



Getting by on the Margins: Sudanese and Somali Refugees

A Case Report of Refugees in Towns
Cairo, Egypt

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

Location



Introduction

This case report explores the Sudanese and Somali refugee experience in Cairo, focusing on Kilo Araba wa Nus¹ and Hay el Ashr, two adjoining neighborhoods on the eastern outskirts of the city with large concentrations of Somali and Sudanese refugees. The case report pays particular attention to the role of social prejudice and racism in the everyday lives of Cairo’s refugees and how this affects their integration. There is extensive research on Cairo’s refugees, including studies of “closed-file” refugees, livelihoods, identity formation, and the relationship between UNHCR and Cairo’s various refugee populations.² These studies discuss physical security, racism, exploitation, and violence, but seldom show how

these issues affect the integration of refugees in Cairo. Yet, these are the issues refugees themselves raise with outsiders as the most pressing concerns within their communities.

This report begins with a brief history of forced migration in Egypt and the legal regime governing refugees in Egypt. The next section explores the urban impact and experiences of Sudanese and Somali refugees in Cairo’s migrant-hosting neighborhoods, focusing on Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr. I end with an assessment of the future outlook for Sudanese and Somali refugees in Cairo.

About the Author and How He Wrote the Report

I, Paul Miranda, lived in Cairo from 2012-17, working with a refugee assistance organization (RAO), first as a part-time caseworker in refugee resettlement for 12 months, then as a full-time resettlement program officer for 6 months, and then as the resettlement program coordinator for another 13 months. As a caseworker, I interviewed individuals and families for potential resettlement in a one-hour intake interview that focused on their lives in Egypt, exploring their security and protection problems, vulnerabilities, livelihoods, housing history, medical issues, and degree of successful “integration.” These interviews also explored whether they had undergone torture or violence in their countries of origin, and the details of their journeys to Egypt. If RAO decided to refer the individual to UNHCR for resettlement consideration, another three-hour interview explored the individuals’ vulnerabilities in Egypt.

Initially I conducted interviews through interpreters; later my Arabic improved enough to work without interpreters. In my latter two roles, I reviewed the intake forms that the caseworkers produced from their interviews and edited the referrals that were drafted from the one and three-hour interviews. I reviewed over 300 screening forms and at least 200 of the longer referral documents. I assisted the screening and intake team at our office’s reception once a week by having short discussions—between five to twenty minutes—with on average ten refugees who were experiencing problems in the processing of their resettlement cases, protection problems, or severe issues of vulnerability.

In 2016-17, I attended four community outreach meetings that lasted two to four hours with a Sudanese community group (SCGA) based in Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus. These meetings discussed a specific topic for an hour, followed by open discussion about community issues, where individuals spoke both of their own problems and community problems. I did not attend the other nine meetings at SCGA’s centers in 2016 but did review the notes from them.

¹ Simply “Araba wa Nus” going forward.

² See Abdel Aziz, N. (2017). *Surviving in Cairo as a Closed-File Refugee: Socio-Economic and Protection Challenges*. Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, The American University in Cairo. Paper No. 10. Moulin, C., & Nyers, P. (2007). “We Live in a Country of UNHCR”—Refugee Protests and Global Political Society. *International Political Sociology*, 1(4), 356–372. Mahmoud, H. W. (2011). “Conflict Defines Origins”: Identity Transformations of Sudanese Refugees in Cairo. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 28(3), 263–289.

This case report is based on my work experience and the community meetings in Cairo, supplemented with a desk review of research on Cairo's refugee communities, and additional unstructured interviews with key informants conducted eight months after I left RAO (see Annex Table 1).

Challenges and sources of bias

My understanding of the experiences of Cairo's refugees is influenced by my work roles and identity as a cis-white American man. Resettlement is highly sought after by refugees in Cairo, and the refugees knew I made decisions on who RAO did and did not refer to UNHCR for resettlement consideration. As Katarzyna Grabska has observed, Sudanese refugees perceived that UNHCR policies did not reward refugees who showed "resourcefulness in solving their own problems" (Grabska, 2006, p. 301). As such, it is possible that in our interactions the refugees emphasized the negative aspects of their lives and the challenges they face. Conversely, my previous roles and the time I spent in Cairo enabled me to understand the depth and magnitude of the issues refugees face because they were more willing to speak of their experience in an official interview setting than with an unknown academic researcher. For example, several women interviewed in RAO said they had told very few people about the rape or gender-based violence they survived out of fear that if members of their community found out it could lead to their husbands divorcing them. Arabic speaking LGBTIQ refugees often told me I was one of the first people outside of their immediate circle with whom they discussed their orientation or identity.

This case report is based on my experiences, and the experiences of a number of refugee key informants. It is not conclusive, broad, or statistically oriented like the myriad International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) surveys conducted in Cairo. However, it aims to fill a gap in the literature on refugee integration in Cairo by offering depth, texture, the long view, and spatial contextualization of Sudanese and Somali experiences.

Acknowledgments

While unnamed for their own security, Paul would like to thank the refugees who worked closely with him throughout the writing of this report and contributed their nuanced knowledge to the final product. Their contributions were crucial and without them this case report would not have been possible.

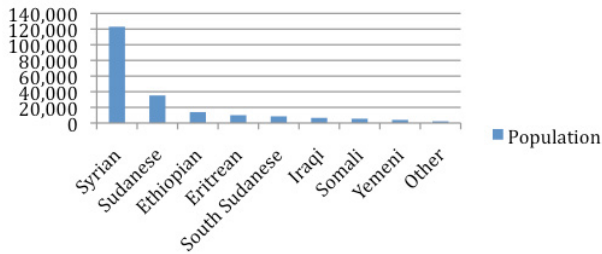
Background on Forced Migration to Egypt

Since the early 1900s, Egypt has hosted numerous communities of refugees and migrants. Armenians fled to Egypt during the 1915 massacre under the Ottoman Empire; thousands of Palestinians arrived in Egypt after the Nakba in 1948 and again after Black September in Jordan 1971; and southern Sudanese refugees started to arrive following the outbreak of the first war in Sudan in 1955. Another wave of Sudanese refugee migration began in 1983 following the establishment of Islamic Law in southern Sudan and the outbreak of the second Sudanese civil war. From the early 1990s, wars and conflict in the Horn of Africa led to large numbers

of Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali refugees coming to Egypt (Jacobsen, Ayoub, & Johnson, 2012, p. 11). Iraqis began to arrive in Egypt in large numbers following the escalation of violence in Iraq between 2006 and 2007. Most recently, large numbers of Syrian refugees started to arrive in Egypt in 2012. The influx of Syrian refugees significantly altered the makeup of Egypt's refugee population and the structure of the refugee protection regime.

According to UNHCR, as of September 2017, there are 211,104 refugees and asylum seekers

September 2017 Population



Nationality	Refugee Population as of Sept 2017	% of Total Refugee Population
Syrian	123,033	58.23%
Sudanese	35,227	16.69%
Ethiopian	14,009	6.64%
Eritrean	10,075	4.77%
South Sudanese	8,578	4.06%
Iraqi	6,611	3.13%
Somali	6,561	3.1%
Yemeni	4,024	1.91%
Other	2,266	1.07%
Total	211,104	

Refugee Arrivals Over Time

Nationalities	2005	2011	2016
Syrian	2	94	116,013
Sudanese	23,637	24,750	33,128
Ethiopian	587	1,436	12,029
Eritrean	294	1,917	7,132
South Sudanese	n/a	n/a	5,641
Iraqi	251	7,436	7,492
Somali	4,184	7,168	7,027
Yemeni	209	256	2,640

registered in Egypt, representing 63 different nationalities (UNHCR, 2017). The largest refugee nationality group is Syrians (123,000), followed by Sudanese (+35,000), Ethiopians, Eritreans, South Sudanese, Iraqis, Somalis, Yemeni, and Others (Table 1).

However, these official numbers are questionable.³ For example, many “southern Sudanese” registered with UNHCR were recognized as refugees prior to South Sudan’s separation from Sudan in July 2012. After South Sudan’s independence, many obtained South Sudanese citizenship and identification papers, but they are still listed as Sudanese in UNHCR’s database because they did not update their information with UNHCR.

