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TWENTY YEARS
OF
DEVELOPMENT
IN EGYPT
1977 - 1997

URBAN EGYPT: TOWARDS A POST-METROPOLIZATION ERA?

ERIC DENIS and ASEF BAYAT

Introduction

For centuries, Egyptian urbanization has continued to receive attention from both its own people and outsiders. Many are fascinated by its past glory and the present gloomier situation; its highly active street life, color, and energy as well as its crowding, noise, air pollution, and slums. More recently, however, the attention seems to have shifted. Cairo is perceived as a giant city choked by overpopulation, seemingly resulting from the influx of *fallahin* (peasants) which is said to be threatening Cairo's urban configuration turning it into a "city of peasants." By the same token, the ecology of the city, the argument goes, is being transformed by the spread of *ashwa'iyyat* (informal communities) which are ruralizing Egyptian urban centers. The last ten years have witnessed a growing concern about how rural migration as a major social problem is laying the groundwork for a major social explosion. The 1996 *Egypt Human Development Report* suggests: "During the last fifteen years we have witnessed a process of ruralization of Cairo, with the growth of many rural formations and semi-rural settlements on the fringe of the city. Consequently, many new sub-populations in the city have their distinct lifestyles and tend to travel in insular circuits."[1]

It is clear that these assumptions are shared not only by lay observers, but also by the national media, academia, government officials, and more significantly by the planning community. In this paper, we question the basis of such assumptions. Not only do we make a case for an alternative picture of urbanization in Egypt, we discuss why such assumptions persist, notwithstanding the data.

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[1] *Egypt Human Development Report, 1996* (Cairo: Institute of National Planning, 1996), 56.

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Two New Major Trends

Tracing the major developments in Egyptian urbanization over the last 20 years, two distinct trends may be observed: on the one hand, stabilization and diffusion of urbanization; on the other, stabilization of rural-urban migration. In other words, Egypt is currently experiencing a double movement of deconcentration, at both the metropolis and national levels.

Between 1976 and 1996, the population in Egypt rose from 36 to 59 million. Indeed, this 23 million increase is equal to the population of Egypt in 1956. Interestingly, this high growth rate is associated with a halt in urban polarization. Contrary to the prevailing idea about a continuous rural-urban influx, the urbanization process in Egypt has been both stabilized and diffused. The urban proportion of the population has declined since 1976, from 43.8% to 43% in 1996. This new pattern of stabilization is associated largely with the 'urbanization' of large villages and the rapid growth of small towns. [See Maps 1 and 2]. Although reliable data does not exist on this, we suspect that migration into these villages and small towns may serve as an important stabilizing factor.

The last 20 years have seen the upsurge of a large number of 'urbanized villages' throughout Egypt. While in 1986, there were only 463 agglomerates with over 10,000 people, by 1996 Egypt had about 708 such 'villages'. The restrictive Egyptian definition of urban conceals an important trend of urbanization. According to the official definition, there are only about 200 cities in Egypt. One way of demonstrating how the countryside is being urbanized is to reveal the significant change in the style of housing. For example, in 1996, an equivalent number of apartment buildings were constructed in the rural areas and in the cities--doubled that of ten years ago. Construction of flats (as opposed to rural-type dwellings) signifies a convergence in the living conditions between urban and rural areas.

The second general trend in Egyptian urbanization has to do with the stabilization of rural migration to large cities. As opposed to the years 1940s and 1960s, when large cities attracted massive numbers of rural people, the trend has slowed considerably. In addition, the metropolis areas are engaged in a structural movement of centrifugal redistribution from the core areas of the big cities to the peripheries--a classical trend in mega

cities all over the world from Paris to New York, Mexico, Bombay and Tehran. As the core areas of the large cities are losing population, new agglomerates around metropolis are emerging [See the Maps 1 and 2]. Thus, Cairo's central districts (i.e., the west bank, Dokki, and Giza) have progressively lost a large portion of their inhabitants in the course of the last ten years. The number of *qisms* which lost population in 1966 was six. They increased to 17 in 1976, 18 in 1986, reaching 22 by 1996. On the whole, central Cairo lost some 580,000 inhabitants between 1986 and 1996.

This trend is not limited to Cairo alone, but can be observed in Alexandria, Tanta, Mansoura, and the cities of the Canal [See Map 3]. In the meantime while these cities lost some of their inhabitants, the villages and towns located in their peripheries grew rapidly. Mahalla al-Kubra, the forth largest city in Egypt, had a growth rate of less than 1% between 1986-96, but the growth rate of the surrounding villages is over 2% per year [see Table 1]. Similar patterns prevail in Tanta, Zaqaziq, and the city of Dumyat, which experienced a negative (-1.2%) growth rate. Only a few big regional cities of upper Egypt such as Suhag and Qina have, in the past ten years, had higher or equivalent rates of growth. This seems to have to do with a time factor delaying the population diffusion in the smaller communities. Instead, the main capitals of the upper Egypt continued to attract population. Moreover, there exists a large number of small towns (such as Qus, Farshut, Luxur, and Nag Hamadi) which are able to compete in their economic activities with the regional capitals in these governorates.

