Stranded in an Urban Landscape

A Field Study on Migration in Egypt

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of migration in Egypt from a Sub-altern realist perspective. As a criticism of traditional realist theories, Sub-altern realism argues that states in the Third World are defined by their weak state structure, which in turn changes their behavior both towards other states and on the domestic arena.

   This paper is based on findings from a *Minor Field Study* that I conducted in Egypt during the summer of 2012. With the help of interviews and empirical research, I have identified how the Egyptian government – as an example of the Sub-altern state – relates to the large number of refugees that exist in the country and how this relationship is affected by the weak structure of the state. The stance of the government is one of 'passive expulsion', where the state does not adopt any measures to integrate or alleviate the suffering of the refugees beyond the immediate necessities. Instead, it relies on the international community.

   I also examine how the stance of passive expulsion affects the aid community active in the country and how this stance creates problems in communication between the organizations and towards the refugees. In the summarizing chapter, I demonstrate that this stance is dictated by external and internal pressures on the Egyptian state. I conclude that, when studying a field such as migration, one must always include an analysis of the domestic situation in the affected countries.

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1   Introduction

The issue of migration, refugees and asylum seekers is a highly politicized subject in today's world. Since 9/11, it has been connected to other phenomena such as terrorism, transnational crime and the risk of epidemic. Extreme right wing parties have in the past decade, by propagating for a stricter immigration policy and by demonizing the immigrants already resident in their countries, gained popularity and sometimes political power. Persons living in the West are often at the same time, through exposure to national and international media, confronted by the plight and suffering of those fleeing from wars, climate destruction and poverty.

Migration is therefore a controversial and complex issue, giving rise to both humanitarian and securitarian concerns in societies. However, it is important to keep in mind, at least when talking about migration from Africa to Europe, that this is not a new phenomenon, but that it has existed for millennia. Some scholars have claimed that the current societal depiction of migration is based on "fundamentally flawed assumptions on the actual magnitude, nature and causes of African migration to Europe, which is not so massive, so new or so driven by 'African misery' as is commonly assumed" (de Haas 2008:3).

Leaving that aside, the fact still remains that a large number of people are currently living in different parts of the world, having fled catastrophes and conflict, forced away from a territory that they can call their own. For the academic community, it is necessary to study how the realities, institutions and world views shape the discourse around migration and refugees, which ultimately affects the way in which the refugees themselves are treated by policy makers and the international community as a whole.

1.1   Research purpose

During the course of my research, I discovered that the scientific material on migration in Egypt and the Middle Eastern region as a whole, has to an overwhelming degree focused on the experiences and world views of the refugees and asylum seekers themselves. Yet very little information exists on how the officials and policy makers, as well as those organizations administering aid and executing said policy, perceive the refugees. By including this dimension, I hope to give a more nuanced view of the nature of migration in Egypt.

1.2   Research question

In this paper, I delve deeper into the shape of the discourse on migration and the challenges which are faced in Egypt. This is a country that hosts a large amount of refugees, both legal and illegal, and which acts as a crossroad of migration from the conflicts south of the Sahara to the countries of the West and East. My purpose is to show that this discourse has been affected by the weak (Sub-altern) role that Egypt has compared to other states in the international system. My research question is as follows:

- With Egypt as an example, in what way is the domestic discourse on migration affected by the nature of the Subaltern state?

- What challenges do transnational actors in the aid community and NGOs face when dealing with the policy environment in Subaltern states?

With these questions, I hope to explain the underlying dynamics of the migration discourse in Egypt. By applying the theory of Subaltern realism, I believe that it will be possible to explain the lack of attention and apparent short-sightedness of the Egyptian state and society when it comes to the large amounts of long-time refugees resident in the country. This short-sightedness of the state also limits the potential policies of the aid community vis-a-vis the refugees. I aim to demonstrate that the Egyptian state has adopted a policy of "passive expulsion" of the refugees living in the country and that, although the state could be considered weak in the international system, it is still able to enforce domestically this policy among the NGOs and aid organizations active in the country.

1.3   Definitions

While this paper primarily focuses on the institutions and organizations responsible for providing security and aid for the refugees, it is nevertheless important to define what a migrant, a refugee and an asylum seeker actually is.

In the field of international politics, it is assumed that there is a crucial difference between a *migrant* and a *refugee*. While they are both part of the phenomenon of international migration, a *migrant* is considered to have voluntarily emigrated from his or her home country, in most cases due to economical considerations (Steiner 2003:181). There is some controversy regarding the definition of a *refugee*, but in Article 1 of the 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention, this entails an individual who in his or her home country

faces "persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion"[1].

An *asylum seeker* is a refugee who is making a request for asylum status in a foreign country. If accepted, the state then grants protection to the refugee. Currently, a refugee has the right to seek asylum, while the authority to grant asylum status rests with the individual state where the request has been made (Copeland 2003:110-112). During this procedure, states must make sure that fundamental human rights are not violated and that the refugee, if the request for asylum is denied, is not returned to a territory where he or she may be subjected to persecution. This is called the principle of *non-refoulement* (Helton 2003:23)

In practice, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between irregular migrants and refugees. Those fleeing from poverty and who search for a better life elsewhere are often mixed up with, or share experiences with those who are fleeing violence and civil war. In all of these individual instances, there are elements of both coercion and free choice (Roman 2006:5). In the past, they have always been treated as separate areas of policy. However, at different stages of the journey, a refugee and asylum seeker can become an irregular migrant, for example when an application for asylum is denied. In order to reach the intended destination, a refugee can act in the same way as an irregular migrant, by entering the asylum country illegally and undocumented. An irregular migrant could also hope to make use of the asylum system, as an alternative way of emigrating to the target country (Papadopoulou 2005:2-3).

