

# Haphazard urbanisation: Urban informality, politics and power in Egypt

Deen Sharp 

The London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Urban Studies

1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/00420980211040927

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## Abstract

The Egyptian military regime of Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi has announced as part of its Vision 2030 its intention to eliminate informal urban areas. The regime has identified these areas – commonly known by the Arabic term *'ashwa'iyyat* (which means haphazard) – as a threat to the nation. The Egyptian state, however, has no clear conception of what urban informality constitutes or what exactly it is eradicating. To understand how and why the state has placed urban informality as central to its politics, I contend that we have to examine the political processes through which this uncertain yet powerful concept is produced. Urban informality, I argue, is a political intervention that is always fleeting and geographically specific in an otherwise haphazard context. Haphazard urbanisation points to the complex power struggles by a range of actors, both within and beyond the state, through which the formal and informal divide can mark urban life. In a critical reading of the first major study of informality in Egypt, I show how the urban was divided into the formal and informal through outdated laws. I detail, by engaging sources in English and Arabic, how the Egyptian state militarised urban informality from the 1990s onwards. I argue that it is through this historical framing that we must understand el-Sisi's current war against urban informality. In turn, I argue that the regime's attempt to eliminate informality has not resulted in greater control over what and how urban informality appears but has deepened the hazardisation of urban life.

## Keywords

development, Egypt, inequality, informality, social justice, theory, urban violence

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### Corresponding author:

Deen Sharp, Geography and Environment, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: [d.s.sharp@lse.ac.uk](mailto:d.s.sharp@lse.ac.uk)

## 摘要

阿卜杜拉·法塔赫·塞西 (Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi) 的埃及军事政权宣布, 作为其《2030年愿景》的一部分, 其计划消灭非正规城市地区。该政权将这些地区(阿拉伯语通常称其为“阿什瓦伊亚特 (ashwa'iyat)”, 意思是“杂乱”)视为对国家的威胁。然而, 埃及政府对什么是城市非正规性以及它到底在消除什么没有明确的概念。为了理解国家如何、以及为什么将城市非正规性作为其政治议程的核心, 我认为我们必须研究产生这一不确定但强大的概念的政治过程。我认为, 在原本杂乱的背景下, 城市非正规性作为一种政治干预目标总是具有暂时性、且与特定的地理位置相联系。杂乱无章的城市化来源于政府内外一系列行为者的复杂权力斗争, 通过这种斗争, 正规和非正规的鸿沟可能会成为城市生活的标志。我批判性地解读了对埃及非正规性的首次主要研究, 展示了城市如何被过时的法律分为正规和非正规两个部分。我借鉴英语和阿拉伯语文献, 详细介绍了埃及政府如何从20世纪90年代开始对城市非正规性展开军事行动。我认为, 我们必须通过这一历史框架来理解塞西政权当前针对城市非正规性发动的这场战争。进而, 我认为, 政府消除非正规性的努力并没有使政府更好地控制城市非正规性的面貌, 而是加深了城市生活的危险性。

## 关键词

发展、埃及、不平等、非正规性、社会正义、理论、城市暴力

Received January 2021; accepted August 2021

## Introduction

Since taking power in 2013, the Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi military regime in Egypt has placed urban informality as a political priority. As part of the regime's Egypt Vision 2030 and tailored to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), detailed in elaborately created promotional videos such as 'A Smile of Hope' (notably posted by the Ministry of Defence and produced by the Egyptian Armed Forces), the Egyptian state has announced its intention to 'eliminate' informal urban areas.<sup>1</sup> The executive director of the Informal Settlements Development Fund (ISDF) told *Daily News Egypt* that 'By 2030, Egypt will be completely slum-free, and all unplanned areas will have improved, in addition to all informal markets. In 2030, Egypt will be reshaped' (Moneam, 2018). The Sisi state has identified 'informal' urban areas – denoted in Egypt in both official and popular discourse by the Arabic term

'ashwa'iyat (the plural of 'ashwa'iy, which means haphazard) – as a central threat to the state. The Egyptian media has widely reported the Sisi state's 'major war' against the spread of informal settlements that are cited to be incubators of extremists and terrorists (Sabahy, 2020; Tamraz, 2019). The newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* stated that even with the economic challenges that the coronavirus has brought to the Egyptian government, it has continued to focus on its plans to address the 'ashwa'iyat that it considers to be among 'the most important issues troubling society and linking poverty to terrorism' (Hassanen, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

To understand how and why the Egyptian state has placed the concept of urban informality as central to its political agenda and as a threat to the state, we have to interrogate and reconceptualise this term and trace its historical geographical emergence in Egypt and beyond. In the first section of this article, I outline contemporary debates on urban informality in both Egypt

and beyond. I argue that urban informality is a political intervention and its appearance is always fleeting and geographically specific in an otherwise haphazard context. I understand the appearance of urban informality *not* as the border of an object or a mode of urbanisation but as a complex power relationship articulated through an unstable political process. Haphazard urbanisation points to the complex power struggles by a range of actors that make up the urban landscape and cannot be divided neatly into the formal and informal without the application of an (always contested) power.<sup>3</sup> To understand the appearance of urban informality and its consequences requires that we trace the political processes through which this concept emerged and is maintained.

