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Stacy Schafer

*The American University in Cairo AUC*

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**SOLACE AND SECURITY AT THE CAIRO REFUGEE DEMONSTRATION**

Presented by

Stacy Schafer  
The American University in Cairo

as part of the panel discussion

**SUDANESE REFUGEE PROTEST IN CAIRO:  
COMMUNITY DYNAMICS AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Forced Migration Postgraduate Student Conference  
University of East London  
March 18-19, 2006**

## ABSTRACT

Over the course of a 92 day sit-in, Sudanese refugees demonstrating in a park in downtown Cairo formed a close-knit community. They preferred to remain outside in a public park indefinitely to other options available to them. Who these protestors were and the reasons for their prolonged stay were a matter of contention from the first days of their demonstration. This paper incorporates my research conducted during the demonstration in order to understand the factors that drew these refugees to protest for such an extended period of time. While consistently demanding that the UNHCR and international community give them ‘their rights’ and improve their situation, the sit-in itself temporarily assuaged many of the hardships they faced. The park was transformed into a relatively autonomous community of refugees who created their own sense of security and provided mutual support and solace for each other. The constant uncertainty and frustration associated with life as a refugee was eased as they were able to take back some control over their present lives. Their protest emphasizes the importance and necessity of such mechanisms and outlets for refugees to seek support and solace; a need that has yet to be addressed for refugees living in this sprawling metropolis.

## INTRODUCTION

In Cairo, with one of the five largest urban populations in the developing world, Sudanese refugees refused to remain invisible and demanded the attention of UNHCR, their Egyptian hosts, and the international community. Their ninety-two day protest came to an abrupt end on December 30<sup>th</sup> as thousands of police surrounded the demonstrators and violently rounded them up. At least twenty-seven people were killed including many young children.

In the final weeks of the sit-in, the numbers had grown so large that many of the protestors were forced to sleep on the sidewalks surrounding the garden or in the adjacent park at night. Who exactly these protestors were had been a matter of contention since the protest began, but what had become abundantly evident in the first weeks of the sit-in remained true to the very end: a strong, relatively independent community had developed inside the park and these refugees preferred to remain in an unsheltered garden over other options available to them. A tight-knit community had developed, a factor contributing to their willingness and desire to remain at the protest.

Acknowledging that the term refugee is a sensitive one that can have a variety of meanings and implications, it is necessary to clarify my usage of the term throughout this paper. I am choosing to use the term Sudanese refugee in its broader sense to refer to “all

who have fled Sudan as a result of one of the civil wars due to personal persecution, insecurity, or general violence.”<sup>1</sup>

### BACKGROUND

The Sudanese refugees’ plight in Egypt has been well documented and studied over the past few years. A 2002 study of Sudanese visiting strategies in Cairo pointed to the expansion of Sudanese social networks as a means of seeking solace and mutual aid in Cairo’s foreign and often hostile urban environment. Maintaining social ties is a paramount priority to a refugee community that is “increasingly fragmented by urban sprawl...”<sup>2</sup> Every study conducted has highlighted the numerous difficulties Sudanese face in Egypt, from difficulty in attaining work permits and steady jobs, to lack of educational opportunities for children and adults, and complaints of racism, discrimination, and harassment from Egyptians.

Even UNHCR has reported that Cairo’s refugees are “virtually out of sight against the backdrop of Cairo's massive population, [and] suffers from the ever-rising cost of living while UNHCR itself lacks the funds to provide them with adequate support.”<sup>3</sup> Inadequate support for recognized refugees, due largely to a lack of funding, has left these refugees to suffer and struggle just as much as every other Sudanese “asylum-seeker” in Cairo. To quote UNHCR again,

Eking out a livelihood in a teeming city is vastly different from life in a refugee camp, where services are freely provided by relief agencies. In the Egyptian capital, families are evicted from their homes because they cannot afford rent; children are denied an education because they cannot afford school fees, and the general health situation of the refugees is deteriorating due to their often poor nutrition and lack of adequate living conditions.<sup>4</sup>

