

The politics of public land dispossession in Egypt: 1975–2011 and beyond

ZIAD KOUSSA

*Department of Political Science and International Affairs, University of
Balamand, North Governorate, Lebanon*

Email: ziad.koussa@fty.balamand.edu.lb

ABSTRACT

This article examines changes in the allocation of urban land in Egypt between 1975–2011 with the rise and incorporation of state authoritarianism and neoliberal economics in what I call ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’. Authoritarian neoliberalism in Egypt transferred ownership of urban lands from public wealth to an affluent class of local and foreign capitalists—often in a non-transparent fashion. The article focuses on the government’s legally sanctioned practices of subsidisations, privatisations and evictions as they relate to what I call, inspired by David Harvey’s formulation, the accumulation of wealth by dispossession. Dispossession of public urban land, I maintain, generated widespread resentment that played a vital, but inadequately discussed, role in the series of revolts that culminated in the 2011 uprising in Egypt. Social tensions engendered in this authoritarian neoliberal regime, I argue, endure under the administration of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who continues to transfer public urban lands, from lower to higher socioeconomic classes, at an even faster pace than his predecessor.

Keywords: Egypt, neoliberalism, accumulation by dispossession, Arab Uprising.

INTRODUCTION

Reforms of public urban and non-urban land tenure across the African continent within the contemporary neoliberal agenda have been advocated on the grounds of transferring property rights from the state to private hands. From the perspective of the neoliberal agenda, promoted and developed by the World Bank (WB), the privatisation of public land is the best institutional system for economic development in the underdeveloped countries of the region (Deininger & Binswanger 1999). However, such a process has prompted many scholars to question the wisdom that such land politics brings. Across

Africa's diverse countries, neoliberal reforms of public land policy have been highly contentious, 'shaping political mobilisation, electoral dynamics, and far-reaching public debates about both democracy and development' (Boone 2007: 558). This article looks at Egypt, where such policies have had the most severe impact.

At first glance, Egypt's population density, calculated as 100 persons per km² (ranked 112 from 232 countries in 2019), can be deceiving to the uncritical observer, especially when one considers that virtually 98% of Egypt's population has always lived on, and from, only 4–5% of its immense land area of 995,450 km² (Shelley 2014: 163). Currently, these roughly 50,000 km², which include both the majority of Egypt's agricultural land as well as its habitable and urban spaces, is home to a growing population of ~100 million people. With the above parameters in mind, a more accurate understanding of Egypt's population density emerges as between 2000 and 2500 people per km², thus elevating its ranking to the ten top countries with highest population densities per km².¹ Given such an overwhelmingly unfavourable population-to-land ratio, distribution and access to habitable lands, both agricultural and urban, were, are and will continue to be of significant social, economic and political consequence.

Historically, private property did not exist in Egypt before the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805–1848). From ancient Pharaonic through Hellenistic and Roman rulers of Egypt (332 BC–AD 619), little changed in the centralised control over land tenure (Powelson 1988: 21–2). As Islam permeated culture (AD 634), successive ruling dynasties continued to assert complete state ownership over most of the land, distributing through tax farming and suchlike institutions usufruct rights to favoured families and individuals (Horii 2011: 179). It was Muhammad Ali who took the first steps to transform usufruct rights into the modern conception of private land ownership. However, by 1952, a few families controlled most of the habitable land in the country, including 'around 80 per cent of all cultivated land' (Osman 2010: 37). After the Free Officers Movement took power in 1952, the State became the single most important landowner through nationalising schemes (Powelson & Stock 1988: 110–11; Osman 2010: 41). After the death of Nasser, from President Anwar al-Sadat's time in power (1970–1981) to the present, the Egyptian State has taken through an authoritarian regime a general neoliberal approach to reverse Nasser's land policies (Richards *et al.* 2013: 122; Alexander & Bassiouny 2014: 6–7). In what follows, I argue that the extensive neoliberal restructuring of land ownership after Sadat took over played an essential but under-emphasised part in the emergence of discontent and resistance that fed into the 2011 uprisings against the Mubarak regime.

In the next section, I outline what neoliberalism and 'accumulation by dispossession' mean, before examining the political implications for urban lands in Egypt and exploring how this gave rise to networks of resistance against the Mubarak regime in 2011.

Neoliberalism: from 'primitive accumulation' to 'accumulation by dispossession'

Neoliberalism involves two basic principles: the expansion of human freedom and well-being (Hall 2011: 706–8) and the promotion of *laissez-faire* capitalism as a way to support this freedom. Supporters of these core principles believe (contra classical liberalism) in privileging private property rights over and above democratic rights as a more fundamental condition of liberty (Plehwe *et al.* 2007: 2). Indeed, social welfare, and by extension, democracy, should only be tolerated if it is 'not inimical to the initiative and the functioning of the market' (Hartwell 1995: 41–2).

Reformulating Adam Smith's (1776) concept of 'previous accumulation' defined as the peaceful 'accumulation of stock ... previous to the division of labour' (1977: 361), Marx asserts that a 'primitive accumulation [indeed] preceded capitalistic accumulation' (1867: 507). However, unlike Smith's peaceful accumulation, for Marx, this process entailed violence and 'the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population ... conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins' (Marx 1867: 533).