In the second section, I contend that the appearance of urban informality in Egypt followed shifts in geopolitical relations. I detail how the specific concept of urban informality was introduced into the Egyptian context by the World Bank and USAID in a period of intense geopolitical transformation at a range of geographical scales. I focus on a 1982 World Bank-funded report that I contend was key to introducing the idea of Egypt being defined by urban informality through the use of outdated and incomplete laws. I note how this same study ignored its own documentation of haphazard urban processes and instead categorised the country as being dominated by informality.

In the final section of this article, I account for why urban informality, despite its variable definitions and contested formations, has emerged as a mainstay to the politics of the el-Sisi military state and resulted in the haphazard urbanisation of the urban fabric. The state in Egypt, as part of a global military trend that meaningfully began in the 1990s, militarised urban informality. It is through this historical and analytical frame that the importance that the el-Sisi military state has placed upon urban informality should be

understood. I stress, however, that while the regime has made a concerted effort to enact policies to eliminate urban informality this has not meant it has the ability to do so. Despite the ever-increasing social repression by the military state in Egypt it does not act in a social vacuum, and while it may be able to conduct singular and dramatic acts in shaping the built environment, the state's intervention is also characterised by haphazard negotiations at a range of geographical scales over who can live where and how, what is legal and illegal and the formal and informal in urban Egypt.

This analysis is part of my own continued research on urban dynamics in Egypt since I lived in the country in 2006–2007 and made subsequent visits in 2012 and 2017–2018. This article relies on an examination of both English and Arabic archival documents of state laws and decrees, human rights organisations reports, NGOs (like 10Tooba Applied Research on the Built Environment) and media (Egyptian and international media and social media). This article consists of a critical reading of the 1982 Abt Association study on *Informal Housing in Egypt*. This report is widely understood by scholars of urban Egypt to be among the first official publications to introduce the terminology of urban informality into the country.

### **Urban informality and power in a haphazard context**

In my framing of urban informality, I contend that urban studies scholars should distinguish between the political process that can produce the appearance of a formal and informal divide and the everyday haphazard urban practices that characterise urban life. I understand urban informality *not* as the border of an object or a mode of urbanisation but the fleeting and geographically specific outcome of a power relationship. Anything can be framed as formal or informal; it

requires the application of a durable structure of power to achieve this appearance. The el-Sisi regime would like to show that it has the ability to determine what is formal and what is not, and what forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear. But the historical-geographical record of informality in Egypt shows a more contested, contradictory and complex set of practices. Urban informality is foremost a political process, enacted at a range of geographical scales, that is always fleeting and geographically specific in a haphazard context.

The declared goal by el-Sisi to clear Egypt of the *'ashwa'iyyat* and 'eliminate' informal areas is startling given the state's understanding of the extent of it in Egypt. Urban informality is often deemed to be – by academics, policy makers and the state – the 'dominant mode of urbanization' in Egypt (Séjourné, 2009: 17). In 2013, the Informal Settlement Development Fund (ISDF), one of the state bodies tasked with overseeing the mapping and classification of informal areas, estimated that informal areas make up 76% of urban areas, with 16 million inhabitants (cited in Khalil, 2021: 354). Urban informality it seems is everywhere in Egypt, yet at the same time what it actually refers to is opaque. There are many different classifications of urban informality made by the Egyptian state, including: aesthetic considerations (i.e. unpainted bricks); classification of land; location; settlement mechanism (squatting versus illegal purchasing) and process (individual versus collective); a large array of different laws; connection to basic urban services; and considerations of health and safety (see Khalil, 2021; Shawkat, 2020). The Egyptian state does not have a singular coherent conception of what and/or where urban informality is (ElGamal, 2017; Sabry, 2009: 29). However, it is not only state entities that have competing and ambiguous categories of the constitution of urban informality; academics have been no more

successful in producing coherent conceptions of urban informality in Egypt or beyond.

Several scholars and policy makers view informal urbanism to be *the* major mode of urban design and development over the past 50 years throughout the global south; more recent scholarship has also sought to show its presence in the global north. There have been many contemporary overviews of the rapidly expanding literature on urban informality (see e.g. Acuto et al., 2019; Harris, 2018; McFarlane, 2019; Marx and Kelling, 2019; Waibel and McFarlane, 2012). Informality studies now comprises a large cross-disciplinary literature that stresses the highly variegated types of informality that exist within and across countries around the world, its applicability to all income groups, the importance of practice and the complex relationships that exist between and within the informal and the formal, as well as the significance of the broader frameworks of social power – specifically, the state, its legal framework and the market – in what gets framed as informal. While urban informality is now considered to be ubiquitous by both scholars and policy makers, there is little agreement over what it actually means. Urban informality has remained an elusive term.

