Surveying Cairo: The Machinery of Social Reform in the Nasser-Era Administration[1]

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Abstract:

This article considers a series of social surveys conducted in Cairo by the Egyptian Association for Social Studies, in the years between 1956 and 1968. This was the period when planning was the leitmotiv of the Nasserite regime and its efforts to build a cooperative socialism. Against the backdrop of the febrile situation these surveys describe in Cairo's social services and associations, and the wider and rapidly changing political situation in Egypt, these surveys, scarcely known even among specialists, reveal a constantly evolving condition of contestation between social reform actors and the administrative services of Nasser's state.

Keywords: Nasser; Egypt; Social Reform; Socialism; Social Services.

1. Introduction

> "Our new society, [which is] cooperative democratic socialism, has as one of its most important components the provision of services of all kinds to citizens and the achievement of a better standard of living for them, in the light of social justice, equality and equality of opportunity." [1]

This is how Egyptian experts justified the surveys of social and economic conditions they carried out in Cairo over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. This investigation took place in more than fourteen of the city's districts (the *qism*, the primary administrative-territorial level within the governorate, or *muḥāfaẓa*) and sought to understand the social and economic condition of the city's people. Although they were monumental undertakings in their time, these surveys remain, today, largely unknown — even to Marxist historians of Egypt. This is the same fate that overtook many other similar scientific and administrative undertakings of the Nasserite state's early years, when the initial enthusiasm that attended such projects would fade, before ultimately succumbing to the complexities of the regime's budgetary crises. It is unfortunate, however, that these sources have fallen into obscurity, given that they are of notable interest for the study of Egyptian society during this period generally, and of the administrative practices of Nasser's regime in particular.

The circumstances through which I encountered these volumes underscore the challenges of locating sources, particularly for historians of the modern Middle East. Although the studies examined here were published by a public institution and, according to their authors, widely distributed to libraries across the region, they are now absent from the National Library (Dār al-Kutub) and other major institutions in Cairo. I would likely never have known of their

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existence had I not discovered one volume by chance in the second-hand book market. It was during a conversation with a bookseller I regularly work with that I first came across the study on the city of Ḥilwān. Engagement in this market fosters contact with interlocutors whose interpretive knowledge of its resources often proves indispensable. Effective searching therefore requires formulating requests broad enough to prompt wide-ranging exploration, yet precise enough to avoid irrelevant material. Examining the cover of the Ḥilwān study revealed that it was part of a series; with the assistance of this bookseller, I set out to reconstruct it. Between 2022 and 2023, I acquired eight volumes, followed by two more in 2024. This experience raises a critical question for historians: how can such documents be preserved and made accessible, so that a body of material both little known and of considerable value is not lost to scholarship?

This paper therefore focuses on these unpublished sources, with the primary objective of presenting them and outlining potential avenues for further research. This corpus warrants detailed study in its own right, not least for the sociological data it contains. Such research will be the focus of future work I intend to undertake within the programme "La Fabrique du Caire moderne," directed at the Institut français d'archéologie orientale by Ghislaine Alleaume and Mercedes Volait, where the raw data from these social surveys will be readily available for reuse [2]. In this paper, however, the focus is on treating the surveys as objects in their own right—that is, as the scientific output of a state administration engaged in an ambitious project of social reform. Methodologically, this has meant privileging an analytical reading of the discourse articulated in the collection, rather than examining the statistical and sociological data themselves. I have therefore concentrated on the introductions and recommendations that frame each volume, in order to interpret the rationale and objectives of this large-scale sociological undertaking. This undertaking itself required the sustained efforts of a team working over a considerable period of time and entailed significant financial investment. The aim here, then, is to shed light on the motivations that underpinned it.

I therefore examine the practices of social inquiry in Nasser's Egypt and seeks to situate them within broader debates in labour and colonial studies (Geerkens et al., 2019; Touchelay, 2024, p. 518). In the Arab world, this field remains largely under-explored, apart from an analysis of Syrian statistical nomenclatures (Longuenesse, 2004, pp. 67–83) and a recent study of poverty surveys in the Maghreb (Perrier, 2023, pp. 45–66). Egypt alone has attracted more sustained attention, with research spanning the British protectorate, the interwar monarchy, and the Nasserist era. These studies trace the gradual development of an official statistical apparatus, first tasked with compiling national accounts and later with measuring living standards, as well as the evolution of its indicators (Ireton, 1991; Alleaume, 1998; Labib, 2024; Ferrand, 2026). The sources analysed here, however, differ from the official surveys explored in this literature. Produced by an intermediate administrative body rather than the Department of Statistics and Census, they resemble instead "a mode of knowing and understanding social life through the *ad hoc* collection of information—distinct from the more regular operations of statistical recording—" which "claims scientific authority and is often justified by a problematic situation on which it was expected to act" (Geerkens *et al.*, 2019, p. 14). By

mapping social groups across Cairo, these surveys were "intended to be followed by action, whether reformist or legislative" (*ibid*., p. 16).

This study first situates the surveys in their context of production. Undertaken throughout the 1950s and 1960s by a reformist association established almost two decades earlier, these inquiries expose the manner in which the Nasserist state appropriated pre-existing mechanisms of knowledge-gathering, harnessing them in the service of an egalitarian, and somehow overreaching, ideological project. I then develop one possible line of interpretation: that this series of investigations captures the shifting projects of urban and social reform in Cairo during the Nasser era. A close examination reveals indeed traces of administrative rivalries that unsettled decision-making at the time, only to be absorbed into the state archives of the Nasserist regime, where they subsequently vanished. In doing so, the paper seeks to advance the study of social inquiry in the contemporary Middle East.

2. Contextualisation

One can argue that the era of Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser's regime in Egypt began in November 1954, when he finally ousted those of his rivals who had come to power with him in the *coup d'État* of 23 July 1952. In 1957, his regime had initiated an ambitious project of social and economic planning, and in May of that year, a presidential decree (no. 481) issued by Nasser had established the National Union (*al-Ittiḥād al-qawmī*), the political entity which would subsequently be declared Egypt's single ruling political party. At the same time, the inaugural National Assembly of the republic was elected, and this body would go on to serve as a forum for articulating the principles of a "socialist, cooperative and democratic society", or "Arab socialism" as it was also called. According to the Egyptian economist, Mohamed Riad el-Ghonemy (2009, p. 255), this "broad concept aimed at such ambiguous ends as social solidarity, social justice, and raising the living standard along a socialist path, permitting private enterprise and ownership to function under 'guided capitalism' free of monopoly", in addition to other aims, such as "the elimination of exploitation in transactions within the domestic market through the dominance of a large public sector and regulation of profit margins, wage rates and consumer prices, as well as through the protection of tenants and the substantial reduction of rental values both in farming and housing".