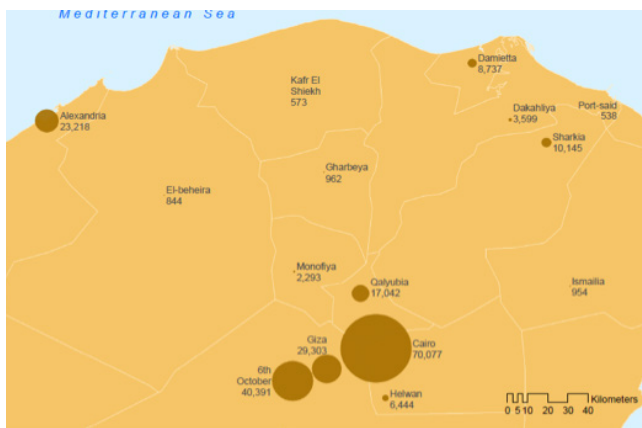
Refugees live in several towns in Egypt, but by far the majority are concentrated in and around Cairo. The map below shows the distribution of refugees according to UNHCR as of December 2017.

International organizations in Cairo such as IOM, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), CARE, Caritas, and UNHCR divide the refugee population between Syrian and “non-Syrian,”⁴ often resulting in separate and unequal programming and interventions. Syrians receive the bulk of international assistance, as they do throughout the Middle East, and is manifest in the Syrian Regional Response Plan—which largely ignores non-Syrian refugee populations in all host countries.⁵ A prime example is World Food Program assistance in Egypt. In 2016, approximately 30% of registered Syrian refugees received 120-220LE (USD 7-12) per household dependent per month in food vouchers. This can be spent at grocery stores including Carrefour (high end). No other refugee population in Egypt is eligible for this assistance. This inequality has created animosity towards Syrian communities from the “non-Syrian” population.

³ Most official registrations of urban refugee populations are outdated and incomplete, simply because it is difficult to keep track of highly mobile populations.

⁴ Also, sometimes referred to as Syrian and Africans + Iraqis.

⁵ For more on the “hierarchies of aid” in the Middle East see Davis, R., Taylor, A., Todman, W., & Murphy, E. (2016). Sudanese and Somali Refugees in Jordan: Hierarchies of Aid in Protracted Displacement Crises. *Middle East Report*, 46(2), 2-10.



(UNHCR, 2017).

Legal Framework Governing Refugees in Egypt

Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, as well as to the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention. Egypt has placed restrictions on five articles of the 1951 Convention related to personal status, rationing, access to primary education,⁶ access to public relief and assistance, labor legislation, and social security.⁷ Egypt did not place a reservation on Article 17 concerning paid employment, and Article 54 of the Egyptian Constitution states that foreigners granted political asylum may be eligible for work permits. However, it is very difficult in practice for a refugee to obtain a work permit. There is no physical office where refugees can apply for a work permit. Not even UNHCR is able to obtain work permits for its refugee staff interpreters, meaning that the agency given responsibility for refugees by the Egyptian government has to illegally employ refugees as interpreters.

Egypt signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with UNHCR in 1954 that assigns responsibility for refugees directly to UNHCR. According to Article 2 of the MoU, UNHCR is entrusted to:

- Cooperate with governmental authorities, undertake the census of, and identify the refugees eligible under the mandate of the High Commissioner;
- Facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees;
- Encourage in cooperation with the Egyptian Government and the international organizations competent in immigration matters, the initiatives leading to resettle, in every possible measure, in the countries of immigration, the refugees residing in Egypt;
- Help, within the limits of the funds received to this effect, the most destitute refugees within the mandate residing in Egypt;
- Ensure the coordination of the activities undertaken in Egypt in favor of refugees under the mandate by welfare societies duly authorized by the Government.⁸

As such, all procedures pertaining to refugee registration, documentation, and refugee status determination (RSD) are carried out by UNHCR in Egypt. In practice, the MoU's transfer of responsibility means that UNHCR assumes the primary role in providing education, health, social welfare services, and livelihoods assistance to refugees. This practice reflects a larger trend throughout the Middle East whereby UNHCR acts as a "surrogate state" and substitutes the state's role in administering key services for refugees (Kagan, 2011).

The MoU between Egypt and UNHCR explicitly lists voluntary and resettlement as the preferred durable solutions. Crucially, it makes no mention of local integration. While the Government of Egypt publicly speaks of welcoming refugees, there are no active efforts or policies to promote the integration of refugees in Egypt (M. Ayoub, personal communication November 19, 2017). Egyptian citizenship is granted on the basis of descent (*jus sanguinis*), so refugees are unable to acquire Egyptian nationality. This effectively rules

⁶ However, Egypt has ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which grants all children under 19 the right to free primary education regardless of nationality. In principle, as of September 2017 all Sudanese and Syrian children can access public education (UNHCR Egypt Monthly Statistical Report September 2017).

⁷ For reservations to the 1951 Convention see <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3d9abe177&query=1951%20Refugee%20Convention>

⁸ Translation by Tarek Badawy with minor revisions by the author.

out full legal integration and means that refugees need to reapply for residency permits every six months at the Mogamma in Downtown Cairo in order for their stay to remain regularized. This is a burdensome and difficult process (see box: Enduring the Mogamma).

As of November 2017, all asylum-seekers except for Syrian and Yemeni nationals undergo refugee status determination interviews adjudicated by UNHCR. When Syrians register with UNHCR,

they are automatically and immediately issued a yellow asylum-seeker certificate which gives them access to a six-month residency permit. Syrian refugee claims are only assessed if they are under consideration for resettlement to a third country by UNHCR, at which time they enter a combined process whereby UNHCR evaluates their resettlement and refugee claim simultaneously. UNHCR intended to start assessing the refugee claims of Yemeni nationals in 2017 but has yet to do so.

Enduring the Mogamma

Refugees start lining up at 4am to make sure that they can get inside the building. Some come the night before and sleep in front of the Mogamma. Once inside, police treat refugees horribly: officers will scream, insult, and, from my own observation, once ripped up an application of a refugee who was nearly done acquiring the various stamps and stickers required from different windows. At any point in this process, a refugee can be told that they cannot renew their residency permit and be arbitrarily denied. When that happens, a refugee can alert UNHCR (or an INGO who in turn alerts UNHCR Protection), who then faxes a letter to the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reminding them that this person is a refugee and entitled to a permit. If the refugee keeps trying, they may eventually receive their permit, however, a small number are never granted residency permits due to “security reasons.” Refugees and their descendants need to go through this process for years on end. The extremely trying bureaucratic process at the Mogamma is so well known in Egypt that a movie, *Al Irhab wal Kabab*, was made about a man who takes everyone hostage inside the Mogamma office after he fails numerous times to change the school his children are registered in.

Background on Forced Migration in Greater Cairo

The majority of Egypt’s refugee population lives in Greater Cairo,⁹ the largest metropolitan area in the Middle East. Cairo is administratively split over three governorates: Cairo governorate, Giza City (Giza governorate), and Shubra al-Khemia City (Qalyoubia Governorate) (Sabry, 2009, p. 29). Each governorate has its own administrative structure with a *muhafiz* (appointed by the president) at the top of a large bureaucratic apparatus. However, the management of urban functions is severely

limited. About 80% of the governors’ budgets come from central government allocations, of which, 55-75% goes to salaries. This leaves 10-20% of the budget for urban investments, meaning Cairo’s governors are unable to do much more than administer the day-to-day affairs of their areas (Sims, 2010, p. 253-54).

Cairo’s population is a matter up for debate. A national census was conducted in July 2017, which

⁹ Referred to as Cairo henceforth.

put Cairo Governorate’s population at 15.1 million and the Giza and Qalyoubia governorates at 9.1 million and 5.9 million respectively. These numbers are likely to be undercounts, and their accuracy is unknown. The 2006 Egyptian census put Cairo’s population at approximately 16 million inhabitants; however, outside analysts believe that the actual number was closer to 20 million. One reason for the discrepancy in numbers then (and probably now) is the abundance of semi-legally and illegally constructed informal housing where approximately 70% of Cairo’s population resides (Keeper, 2009, p. 13, 15). Much of the informal housing in Cairo was and continues to be constructed on the periphery of the city. Despite clearly being part of the agglomeration of Cairo, many of these informal areas were not considered part of the city by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) and were not counted in the 2006 survey (Sabry, 2009, p. 30).