In short, over the last 20 years, Egypt has experienced a double movement of deconcentration of population both at the metropolis and national levels. Urbanization has begun to diffuse throughout the country, and the rural exodus appears to belong to the distant past. Already in 1986, some 80% of the migrants recorded in the cities came not from the countryside but from other urban centers. In general, the share of interprovincial migrants, people born outside a given province, decreased from 11% in 1960 to 7.5% in 1986. Thus, permanent population movement paved the way for an increasingly circular migration.

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Causes

What were the causes of this new pattern? Many people still continue to move from one place to another. However, the pattern of population movement seems to have shifted in the last twenty years. The large cities, notably Cairo, have ceased to attract a large segment of the migratory population. Greater Cairo, for example, is now 17% of the total population-- the same proportion as in 1966. The prime reason for this is an apparent 'saturation' of the big cities to accommodate the low income (or even very affluent) groups. The current urban condition has caused many inhabitants to seek residence outside major urban centers. While large cities still provide opportunities for employment, the high price of land, population density, and shortage of affordable accommodation associated with partial free market cost of housing, force many new-comers as well as long-term residents to reconsider staying in the city. Indeed, the existence, by 1996, of some 750,000 vacant apartments (17% of the total) in Cairo has done little to halt this process of out-migration.[2] Homeseekers essentially lack any access to the rent controlled accommodations, even though these flats might not actually be occupied. The very low rent (controlled) encourages the holders to retain those homes even though they might not occupy them. Beyond that, the unaffordable price of newly-built formal housing excludes the low-income groups from the housing market. Thus, there remains no other option for the young people, in particular those intending to start a family, but to seek housing only in the informal market. Hence, they venture out to join the "outsiders" who inhabit the large *ashwa'iyyat*, the informal agglomerates around the metropolis areas.

Most of these people still depend on job opportunities within metropolitan area to which they commute daily. However, their residential communities are more than simply functional "dormitories". Rather, they are the locus of family, network of friends, recreation, and life.

In brief, this pattern of settlement means a prevalence of not only a centrifugal redistribution of population from the core areas, but also a circular (as opposed to definitive rural-urban) migration.

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[2] These figures include rent-controlled, free market housing, as well as flats in uninhabitable conditions. See *General Census of Population, Housing and Economic Activities* (Cairo: CAPMAS, 1996), first results.

These informal agglomerates on the peripheries of the big cities perform significant function in the national economy. They accommodate cheap labor with wages subsidized by low-cost housing and necessities of life--affordable land, working opportunities, and food, in particular, agricultural products. They offer the inhabitants the possibility of maintaining a strong network of kinship, security, and protection.

Such spatial arrangement and community construction owes much to the peculiar Egyptian spatial form--its density and proximity of communities to each another. In 1996, on average, 1,600 people lived in every square kilometer, the same density as in the New York Metropolitan area, and local units had an average of 4500 inhabitants.[3] Beyond density and proximity, a significant factor is the revolution in informal transportation, the mushrooming of *service* microbuses which have reduced temporal and spatial distances, and led to an interconnected system of cities and villages. The number of microbuses in Cairo jumped from 14,000 units in 1990 to 60,000 in 1995. At the cost of traffic congestion and air pollution, the increase in informal transportation has generated the kind of time-space convergence that characterized early 20th century Egypt, if we remember that Egypt had one of the oldest train networks in the world. With such transportation, you are never far from the city. As a 1997 national household survey indicates, 91% of Egyptian households are less than half an hour from a permanent bazaar and 74% from ad hoc markets.[4]

In addition to the agglomerates on the fringes of the big cities, the last 20 years has also witnessed the dramatic spread of "urban-villages" (with 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants) across the Egyptian countryside. Immigration contributed a great deal to their growth. With an average population of 15,000 people, these villages began to acquire urban characteristics such as a greater social distance and anonymity among their inhabitants (among many "strangers" residents), more extensive exchange of goods and services, the division of labor, and occupational diversity. In such urban villages, occupations are no longer limited to the traditional barber, shepherd, or butcher but encompass many modern occupations such

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[3] Calculated by EGIPTE, CEDEJ (Cairo: Cedej, 1998).

[4] G. Datt, D. Jolitte and M. Sharma, *An Analysis of Household Survey Data for 1997*, International Food Policy Research Institute; Food Security Research Project (June 1997).

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as teachers, mechanics, drivers, lawyers, doctors, shopkeepers, employees of day care centers, government officials and so on. In addition, modern transportation, television, and new consumption patterns have enabled these villages to develop some aspects of an urban way of life. The availability of electricity, a significant factor contributing to a more modern way of life, has resulted from the operation of high dam as well as the unique concentration (proximity and density) of village communities along the Nile Valley, which has rendered electrification more efficient. The vast majority of rural households (86 percent) enjoy electricity and well over half of them (57 percent) have access to running water (up to doorsteps). The process of agglomeration of this type possesses an inertia which tends to reproduce that process. As more people gather in these communities, diversification expands, new activities and occupations are created which in turn attract more outsiders. Thus, once businesses grow, there will be a need for coffee houses, restaurants, and guest houses to accommodate business people, drivers, and travelers in turn create new non-agricultural job opportunities.