This political ambition to build a cooperative society in Egypt was reflected in the general orientation of the country's services towards a national development plan for the period 1960–1965. Based on an Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) model, this plan had a three-fold vision: to double the national income within ten years, implying an annual growth rate of 7.2%; to achieve greater equality of opportunity through the redistribution of income and arable land; and to expand employment opportunities for the population (Abd al-Rahman, 1963; Hansen & Marzuq, 1965, pp. 295-297). The plan's implementation thus presupposed the administrative supervision provided by a strong state, to be exercised through extensive nationalization and a massive expansion of the public sector, which saw the number of civil servants increase by 343 per cent between 1951 and 1971 (Baer, 1964, p. 218).

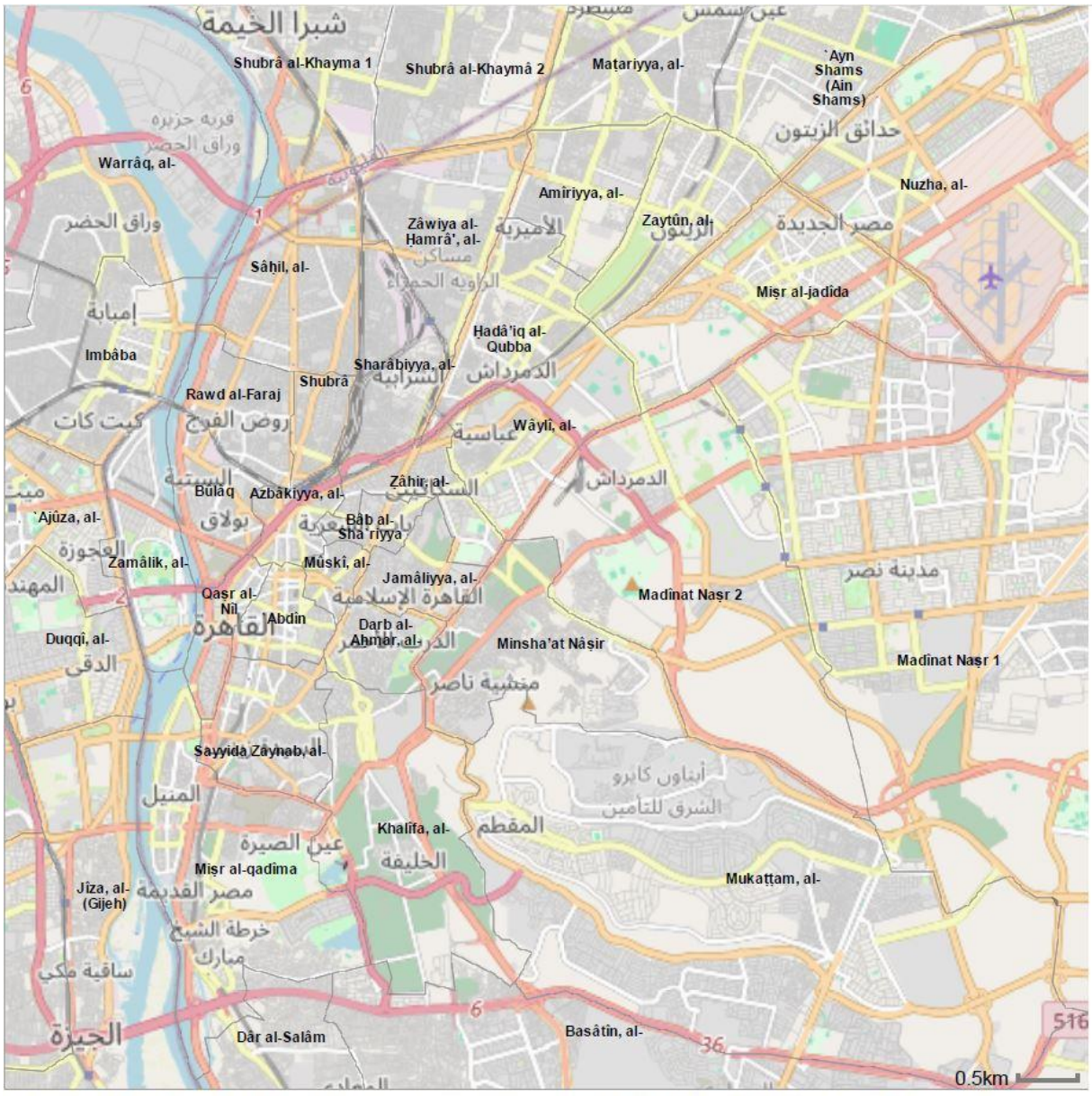
On initial examination, the series of surveys initiated by the Ministry of Social Affairs appears to have been part of this planning initiative, in a context of rapid population growth, estimated at 2.7% annually: between 1952 and 1970, the Egyptian population grew from 22.1 to 34.6 million, while Cairo itself doubled its population over the same period, reaching 5.5 million by the end of the 1960s. This process of metropolitan concentration, whereby rural out-migration flowed almost exclusively towards Cairo and Alexandria until the early 1970s (Denis, 1998, p. 186), exerted intense pressure on the Nasserist government, confronted both with "the problem of planning for future urban expansion" and with the need to "[make] up a deficit [that had] accumulated over the preceding decades" (Abu-Lughod, 1971, p. 160). The newly established Cairo municipality, created in 1949 (Law no. 145) "as a district from the provincial government" and subsequently reorganised under Laws No. 124 of 1960 and No. 1951 of 1961 (*ibid*., p. 147), was tasked with addressing the imbalance between rapid demographic growth and the limited availability of public services: the urban fabric was becoming denser as the footprint of public administrations expanded, yet adequate housing for the entire population was lacking. In 1960, Cairo's 3.3 million inhabitants—living in households averaging 4.8 members—occupied 687,858 dwelling units containing over 1.4 million rooms; families frequently crowded together in a single room (*ibid*., pp. 164, and 182-220, for an ethnographic account of housing conditions in Cairo during the 1960s). Yet the housing schemes initiated by the municipality throughout the 1960s failed to alleviate the acute pressure on the housing market, since they targeted exclusively low- and middle-income groups (earning less than EGP 25 and between EGP 100 and 250 per annum, respectively), who already devoted more than 60 per cent of their income to rent. To this must be added the intensification of road traffic, as the number of motor vehicles reached 60,000 in 1960, including 33,000 private cars and 1,700 buses (*ibid*., p. 159).