The volume of scholarship on informality and the wide range of different contexts and things to which it refers has led to some academics questioning how analytically useful the distinction between informal and formal is and to the need to search for a more specific urban grammar (McFarlane, 2019). Herrle and Fokdal (2011: 7) have declared urban informality to be a myth due to its ever-changing formations and vague formulations. Accepting this idea, however, would tell us little about why the Egyptian military state has been so preoccupied with this term and has directed great resources in efforts to 'eradicate' it or why urban studies scholars have spilt considerable ink trying to come to terms with it. Urban informality is a

framework that plays an important role in directly shaping the urban order and struggles within it – at times to devastating effect. The formal and informal urban divide does political work that we need a better understanding of. Specifically, how and why urban informality has emerged as central to politics, to what end and its impact on the built environment and urban social life.

Drawing on Mitchell's (1991) argument in relation to the state, I contend that the elusiveness of urban informality should tell us something about this concept. Rather than dismissing urban informality as a myth or responding to this accusation by searching for a more specific or fixed definition, we need to examine the political processes through which this uncertain yet powerful concept is produced. My analysis of urban informality contributes to the call by Marx and Kelling (2019: 499) to be attentive to how and why informal distinctions emerge and the social processes that underly what comes to be identified as informal. In this article, I outline how the World Bank introduced urban informality into Egypt in the late 1970s using outdated and colonial laws and the broader geopolitical framework that this was situated within. In turn, I show how the Egyptian state was reluctant to utilise the term urban informality until the 1990s when the military state sought to link the Islamist 'threat' to it. It is these political contexts that we should be attentive to in understanding both the ubiquity of the elusive term of urban informality in Egypt and its power.

The scholarship of Roy (2005, 2009, 2018) has been particularly influential in theorising urban informality. Roy (2005) defines urban informality as a *mode* of urbanisation, an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation.<sup>4</sup> In this framing, urban informality is a mode of power and discipline: 'informality exists at the very heart of the state and is an integral part of the

territorial practices of state power' (Roy, 2009: 84). In recent years, there has been a collective scholarly effort led by Roy's (2005, 2009, 2018) writings to interrogate the complex political relationship between urban informality and the state (Beier, 2021; Bénil-Gbaffou, 2018; Haid and Hilbrandt, 2019). Haid and Hilbrandt (2019: 555–557), for instance, have argued that we need to understand the porosity of the state itself and the heterogeneity of practices that constitute it; this includes diversity within the state, the different geographical scales that comprise the state and the conflicting political interests within it and the impact of institutions beyond the state (i.e. international organisations or NGOs). This article is a contribution to theorisations of urban informality that aim to be more attentive to the intricate political struggles that underlie the production and durability of this concept. I understand the appearance of urban informality *not* as the border of an object or a mode of urbanisation but as a complex power relationship articulated through an unstable political process.

Urban Egypt is not dominated by urban informality on one side and urban formality on another, but by haphazard urbanisation in which anything can be made to appear formal or informal if there is the will and power to do so. Haphazard urbanisation points to the complex social negotiation between a large array of networks through which the urban is practised and formed. To create the appearance of a formal and informal divide in this haphazard context, power has to be mobilised, produced and composed. It has to be a power that is not automatically achieved but the result of a process that is always open to a range of outcomes, and one that is always geographically and temporally specific. As I detail below in the case of Al-Warraq Island, even in the highly authoritarian context of Egypt the ability to produce this power, to create the appearance of divides between the formal and

informal, can be resisted and transformed. Due to the contested process of creating the appearance of a formal and informal divide, scholars should also be attentive to how this political process can result in putting urban collective life in danger – its hazardisation.

### *The appearance of urban informality*

Even before the concept of urban informality began to be used by scholars in the 1970s (for a history of the term, see Harris, 2018), who could live where and how occupied a notable place in Egyptian politics. Before the 1952 Revolution, or coup d'état, a series of British and French colonial codes and regulations guided Egypt's urban planning and design. Following the revolution, Gamal Abd al-Nasser's government was keen to replace these colonial rules. A complex social struggle ensued between Nasser, various parts of the state and private land-owners over who was allowed to build shelter, and where and how. As the Nasserite government focused on industrialisation, and the construction of factories and industries, it mostly took a hands-off approach to how most Egyptians achieved shelter (Hassan, 1978). The government often produced new legal frameworks and amnesties at politically notable moments, such as the 1956 Presidential elections or the conflict of 1967 (Shawkat, 2020). The specific appearance of the formal and informal divide in Egypt as a policy framework and political device, I contend, arose in the crucial period of 1967–1973 and its aftermath.

