INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF SHELTER IN EGYPT

Housing is a fundamental cornerstone of Egyptian life: It can make or break marriage proposals, boom or bust the economy, and popularize or embarrass a ruler. It is debated as much as football and religion. Egypt's airwaves regularly beam footage of neat government housing and chaotic self-built settlements. Facebook is chock-full of people seeking buying advice, complaining about delayed housing projects, and protesting eviction, rent control, or a new development.

Housing is social. It is the cradle that shelters people's lives, with an entire spectrum of responses having evolved to suit the means of millions of households. Communities have mobilized to self-build, with construction completely managed by the owner down to the last detail. Other people buy their own homes, while only one-quarter of urban Egyptians rent. Those who cannot afford to build, buy, or rent are compelled to squat, some in cemetery courtyards and vacant government-built housing.

Housing is money. Buying is seen as the most effective way to invest your hard-earned cash, where local and foreign investors, as well as speculators, have taken advantage of a deregulated property market to make what they believe is a guaranteed return. The construction sector is one of the largest industries in Egypt today, employing millions. However, this deregulation by the government has also resulted in an inexorable erosion of affordability, with over half of Egyptians unable to afford median-priced homes, and millions forced to live in inadequate shelter.[1]

Housing is political. Almost every Egyptian ruler over the last nine decades, from King Fouad to President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, has directly associated himself with at least one large-scale housing project. In other words, housing has transcended a whole range of political ideologies—from

colonial, through socialist, and then neoliberal regimes. Publicly owned housing agencies invest billions every year to build subsidized and for-profit housing. In many instances, government housing has been used as a tool to rally political support or demobilize social unrest—Advertisements for social housing would spontaneously appear in the newspapers during elections, or whenever the streets would tremble with protest.

Housing is also contentious. While most people associate a home with stability, it is only so for some people, some of the time. Millions of mostly poor, but also middle-income families, live in a state of legal or physical precarity. Those seen by the government as living in informal housing face a constant threat of eviction, and tens of thousands of families have been evicted to make way for urban development projects, or because their buildings were deemed illegal and demolished. Almost one million families live with the threat of imminent disaster, with hundreds of buildings collapsing every year[2]—many of which are damaged, left to decay, or even tampered with on purpose to allow landlords to evict rent control tenants, while the rest are shoddily constructed by unscrupulous developers.

Egypt's Housing Crisis delves into this multilayered world, tracing an almost perpetual housing crisis in Egypt. It explores the shift in official discourse over the last eight decades, from an issue of 'homes' to 'housing,' and from a 'problem' to a 'crisis' and back to a 'problem' again. While this shift in language may have happened quietly, it belies how officials in Egypt changed their view of dwellings over the last century.

An Overview

Egypt's Housing Crisis provides an urban history of housing in Egypt over the course of eighty years. It does so through a reading of the main policy elements the government has used to shape housing supply during this time: regulation and provision. Chapters 2 and 3 trace how laws have been enacted to regulate the use of private property—through the self-build process (chapter 2) and through the rental market and, briefly, the sales market (chapter 3). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover provision in both rural and urban settings. The final chapter shows how all forms of housing have simply unravelled, weighed down by decades of regressive policies that have only been propped up to serve particular interests. *Egypt's Housing Crisis* need not be read in any particular order, as each chapter is a standalone essay.

Chapter 1 (Etymology of a Crisis) provides a brief politico-statistical history of housing in Egypt, tracing official discourse from the 1940s to the

present, providing the book's backbone, from which the reader can then branch off directly to the chapters that provide more detail. It starts by outlining the history of the discourse around housing, and then adds statistical background on housing production from the 1960s, as well as tenure patterns from the 1970s onward.

Chapter 2 (Self-builders) looks at the most popular avenue to housing. While most owners do not do the actual building themselves, this chapter details how they acquire the land, design their homes, and manage the entire building process. Chapter 2 also discusses how, despite a raft of laws outlawing many of the self-built homes, along with squatting on state-owned land, the government has de facto tolerated the practice since 1956. This was through a host of amnesties with the goal of helping to ease the homes crisis and even the extension of formal infrastructure to most settlements, but in exchange for what?

Chapter 3 (Old to New Rent) chronicles changes in rent legislation from the 1940s through the 1990s, and the major effects this has had on housing. Old Rent, which is Egypt's special blend of rent control—introduced under a colonial regime, bolstered during a socialist one, and maintained through neoliberal times—has been especially contentious. Many landlords have sought to evict tenants by condemning buildings and sometimes fatal actions that include deliberately knocking them down. Its ambiguity has also led to cases of massive fraud. The chapter then details the introduction of New Rent (market rent) in the neoliberal 1990s, with its promise to liberate vacant property and solve the housing problem. Initially it may have helped, but today, almost half of Egyptians cannot afford median rents. Meanwhile, over a million homes are still under Old Rent with growing, anxious demands from landlords to get their properties back.