Taken together, these constraints highlighted the urgent necessity of rethinking the organisation and provision of social services in Cairo. This explains the decision by the Ministry of Social Affairs, in 1958, to direct the Egyptian Association for Social Studies (EASS) to carry out a vast survey covering the entire capital:

> "This social research on services in Cairo's neighbourhoods [...] forms the cornerstone of the policy of social planning of services for the capital's population. These services are the measure of social development as well as a measure of economic, political and cultural development as long as that society is in balance." [3]

The nature of the areas studied demonstrates the Nasserite administration's interest in poor or working-class neighbourhoods. In accordance with the terminology of the time, the administration refused to use the term "poverty" and instead employed alternative phrases such as "limited" or "average income" (respectively, *maḥdūd al-dakhl* and *li-dhawā al-dukhūl al-mutawassiṭa*) [4]. The areas studied included al-Darb al-Aḥmar, Gamāliyya* (1958), Shubrā (1958), Būlāq, ʿĀbdīn* (1960), Miṣr al-Qadīma* (1961), Rawḍ al-Faraj* (1962),

Sayyida Zaynab* (1963), Mūskī* (1963), Ḥilwān* (1964), Bāb al-Shaʿriyya (1965), al-Khalīfa, al-Zaytūn and Sāḥil* (1968)[3].



Map of the districts surveyed

They correspond to the three zones identified by Janet Abu-Lughod: the Northern City, with over 55 per cent of Cairo's population in the 1960s, and the Eastern and Western Cities, each comprising about one quarter (1971, pp. 172 and 178). These surveys were conducted in a relatively short period of time, between 1957 and 1962, but their publication spanned the entire 1960s, something which raises questions about the reliability of the statistics they presented. Additionally, the Permanent Conference on Public Service (later merged with the

[3] Where an asterisk appears against these names, these are those districts studied in this paper.

National Planning Commission), carried out four other surveys in al-Wāyīlī (1960), Imbābā (1962), Dukkī (1963) and Gīza. These studies, in four parts, and including one on al-Ahrām* (1964), were to be published by the EASS, along with various *ad hoc* reports on family structures, libraries, factory workers, vocational training, including one on Izbikiyya* (1971): very few of these are available today (see bibliography).

Rather than representing a novel phenomenon, this investigatory campaign was part of a long-standing pattern of activity on the part of the Egyptian state, one that preceded even the ascendancy of the Free Officers and the establishment of state socialism. The goal of such campaigns, regardless of which regime might be in power, was always to exert control over Egypt's national associative life. The question therefore arises as to how this series of studies should be interpreted. If viewed as the continuation of an administrative mandate, it underscores the persistence of a specific philosophy of governance, that of "cooperation" and social reform, which had found a new form in the language of the Free Officers. The father of the cooperative spirit in Egypt is said to have been ʿUmar Luṭfī (d. 1911), the lawyer who founded the first agricultural cooperative union in 1908 (Rashad, 1939, p. 470; Shādilī, 1976, p. 138). This Egyptian cooperative spirit was now, in the late 1950s, to be integrated into the ideological project of the Nasser regime, that of a classless society, at least according to what the largely forgotten series of surveys discussed here shows. In other words, this documentation illustrates how the state gradually recruited – or conscripted – a movement led by social reformers and did so in order to achieve its socio-economic objectives, at the same time as it was groping towards a coherent ideological stance.

3. The Egyptian Association for Social Studies (EASS): the public services inspector

The journey of the EASS exemplifies the two main features of social reform and poverty management in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century, as Mine Ener explained it: its origins in independent benevolent associations and its progressive integration into the state administration (Ener, 2003, 127-133).

In 1935, the Institute of Social Work was established in Alexandria, followed by the subsequent establishment of a second branch in Cairo two years later (El Shakry, 2007, pp. 132–133). In his autobiography, Sayyid ʿUways (1985, p. 65), one of the first graduates of the Institute, recalls the reasons for its foundation. Its aim, he states, was to train "professional experts capable of studying social problems at their source by interviewing fathers and mothers in their homes, working in hospitals and shelters, in social centres and workers' clubs, and [by] entering the homes of peasants to obtain, in all these fields, direct experience of reality." At its inception, the Institute enrolled 65 students distributed across the three-year training period. By the end of the first decade, its headcount had grown to 148, with students selected on the basis of their suitability for the course.

The aspiration to "professionalize" social reform is evident in the founding of the Egyptian Association for Social Studies (EASS), which was established as the supervisory body of the Institute in 1938. The EASS had initially been constituted around a nucleus of foreign social

workers, including Eisa Meister-Thabet, a Swiss social worker, and Wendell Cleland (d. 1972), a sociologist who had participated in the founding of the American University in Cairo in 1919. Over time, it expanded its membership base, receiving financial and scientific support from Egyptian benefactors such as the famous feminist Hudā Shaʿrāwī (d. 1947) and prominent industrialists associated with the Bank Misr and the Sugar Companies (Roussillon, 1994, §11).
In other words, the Institute was established to provide a dedicated workforce for the EASS planned investigations, in order to "deduce the orientations of Egyptian society and the measures to be taken to guide it along the path to betterment, enabling it to face up to the prospects of the future." [5]

While national sociology was in the process of becoming institutionalized—marked by the creation, in 1925, of a chair at the Faculty of Arts of Cairo University—the first large-scale social surveys were conducted outside the strictly academic domain, by circles aligned with European currents of social reform, such as those associated with the EASS. In 1938, for example, Cleland led a survey on poverty in Egypt with 250 investigators, the Institute students among them: it was considered as "a first in Egypt, both as teamwork and fieldwork" (Roussillon, 1994, §14). In 1939 and 1940, the students took part in projects to reform the Egyptian village, and to fight juvenile delinquency in Cairo.

Through its role in the "accumulation of knowledge", the EASS served as the setting in which the scope of social reform gradually became defined. This process involved a re-evaluation of the boundaries of social action and the distribution of roles within this field (Roussillon, 1994, §15). As a result, the EASS can be understood as a projection of the Ministry of Social Affairs (founded in 1939) into the wider field of Egyptian society, since in 1942, a Bureau for Social Studies was founded inside the EASS, under the supervision of the ministry's general secretary, ʿAbd al-Munʿīm Riyāḍ. One of its principal objectives was to guarantee the coordination of disparate charitable and social initiatives, thereby integrating the altruistic ethos espoused by select local actors into the overarching social reform policy pursued by the Egyptian monarchy.

