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### A VISIT TO THE ZABALIN - I

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Dear Peter,

I was quite pessimistic in my last report (DJV-4) about Egypt's long-term development prospects. Since coming to Cairo I have talked to perhaps fifty professionals who are intimately involved with some form of aid and development. About half are Egyptian, half expatriate. Most have been equally pessimistic in their assessments. A fair number were outright cynical. One of USAID's top officials told me "you'll be very lucky to find one successful project for every twenty horror stories."

It is easy to argue that there have been too many horror stories these last few years. Many projects funded by international agencies and bilateral agreements have been delayed beyond reasonable limits by the bureaucracy and by sheer inertia. Cost overruns and shoddy workmanship are rampant. I've seen housing projects that crumbled before they were occupied. The recently constructed highway near the Moqattam hills is so badly constructed that even Cairo's intrepid taxidivers avoid it if at all possible.

Perhaps the most insidious charges one hears of are corruption and favoritism. Daily exposes in the opposition papers and frequent editorials in Al-Ahram confirm the worst. It is easy to understand at least part of the problem. Since 1973 Egypt has received several billion dollars in aid from other middle eastern countries, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. That amount diminished after 1979 in retribution against the Camp David accords. Since then the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has annually channeled more than \$800 million dollars to Egypt.

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The disbursement of such large amounts of money creates problems, no matter how closely supervised. A middle-aged government engineer making \$100 per month suddenly finds himself co-administering a \$400,000 project. The opportunities for kickbacks are often too great to resist, the chances of getting caught and brought to trial often almost non-existent. This penchant for corruption and financial mismanagement is latent in most societies. But it became an art - or at least a carefully honed craft - during Sadat's infitah period. Stories of high-level corruption were rampant, fueled by speculations about Sadat and his family. Esmat Sadat, the president's brother, rose from obscurity to become a multimillionaire. The president at the time of his assassination owned 32 houses and palaces. Many of his top advisors were later implicated in financial scandals. To his credit, Hosni Mubarak quickly removed them from his cabinet after assuming power.

I am only recalling these well-known facts to sketch the background in which the United States had to formulate its aid policies in the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Since then the agency has been the target of an inordinate amount of criticism. President Mubarak and many Egyptian officials object to the guidelines attached to USAID programs and to the foreigner advisers that implement them. It now employs more than one hundred Americans. Some Egyptians consider USAID a form of neo-colonialism.

USAID officials counter that oversight is the only acceptable way. Some are more blunt. One officer I've gotten to know quite well took me on a trip of one of his projects - in this case an addition to a hospital. He pointed with considerable pride at what had been accomplished. He then added that "if it had not been for my personal involvement and checking and rechecking, this would still be an unimproved piece of land." Many Egyptians would dismiss this as utterly paternalistic. But several also admitted in private conversations that there is some truth to such statements, no matter how repugnant they are to local officials.

Some local and expatriate development specialists consider USAID inefficient and charge that it concentrates on high visibility projects. They stress the need to pay particular attention to investments that would really help Egyptians on a day-to-day basis. But USAID officials can point to substantially improved sewer systems in Cairo, to fly-overs that channel some of Cairo's traffic away from overcrowded areas.

Last but certainly not least, the international press has found USAID a meaty apple to bite into. I have in my study several articles critical of the agency, including a few from the so-called elite press. Some are at best badly researched, at worst tabloid rantings. In one particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Heikal in his Autumn of Fury (London: Andre Deutsch, 1983) devotes a whole chapter to corruption during the Sadat presidency. Heikal was a confidant to Nasser, and to Sadat in the early 1970s. After a falling out between the two men, Heikal became increasingly critical of Sadat and was briefly imprisoned in 1981. As many of his other books and essays, Autumn of Fury must be read with a healthy amount of skepticism.

amusing article, a well-known American journalist complains that as soon as he opens his window he is "assaulted by the stench of open sewers." He then asks rhetorically what USAID has spent its money on? The reporter in question lives in one of the most fashionable neighborhoods of the city, in the penthouse of a tall apartment building. About the only thing he seems likely to get assaulted by is an occasional mosquito from the Nile flowing past the building's foundations.<sup>2</sup>

I would be the last to say that all's well with USAID. Its approach is often heavy-handed. Its presence is too large and too conspicuous. Its gigantic budget has spawned a veritable cottage industry of consultants. Most of these have high professional standards. But it is also common knowledge that many consistently channel contracts to consulting firms they own.