In contradistinction to Marx, Harvey (2003, 2007) asserts that primitive methods of accumulation are not confined to the first moment but complement capitalism's rise throughout its history. In this, Harvey affirms and extends a view, held by Arendt, Kropotkin and Luxemburg, which rejects Marx's originalist theory of capitalism and asserts that primitive accumulation has always been a continuous and constitutive feature of capitalist expansion (Arendt 1973: 148; Kropotkin 1995: 221; Luxemburg 2003: 348–9). Furthermore, Harvey distinguishes his assessment of 'primitive accumulation' from Luxemburg's, who had theorised it as a process by which capitalist formations conquer and dispossess outside 'non-capitalist social strata ... as a source of supply for its means of production' (2003: 348–9). On the contrary, he asserts that 'primitive accumulation' has from the beginning played a continuous role both inside and outside of capitalism, as a parallel mechanism and an on-going practice, along with the standard operation of expanded reproduction. Thus, Harvey declares that since Marx's notion of 'primitive' or 'original' accumulation seems to be, from the beginnings of capitalism, an ongoing predatory process: 'I shall ... substitute these terms by the concept of accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003: 144).

According to Robert Nichols, Harvey's conception of accumulation by dispossession (AbD) is more complicated as it illuminates the process of accumulation in new domains in both capitalist and non-capitalist social formations (Nichols 2015: 20). Indeed, for Harvey AbD entails:

The pillaging of the world's stockpile of genetic resources ... The corporatisation and privatisation of hitherto public assets (such as universities), to say nothing of

the wave of privatisation (of water and public utilities of all kinds) ... The reversion of common property rights won through years of hard class struggle (the right to a pension, to welfare, to national health care) to the private domain has been one of the most egregious of all policies of dispossession pursued in the name of neoliberal orthodoxy. (Harvey 2007: 35)

Moreover, Harvey asserts that AbD emerges in our contemporary neoliberal era from a 'background state to become the dominant form of accumulation relative to expanded reproduction' (2003: 153). Thus, AbD for Harvey is a clear political project of wealth redistribution, or what he calls 'regressive redistributions' (Harvey 2007: 46) through privatisation and commodification of communal wealth upwards towards more affluent and wealthier classes at the expense of weaker segments of society. In Harvey's analysis, the neoliberal State acts as the 'prime agent of redistributive policies, reversing the flow from upper to lower classes that had occurred during the era of embedded liberalism' (Harvey 2007: 163) or state socialism, as is the case in Egypt.

Resistance to accumulation by dispossession

The section above explored how Harvey's theoretical understanding of our contemporary form of capitalism can help us better understand the emergence of current oppositional cultures and social movements that 'either explicitly or tacitly reject the market ethics and the practices that neo-liberalisation imposes' (Harvey 2003: 185). For example, self-conscious movements such as the 1994 Zapatista movement 'for humanity and against neoliberalism' (Zapatistas 2011: 9) are a compelling and provocative instance of the spread of radical resistance against land dispossession from a local issue in Mexico to a global one (Khasnabish 2013: 192). Indeed, from Latin America (Spronk & Webber 2007) to India (Levien 2011) and Africa (Martiniello 2013; Gillespie 2016; Prempeh 2017) democratic struggles against the State's imposition of neoliberal practices, in which dispossession is prominent, have been widely reported.

In Egypt, resistance against AbD is mapped out in several domains. Julia Elyachar reworks Harvey's model to focus not on the State as the principal agent of AbD, but on practices carried out by both international and non-governmental organisations in Cairo towards the informal economy of small workshops, 'to expand the market through dispossession' (Elyachar 2005: 29 & 214). Alternatively, Ray Bush uncovers the process of AbD from smallholder farmers, inaugurated by agrarian reforms Law 96 of 1992, which led to the emergence of vast networks of resistance (Bush 2011: 396; El Nour 2015). In housing allocation policies, Angela Joya focuses on how opposition grew and galvanised against AbD (Joya 2013). Regardless of the different domains (housing access, agricultural land or the small workshops), resistance against AbD always proceeds against those in political power because the State, 'with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in

both backing and promoting these processes [of AbD]' (Harvey 2003: 145). Indeed, many of those who participated in the 2011 Egyptian uprising did so in response to dispossession and its attending experience of displacement, poverty, marginalisation and inequality, as the State pursued a neoliberal economy of AbD (Roccu 2013a, 2013b).

Next, I explore AbD in Egypt, specifically in public urban and 'undeveloped' state-controlled land. I will thus gather specific data (those on public urban (PUL) and 'undeveloped' state-controlled land) from a diverse collection of fragmented empirical research material, and present it under the rubric of AbD. In this regard, I will explore the various legal manoeuvres of property restructuring that led to the commodification of PUL and were used for wealth accumulation in a profit-oriented real estate market. Second, I will explore the strategies of dispossession, taken under the guise of 'development', as a way through which the State subsidised both internal and external infrastructures, at the public's expense, for the benefit of private real-estate developers. Third, I look at how enforced evictions became government strategies to transfer PUL to private hands, most of which ended up in the creation of gated housing developments that cater to the more affluent classes at the expense of the low-income strata. Finally, the conclusion outlines how AbD in urban land created widespread material and social inequality, loss of rights, dignity and even life, which in turn generated increasing discontent and intensifying resistance that fed into the uprisings of 2011 and beyond.

ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION IN URBAN LAND:
THE CASE OF EGYPT

Urban public land dispossession through the legal restructuring of property rights

Between the time of the Free Officers Coup of 1952 to the late 1950s and early 1960s, Egypt, through numerous nationalisation decrees and legal manoeuvres, became the largest owner of PUL (Durac & Cavatorta 2015: 119). In this regard, 'Law 147/1957 amending Article 970 of Common Law 131/1948' (Shawkat 2016a: 12) was enacted to initiate and establish the State's control over all public land, including the 11% of Egypt's arable land owned by the Religious Endowments (Alianak 2007: 171). Nasser's government then divided the newly nationalised urban land into two distinct types of public ownership. Some public areas were categorised as Public State Land designated mainly for public infrastructures such as roads and canals, while other public lands were classified as Private State Land to be primarily used for housing projects (Shawkat 2016b: 119). Next, five State agencies were created to administer over 2.1 million hectares of nationalised land, nearly half of Egypt's territory (World Bank 2009: 135; Shawkat 2016a: 1).

One of the major strategic goals behind the Nasserist nationalisation policies was to facilitate, create and implement, on public land, master plans to resolve the mounting need for social housing (Mosha 1995: 48). Accordingly, in 1961,

plans to build six satellite cities on this newly possessed public land around Cairo were proposed (Joya 2013: 132). The purpose was to construct and transfer social housing² at cost (and on a need-only basis) to workers and low-income Egyptians (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UN-Habitat) 1993: 127). After President Sadat took power in 1971, the Nasserite strategy of using PUL for social housing began to be dismantled in favour of developing more market-friendly approaches. To that end, the powers of the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA, the institution most responsible for urban land) were expanded and codified by Law 95, 1979 (Bush & Ayeb 2012). Accordingly, Prime Ministerial Decree No. 540, 1980 gave the NUCA controlling rights to develop public land for housing purposes covering 600,000 feddans or about 2,500 km² (World Bank 2006a: 13). Theoretically, these developments were designated to improve housing opportunities for low-income Egyptians; however, as will be seen below, this vision changed and took a new and radically different direction after the 1980s and 90s.

Indeed, after 1980, the NUCA concentrated most of its efforts not on directly using PUL for social housing, but on privatising vast tracts of real estate, through legal manoeuvring, to an affluent capitalist class both local and foreign (Bassiouni 2017: 289). For example, in 2007, Issa and Schechla pointed to a scandalous revelation by Major General `Umar al-Shuwadafānī (head of the National Centre for Land Use) in which he disclosed that top government officials and their business-partner relatives, referred to as ‘the land mafia ... had seized some 16 million feddans (67,200 km²) of the Egyptian people’s land’ (Issa 2011; Schechla 2014: 6–7). This area is equal to the size of Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Historical Palestine combined (Masri 2012). Based on these and other revelations, the People’s Assembly deputy, Gamal Zahran, announced in the November 2007 parliament session that the State had lost some EGP800 billion (~US\$13 billion in 2007) in the (less than transparent mechanisms of) privatisation of urban lands, which were distributed to an affluent class of politically connected businesspeople, otherwise known as crony capitalists (Aliwa 2007; Sims 2015).

Notably, in one instance, Masri points to an area of around 100 million m² west of the Suez Gulf that was transferred in 2004 without any official auction for one Egyptian pound per m² (a price far below the market value for such land) to four politically connected Egyptian billionaires plus one Chinese company (at 20 million m² each) (Masri 2012), who then gained immediate and vast fortunes from them. Indeed, this single case involved a transfer of public wealth amounting to around EGP9.9 billion (~US\$2.2 billion in 2004). Masri discloses that Ahmed Ezz, a billionaire and one-time senior member of the ruling National Democratic Party of Egypt (NDP) under Mubarak, immediately sold 150,000 m² of his share of this land to Kuwaiti investor Nasser Al-Kharafi at EGP1,500 per m² (~US\$330 in 2004), thus immediately profiting by a staggering US\$50 million. Similarly, another well-known Egyptian billionaire, Naguib Sawiris, reportedly built a factory on around 200,000 m² of his share of the land and sold the rest (19,800,000 m²) to an

undisclosed party. Likewise, billionaire Mohamed M. Abou-Elenin, a member of the Egyptian Parliament for over 15 years (1995–2011), built an industrial plant on around 150,000 m² of his share of the land and sold the rest (19,850,000 m²) to an undisclosed party. Billionaire and former politician, Mohamed Farid Khamis, reportedly built a relatively small factory on around 20,000 m² and also sold the rest of his 20,000,000 m² for an undisclosed amount reaching billions of Egyptian pounds (Masri 2012). No information about what the Chinese company did with its share of the land can be found. If the price of US\$330 per m² that Ahmed Ezz got for his property is anything to go by, then the total sum that this particular land grab transferred into private hands from Egypt's commonwealth is close to US\$33 billion.

In 2011, Abdel Khalek Faruq,³ critical economist and anti-government activist, published a book detailing a significant number of cases of state-sponsored dispossession across various sectors such as communications, natural resources (e.g. steel and gas) and, importantly, on public urban and non-urban land (Faruq 2011: 29–30). Based on an unpublished affidavit by a member of the Egyptian parliament (Saad Al-Hussein), Faruq estimates that around 170 million m² of urban public land was transferred to private hands in the Mubarak era (Faruq 2011: 45 & 354–64). One of these cases is related to the government transferring an estimated 53 million m² of prime real estate in Cairo to construction tycoon and politician Hisham Talaat Moustafa, at 'below its legal value' (Gribbon & Hawas 2012: 126) in 2004. A part of this deal mandated that Moustafa's investment company would also 'supply the NUCA with housing for low-income households, equal to 7 per cent of total development costs' (Peterson 2009: 60), but instead the total land area was used to build a gated community/city for the wealthy called Madinaty (Faruq 2011: 45 & 354–64).