Before delving into the specifics of the neighborhoods where Cairo’s refugees live, it is important to understand how local governance and urban planning in Cairo’s informal and semi-formal areas works. Most of Cairo’s informal

neighborhoods were built on privately owned agricultural land that was subdivided and sold to private owners or developers. While the individual inhabitants or their landlords may have legal ownership rights to the land, the structures themselves are illegal as the land is zoned for agricultural production. Urban authorities have followed a *laissez-faire* policy in these areas, but their tolerance is supported by a “well-consolidated system of clientelism and corruption,” leaving the residents of informal areas dependent on the “benevolence” of public authorities (Piffero, 2009, p. 22, 25). While informal residents’ tenure security is somewhat tenuous, David Sims notes that with massive amounts of construction in Cairo’s informal areas, a “critical mass” of residents exists whose eviction would require enough cost and political opposition “to make local authorities simply give up” (Sims, 2010, p. 110). Yet, the residents of these areas must navigate and pay bribes into informal networks of middlemen, powerbrokers, and politicians in order to construct basic infrastructure and to ensure continued tolerance of their urban investments (Piffero, 2009, p. 25).

Mapping Cairo’s Refugees

Cairo’s refugee population is clustered by nationality in disparate, but sometimes overlapping, parts of the city.

Determining how many refugees live in these various neighborhoods is difficult. While the planning for the 2017 census included discussions about counting migrant and refugee figures, the 2017 CAPMAS National Census did not count refugees or migrants.

Other groups of migrants live amongst the refugees. For example, in Hay el Ashr, there are Nigerians and other West Africans, and students studying at al-Azhar University from China,

Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Central Asian countries. Furthermore, many of the refugee national populations sub-divide by identity groups: for example, amongst Eritreans, Christians cluster together, while Ethiopian Oromos separate from Amharas.

One source of information about where refugees live is UNHCR’s registration data. An asylum seeker’s current address is recorded on the registration form and printed on their UNHCR card. While it would be possible to pull these figures from UNHCR’s database (called ProGres), the database is inaccurate because, as discussed above, the information is rarely updated.

Geographic Distribution of Cairo's Refugees by Nationality

Neighborhood	Syrian	Sudanese	South Sudanese ¹⁰	Eritrean	Ethiopian	Iraqi	Somali ¹¹	Yemeni ¹²
Central-North Cairo (east side of the Nile)								
Ain Shams		X	X					
Matareya			X					
Abbassia		X	X					
Hadayek el Zaytoun		X						
Helmiyat el Zaytoun		X			X			
Heliopolis	X	X				X		
East Cairo								
Araba wa Nus		X	X					
Hay el Ashr		X	X				X	
Hay el Tasa'							X	
Hay el Sabia							X	
Nasr City ¹³	X					X		
South Cairo (east side of the Nile)								
Arab Maadi		X	X		X			
Hadayek el Maadi		X	X		X		X	
Helwan	X	X						
Maadi	X	X	X		X		X	
West Cairo								
Ard el Lewa		X		X	X		X	
Baragel		X						
Bulaq el Daqrur		X						
Dokki		X						X
el Marg		X						
Faisal	X	X		X		X		X
Mohandeseen		X		X	X	X		
Satellite Cities								
6th of October City ¹⁴	X (Hossary square area)	X (Masaken Osman sub-district)		X		X	X	
10th of Ramadan City	X							
el-Obour City	X							
el-Rehab City	X					X		
Jissr al-Swiss	X					X		
Madinaty	X							
Sadat City (Menofia Governorate)	X							
Tagmouh 1 and 5	X	X						

¹⁰ There are large concentrations of South Sudanese in Ain Shams, Matareya, Abbassia, and Maadi, but also pockets of Sudanese in the other three Central-North Cairo neighborhoods.

¹¹ Many of the Somalis clustering in 6th October, Hay el Tasa', and Hay el Sabia returned from years abroad in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Some travel and live on passports they acquired abroad.

¹² My data on Yemeni refugees is limited and there could be other areas of Cairo where they are living.

¹³ This refers to the wealthier areas of Nasr City closer to the urban core of Cairo where there are many malls.

¹⁴ 6th October City has many districts and sub-districts, and a substantial Syrian presence around Hossary square.

Traveling to UNHCR

Getting to UNHCR's office in 6th October City in Cairo's traffic means spending hours on a microbus. You try to arrive at the UNHCR office around dawn. Some come the night before and sleep in front of the building with their young children. After waiting for hours in a disorderly line in Cairo's stifling heat, you speak to someone through a thick glass window surrounded by a barbed wire fence with a crowd of people crushed around you leaving no privacy. UNHCR has a phone hotline which has improved somewhat over the years; however, you use up phone credit while sitting on hold for ~30 minutes before being able to speak to someone. Suffice to say, unless it is an emergency, it is not worth one's time to try and update UNHCR.

When refugees change neighborhoods or depart the city, they rarely inform UNHCR. In part this is because informing UNHCR of personal updates or even speaking to a UNHCR employee is a time-consuming and trying process. Refugees must travel from their neighborhoods to 6th October City, which often means traversing the entire city, a distance of up to 60km or more (see box: Traveling to UNHCR).

Sudanese and Somali Neighborhoods: Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus

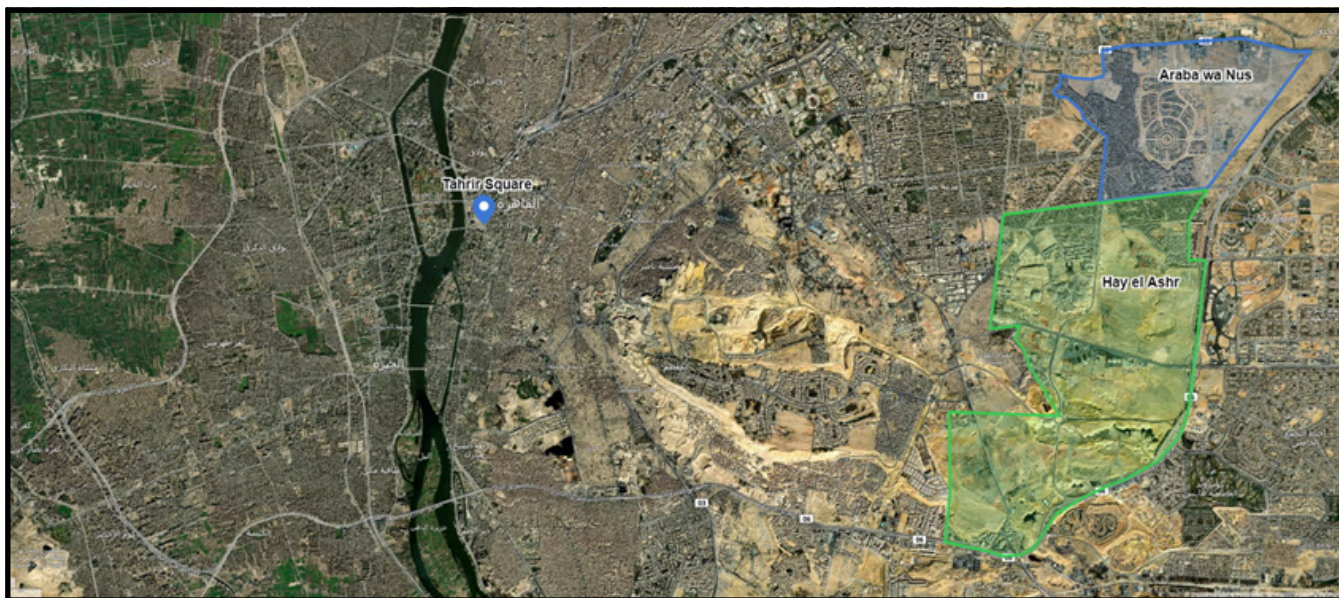
Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr are adjoining sub-districts in Nasr City on the eastern side of the Nile,

just south of the airport. It is a one- to two-hour trip from the city center by public transportation, depending on traffic and the combination of transportation used, which might include tuk-tuks, minibuses or larger public buses, and possibly the metro.

Governance

The official name of Araba wa Nus is Ezbet al-Haggana. The neighborhood was established in the 1960s as a settlement for the families of Egyptian soldiers. The area was originally set up as a formal neighborhood, but the families who settled there began "illegal squatting" and occupied the surrounding vacant land, leaving the area in a state of quasi-formality and illegality

Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus¹⁵



¹⁵ Tahrir Square is considered Cairo's city center and also where the Mogamma is located.

(Piffero, 2009, p. 22). Informal areas such as Araba wa Nus suffer from a severe lack of local governance and bureaucratic administration. *Hayy* (plural: *ahya'*) are the local district units in Cairo. Their administration is extremely weak and concerned primarily with building control and permit functions, an area ripe for extracting bribes. David Sims notes that many of the district chiefs are ex-military and ex-police officers whose staff is primarily made up of low-level employees who rarely show up for work. Each district or *hay* has an elected “local people’s council,” with elections intended to take place every four years. These councils are supposed to be the local citizens’ representation to executive government bodies, but much of the councils’ work involves the operation of patronage networks rather than formal governance (Sims, 2010, p. 255).

