

Trains on the Nile: On Track to Disaster
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LEAD-IN: Chugging along faulty infrastructure, and driven by corruption, Egypt’s railway system is on track to disaster, with 550 train accidents every year. Horrific deaths, public outrage, and politicians’ promises always follow. But the trains never change course—and it’s the poor who end up paying for a one-way ticket to death.

NATSOUND choo choo
MUSIC “Merizfon by Turku

The world’s second-oldest railway network, & the Middle East’s largest, is in Egypt, established in 1853.

MUSIC “Merzifon” by Turku

Egyptian National Railways were first built only to serve the commercial interests of the British Empire and the cotton trade in Egypt’s Nile Delta.

MUSIC “Merzifon” by Turku

But now, they transport 2.3 million passengers a day. But for most of Egypt’s train passengers—it’s a risky ride.

MUSIC “Merzifon” by Turku
NATSOUND train halting

Egypt’s Transportation Ministry reports a yearly average of 550 train wrecks on its railways. One of the most devastating was at a crossing in Upper Egypt last November, in which a speeding train crashed into a schoolbus, killing 50 children. American University in Cairo professor Pascale Ghazaleh reacts:

MUSIC
PASCALE: “My initial reaction I have to say was not an intellectual one, I reacted as a mother. Because one of the first details that I read apart from the numbers of children, and the way in which they died, and you know the ways in which their bodies were dragged across the tracks, and mangled...One of the first details I read after that was the fact that one of the parents, a father, had slapped his child to make them get on the bus on time. And, one of the mothers had, when she heard the news, had started, you know, had gone into hysterics, saying, “I didn’t give them breakfast before they left home.” So for me that was like, the killer.” (39secs)

Shortly afterward, the assistant professor of history co-wrote an article titled "The Politics of Trains." I asked her what compelled her to write about the accident in a political context. She told me that Egypt's fatally faulty trains are no accident and that little to no attention is paid because they mostly serve Egypt's neglected poor class. As a result, the poor are disproportionately killed in train wrecks.

PASCALÉ: "The people who take the trains are most likely to be people who are not, you know, among the country's ruling class. And the accidents happen to trains that are generally second or third-class trains. There has been a relationship with Upper Egypt and the Delta that goes back to the 19th century—a relationship of exploitation, extreme exploitation. Upper Egypt does not receive any investment, in terms of education, in terms of infrastructure, in terms of institutions. It used to be, sort of the granary, of the country, and the granary of the Ottoman Empire. And now you see the state, in which it finds itself: Illiteracy is rampant, poverty is rampant, and it's portrayed as this kind of political badlands where no one can go, because you know there's such a strong Islamist presence there... which, I'm not sure has been an accurate portrayal. Islamism and drugs, together, kind of make it seem like Upper Egypt is hopeless. So I think this is a very important aspect of the politics of this particular incident, that Upper Egypt has served as this kind of foil to the politics of Cairo, to the politics of the state, as a way of justifying, sort of, its own poverty, its own exploitation." (1min 27secs)

Amr Nasr El-Din is a PhD student and train lover who wrote a research paper on the history of Egypt's railways. While the government invested heavily during its first hundred years in order to facilitate freight or security transport, the emergence of airplanes and highways led to a drastic drop in funding, but not in passengers.

AMR "There was a rise of investment in highways, in airports...so other new local transportation means were being developed and were catching bigger investment sums from the available funds. Then came the 1967 war and there was total, sort of lack of investment for more than six years in railroads. And after that, things were not getting fine because, from even when things started getting better after the signing of the peace treaty, railroads were no more in sort of a dominating position among the various transportation methods in Egypt. And secondly, there was huge interest in developing roads, and local air transport, which really had its toll on investments allocated to railroads." (56 secs)

Amr says Egypt's government still values its trains, but only as a mode of transport for goods, not for people.