The growing deregulation of agricultural, moreover, is likely to contribute to the growth of urban villages. A new class of well-to-do villagers emerging out of investment in real estate, construction, and in cash cropping, may develop an urban life-style. This process is especially aided by the current abundance of modern consumer goods as it renders the concentration of population in the cities unnecessary. To be able to consume new products, consumers do not need to be located in the center of things (in Cairo or Alexandria). Those commodities can be brought to them even in the "villages".

Of course, we do not intend to present these communities as full-fledged urban entities, since in this context urbanity, defined in terms of diversity, contains many contradictions. In large part, these agglomerates are still dominated by agricultural activities. Although diversity is spreading, it is still limited. The conventional urban services (such as paved roads, piped water, garbage collection, sewer systems and the like) are largely absent. Moreover, the illiteracy rate, especially among women, is quite high. Nevertheless, this slow but creeping urbanity represents a significant shift in the Egyptian demography and political economy. First, it signifies, and contributes to, a decline in the pattern of rural-urban

migration. Secondly, it reflects the prevalence of more *dynamic* communities characterized by an increasing mobility, commodification, exchange, greater availability of consumer goods and, finally, a new pattern of social stratification where status and influence are assuming new sources--not only family and wealth, but also modern occupations, education, and access to new products.

Urbanization of the countryside, of course, should be seen not as a uniform dispersion of urbanity in the hinterland, but rather as a new trend of polarization at the level of small cities and large villages, or urban villages. The end of 20th century Egypt, then, a trend of urbanization outside the administrative definition of cities, a sort of spontaneous urbanization of larger villages and small towns.

Social and Political Consequences

This new pattern of diffuse urbanization raises some important issues regarding assumptions about the urbanization process as a social change with significant social and political consequences. To begin with, it questions the classical assumption which attributes current urbanization in Egypt to a supposed massive rural-urban migration, and the current urban problems to the influx of *fallahin* to cities. Still, many envision Cairo and its problems from the vantage point of Janet Abu-Lughod's classical study, paying little attention to the changes which she later acknowledged to have occurred since the 1970s.[5] The purpose of our paper has been to illustrate some of these transformations.

On the other hand, this pattern of diffused urbanization points to a shift from a universal, state-managed and planned urbanization to a more private and spontaneous one. This "post-metropolitanization" should be seen as a new trend in, and a challenge to, Egyptian political economy and to its state at the end of 20th century. This unplanned urbanization highlights not only a concentration of population, but also the needs, concerns, and possible urban-type conflicts that would directly involve the state. It is not, therefore, surprising that the state refuses to recognize these

[5] Indeed, Abu-Lughod's later studies illustrate some of these changes. See her "*New York et Le Caire vus de la rue*," *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales* 42 (1990): 345-58.

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agglomerates as urban, since doing so would obligate it to make expensive urban provisions such as sewerage, paved roads, running water and the like.

It is clear that the official definition of *urban* in mere administrative terms (as *markaz*) is simply an arbitrary construction. If Egypt adopted the Indian urban definition (communities with over 5000 inhabitants), around 80% of Egyptians would be urbanites. According to the Philippine definition, 100% of them would be living in cities. The Egyptian official definition may be functional for administrative purposes, but it conceals an alternative process of urbanization--namely the one which concerns mostly the small towns and the struggling urban villages with a population size of 10,000 and over. Perhaps, this pattern of unrecognized urbanity in Egypt conjures up Gamal Hamdan's expression that "urbanism (*'umran*) begins in the village."

It becomes evident that the predominant outcries about the ruralization of the main cities resulting from the invasion of peasants, is rather overstated. The fact is that over 80% of the population of Cairo and 86% of Alexandria are born in these cities. The remaining migrants (over 80% of them) come overwhelmingly from different cities, not from the countryside. Indeed, the strict official definition of what constitutes an urban unit, and the invention of the concept of *ashwa'iyyat* as a political category tend to produce new spatial divisions which exclude many citizens from urban participation. The *ashwa'iyyat* are perceived as "abnormal" places where, in modern conventional wisdom, the "non-modern" and thus "non-urban" people--the villagers, the traditionals, the nonconformists, and the non-integrated--live. It is indeed puzzling that over 20% of the entire Egyptian population and half that of Cairo who are residents of the *ashwa'iyyat*, are considered outsiders residing in abnormal conditions.