Although the EASS survived the seizure of power by the Free Officers, it experienced, subsequently, a notable shift in its sociological composition. Technical experts with degrees in sociology assumed control from the pashas, who had been the majority among the agency's directors in the preceding liberal era. The recruitment of these "technocratic" intellectuals into the service of Nasser's regime is a well-documented phenomenon (Moore, 1994, p. 16), and the profile of the director of EASS during the 1960s, Badrāwī Muḥammad Fahmī (born 1915), provides a case in point. After graduating from the Higher Institute of Teacher Training in 1935, and the Cairo School of Social Services in 1940, he left for the United States, where he obtained a master's degree and a doctorate in social services at Columbia in 1947 and 1949. Upon his return to Egypt, he was employed by the Ministry of Education and, subsequently, the Ministry of Social Affairs, before being appointed Dean of the School of Social Services and Director of EASS. [6] Another indication of this drive to bring previously independent organizations into the state apparatus is that the EASS itself was registered with the

International Association of Sociology in 1950, a decision that would later be contested by Egyptian sociologists. [7] Overall, this drive to organizational conscription (what might be termed "supervised enrolment") not only expressed an attitude towards social reform in general, but also a push to professionalize social work.

4. The EASS series in Nasser's era: inventorying Cairo

As the Ministry of Social Affairs was the showcase for the regime's promises, the EASS remained a key player in the scientific and political life of the Nasserite administration which largely pervades the objectives of the Monarchy. Indeed, a quick glance at the table of contents that was presented in each volume of the series I examine here is enough to reveal that series' main objectives:

General Introduction
History of the district
Demographics
Religious Institutions
Educational Institutions
Social Institutions
Cooperatives
Private clinics
Medical institutions
Pharmacies
Economic institutions
Trade union organisations and institutions
Miscellaneous institutions and organisations
Recommendations

The clear aim of this continuous inventory of social services was to ensure compliance with the new legislation that had come into force regarding the statutes of national associations. This is confirmed by the introduction to the survey on Gamāliyya, the second such study to be conducted and published in 1958:

> "The Ministry of Social Affairs has adopted a policy aimed at [organising society and coordinating social services]. This began with a series of steps, the most important of which was the creation of service coordination councils in the neighbourhoods and the promulgation of Law 384 of 1956, which regulates social organisations and the formation of specialised committees in various fields. Next, the Bureau for Social Research in the Ministry of Social Affairs was given the task of carrying out a survey of the various services in the neighbourhoods [...] in order to arrive at a complete and comprehensive plan for the various social services in the city of Cairo." [8]

The aforementioned legislation was a component of the enduring process of regulating Egyptian associative life. This had commenced with the establishment of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The first decree was adopted on 8 March 1939, banning associations of a political nature, and an inventory of associations was subsequently published in English. In

1945, Law No. 49 established the Council of Public Services, which was tasked with "promoting best practices in social services rather than establishing strict control over them" (Istiphan, 1956, p. x). This entailed financial supervision, the appointment of Ministry of Social Affairs representatives to association boards of directors, and the exercise of a new authority to dissolve associations. These prerogatives granted to the state by the law were designed to ensure the regulation and oversight of social services (Ben Néfissa, 1991, p. 5). A second inventory was published in 1948, this time in Arabic, listing 1,167 associations year on year (Istiphan, 1956, p. ix). In 1951, Law No. 66 placed religious, cultural and scientific associations under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior; Law No. 384 of 1956 introduced additional restrictions on civil associations (Ben Néfissa, 1991, pp. 18–20). Ultimately, in 1964, Law No. 32 was introduced, mandating the dissolution of all associations (which exceeded 4,000 in number) and their subsequent registration and reincorporation by the state, a move which enabled the state to refuse recognition to associations deemed politically or religiously dangerous. This move came after a comprehensive examination of these associations and their organizational structures and rationales (Sullivan, 1994, pp. 12–35).

Therefore, it was in prevision of Law No. 384 of 1956 that the EASS was mandated to update the Directory of social services and associations in Cairo. The exact sequence of events cannot easily be reconstructed in this case, as two different and competing narratives exist. According to the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo, in 1954 the Ministry of Social Affairs enlisted around 80 students from two Schools of Social Work to compile a directory of the city's social services. [9] Although some preliminary work for this directory was (apparently) done in 1953, it was not until late 1954 that it proved possible "to initiate a more thoroughly-planned, better-financed program" in this case. This survey, begun in January 1955 and completed in April 1956, had two main purposes:

> "To prepare an up-to-date Directory of Social Agencies in Cairo that could be used by social workers, research groups, community leaders, socially minded citizens, and outside visitors interested in social welfare services in the city;
> To describe, measure and analyze the services of the existing agencies in terms of their stated purpose, extent and type of services, staffing, clientele, financing and geographic distribution." [10]

It is therefore highly likely that the series of studies which are examined here grew out of this first survey of social agencies. However, due to the lengthening of data processing and publication, the Social Research Center was (again, apparently) authorized to publish a first Directory of Social Associations in 1956. This text listed 1,198 associations, two-thirds of which were religious, and one quarter of which were described as being in receipt of ministry subventions (Roussillon, 1994, §27). The Bureau of the EASS would then have published its detailed surveys over the course of the 1950s and 1960s.

However, in the introduction to the last survey published in 1968, which was undertaken to measure the effects of Law No. 32 of 1964, a different narrative is provided: the survey would

have been led from 1955 on a sample of 652 associations taken from the total of 1,167 recorded in 1945. The questionnaire recorded "the age of the institution, its affiliation, its location, the nature of the services it provides, the cost of these services, the amount of the benefits derived from them, the nature of the beneficiaries, the conditions it sets for the provision of these services, its administrative apparatus, its nature, its technical level and working conditions, its wages, salaries, equipment and conditions of the institution, its intangible capacities, resources and expenses."[11]

Interestingly, Egyptian academic sociology remained on the margins of these large-scale surveys. Although the Sociology Department at Cairo University regained its independence from Philosophy in 1947 after a decade of relegation, the subsequent reorientation toward applied sociology (*ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ al-taṭbīqī*), with its emphasis on empirical approaches, advanced only slowly. Even as field research became more frequent—such as the 1947 study by Zāhiyya Marzūq and Muḥammad Saʿīd Amīn in Alexandria—such investigations were more often undertaken by foreign experts, individual researchers, or philanthropic organizations than by Egyptian academic institutions proper (Ferrand, 2026). It is therefore not surprising that the EASS did not seek the collaboration of any of the three sociology departments existing in Egypt during the 1950s (at Cairo, Alexandria, and ʿAyn Shams Universities), but instead turned to the Center for Sociological and Criminological Studies, established through an agreement between Cairo and Washington in 1955. This is illustrated, for example, by the participation of such figures as the sociologist Gamāl Zakī (trained at Indiana University, he was who was director of the Department of Rural Studies in the CSCS, and had been active in the survey of the district of Bāb al-Shaʿriyya published in 1965), the already mentioned Sayyid 'Uways (director of the Department of Juvenile Delinquency), and one of the period's prominent sociologists Ḥasan al-Sāʿātī (Rashad, 1961, p. 170; ʿUmrān *et alii*., 1975, pp. 299–300). This might explain the progressive technicisation of the publication, whose scientific references thickened over time.[12] As for the Department of Statistics and Census, it was fully engaged in the major nationwide surveys of the period, such as the Household Budget Survey and the first annual Labor Force Survey, both launched in 1958–59 (Ferrand, 2026). Thus, it provided part of the demographic data on which the EASS relied, but did not itself participate in the fieldwork.

