

The Planning Review

SLIP

2017 · 2nd ed.



ROUTLEDGE



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Cairo: Speculative Informality

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What appears to be a simple transaction of bread for money is only the visible part of a more complex skein of deals taking place behind the scenes. Take, for example, a small bakery in the poor Cairo neighborhood of Imbaba. It is January 2008 and crowds are lined up to buy *baladi* bread – basic staple of the Egyptian diet also known as ‘the people’s food’. Yet, this is anything but a peaceful, run of the mill affair. Customers push, punch, and elbow their way to the front of the line, thrusting money impatiently at the baker behind the bars that separate him from an angry mob. There have been reports of breadline violence in other parts of the city, with people wielding guns and shooting at each other in order to get their share. Bread, paradoxically, which in Egyptian Arabic is called ‘*aish*’ and literally meaning ‘life’, has nurtured acts of desperation that in the most extreme cases resulted in deaths. Indeed, as

one journalist wrote, “it is hard to make ends meet in Egypt”, especially when it comes to buying food (Slackman 2008).

But how can something as common as daily bread be caught up in a ruthless game of life and death? Remember that 2008 was a watershed year in many respects, not least because it marked a new height in soaring food prices around the world, pushing even more millions into poverty in that year alone (United Nations 2011: 63). Risky speculation in agricultural commodities combined with natural disasters such as severe drought were only two of the most pronounced factors that adversely affected all markets associated with food production and distribution during that year (United Nations 2011: 66). Among other UN-designated developing countries, Egypt was particularly hard hit, considering its heavy reliance on imported food, and that with an already weak cur-

Man selling subsidized bread through a barred window at a bakery in the Imbaba neighborhood of Cairo, January 16, 2008. (Photo: Shawn Baldwin, courtesy *The New York Times*)



rency depreciating day by day. With scores of people unable to afford basic provisions, there was a run on bakeries like the one in Imbaba to secure cheap bread.

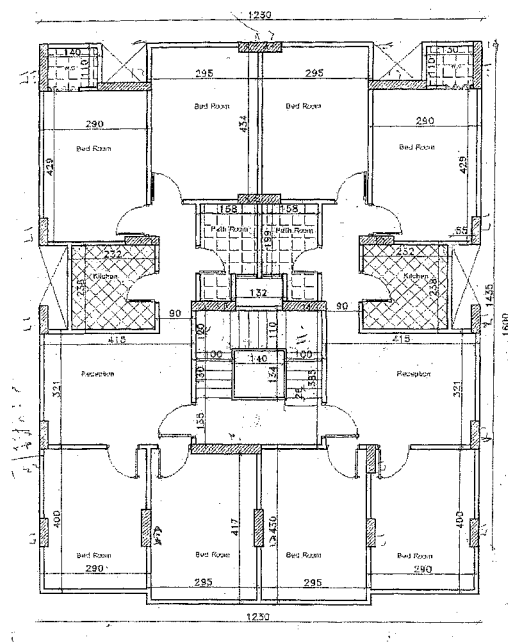
If *baladi* bread is the staple food of the poor in Egypt, then its spatial equivalent is the *baladi* neighborhood, the setting that is home to a majority of the populace. At least according to common wisdom, one feeds the other: cheap bread sustains the masses. Yet, the ostensibly clear relation between urban core and the greenbelt normally used for food production has been compromised in Egypt. Fertile land in the Nile Valley has been steadily decreasing due to the encroachment of settlements over time, with urbanization claiming ever more territory. In effect, as in so many other places in the world, one eats the other: the city consumes the basic resource of agrarian land. This is the bitter outcome of urban growth in Egypt. As its cities expand, the country becomes increasingly ensnared in the tangle of international food regimes. Less and less territory is available for locally produced crops, and unavoidably the country becomes more and more reliant on imports, turning the world itself into Egypt's hinterland.