While local representatives will occasionally respond to citizens’ demands for missing services and public infrastructure, local governance in Cairo can be best thought of as “crisis management” or a “day-to-day muddling through” from one problem to another (Sims, 2010, p. 256). Residents of Araba wa Nus described to al Masry al Youm (Egypt Today) in 2009 that the area’s representatives appeared only during election time and did little to provide for the area.¹⁶

Demographics

The Sudanese population in Egypt is ethnically diverse. According to 2016 UNHCR statistics, some 25% of the registered population were Nuba, 20% were Fur, and the remaining 55% were divided amongst other Sudanese ethnicities.¹⁷ The Nuba, the largest Sudanese ethnic group in Cairo, have formed their own “community-based organization,” which I refer to as Sudanese Community Group A (SCGA). It consists of 22 Nuba “families” (how their leaders refer to different Nuba sub-groupings) and claims to have some 7,500 registered members in Cairo. Both the current and former chairman

estimate that the majority of Sudanese refugees residing in Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus are Nuba.¹⁸ Most Sudanese refugees have been in Cairo more than five years.¹⁹ Many refugees express frustrations about this length of time and what they see as a lack of sufficient assistance (See box: Length of Time in Cairo).

Length of Time in Cairo

In a meeting with a Nuba community group in October 2016, an individual said “I’ve been in Cairo for 17 years and had refugee status for 14 years. I don’t know why I’m still here, what’s happening in the UN? We have no food, no good work, and no way to leave the country.” At an October 2016 meeting, another Nuba noted that “We have been here for many years, but UNHCR has done nothing for us. For whom are they working? Not for refugees. Some of us came in the 1990s and 2000s. We brought small children here, and now they are young men. Is this humanity?” While these comments were from individuals at these meetings, they were by no means extraordinary. Over the course of the 13 meetings that were held with the Nuba groups from early 2016 to early 2017, this complaint was continually raised.

Spatial Distribution of Populations in Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus

Throughout Cairo, African refugees cluster in groups to try and provide themselves with some sense of protection, but they live alongside the local Egyptian population. In Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr, most apartment buildings contain a mix of Sudanese or Somali and Egyptian residents. Araba wa Nus is primarily inhabited by Sudanese. Hay al Ashr contains large Somali and Sudanese populations, with the area known as Tabba inhabited mostly by Sudanese, and Saqr Quresh mixed with Sudanese and Somalis.

¹⁶ See <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/29031>

¹⁷ These statistics were provided during an inter-agency working group in early 2017.

¹⁸ This fits with the findings from Jacobsen’s 2012 survey of Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus (n=158 households).

¹⁹ In Jacobsen’s 2012 survey, 40% of the total respondents (n=565 households) had been in Cairo for 5-8 years and 25% for 8 or more years. Of respondents from South Kordofan (where the Nuba groups originate from), 45% had been in Cairo for 8 or more years and 35% for 5-8 years.

Map of Araba wa Nus



Map of Hay el Ashr



Somalis first came to Hay el Ashr some years ago because of affordable rental and living costs, and because Hay el Ashr has an open feel, especially around Swissry A and Swissry B streets, with wide main streets and buildings laid out in a somewhat organized fashion. The spaciousness of the area appealed to refugees as it felt less congested and crowded compared to Cairo's other refugee neighborhoods.

However, security in Hay el Ashr has declined over the years. Many refugees, especially women and younger children, make sure to return to their homes in the early evening and do not move around in the street at night, especially in Saqr Quresh. Young Sudanese and Somali men spend their evenings in coffee shops run by their

co-nationals watching football and drinking tea, coffee or juices. Despite spending time in cafes or just hanging out in the street, there is little to no interaction between Somalis or Sudanese and Egyptians or between Somalis and Sudanese.²⁰ For example, there are two football pitches in the western part of Hay el Ashr, where Somalis rent time to play, but when they do, they do not interact with the Egyptians in any meaningful way. Many of the Nuba in Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr are Christian. Despite a large Egyptian Church in Araba wa Nus and a sizeable Egyptian Coptic presence, there is little interaction between Sudanese and Egyptian Christians. Sudanese Christians have their own informal churches in both neighborhoods they use for smaller services and attend Sunday services at different churches throughout Cairo.

Refugees' Experiences

Livelihoods

Cairo's refugees are not legally allowed to work, so they work in the informal sector—as do most low-income Egyptians. In Jacobsen's 2012 study, nearly 70% of the 565 surveyed Sudanese households reported working in casual day labor as their primary livelihood. Some of the most common jobs were housecleaners, street vendors, factory workers, henna drawing / perfume making, and security guards (Jacobsen et al., 2012, p. 29-30). Similarly at RAO, our clients worked informally on a piecemeal basis—women as housecleaners, men as street vendors, security guards or doing odd jobs.²¹ Somali men are less likely than Sudanese to work in street vending. Some

Somali men work for *hawala* money transfer companies, or in the service industry as waiters in restaurants and cafes (Abdel Aziz, 2017, p. 28). More educated individuals work as tutors for the children of Somali families returning from the United States, Europe, and Canada.²²

Even with some income, life is a struggle with low pay and long hours for most refugees. Jacobsen's study found that the income of Sudanese respondents "seldom yielded enough for subsistence and many [were] barely above the level of begging." Their struggles are further complicated by the high number of people in each household relative to income earners (i.e. the dependency ratio). In the study, 20% of households had four dependents supported by

²⁰ The relationship between refugee communities can sometimes be fraught. In an extreme example, in summer 2017, a group of Somali young men killed a Sudanese young man in Hay el Ashr after a group of Sudanese men sexually harassed a Somali woman. Leaders in both communities quickly came together to diffuse the situation.

²¹ In Grabska's 2003-2004 study, 75% of her 179 respondents were working, mostly in the informal sector. Most women did domestic work while 25% of respondents, mainly men, were street vendors (Grabska, 2006, p. 299).

²² Alternative livelihood options include niche refugee markets such as selling traditional food products, performing music during weddings, and other cultural and traditional services.

one earner, 20% had a five-to-one ratio, 15% had a six-to-one ratio, and 20% had a seven-to-one ratio (Jacobsen et al., 2012, p. 28, 30-31). These struggles were obvious to me during my time at RAO. On almost a daily basis, African refugees approached RAO because they were facing eviction due to inability to pay their rent, or unable to support their families. Many who were evicted had possessions stolen by their landlords.

Economic Struggles

During one RAO community meeting in Araba wa Nus in September 2016, one person said, “we do not have jobs and cannot provide for our families. And even when we do find jobs, we work like slaves for little pay.” At another meeting in November 2016, an individual said, “our wives work long hours for little pay for Egyptians...are we here to work as slaves?”

The struggles of single mothers to work and care for their children often came out during our outreach meetings. With few options for childcare, many mothers lock their children in the house when they go to work. In a meeting in October 2016, a Nuba woman pointed out that Egyptian employers set their hours from 8am to 6pm with no option for negotiation, leaving them with “no way to take care of [their] children.”

Exploitation and violence are common in the workplace, and widely reported by researchers.²³ African refugees are frequently paid less than promised by employers; fired without being paid at all; unexpectedly laid off; accused of theft and detained by the police or by the family they work for (occasionally as pretext for termination). Many report being abused physically—particularly women—or verbally in the workplace. Women African refugees at RAO often reported severe sexual and gender-based violence working as housecleaners. One woman remarked:

We thought we were escaping war, but we are facing another war here in Cairo. We face sexual harassment on the street, men are always touching us inappropriately. At work, bosses have a bad heart. If you work as a maid, they will accuse you of stealing and imprison you in the house.

Sexual and gender-based violence has ripple effects. One Sudanese man noted that “for a lot of husbands, if he knows his wife has been raped, he will not want to be with her anymore.”