Erving Goffman's concept of a 'total institution' helps explain some of chapter 4 ('Model' Villages for 'Model' Citizens). This chapter investigates how the government sought to control the rural population between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century. The first section of the chapter looks at *'izba*s, private hamlets that were located on large landowners' estates, which came to house a considerable portion of the population who were ruled by proxy between the 1840s and 1952. The chapter goes on to chronicle the 'model village' movement of the 1930s and 1940s, whereby the government, as well as private enterprise, aimed to reconstruct rural housing and remold people into 'model citizens.' The movement would also set the stage for later forms of mass rural housing, the

New Villages, popularized during the Arab socialist era (1952–70), resettling tens of thousands of people on desert land reclamation schemes in 'model societies.' The chapter concludes with the demise of rural population control through government villages by the end of the millennium, to be replaced by a resurgence of private agricultural workers' camps—a rebirth of the *'izba*.

The story of chapter 5 (Government Housing, a Brief History) is the evolution of urban mass housing over the last century—tracing its origins from the *musta'marat* (workers' colonies) and company towns built by private industry from the 1920s, through their popularization in the 1940s, and their transformation into government housing estates in the 1950s to solve the housing crisis. Egypt's rulers have associated themselves with mass housing, something that has made it more political than pragmatic, where the uniformity of the housing blocks belies myriad tenure options, and application regimes that changed as the politics did. The chapter concludes with the final major transformation of mass government housing in the late 1970s, from renting to ownership, or from a political social provision to a political commodity, a policy that has remained in place until today.

Chapter 6 (Government Housing Today) takes an in-depth look at current mass urban housing through two of the largest schemes in its history—Mubarak's National Housing Project, initiated as part of his election campaign in 2005, and the million-unit Social Housing Project, born amid the 2011 uprising that toppled him.

The seventh and final chapter (Housing Unravels) delves into the spectrum of informality that pervades not just self-build, but all other housing in Egypt. It examines a number of cases, some that converge from previous chapters on self-build, rent, and government housing, and others that are about state-led gentrification. All are about one form of informal tenure or another, in a climate that looks increasingly like a manufactured informality, and a bureaucratic regime that is structured so that dwellers across the income spectrum rarely have secure and stable tenure.

A Note on Sources

I have relied on a wide array of sources to cover the many facets such a fundamental issue presents. Reams of primary official documents have given the government's view on housing. Archives for both presidents Gamal Abd al-Nasser and Anwar Sadat have been compiled by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, offering their speeches, but more importantly for Nasser, minutes of cabinet and Arab Socialist Union (ASU) meetings, a rare source of frank

government material. For President Hosni Mubarak, the government's State Information Service (SIS) has published books and keeps an online archive of speeches, though these need to be accessed through the Internet Archive. SIS has been less consistent with later presidents, Muhammad Mursi and Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, but has still provided some material.

Legislation has provided a wealth of official material, where besides the articles of the laws themselves, attached Explanatory Notes usually written by the ministers submitting the laws to parliament, are available from the 1950s through the 1990s. Attached Parliamentary Reports, generally available from the 1970s to the 1990s, have summarized the parliamentary committees' main arguments for the laws, giving a candid insight into that institution's workings. While printed volumes of the laws are available at government outlets, I have relied on a searchable subscription-based database of Egyptian legislation provided by Eastlaws.

Countless tables of statistics have enabled the matching of policy shifts to repercussions in brick and mortar. For this, I relied on the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, known as CAPMAS, which is the main official government body in Egypt that collects statistics and produces the census. Estimations, correlations, and triangulations I made to plug gaps, smooth out inconsistencies, or address errors, are explained in chapter 1, which provides an overview of most of the statistical information used in the book. Other material has come from government reports, primarily from the Ministry of Housing. Some unpublished or historic material that has not been properly archived has been found in foreign financial agency reports, produced jointly with ministry teams or through official government support.

Additionally, vignettes of first-hand experiences of over fifteen individuals I interviewed over several years have given the on-the-ground dimension of the shift from 'homes' to 'housing,' providing nuance and detail. While a portion have been conducted for this book, the rest are based on my work on urban and housing policy that started with the Shadow Ministry of Housing blog, back in 2008, during which I wrote a number of articles and produced ten short documentaries on housing issues. Chapter 6 is based in part on previous work on government housing projects, and chapter 7 is based in part on my work on eviction cases during a stint as housing rights officer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). Work from 10 Tooba and the Built Environment Observatory, which I cofounded and manage, has also contributed to the book.

In addition to the primary material, a wealth of academic research written by architects, planners, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and economists has been invaluable in smoothing out gaps between official texts and oral accounts, especially for historic events or detailed case studies. The Egyptian architecture and planning magazine *Majallat al-ʿimara* has been an important resource for information from the 1940s, and the digital archive prepared by the Special Collections at the Fine Arts Library of Harvard University has been invaluable. Newspaper reports have also been consulted in reporting both official discourse and popular views. For historic coverage, an online archive of the semiofficial daily *al-Ahram* hosted on the Internet Archive covering the 1960s through the 1990s has been used, as well as the Egyptian Press Archive compiled by CEDEJ that covers the 1980s through the 2000s and is hosted online by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.