Over and above the irregular sales of public land to an affluent Egyptian class of capitalists and companies discussed above, dispossession was further accelerated by the 1997 decision to permit foreign ownership of real estate for the first time (Hanieh 2013: 66). In 2007, Prime Ministerial decree 350/2007 removed almost all restrictions on foreign investors buying property and land in Egypt (Oxford Business Group 2014: 279), thereby opening up more public land sales to foreign speculators. The Egyptian government encouraged this by embarking on a substantial sell-off of 'urban areas by auctioning land at low prices or negotiating closed-door agreements with individual companies' (Hanieh 2013: 66). Hence, investment from large regional developers, usually those associated with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (e.g. Emaar, Solidere, Barwa, Damac) in partnership with local companies (e.g. Bahgat Group, Talaat Moustafa Group, Oriental Weavers), enormously expanded into PUL acquisition and real-estate developments (Hanieh 2015: 168). By 2007, it was estimated that around 16.5 million m² of PUL (90% of what Egypt's government had auctioned) had been surreptitiously transferred to Saudi, Qatari and UAE investment companies (Hanieh 2015: 168). According to a 2010 report by Deutsche Bank, cited by Hanieh (2015), Egyptian-based companies, such as Talaat Moustafa Group (TMG) and the

Sixth of October Development and Investment Corporation (SODIC), in partnership with Gulf-based companies, controlled an estimated 50 million m² of land across Egypt. Controlling shares of both of these companies were in the hands of foreign investors, mainly two Saudi companies of The Olayan Group and the Saudi Binladin Group (Hanieh 2015: 168).

In the aftermath of the 2011 popular uprising in Egypt, the auditors of the Urban Communities Authority issued report No. 755 on public land transfers, which included details of these and other land transfers, which took place under suspicious conditions, to foreign and local companies (Schechla 2014: 7). According to Schechla, this report found that President Mubarak allocated 120,000 m² of PUL by illegal means (estimated to be worth around €5.4 million) in the Marina tourism complex to UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nahyān (2014: 7). Joseph Schechla, the coordinator of the Habitat International Coalition–Housing and Land Rights Network (HIC-HLRN), has asserted that these legalised, and often fraudulent transfers of PUL to private control were ‘a subject central to the Arab awakening’ of 2011 (Schechla 2014: 1). Similarly, Samir Amin asserted that before the Egyptian ‘reawakening’ of 2011, there was growing discontent in the popular perception of the organic corruption of the Egyptian State (Amin 2016: 29). Nevertheless, since the rise of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013, practically all cases have been ‘dismissed or rescinded, [a] testament to the return to Mubarak-style’ authoritarian neoliberalism that supports transferring PUL to wealthy Gulf and Egyptian individuals and corporations (Sinno 2017; Simcik Arese 2018a, 2018b). Indeed, according to Rod Sweet, after Abdel-Khaleq Farouq published a book that criticised Sisi’s economic policies, the police arrested him and ‘seized 185 copies of an initial 200-copy run before any could be sold, and also arrested the publisher’ (2019: 25).

Urban public land dispossession through subsidisation strategies

The need to urbanise new land to meet the needs of Egypt’s growing population had pushed successive governments to follow a policy of expanding new housing projects into desert lands at the urban fringe. In this regard, the most significant economic issue associated with developing such areas has always been related to the financing of the expensive infrastructure required (e.g. transportation, water, sanitary drainage and power). Under Nasser, and for some time under Sadat, the strategy was for the State to fully finance the infrastructure needed for such desert land as well as the construction of the social housing itself. Under this type of arrangement, houses were mainly built and sold at cost-effective prices to low- and moderate-income buyers and were sometimes transferred through subsidised rental schemes (Harms 2017: 149–55). However, this top-down wealth transfer began to move in the opposite direction after 1974, with Egypt’s adoption of an open-door policy.

Indeed, by 1996 around 1,200 km² of public land, with fully developed infrastructure (at the public’s expense), had been allocated to private property

developers: 'i.e., an area more than 2.5 times the size of the greater Cairo area, which had taken 100 years to increase from 35 to 480 square kilometres' (Denis 2011: 140), at undisclosed prices. The development 'absorbed huge public investments ... [in] infrastructure services – roads, sewers, water, street lighting, public spaces, landscaping, and treatment plants ... along with expensive access roads and utility trunk lines, needed to supply the new towns' (Sims 2012: 107; Harms 2017: 151).

Therefore, to understand the complexity of urban land dispossession, it is essential to deconstruct the transferring process, to private real-estate developers, of PUL with its infrastructure fully developed. It has been the standard practice of the Egyptian government to install both internal and external infrastructure at the public's expense, and allocate this developed land 'to private promoters through private negotiations or sales at prefixed, below-market prices' (Peterson 2009: 56). Such claims are supported by a World Bank report which points to a fragmented system of public land transfer that relies on 'State-determined administrative pricing of land at below-market rates, irrespective of the opportunity cost of the land' (World Bank 2008: 23). Moreover, the same report points out that such administrative pricing is often below the infrastructure costs, which only fuels speculation (23). This arrangement facilitated the transfer of vast public wealth into private hands. Up to 2005, the NUCA, empowered by exclusive rights to develop infrastructure in State-owned desert areas (Sims 2012: 77), had extensive infrastructure services installed on 435 km² for 'new city development[s] ... out of which, approximately 218 square kilometres were designated for housing' (World Bank 2006b: 57). In this regard, Peterson (2009) states that the estimated expenditure on these land developments was ~US\$12.7 billion and only covered the costs of the internal infrastructure. However, if the costs of connecting this internal infrastructure to external foundations (i.e. highways, electricity, telecommunications and water supplies) are factored in, these estimates become much higher (Peterson 2009: 56). And, as Peterson claims, 'in the last 25 years, Egypt has recovered from land sales ... less than half the amount it has invested in internal infrastructure' (2009: 58).