Children’s Education

Sudanese children are allowed to enroll in Egyptian public schools, but Sudanese refugees are often reluctant to enroll their children in Egyptian schools, even private schools, due to discrimination, bullying, and abuse.²⁴ Many Sudanese shared this view: “our children are unable to integrate with Egyptian students.” Most parents prefer community-run Sudanese schools which use the Sudanese national curriculum and are supported by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) after an accreditation process. In 2016, a Sudanese school in Araba wa Nus served 450 students ranging from kindergarten to grade 12. Most students were Sudanese living in Araba wa Nus, but there were also Somali and even Palestinian students in the school. Somali families in Hay el Ashr can enroll their children in Egyptian public school; however, schools often require a letter from the Somali embassy first. As many Somali refugees do not have passports, it is difficult to access embassy services. To obtain a letter, a Somali refugee must bring three passport-carrying Somalis to the embassy to verify their identity, and the refugee must pay a fee. Because Somali children in Egyptian schools face discrimination and abuse, some families in Hay el

²³ See Ahmed, A. (2010). ‘I need work!’: The Multiple Roles of the Church, Ranking and Religious Piety Among Domestic Workers in Egypt. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 11(3-4), 362-377 and Jureidini, R. (2009). Irregular Workers in Egypt: Migrant and Refugee Domestic Workers. *IJMS: International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 11(1), 75-90.

²⁴ Egyptian public schools have a poor reputation even amongst Egyptians. Egypt has four categories of schools: standard Egyptian public schools are the lowest ranked and least valued, Egyptian “language schools” are public but with a slightly higher reputation, private schools are sought after but expensive, and most desirable are the very expensive international schools where the primary language of instruction is English.

Ashr opt to enroll their children in Sudanese-run community schools. As both the Sudanese and Egyptian school curriculums are in Arabic, the Somali community center in Hay el Ashr offers Somali language classes for young children so that they do not “forget their language.”

One informant recounted how a Sudanese family enrolled their children in an Egyptian school, but after a week pulled them out and enrolled them in a Sudanese school in Araba wa Nus. The Egyptian students in the school “touched the children’s bodies all the time, saying ‘why are you so black?’ ‘What did the sun do to you?’” While at the Egyptian school, the children had been unable to eat and went home and cried at night. This abuse could also get violent. Some parents reported their children being beaten in schools, hit with stones or glass bottles, and ignored by teachers. Some of the parents tried to talk to the teachers and the principals about these problems but reported that no one was interested.

Medical services

African and Iraqi refugees access medical care at Caritas Egypt, located in Garden City (one to two hours by public transport from Araba wa Nus

and Hay el Ashr). Caritas is one of UNHCR’s NGO “implementing partners,” i.e. sub-contracted by UNHCR to serve refugees. Caritas refers cases to the Arab Medical Union which then refers the individual to the appropriate secondary healthcare provider such as St. Mary’s Hospital in Abbassia or Qasr al Aini Hospital. The services are generally of poor quality, like the entire Egyptian healthcare system, with long waiting periods.²⁵ Caritas is perennially underfunded and usually runs out of budget towards the end of the year. Typical advice for people denied medical services in November or December is to “try again in January or February when Caritas has more money.” Additional services are offered by other NGOs including psychological counseling, psychosocial services, and physical therapy from Doctors Without Borders (MSF), PSTIC, and St. Andrew’s Refugee Services (StARS). CARE offers case management for gender-based violence cases and has a shelter for survivors of domestic abuse. PSTIC and StARS also have medical access teams for when the referral pathway breaks down, which is frequent. Terre Des Hommes has a few partners throughout Cairo working on child protection and psychosocial activities, but its services almost exclusively reach Syrians. Several Syrian-run organizations like Syria al-Gad, Hamzat al-Khatib, and Fard operate fairly large-scale programming relative to their size and budget.

Urban Impact on the Economy and Housing

Rents and prices in general have been highly dynamic in Cairo over the past two years because of the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, inflation, and general economic woes. This has meant low-income people suffer from price inflation, but as discussed below, refugees struggle more because

of the discrimination they experience particularly in the housing and employment markets. In low-income areas like Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr, the large number of refugees support the local economy.

²⁵ As of 5 December 2017, AMU pulled out of its agreement with UNHCR, leaving the medical referral system in disarray. UNHCR and its partners are currently trying to re-establish a referral pathway, but this could take time.

The local economy: Sudanese and Somali businesses

In Hay el Ashr and Araba wa Nus there are dozens of Somali and Sudanese run businesses ranging from small cafes serving tea, juice and snacks to larger restaurants, small grocery stores, cellphone stores, barber shops, small clothing stores, and tailors. At the neighborhood level, the Somali business impact in Hay el Ashr is small relative to the majority Egyptian population, but clearly visible as you walk around. Hay el Ashr covers about 1.5 square miles (2.4 square km), but Somalis cluster in an area about a half square mile (0.8 km)²⁶ (see Map). Here, there are five Somali cafes each employing three to six Somalis, three tailors each employing two to three Somalis, a small grocery store, a barber shop, and a community center. The cafes are furnished with plastic tables and chairs surrounding a television for watching soccer or Somali news stations. One Somali observer said Somali business owners did not receive financial assistance from the humanitarian system but used money earned working in the Somali *hawala* system and invested in starting small businesses. In this area, Somalis also frequent an Egyptian-owned internet café, a gym, a barber shop, and a few cafes and restaurants.

In Tabba, the main Sudanese part of Hay el Ashr, there are six to seven small Sudanese-run cafes and restaurants, as well as small grocery stores, bakeries, cellphone stores, barbers, internet and call centers, electronic goods shops, tailors, a spice shop, and a book store. Like the Somalis, each business employs a few Sudanese refugees at most and are fairly small operations, but they are immediately visible in the back streets of Hay el Ashr behind Ahmed el-Zomor Street. There are also two larger buildings in Tabba filled with Sudanese shops and around 30 Sudanese working in each building. On al Warshah Street, which separates Saqr Quresh from the rest of Hay el Ashr, many small Egyptian auto body shops

line the street. In the afternoon, small groups of Sudanese children work in the shops and older Sudanese men work as day laborers.

The economic impact of refugees is not limited to these two neighborhoods. In Ard el Lewa, refugee-run businesses are visible as soon as you descend the Silm Azela stairs that connect Ard el Lewa to Dokki. There are dozens of Eritrean and Sudanese coffee shops, clothing stores, restaurants, PlayStation Cafes, call centers, and even a few bars.²⁷ The shops sell Sudanese and Eritrean goods: coffee pots, coffee beans, and spices imported from Ethiopia, traditional clothing particularly for weddings, and anjeera (the Ethiopian bread made from fermented grain). The coffee shops and PlayStation cafes are popular hangouts for male youth, who also use them to smoke hash and bango. In an attempt to access this market, Egyptians have opened cafes decorated and geared towards Eritrean customers with Eritrean wait staff. The shops do not only cater to the Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali, or Sudanese niche markets, some of the Eritrean coffee shops are popular with Egyptians and other African refugees. Eritreans who run the coffee shops often work with Egyptian partners as this provides them with a degree of protection against the police and Egyptian youths who can cause problems for them. One local from the neighborhood said there are often disputes between refugee business owners and Egyptian shop owners who complain that the refugee shops are taking up space and refugees should not have businesses in Egypt, noting that Egyptians fight with the refugee shop owners and hassle them.