As with any work of this scale, the EASS encountered several difficulties, which are sometimes openly discussed in the account of the project, but only implicitly mentioned on other occasions. In the introduction of ʿĀbdīn's survey, what is frequently (and obviously) criticized is the absence of statistics, as well as the "immaturity of statistical awareness" (*nuḍūj al-waʿī al-iḥṣāʾī*) displayed by Egyptian administrations. [13] This critique was followed by a battery of further criticisms, which denounced the falsification of data concerning the associations, the lack of interest in record keeping shown by those associations and social institutions, their parallel reluctance to display information, (probably from fear of incurring higher taxes), the cumbersome administrative procedures required to obtain authorization to interview people and gather information about institutions (schools, for example, could not display information without the agreement of the Ministry of Education) and the difficulties involved in actually reaching the intended beneficiaries. Those difficulties

were not insignificant: in many documents, for instance, the Bureau expresses regret that data collection and interviews are being hindered by certain members of the associations concerned. Not only were these persons interfering in the relationship between interviewers and interviewees, but they also seemed reluctant to permit access to their accounts books and registers of beneficiaries and were unwilling to provide numbers about take-up of the services they provided. In such documents we see concrete evidence of civil society's resistance to the Nasser administration and its attempt to register and control.

Beyond these criticisms, which fall into the usual discourse of administrative literature, some other problems are immediately visible on the surface. These include the questionable reliability of statistics, which, the Bureau regularly regrets, exhibit frequent *lacunae,* usually pertaining to the associations visited. Very often (the documents indicate) these associations were found to have moved, or even to be no longer in existence: where they did exist, their financial statements would be found to be systematically false, or there would be no record of attendance levels, *et cetera.* Miṣr al-Qadīma's survey, published in 1961, was the first to include the newly available statistics collated from the 1960 census. This census, which bears resemblance to a general account of the population per *shiyakha* (the general unit of measurement), had initially been planned for 1957; however, it was delayed by the Suez Crisis. It is not clear whether the series that form the body of data were all conducted at the same time: they may have been carried out batch by batch. To put it another way, it is not clear if the survey of associations in the Miṣr al-Qadīma, ʿĀbdīn, and Rawḍ al-Faraj districts was conducted prior to 1960 and subsequently incorporated into the census statistics, or if it was carried out after the publication of the first part, which includes data on Būlāq, al-Darb al-Aḥmar, Shubrā and Gamāliyya [14]. I hypothesize, in this case, that the surveys already referred to (those of the districts Miṣr Qadīma, ʿĀbdīn, Rawḍ al-Faraj) were carried out after the first part of the series (those concerned with Būlāq, al-Darb al-Aḥmar, Shubrā, and Gamāliyya) was published.

I form this hypothesis on the basis of certain questions that suggest themselves. In the first case, there would be a discrepancy between the survey and the general report made out of it. Do the statistics on associations and the statistics on the general population correspond to the same period of time? What constitutes an estimation? It appears, at least, that the statistics utilized were all derived from data collected subsequent to 1957, as the indicators and definitions were established by the Central Commission for Statistics during that period (Ferrand, 2026). The quantity of data to be processed, coupled with the prevailing scepticism towards scientific research, frequently resulted in delays in the dissemination of statistical information. This observation was documented in a report by the Ministry of Social Affairs pertaining to the budgetary allocations for the 1960/61 financial year: in the context of expenditure item number 16, for example, which pertained to the acquisition of literature on social themes, a sum of 1,600 Egyptian pounds (about 7,400 US dollars in the money of the time, equivalent to about 76,000 US dollars today) was allocated. However, a marginal note within the document offered this caveat: "must be completed." [15]

The value of these surveys is repeatedly emphasized in the introduction, something which may be interpreted as an increasing awareness of the program's potential limitations. The introduction of Sayyida Zaynab's study evidenced the apparent success of the series in terms of both planning and research.

> "As the Bureau devotes a great deal of time and effort to conducting this research, and as it encounters many problems and difficulties in its mission, and as circumstances force it to make sacrifices beyond its capacity, it finds great compensation [...] in the interest of those responsible for the research it publishes. They have taken many of its recommendations and put them into practice. Demand began to pour into the offices of all the directorates, both inside and outside the United Arab Republic. Not only did they all ask for copies of these studies, both those that had been published in the past and those that would be published in the future, to complete their cycles, but these studies became scientific references for researchers in many fields of knowledge, [...] particularly for bodies concerned with demographic studies, which prompted private and public libraries to compete for copies of this research for inclusion in their collections." [16]

This is a surprising assertion, given that the series of investigations referred to is, in fact, impossible to find in the various libraries in Cairo: at best it is only partially available, at worst it is completely absent. A quick glance at the online catalogues of Arab national libraries, such as those of Iraq or Saudi Arabia, leads to the same conclusion: this document has disappeared from the shelves, if it ever even had a place upon those shelves. A year later, in 1964, the introduction of Ḥilwān's survey would take a slightly different tone:

> "Evaluation is in fact a fundamental and necessary process that shows us where we have been, where we are now and where we will be tomorrow. The return is many times greater than the investment. We must not forget this in the workplace and in our interaction with the events around us. [...] The Bureau – as a social research organisation – puts all its capacities at the service of all these objectives and is ready to respond to any call and provide any technical assistance and advice to anyone who wants it, which is also its objective in the service of the community." [17]

The concern articulated by the Bureau of Social Studies should, it seems, be comprehended as that of a group of social actors who were facing challenges to their legitimacy. This issue extended beyond the confines of the budgetary perspective, despite the fact that the Egyptian state was at that time grappling with a precarious financial crisis, (this was partially attributable to Nasser's participation in the armed conflict launched by the Republic of Yemen against the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen and its Saudi Arabian ally). The Association's primary objective, at this time, was to safeguard the employment of the social workers it was training, a necessity that is substantiated by the investigations it was conducting. Through the series, one can read a persistent desire to protect the legitimacy of the EASS and its social workers. Regardless of the tasks involved, the Bureau expressed reservations about "completing them without the resources and skills typically associated with a full-time social worker". [18] Graduates of vocational training courses were, indeed, encountering difficulties in finding employment. In 1963, the Institute of National Planning estimated that 17.5% of

higher education graduates from the schools of social work were employed in other sectors, while all secondary education graduates from the same schools were unemployed upon leaving their training (Hamza, 1963, p. 62; Ahmed *et al*., 1963, p. 27).