What makes the imbalance between arable and urban land all the more complex is that the ongoing appropriation of farmland by the urban realm has been conducted primarily off the record, informally and extra-legally, despite government awareness of the mounting tendency of rural migrants and those seeking affordable housing to settle wherever possible on the city's edges. Such encroachment stands in defiance of the law that strictly prohibits any construction on rural property except for agriculture-related activities. Giving weight to the gravity of the situation, a military decree to this effect was implemented rather late in the game in 1996, as a means to reinforce previous legislation that in any case had never taken hold (Denis 2012: 231). Nobody complied with the edict, and so informal construction continued unchecked. Illegality, it would seem, constitutes a hushed form of common law, a low-lying norm that not only determines behavior, but also gives shape to urban development. Since achieving independence in the early 1950s, Egypt has faced an acute housing shortage, a condition exacerbated in the following decades by the state's inability to provide a sufficient number of low-cost dwellings. Without a formal solution to this problem, successive regimes have turned a blind eye to informal construction, as if simply wishing it away would

absolve the government of any municipal responsibility in the matter.

Wishful thinking aside, government neglect *vis-à-vis* 'popular urbanization' has not only jeopardized the nation's capacity to feed itself, but has also reinforced the grounds for social stratification. Already existing divides are cut ever more tangibly into the urban territory, deepening the schism between urban and rural cultures, empowered and dispossessed classes, rich (*raqi*) and popular (*baladi*) neighborhoods, in conjunction with rifts among rival religious faiths (Miller 2006: 383). This has given rise to ever more virulent rounds of stigmatization, with one group denouncing another. Moreover, distinctions are carved into the notion of the 'popular' itself. Lines have been drawn between older and more established urban communities that have a certain historical legitimacy and ethnic identity, and newer ones that have sprung up on the fringes of cities, which because they are deemed 'other' and thus potentially dangerous, are associated with the ills of society. This goes not only for the people who live there, but also for their spatial domains as well. There are, for instance, the poor or '*sha'bi*' precincts in the urban core and the squatter settlements or 'slums' often situated in interstitial urban spaces as well as on desert land. In addition to these marginalized neighborhoods, there is another type of settlement that has emerged as the most prevalent response to rampant population growth and a lack of affordable housing, commonly known as *ashwa'iyat*, literally meaning disordered, haphazard, or random. Although originally used as an adjective or qualifier, the term has become a common noun over time to identify the substantial presence of informal communities both within cities and on their edges. Be that as it may, such negative attributions betray a shared prejudice toward spontaneous and unplanned neighborhoods, most of which occupy what was once prime agricultural land. Seen as a possible threat to urban well being, they figure ominously in Egypt's imaginary, prompting sociologist Asef Bayat and urban geographer Eric Denis to rhetorically ask "who is afraid of the *ashwa'iyat*?" (Bayat, Denis 2000: 185).

According to economist and urban planner David Sims's 2010 study *Understanding Cairo*, there were hardly any informal areas recognizable as such in the capital in the 1950s. He reports that half a century later "a full 63.6 percent of the population of 17.3 million inhabitants lived in informal areas" (Sims 2010: 96). Notwithstanding the air of precision of these



Plan showing structural frame, brick infill walls, and ventilation shafts of an informal building on a 10 by 14 meter lot in the neighborhood of Ard al-Liwa, Cairo, 2014.

(Source: courtesy CLUSTER Cairo)

numbers, exact statistics are hard to come by in a context that is by definition off the radar. With more than 10 million people reportedly living in marginalized areas of the city by the turn of the millennium, it is difficult to imagine how such a multitude could be ignored, yet they were, and the consequences have proved unstoppable. The pace of informal construction in Cairo was further accelerated following the Arab Spring, due to an even more tenuous chain of command in urban governance brought about by the ensuing power vacuum. At that point, almost anything went.

Imbaba, home of the small bakery besieged by angry mobs in 2008, is one of the largest informal neighborhoods in Cairo, and has become the quintessential gauge of informality nationwide. But it began very modestly, given that urban expansion on farmland is a process that proceeds incrementally. Imbaba was originally a small village and for centuries a camel trading post on the outskirts of the capital which began attracting settlers from Upper Egypt as well as other parts of the country in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In this period, a first wave of makeshift buildings appeared (Sims 2010: 100). The following decades saw the introduction of reinforced concrete frames and slabs with masonry infill, a construction technique most likely imported by Egyptian migrant workers returning from jobs abroad, primarily in the Gulf Arab states. While these structures were usually no more than five stories tall, the next generation went higher, in