AMR "They value the importance of trains, yet unfortunately the way that they deal, you know like, it's as if you have a car, you know how important is it, but you don't really care of doing the maintenance, you're not really good at keeping with the schedule of the maintenance." (18 secs)

The Transport Ministry says that 5,500 kilometers of railway lines in Egypt are unsafe because they depend on mechanical signals. Many of them are so outdated that workers have to call each other or pass handwritten notes to operate crossings. Only 500 kilometers of Egypt's railway lines are considered safe because they depend on electronic signals. The ministry says to fix these problems, it needs around 500 million pounds—which it doesn't have.

AMR “I had an opportunity to visit the main maintenance facilities, they are in a place called El Farz, they are in the north of Cairo, and let me tell you that, even the first-class, luxurious trains, working on the Egyptian railroad network, leave the maintenance facility with faulty equipment. It's extremely normal that trains go with problems in the connections, problems in the brakes...and that happens on a daily basis.” (34 secs)

But if there isn't enough money for maintenance as the Ministry claims, then how and why was 170 million pounds spent redecorating the Ramses train station in Cairo, instead of on safety measures at crossings or on locomotives themselves?

Dr. Rashad al-Mitini resigned as transportation minister after the schoolbus-train wreck. Nearly six months and another high fatality crash later, he says that “of course” his resignation hasn't changed the disastrous course of Egypt's trains—the problems of mismanagement and corruption run deep.

RASHAD “Why there is problem in the railway? Bad management—even if we have the money. That's why I said it is not the money, the ability of the money is the reason.” (14 secs)

The misallocation of funds is visible, and it is jarring. Step out of the gleaming gold and marble Ramses station, and await on a platform the arrival of creaking, dusty, and rusty train carriages with no windows or air conditioning. These are not just ugly, old, or uncomfortable carriages—the transportation minister estimates that 85 percent of them are unsafe.

“Family business: which means that everybody in a place wants to have his sons, daughter, working in the same place. And actually, we have an agreement, an official agreement, that the sons and daughters of the working persons, they are having the priority to be hired in this. Even if they are not in the specialization which is needed. Like, if you are talking about the ENR, why should I need somebody studying sociology, as an example? Social studies. Philosophy...why should I hire somebody like this?” (48 secs)

But not only is nepotism and money management for maintenance a problem, so is human resources management. Many of the accidents are caused by small but costly mistakes by humans working for low pay and long hours under difficult conditions.

AMR: “When we should approach the idea of human capital, I think that we should focus about the conditions of the workers who are doing everything from A to Z. The workers

who are being blamed for every single accident. We should see how they are living. No one should come and tell me you know like, hey, no one wants to work in the Egyptian railroads. Excuse me, what is the Egyptian railroads offering its employees? These guys are working in terrible working conditions. How can I ask him to do better? So when we are talking about developing human capital, it's not only about developing the management, the skills of the upper echelons—it's more about creating a suitable working environment for the common workers.” (49 secs)

5000 Egyptian railway employees went on strike recently, halting services nationwide. The government's initial response was to threaten to prosecute the strikers. Later, it gave employees a 10 percent pay increase of only 20 to 70 pounds, but made no other changes.

For families of train wreck victims, this stagnant change is making it even harder for them to get over their grief, because resignations and compensation for their loved ones will never do.

PASCALÉ “So it's political in the sense that there's no consequences when something like this happens. It doesn't have consequences for the minister's career, it doesn't have consequences for the presidency, it doesn't have consequences for any of those high-ranking positions. And you think if it did, then these accidents wouldn't happen on such a regular basis, then some investment would be made in the infrastructure, then some attention would be paid to these things that have to do with people's lives and their basic rights.” (33 secs)

CREDITS:

Interviewees: Pascale Ghazaleh, Amr Nasr El-Din, Rashad El-Mitani

Music: Merzifon by Turku, instrumental Oud from SoundCloud, Fi'idaya Mazaneeh by Mohamed Mounir, Nasheeds from SoundCloud