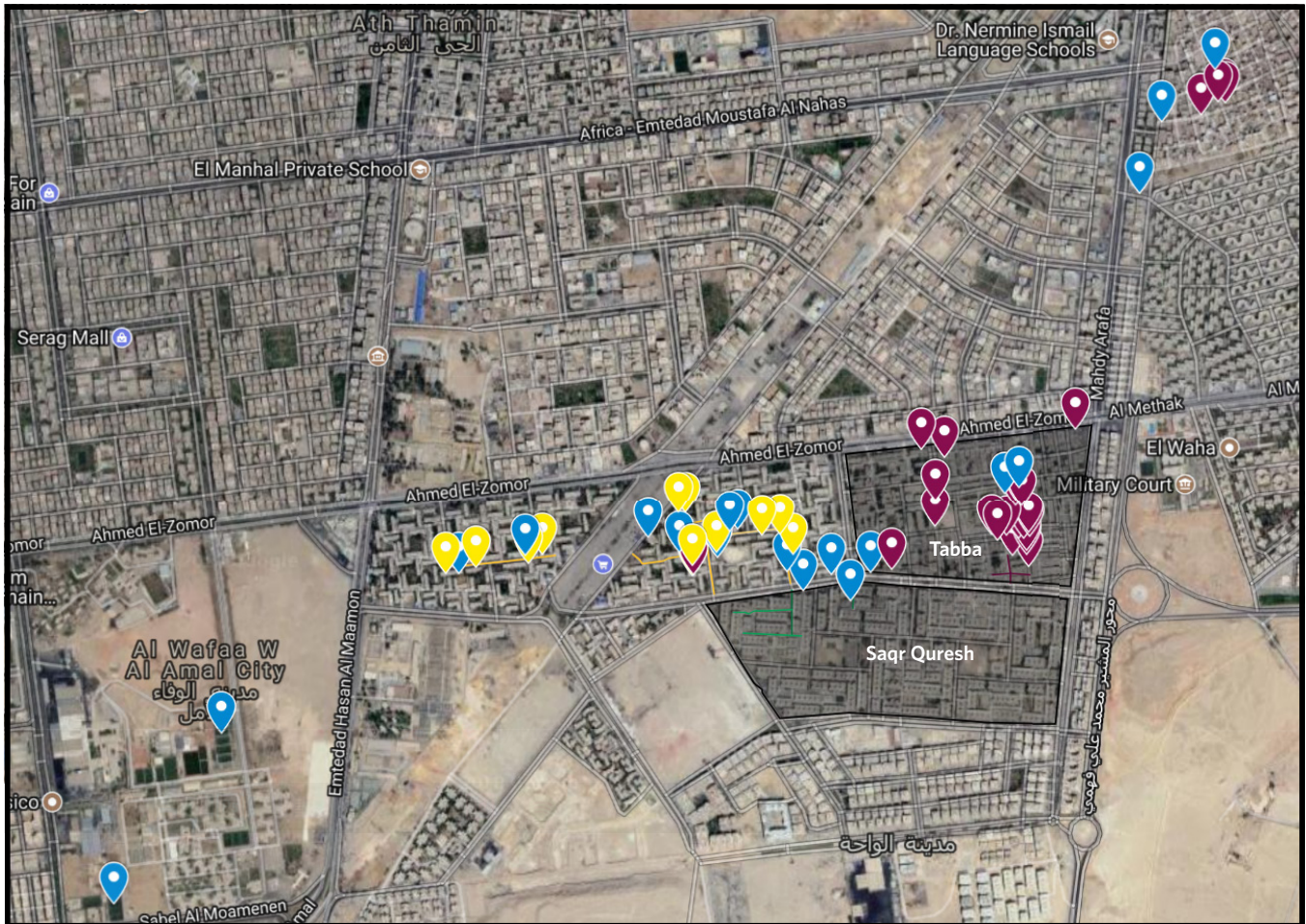
Housing

In Cairo, many Egyptians have rental contracts dating from the 1960s based on relatively low rents (between 100-300 LE per month, USD 5-16) and which protect them against eviction. Foreigners including refugees on the other hand

²⁶ These are rough estimates from measuring distances on Google Maps.

²⁷ The bars in Ard el Lewa create problems in the neighborhood. They are illegal (the owners produce their own alcohol) and some Eritrean patrons stumble around the neighborhood visibly drunk.

Detailed Map of Hay el Ashr



- Somali
- Sudanese
- Egyptian
- Streets with a Large Somali Presence
- Streets with a Large Sudanese Presence
- Streets with a Mix of Both Sudanese and Somali

- | | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| 📍 Caritas Pharmacy | 📍 Somali Tailor 2 | 📍 Fayoum Restaurant | 📍 Sudanese Barber Shop 1 | 📍 Sudanese Future School 2 |
| 📍 Somali Cafe | 📍 Somali Tailor 1 | 📍 Somali Cafe & Rest 7 | 📍 Ama Community Association | 📍 Tabba |
| 📍 Caritas Pharmacy | 📍 Somali Shop 1 | 📍 Somali Cafe & Rest 6 | 📍 Sudanese Call Center 1 | 📍 Araba wa Nus Main Entrance |
| 📍 Bakery | 📍 Barber Shop 2: Somali | 📍 Cafe 2: Egyptian | 📍 Sudanese Book Shop 1 | 📍 Main Entrance 2 |
| 📍 Swissry B Street | 📍 Sudanese Internet Cafe & Call... | 📍 Somali Cafe & Rest 4 | 📍 Sudanese Spice Shop 1 | 📍 Sudanese Church 3 |
| 📍 Football Pitch | 📍 Gym 1 | 📍 Cafe 3: Egyptian | 📍 Sudanese Multi Business Buil... | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 6 |
| 📍 Football Pitch | 📍 Somali Street 1 | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 1 | 📍 Sudanese Multi Business Buil... | 📍 Sudanese Barber Shop 2 |
| 📍 Mosque 1: Abu Bakar Saqid | 📍 Somali Street 2 | 📍 Sudanese Future School | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 3 | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 7 |
| 📍 Mixed Street 1 | 📍 Somali Tailor 3 | 📍 Africano Internet | 📍 Sudanese Church 2 | 📍 St. Mary's Health Clinic |
| 📍 Barber Shop 1: Egyptian | 📍 Somali Cafe & Rest 3 | 📍 Sudanese Street 1 | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 4 | 📍 Swissry A Street |
| 📍 Mixed Street 2 | 📍 Mosque 2: Shirbini Mosque | 📍 Sudanese Street 2 | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 5 | |
| 📍 Saqr Quresh | 📍 Somali Cafe & Rest 5 | 📍 Sudanese Street 3 | 📍 Hay el Ashr Market | |
| 📍 Mixed Street 3 | 📍 ESDA | 📍 Sudanese Church 1 | 📍 Hay el Ashr Youth Sports Cen... | |
| 📍 Mixed Street 4 | 📍 Rock Internet Cafe | 📍 Sudanese Cafe & Rest 2 | 📍 SCGA Office | |
| 📍 Cafe 1: Egyptian | 📍 Somali Street 3 | 📍 Sudanese Mobile Repair | 📍 Sudanese Kindergarten 1 | |

are subjected to exponentially higher rents, have no legal protection against eviction, and are less able to negotiate rents (Jacobsen et al., 2012, p. 37). Even when Egyptians do not have the “old” rental contracts, they still pay considerably less than refugees, and landlords continually raise rental prices on refugees. This price gouging also extends to electricity and water bills (Abdel Aziz, 2017, p. 24).²⁸ In Hay el Ashr, most apartments are two- or three-bedroom. Rental prices are now 1,500-3,000 LE per month (USD 83-170) for refugees. While all African nationalities are obliged to crowd into apartments and share bedrooms to save on rent, Somalis appear to do this more than others, with as many as three people sharing a bedroom. One Somali’s neighbor in Hay el Ashr has 15 people (husband and wife, five to six children, and extended family) living in a two-bedroom apartment. To afford rent, many African refugees also report cutting down on food or daily meals (Abdel Aziz, 2017, p. 26).

Governance

Cairo’s neighborhoods have little in the way of functioning local government. When asked about his school’s interactions with local government in Araba wa Nus, one Sudanese school administrator said, “We do not interact with the government in any positive way. Sometimes they create problems for us.” These problems concern Egyptian police occasionally threatening to close the school down, as well as problems with the local community, including groups of young Egyptian men harassing the students. Sometimes fights break out between Sudanese and Egyptian young men as students leave school in the afternoon. Egyptian security forces intervene, and officers accuse the administration of “running an illegal school,” and “not respecting the [local] residents.” On one such occasion, officers said to the school administrator, “we try to support you by leaving you alone to teach your children, but if you make more problems we will close you down.” Despite these problems, the school has continued to operate for over nine years.

²⁸ Abdel Aziz writes further on the housing difficulties refugees experience in Cairo.

²⁹ In its November 2017 Protection Working Group, UNHCR reported 188 refugee detentions for the month and noted that Egyptian authorities carried out several large roundups of refugees for the fifth month in a row.

In many ways, this dynamic is typical of Cairo’s informal areas whose residents live under the “benevolent tolerance” of public officials. However, African refugees expressed frustration at their inability to access police services when they tried to report crimes or seek assistance (See box: Replacing a Stolen UNHCR ID Card).

Replacing a Stolen UNHCR ID Card

One problem refugees face is the loss of their ID card when their bags are stolen, and the subsequent difficulty of getting a police report. Refugees would ask RAO to help them get UNHCR to issue them a new ID card without the required police report. We typically advised them to try going to a different police station and just telling the officers that they lost the card rather than claiming an Egyptian stole their bag which contained the card. This seemed to work for most people, or at least they did not repeatedly come back to the office with the same request.