In 2004, the Government decided to sell a substantial land parcel 'of 90 feddans (378,000 m²) located at the main entrance of New Cairo City' (World Bank 2006b: 57). The sale, which attracted four private developers, was conducted by public auction. On paper, the deal appeared transparent, with the Government receiving three times the price it had initially sought. However, this could only happen because the official land market price for real-estate investments was administratively set at EGP225 per m² (regardless of the parcel's location within the city) and because only a handful of handpicked companies could bid (given the size of the plot on offer). Eventually, the winning investment company ended up paying three times the administrative price at LE625 per m². However, as Peterson asserts, this amount was 'barely enough to cover the costs incurred in providing internal infrastructure' (2009: 58). Ultimately, if the examples presented above were the norm in neoliberal Egypt,

and they were as I have shown above, then one can only imagine the extent of AbD in urban infrastructure on public land that occurred during the Mubarak regime.

Dispossession through evictions

To understand the dispossession of PUL in more depth, it is essential to look at PUL already inhabited by settled populations. In the context of a neo-liberal drive for privatisation and cuts in government spending on housing and other social services, Egypt's urban population became further concentrated in urban slums in and around the main cities of Cairo and Alexandria (Khalifa 2011: 40; Tarbush 2012). However, as the neoliberal economic policies undertaken by Mubarak were deepened, these slums (or informal areas) became the target of new forms of politically motivated development projects, such as the 'Greater Cairo Strategic planning 2050' (Sims 2012: 88). Under the pretext of bringing 'order' to the city, the State formalised efforts to free up more PUL through a process of forced evictions (Soueif 2012: 25), defined as 'the permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection' (Riedel *et al.* 2014: 361). As early as 2000, the UN agencies were reporting on such cases of 'forced evictions without alternative housing or compensation ... [on] poor communities like the Potters village and the Ayn Helwan area in Cairo' (CESCR 2003: 190; UN-Habitat 2006: 32). In what follows, I will look in detail at some of the accounts of enforced dispossession/evictions, reported on by the Egyptian press and Amnesty International, in order to understand the process through which the State enforced, by decree and decree, further wealth accumulation from PUL into private hands.

Indeed, to further PUL dispossession through forced evictions, the government seized on an opportunity created by the 2008 rockfall at the informal settlement of Duweiqā district, at the base of the Moqattam cliffs, Cairo, which destroyed 97 homes and killed over 100 residents (Amnesty International 2009). As a result of the Duweiqā rockfall, the government established (by presidential decree 305/2008) an agency called The Informal Settlements Development Fund (ISDF), which was empowered to develop plans to deal with informal settlements in Egypt (Amnesty International 2009).

Accordingly, the ISDF reviewed all of Egypt's informal areas and designated which were unsafe on a scale from 1 to 4: Grade 1 representing the most unsafe and Grade 4 the least (Ababsa *et al.* 2012: 205). According to a 2011 Amnesty International report, the ISDF planned to resettle residents living in Grade 1 areas to safer accommodation while residents in Grade 2 areas were designated to be either resettled, rehoused, or to have their building stock upgraded, depending on the prevailing conditions. In Grade 3 areas the ISDF planned to address public-health issues while, for Grade 4 regions, it sought to prepare a legal framework for the Government to regularise the residents' tenure of their land (Amnesty International 2011: 13; Khalifa 2015: 1155).

However, while this official grading system appears to set out rigorous and rational approaches to aid slum dwellers, for a variety of reasons, this has not always been the case. The intervention has been selective, irrational and ad hoc. According to the 2011 Amnesty International report, residents living in Grade 2 areas were evicted before those living in life-threatening Grade 1 areas. The notion of resident's 'safety' appears to be a whitewash used to justify exploitative policies and, in extreme cases, displace poor people living on valuable real estate. In particular, if examining the areas targeted by ISDF intervention, it becomes evident that those living in so-called hazardous regions, which also were of high commercial value, were particularly vulnerable to forced eviction.

As part of plans to deal with 371 districts deemed 'unsafe' by the ISDF (Shenker 2017), Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif announced on May 2010 that residents of 33 (Grade 1) unsafe areas in both Cairo and Giza governorates would be relocated in new housing units built for them by the government (Hamilton *et al.* 2012: 28). The ISDF Executive Director promised (along with other socio-economic incentives) that the housing units would be handed over to these residents free of charge (Amnesty International 2011: 85). However, a closer look reveals the implicit agenda behind this relocation of 37,500 families, advertised as social intervention schemes to move residents from unsafe areas (now named shack areas) to safer environments. As it turns out, the 460 acres of land reclaimed from the clearing of the 33 shack areas was estimated to be worth at least EGP3.7 billion (~US\$622.88 million) while the total cost of the alternative housing units stood at just EGP2.6 billion (~US\$437.7 million); the remaining money was kept by the government and was earmarked to benefit the evicted families (Amnesty International 2011: 85–6). However, a letter sent by Amnesty International to Prime Minister Nazif expressed fears that the government's guarantees to the residents of the 33 shack areas, to provide them with alternative housing, should they accept relocation, were not being upheld. No response to the letter was received (Amnesty International 2011: 87).