There is also a strong cultural aspect to this. USAID is seen by some Egyptians as the nucleus of a strong American influence and presence. It is hard to deny some of these allegations. An estimated 10,000 Americans now live in Cairo. Many are clustered in Maadi. The suburb looks very much like its affluent counterpart in the United States. The American presence and lifestyle jars with the sensibilities of a country where Islamic values are slowly reemerging as common discourse for people from all walks of life.

There are undoubtedly reasons to criticize USAID and some aspects of its impact. In all honesty, some of its own officers have been its fiercest critics. But it is not my intention in this report to take an in-depth look at the agency. My point is simply that aid and development is a two-sided coin. Donor countries demand some type of control over what they spend. In some cases they even demand political pay-offs. The prospect of development becomes part of larger calculations. Perhaps nowhere is this more tangible than in Egypt today.

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<sup>2</sup> I have in a more or less systematic fashion followed reporting about Egypt in four major US newspapers. Conscious of the constraints under which journalists have to work, I am nevertheless struck by the often poor quality of the articles. One real problem seems to be ever-present urge to establish credibility for a story. As a result there is an overwhelming tendency to interview top-level officials who often know little about what takes place on a daily basis. Another method is to label all sources "experts" or "well-known authorities." A few weeks ago I interviewed a woman who had been touted as "the foremost authority on the impact of returning Egyptian laborers on village life." In reality the person knew little about the subject beyond generalities, something she made quite clear at the beginning of the interview! There is also the tendency to isolate certain events and make them look as THE event, completely divorced from surrounding issues. One particularly good example has been the treatment of Islamic revival in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the death of Sadat.

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And for better or worse, aid and development is now big business. It is no longer the exclusive domain of bearded young men and sisters in immaculately starched white uniforms bringing light to the natives. As the reports on garbage collection in Cairo will show, however, they also remain very much a part of the picture.

I have deliberately shifted my attention these last weeks from a "macro" look at aid and development to a "micro" approach. I closely followed a few particularly interesting projects in the Greater Cairo Urban Region (GCUR). They are quite small in monetary terms. They are aimed directly at specific communities within Cairo, and deal with so-called "basic development." Part of their funding comes from international agencies and bilateral aid, including USAID. Above all, they have been quite successful and provided an excellent antidote to my pessimism.

The one I would like to report on in this report (DJV-5) and the next one (DJV-6) concerns the Zabalin community. As most readers of these reports who live in large cities know, garbage means money. Its collection and processing often consumes a sizable part of a city's budget, and for that chunk of money legitimate (and quite often not so legitimate) businesses fight a mean battle. Cairo, with more than ten million people, is no exception. Most of its household garbage is collected - in an almost medieval fashion - by the Zabalin.

A few years ago their plight attracted the attention of several donor agencies. This was largely due to the work of two people. The first is Sister Emmanuelle, a French nun who is often referred to here as "Mother Theresa of Cairo." The other is Munir Buscha, a young Egyptian engineer. I had the opportunity to talk to them extensively, and travelled to the Zabalin settlements on several occasions.

What follows is the first part of two reports on efforts to improve the conditions of approximately 10,000 of Cairo's poorest and socially least integrated communities.

A VISIT TO THE ZABALIN

The first day of every month there's a soft knock on the apartment's back door. I usually grab a couple of pounds and open the door. Outside is Georges, one of the city's estimated 12,000 zabalin (garbage collectors). His skin is darker than the average Cairene's, a reminder of his ancestry in Upper Egypt. He wears the nubian headdress and a galabiyya caked with dirt. A ghalak (straw basket) that holds the garbage he has just collected from the apartment is slung over his shoulder.