For the purposes of this paper, it has been important to note that both migrants and refugees share similar experiences and that the distinction between the two types is not as clear or simple as it is made out to be by policy makers. It is important to point out that in this paper, I will deal only with those migrants and refugees who have fled from other countries in the MENA[2] region, or from sub-Saharan Africa, and not those of Egyptian nationality that choose to leave the country.

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[1] Can be found here: http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html
[2] Middle East and North Africa

2   Theory and Method

In this chapter, I explain the theory of Sub-altern realism and how I use it in relation to the field of migration in Egypt. In the following sub-chapter is a discussion regarding the methods used for material gathering.

2.1   Subaltern realism

The theory of Subaltern realism emerged in the 1980ies and 1990ies as a critique of the assumptions of mainstream realist theory. Sub-altern realism challenges the traditional realist view of the state system and seeks to expose it as a theoretical field that owes much of its contents to the nature of the international system during the Cold War. Here, states were seen as bricks on a playing board, to be moved here or there according to the wishes of the superpowers. Any change of the rules or the moving of a piece was always explained as being due to external factors (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams 2010:48).

To challenge this perspective one of the main proponents of the theory of subaltern realism, Mohammed Ayoub, claims that the realities and conditions that Third World states have to face are entirely different from those experienced by countries in the richer and more developed world. Ayoub means that this is a clear example of the social and political inequalities existing within the field of international relations, that mirror economic and developmental inequalities in the world outside of academia (Ayoub(a) 2002:47-48). The "traditional Realist focus on external threats to national security is highly problematic" (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams 2010:50).

The realist focus on security is based on the type of state that arose in Europe after the Peace of Westphalia, which is a product of the distinct historical circumstances of that period. The modern Third World states, Ayoub argues, have been formed under different circumstances, often under pressure from stronger external powers, thus accelerating the state formation process to a great extent. This in turn has given these states 'weaker roots' in comparison to the states in the West. "The legitimacy accruing to Western states by virtue of centuries of development is often weaker within Third World states" (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams 2010:51).

Ayoub argues that the Third World states are characterized by their weakness, both domestically and in relation to the other countries in the international system. They have to answer to or accept aid or supervision from more developed states that are higher up in the international hierarchy. Because of this, they become less interested in security matters on an international level, but focus instead on their own regions and immediate neighbourhood. In the context of international politics, they therefore play a subaltern role. Because of their position of relative powerlessness, they focus more on short-term benefits and gains that would put them at an immediate relative advantage regarding other states in their neighbourhood, instead of focusing on projects that would have more long-term benefits (Ayoub(a) 2002:45-46).

In effect, the Sub-altern state is faced with a 'security predicament' unlike what a state in the West would face. These challenges are the following:

- Weak state structures (as explained previously)
- Regional conflict (often increased in scale by internal factors)
- The weak position of the Sub-altern state in the international system

The main cause of these security predicaments is the unformed nature of the Sub-altern state in relation to the traditional state of realist theory.

2.1.1 Sub-altern realism and migration

In this chapter, since previous researchers have not delved into this aspect of the theory, I present my own view of how the policies of a Sub-altern state would be affected by its nature as a weak actor in the international system. One can assume that when a state in the international system is posed with the dilemma of how to deal with an influx of refugees and migrants, it can follow two main kinds of strategies: to accept the migrants in their society, or to seek to expel them.

The choice between acceptance and expulsion is guided by factors such as the interests of society, the economy, media, the interests of the bureaucracy and the government itself, as well as the international community. However, the strength or weakness of the state – both internally and in relation to other states in the international system – determines what kind of policies can be enacted. The different forms of policy that can be adopted are shown in the following table.

Strong state	Subaltern state
Active acceptance • Migrants are seen (by government and society) as a positive force • Immigration is actively encouraged • Integration is seen as the solution	Passive acceptance • Migrants are seen (by government and society) as a positive force • Few legal restrictions to integration and migration • The state lacks resources for active integration
Active expulsion • Migrants are seen as a detrimental force in society • The state closes its borders • Migration is securitized • No, or very little positive involvement in situation of refugees and migrants. • The state seeks to actively expel migrants.	Passive expulsion • Migrants are seen as a detrimental force in society • Strict legal restrictions to integration and migration. • No, or very little positive involvement in situation of refugees and migrants. • The state lacks resources for active expulsion

During the course of his paper, I argue that, due to the subaltern nature of the state, the Egyptian government has adopted a policy of passive expulsion towards the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers resident in the country.

Although the state is too weak to adopt a more active policy, this passive stance still greatly affects how the aid actors present in Egypt can operate. The weak nature of the state therefore hampers the development of effective and long-term solutions on how to solve the dilemma of the refugees.

2.2   Method

In the following chapter, I describe the methods I have used in gathering material. I also describe my experiences while conducting my field work in Egypt and what kind of methodological preparations I conducted before and during my stay there.

I conducted a *Minor Field Study* in Egypt during the summer of 2012. I performed a number of interviews with what I had identified beforehand as actors within the policy area of migration and asylum seeking. However, to give further empirical weight to my findings - and to improve my own understanding

beforehand - I also read and used academic articles published in peer review magazines, and material published in the main stream media in Egypt.