Information about government-sanctioned dispossession, forced evictions and demolition of dwellings is difficult (and potentially dangerous) to come by. However, from 2004 up to 2011, NGOs such as HIC-HLRN, Amnesty International as well as others, were able to document at least nine such cases of violent evictions, which most probably account for only a small fraction of those that took place. Such removals left residents dispossessed, alienated and angry as well as homeless. I will discuss two other cases to further illustrate how the State executes eviction/dispossession.

The first case is related to the informal settlement of Tossou, Alexandria where, in the morning of 1 May 2008, Central Security troops surrounded the homes of some 2000 people and 'proceeded to use tear gas and police dogs to force some of the inhabitants out of their homes before the houses were razed to the ground' (Carr 2008: Para. 2). Those made homeless by this forcible eviction proceeded to protest outside the Ministry of Agriculture

without any success, demanding they be allowed to buy the land on which they had been living (Gunning & Baron 2014: 68).

The second occurred in March 2010 when the ISDF announced one such forced eviction and relocation from designated Grade 2 'unsafe areas' of Zerzara in Port Said. On 4 May 2010, bulldozers demolished 15 homes in Zerzara without notice and families were left out on the street. There was a heavy police presence and, according to the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights, officers beat some of those targeted for eviction. On 3 October 2010, about 100 people from Zerzara staged a protest in front of the headquarters of Port Said governorate asking for adequate housing, a demonstration that highlighted the dangers that the government could face from the dispossessed through forced eviction (Amnesty International 2011: 47).

In 2010, Amnesty International reported that residents of evicted communities were suspicious about the inconsistent government approach and were claiming that the purpose of eviction was not 'to protect them, but so that the land can be developed for commercial gain' (2011: 3). Yahia Shawkat asserted 'that owners of such buildings sometimes seek a demolition order for commercial gain, as this would allow them to evict tenants that pay an old fixed rent and then build a taller structure with apartments that could be sold' (Amnesty International 2011: 22). Actually, 'of the 410 protests reported in al-Masry al-Youm as involving more than 500 protesters between 2008 and 2010, thirty-nine focused on ... evictions' from informal inner-city areas (Gunning & Baron 2014: 68).

Since the rise to power of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in July 2013, the HIC-HLRN has documented numerous new evictions and dispossession from valuable PUL in the name of modernising Egyptian cities, most famous of which are the Tal Al-Akareb in Al-Sayeda Zainab district and the Warraq Island (Mada Masr 2017).

Gated communities

Evictions, demolitions and the sale of PUL with pre-built, taxpayer-financed infrastructure produced exclusive gated communities for the rich, with restricted consumption zones, entertainment centres, restaurants and night-clubs, shopping malls, golf courses and theme parks (Adham 2005: 24).

In 1976 President Sadat initiated the construction of the Tenth of Ramadan City (AlSayyad 2011: 260), which was followed by the NUCA plans to construct 17 new cities, including the Sixth of October, Sadat City, El Obour and Bourg El-Arab el Gedida (AlSayyad 2011: 260). These cities were each intended to house between 250,000–500,000 low and middle-income Egyptian families (World Bank 2008: 51). However, in 2006, after 30 years of new-town policies, the data told a different story. The new towns turned previously owned public lands into private gated communities with 'shopping malls and amusement parks, for upper-class consumption' (Peterson 2011: 17). After reviewing a number of these new town projects, Kuppinger claims that the State constructed

new bridges, roads and other essential infrastructure ‘in record time’ and at the taxpayer’s expense in Cairo’s desert suburbs, only to be sold to private ownership at low cost (Kuppinger 2004; 2006: 52–4). This allowed private developers to build high-end residential units for Egypt’s rich (Mitchell 1999: 28).

In 2006, other gated communities were constructed around Cairo on ‘more than one-hundred square kilometres’ (Denis 2006: 50) of desert land which were sold to private enterprises. Haram City is one example of those gated communities which was built on land subsidised by the Egyptian government and effectively privatised in the hands of billionaire Samih Sawiris, who bought through his company Orascom Housing Communities (OHC) ‘4.2 million square metres of land from the New Urban Communities Authority for about LE10.7 per square metre (£1.7 per square metre, in January 2006), an extraordinarily cheap price for public land’ (Simcik Arese 2018a: 3). While OHC was promoted as a public/private initiative to build affordable housing for 400,000 people from low-income families, like most gated communities it was ‘mostly populated by those who have found wealth under state privatisation – who seek lifestyles, consumption and a sense of personal autonomy beyond that deemed possible in traditional Egypt’ (Simcik Arese 2018a: 8).

A survey of five new towns surrounding the Greater Cairo Region shows that by 2011, 466 high-end gated communities had been either constructed or were under construction (Ghonimi *et al.* 2012). The primary beneficiaries of this mushrooming of gated communities (with such ostentatious names as Utopia, Beverly Hills, Palm Hills, Jolie-Ville, Mena Garden City and Dreamland) are the affluent private contractors and developers who concentrate on catering for a profitable luxury housing market, ignoring the needs of the majority of Egypt’s people (Abaza 2006: 33).