This body of documentation reveals, in my opinion, the challenge of delineating the scope of action for the various actors and administrative services involved in the process of social reform and development in the Egyptian capital. Owing to its relatively detached position, the Bureau of Social Studies positioned itself as an independent coordinator, specifying the tasks to be undertaken and clarifying the distribution of responsibilities.

5. A Discourse on Responsibility: Community Spirit and Subsidiarity

In an ongoing project, the anthropologist Chihab El Khachab (Oxford University) has been studying the principle of responsibility as it was embodied by Egyptian civil servants working in the Ministry of Culture in the 1950s and 1960s. The examination of this ethic of political participation among the administrative staff is interesting from a historical point of view in that it demonstrates this ethic's influence on the discourse and behaviour of Egyptian personnel. From an anthropological point of view, another question is raised: that of the individual appropriation of shared political objectives, in this case the objective of social reform. The following section has been largely inspired by this reflection. The careful investigation of the EASS surveys enables the reconstitution of the power struggle between the different departments responsible for implementing public policies.

In a regime which had made cooperation the common value of its moral, political and economic development, the involvement of its citizens in national progress was a key value which pervaded the discourse of the time. In this cooperative socialism, each and every individual was seen as having a role to play, according to the group to which he or she belonged, and according to his or her own capacities. This political rhetoric easily merged with the American sociology of "community development" in which Roland L. Warren (1915–2010), a figure often cited by the Egyptian experts, was a prominent figure in the 1960s. In Miṣr al-Qadīma's survey, the Bureau acknowledged his interpretation of the subordination of family mechanisms to those of society as a whole to better encourage individual participation in modern development. [19] The use of this theoretical framework incidentally illustrates the spread of American social sciences, especially in sociology and management theories, in the Middle East during the 1960s (Ferrand, 2026; Labib, 2022).

To take but one example, the surveys pay close attention to general interest associations (*jamaʿiyyāt taʿāwuniyya*) that citizens can set up themselves to obtain basic goods at lower prices, and which have a long history in Egypt (Shādhilī, 1976, pp. 137–140). According to the Bureau, Miṣr al-Qadīma (Islamic Cairo) was, in 1961, the district with the fewest social services: a mere 1.1 per cent of its inhabitants were enrolled in an association. The Bureau's social workers then called for the creation of a Special Commission attached to the Socialist Union (as the sole national political party had been renamed in 1961), to encourage the development of necessary social services by "harnessing the generous sentiments and

fundamental social values" that were assumed to exist among the people. [20] It is interesting to note that this appeal shows a more flexible approach to the objectives that Egypt's socialist welfare state putatively aspired to: even if the "improvement of living standards" (*rafʿ mustawā al-maʿīsha*) remained at the heart of the regime's ideology, this did not have to be achieved solely through state efforts, but could also be done through collaboration with citizens. Consequently, according to the Bureau's experts, the lack of solidarity and cooperation in the Cairene neighborhoods is not only due to insufficient savings or the inflation, but also to the weak "cooperative consciousness" (*al-waʿī al-taʿāwūnī*) of the privileged population:

> "Some highly educated people believe that in the field of social services, the association is the body that receives subsidies and aid and provides services to the needy, and since they are not in need, there is no advantage for them in cooperating with it, and on the contrary, they should be ignored." [21]

Additionally, through the different surveys, a skills assessment of the different administrations involved in the Cairene public policies was drawn up. This would lead the Bureau to point out, for example, some negligence on the part of the Department of Labour within the Ministry of Social Affairs, and to call for stronger social protections for teenagers working in Cairo's tanneries, as well as affordable childcare for female employees. [22] Between 1955 and 1965, the Egyptian State would ratify 33 of the 124 conventions adopted by the International Labour Organisation (Egypt had been a member of this body since 1936). Among these were several conventions on the minimum age for employment in specific economic sectors. Combined into a single text, these conventions were ratified by Egypt in 1973, and a general minimum employment age of 15 was declared. [23] Similarly, the Bureau called to order the managers of national big companies (those with more than 10 workers) whose role in social reform could bypass workers unions by providing, e.g., "adequate housing" and canteens to their work force, and by so doing, help in "maintaining continuous production".[24]

Clearly, it was the control of professional unions that was at stake here. This had been an ongoing process from the 1930s onwards, which historians have already accounted for (Moore, 1974; Springborg, 1978; Ben Néfissa, 1991). In ʿĀbdīn's survey published in 1960, the Bureau commented that "trade unions are currently going through a dangerous period of transition", since Law no. 91 of 1958 had not been adopted yet. [25] The reference, here, was to the obligation for all workers wishing to hold a position of responsibility within their trade union to first join the Socialist Union, a decision which itself followed the state's creation of the General Federation of Egyptian Workers in 1957 (Longuenesse & Monciaud, 2011, p. 369). This is also evident in the invitation extended to companies to encourage their employees to take out health insurance, at the same time as the government was gradually expanding the social security system through the Social Insurance Organization (*Muʾassasat al-taʾmināt al-ijtimāʿiyya*), which had been founded in 1959. The new system involved the bringing together of three previously independent forms of social security coverage, *i.e.*, old-age pensions, invalidity benefits, and death payments and applied in principle to all salaried workers and apprentices, with the exception of agricultural workers and workers employed on

temporary occasional jobs (Ferrand & Mayens, 2025). However, only companies with more than five employees were covered, which excluded a large majority of the Cairene population, since “in 1957, 55 percent of the industrial labour force of Cairo was employed by the 87.5 percent of all firms consisting of four or less persons” (Abu-Lughod, 1971, 162). The Bureau’s efforts to align its recommendations with the continually evolving social legislation reveal the somewhat ceremonial role it assumed as a *de facto* inspector general over Nasser-era administrations.