2.2.1 Interviews and direct observation

When conducting my field study, I took a number of issues into consideration. Initially, it was important to gain a general understanding of the issues of migration before travelling, as well as to establish what kind of analytical framework I would use. Here, I followed the advice laid down by Steinar Kvale, which in essence asserts that one should consider *how* the interviews will be analysed *before* they are carried out, not after the fact (Kvale 2009:206).

In order to understand the discourse of the actors, I have sought to obtain descriptions of the interviewee's life, world and experiences in order to understand how the subjects comprehend their surroundings (Esaiasson et al, 2009:284-289). Here, I have used the method of *unstructured interviewing,* which differs in relation to its structured counterpart in that it "attempts to understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana & Frey, 2000:652-657).

I continued my interviews until I reached a stage where theoretical analysis would be possible (Esaiasson 2009:292). I experienced this after about ten interviews. My aim was to interview people from as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible and from different organizations dealing with refugees and asylum seekers. When conducting my empirical study during the spring, I identified these as the Egyptian government, international aid organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM, international and local NGOs involved with refugees, the international community and the refugees themselves. In the end, I gained access to the following organizations:

- The UNHCR in Cairo – the main UN organ dealing with refugees and asylum seekers, responsible for Refugee Status Determination procedures.
- Researchers specializing in the field of migration, associated with the American University in Cairo.
- The International Red Cross
- AMERA-Egypt (African and Middle East Refugee Assistance). NGO specialized in providing legal aid assistance and psycho-social support to refugees. Implementing partner of the UNHCR.
- Catholic Relief Service. NGO focused on providing vocational training for refugees. Implementing partner of the UNHCR.
- IOM – The International Organization for Migration.

When seeking to gain access to the aid organizations, my efforts were generally successful, especially concerning the UNHCR or partners of this organization. Those who agreed to being interviewed were also positive to recommending others for future interviews. Hence here I used the snowball technique of collecting material (Esaiasson et al, 2009:216)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it proved very difficult to gain access to government ministries or employees. This could be due to the obscure nature of the Egyptian state. Another reason could be that the fieldwork was carried out partly during the month of Ramadan, when many ministries are closed. To explore the position of government on the issue of refugees, I had to make do with questioning my interview subjects on their impressions, as well as conducting my own empirical study before the fieldwork.

During the course of gathering material from these interviews, a number of the subjects requested to be anonymous. When this has been requested, I have complied with their wishes.

3   Egypt as a Subaltern state

In this chapter, I describe the situation for refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt. After giving a general outline on the nature of migration in Egypt, I describe how refugees are portrayed in media and society. I then move on to how the mostly urban environment creates certain challenges for the refugees and aid organizations. Finally, by the end of the chapter I present the Egyptian government's standpoint on refugees and how this can be described as a policy of "passive expulsion".

3.1   Background: Egypt and Migration

Egypt and the MENA region could be considered an important brick on the international 'migrationary' chess board for a number of reasons. Due to the outbreak of war in the Horn of Africa, Egypt has since the 90s been affected by mass waves of migration. Since 1992, both internal and external conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have created large amounts of refugees, where Palestinians, Sudanese, Somalis, Ethiopians, Eritreans and other nationalities have at different times fled to or passed through Egypt (Zohry 2010:323-324).

The North African region, stretching from Morocco in the West to Egypt in the East, has evolved into what could be called a "major transit space" (Nassar 2008:3). Egypt is therefore considered a transit country for refugees[3] on the way to other destinations. Since the development of restrictive migration policies in the EU, the migrant populations have become 'stuck' for extended periods of time, sometimes even for decades (Roman 2006:4). The majority of the refugee groups are gathered in Cairo and because of this, there is also a great concentration of aid organizations and NGOs to the capital city (Zohry 2010:323-324, 329).

A debate on the merits of migration – in the way that the subject is treated in the West – simply does not exist in Egypt. Although Egypt hosts a large refugee population, its numbers and the problems these communities are facing, are lost in

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[3]A country of transit is defined in the IOM Glossary on international migration as "the country through which migratory flows (legal or illegal) move" (IOM 2004:2). Transit migration does not always result in continued migration, as it can also lead to the migrants settling down in the assumed transit country (Roman 2006:2). de Haas has questioned the assumption that all migrants seek to enter Europe, claiming that for a considerable proportion, their primary destination is in fact North Africa - most particularly Libya (de Haas 2008:5).

the face of the massive numbers of domestic poor (Mahrous 2012, ICRC 2012, Sadek 2012, Ayoub(b) 2012).

The media is generally not interested in the refugee situation, except during moments of crisis. An example of such a moment is during the sit-in of the Sudanese community in front of the UNHCR in 2005, where police forces broke up the demonstrators after months of strikes with violent means (Ayoub(b) 2012). It is also important to note that in the media, the refugees are generally referred to only as *migrants* crossing the border illegally, while no mention is made of their refugee status or reasons for migrating (ICRC 2012). It is not uncommon for newspapers and magazines to publish articles and editorials, portraying Sub-Saharan African migrants as drug dealers and as dangers to the values and morals of society. These articles warn of 'waves' of illegal immigrants from the south, that will 'flood' the country and rob it of its wealth and employment opportunities (Grabska 2006:41).

In a survey by the UNDP on the perceptions of migration around the world, the Egyptian respondents answered in quite a negative way. About 55% of the respondents believed that it was necessary to limit migration in order to ensure jobs for local Egyptians (UNDP 2009:90). This shows that the perception of migrants, although not applied to asylum seekers and refugees in particular, could be constructed as a threat to the economical security of the citizens.