Finally, it is crucial to examine how the development of gated communities in new towns was accompanied by a land speculation boom that brought in immense profits, mainly for private contractors and developers. Indeed, land speculation was boosted because Prime Ministerial decree 350/2007 removed all restrictions on foreign companies and individuals buying property in Egypt (Oxford Business Group 2008: 221). As a result of the adoption of this decree, land prices rose by an ‘outrageous 116 per cent overnight, in the suburb-like “new cities” around Cairo, where most land speculation occurs’ (Shawkat 2016a: 4). Subsequently, the 2008 Oxford Business report on Egypt revealed that the government sold vast tracts of PUL, totalling 20 million m², to real estate developers Gulf firm Emaar and Damac – ‘the largest tranche of sales ever’ (53). Therefore, against this web of property speculation, land prices from 2003 until the January 2011 revolution, according to Shawkat, rose at ‘a staggering average annual increase of 148%’ (2016: 4). Against the background of these rising real estate prices, the average income increased only 1% per year from 2008/2009 to 2012/2013 and 26% of Egyptians were living at or below the national poverty line. This disparity between income and real estate prices created one of the most unequal housing markets in the world (Shawkat 2016a: 4).

Resistance

On 25 January 2011, the Egyptian people stormed the streets to protest the social and economic policies of the previous two decades. Alexander and Bassiouny have stressed that ‘the initiators of the street protests that began on 25 January were a loose coalition of opposition groups and activists’ (2014: 192), many of whom had been active since 1991 against the State’s implementation of vital institutional and legal structures to secure the transfer of PUL into local and foreign private hands. These strategies of PUL dispossession contributed to an estimated 28 million Egyptians (Elasrag 2016: 138), most of whom were surviving on US\$2 a day, living in slums that surrounded the country’s major cities (Bassiouni 2017: 532). Pertinently, at the time of the uprising in 2011, ‘64 per cent of residents of Greater Cairo lived in these settlements, comprising around 40 per cent of Greater Cairo’ (Gunning & Baron 2014: 155), a situation that was mirrored in most of Egypt’s big cities. Dispossession of land drove many Egyptians to join the impoverished residents of these slum areas, who lived discontented and troubled lives with most of their essential needs continuously under threat (Joya 2013).

Before the 2011 uprisings, the available data show that the average rate of collective action against the government more than tripled to around 410 incidents annually compared with a mean average of just 122 protests a year between 1998–2004 (Alexander & Bassiouny 2014: 97). From 2004, we begin to see a marked increase in anti-ABD struggles as life for most Egyptians deteriorated in the aftermath of the April 2004 appointment of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, who was brought in ‘to accelerate ... the liberalisation of the economy in accord with the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program negotiated with the IMF and World Bank in 1991’ (Beinin 2016: 10–11). Indeed, Cook proclaims that popular protest in 2004 ‘accounted for a little more than one-quarter of all the protests staged in the preceding six years’ (Cook 2011: 178). Similarly, Ottaway & Hamzawy (2011: 2–4) also claim that in 2004 such protests marked a ‘200 per cent increase from 2003’. In the same vein, Beinin claims that there were ‘265 collective actions in 2004—more than double the 1998–2003 average—[with] over 70% (190) of them occur[ing] after the Nazif government took office in July’ (2016: 10–11).

Moving on, between 2004–2007 new highs of more than 200 anti-government protests per year were recorded, although this number was small in comparison to the ‘highs of 614 in 2007 and 609 in 2008’ (Beinin 2015: 33), which involved ‘over 1.2 million people’ and were the most widely joined popular movements in Egypt since 1952 (Beinin 2009: 77). In this regard, Guazzone & Pioppi (2009: 37) declare that ‘202 collective actions in 2005, 222 in 2006 and a staggering 614 in 2007’ were against land dispossession. By 2008–2010 widespread protests related to social justice and bread-and-butter issues by the general public had reached approximately ‘a thousand strikes [annually] ... with over 300 labour strikes in the first half of 2010 alone’ (Alianak 2014:

60). Beinlin reports that in 2009 and 2010 the ‘number of actions’ plus the number of ‘alternative ... actions’ against the government’s economic policies had easily gone over one thousand (2015: 36).

According to Alexander & Bassiouny, on 25 January 2011, protests against authoritarian neoliberalism quantitatively continued to increase but also qualitatively created a ‘profound rupture with them’ (2014: 192). The ‘streets of discontent’ (Bayat 2013: 52) created by PUL dispossession in the slum areas ‘became sites of mobilisation where the demonstrations could start and grow ... Large enough to overwhelm the police stationed at the large public thoroughfares and squares’ (Gunning & Baron 2014: 55). According to Gunning & Baron, during the 2011 uprisings these areas became ‘feeder sites ... linking the periphery with the centre by making them the epicentre of revolutionary mobilisation’ (2014: 155). Thus, the three long decades of intense government-driven neoliberal AbD generated increasingly volatile anti-dispossession networks of people without fundamental freedoms and dignity and eventually ‘produced a rare moment of solidarity’, which was essential in the Egyptian uprisings of 2011 (Winegar 2018: 124). Therefore, a picture emerges of the 2011 revolution that has been ignored by most popular accounts, but one which bears directly on the current situation in Egypt.

ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION IN URBAN LAND AFTER THE EGYPTIAN UPRISING IN 2011

In the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising of 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) gained power, between 2012 and 2013 under then-president Mohamed Morsi. Misunderstanding the uprising’s rejection of neoliberal political-economy (authoritarian or otherwise), Morsi continued with the same economic IMF policies as his predecessor, albeit now under a democratically elected government (Hecan 2016: 774–5). Indeed, the Brotherhood’s leaders had gradually embraced neoliberalism during the decades prior to 2011. Consequently, the MB failed to address the underlying causes of the public’s discontent with Mubarak’s neoliberal economic policies (Armbrust 2011; Joya 2011). This helped undermine Morsi, ultimately facilitating his removal from office in July 2013, by the then army general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (Wael Gamal 2019).