Refugees are often told they are the responsibility of the “UN” and not the Egyptian police. At the same time, there has been increased policing of refugees in Cairo in recent years. While I was at RAO, there was a constant trickle of family members coming in to report individuals being detained. In 2016, interpreters said it was more important to ensure one’s residency permit was up to date compared to previous years. In mid-2017 Egyptian police started conducting roundups of refugees, and in Hay el Ashr, the climate has become especially frightening for the young Somali men who frequent the cafes. Police have raided the cafes and arrested all the Somalis present as they watch soccer or enjoy a meal together. During these raids, one Somali noted police officers sometimes make individuals empty their pockets and take their money.²⁹ Some refugees say Egyptian police officers detain refugees and demand money for their release.

Refugees who are detained are kept for one to two weeks, and sometimes up to three months as they go through a document verification check. They are shuffled back and forth between the police station and different administrative buildings in Cairo or other governorates. While detained, refugees share the same cells as individuals

accused of crimes, often resulting in abuse and mistreatment. Sudanese men often report needing to pay money to have a place to lie down to sleep, or as protection from others in the cell. Physical violence from detention center security officers is common.

African Refugees' Experiences

Sub-Saharan African Refugees' Experiences

Prejudice and racism is prevalent in the day-to-day life of Africans in Cairo.³⁰ Egyptians, particularly young men (*shabab*), yell “chocalata,” “dalma,” (darkness), or “samara” (black), or “bonga bonga.” They make gorilla sounds and throw stones, trash, or water on Africans in the street.³¹ These experiences of racism are pervasive in daily interactions, media, and law enforcement (see box: Egyptian Visions of Africa).

The harassment sometimes turns violent. Many Sudanese have been physically assaulted or robbed in their neighborhoods by groups of Egyptian men, particularly at night. This harassment is longstanding and widely reported.³² African school children are racially insulted or have rocks and trash thrown at them as they leave their schools. Sudanese teachers report *Shabab* bang on the windows during school lessons and yell racial insults at the students in class. On one occasion, a group of young Egyptian men brandishing knives and machetes came into a Sudanese school in Araba wa Nus threatening to harm the students if the school did not pay

protection money. The head teacher tried to call UNHCR but received no response. He then called the building's landlord who arrived and convinced the young Egyptian men to leave.³³ The head teacher said groups of young men still make demands to the school administrators for protection money during the school year. The administrators have often asked the landlord to intervene, and when he does, he raises the rent.

There is a strong gender component to the racism experienced by African refugee women in Cairo. Black women are sexually harassed and referred to as prostitutes in the street and asked to perform “indecent” acts. The racist stereotypes of black women and their bodies in Egypt have been documented elsewhere.³⁴

Sudanese Street Experiences

Amira Ahmed, a researcher from north Sudan, says in Cairo she herself receives “many racist comments in the streets” and finds “people look at me in a different way.” In Amira's opinion, Sudanese refugees face a lot of “racism and xenophobia because of their blackness, cultural differences, and identity as refugees as they are perceived as a burden and taking opportunities away from Egyptians.”

³⁰ While Egyptians are technically African, there is a prevalent exceptionalist attitude in Egypt separating them from other black or sub-Saharan Africans.

³¹ I do not know what “bonga bonga” means, nor did the Sudanese I asked over the years. When I asked Egyptian friends, the conversation quickly veered into defensive claims that racism does not exist in Egypt.

³² In Jacobsen's 2012 study, 82% of Sudanese respondents (n=565) reported facing harassment from the local community, 40% experienced robbery, 36% physical assault, 24% harassment from authorities, and 18% arrest or detention by police in the previous year.

³³ When I asked the teacher how the landlord was able to make the young men leave, he said “I don't know why these gang guys are so afraid of him. I heard that he was an officer in the army, but I am not sure.”

³⁴ African refugee domestic workers are portrayed as “sexual beings” and stereotyped as women who are “willing to do anything” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 10-11).

Egyptian Visions of Africa

In the 2001 movie “Africano,” one of Egypt’s most well-known action movie stars, Ahmed el Siqqa, goes to South Africa to work as a veterinarian and ends up on an adventure around the Egyptian collective vision of “Africa.” Watching this movie in 2015, I was struck by two things: 1) how highly racist the depictions of “Africa” were, and 2) all the things I heard from African refugees started to make more sense seeing the way Africa is portrayed in Egyptian media.

There is a long history of Egyptian cinema contributing to “anti-blackness” in Egypt. In the 1940s, Africans were juxtaposed to Egyptians with a “deeply ingrained vision of Africa as a place of adventure and inferiority” that affirmed Egyptian Nationalist claims to Sudan, and Egyptians’ own modernity and liberation. In these films, black characters were silent and servile, and blackness represented violence and irrationality. Images like Free Officer Salah Salim playing “Tarzan in the ‘jungles’ of Sudan” were rooted in Egyptian histories of slavery, racial superiority, and claims to empire (Elsaket, 2017, p. 27-28). The way Egyptian media and pop-culture portrays Africa surely contributes to the widespread perception of “Africans” as subordinate Others.

The Sudanese community schools have organized themselves, and administrators and teachers meet every three months to plan cultural events and discuss school challenges—including how to protect the children on their way home from school. One administrator in Araba wa Nus said, “the teachers cannot protect themselves, so who’s going to protect the students?” Students told him that in school they could focus on their studies, but once they left the building, they worried about how they would arrive home safely. Their fears are not unfounded. In February 2017, an Egyptian man murdered Gabriel Tut, a South Sudanese volunteer teacher, in the courtyard of a Sudanese school in Ain Shams after striking him on the head with a metal rod.³⁵

Racism and discrimination were frequently referenced in our meetings in Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr. One Nuba individual said, “there is a distinction between us and other refugees like the Iraqis and Syrians. They are treated better by the police and by Egyptians because of their color. Why?” I frequently heard the sentiment: “I demand that you or UNHCR take us to a country that has the same color skin as us.” In one study of Egyptian residents—mostly children and young people in Araba wa Nus and other areas in Cairo with large Sudanese refugee populations—the

young men readily admitted to throwing stones at refugees or insulting them as they walked in the street. One mother said her son beats up refugees, and while she does not think he should use violence, she thought “if we are too nice to them, they will never leave.” The study interviewees spoke of making fun of skin color, but claimed this was not racism, just part of Egyptian culture. The interviewees expressed with “anger and firmness” that refugees needed to “behave according to Egyptian traditions,” and their belief that African refugees enjoyed more rights than Egyptians and protection and support from various “entities” (Salem, 2013, p. 40, 59, 62, 65).

Several Sudanese said the racism they experienced made them wish they had stayed in the Nuba Mountains even if it meant death: “If we knew it would be like this, we would not have come to Egypt.” Or, “Our kids get caned or stoned when we send them to the shop to buy something. When I intervene, they beat me too. If I report the case to the police, they don’t help. If we knew this would happen, we would have stayed in the Nuba Mountains and been killed by airplanes instead of coming here.” Or, “Tell me to go back to Sudan to die or resettle me.” The day-to-day reality of being a refugee in Cairo with a dark skin complexion is grim.

³⁵ See <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/03/19/feature/politics/strangers-in-another-country-the-murder-of-gabriel-tut/>

Social Networks and Political Mobilization

It is difficult to gauge the extent of political activity by the Sudanese in Cairo. Some individuals are well known for their political activism and connections to Sudanese opposition parties, and there are widely reported threats, harassment, and even kidnappings and deportations of these activists by individuals assumed to be associated with the Sudanese embassy in Cairo. Much of this happens out of sight of most Western aid workers. Sudanese and other African communities, particularly Ethiopian Oromos, have mobilized and protested against UNHCR and its partners in response to UNHCR's policies or the injustices and indignities they face in Egypt (see box: The Mustafa Mahmoud Park Protest).

In late spring 2013, Ethiopian Oromos held a week's long protest outside of UNHCR after a reported spike in violence against them related to a media storm in Egypt surrounding the potential diversion of Nile water due to the construction of

Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam. The protestors demanded that UNHCR make a public statement that Ethiopian refugees in Egypt had no relation to the Ethiopian government or the construction of the dam. In July 2016, two Oromo asylum seekers died in front of UNHCR after one of them self-immolated as part of a larger protest against UNHCR's mass rejection of Ethiopian Oromo refugee claims in 2016.³⁶

Refugee political engagement usually concerns UNHCR and the humanitarian system. Some leaders of refugee community-based organizations occasionally meet with foreign embassies and talk about their situation in Cairo as well as that of their co-nationals back at home. There is, however, no mobilization against the state or Egyptian civil society. Why this is, remains a question needing further exploration.