The refugees complain of harassment from local Egyptians, ranging from insults to stone throwing. Racism towards black refugees is often reported (Shafie, 2004: racism and xenophobia). There are also reports of harassment from police. A lot of officers do not recognize or do not understand the ID cards that recognized refugees are issued. Many illegal and legal refugees therefore end up in detention (AMERA:B 2012).

It is important to note however, that on a local and individual level, where the refugees live their daily lives as neighbours, customers, street vendors and take part in the social life of the street, a process of adaptation takes place. Especially the Sudanese experience less racism and harassment from those in their immediate neighbourhood than when they venture out into the more anonymous areas of the city (ICRC 2012, Mahrous 2012).

The refugees often live in the same areas as forced migrants from Upper Egypt; that is, those migrants with Egyptian citizenship who have fled difficult economic conditions, conflicts in their home villages or are in search of better employment and living standards (Le Houérou 2006:64-67).

3.1.1 Challenges in an urban environment

As has been stated, the majority of refugees in Egypt live in spread out communities in the capital city of Cairo. This large urban population of refugees

poses unique challenges. As the international aid community is geared towards providing help for refugees and asylum seekers based in camps, those living in an urban setting are often ignored. The groups disappear among the masses of ordinary Egyptians, and multiple nationalities live far apart from each other. There is little communication between these groups, making urban refugees among the most desperate and vulnerable of all (Oxfam 2005:9).

Another problem with this urban setting is that it becomes difficult to measure the population. While an estimated half a million to three million regular and irregular refugees and migrants are staying in the country currently, the issue of estimating the amount of refugees has always been difficult. For example, it was previously believed that the Sudanese population numbered in the hundreds of thousands, while recent reports show that there could perhaps be as few as 60.000 in the country, where half of this amount is fully integrated in Egyptian society (Ayoub(b) 2012). Aside from these, there are many who have been denied their application or are staying in the country illegally (Mahrous 2012).

However, the urban setting does not only create problems. The centralization of transnational aid organizations to the capital has made it easier to develop and support legal aid initiatives for asylum seekers (Kagan 2006b:49), and the UNHCR and other privately sponsored organizations host some of the largest resettlement programs for refugees to the Western world - to Canada, Australia, USA and Finland. This has served to attract a great amount of additional refugees in the hope of being legally resettled to the West, even though the rate of admittance is currently very low; only about 3000-4000 refugees are accepted for resettlement each year (Nassar 2008:7).

The southern Sudanese population, which is the largest migrant community after the Palestinians, has historically enjoyed a privileged position compared to other non-Arab refugees. An agreement between Sudan and Egypt (the Wadi el Nil agreement) gave them right to settle and work in the country. However in 1995, after a failed assassination attempt on President Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia, which was blamed on the Sudanese government, it was revoked. This made Sudanese staying in Egypt equal in status to other foreigners. Another agreement was signed in 2004 (the Four Freedoms Agreement) which once again gave the Sudanese the right to settle (Grabska 2006:14, 21). However, for employment, the Sudanese now need a work permit, which is difficult to attain, because they can only take jobs that ordinary Egyptians are not willing to take. The Sudanese, like the rest of the refugees, are thus relegated to the informal sector (AUC:A 2012).

Looking back on our definition of the Sub-altern state, the following characteristics were used to define the phenomenon:

- Weak state structures
- Regional conflict
- The weak position of the Sub-altern state in the international system

We can see that, in relation to the nature of migration and the policies adopted by the Egyptian state, the concept of Sub-alternism can indeed be adopted. A weak state structure and low standing in the international system, coupled with the prevalence of regional conflict (in the Middle-East and in the Horn of Africa) has given rise to a situation that would not be possible in the countries of the West, on which the realist theories of statehood have usually been modelled.

3.2   Findings: The government's stance toward the refugees

Strictly speaking, Egypt has no official immigration policy. The issues of entering and leaving the country are mainly seen as security matters, and discussions on integration or on whether or not to implement a wider policy framework are non-existent (CRS 2012).

An example of this focus on security is how illegal entry into the country is handled by the authorities. In a lot of countries, although it is illegal to enter without a visa, it is not a crime, which means that the criminal law is not invoked and will not lead to imprisonment. In Egypt however, it is a crime to enter the country without a passport. A considerable amount of the refugees enter Egypt through Sudan by being smuggled across the border. If they are caught on the way to the UNHCR or before they are able to claim refugee status, they are sent to prison for the crime of illegal entry (AMERA:B 2012). Another example of this focus on security is in the field of research. The government does not condone research on Palestinians as well as research regarding the border to Israel or in the Sinai as a whole. Reporting on mistreatment or human rights abuses towards the Palestinians in the country is considered a very difficult political issue and could carry high political costs for the government (Sadek 2012).

The government has divided the responsibilities for handling and administering to the needs of non-national and foreign residents among a large number of different ministries, which leads to difficulties in coordination (Baldwin-Edwards 2006:319). Despite the lack of a clear immigration policy, Egypt is a signatory to a number of international conventions[4] guaranteeing human rights for refugees and asylum seekers. Even though Egypt has signed the

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[4] According to Grabska (2006:16), they are: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1981; The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1981; The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1981; The International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), 1967/1972; The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1991; The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as amended by the 1967 Protocol; The UN Convention on Migrant Workers and their Families, 2003; The 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights; 1992.

UN Refugee Convention of 1951, certain reservations were made towards the articles guaranteeing their right to work, health care and education (Zohry 2010:327-328).