As of 29 February 2004, 76% of the nearly 20,000 refugees under the protection of UNHCR were Sudanese.<sup>5</sup> UNHCR recognized 14,999 Sudanese refugees by the end

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<sup>1</sup> Grabska, Katarzyna. “Living on the Margins: The Analysis of the Livelihood Strategies of Sudanese Refugees with Closed Files in Egypt.” *Working Paper #6*. (FMRS, June 2005).p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Fabos, Anita. “Of Metaphors and Microbuses: Sudanese Visiting Strategies in Cairo.” (3/4/02). The American University in Cairo.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, “Hard Times for Cairo Refugees.” (November 2002) <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=3de201595> >

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR Country Operations Plan: Arab Republic of Egypt, 2005.

<<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&id=415962214&page=home>. >

of 2004.<sup>6</sup> Sudanese nationals in recent years have made up the largest group approaching UNHCR as asylum-seekers. Over 80% these Sudanese applicants are Christian southerners (predominantly Dinka, Nuer and Nuba). In addition, about 80% of these claimants are single men.<sup>7</sup> Among Sudanese refugees, southern Sudanese made up 61% of those recognized by UNHCR.<sup>8</sup>

These refugees perceive their stay in Cairo as temporary. Local integration has been opposed since long before this demonstration. The pervasive rumors and sentiments of discrimination and harassment that abound in the refugee community only highlight their opposition to a permanent stay in Egypt. Egypt is considered a transitory stage, and their continued hardships in Egypt create a sense of unity and belonging as they wait.

They are strongly dissatisfied with their present lives and situation in Egypt as refugees and are united by this shared discontent. The demonstration provided a new forum for these refugees to come together and express their group identity and shared hardships. They feel marginalized in society, and by coming together at the park they created a distinct community in which they felt safe and could rely more readily on their fellow Sudanese for comfort and support—an otherwise often impossible task when typically separated by an hour or more commute at different ends of the bustling city.

### **THE DEMONSTRATORS**

My research sought to determine the reasons and motivations behind individual refugee's decisions to join the sit-in. I conducted research over a three-week period from mid-November to early December containing both quantitative and qualitative components. A total of 149 Sudanese demonstrators (and one Ethiopian) were surveyed and about fifteen informal group interviews were conducted. Although every attempt was made to interview as many people as possible from all groups and sectors of the demonstration, this was not a random sample and my results cannot be generalized and considered representative of all those present at the demonstration. However, the demonstrators surveyed and interviewed offer some valuable in-depth insights into the plight of a number of asylum-seekers at the protest and a picture, if not entirely complete,

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6 Shafie, Sherifa. "FMO Research Guide: Egypt." (July 2004, Updated June 2005). pp. 5-6.

<<http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo029/fmo029.pdf>>

7 UNHCR Country Operations Plan: Arab Republic of Egypt, 2005.

<<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&id=415962214&page=home>. >

8 Shafie, pp. 5-6.

of the community formed at the sit-in. UNHCR and many NGOS expressed concern early on that many of the demonstrators were enticed to join the protest by false and misleading information.<sup>9</sup>

Of the 149 refugees surveyed in this research, 24.2% had blue cards, 43% had yellow cards, 13.4% had closed files, and 15.4% had neither a card nor a closed file. Two people interviewed said their cases were being appealed, but had no documentation. Four individuals had closed files, but also managed to obtain yellow cards. The majority of people with no card or file were all refugees who had arrived in Egypt within the past six months. A handful of these people had arrived since September and had only lived at the protest during their stay in Cairo.

These numbers were largely confirmed after the demonstrators were arrested in December. Of the 2,174 originally detained, all but about 400 were released within the first few days because they had blue or yellow UNHCR cards. By 27 January, only 169 people remained in jail. These were the “closed file” cases not considered to be persons of concern to UNHCR. Everyone else either could produce documentation from UNHCR or were recent arrivals or Darfurians to whom UNHCR subsequently gave yellow cards while they were in prison.<sup>10</sup>

In his evaluation of UNHCR policy in Cairo, Sperl noted in 2001 that “As far as Sudanese and Somali refugees are concerned, there is no valid distinction between recognized refugees, asylum seekers and rejected cases when it comes to issues of livelihoods.”<sup>11</sup> It should not be surprising that there were such large numbers of recognized refugees and yellow card holders, all of whom are receiving some ‘protection’ from UNHCR, present at the demonstration. Regardless of their status, they face the same problems and concerns as closed file refugees.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that some of these people are termed ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘closed files’ or ‘economic migrants’ or ‘recognized refugees’ does not alter the fact that they are facing the same conditions in Cairo.