The war of 1967 had a dramatic impact on the urbanisation process in Egypt as the country focused its resources on the conflict. The war economy resulted in a fast-paced extension and intensification of urbanisation. Higher-income groups sought safety for their assets and ploughed money into land (prices doubled from 1967 to 1972) and the government abandoned the construction

of subsidised housing (Néfissa, 2009; Shawkat, 2020). This trend of rising land prices and decreased subsidised housing was continued following the end of the October 1973 war and President Sadat's announcement of the *Infitah* (the Open-Door Policy). Sadat's famous 1974 October paper announced the construction of several new desert cities around Cairo. The government claimed they would release pressure from the centre of the city. Desert cities would act, and continue to do so, for the Egyptian state as the objects on which they would *try* to fix a formal definition of the built environment (one with physical characteristics) and reinforce the appearance of the formal and informal divide in the country (see e.g. Khalil, 2021). Despite the continued construction of these desert cities from Sadat to the current regime of Sisi, vast amounts of housing within these desert cities for the most part lie uninhabited (Shawkat, 2020: 161).

The state has never had complete control over what, how and where shelter, and urban social life along with it, emerges. In the Sadat period, the formation of the built environment was impacted not only by the conflict occupying the state but also by the 1973 oil crisis. This period resulted in the rise of the oil-rich Gulf monarchies and meant many Egyptians of all classes went to work and sent remittances back home. The preferred investment for surplus capital from remittances was land, bricks and mortar (Sims, 2010). As a result, land prices continued to rise and real estate emerged as a central component of the economy. Remittances make a notable contribution to Egypt's economy and according to the World Bank accounted for US\$24 billion in 2020, amounting to 6.7% of GDP. This contributed to the haphazard urbanisation process and the appearance of a formal and informal divide – but one that requires further scholarly investigation.

The *Infatih* turned Egypt away from the Soviet Union and towards the West, allowing for greater foreign investment and for Egyptians to travel more freely abroad. It shifted government policy to a more concerted intervention by the state, elites and western organisations, into the built environment. It was in this period that western institutions, such as the World Bank, entered Egypt and entities with existing relationships, like USAID, expanded and began to directly advise the Egyptian government on how to deal with the housing question. It was also in this period that the formal and informal divide emerged as a tool to attempt to organise the built environment. Sadat signed the Camp David Accords in 1978 and this had significant implications for the shape and form of urbanisation, and in particular for the divide between the legal and the illegal and for the appearance of the formal and the informal.

Months before Sadat's assassination in 1981 by Islamist militants, associated with al-Jihad, the government issued an amnesty on demolitions of illegal buildings in parallel to a range of new laws imposing tighter control and punishment of buildings constructed without a permit (Shawkat, 2020: 41). Funding by the US, directly and through its parastatals, was significantly increased to Egypt in the run-up to and after the Accords in 1978 and further again following the assassination of Sadat; mass housing programmes and aided self-help schemes received notable support. CIA archival records detail how Washington feared Sadat's vulnerability to urban insurrection and sought to reform Egypt's urban administration (Dorman, 2013: 1593). The World Bank and USAID wanted the Egyptian government to shift their current policy approach to the urban poor from neglect to active engagement through identifying 'informal settlements', creating appropriate legislation, construction of infrastructure

and 'aided self-help' – or what the World Bank called 'site and services'.

From the 1970s onwards, the World Bank actively sought to identify 'informal' settlements and encourage governments to facilitate the legalisation (formalisation) of these shelters and allow the urban poor to find their own housing solutions (Harris, 2003). The US in the Cold War era viewed mass homeownership, and specifically aided self-help, as a mechanism through which to expand an American model of capitalism and protect its geopolitical interests. Kwak (2015: 89) argues that American housing advisors who began urging countries around the world to embrace mass homeownership embraced the idea of aided self-help 'for its quintessentially capitalist, anticommunist ethos'.

Sakr (1990), a senior planner in the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP) who worked on the first World Bank-sponsored studies on informal settlements, notes in her PhD thesis that the World Bank and USAID were the first to frame the housing crisis in Egypt as one centred specifically around informality and to suggest solutions to the Egyptian government on how to address it. The Bank and USAID, Sakr (1990: 5) notes, took a two-phased approach, a one-year study phase (1977–1978) and a four-year implementation phase (1978–1982): 'These projects represented the first attempt in Egypt to explicitly acknowledge the unauthorized self-help activities taking place in informal areas'.