The perception of refugees among government officials is generally tied to ideas of burden and negative responsibility. "[T]here is a strong perception of refugees as unskilled, uneducated, and illiterate, who compete for jobs with poor Egyptians" (Grabska 2006:22). According to one interviewee's opinion - who has worked within the state institutions before she changed to the aid community - the reasoning among some officials and politicians is that "if we make it hard enough for them here, they will go back to their own country or somewhere else" (CRS 2012). However, the state treats migrants and refugees from Arab countries very differently compared to those coming from sub-Saharan Africa (UNHCR:B 2012).

All sources that I studied agreed that the Egyptian government views the situation as temporary and is very much against local integration. The government officials do not want to burden their ministries with the responsibility of finding jobs and providing services to the refugees. They favour the UNHCR to find a solution - which in their eyes is repatriation or resettlement, not integration (Ayoub(b) 2012). Another factor contributing to this passive stance is that to conduct the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures is a costly procedure and can be politically sensitive. The state is not willing to face the costs and political risks associated with such an undertaking (UNHCR:B 2012).

As the Egyptian state has declined (or deems itself unable) to handle its refugee population, the responsibility has been handed over to the UN. Therefore, it is the UNHCR office in Cairo that decides the refugees' right to asylum in the country (UNHCR:C 2012). Among developing countries, this is not entirely unusual. In countries that themselves lack the capacity to handle refugee status determination, the UNHCR steps in to handle the evaluation of individual refugees. The UNHCR is involved in RSD operations in 68 countries around the world, with the largest being in Kenya, Malaysia, Turkey, Somalia, Egypt and Yemen (Stainsby 2009:53). In these instances, the organization is in control of the entire process of refugee protection, including deciding who is or is not a refugee, distributing aid to those with a proven need, to advocating for refugee rights and overseeing the implementation of those rights (Edwards 2010:49).

Institutionally, the problems and issues of the refugees are administered through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although departments exist to deal with development and aid to the poor, the refugees are not given access to these institutions (CRS 2012). The Egyptian government therefore prefers resettlement to integration. At the same time, no active or aggressive policy of expelling them from the country exists (Mahrous 2012).

As we can see, although not actively opposing the existence of refugees in the country – the government is content only to monitor the situation of the refugees

through resident aid organizations – the authorities consider the situation temporary and are unwilling to consider any other option than resettlement of the refugees. A policy of 'passive expulsion' has been adopted, where refugees are tolerated for a short period of time, yet no effort is undertaken to ease their situation, or to come up with alternative solutions of integration or community development. If we go back to our definition of the passive expulsion policy, we can see that the defined characteristics correspond with the stance adopted by the Egyptian state:

- Migrants are seen as a detrimental force in society
- Strict legal restrictions to integration and migration.
- No, or very little positive involvement in situation of refugees and migrants.
- The state lacks resources for active expulsion

I will show in the next chapter how this stance affects the options and policies of the aid actors working in the country.

4   Challenges to aid actors

In this chapter, I show how the governmental stance towards the refugees affects the aid community. By describing the challenges experienced by the actors, I wish to put focus on how the lack of state involvement hampers the possibility of effective aid delivery. In my final chapter – with the help of my findings in this chapter – I show how the stance of 'passive expulsion' hinders the development of effective alternative policies. Without the state taking an active role, the aid community is fragmented and unable to come up with common solutions or to work towards a common goal.

The main message I received from all those I interviewed was the absence of the state and society in regards to awareness and engagement in the situation of the refugees. There were also some differences in opinion regarding the basic definition of protection. The role that the UNHCR should play and how much responsibility it should take in the vacuum the state has left with its inaction was also a contested subject that I aimed to explore during my interviews.

4.1   The UNHCR

According to a scholar at the American University in Cairo, the UNHCR was previously known for its liberal resettlement policies, which attracted many refugees to the city (Ayoub(b) 2012). An employee at AMERA remembered that in the past when he started working there – in 2001 – the UNHCR quotas for resettlement were about 3000-4000 persons per year, where the majority of those resettled were southern Sudanese (Mahrous 2012). However, with the countries of the European Union restricting immigration, the amount of resettlements from Egypt was lowered drastically. (Ayoub(b) 2012).

As the UNHCR has assumed responsibility for refugee status determination procedures, the UNHCR has taken the role of a *gatekeeper*, determining and controlling the flow of legal migration for those seeking asylum in the West. Yet, with limited funds and mandate, the ability of the agency to provide sufficient aid to these groups will always be dependent on the commitment of the local governments and "when government commitments to refugees falter, so does UNHCR protection capacity" (Kagan 2006a:2-13).

With the UNHCR acting as the gatekeeper for refugees, a number of problems is created. There is the risk that many of the safeguards that a regular government can provide to the procedures will be lacking. Also the procedures - which are resource-intensive - force the agency to relocate funds from other vital activities. Most important however, is the fact that when the UNHCR takes on both the role of refugee protector and the role of decision maker, an obvious conflict of interests occurs (Kagan 2006b:48). Increased political involvement could create a perception of the UNHCR as an unreliable and partial actor, which detracts from its original, most vital purpose: that of protecting people needing asylum (Pugh & Cunliffe 1997:25-26).

The nature of the Subaltern state therefore creates a challenge for the UNHCR; whether to expand its activities to meet the needs of the refugee population, or to limit itself to its core functions of aid delivery, relief and monitoring of human rights. As we see in the next chapter, the ability of the organization to expand its activities is greatly hampered both by budgetary concerns, as well as by its relationship with the host government.