some cases reaching up to ten-story buildings (Denis 2012: 236). By 2016, informal real estate speculation – again under the radar of official monitoring – had taken off to such a degree in neighborhoods like Imbaba that illicit developers were building tenements of up to 15 stories, most with elevator shafts, yet many without the provision of functioning cabins. These structures seemed to go up almost overnight, where space permitted, producing an almost seamless fabric. In all, this building frenzy has resulted in a seemingly endless and homogeneous skyline of brick that marks the fateful shift from green to red belt taking place in the capital.

Informal construction in Egypt is of a very different order than in other parts of the world due to its high structural quality. “It is worth noting,” writes Sims, “that in the 1992 earthquake in Cairo, practically all building collapses and the resulting fatalities occurred *not* in informal areas, but either in dilapidated historic parts of the city or in formal areas where apartment blocks had been constructed by (sometimes) unscrupulous developers and contractors” (Sims 2010: 100). In spite of being built outside the purview of official zoning and building regulations, informal construction adheres to strict rule-of-thumb standards and is executed by quasi- and extra-legal construction crews using well-established technologies. The process is facilitated by payoffs made to inspectors who accept bribes to look the other way and underwritten by negotiations conducted at the margins of legality. What results is a parallel society, one built-up beyond official norms, yet guided by its own logic and systematized behavior. So the common perception that these agglomerations are unplanned, random, or haphazard is indeed a misconception. On the contrary, ‘informality’ here is a highly organized physical and social condition that has matured to engender what would be better called ‘advanced informality’, a type of self-processing phenomenon that is becoming ever more enmeshed with the formal city.

Informal building densification on farmland, whether in Imbaba or elsewhere in Egypt, followed and still follows the given subdivision of agricultural plots – small, rectangular, and separated by long straight irrigation channels, which serve as access arteries for the ever expanding districts. Here, form follows food, or at least the pattern of those properties on which it was formerly produced. This pattern has undergone significant change over time, from large parcels owned by the landed gentry prior to the country’s independence, to much smaller