The 1982 Abt Associates study, *Informal Housing in Egypt*, financed by USAID and supported by the World Bank, and undertaken with the General Organization for Housing, Building and Planning Research (GOHBPR), is the central study of this period that explicitly sought to assess the level of urban informality in Egypt. The release of this study was also accompanied by the announcement of a new planning law

that attempted to synthesise the fragmentary body of urban planning laws in the country (Elkhashin, 1997). The Abt Associates study recorded high levels of informality, noting that 84% of all housing in Cairo and 91% in Beni Suef (a city south of Cairo) between 1970 and 1981 was informal. But the authors also noted that (unlike in Latin America) squatting made up only a small share of informal housing. While the Abt document reported that definitions of informal housing fluctuated in Egypt, it defined informality in the study in relation to the legal system.

Informal housing in the Abt report was considered to be on land that is illegally subdivided in contravention of Law 52 of 1940 or that violates building regulations.<sup>5</sup> It is curious that the study took Law 52 to define urban informality because, as the authors note: ‘According to planning officials interviewed, this law has been ineffective since enactment ... once neighbourhoods are established in illegal subdivisions, the law is virtually impossible to enforce’ (Abt Associates with Dames and Moore, General Organization for Housing, Building, and Planning Research, 1982). The authors omit the fact that this was a colonial law or the implications that using an ineffective and unenforceable law may have on their assessments of urban informality. The sheer number of settlements that violated Law 52 and building codes meant that this classification of urban informality constituted a wide variety of different settlements, ages, security statuses, classes and infrastructural provisions (many areas classified as ‘informal’ had access to basic urban services in line with city-wide averages). But the Abt report neglects the significance of the complex negotiations and active planning between various state institutions (in particular between central and local government), within the legal system, as well as between various stakeholders over the different properties it clumps together as informal. This is

even though the authors detail in the report, if one reads carefully, intricate practices of haphazard urbanisation in the implementation and organisation of the urban communities.

The Abt report, on the one hand, does carefully detail the intricate political struggles that went on in claims to the ownership of dwellings. But on the other hand, the authors insist on the appearance of a formal and informal urban divide. For instance, the report cites ‘informal’ land registration being undertaken to transfer land. This entails a seller going to court and alleging partial non-payment from the buyer. The court then charges the buyer in writing and issues a court order, and the buyer pays and receives a receipt from the seller – once the buyer has finished the house, they then register it with the local district. The report details many other instances like this, including: a group of residents due to be displaced through a stipulation in Law 52/1940 over the width of a road who won from the courts the right to remain; and a resident who received a fine from a police officer and then used this same fine to gain recognition as the owner of the property. Even the government, the Abt document reported, fell afoul of laws relating to illegal subdivision, but it negotiated a ‘formal’ outcome. The report adds that, in the provision of infrastructure, ‘once informal housing areas are spatially consolidated and represent permanent residential communities and residents collectively request government recognition, formal provision of infrastructure may be forthcoming’ (Abt Associates with Dames and Moore, General Organization for Housing, Building, and Planning Research, 1982). Notably, as Shawkat (2020: 190) has detailed, these practices continue to this day; Shawkat also cites similar levels of informality being officially reported in Egypt 40 years after the Abt study. Despite the Abt report detailing haphazard urban processes – an array of complex social negotiations between



a large array of networks through which the urban is practised – it insisted on the appearance of an urban scene divided into the formal and the informal.

The Abt report was accompanied by the World Bank and USAID prompting the Egyptian government to implement upgrading projects in ‘informal’ areas and to abandon the construction of subsidised public housing. The World Bank wanted the government to focus on what cannot be done by private individuals, such as legalisation, overall planning and the provision of technical and social infrastructure (Sakr, 1990: 6). But the government was, according to Sakr (1990: 7), not convinced by this approach. The government was worried that legalisation and upgrading projects would encourage new informal areas, and it was also reluctant to abandon its highly visible public housing projects for less visible upgrading projects.

Forty years after the publication of the Abt report, the idea that urban Egypt can be divided into the formal and informal is more powerful than ever despite its continued elusiveness. The announcement by the el-Sisi state of the elimination of informality has been accompanied by speculator acts of destruction and construction of the built environment and the passing of laws like the Construction Violations and Reconciliation Law. Despite all these actions, it remains unclear what urban informality is for the Egyptian state – its legal declarations could (like the Abt study) constitute almost the country’s entire urban-scape. But what accounts for the tenacity of the elusive concept of urban informality? Why did the Egyptian state at first show little interest in the concept of urban informality but by the 1990s become increasingly infatuated by it?