4.1.1 Findings: The Responsibilities of the UNHCR

According to one of my interview subjects working on a high level within the UNHCR, in relation to the Egyptian state the obstacles and challenges that the UNHCR faces are not great. The legal procedures for RSD have already been laid down a long time ago and there is very little involvement by the state in these procedures or in the situation of the refugees (UNHCR:B 2012). When interviewing UNHCR representatives, it became clear that differences in opinion existed on how to use the funds that are at the disposal of the organization. These differences reflected the basic argument of this paper: that lack of state involvement, due to the weak nature of that state, hampers the development of effective alternatives of aid to the refugees.

One interviewee (UNHCR:A, 2012) described these differences as rooted in whether the UNHCR should focus on individual status management and aid delivery, or on a more community development based approach. The issue concerns whether the UNHCR should progressively try to aid and empower the refugees in Egyptian society, through training, education and by shouldering a greater amount of responsibility for the welfare of the refugees, basically assuming more functions of the state, or if it should remain as a monitor and aid giver according to its original function.

In the opinion of my interview subject, a solely assistance and aid based strategy only leads to and creates dependence by the refugees on the UNHCR. An analogy would be that you give the refugees fish, but don't teach them the *skill* of fishing and don't solve anything in the long term. The community development

approach would act as an anchor of integration for the refugees in Egyptian society:

> There is a need to engage civil society in supporting integration of refugees, but not only this, but to raise up both poor people in general as well as refugee groups at the same time.
> UNHCR:A, 2012

The same person claimed that there is much opposition within the UNHCR towards these kind of projects – at least on higher levels – where the bureaucratic culture is more focused on delivering aid and the ability to show results and responsibility to the donor. However, some moves have indeed been made towards a more ambitious strategy. The new urban policy adopted in 2009[5] by the UNHCR includes some elements of community development, where the idea is to strengthen the institutions of society through capacity building, and thereby making the local municipalities take ownership of the situation (UNHCR:A, 2012).

Other representatives within the UNHCR gave a more varied picture. They agreed that the donor countries put demands on the shape that aid delivery should take, yet they argued that the stance of the government and the stance of the refugees themselves had a much greater impact on the policies of the UNHCR.

A person with great experience working within the UN institutions in the Middle East explained that while there might be a wish for more ambitious policies among the leadership, the organization is and will always be hampered by issues of funding and acceptance by the state. Perhaps a few minor projects aimed at community development would be possible, but on the whole, for the UNHCR it is simply not possible to take on the role of the state, nor is it willing to face the political risks involved. The UNHCR can not pursue a political strategy that goes against the wishes of the state with which it is cooperating (UN:A 2012). An example of this is the case where the Egyptian government has asked the UNHCR not to become involved with the Palestinians resident in the country. Here, the UNHCR has to accept the sovereignty of the state and can not bypass its decisions (UNHCR:B 2012). This is a clear case where the state dictates the boundaries of what policies and solutions are available (or not) to the aid community.

There are other problems associated with a more ambitious community development policy. Such a policy would need for the UNHCR to cooperate with a large number of domestic NGOs and community service organizations. Since the UN institutions need to be politically neutral in order not to endanger its cooperation with the state, the UNHCR has to be very selective regarding who they cooperate with, making sure that these organizations (or 'implementing partners' as they are called) do not damage the image of the UN (UN:A 2012).

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[5]To be found here: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ab8e7f72.html

Other members of the UNHCR believed that to pursue a policy of community integration and development would not be popular among the refugee groups either. In the past, in some cases the UNHCR employees were instructed to tell refugees that if they had very small chances of resettlement, they should adopt integration as a strategy. This proved to be very unwise, since it sent bad signals to the refugees, who generally come to the country in order to leave for the West. To some, the more ambitious goals of community development are therefore unrealistic, as they go against the interests of both the refugees and the mandate given to the UNHCR by the state (UNHCR:B 2012).

In summary, my findings on the differences in perspectives regarding what responsibilities the UNHCR should take were quite interesting. They show that different employees within the organisation differ regarding what path the aid community should take, whether towards a greater commitment towards the refugees, or whether the organisations should remain in their traditional roles of aid relief. These differences seem to exist on a vertical level, since those working higher up in the organisation have to take into account the overarching responsibilities of the UNHCR as a whole, while those working closer to the refugees themselves, are more focused on the fact that the UNHCR, with the absence of the state, is currently the only entity in the country able to relieve the suffering of the refugee population. The are therefore more immediately affected by how the absence of the state worsens the situation of the refugees.

4.1.2 Finding: Communication between actors and towards refugees

With the absence of a strong unifying actor such as the state, the aid community has fragmented. This has given rise to a number of effects. To begin with, it decreases the possibility of cooperation between the actors present in the country. It also makes it harder for the aid organizations to reach out to the refugees, especially in an urban environment such as Cairo, and to see to their needs or monitor their situation.

The UNHCR partner organizations all agreed that cooperation between them and the UNHCR was on the whole very good and well organized (CRS 2012, Doss 2012, Mahrous 2012, UNHCR:C 2012). Others whom I interviewed however, that were not connected to the UNHCR, stated that they experience a culture of 'turf wars' between the UNHCR and other members of the UN system, and other large international aid organizations, which prevents a deeper level of cooperation. Since all organizations within the UN are engaged in a competitive race for funding for their own specific projects, this means that they fight for the same money against other projects in their sister organizations. The aid organizations have thus created overlapping mandates, where they compete against each other (UN:A 2012).