He is thirteen and has been collecting garbage with his father for almost six years. Soon, he says with a quick smile, he will have his own cart. His sister collected garbage alongside him until a couple of years ago. Then she turned fourteen and stayed home to help sort the garbage her father and brothers collect. With another smile Georges asks for his monthly fee and then quickly disappears into the stairwell.

No one in Cairo really knows when systematic collection of zabala (garbage) started. Few people care to find out. The zabalin are Egypt's untouchables. They offend Cairenes who pride themselves on their sophistication. Their rickety wooden donkey carts are anachronisms in a city of modern skyscrapers and an estimated 500,000 automobiles. What are tourists to think of young zabalin children perched on top of garbage carts, surrounded by clouds of flies? They raise pigs, animals considered unclean by muslims. They are - although no one will ever mention this in a public conversation - Copts, part of Egypt's minority of an estimated six million christians. Above all, they are Cairo's unwanted and unwanted gadflies, a constant reminder of the city's inability to provide basic services to part of its population.

Cairo generates almost four thousand tons of garbage daily. The municipal government collects 1,600 tons. The zabalin collect another 1,800 tons. The remainder is simply dumped in the streets, on vacant lots, and at the edge of Cairo's low-income suburbs. Some of it is collected from time to time by the local government. A substantial part simply accumulates. The resulting scene reminds the few visitors who ever penetrate into these areas of descriptions of London in the Middle Ages. Sewage runs freely in the streets. Roads are often a foot higher than the thresholds of the surrounding houses, packed with an accumulation of many years' garbage.

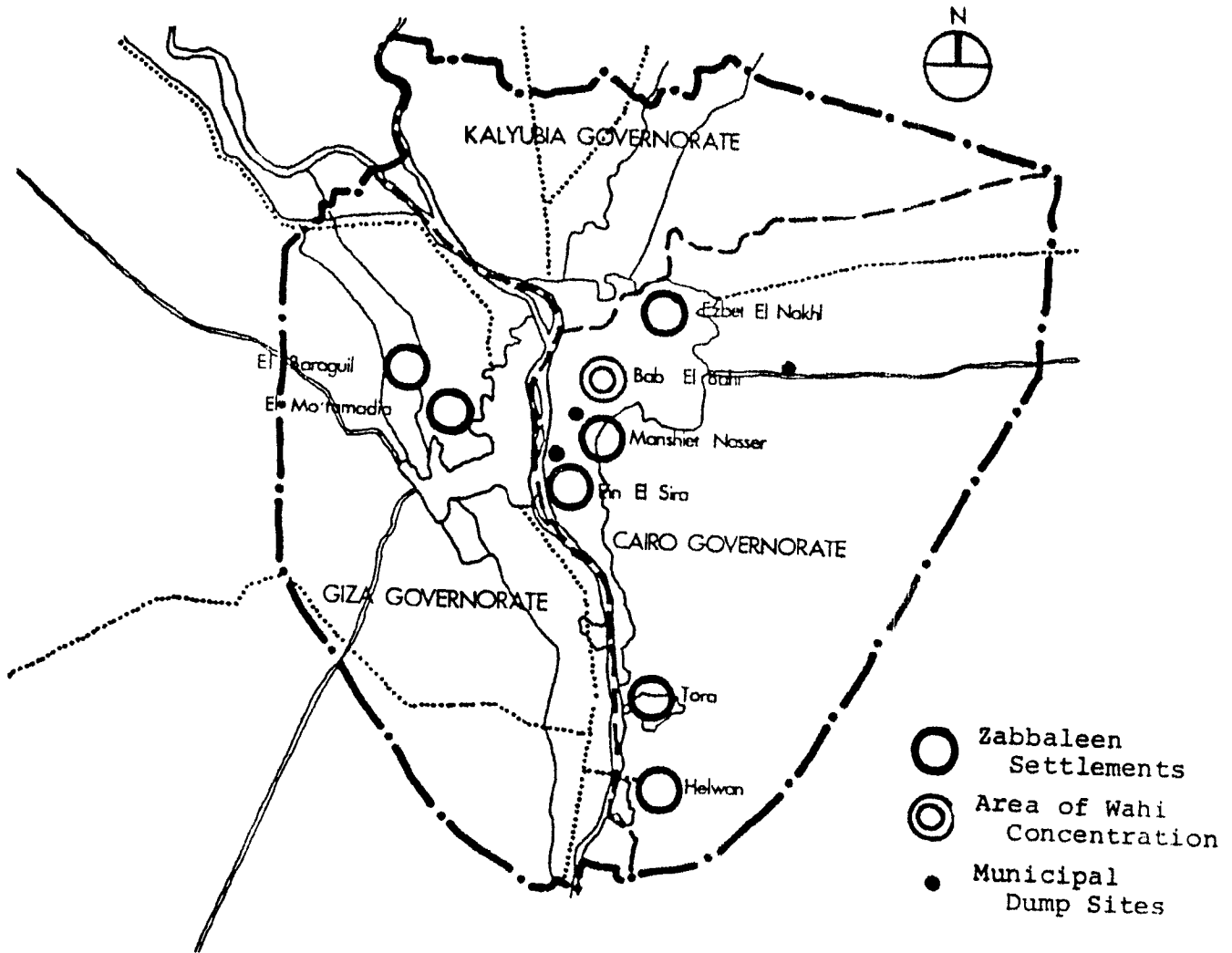
Informal garbage collection in Cairo started about one hundred years ago when the wahis, people of the oases, started to migrate to the capital from Kharga and Dakhla. They quickly assumed control over the collection and disposal of household wastes. For a fee the wahis obtained the exclusive right to haul garbage from specific buildings, and to charge a fee to each apartment within the building.