The activities of Islamist militants in Imababa, an informal community in Cairo, and the subsequent massive intervention of security forces during the early 1990s, have reinforced the image of the *ashwa'iyyat* as the Hobbesian locus of lawlessness, extremism, crime, and poverty. The latter may indeed be present in the poor squatter areas. However, this type of behavior does not emerge from some cultural essentials of the inhabitants, since *ashwa'iyyat*, despite their appearance, consist of heterogeneous occupational and cultural universes. These peripheries, stigmatized as rural are not only recipients of migrants from the urban core

areas, more importantly, they are the localities of Cairo's youth (those 20-25 years of age) and the newly married couples--the future of Cairo [See Maps 4 and 5]. The *ashwa'iyyat* are not simply exclusive poverty belts, but also the horizon of many of the middle class urbanites, professionals, and civil servants. What perhaps may breed lawlessness is not the cultural essentials of residents, but rather the consequences of their perceived "outsiderness", density, and spatial fuzziness. An outsider community, even if located in the heart of a city, by definition lacks street names, home numbers, maps, police, paved roads for police cars, and thus state control.

This tendency to produce outsiders through the language of informality and "*ashwa'i* way of life" has been amplified and contrasted by a shift of emphasis from public into private spatial development; it is exemplified in the new highly exclusive townships with a global urban planning par excellence. We are referring to the recently emerging opulent private cities possessing lavish properties equipped with swimming pools and athletic facilities-- such as al-Rihab, New Cairo, Mena Garden City, Dream Land, Utopia, and Beverly Hills whose names bear the project of splitting the city.[6] This trend seems to point to the transition of Cairo from a European model of a compact city, such as London, to the American pattern of vast diffused spatial development, like Los Angeles, where identity, history, memory, and symbolism (e.g., the city center) is lost to the diversified sub-centers of the vast urban plain.

In today's Egyptian cities, then, it is not only the poor who are forced to move out of the core; the affluent are also intent on leaving the city. The rich are escaping from high density, traffic congestion, air/noise pollution, and spatial constraints that are transforming even the upscale posh districts. A casual observation would reveal how rapidly the old spacious villas in Zamalek and Maadi, suburb of Cairo, are turning into densely built apartment high rises.[7] It is no longer Zamalek and Maadi which signify status symbols, but the new private cities. The new money (coming from lucrative private business), the more efficient means of private transportation and communication, and the new ring roads

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[6] For the al-Rihab private city see *Business Monthly* (Cairo) June (1997): 41-44.

[7] Fatemah Farag, "The Demolition Crew," *al-Ahram Weekly*, February 6-11(1998):15.

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encircling the city account for the factors that enable the rich to pursue this historic exodus.

This duality of peripheral informalization, on the one hand, and planned exclusive suburbanization, on the other, have become a stark manifestation of urban polarization and social cleavage in Egyptian society today. Indeed, Egyptian urbanism is characterized by closure or the "surrounding-wall" paradigm--it is not a shared horizon; rather it produces outsiders.

Conclusions

In this essay, we have suggested that the process of demographic change in Egypt during the past twenty years or so has resulted in the growth of three new entities: urbanizing villages across the country, informal agglomerates around the large cities, and the exclusive private cities in Cairo. Here, we have offered only a tentative examination of these trends and their social consequences. It is, however, imperative not only to acknowledge these processes, but to embark on a serious study of their short and long term consequences. Ignoring them is likely to result in grave political and social problems.

TABLE 1

SECONDARY CITIES (EXCLUDING CAIRO AND ALEXANDRIA)

Secondary city	1966	1976	1986	1996	1976-86	1986-96	1976-86	1986-96
	city population (x 1.000)				city annual growth		rural surrounding	
Mahalla al-Kubrâ	191	292	361	395	2.13	0.93	2.41	2.25
Tanta	230	283	337	371	1.74	0.98	2.68	2.17
Mansûrâ	195	259	318	370	2.04	1.53	2.38	2.22
Asyût	150	209	273	343	2.69	2.32	2.80	2.49
Zaqâzîq	150	203	244	267	1.89	0.90	2.95	2.35
Faiyyûm	134	167	213	261	2.47	2.05	3.28	2.69
Kafr al-Dawwâr	109	146	193	232	2.79	1.88	2.79	1.88
Aswân	125	145	191	220	2.80	1.42	2.80	1.97
Damanhûr	146	171	191	212	1.13	1.07	1.13	1.07
Minyâ	113	146	179	201	2.04	1.18	2.94	2.48
Banî Swayf	90	118	152	172	2.60	1.23	2.88	4.02
Qinâ	69	94	120	171	2.50	3.63	2.90	2.62
Sûhâg	75	103	133	170	2.57	2.52	2.42	2.47
Shibîn al-Kûm	81	103	132	160	2.55	1.92	2.48	1.79
Banhâ	64	89	116	146	2.68	2.34	2.73	2.15
Mean	160 cities				2.60	1.81	2.69	2.31

Source: CAPMAS, *General Census of Population, Housing and Economic Activities*, 1966, 1976, 1986.