If the adoption of neoliberalism in Egypt, along with its underlying process of AbD in PUL played an essential role in the revolts of 2011, then the question for today is how much of this still continues under the contemporary regime of el-Sisi? In this regard, I assert that the seemingly secure regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi continues to be undergirded by the same structural contradictions that gave rise to the popular uprisings of 2011. Indeed, President el-Sisi began to implement in earnest the unpopular economic restructuring required by the agreement reached with the IMF for a US\$12 billion loan in December 2016. Almost immediately after the deal was signed, the Egyptian government embarked on an extensive privatisation programme of its public assets in

banking and financial institutions, the oil and gas industry, construction companies and real estate (Trofimov 2017; Rutherford & Sowers 2018: 24–6; Hanieh 2019: 261). One blatant example of land sales is the 2017 decision by Egypt to transfer two islands in the Red Sea to Saudi control; reportedly Saudi Arabia paid Egypt US\$25 billion to give up the islands of Tiran and Sanafir.⁴

Furthermore, the commodification of PUL under Mubarak, which had enriched a small fraction of local and foreign capitalists at the price of dispossessing and impoverishing most Egyptians before 2011, continued unabated after el-Sisi took power in 2014. Having acquired vast urban land for almost no cost Emaar Misr, a subsidiary of Emirati Emaar Properties, was assigned a contract in 2014 to build a retail development as part of the Uptown Cairo housing project, while Emirati Arabtec Holdings was contracted to build around one million housing units on PUL across Egypt (McMahon 2017: 217). This invited large conglomerates from the Gulf to invest their surplus capital in the most extensive acquisition of PUL as well as construction companies and related industries (Hanieh 2019: 275–9). While cloaked in the expertise discourse of solving Egypt's housing problems, such public-private partnerships opened further avenues for accumulation by dispossession.

In 2015 it was disclosed by Rod Sweet that Dubai's most eminent developer, Emaar Properties, later joined by China State Construction Engineering Corp (CSCEC), would lead a project to build a new national capital on 700 km², which was to include thousands of schools, millions of housing units, an opera house, eight-lane boulevards, forested parklands and 'various clusters with labels such as "Smart Village," "Medical City," "Knowledge City," and the like' (Sweet 2019: 19). With no clear information about the sale price of appropriated lands, this so-called joint venture with Emirati and Chinese capital is reminiscent of the fraudulent land transfers of the Mubarak years. Returning to the question of AbD in PUL in the new capital project, the answer is that the city will be inaccessible to ordinary Egyptians. Consistent with a State-backed profit-driven real estate business model, Egyptian real-estate developers such as Sourouh Developments and Entrada received ministerial approval to advertise '3,000 residences to be sold for E£8,800 [US\$530 in 2019] per square metre, which puts the price of the smallest apartment (120 sq m) at more than E£1 m [US\$62,000]', a price few Egyptians can afford (Sweet 2019: 25).

With this knowledge in mind, we can expect that the current el-Sisi regime, which continues to implement unpopular neoliberal policies in wide-ranging domains, besides privatisation of PUL, such as education, health care and state-run factories, to name a few, continues to be threatened by the same dispossession struggles that toppled the Mubarak regime. Aware of such an outcome, and the centrality of political repression to the reproduction of authoritarian neoliberalism, the administration of el-Sisi, since taking power in June 2014, has wasted no time developing a comprehensive police/military security machine unmatched since the worst years of al-Nasr's rule in the 1950s and 1960s (Abdelrahman 2017; Stork 2019). In an atmosphere of

permanent, elevated crisis, it is a risky path to depend on brute force because, if it fails, as Mubarak's downfall suggests, el-Sisi's legitimacy will come under renewed scrutiny from a dispossessed and suffering population.

On a final note, while this article does not extend its research of AbD in PUL beyond the case of Egypt, it must be pointed out that, in the broader context of the African continent, neoliberal restructuring and the economics of expropriation have, in different ways, adversely affected most countries in Africa (Ferguson 2006; Chalfin 2010; Bond 2011; Büscher 2013; Wiegatz & Cesnulyte 2016). Moreover, as is the case in Egypt, neoliberal entrenchment across the African continent engendered urban land dispossession on an unprecedented scale (Neimark *et al.* 2018; Steel *et al.* 2019). While nothing like the 2011 revolutionary uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia have occurred in the rest of Africa, similar patterns of State repression and resistance to AbD have been detected and mapped out, which may help us predict the possibility of uprisings in other African countries (Bridoux 2019).

NOTES

1. World Countries by Population Density. 2019. <<http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-density/>>, accessed 7.9.2019.
2. Social Housing here refers to government-owned and controlled housing used to provide shelter, on a need and nonprofit basis, to low-income classes and people with particular needs.
3. Abdel Khalek Farouk was detained on 21 October 2018, after publishing a book titled 'Is Egypt Really a Poor Country?' that contained revelations about corruption. <<https://egyptianstreets.com/2018/10/24/egyptian-economist-abdel-khalek-farouk-arrested-for-criticizing-egypts-economy/>>.
4. Report: Saudi Arabia paid Egypt US\$25bn for Red Sea islands – Middle East Monitor [WWW Document], <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170629-report-saudi-arabia-paid-egypt-25bn-for-red-sea-islands/>>, accessed 20.7.2019.

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