### **Militarising urban informality**

In October 1992, an earthquake in Cairo killed 561 people and injured thousands of

others, many of whom the government reported to be living in precarious structures (although this is disputed) (Florin, 2009). The government was slow to respond to those in need of assistance compared to fleet-footed Islamic charities and groups who were viewed by those in need and others as far more effective in their provision of assistance, including blankets, food, medicine and shelter. The government did not take kindly to the comparison with these Islamic groups and tore down tents and sabotaged other assistance that they provided (Napoli, 1993). Two months later, the earthquake was followed by the infamous siege of Imbaba, a working-class district in Cairo. Al-Gama‘a al-Islamiyya, a militant Islamist group, had announced in a televised news conference that it had established an independent Islamic state in the area. The government response was to seize the area – with reports citing as many as 18,000 troops – to ‘cleanse’ this community of the militant Islamist group (Singerman, 2009). Singerman (2009: 115) writes that the political spectacle of the siege stigmatised informal housing areas:

The focus on the problems associated with informal housing areas, and informality in general, had been discussed in the media before the siege, but after the siege the print media highlighted a new disturbing link between Islamists and informal housing areas that evoked a sense of crisis, if not hysteria.

This spectacular use of force by the Egyptian government in Imbaba and its intensified focus on informal areas should be placed in a context of increased anxiety in military headquarters across the world over the threat that urban areas posed to global security. The siege of Imbaba was one urban conflict among many in the 1990s that would confirm to many military analysts and urban studies scholars that warfare had been urbanised. The aftermath of 9/11 would further

accelerate these trends. In 2003, Richard Norton, a former commander in the US Navy, penned his influential article on ‘feral cities’ – defined as a metropolis with a population of more than a million people but where the government has lost the ability to maintain the rule of law within the city’s boundaries. These ‘feral cities’, Norton argues, ‘exert an almost magnetic influence on terrorist organizations’ (Norton, 2003: 98). Emphasis was placed on cities with large Muslim populations, like Cairo, stressing not only their size but their association with militant Islamist groups. Even on the left, scholars voiced similar concerns (see for instance Davis’ (2004: 30) influential thesis titled ‘Planet of slums’, where he detailed how Islamist movements had become the ‘real government of the slums’). This body of work took informal areas, the absence of state-provided basic urban services and physical infrastructure, as well as the informal economy to be key indicators of ungovernability.

There was, however, thin evidence that militant Islamist groups had a strong association with the urban poor. The link with Islamist groups to ‘informal areas’ in Egypt was inevitable, with some definitions of informality incorporating 90% of the country’s built environment. But more substantially, Bayat (2007), in arguing directly against Davis (2004) and others, noted that in Egypt (and beyond) there is no obvious link between the urban poor and militant Islamism. He definitively showed, as the empirical evidence has borne out, that Islamic militancy does not have an ‘urban ecology’. Furthermore, Bayat (2007) stressed that politicians and the academic community in Egypt viewed informal areas (or the ‘ashwai’yyat) through the prism of ‘slums’ formulated in the US where joblessness and the decayed family structure are said to be responsible for crime and violence; the areas identified as ‘ashwai’yyat in Egypt did not

suffer from higher crime rates than other areas and were home to a substantial number of middle-class urbanites (Bayat, 2007: 587–588). Despite the absence of any substantive connection between the Islamic military and areas identified as being informal, the siege of Imbaba provoked the Mubarak regime to launch a plethora of initiatives around areas it identified as informal, in order to combat ‘terrorism’.

While (as detailed above) urban informality had been discussed and studied amongst government officials for well over a decade, at the beginning of the 1990s the Egyptian state in the context of the siege of Imbaba ‘discovered’ urban informality as an urgent security issue to be confronted (Sims, 2010: 68). It was also in the 1990s that the term ‘*ashwa’iyyat*’ began to be used widely both in official and popular discourse in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> As Bayat and Denis (2000: 197) note, ‘The ‘*ashwa’iyyat* are perceived as “abnormal” places where, in modern conventional wisdom, the “non-modern” and thus “non-urban” people, that is, the villagers, the traditionalists, the non-conformists and the unintegrated, live’. The central government in Egypt now actively took the World Bank approach suggested in the late 1970s and provided extensive infrastructure and basic urban services to areas it classified as informal. Notably, police stations were an integral part of this new infrastructural package (Sims, 2010). Government control and surveillance were increased but so were techniques to circumvent them, including the rise of an array of middlemen – many of whom were government officials (Haenni, 2009; Shawkat, 2020; Sims, 2010). Haenni (2009) has argued that the supposed effort at formalisation by the Egyptian state actually created new forms of informality. The state ‘manufactured’ ever more layers in which a building could be considered to be informal and ownership rights became ever more precarious. The appearance of the informal and formal

divide in Egypt became a state obsession but it simultaneously resulted in the hazardisation of the built environment, creating ever more complex knots, conflicts and negotiations (haphazard urbanisation) over who could live where and how.

In 2013, the military coup in Egypt that brought el-Sisi to the Presidency meant a deepening of the militarisation of the state and its urban agenda (Khalil, 2019a: 96). The el-Sisi era has been marked by the hazardisation of the built environment that has been accelerated and deepened by its plans to 'eliminate' urban informality. The el-Sisi state has placed concerted attention on urban informality, I contend, because this urban planning concept lies at the intersection of two perceived threats. The first is the continued association by the Egyptian state of Islamist violence with urban agglomeration. The second is the perceived threat that dense urban areas pose as a place for people to gather to protest in the context of the 25 January revolution. The 2011 Egyptian revolution was characterised by urban revolt, and informal urban areas were often identified and characterised by scholars and journalists as being at the centre of the mobilisation of the protest (Adham, 2016).