If Karl Marx had been familiar with garbage collection in 19th century Cairo, he undoubtedly would have used it as an example of emerging capitalist relations. The wahis who controlled the market quickly turned into the administrators of the system they had created. They sold the

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right to collect garbage to the Zabalin who were more recent arrivals from Upper Egypt. It is this system that remains largely intact today. The wahis pay fees to building owners and in turn collect fees from apartment owners and from the Zabalin.

In theory the wahi must bring the garbage from the individual apartments to the street level where the Zabalin collect it. But as is the case in my building, wahis will often offer "rebates" to the Zabalin if



The Greater Cairo Urban Region (GCUR) encompasses three governorates (Cairo, Giza, Kalyubia). This map shows the locations of the seven Zabalin settlements, the Wahi settlement at Bab El Bahr, and the municipal dump sites.

they collect the garbage at the apartment door. Although Zabalin are not permitted to collect fees, Georges' monthly appearance shows that even here the rules of this complex social system have been slightly bent.

Manshiet Nasser is the largest of Cairo's Zabalin settlements. It is perched on a plateau in the Moqattam hills near the Citadel. It is here that some of the stones for the great pyramids were hewn. An estimated 6,000 people now live and work within the old quarries covering 65 acres of garbage. It was built overnight in 1970 after the Manshiet Nasser Zabalin had been forced to leave their previous settlement. The neighboring village objected to their pig raising and the government forced them out of the area. As all previous Zabalin settlements, Manshiet Nasser is a squatter area. The government has not yet recognized its existence. But its size now makes it unlikely that its residents will have to move again.

Days start early at the Manshiet Nasser Zabalin settlement. By 5 a.m. donkeys are already hitched to the garbage carts. Shortly afterward the main road leading into Cairo is choked with several hundred carts. The settlement is a few miles from the center of town. The ride may take up to three hours. Each Zabali has his buildings assigned by the wahi. The father and older sons steer the cart. Young boys and girls guard the cart while their elders collect the garbage.

