



**THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO**  
**FORCED MIGRATION AND REFUGEE STUDIES (FMRS)**

**LIVELIHOOD AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS  
OF SOMALI REFUGEES IN CAIRO**

**MULKI AL-SHARMANI**

Working Paper No. 2  
JULY 2003

The Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program (FMRS) at the American University in Cairo (AUC) offers a multi-disciplinary graduate diploma. Central to the program is an effort to incorporate the experience of displacement and exile from the viewpoint of refugees and other forced migrants. FMRS supports teaching, research, and service activities that promote a growing appreciation of the social, economic, cultural and political relevance of forced migration to academics, the wide range of practitioners involved, and the general public. While maintaining a global and comparative perspective, FMRS focuses on the particular issues and circumstances facing African, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean peoples.

The Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Working Paper Series is a forum for sharing information and research on refugee and forced migration issues in Egypt and the Middle East at large. The Working Papers are available in hard copies as well as in electronic version from the FMRS website.

*Forced Migration and Refugee Studies (FMRS)  
The American University in Cairo  
113 Kasr El Aini Street, PO Box 2511  
Cairo 11511, Arab Republic of Egypt*

*Telephone: (202) 797-6626*

*Fax: (202) 797-6629*

*Email: [fms@aucegypt.edu](mailto:fms@aucegypt.edu)*

*Website: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/fms/>*

## **CONTENTS**

- I. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**
- II. DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**
- III. BACKGROUND OF THE HOST SOCIETY**
- IV. PROFILE OF THE SOMALI REFUGEES IN CAIRO**
- V. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**
- VI. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**
  - A. Selection of Interviewees and Field Sites**
  - B. Quantitative Data: Questionnaires**
  - C. Qualitative Data: Life Histories and In-Depth Interviews**
  - D. Research Assistants**
- VII. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS**
  - A. Demographic Profile of the Interviewees**
    - 1. Age Group and Marital Status
    - 2. Clan Affiliations
    - 3. Educational and Occupational Backgrounds
    - 4. Patterns of Flight and Displacement
    - 5. Residential Areas in Cairo
  - B. Socio-Economic Conditions and Livelihood Strategies**
    - 1. Legal Status: Needs and Strategies
    - 2. Economic Sustenance: Remittances, Aid Money, and Income-Generating Activities
    - 3. Housing and Household Types: Needs and Strategies
    - 4. Food and Other Expenditure Strategies
    - 5. Education Needs and Resources
    - 6. Health Needs and Resources
  - C. Community-Building and Livelihood Strategies**
  - D. Integration into Host Society**
- VIII. CONCLUSION**

## **APPENDIX**

## **REFERENCES**

## **I. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

This paper reports on the findings of an eight-month research project on the livelihood strategies and identity constructions of Somali refugees in Cairo. This project, which started on September 1, 2002 and ended on April 30, 2003, addressed the following questions: (1) What are the legal and socio-economic conditions under which Somali refugees live and strive to secure their livelihood? (2) What are the resources and the strategies that the refugees use in securing and enhancing their livelihood? (3) What kind of collective identity constructs do the Somali refugees negotiate and create in the daily process of securing their livelihood?

## II. DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

I will start with defining the key categories and concepts that are used in this project, namely, 'livelihood,' 'refugee,' and 'identity.' First, I define 'livelihood' as legal, economic, educational, and social capital that refugees strive to secure and maximize in order to get by in Cairo and plan ahead for their future. I adopt the approach in the literature on refugee studies that views the livelihood of refugees as an integral part of a larger and complex process of integration into the host society (Kulman 1991, Harrell-Bond 1986, Kok 1989, Kunz 1981). 'Integration,' however, is a concept that has been used in various and sometimes inconsistent ways, whether by scholars, NGOs or government institutions working with refugees. For example, Kibreab (1989) argues that the distinction between 'local settlement' and 'integration' is often overlooked and the two terms are used interchangeably. Kibreab points out that integration is the "economic, social, and cultural process by which the refugees become members of the host society on a permanent basis" (p. 469). Local settlement, however, is a situation in which the refugees may be settled in a host society, but they are isolated spatially and marginalized economically and legally. Other scholars have also called for a conceptualization of political conflicts among refugee groups and different member groups of host societies (Harrell-Bond 1986, Kulman 1991). Frechette (1994) stresses the importance of viewing integration as a continuum, as a process of varying degrees and forms of "acceptance, participation, and change" in which both the refugees and host society are involved. It is not the purpose of this paper to take a position in the debate about the most accurate and helpful definitions of integration. However, what I have borrowed from these different conceptualizations of integration is the concept of integration as a larger and multi-layered framework within which to analyze the livelihood of a particular group of refugees. That is, by linking livelihood to integration, I am able to examine and analyze the daily strategies used by Somali refugees for survival and living a more secure legal, economic and social life as a part of a larger and on-going process that brings the refugees either closer to or further from the elusive goal of acceptance and participation in host societies.