The period of the 2011 revolution was marked by a notable assertion of the right to the city (Sharp and Panetta, 2016). Urban communities challenged in a highly visible manner the organisation of the built environment, such as constructing alternative highway entrances and enacting their own 'site and services' projects. The appearance of urban informality in this revolutionary period was markedly changed and notably targeted the rich and powerful, which had previously not been thought possible. Twenty-eight businessmen, controlling an estimated 80% of land reclamation projects, and several ministers were indicted for illegal

lands deals (Joya, 2011: 376). In February 2011, Ahmed El Maghrabi, the Housing Minister from 2005 to 2010, was accused of selling 113 acres of state-owned land in 6 October City (a so-called 'desert city' established on the periphery of Cairo by former President Anwar Sadat in 1979) to the Akhbar al-Youm Investment Company to develop middle-class housing. In 2015, Maghrabi has acquitted of all charges, along with nearly all of these cases, which were dropped following the military coup in 2013 (Arese, 2018: 623). The top-down appearance of urban informality – as one seemingly demarked by the state and focused on the urban poor – was restored.

It is through this political history of urban informality, and its militarisation, that the renewed war by el-Sisi to 'eliminate' urban informality should be comprehended. In 2011, the Maspero neighbourhood of Cairo, adjacent to Tahrir Square, gained a reputation for being one of the most militant areas – defending and directing protesters to the square. The revolution had also sparked residents into organising and demonstrating against the state's long-term attempts to displace them (Wahba, 2020: 10). In late April 2018, the 77-acre Maspero Triangle site, an area of prime and strategic real estate, was dramatically turned to rubble. Khalil (2019b), in her documentation of the struggle between the people of Maspero and the state, noted that 'The Egyptian government uses the term of "development of slums" to describe its efforts to relocate residents, which include forced evictions and the use of security forces to remove the families'. The state has declared its intention to turn this district into a commercial and entertainment hub financed supposedly through land sales in this area. The rubble of Maspero and the rows of military constructed and designed public housing in Al-Asmarat on the periphery of Cairo where many of the residents

were rehoused provide a stark materialisation by the state of the formal and informal urban divide.

Maspero and Al-Asmarat, however, while directly impacting thousands of urban Egyptians, do not impact the vast majority of those placed under the various formulations of informality. These definitive actions by the state – that do indeed create a stark divide between the formal and informal – are not how most Egyptians experience informality. An example is the Construction Violations Reconciliation Law, passed by the Egyptian state in 2019 and amended in 2020, which aimed to solidify the appearance of the formal and informal divide by legalising many buildings. The Built Environment Observatory (BEO, 2020) has estimated that this law has incorporated as many as 8.2 million housing units built without a permit since 2007 alone. But, as detailed by the BEO, the ambitions of this law, despite being declared by the machinery of the state, have been met with all sorts of entanglements and compromises: the municipalities did not have the capacity to undertake such a large reconciliation and have been largely reluctant to impose it; the Engineers' Syndicate tasked with undertaking structural reports to conform to the law is too expensive for most; the law is unpopular with owners of buildings; and there is a lack of clarity over who should apply. The result is that instead of the complete transformation of how property is held by millions in the country (the stated aim of the law), the law has resulted in 32,000 applications for reconciliation (BEO, 2020). Rather than organising the built environment into a more durable appearance of the formal and informal, another hazard has been produced for urban Egyptians to navigate in their quest for everyday survival.

The rubble of Maspero and the lines of public housing in Al-Asmarat are the exceptional instances in which the formal and informal divide has (at least superficially)

been made to appear. The vast majority of Egyptians live in a haphazard urban context in which there is a constant negotiation over where Egyptians can and cannot live, and what is formal and informal. The thousands upon thousands of empty apartments in the desert cities are just one testament to this (detailed in Shawkat, 2020; Sims, 2010, 2015). The way in which urban informality by the state can result in the hazardisation of urban life rather than the neat determination of what is informal and what is not has also been articulated in the state's struggle to impose its definition of informality. The state does not act in a power vacuum; there are struggles within it and beyond over the placement of urban life.

