of informal housing. The problem is one of value, recognition, and rights of those who live in the city. The valuing of the individual, the recognition of each person’s social and economic contributions to society, and the rights the residents have to certain livelihoods.

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<sup>129</sup> Roy, 147.

## **Future Possibilities**

The problem, ultimately, is not one of informality, but what the state and distinction of 'informal' indicate for people's lives, such as housing insecurity, lack of service provision, or social stigmatization. The problem is also not that those who live in the *ashwa'iyyat* cannot participate in the formal housing market. Although de Soto sees great possibilities in granting land titles to the poor he believes to be the residents in informal housing as a way for them to participate in markets, I do not see how such a process will occur. The mere granting of land titles does not guarantee that people's lives will be improved through subsequent market participation. Moreover, it ignores the intense market transactions that occur in informality already. It is my belief that the real issue is the quality of life of those living in the *ashwa'iyyat* and the government's recognition of the lives they do lead. Therefore, the solution is not so much one of granting land titles as a means to enable participate in the market, but guaranteeing fundamental rights, such as: adequate shelter (perhaps through land titling as the recognition of housing rights); access to services, like water and waste systems; and political voice.

The negotiation facilitated by APE, which led to land titling for the Tora *zabbaleen* community, shows the potential for squatter communities and residents of *ashwa'iyyat* to gain legal titles for the land on which they have built their homes. However, the issue of whether or not land titling improves lives remains. While de Soto argues that land titles will allow people to pull themselves out of poverty and help stimulate the national economy by transforming the 'dead capital' into 'live

capital,' this does not signal wealth transfer, but rather wealth titling.<sup>130</sup> Land titles do afford residents security in knowing their rights to the land are recognized by the state and usually mean the provision of services, yet the titles themselves are not the ultimate solution, but rather the sign of a solution. In Cairo, land titling would be an indication of the state's recognition of the rights and values of residents of the *ashwa'iyat*. Furthermore, it would indicate the government's understanding that Cairo can in fact be a global, cosmopolitan city by including and recognizing the *ashwa'iyat* as part of the city. This would be premised on an inclusive notion of cosmopolitanism, a vernacular cosmopolitanism,<sup>131</sup> that is defined by justice.

It is important to consider the scale at which land titling in Cairo could occur. In the case of Tora, an NGO was able to leverage the connections and influence of its powerful president and her invested interest in the cause to gain security for its residents from the government. Furthermore, APE was able to use its knowledge and connections with the *zabbaleen* from previous work to gain their trust during the negotiation process. While the settlement reached between the two parties does indicate the possibilities, it also illustrates the efforts, coordination, and social connections required in order to bring about change in terms of both policy and perception. The negotiation brought about and facilitated by APE and Yousriya Sawiris is not a process that is replicable for all informal areas. The case of Tora demonstrates that titling for *ashwa'iyat* areas at a broad level requires a shift in the government's perception of the residents of the informal settlements.

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<sup>130</sup> Roy, 152.

<sup>131</sup> Singerman, 20.



Recognizing that the issue goes beyond simple land titling and acknowledging the power of using third party facilitators, what are the possibilities for residents of Cairo's *ashwa'iyyat*? It would be a mistake to think of the *ashwa'iyyat* as merely a local issue. While *ashwa'iyyat* are specific and local to Cairo, one should not ignore the global forces at work or the global implications.<sup>132</sup> The choices of the Egyptian government, such as budget expenditures and security decisions, are influenced by global factors and the system in which Egypt finds itself. The decision of whether or not to invest in touristic sites or the provision of public services in the *ashwa'iyyat* is one that the state chooses based on what it deems as a greater priority. Generally, the former has received the priority in terms of budget allocations, while the latter has only received attention as a problem in government discourse. Recognizing the affects of the global on the local, movements solely rooted in the local will not bring about mass change.

David Harvey discusses this idea with his notion of 'militant particularism.' Harvey holds that all political activities have particular origins, and all depend on and stem from a particular time, a particular place, and particular persons.<sup>133</sup> The term 'militant particularism' denotes the grassroots ferment that urban social movements are almost always rooted in, at least initially. However, the transformative power of said movements or lack thereof depends on grassroots movements' ability to reach a universal language and meaning. He argues that local movements can only be meaningful and interesting or advocate social change "to the

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<sup>132</sup> Gilbert, 60.

<sup>133</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 190.

degree they transcend their particularities” and recognize that “universality always exists in relation to particularity.”<sup>134</sup> Bayat makes similar claims regarding the power of the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ and its ability to cause broader political transformation. The actions and impacts of the individuals should not be minimized in their effects; however, their actions are constrained and require a larger national or transnational movement to possess the capacity to bring about broader political change.

Ultimately, the Egyptian government must recognize the value of the lives of those who live in the *ashwa’iyyat* and see them not as marginalized, terrorists, or backward, but as full citizens who participate and contribute socially and economically to Egyptian society. The government can then make political decisions prioritizing their lives and the livelihoods they can lead over other issues on the political agenda. Currently there is the potential for a value shift as a result of change in the state’s political leadership. Egypt is at a pivotal political point as the state looks to the upcoming election of 2011 and the waning health and grip of Mubarak’s presidency. However, one must consider the possibilities in light of the current political situation. This requires the identification of the way in which the *ashwa’iyyat* could turn into a larger movement that connects with a universal to transcend the local. This would create the possibility for policy change at the level of the Egyptian state and, perhaps, at a global level for a re-thinking of the issue of informal settlements.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 193-4.

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