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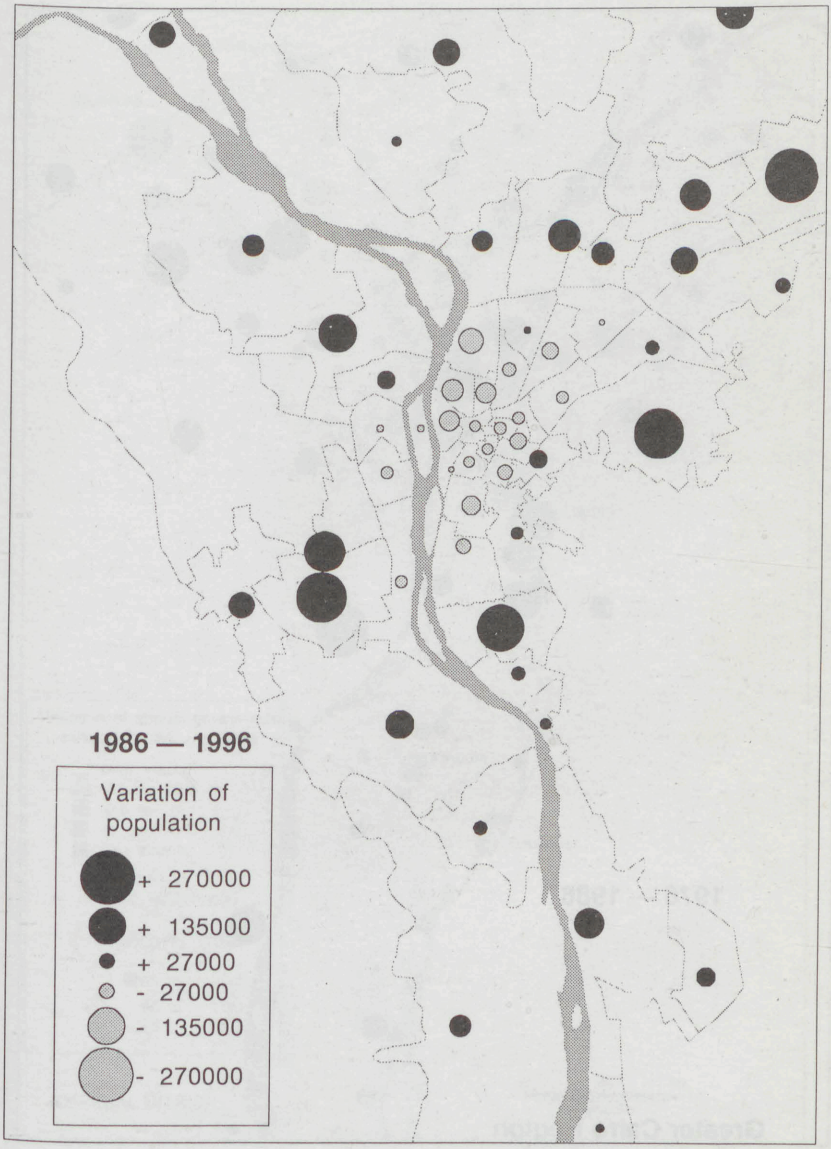
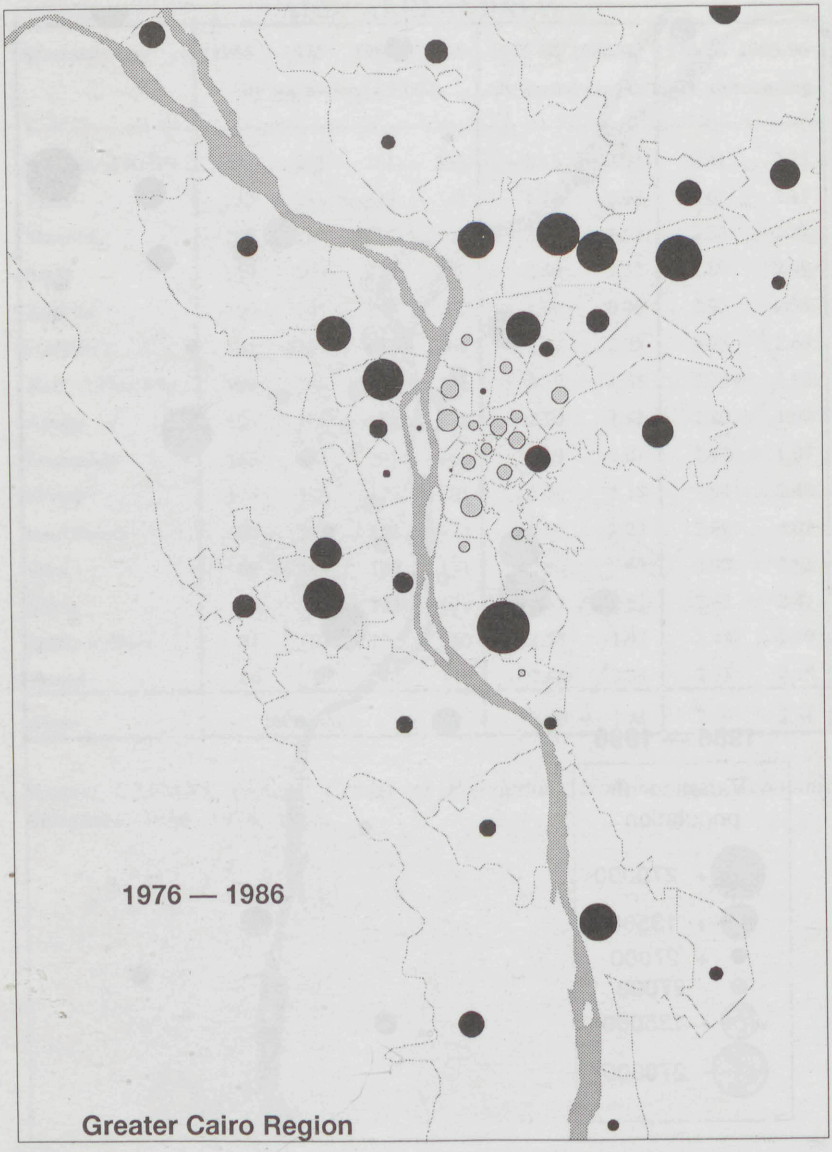