Gangs

In Araba wa Nus, Hay el Ashr, Ain Shams, and Hadayek el Maadi, "gangs" are frequently cited

The Mustafa Mahmoud Park Protest

From 29 September to 30 December 2005, some 1,800 to 2,500 Sudanese refugees, asylum seekers, and others carried out a sit-in in front of UNHCR's office, at that time, located across from Mustafa Mahmoud Park in Mohandeseen. The protest was sparked by UNHCR's decision to halt individual refugee status determination interviews for Sudanese asylum seekers due to the recent signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan, and by the community's long simmering frustration with their situation in Cairo. Protesters in the camp eventually produced a final statement with 12 demands and proclamations. The list's second statement proclaimed, "Because of **racial discrimination and no protection from it**, and the lack of the right to work, health, and education, **we can see no possibilities of our integrating into Egyptian society, even temporarily.**" And statement number 12: "Realizing that Sudanese refugees are faced **daily with discrimination and violence and a denial of their human rights**, we urge UNHCR to pursue resettlement for as many of the most vulnerable cases as possible." These demands were not met, and from day one of protests, the UNHCR tried to disavow the park protesters as economic migrants who were not their responsibility despite the fact that the vast majority of them were "persons of concern." Without protection, the protest ended tragically when thousands of Egyptian police officers stormed the encampment on 30 December 2005, killing 27 refugees and asylum seekers, at least half of whom were children, severely beating hundreds of demonstrators, and keeping more than 600 Sudanese refugees in detention for weeks (see American University in Cairo, *A Tragedy of Failures and False Expectations*, 2006).

³⁶ See <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/08/01/feature/society/the-desperation-of-oromo-refugees-in-cairo/>

as a major source of insecurity. These gangs are groups of Sudanese and South Sudanese young men who refer to themselves as the *Lost Boys* and the *Outlaws*. In her 2009 report, Natalie Forcier said that young Sudanese men who are “denied access to services and traditional support networks” and are unable to obtain secure employment are forced to the margins of an already marginalized community. In their “struggle for respect, masculinity, and identity,” they find support, a sense of belonging, and identity in these groups. Over time, a rivalry emerged between them, leading to violence and the subsequent “normalization” of violence. While these young men (up to 2009 at least) constituted only a small minority of the population, Forcier argues that they shaped the “entire public street culture among Sudanese in Hay el Ashr, Ain Shams, Hadayek el Maadi,” as people confined themselves to their homes out of fear of attacks from the main groups. By October 2009, with new programming in place targeting at-risk youth and three of the four groups ending their rivalry in a peace agreement, gang related violence declined, and there were only three recorded incidents between December 2008 and March 2010 (Forcier, 2009, p. 3, 12, 25). But, since 2015-16, Sudanese community leaders have noted a return to gang-related violence. From 2014-2017, during my time at RAO, Sudanese and Somali refugees often described how gang-related violence affected them and their security in their neighborhoods.

Future Outlooks on Integration

Discrimination, racism, and even violence pervade the lives of Sudanese and Somali refugees in Cairo, so it is not surprising that they do not see a future for themselves in Egypt. These sentiments have long been a feature, as seen in the 2005 Mustafa Mahmoud protest described above. Sudanese refugees are, by and large, not open to the idea of integration. They view Cairo as a stepping stone or a temporary stop-over on the

way to a more permanent destination,³⁷ despite some having been in Cairo for 10 to 15 years.³⁸ Some said they could only feel integrated in Cairo if they enjoyed the same rights as Egyptians, had access to the services and assistance they require, and felt that the host community accepted them despite their differences. As one refugee noted, “How can I ever feel integrated in Egypt when I feel like I am less than everyone [Egyptians] around me and don’t have the right to do anything?”

In 2017, when the first Executive Order effecting immigration and refugee resettlement to the United States was issued on 27 January, RAO quickly organized an open-floor meeting with SCGA to discuss how it would affect their community in Araba wa Nus and Hay el Ashr. During the meeting, someone asked me what the international community might do if the United States stopped taking large numbers of refugees through resettlement. After I pointed out that the international community already takes only very small numbers of resettled refugees, I admitted that I had no idea but thought it possible that other donor countries could increase aid to countries like Egypt—which was already happening in response to irregular migration across the Mediterranean—to work on integrating refugees in the countries of first asylum. My Sudanese colleague responded that money spent in this way would be a waste, believing that local integration was just not feasible for Sudanese refugees in Cairo.



³⁷ Interviews with Amira Ahmed and Maysa Ayoub. See also Grabska, 2006, p. 288.

³⁸ For some Somalis the desire to be resettled or move on can be so strong that they are said to be suffering from or stricken with “Buufis.”

Conclusion

The problems and challenges discussed in this report are those Sudanese, Somali, and other African refugees frequently asked us at RAO to bring to UNHCR and the wider world's attention. They are also the issues that explain the lack of integration in Cairo. Working in refugee status determination and resettlement, I was continually frustrated by the need to fit the complex narratives of every person's experience into the neat boxes of the five protected grounds of the 1951 Refugee Convention, or the categories of the UNHCR Resettlement Handbook: I hope that in this report I have not again forced the complex experiences of refugees into victimization boxes.

Despite the challenges Africans face in Cairo, I have seen first-hand how they persevere, with or (usually) without assistance from UNHCR and its partners. Many of the teachers in the Sudanese schools across Cairo "are not actually teachers, but they trained themselves to at least try to help their communities." In a common example, one Eritrean described how an unknown Somali refugee warned him and a group of Eritreans about an Eritrean woman being harassed by a taxi driver. The Eritreans paid off the taxi driver and sorted out temporary free housing for the woman who had just arrived in Egypt the same day. Amira Ahmed has observed how Sudanese domestic workers rely on their religion to support themselves (Ahmed, 2010, p. 373). There are countless acts, every day, of refugees working together to create positive outcomes for their communities.

Continued denial of their rights as refugees and the lack of a path to citizenship make the outlook for African migrants in Cairo dim, and attempts to promote local integration are likely to be frustrated. UNHCR Egypt only received 27% of its requested funding in 2017, so international assistance will continue to be under-funded (UNHCR, 2017). But the Sudanese and Somali refugees in Cairo will continue as they have for years, scratching out an income in the informal sector, living on the

margins of the city, and finding ways to resist and sometimes overcome the abuses they face.

Finally, the experiences of Sudanese and Somali refugees in Cairo speak to a few wider lessons about urban refugee integration that other cities can draw on. First, while recently arrived refugees are in need of assistance, the needs and desires of the local host population must be kept in mind. Urban refugee neighborhoods are often places of longstanding poverty and deprivation, and many local Egyptians living there are themselves marginalized. Organizations working with refugees should take a neighborhood by neighborhood approach to learn about the day-to-day issues affecting both refugees and their neighbors. This speaks to the need to disaggregate the city space at the neighborhood or sub-neighborhood (block) level, because the experiences and challenges of different refugee sub-groups differ based on location. A disaggregated, localized approach allows agencies to design interventions that address specific challenges in neighborhoods and can enable them to draw on and build solidarity between local groups. Lastly, communication between refugees and the agencies, government institutions, or responsible organizations is key. Sitting behind a 12-foot barbed-wire fence in a distant secure area and waiting for refugees to come to you will not work. It means going to the neighborhoods, speaking to communities, and understanding what their lives are like. Without that kind of interaction, urban refugee neighborhoods will remain behind a veil of ignorance on the part of aid agencies who will remain in a perpetual fog, making it difficult to design programming that will have a meaningful impact on refugees' lives.

Annex Table 1. List of community meetings and conversations

Community Meetings:	Present at Meeting	Attendees
Moro 21 Feb 2016	X	50 (estimate)
SCGA Leadership 21 Feb 2016		50 (estimate)
Moro 16 March 2016	X	40 (estimate)
SCGA General 16 March 2016	X	50 (estimate)
Moro 25 Sept 2016		31
Hiban 16 Oct 2016		85
Rif Algarbi 17 Oct 2016		84
Tulishi 23 Oct 2016		35
Shad 1 Nov 2016		25
Kawalib 2 Nov 2016		25
Catcha 7 Nov 2016		33
SCGA General 22 Jan 2017	X	30
SCGA Leadership 13 Feb 2017	X	40

Annex Table 2. Unstructured Key Conversations (Oct-Dec 2017 and April 2018)

	Men	Women
No. of individuals	6	5
Nationalities	Eritrean, Somali, Sudanese	Austrian, Egyptian, Eritrean, Somali, Sudanese
Organizations Represented	SCGA, Sudanese Community School, RAO	American University in Cairo, Northeastern University, RAO, Somali Community Association

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

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