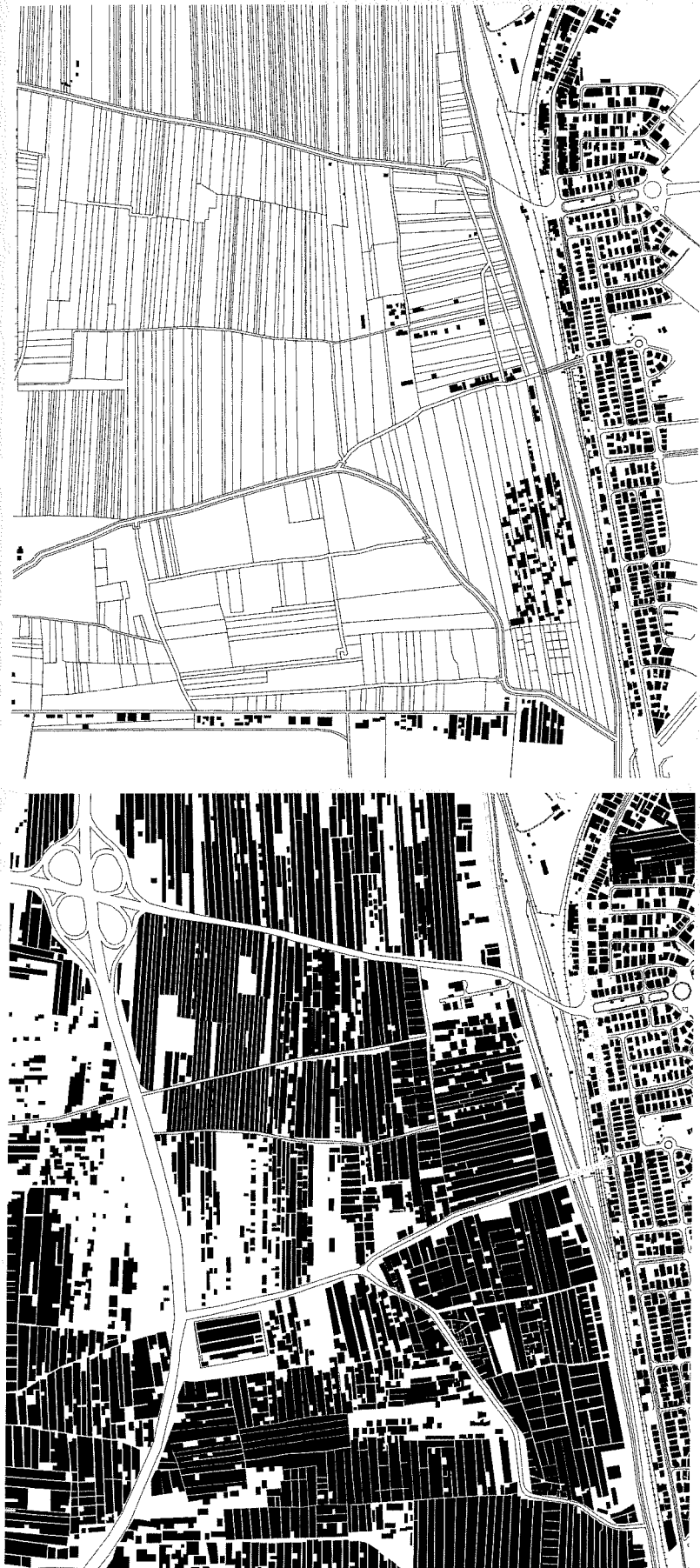


Figure-ground plans on the northwestern edge of Imbaba along the ring road circumscribing Greater Cairo, showing the extent of informal growth from the 1970s and 2010s. (Source: Charlotte Malterre-Barthes)



Aerial views of agricultural land on the northwestern edge of Imbaba along the ring road circumscribing Greater Cairo, showing the extent of informal growth in 2003 and 2013. (Source: Google Earth Data ©2013 Google)

lots based on the nationalization and redistribution of land according to schemes introduced as part of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's mid-century agrarian reforms (Mitchell 2002: 54–79). Though his vision intended to transfer more land to more stakeholders and thereby help them to achieve self-sufficiency, the small scale of the plots has in the meantime unwittingly enabled the element of incremental growth so essential to informal development. Tracts could be acquired piece by piece for relatively little capital in straightforward transactions, even though construction on them is officially prohibited. Moreover, land has often been subdivided illegally into even smaller parcels, again with indifference to the law, specifically the 1982 *Urban Planning Act*, which restricted subdivisions of agricultural property and declared infractions a punishable offense, yet has rarely been enforced. Following the pattern of agricultural subdivisions, these areas were

built-up piecemeal, and have ultimately evolved into a hyper-dense urban fabric, with buildings crammed next to one another, all punctuated by ventilation shafts and accessed by a maze of unpaved alleyways running among them. Neighborhoods often lack sufficient sanitation and sewage, and if introduced at all, this is usually done indiscriminately, leading to a wild undergrowth of septic tanks, pipes, and fittings. Garbage is more often than not simply dumped in canals, which at times become “so clogged with accumulated rubbish that they appear to be solid ground” (Sims 2010: 107). What was once the vital source of water for crops is now the preferred dumping ground for urban waste. No wonder authorities are overwhelmed and have in the past opted to repress the issue altogether.

Physical density is mirrored in social density. Depending on where boundaries are drawn, the population of Imbaba, including nearby villages that have been absorbed in the

meantime, is estimated to be between 850 000 and a million inhabitants, but again, no one knows for sure (Bayat, Denis 2000: 185; Sims 2010: 115). Informal provenance notwithstanding, Imbaba has become a *bona fide* community in its own right, if not a city within the city. Entire industries have emerged to service the neighborhood's specific needs, providing all necessary trades of the building sector such as local laborers, building firms, contractors, developers, and real estate brokers. "Personal acquaintance and community-sanctioned trust are the main guarantees of sale transactions" (Sims 2010: 114). Local networking is key; word of mouth recommendation is the primary mode for securing commissions; who knows who and who owes what to whom determines what gets built, sold, or rented. But areas like Imbaba are not just home to a multitude of people; they are also employment generators comprising a profusion of small enterprises that contribute to Cairo's overall economy. In sum, informal agglomerations are essentially working-class neighborhoods, heterogeneous in their ethnic makeup and income levels, and tight-knit in their social structure. Those who dwell and work here have been brought together by circumstance, a chance convergence that has spawned an informal 'machine for living' and working.