1986 — 1996
Variation of population
+ 270000
+ 135000
+ 27000
- 27000
- 135000
- 270000



Greater Cairo Region

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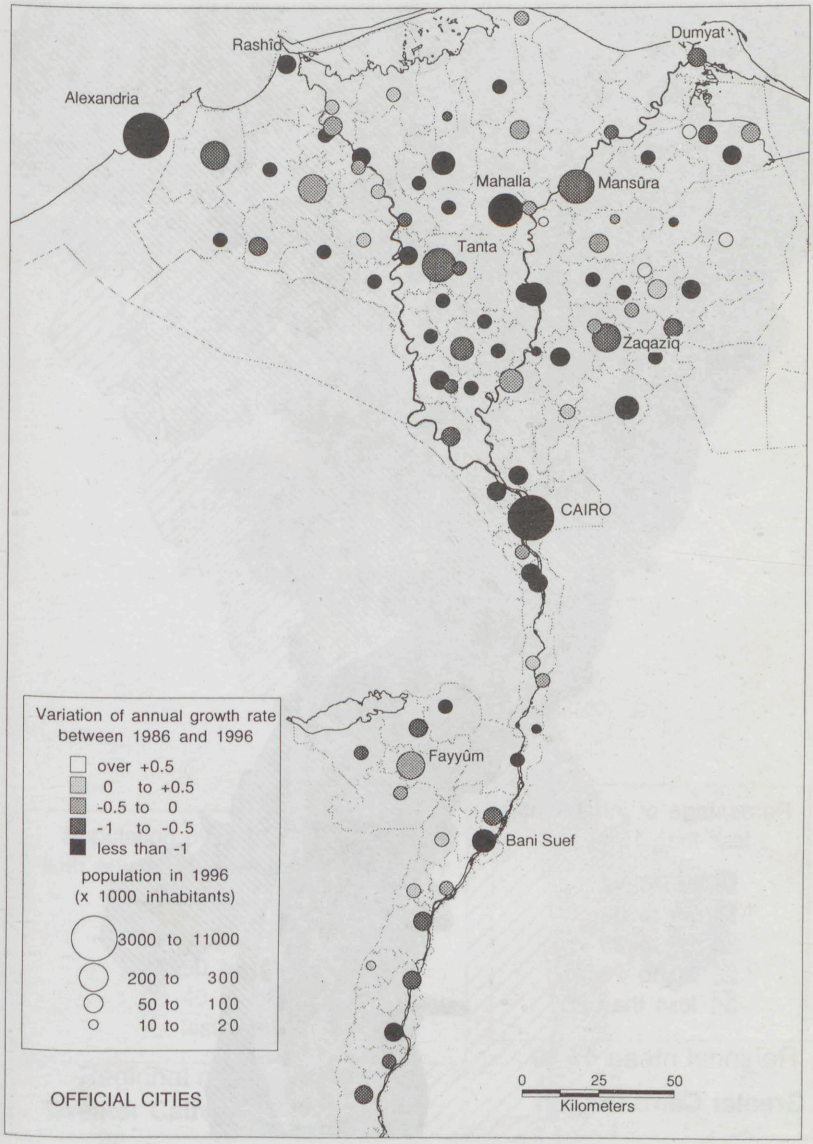
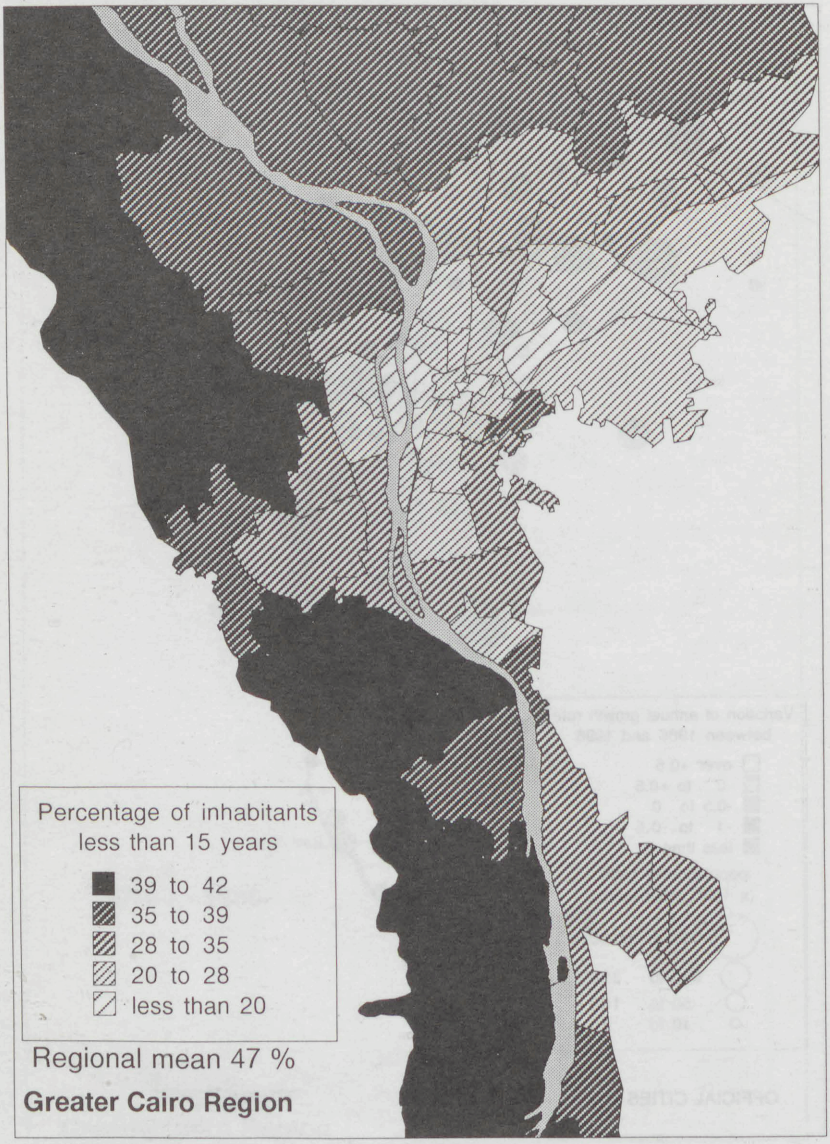