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<sup>9</sup> UNHCR Cairo. Memorandum on 30/10/05.

<sup>10</sup> FMRS Report on the Forced Removal of Sudanese Refugees (forthcoming). The American University in Cairo, March 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Sperl, Stefan (2001), “Evaluation of UNHCR’s policy on refugees in urban areas: a case study review of Cairo,” EPAU, p. 15

<sup>12</sup> Grabska, p. 80.

Unquestionably, men made up the majority at the protest. Most (60%) of the men interviewed were unmarried; and the vast majority were between the ages of 20 to 35.<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with Kibreab's findings on urban refugees in Khartoum. Urban refugees tend to be predominantly young, single, and male and this was certainly the case at the demonstration.<sup>14</sup> Of the 52 women that were interviewed, however, the majority (82%) were married. Most of the women at the demonstration are married and have their immediate families with them in Cairo, yet most apparently lacked support networks prior to joining the sit-in.

The biggest concern expressed by refugees, and the primary reason they remained at the sit-in so long, was reiterated over and over by refugees at the protest. Protection was why they were there; protection is what they were demanding from UNHCR. But what exactly did they mean by 'protection'? As Grabska observed in her research: "refugees view their protection not only in terms of being free from random arrests and deportation but as linked to the provision of basic human rights, such as access to education, work, housing, and health services."<sup>15</sup>

First and foremost, the problems refugees mentioned that prompted them to join the demonstration had to do with their treatment in Egypt and lack of opportunities and access to public services. Every mother interviewed emphasized that either she could not afford her children's schools or that the schools her children went to were inadequate. Resettlement did not lure them to the protest; these tangible problems did. But for many of these refugees, the best way, if not the only way, to solve their problems was to be resettled. Sperl came to a similar conclusion when he acknowledged in 2001 that "local integration remains a distant goal and that UNHCR is increasingly unable to provide an adequate level of support, resettlement has become the only viable durable solution for refugees in Cairo."<sup>16</sup>

However, their conception of resettlement was unusual. "Resettlement" to them was not limited to countries like Australia and the United States. Any country that would respect their human rights or where UNHCR would provide more adequately for their

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<sup>13</sup> See Tables in Appendix 1.

<sup>14</sup> Kibreab, p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Grabska, p. 46

<sup>16</sup> Sperl, p. 3. However, it can be argued that since the peace agreement was signed in Sudan, repatriation is now a "viable" option and resettlement is not the only solution.

needs was acceptable. Surprisingly, a number of people expressed interest in refugee camps in other African countries and lamented how unfair it was that UNHCR did not give them the same attention as their fellow refugees in Uganda or Kenya. Even suggestions that somewhere in Upper Egypt might be an appropriate resettlement location were acknowledged as a possibility.

A common sentiment was that of being “ignored” as a refugee in Cairo. Many believed that maybe now that the refugees had organized as such a visible group UNHCR would finally listen. These demonstrators are urban refugees—they feel forgotten, alienated, unprotected, and vulnerable. Their plight and protest illustrate the difficulties that all asylum seekers face, regardless of their status with UNHCR, in a relatively poor urban environment like Cairo. In fact, as many of these demonstrators have stated and firmly believe, life in urban areas can be, and often is, “significantly more difficult than in a rural settlement, where appropriate community support can be generated.”<sup>17</sup>

Common experiences of alienation, discrimination, and marginalization have brought these refugees from all regions of Sudan, from various ethnic groups, and with often different circumstances within Sudan that forced their flight. They are a “miniature Sudan without all the war” as one eloquent refugee leader phrased it. Even the former Prime Minister of Sudan, Sadiq al-Mahdi, who first visited the demonstration in late November, commended the diverse Sudanese group for their unity and courage in the battle for their human rights.