Once the cart is full the return trip to Manshiet Nasser starts. Dodging Cairo's heavy traffic, it often takes several more hours before reaching the settlement. Breakdowns of the old carts are commonplace. Upon arrival the garbage is dumped into the central courtyard of each house. The women and girls immediately start the sorting. Organic scraps are thrown into one corner of the yard. Pigs freely roam around in the courtyard and eat whatever is thrown to them. Plastic, textiles, bones, paper, glass, and metal are carefully assembled into different piles for recycling.

Until a few years ago the sale of pigs was the only source of income for the Zabalin. They still receive no compensation for picking up the garbage. At the time Manshiet Nasser was by all accounts a living hell. The area was rocky, very steep, and virtually uninhabited. There were no paved roads, no electricity. Water had to be hauled up from a few wells at the edge of the settlement. Donkey carts had to negotiate steep alleys filled with pig manure, often slipping back and upturning the carts. Spontaneous combustion caused numerous fires. Several times large parts of the settlement were destroyed, wiping out the few material possessions families had accumulated. One of every four children died before reaching its first birthday. As a squatter settlement Manshiet Nasser had no access to the government subsidized food system. Incomes were among the lowest in Egypt. In 1983 an average family had eight members and subsisted on a monthly income of about \$80.

Cairo simply cannot take care of its garbage problem. The city has grown too fast, from 5 million in 1966 to over 10 million today. The city - as Egypt - is short of money. A recent report estimated that systematic garbage collection alone would cost Cairo more than its entire annual

municipal budget.

As many other municipal agencies, Cairo's Municipal Sanitation Force (MSF) is overstaffed, poorly run, and riddled with corruption. Confusion exists over who should collect within the different governorates that make up the Greater Cairo Urban Region. A survey made in 1982 showed that on average only 60% of MSF's vehicles are in working condition. Fifteen percent are for all practical purposes obsolete. With more than 10,000 employees the municipal department daily collects 1,600 tons; the Zabalin collect 1,800 tons with an estimated 3,000 men. Total costs per ton of garbage collected amounts to 4.41 pounds for the Zabaleen and 22.57 pounds for the MSF. For every truck MSF puts on the street it needs a support crew of forty people. The Zabalin use only two men per cart. Worker productivity for MSF workers is one fifth of his Zabalin equivalent, despite the use of sophisticated compactor trucks.

In 1980 the governorate for the first time launched a program to upgrade garbage collection in the city. It was clear that the municipal government would not be able to replace the free service provided by the Zabalin. The report furthermore stated that as Cairo continued to grow, the ability of the Zabalin to collect and process garbage needed to be improved. The untouchables would somehow have to be integrated into the system or, to use the report's language, the city would need to "remove constraints on their productivity."

The Zabalin were far from enthusiastic about the government's plans. For years they had been shuttled back and forth between different settlements, often after being forced off the land. The Zabali system itself was a tightly integrated one. Few of the garbage collectors saw much use in expanding their activities for the sake of a population that had, at best, ignored and shunted them.

There was also an economic reason why the Zabalis were loath to take on new responsibilities. They had traditionally been collecting in high and middle income neighborhoods. At the time garbage had only one purpose for the Zabalin: as feed for the pigs they raised in great quantities. Garbage in the neighborhoods they collected in contained approximately 70 percent organic materials. With one daily cartload of this "high quality garbage" the Zabalin could raise fifty pigs per year. At a price of 45 piasters per kilogram and at an average weight of 60 kilograms per pig, the income from this type of garbage was quite high.

Now, however, the government wanted the Zabalin to collect in low income suburbs. The garbage here contains much less organic material. Cairo's poor raise goats, chicken, and rabbits that consume much of what the Zabalin were looking for. They considered it uneconomical to branch out into the poorer neighborhoods for that reason. The Cairo study confirmed formally what the Zabalin knew from years of experience. "Low quality garbage" contained only 27 percent organic material.

After decades of neglect the Zabalin now found themselves willy-nilly at the center of attention. If it had not been for Sister Emmanuelle and Munir Buscha, however, it seems unlikely they would ever have made the step from garbage collectors to successful economic entrepreneurs. More about this conversion in my next report.

All the best,



Received in Hanover 8/25/86