All interviewees raised some criticism of the UNHCR, always highlighting the lack of communication between this organization and the refugee communities (UNHCR:C 2012, CRS 2012, ICRC 2012, Mahrous 2012). It is important to note however, that due to state absence, the very role that the UNHCR possesses has made it the focal point of criticism (UNHCR:C 2012). One person working for the International Red Cross, believed that a key element to the problems of communication is that the UNCHR does not properly inform refugees who have arrived recently in Cairo of where to get aid, what the aid community can provide for them and how to integrate themselves in society. Representatives of the claimed that their communication with the refugees is good enough (UNHCR:B 2012), but according to others, the refugees currently get their information primarily from relatives and community members and not from the aid organizations (CRS 2012). The same view is mirrored by the refugee groups themselves. "Refugees [...] find it problematic to approach the UNHCR directly, as the access is very restricted for security reasons" (Grabska 2006:34).

This lack of information creates problems, where the refugees do not know how the refugee system works or what the UNHCR is actually able to do. The context, working situation and resources of the UNHCR is adding to their problems as well. Strikes outside the office are very common, the working environment is negative, with refugees threatening or following employees, creating a poor working environment for aid workers, which further complicates the dialogue between refugees and the aid community (CRS 2012).

4.2   The focus of the aid community

As might be expected, the obstacles and challenges facing the organizations that make up the aid community in Egypt differ according to their established mission. Considering the lack of a clear discourse on refugees and asylum seekers in the country, or an active involvement by the state to create such a discourse, it is not surprising that the aid organizations all have different experiences or opinions on how the work of the international aid community is best carried out. According to a scholar at the American University in Cairo:

> Providing protection to refugees is what the international aid community is all about. But when I ask them what they actually mean with *protection*, they all give me different answers. [...] The refugee aid community in Egypt lacks a common definition of protection.
> Sadek 2012

When talking to the protection office in UNHCR for example, she said that they defined protection as simply 'freedom from arrests' (Sadek 2012). This was also my experience when questioning one of the staff at the office on what obstacles

they were facing. The answer to what they saw as protection for the refugees was basically only given from a security standpoint (UNHCR:B 2012) and none of those I interviewed brought up issues such as protection from hunger, to provide adequate education or healthcare. In other organizations, such as at the ICRC, protection was defined as providing tracing services: registration of refugees, tracking and information gathering (ICRC 2012). Most NGOs, especially the churches, mosques and Islamic associations, have a traditional charity mindset, meaning an aid and assistance based strategy. Only a small minority of them have a microfinance or development based approach (UNHCR:A, 2012).

Some of the aid community organizations also experience problems with lack of communication with the refugees, which results in misunderstandings of what functions and services they are able to perform (Mahrous 2012, CRS 2012, Doss 2012). The reason for this could be that the refugee regime in Egypt, due to state absence, has come to operate on an ad-hoc basis. Here, it is important to bring up a vital matter on how the aid organizations work in the country. There is a law in Egypt that forces the organizations to have an official registration before they can begin operating in the country. The government also carries out recurring and demanding inspections, which are difficult for small NGOs to handle. Acquiring the official permit to operate in the country is a time consuming process that takes many years. As a result, many organisations, even bigger ones like Human Rights Watch, are not registered with the government and are in effect working there illegally (AMERA:B 2012). This adds a further element to the insecurity of the main human rights actors in the country, since they are operating with a continued fear of being shut down or censored by the government. It also shows how the state's stance of passive expulsion of the refugees affects the aid community, in hindering their ability to operate and to reside legally in the country.

The aid community is also strongly focused on the Sudanese community in Cairo. This is understandable, as it is the largest and best organized group among the refugees. In the past, the vast majority of refugees in Cairo were Sudanese and the aid network currently in place was constructed to meet this need. Now however, there are more different kinds of refugees, such as Iraqis, Syrians, Ethiopians and Somalis (UNHCR:B 2012).

Another problem that the aid organizations found in their work was not in relation to the largely passive government, or towards the other organizations in the aid community, but towards the refugees themselves and the strategy these refugees adopt in communicating with the aid organizations. An example of this challenge (as they called it, to 'navigate' the refugee communities) is when refugees end up in prison. It is very common for them to register with false names in order to guard their true identity, or because the refugees believe it will increase chances of resettlement, while in fact it becomes very difficult for human rights' organizations to find the person and make a release possible. These kinds of

strategies adopted by the refugees make it much harder for the ICRC to perform tracing and to track the refugee community in the country (ICRC 2012).

4.3   The Refugee Communities

> Refugees don't WANT to migrate to Egypt, but are here because they wish to emigrate somewhere else. Egypt is a stop-off point. For this reason, refugees are not willing to be integrated in the societies.
> CRS 2012

A central issue to the refugees is their chances of resettlement. It is seen as their greatest chance of improving their situation, while the actual chance of resettlement is in fact very low (UNHCR:C 2012). However this focus differs from group to group. For example, the Iraqis generally have very little wish to stay in the country and have maintained their hopes for resettlement for a long time, while the Sudanese have created their own organizations and have come some way towards integration or further cooperation with the Egyptian host society (Sadek 2012).

The scholar whom I interviewed also believed that parts of the refugee community also experience some frustration with the academic researchers doing field work on the situation of the refugees. According to her, the community leaders (who are most often contacted by the researchers) experience a kind of 'interview fatigue', where researcher after researcher visits, conducts his or her studiy and then leaves, without improving the situation of the community in an obvious way (Sadek 2012).

A person working within the Catholic Refugee Service, a UNHCR implementing partner with close ties to the refugees, raised the view that the refugees adopt certain strategies in the way that they interact with the aid community. Even if the refugees are integrating in society, she claimed, they will not tell this to the aid community organizations. The set-up of the aid community encourages this behaviour, because those who complain the most also get the most benefits. The refugees recognize this and develop an argumentative attitude towards the organizations (CRS 2012).