#### **THE PROTEST AS A SOLUTION IN ITSELF**

Rumors and gossip have typically been the vehicle for refugees to oppose the existing order; this protest demonstrated that refugees can, and sometimes will take stronger action to express their frustration and discontent with a system they have no control over.<sup>18</sup> What triggered these refugees to take such drastic measures? Had their situation in Cairo become significantly worse? Research conducted during the demonstration and interviews with numerous refugees and protest leaders give some insight into what prompted their sit-in. An outsider could not enter the refugees’ sit-in

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<sup>17</sup> UNHCR (1997) ‘UNHCR Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees’, Geneva, 25 March, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Paldam, Astrid. “Narratives of Sudanese Refugees in Cairo,” unpublished mss. (2005), p. 60.



without having at least one very vocal refugee lecture him on refugees' rights, human rights, and even international refugee conventions. Many of these refugees knew their "rights" and vehemently demanded that UNHCR and international community fulfill their obligations immediately. This heightened awareness of their rights, however, had made them increasingly aware of their own helplessness. Their protest was originally a way to demand these rights, but had soon become an act of empowerment all its own. Their protest, for many, became their solution. They had created a miniature, self-governed refugee camp and in doing so had empowered themselves. While still having little say in their future, they now had some control of their present. This sense of control over their own lives in the company of fellow Sudanese with shared hardships is exactly the kind of situation many had hoped to achieve by being transferred to refugee camps.

Many of the refugees joined the protest because they had lost their jobs and could no longer pay their apartment's rent. Far more, however, faced with continual money problems and unscrupulous landlords, chose to leave the tiny apartments they shared with five to ten other people. They felt safer here and numerous refugees asserted that their conditions are far better here than they were in el-Maadi and Arba wa Nos neighborhoods. For all of these people, the garden had become home. They insisted it was far better than their previous accommodations in Cairo. It was emphasized numerous times at the demonstration that this situation (living at the park) was better than their living situations before. Comments like the following were common: "People here [refugees at the demonstration] have the same problems and they understand. We won't be murdered or beaten up in the streets when we are here together." Another elaborated: "All the people here are Sudanese and there are lots of police." Even those who still could remain in apartments chose to stay at the demonstration because they felt it was safer and there was "more protection." One man asserted that despite the cold weather, even the women and children were better off there because this is the only way they could be protected.

For women in particular, the demonstration provided an opportunity for many to develop friendships with other refugees and allowed their children a safe environment in which to play. For many, this was also the first time they learned about the services and resources available to them. The protest, while attempting to get UNHCR to improve

conditions, helped these women just by facilitating a sense of community and creating social networks that could be turned to for support.

Among those who had found employment in Egyptian households or factories, nearly all spoke of the harassment and ill treatment they encountered daily. They liked the demonstration because, as they no longer had to worry about paying rent, women could spend more time with their children, and could avoid the humiliation and treatment encountered in their workplaces. Police and employers are not the only groups these refugees fear. They also distrust Egypt's public health and medical services, fearing they will be killed for their organs or diagnosed improperly because, they assert, many Egyptians do not treat them like human beings.<sup>19</sup> At the demonstration, the refugees preferred to provide their own medical treatment. They bought their own medications and IVs and a Sudanese doctor came frequently to check on the group. Only when a person became very ill did they reluctantly go to the hospital.

What their original expectations were, it is hard to know for certain. But, almost three months into the demonstration, their hope for a "radical solution" had largely disappeared and, while always a welcomed dream, they knew it was not going to be realized. Regardless, their sit-in had answered many of the demands and problems that brought them together in the first place, and they were content and determined to stay because they considered their current situation better than other alternatives. The refugees at the protest had formed their own protected community. Their children played together, the women cooked and socialized. Full meals were cooked at the demonstration, some of the children were taught English and Arabic inside the garden in the afternoons. They brought in their own doctor and even their own artists to entertain and teach the children to paint. They did all of this without the assistance of UNHCR. The Washington Post and BBC referred to the demonstrators' park as a "refugee camp" or a "makeshift refugee camp". While such language was shunned by leading refugee advocates, it seems an apt description and certainly reflects the way the demonstrators came to perceive their own sit-in; the only difference being the level of autonomy attained at the Cairo encampment.