Though not acknowledged for so long, the *ashwa'iyat* neighborhoods did not go entirely unnoticed. Having a clear interest in supporting stability in the region, international organizations such as the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched parallel initiatives in the late 1970s to persuade the Egyptian government to upgrade informal settlements. Lasting nearly a decade, these projects pursued the objective of introducing the principle of cost recovery for the provision of infrastructure in irregular settlements. "Beneficiaries would pay for the goods and services received, generating funds that could be spent on subsequent phases of upgrading, thus setting in motion a self-sustaining process by which a wider range of Egyptians would ultimately have access to serviced formal-sector dwellings" (Dorman 2009: 278). The *ashwa'iyat* would in this way bring much needed returns not only to the informal, but also to the formal city, at least in principle. In this particular case, a total of USD 35 million in loans and grants was allocated to trigger the hypothetical cycle of rehabilitation, with roughly a third of the amount to be paid back by the government under the terms of a credit agree-

ment. This program, however, was anything but consensus-driven in that "Egyptian government officials were initially uninterested in upgrading low-income settlements. They would have preferred their demolition and the relocation of their inhabitants to either a purpose-built 'model city for the poor' or new desert cities, both of which they hoped the donors would fund" (Dorman 2009: 278). The World Bank and USAID moved quickly to reject this agenda, using the large sum of money offered to force the government into compliance. Egypt's housing ministry had no choice but to give in, and responded by setting up affiliate offices in Cairo's informal neighborhoods to manage investments in local infrastructure. While these urban development projects did achieve relative success in some targeted areas, including Imbaba, overall they failed to generate any returns. This failure was due in no small part to the entrenched position of the state, which favored the construction of new settlements. Moreover, the entire scheme ran counter to the preferred way of doing business, which relied on a clientelistic model based on favors among a network of acquaintances. Eventually, the money ran out with only some services having been implemented, and for all intents and purposes, the mission was stopped in its tracks.

Despite the futility of these efforts, informal communities began to gain more visibility in both national and international media in the early 1990s. The turning point was a major coordinated assault led by the military and the police in December 1992, targeting the *ashwa'iyat* of Imbaba. Suddenly, "a nameless neighborhood became a symbol, a paradigm: Imbaba was besieged by 16 000 security forces, led by 2000 officers, one of the biggest sweep operations ever undertaken in Cairo," wrote urban geographer Eric Denis in one of the first scholarly accounts of the event; he went on to claim that this incident brought the society of informality into the limelight, and since then it has become impossible to ignore it (Denis 1992: 121). The sweep lasted six weeks, during which hundreds of residents were arbitrarily interrogated and many imprisoned, including a number of suspected militants. The state brought in heavy artillery, from armored cars to tanks, aiming to bring outlaw territory under control. In the spirit of informality and on-the-spot ingenuity so often attributed to these communities, piles of garbage were used by residents as barricades to block access by security forces, forcing them in turn to remove hundreds of tons of refuse just to enter the site.

This intervention changed the fate of the district overnight, serving to brand it as even more deviant and treacherous, for most reports in the press used the so-called ‘discovery’ of informality as an opportunity to criminalize the poor and their habitat. The “Siege of Imbaba,” as it came to be known, was a political spectacle, an “instrument of governance or a mechanism that attempts to shore up the ideological legitimacy and authority of the government and public support for its policies,” in the words of urban politics scholar Diane Singerman (Singerman 2009: 117). The ensuing discourse took on a ‘biopolitical’ dimension by equating an urban condition with ‘disease’ for political gain. Imbaba was Cairo’s ‘cancer’ that needed to be cured; residents were ‘animals’ to be tamed; informal settlements were depicted as ‘pathological’ to distance them from the ‘normal’, civilized city (Singerman 2009: 118–125). Imbaba was portrayed as a literal blight on the land endangering the nation’s capacity to sustain itself, the problems and anxieties associated with food security, among other challenges, having been projected bluntly onto this particular community. Stigmatization was

used as a political tool, one deployed to construct an ‘other’ for the sake of legitimizing the regime’s repressive nature.