Second, I use the term 'Somali refugee' to refer to all Somalis who identify themselves as people who had to flee their homeland because they could not find security and stability since the Civil War in 1991. The refugees interviewed for the purposes of this project include not only those legally recognized as such by the UNHCR, but also asylum seekers, rejected applicants, those whose files have been closed, and some who have not gone through the process of applying to the UNHCR for asylum.

I adopt the theoretical approach that conceptualizes refugees and "refugeeness" as a complex and dynamic "process of becoming... a gradual transformation, not an automatic result of the crossing of a national border" (Malkki 1995: 114). This means that being a refugee is not a unilateral, unidirectional identity construct that emerges from one or several experiences of violence, war, persecution and displacement from the homeland. I view it rather as evolving experiences, processes, relationships, and networks. Moreover, I have approached and studied the interviewees in this project not as passive and vulnerable individuals or groups, but as active individuals and groups who, precisely because of their vulnerability, are constantly planning and working on bettering circumstances and possibilities for themselves and their families and communities. This action-oriented view of refugees is not an ideological position, but a more realistic and helpful theoretical approach that has enabled me as a researcher to understand better the strategies, resources, and limitations of these people as they engage in the daily process of securing livelihood.

Third, I argue that in an urban setting and in host societies where refugees are not desired to be 'visible' and are seen as a temporary problem to be resolved, the process of securing livelihood may

be intertwined with those of community-building and construction of different collective identities. One important part of the focus of this study was to examine the ways the refugees made use of and transformed traditional Somali collective identity constructs such as clan affiliation and Somali nationalism, as well as the ways they created new and significant identity constructs based on membership in refugee communities in previous host societies or sharing neighborhoods in Cairo. The question of identity was significant precisely because it was part and parcel of individual and collective efforts to secure livelihood and maximize resources.

### III. BACKGROUND OF THE HOST SOCIETY

Throughout its history, Cairo has hosted many foreigners and refugees. In the first half of the twentieth century the refugee population in Cairo consisted of Armenians, Palestinians, and Sudanese. Many of the Armenians have moved since then to other countries. More Palestinians and Sudanese have moved to Cairo in the second half of the century. In the last two decades, the refugee population has widened to include sizeable numbers of refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia as well as more Sudanese.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being one of the drafting members, Egypt is a party to 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Egypt is also a party to the 1967 Protocol and the OAU Convention of 1969. This entails an obligation on the part of the Egyptian government to offer asylum and resettlement to refugees who have fled to Egypt from their homelands. However, by placing reservations on four of the articles in the 1951 Convention, Egypt has withdrawn from the refugees in its territory significant rights, namely the rights to employment, permanent residence, and access to state education. Moreover, the government of Egypt has obligated the UNHCR office in the country to handle the process of accepting or rejecting applicants for refugee status. Moreover, those refugees who are recognized often face continuing hardship and economic problems since they are not allowed to work and they receive very little or no financial assistance or educational grants from the UNHCR office.

In short, life for many of the refugee population offers very few or no legal rights and extreme economic hardship. This is particularly true of African refugee populations whose cultures and languages are noticeable different from that of the host society.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of refugee groups in Cairo. I am only citing those with large numbers of people.

#### IV. PROFILE OF THE SOMALI REFUGEES IN CAIRO

In January 1991, the despotic and corrupt regime of the late President Mohamed Siyaad Barre was overthrown in Somalia by a coalition of clan-based opposition movements. After the fall of Barre's government, a violent power struggle erupted among the various opposition movements. Thousands of Somalis were killed in the civil war. Many more perished in the war-induced famine. Many had to flee the country to Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa, the Middle East, North America, Europe, and Australia. Since large numbers of Somalis who fled their homeland are now dispersed in different parts of the world, in a real sense there is a 'Somali diaspora.' Close to 100,000 Somalis have moved to Europe since the advent of the civil war. Fifty thousand Somalis have settled in the United States since 1990, and in Canada the number is 70,000. In the Middle East (mostly Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Egypt), the number of Somali refugees is close to 75,000 (Montclos 2000).