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<sup>19</sup> Ghazaleh, Pasquale. "In 'closed file' limbo: displaced Sudanese in a Cairo slum." *Forced Migration Review* (January 2003), <<http://www.fmreview.org/text/FMR/16/08.htm>>

### AN UNACCEPTABLE SOLUTION

UNHCR asserted numerous times over the course of the demonstration that it questioned whether the demonstrators were actual ‘refugees’. In a UNHCR Memorandum from 30/10/05 UNHCR stated that: “From the information available to UNHCR, two facts are clear. Firstly, the vast majority of the Sudanese demonstrators are southern Sudanese. Secondly, a great number of them are unsuccessful asylum-seekers (the so-called “closed files”) who are not of concern to UNHCR and new arrivals who have registered themselves as refugee applicants with the hope of immigration to America or Australia.”<sup>20</sup>

Seventy percent of the people interviewed in my November research had yellow or blue cards and thus were eligible for some form of protection from UNHCR. They most certainly constituted “people of concern” to the organization and their status entitled them to a number of healthcare and educational opportunities through UNHCR and its implementing partners. These people, technically under the protection of UNHCR, were in the majority at the demonstration as was further documented by the Egyptian government as it began releasing blue and yellow card holders following the initial detention of all refugees at the protest.

My research indicated that the 149 people surveyed were not predominantly Christian southern Sudanese with closed files. Rather, all dimensions of the Sudanese refugee community in Egypt were found at the demonstration. In addition to the diverse regions represented, the number of Muslims and Christians was almost equal.

Throughout the course of the demonstration, UNHCR’s hostile attitude toward the protestors was evident in each new memo it sent out or meeting it facilitated. Not only did UNHCR temporarily limit its operations and deny refugees’ access to its premises in response to the demonstration, early on UNHCR began requesting that the Egyptian government take action to end the protest. As early as 2001, Sperl’s recommendations for UNHCR included developing a “positive partnership with refugees” and engaging them directly “in the design and implementation of self-reliance programmes.”<sup>21</sup> This objective, however, had still not been achieved in 2005.

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<sup>20</sup> UNHCR Cairo. Memorandum on 30/10/05.

<sup>21</sup> Sperl, 5.

No one has denied that the plight facing refugees in Cairo is real and unacceptable, yet many responded to these refugee demonstrators as though they were being unreasonable. These refugees refused to be 'out of sight and out of mind' any longer. They wanted to be seen and heard so that they could have a say in the policies implemented to "help" them and finally begin to have their problems and needs adequately addressed.

### CONCLUSIONS

"If rural refugees were, in the 1970s, 'what the eye did not see,' today refugees in many African urban centers are what the eye 'refuses to see.'"<sup>22</sup> By late February, the last of the demonstrators still detained had been released. None have had their belongings returned to them, and they are once again spread out across the city. They grabbed the attention of the international media for a few days, but once again they have faded into the background of the bustling city. Many had been separated from their children, family, and friends when the demonstration was broken up. The majority had no apartments to return to and were once again released into a life of insecurity which they have little control over. Their shared "narrative of suffering" had brought them some solace and sense of community in the past, but after living in a real community for three months where their security and support were tangibly felt may make adjusting to their lives scattered throughout the city much tougher.

Their protest highlighted an important aspect of refugee life that needs to be acknowledged and fostered, yet is sadly being ignored. Refugees in Cairo face many difficulties, are in a new and unfamiliar environment, and are unhappy with their present options. They need a venue where they can feel safe and be surrounded by friends and others who can relate to their hardships, problems, and concerns. Such opportunities to come together are rare in Cairo. Refugees have few outlets to express their frustrations, seek solace among friends, and let their children run and play in safety. The demonstration fostered such a community and provided many services that up until now have largely been unavailable to Sudanese refugees dispersed across the city.