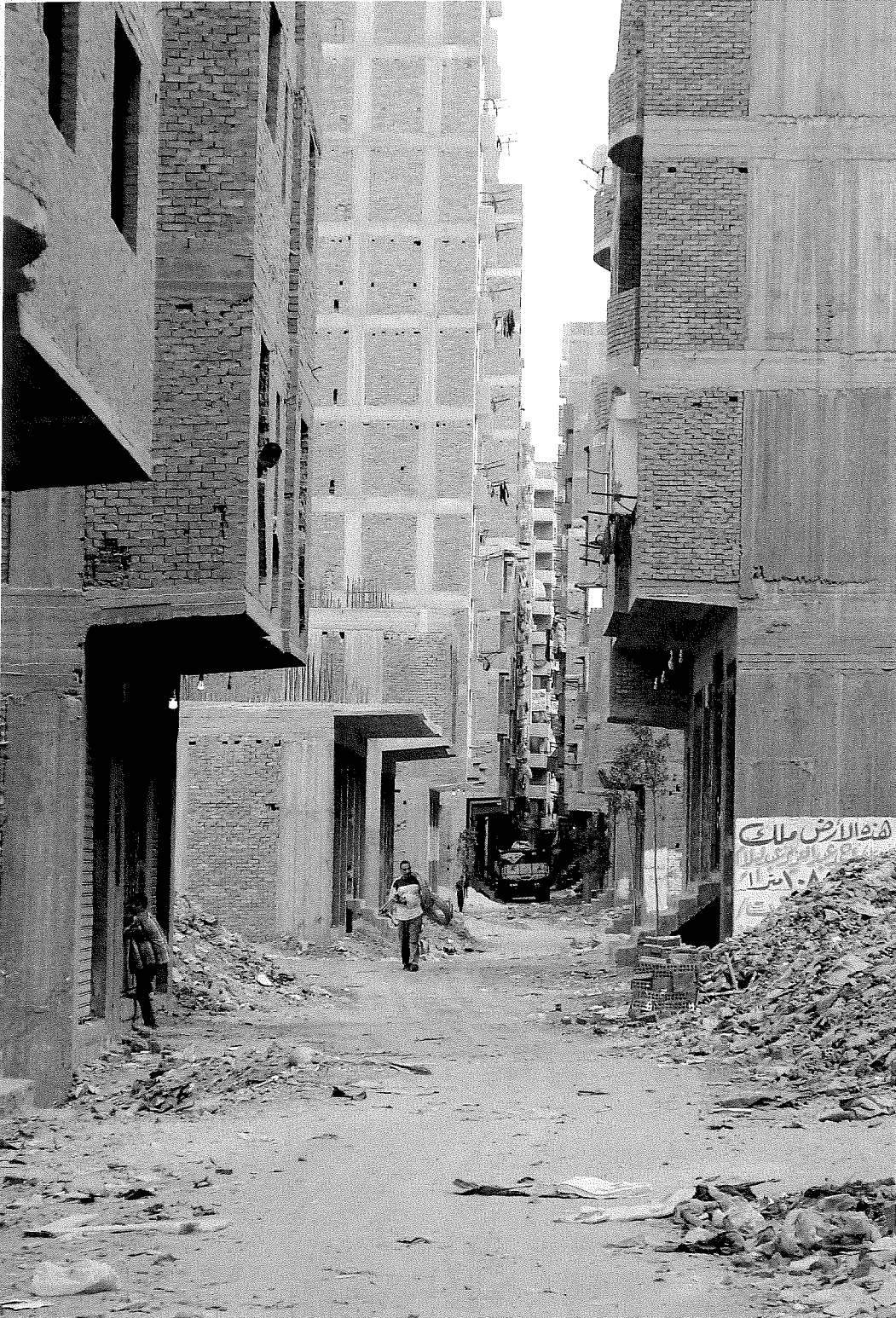
The smear campaign against poor settlements served an additional agenda, namely, that of discrediting both moderate and militant religious movements, and thereby reducing their power. With informality now linked to Islam, these settlements were branded as being not only uncivilized *but also* threatening. Islamic fundamentalists had taken root in parts of Imbaba and become quite influential as a local political force. Muslims had embedded themselves here primarily to advance their cause, recruit new members from among the neighborhood’s youth, and foment dissent toward the government. One religious cell in particular, Gama’a Islamiya, a radical offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, is notorious, having been accused of numerous crimes against political figures, the most prominent being the cell’s alleged assassination of President Sadat in 1981. Negative reputation notwithstanding, such groups do perform important social functions in dispossessed communities by providing much needed assistance, as the Brotherhood