Rashîd
Dumyat
Alexandria
Mahalla
Mansûra
Tanta
Zaqaziq
CAIRO
Fayyûm
Bani Suef
Variation of annual growth rate between 1986 and 1996
over +0.5
0 to +0.5
-0.5 to 0
-1 to -0.5
less than -1
population in 1996 (x 1000 inhabitants)
3000 to 11000
200 to 300
50 to 100
10 to 20
OFFICIAL CITIES
0 25 50
Kilometers


Percentage of inhabitants
less than 15 years
39 to 42
35 to 39
28 to 35
20 to 28
less than 20
Regional mean 47 %
Greater Cairo Region

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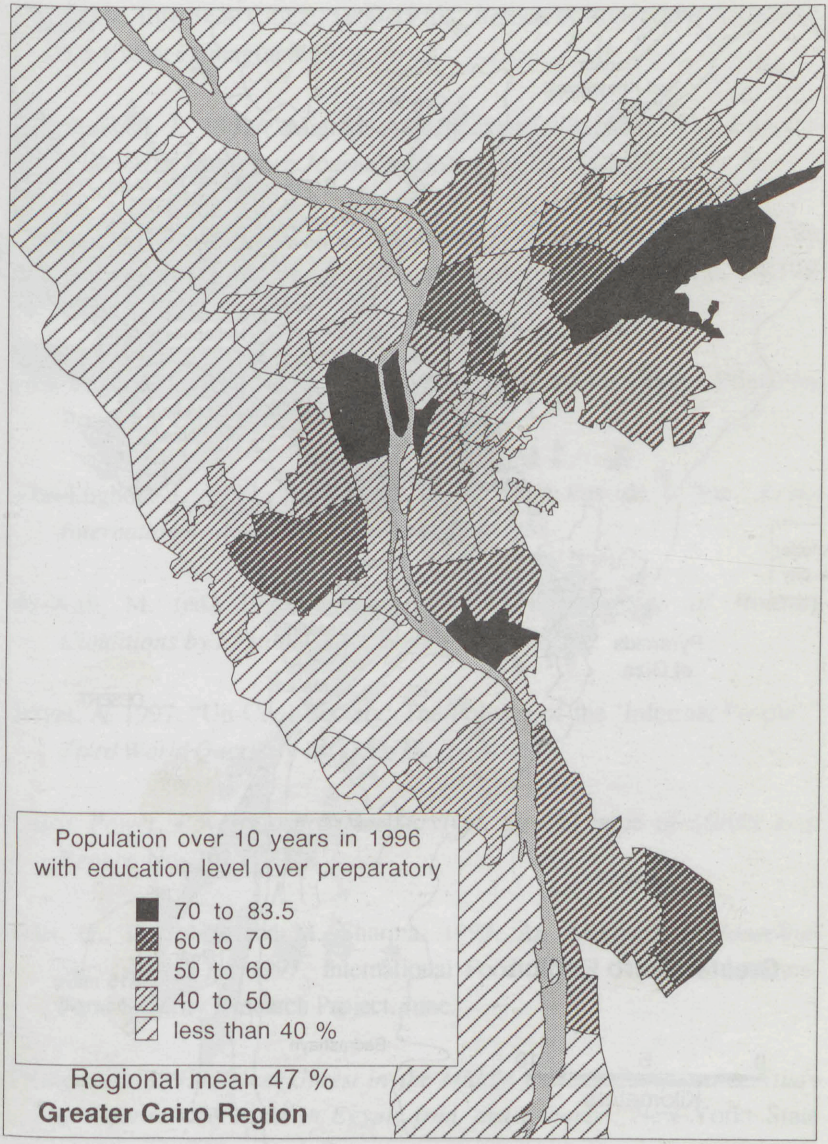
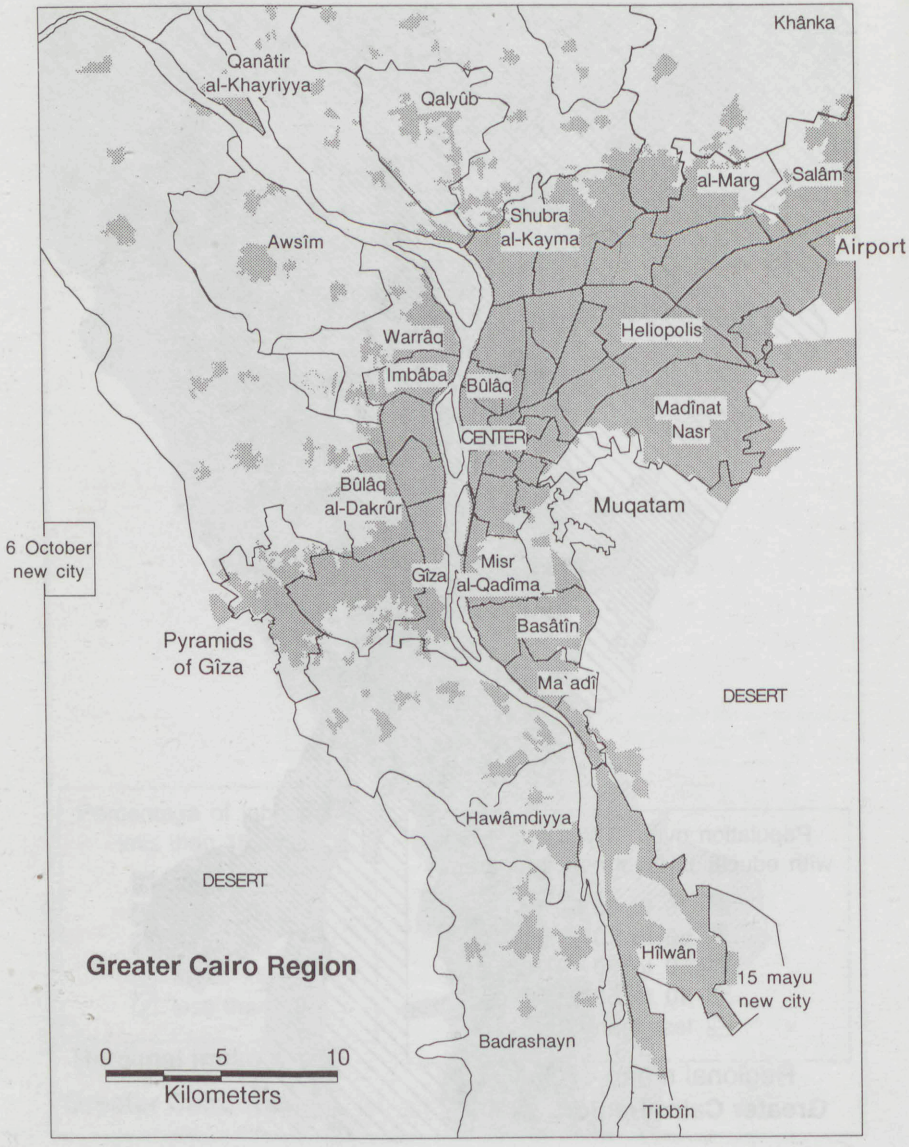

Population over 10 years in 1996
with education level over preparatory
70 to 83.5
60 to 70
50 to 60
40 to 50
less than 40 %
Regional mean 47 %
Greater Cairo Region


Khânka
Qanâtir
al-Khayriyya
Qalyûb
al-Marg
Salâm
Shubra
al-Kayma
Awsîm
Airport
Heliopolis
Warrâq
Imbâba
Bûlâq
Madînat
Nasr
CENTER
Bûlâq
al-Dakrûr
Muqatam
6 October
new city
Gîza
Misr
al-Qadîma
Basâtîn
Pyramids
of Gîza
Ma`adî
DESERT
Hawâmdiyya
DESERT
Greater Cairo Region
Hîlwân
15 mayu
new city
0
5
10
Kilometers
Badrashayn
Tibbîn

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