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<sup>22</sup> Kibreab, Gaim. "Eritrean and Ethiopian Urban Refugees in Khartoum: What the Eye Refuses to See," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (December 1996), p. 131.

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## APPENDIX 1

## Refugee Status

	Frequency	Percent
Blue Card	36	24.2
Yellow Card	64	43.0
Closed File	20	13.4
Appeal	2	1.3
None	23	15.4
Closed file, Yellow card	4	2.7
Total	149	100.0

## Ethnicity

	Frequency	Percent
Bargo	3	2.0
Bija	3	2.0
Bin Helba	2	1.3
Danagla	2	1.3
Dinka	23	15.4
Foulani	4	2.7
Fur	14	9.4
Kojulu	4	2.7
Latuka	7	4.7
Massalit	7	4.7
Nuba	25	16.8
Nuer	22	14.8
Shilluk	1	.7
Tama	2	1.3
Zagawa	4	2.7
other*	26	17.4
Total	149	100.0

## Marital Status \* Gender Crosstabulation

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Marital Status	Married	Count	36	43	79
		% within Marital Status	45.6%	54.4%	100.0%
		% within Gender	37.1%	82.7%	53.0%
		% of Total	24.2%	28.9%	53.0%
	Single	Count	58	4	62
		% within Marital Status	93.5%	6.5%	100.0%
		% within Gender	59.8%	7.7%	41.6%
		% of Total	38.9%	2.7%	41.6%
	Widowed	Count	3	5	8
		% within Marital Status	37.5%	62.5%	100.0%
		% within Gender	3.1%	9.6%	5.4%
		% of Total	2.0%	3.4%	5.4%
Total	Count	97	52	149	
	% within Marital Status	65.1%	34.9%	100.0%	
	% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	65.1%	34.9%	100.0%	

\*Other tribes include: Ashonee, Asholay, Bagara, Balenda, Bari, Bariya, Bidaria, Buy, Darhami, Habbania, Halowein, Ja'aliyya, Joayamo, Jemu'iya, Jur, Lakoya, Mahass, Mandari, Mellay, Moro, and Rizeigat.

## Years in Cairo \* Refugee Status Crosstabulation

			Refugee Status					Total	
			Blue Card	Yellow Card	Closed File	Appeal	None		Closed file, Yellow card
Years in Cairo	less than 6 months	Count		4				14	18
		% within Years in Cairo		22.2%				77.8%	100.0%
		% within Refugee Status		6.3%				60.9%	12.1%
		% of Total		2.7%				9.4%	12.1%
	6 months - < 3 years	Count	10	54	2		6	1	73
		% within Years in Cairo	13.7%	74.0%	2.7%		8.2%	1.4%	100.0%
		% within Refugee Status	27.0%	84.4%	10.0%		26.1%	25.0%	49.0%
		% of Total	6.7%	36.2%	1.3%		4.0%	7%	49.0%
	3 - < 6 years	Count	19	4	11	2	3	3	42
		% within Years in Cairo	45.2%	9.5%	26.2%	4.8%	7.1%	7.1%	100.0%
		% within Refugee Status	52.8%	6.3%	65.0%	100.0%	13.0%	75.0%	28.2%
		% of Total	12.8%	2.7%	7.4%	1.3%	2.0%	2.0%	28.2%
	6 - < 10 years	Count	3	1	7				11
		% within Years in Cairo	27.3%	9.1%	63.6%				100.0%
		% within Refugee Status	8.3%	1.6%	35.0%				7.4%
		% of Total	2.0%	.7%	4.7%				7.4%
	10+ years	Count	4	1					5
		% within Years in Cairo	80.0%	20.0%					100.0%
		% within Refugee Status	11.1%	1.6%					3.4%
		% of Total	2.7%	.7%					3.4%
Total	Count	36	64	20	2	23	4	149	
	% within Years in Cairo	24.2%	43.0%	13.4%	1.3%	15.4%	2.7%	100.0%	
	% within Refugee Status	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	24.2%	43.0%	13.4%	1.3%	15.4%	2.7%	100.0%	