At this time, the Bureau was conducting a comprehensive review of the activities of the various ministries and departments involved in social reform and urban development in the Egyptian capital. It was urging the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation to supervise the provision of local libraries more closely, as it considered these to be “meagre and poor in content” and “inactive”, or dependent on local mosques, the educational role of which was to be monitored. [26] The Ministry of Health was asked to strictly control the establishment of medical practices, which are too often “concentrated where [doctors] can make material and moral profits without concern for the local environment or the Ministry of Health’s refusal to grant them a licence”, as well as to ensure that Egyptian doctors would perform part of their duties in public clinics. [27]

One of the best examples of this internal conflict between involved administrations can be seen through the Bureau’s comments on urban planning. In the survey of Miṣr al-Qadīma published in 1961, one can read:

> “Current efforts to address the problem [of population growth] are not consistent with its solution. […] We call for the establishment of a permanent body representing the various sectors concerned, whose mission will be to study and develop a comprehensive plan for the city of Cairo, with a five-year deadline for completing this task, and that this committee take into account in its planning the rapid development and existing problems, and adapt to them.” [28]

The Bureau goes on to list a few preliminary guidelines for this, such as “the accurate and comprehensive identification of all needs, services and facilities of all kinds for all new and poorly planned areas”, a general budget and assessment of “material and labour requirements”. Its global philosophy was to “relieve pressure on central Cairo by transferring certain important public institutions to new areas” and “preventing rural immigration”, thereby “achieving a balance.”

Anyone familiar with Cairene urban history would be surprised by this emphatic call, given that a master plan for urban planning had already been elaborated, in a process that had begun in 1953 and ended in the plan’s officially adoption in 1956, on behalf of ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Baghdādī, the Minister of Local Communities (Kadi, 1990, p. 188). The original plan, designed by four Egyptian experts trained abroad and kept strictly secret, involved unblocking Cairo through the construction of six “satellite industrial towns”, as set out in the master plan. However, driven by the consequences of the Suez crisis, the Egyptian government had to address the most urgent issues: “setting aside the essence of the master plan, *i.e*. long-term

planning, the state intervened on an *ad hoc* basis, establishing housing policy [and schools] as the cornerstone of its urban policy" (Kadi, 1990, p. 192). Only one of the six planned towns was built, Ḥilwān, as well as the vast administrative district named Madīnat Naṣr, which was intended to house government departments.

The failure of the first urban master plan, as well as the ideological and budgetary crisis that the regime experienced in 1963–64, meant that the Bureau's reports contained continuous criticism of the urban policy carried out since 1956. In the introduction to Mūskī's survey (1963), its director, Badrāwī Muḥammad Fahmī, clearly expressed his team's main concern: "Can Cairo cope with such enormous population growth? Can we address the problems posed by the current population in a way that allows us to identify and plan the services needed to ensure a decent standard of living?" [29]. He then listed these "problems": the disparity between Cairo's neighbourhoods, the confined nature of the capital, and the problems traffic and public transport. What was at stake was the capacity of the Nasserite state to fulfil its socialist objectives, in a context where the population it ruled had an average monthly income of less than 3 pounds per person; or to paraphrase an engineer in chief for urban planning, who was writing in *al-Ahrām*, the most important daily newspaper, to ensure "the inhabitants of al-Darb al-Aḥmar, [one of Cairo's poorest neighborhoods] could benefit from the same services as those who live in Zamālek [an upper-class district on the Nile]". [30]

While the experts from the Bureau shared some of the concerns expressed in the 1956 master plan, they strongly disagreed with the decision to outsource activities and administrations on a large scale, and they also opposed the trend towards gigantic urban projects – a direct critique of Madīnat Naṣr. Instead, they advocated for a more equitable distribution of resources within the city, through densification of the built-up area:

> "In the neighbourhoods we have studied so far — Būlāq, al-Darb al-Aḥmar, al-Gamāliyya, Shubrā, ʿĀbdīn, Miṣr al-Qadīma, Rawḍ al-Faraj and Sayyida Zaynab — we have noticed that 25–40% of building land is not being fully exploited. This land is either vacant or used for garages or warehouses, or has a few single- or two-storey buildings on it, […] either completely or partially unused. While Cairo continues to expand and its buildings and inhabitants remain cramped, we must first turn our attention to these huge spaces, which on average represent about one-third of the city's built-up area. Only once these spaces have been fully exploited should we consider other spaces on the outskirts and outside the city. Ideally, a specialised system would be set up in Cairo's various districts, particularly the central and working-class areas, to study the reasons for their underutilisation and remove all obstacles to their exploitation, providing all necessary facilities through private cooperative institutions or public sector companies." [31]

What could be considered as a mere anecdote sheds lights on a significant aspect of Egyptian history during the Nasser years, evidence of which has otherwise largely disappeared from the archives. These surveys help fill that gap by providing an insight into the debates and tensions that were raging within the administrative departments of the Nasserite state regarding the urban development projects in Cairo, and around Egyptian development policy more generally. That this contestation ultimately ended in favor of a densification of the urban

environment, as opposed to an expansion of new-build areas, is to be understood in the framework of a budgetary crisis linked to an international context evoked earlier, as well as the material consequences of the adoption of a socialist economic plan, *i.e.*, the expansion of the public sector and the increased weight of the State's finance, as Fahmī further warns:

> "Over the next fifty years, individuals will have considerably less ability to build than they did over the last fifty years due to the radical change in our society: its transformation from capitalism to socialism, and the implementation of a system of nationalisation and a planned economy. Individual incomes are determined within a framework that encompasses all social classes, with a convergence between the lower and upper limits of this framework. The significant wealth accumulated by a group of individuals in society in the past will be divided into smaller units through inheritance from one generation to the next. This means that individuals cannot be solely responsible for renovating and building the housing sector in the rational manner required by our current situation — i.e. through vertical expansion — without positive intervention by the public sector. This could take the form of financing or creating huge cooperative institutions with significant capital that would take on this enormous burden in place of individuals." [32]

Fahmī gives a simple example: if the plan was to go on constructing buildings that would reach towards the sky, then lifts would need to be installed in each tower. However, Egypt did not manufacture lifts, and it would have been prohibitively expensive to import them. This statement's uncompromising logic echoes a spread belief in Nasserite administration that "nationalization would contribute significantly to higher savings and government revenues", which would be later re-injected in welfare policies and infrastructures – around 35 to 45 per cent of public investments between 1960 and 1970 (el-Ghonemy, 2009, pp. 258 and 261). The Bureau's emphasis on redistributing the resources generated by the sweeping nationalisations of 1961 underscores the ideological tensions among the political elites of the period. While figures such as Fahmī urged a stronger commitment to the public sector, others—soon branded a "new bourgeoisie"—advocated tolerance of the private sector, or "national capital" (*rāʾs al-māl al-waṭanī*), which the regime relied upon to implement its five-year plan. Despite nationalisation, the private sector continued to account for an average of 5.7 per cent of total investment annually during the 1960s, rising to 8 per cent in 1966 and 14 per cent in 1968 (Wahba, 1994, p. 111). Fahmī's observation can thus be read as a critique of those within the Cairo governorate who resisted the state's full assumption of housing development and maintenance costs, shifting the burden instead onto tenants unable to bear it.