The example of the resistance by residents of al-Warraq Island against the Egyptian state imposing its definition of urban informality on inhabitants is an illustration of how this category can be unsettled. The Egyptian state announced that it planned to turn al-Warraq Island in the Giza district of Cairo into a tourist destination and expropriate the land, planning to evict the estimated 120,000 people that inhabit the island (Arabic Network for Human Rights Information [ANHRI], 2018). Notably, the economic viability of turning this island into a tourist destination and of moving its inhabitants, and the substantive interest of (Gulf) investors to invest in such a project, are all unknown. The government, according to the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) who conducted field visits with the island residents, reported that inhabitants informed them that the state had prevented food supplies reaching the island, had cut off water and had accused them of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. The residents mobilised into committees representing the families living on the island to maintain their presence there, running Facebook pages and doing interviews on BBC Arabic and other news channels.

In July 2017, the government began tearing down houses while families remained inside, leading to among the first notable instances of violence between the protesters and the state since the 2011 revolution and the death of a 26-year-old man, Sayed Hassan Al-Gezawy (ANHRI, 2018; Khalil, 2019a: 106). The police and military had reportedly planned to demolish 720 houses but withdrew following protests by the island inhabitants after five houses had been destroyed (Bassam, 2018: 3). The battle for control of the island between the state and the islanders continues, as the state carries on its attempts to transfer 100,000 residents from the island to one of its public housing complexes. In December 2020, the state sentenced 35 of the protesters to prison and hard labour and restated its intention to displace the residents of the island (Al-Muhandis, 2020). Like much of urban Egypt, the struggle continues between the residents of Al-Warraq Island, various factions of the state and business interests. Khalil (2019a: 107) notes that the violence caused by forced evictions is not only limited to al-Warraq but has also occurred in many other governorates. The appearance of the formal and informal divide is a central concept in these struggle. The wrestling over the formal and informal urban divide is resulting in the hazardisation of urban life.

## Conclusion

Debates over what urban informality is continue to rage not only within and beyond the state in Egypt but also in the pages of scholarly journals. Several recent articles have called for urban studies to: ‘transcend urban informality’ (Acuto et al., 2019); understand urban informality as a ‘site of critical analysis’ (Banks et al., 2020) or as ‘splintered’ (Beier, 2021); consider ‘informality as a condition’ (Marx and Kelling, 2019); or think of alternatives, like ‘popular urbanization’ (Streule et al., 2020). In this article, I have

not argued for a more precise or fixed definition of urban informality or called for alternative formulations to it, but for scholars and policy makers to be attentive to the political processes through which this uncertain yet powerful concept is produced. Through a critical reading of the Abt report that first introduced the language of informality, I illustrated the arbitrary way in which much of urban Egypt was classified as informal. Despite the fact that this study detailed a range of haphazard urban practices, it insisted that urban Egypt was divided into the formal and informal. I in turn highlighted the geopolitical shifts and motivations that underlie the appearance of urban informality. Urban Egypt, I contend, is characterised by haphazard urbanisation, constituted by complex urban struggles, in which it takes the mobilisation of notable power to produce the appearance of a formal and informal divide and make it durable.

My approach to urban informality is one that does not understand it to be an object or a mode of urbanisation that is central to the territorial practices of state power. In tracing the Egyptian state’s engagement with urban informality, I highlighted how the state showed great reluctance in engaging this framework, until it was framed as a threat and subsequently militarised in the 1990s. Urban informality is now viewed by the el-Sisi regime as a central threat to the state but this has not meant that it has been able to dictate the appearance of urban informality. Rather, it has at times resulted in deadly struggles and what I term the hazardising of collective life in the country, making the achievement of a just, beautiful and sustainable city life ever more difficult in the country.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mehran Kamrava, Zahra Babar and Suzi Mirgani for the invitation to a workshop at Georgetown University-Qatar on

informal politics in 2018 that instigated this research. My thanks to Noura Wahby for commenting on a draft. At LSE, I would like to thank the students in GY431 (Class of 2020) for their thoughtful insights into urban informality in Egypt and beyond and the participants in the Writing the World workshop for their engagement with this article.


### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Deen Sharp  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0524-0540>

### Notes

1. Egypt Vision 2030. Available at: <https://egypt2030.gov.eg/?lang=en> (accessed December 2020); Egyptian Ministry of Defence, A Smile of Hope, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvPajn\\_BIKs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvPajn_BIKs) (accessed December 2020).
2. Translation by the author.
3. Hazard as a noun means a danger or risk; for example, the hazards of urban life. It can also mean chance and probability, an English meaning that might have derived from the Arabic *al-zahr* (meaning 'dice').
4. Roy (2005) understands the term *mode* to mean a manner, form or method.
5. Notably, the Abt study report incorrectly cited Law 52 of 1940 as 'Law 52 of 1940 and 1975'.
6. According to Shawkat (2020: 44), Decree 75/1990 marks the first time the term 'ashwa'yyat was used in legislation to describe informal areas. The Informal Settlements Development Facility (ISDF), as it is known in English, is officially named in Arabic 'The

'Ashwa'yyat District Development Fund'. The 2014 constitution commits the state in Article 78 to create a 'strong and complete plan' to 'face the 'ashwa'yyat problem'.

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