My subjects describe the overall level of frustration among the refugees against the UNHCR as very high. This is tied to the fact that since the state has resigned from handling the issues of the refugees, the UNHCR has become the "critical organization deciding their fate" (Grabska 2006:49). Any unhappiness or criticism will therefore be directed against the UNHCR, whom they see as the main organization responsible for their fate, not the Egyptian state (ICRC 2012).

This frustration and anger directed against the UNHCR was clearly visible when I visited their office in the Cairo suburb of 6th October city on the western

side of the Nile. Before entering the fortress-like building, I witnessed a violent quarrel between an African refugee and a security guard. A relatively large number of refugees were also camping or waiting outside the office in a small park on the other side of the road.

When questioning UNHCR representatives about the groups of refugees outside the office, one of them admitted that the main problem she experiences in her work is the security of staff members, comparing it to the experiences of a siege. There are incidents almost on a daily basis, of spitting, swearing, people from outside breaking windows and throwing stones at staff members or security guards. Before the revolution, the police officers in the area were very active in protecting the UNHCR office from attacks from the refugees staying outside, but after the fall of the government of Mubarak, they experience trouble getting the police to protect them. The implementing partners of the UNHCR, such as CARITAS, also face some anger by the refugees (UNHCR:C 2012).

According to an employee at AMERA the UNHCR is doing its best to care to the needs of the refugees, but some refugee groups and organizations have different opinions, generally believing that the UNHCR is working against them. (Mahrous 2012). Coupled with this is the fact that even though the numbers of refugees tends to be constant or increasing, the strained resources of the UNHCR office in Cairo makes it hard for them to handle the high case-load, leaving those in need at risk of increased suffering.

The frustration, coupled with the decreased chances of resettlement in the last few years, led to the protests and sit-ins in front of the UNHCR offices by the Sudanese community in 2005. Protesters shouted slogans such as: "We are the victims of mismanagement," "We reject local integration," "Where is the international media?" and "Attention please: Who will restore our rights?" (Azzam, Brankovic & Danielson 2006:19). This sit-in is the only major case where a refugee group has tried to publicly give voice to their situation and to influence the media or society to take their situation seriously (Azzam, Brankovic & Danielson 2006:12-17).

It is clear that the refugee groups are greatly affected by the lack of involvement or endorsement by the state. At the same time, the state's focus on resettlement, mirrored by the demands and expectations of the refugees themselves, hampers any initiative towards empowerment or community development. This further increases the status of the refugee communities as being apart from society and as a permanent 'temporary problem' in Egypt.

5   Conclusions

It is clear that regarding the issue of transnational migration within and through the country, Egypt is a typical example of the Subaltern state. In handing over the mandate for managing refugee status determination procedures to the UNHCR, and in relying on the aid community to deal with the needs of the refugees, it can be argued that the Egyptian state has acted according to a *short term interest based approach*. A large population of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have been staying in the country illegally and for extended periods of time. An active, more sustained and focused involvement by the state on how to handle the refugees could have created a different situation that in a longer term perspective would have avoided the problems that have been created.

If a long-term strategy had been pursued, the Egyptian state would be faced with two options; either to involve themselves in the monitoring, registration and determination of refugees and asylum seekers and to seek solutions to their problems (an active integration policy), or to close their borders, cancel international migration agreements and shut out any further migration from the deemed 'source' countries to the south (an active expulsion policy).

However, due to the constraints put in place with Egypt as a Subaltern state in the international system, it becomes clear that both these strategies are unattainable. The political and economical costs of the first option are considered too high and risky, since the registration of refugees risks causing quarrels or disputes with important neighbouring countries from where these refugees are fleeing but whose governments still have good relations with the Egyptian state (for example Sudan). Integration would be a problematic policy to adopt, since it is considered to be widely unpopular in Egyptian society and among the refugees themselves. Finally, since the procedures are costly, and as the Egyptian economy is already strained, this could also prove to be very unpopular in Egyptian society, who would rather see resources invested in economical development.

The second option, to close borders and reject all international obligations, is equally difficult to achieve. With its sub-altern role in the international system, were the Egyptian state to pursue this, the international humanitarian backlash would be too great, likely resulting in economic sanctions and embargoes. The result then, is that the state chooses a passive stance that is associated with less risk in a short-term perspective: to ignore the situation and to hand over responsibilities to the international aid community. The weakness of the state has clearly shown why integration is not an option and why the authorities have opted for what one could call a form of 'passive policy of expulsion'.

This non-involvement of the state in the situation of migrants and refugees can also be counted as one of the reasons for why no clear debate has developed in Egyptian society over how to solve the issues of the refugees, alleviate their suffering or to help them integrate or be repatriated. Although the weakness of the state ensures that a policy of passive expulsion is adopted, the government is still able to dictate how the discourse takes shape among the international and domestic organizations resident in the country. Without support from the government, the aid community is left to fend for itself, with limited resources and unable to raise awareness, to steer the discourse in order to come up with alternative solutions. Instead it is forced to operate on an *ad-hoc* basis with constant fear of being shut down or censored.

In a wider perspective, it becomes interesting to see how the aid community is affected in other countries, where they face a government that is negatively disposed towards the existence of refugees within its borders. The findings in this paper also demonstrate that when studying the issues of migration and refugees in developing countries, it is important to take the domestic situation into account. An adequate understanding of the motivations of government, society, the aid actors and the refugees themselves is required in order to fully grasp the problems facing the refugees and how to solve these problems.

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