In 1963, when Mūskī's survey was published, the Egyptian state had already failed to reach the two main goals it had set for itself in the late 1950s. At that time, while defining its five-years plan, it had been aspiring to both industrialize the country through heavy public investments, and to increase the consumption level of the population. As Mourad Wahba has pointed out (1994, p. 97), "it would have been difficult, at the easiest of times, to finance both goals simultaneously, [but] in a period of economic problems, these contradictory goals were accommodated with increasing difficulty". Indeed, between 1962 and 1963, Egypt was facing a cascade of economic and political disasters, ranging from the depletion of its sterling reserves, to a fall in cotton exports, a disturbing drop in income from the Suez Canal, and the

effects of the war in Yemen. Instead of the annual 7 per cent of GDP which the five-year plan had predicted, the 1960s witnessed a growth rate of just 4 per cent per year, accompanied by a 3 per cent rate of inflation.

When Fahmī's called for "cooperative institutions", the reference was to the model of holding companies born from the 1961 Socialist laws, which would gather and control the confiscated capital. This can be understood as an attempt in the construction sector (largely dominated by private capital) to maintain one of the two goals mentioned above, welfare policy. In 1961, 75 per cent of that sector was funded by private capital. By 1964/5, at the end of the five-year plan, the sector represented 10.4 per cent of the GDP growth rate and 4.7 per cent of Egyptian GDP (Wahba, 1994, 73, 92 and 95). All the same, the Bureau's desire for a new master plan was realised in 1965, when the High Committee for Greater Cairo was established, at a time when the country and its capital were facing an immense infrastructure crisis, in which the city's sewerage system was teetering on the brink of collapse, in a context where the urban population had doubled since 1956. By 1965, it had reached 4.2 million inhabitants (Kadi, 1990, pp. 195-197).

6. Conclusion

These surveys, in both the historical setting and political processes they reveal, offer an alternative perspective on Nasser's Egypt, one which implies that the regime's ultimate collapse should not mean that its statistical and reform efforts should not be simply ignored. What is important here is the manner in which the Nasserite administration remodeled Egypt's liberal heritage into a political philosophy of cooperation. It reveals, first, the reappropriation of the welfare objectives of the monarchy, whilst concomitantly studying the distribution of public services among the various Cairene districts. The perpetuation of the leaders' interest in the standard of living of its population enabled the EASS to easily preserve its purposes and *raison d'être*, while ensuring it retained its position and place under the banner of 'Arab socialism'.

This series also reveals, albeit inadvertently, the multiple and contradictory plans to develop Cairo, and the struggles for budgetary priority among Nasserite administrators. Therefore, it provides a highly useful body of documentary evidence with which to discuss the methodological and historiographical challenges faced by historians of modern Egypt, in the 20th century – and, by extension, that of the whole Middle East in the same era also. Two of those challenges (by no means the least significant) involve the paucity or lack of official archives in the authoritarian states, and the ideological bias inherent in those sources that do remain available. I hope this study will offer "[possible] archives" on 1950s and 60s Egypt, which convey a glimpse of social reform and public policy that would otherwise remain rather displaced. [33]

Notes

[1] *Rawḍ al-Faraj*, n.d., p. 4.

[2] : See “La Fabrique du Caire moderne” programme, especially the geographic information system (GIS) and the gazetteer developed for the district of Nasriyya: ‹https://nasriyyawebgis.huma-num.fr/map.html›

[3] *Rawḍ al-Faraj*, n.d., p. 4.

[4] *Mūskī*, 1963, p. 12. For a map of the districts (*qism*) studied, see online.

[5] EASS, *Annual Report 1942-43*, p. 38, quoted in Roussillon, 1994, §15.

[6] Rashad, *Dalīl al-mushtaghilīn*, 1961, p. 26, no 27.

[7] Letter from H. El Saaty to T. Bottomore, 16 February 1954. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, ARCH00648, 411. For more on this subject, see Ferrand, 2026.

[8] *Gamāliyya*, 1958, p. 3.

[9] Founded in 1953 by Ford Foundation and directed by Ḥannā Rizq, a sociologist who held a doctorate from Princeton, the Social Research Center of AUC aimed at “conduct[ing] social research, promot[ing] the training of social research workers, and giv[ing] assistance generally to research work and research scholars in the Middle East area”. See Istiphan, 1956, p. ix.

[10] *Id*.

[11] *Sāḥil*, 1968, p. 7.

[12] The best example is the introduction of *Rawḍ al-Faraj* (1962, pp. 3–7), where an ideal “balanced society” is defined through the work of American theorists.

[13] *ʿĀbdīn*, 1960, p. 19.

[14] *Gamāliyya*, 1958, p. 3; *Ḥilwān*, 1964, p. 5.

[15] Dār al-Wathāʾiq al-qawmiyya, Majlis al-Wuẓarāʾ, 0075-021665-20.2.

[16] *Sayyida Zaynab*, 1963, p. 3.

[17] *Ḥilwān*, 1964, p. 6.

[18] Id., p. 7 ; ʿĀbdīn, 1960, p. 427.

[19] *Miṣr al-Qadīma*, 1961, p. 6. See, for example, Warren, R. (1956). Toward a Reformulation of Community Theory. *Human Organization* 15 (2): 8–11.

[20] *Miṣr al-Qadīma*, 1961, pp. 419 and 426.

[21] *ʿĀbdīn*, 1960, pp. 19–21.

[22] *Ḥilwān*, 1964, p. 435; *Gamāliyya*, 1958, p. 211

[23] See the ILO online database of conventions: https://shorter.me/uBmWY. See also Badawī, 1967.

[24] *ʿĀbdīn*, 1960, pp. 357–358.

[25] *ʿĀbdīn*, 1960, p. 448.

[26] Respectively *ʿĀbdīn*, 1960, pp. 438 and 442 (recommendations n°25 and 40); *Sāḥil*, 1968, p. 288.

[27] Id.

[28] *Miṣr al-Qadīma*, 1961, p. 13

[29] *Mūskī*, 1963, p. 8.

[30] "Taḥqīqāt", *al-Ahrām*, 8 October 1962, quoted in *Mūskī*, 1963, p. 3.

[31] *Mūskī*, 1963, p. 17.

[32] Id.

[33] In reference to the Ifao-AUC Conference on "Impossible Archives" held in Cairo on the 16 and 17 June 2023.

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For an interactive map of the different districts of Cairo, see the Cedej/Capmas online platform: ‹https://tinyurl.com/52r3fajf›

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