Informal construction in the district of Ard al-Liwa, Cairo, 2015.
(Photo: Lorenz Bürgi)



did, for example, in the aftermath of the 1992 earthquake. The dismal government relief efforts at the time were indeed an embarrassment, and these groups stepped in, organizing temporary shelter, food, and medical supplies for displaced residents. The newly won popular

support reinforced the power base of religious fundamentalists, most notably Gama'a Islamiya, who announced its plans at a press conference in November 1992 just a month before the siege to found an independent "Republic of Imbaba" right in the heart of Cairo, a plan obvi-



Street view of illegally constructed housing on land originally used for farming in the neighborhood of Ard al-Liwa in Cairo, 2014. (Photo: Daniel Ostrowski)

ously meant to incense a sluggish state (Singerman 2009: 113–114).

The prospect of a ‘fundamentalist city’ in the nation’s capital was certainly one of the main motivations of the crackdown that aimed in one blow to clean up the scourge of society, secure the elite’s ruling monopoly, and improve Egypt’s image both domestically and abroad (AlSayyad 2011: 3–4). And this siege was just a prelude to other such bouts of government repression in Imbaba which would take place prior to and after the Arab Spring revolts, with residents being harassed, imprisoned, or shot. Along with other *ashwa’iyat*, Imbaba became the target of subsequent shows of force. President el-Sisi, who came to power after the 2013 *coup d’état*, pursued state persecutions that were no doubt largely due to former President Morsi’s affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood as one of its earlier leading members. As informal communities grew and came to occupy more and more agricultural land, and in the process gained strength as a constituent force, they were increasingly branded as a national threat and thus constituted a menacing political foe to be eliminated. Imbaba was

singled out as dangerous territory, especially due its association with Gama’a Islamiya, which has since been designated a terrorist organization linked to the jihadist militant group IS or the Islamic State.

Coming back to the relation between *baladi* bread and *baladi* neighborhoods, it is clear that the means of sustaining urban populations are anything but secure, subject as they are to ever more convoluted forms of political maneuvering. The entanglement of food and power, evidenced all the way from the top down to the local bakery in Imbaba, becomes more complex in light of both being compounded by another entanglement of food and power with urban informality. The political economy of food security is inextricably related to the political economy determining land tenure security, even in contexts where the latter is not officially recognized or guaranteed. So what appears as down-to-earth as having a roof over your head is intimately tied to getting food on the table, with a president’s dream to socialize the land unintentionally giving birth to a building frenzy, with the wheeling and dealing of the farmer and developer eager to purchase land, with the building inspector

Informal construction following the Arab Spring accelerated by ‘informal speculation’ on property development, 2013. (Photo: Tomas Munita, courtesy laif agentur)



bribed by a local contractor to build on agricultural parcels, with displaced families given no choice but to migrate to urban peripheries, with land further subdivided to allow even more construction, with the government casting a blind eye on blatant infractions of the law, with the clash of interests between foreign and domestic agendas concerning settlement upgrade programs, with religious fundamentalists taking advantage of state indifference to establish their own bases of power, and with government crackdowns on poor neighborhoods legitimized by stigmatization via the media, it is no wonder Egypt is facing the familiar refrain of revolution in its city streets. And, as the country becomes all the more reliant on foreign markets and thereby more embedded in the prevailing global economy, informality seems to be the inevitable course of the nation's fate.

Further reading

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