In Cairo, according to the UNHCR Cairo Office Operations Situation Report of March 2003, there are currently 1832 recognized Somali refugees, 952 rejected applicants, and 1,544 asylum-seekers whose cases have not yet been decided. Prior to the 1991 Civil War, the Somalis residing in Cairo were of three main groups: 1) diplomats and their families, 2) university students who were recipients of scholarships either from the former Somali government or the Egyptian government within the bilateral educational relations between the two countries, and 3) female-headed families who came to Egypt for the education of their children while the husbands were working in the Gulf area and sending income to their families in Cairo. The onset of the Civil War resulted in a large number of Somalis coming to Cairo. For the first half-decade after the onset of war, Somali refugees were mostly of urban background, had college degrees, and had previously held professional or administrative jobs in the homeland or in Gulf countries. They fled the country via Kenya or the Gulf region without spending more than few days or weeks in the transit areas (Al-Sharmani 1998). In addition, some of the male refugees already had wives and children who were living in Cairo when the war broke out. Over the past five years, the profile of the Somali refugee population has changed. Many of the refugees who are currently living in the city have been here for five years or less. Moreover, they are of different socioeconomic background and experienced different patterns of flight from many of those who moved to Cairo immediately after the Civil War broke out or those who were living in the city prior to the war (a large number of both groups have since resettled in the West). The current groups are a more heterogeneous mix of Somalis of rural and urban background. They also have much less education. Furthermore, the patterns of flight of the current refugee groups are very different in that a considerable number of them lived for some time in other host societies, specifically Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Yemen.



## V. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Kibreab (1996) poignantly describes refugees in urban African countries as “What the eye refuses to see.” Most African countries that are host to large numbers of refugees purposefully isolate refugee populations or keep them in highly precarious legal and economic conditions so that the refugees feel vulnerable and adopt invisibility as a survival mechanism. Moreover, refugee populations in such host societies are forced by government policies to depend on aid organizations for sustenance. This state of affairs benefits host governments economically and often politically, but increases the vulnerability of the refugees. This situation is true of urban refugees in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt.

Yet the very large number of these culturally and ethnically diverse urban refugees, their livelihood strategies, and the dynamics of their relationships with host societies and aid organizations make them ever more visible and significant groups to be researched, for several reasons. First, this kind of research allows us to reexamine the notion of nation-states and territorial borders through the context of mobile refugee groups in corrupt nation-states struggling to hold on to power over their own populations, who often use refugees as a tool of political pressure. Second, African and Middle Eastern countries, as host societies for diverse ethnic and cultural refugee populations, offer unique contexts to examine the notions of integration and the different meanings of cultural and ethnic homogeneity and heterogeneity, since the language of collective identities in such contexts make claims to African identities, Arab nationalism (with all its contradictions), and Muslim and non-Muslim identities. Third, many of the refugee groups in African and Middle Eastern countries have strong links with families and fellow community members who have settled in Western countries. Hence, the study of lives and experiences of refugee groups in Africa and the Middle East can provide an interesting perspective on different inter-connected transnational refugee communities and how they fit into various nation-states.

Studying the livelihood strategies of Somali refugees in Cairo provides a good context for examining such issues. Somali refugees are the second largest African refugee population in Cairo. They are part of well-connected transnational communities of Somali refugees who have settled in various Western countries since the Civil War. Many scholars of Somalia have displayed Somali society as homogeneous, sharing one culture, religion (Islam), and language, but plagued by a divisive kinship system and dysfunctional corrupt state (Lewis 1994, Samatar and Laitin 1987, Samatar 1997). Other scholars have challenged this notion of homogeneity and focused on highlighting the regional, racial, and economic hierarchies on which the society is based (Mukhtar 1995, Kusow 1995, Besteman 1999). There is consensus among those scholars, however, that Islam has historically been one of the main foundations of national identity. In fact, Cassanelli (1982) stresses that “if today one can almost automatically say that to be a Somali is to be a Muslim, historically it can be said that to accept Islam was to accept membership in a larger Somali nation.” (p. 129). Yet Somali refugees in Cairo find that Muslim identity is differentiated in an Arab Muslim setting where the non-Arab ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the Somalis set them apart, very distinctly, from the Egyptians and place them in an inferior status. Thus a study of the Somali refugees provides a good context for examining the issues of integration and cultural difference within the context of Egyptian and Arab nationalism. Moreover, the Somalis in Cairo are a good example of urban refugees as the invisible lot or, in Kibreab’s words, “what the eye refuses to see.” This is the case not only because of the Egyptian government’s policies towards refugees in general, but also because unlike the case with other large refugee populations such as Palestinians and Sudanese, there has been relatively little awareness of Somali refugees among aid organizations and scholars. The literature about Somalis in diaspora, while scarce and very recent, has mostly focused on their experiences in the West (Al-Sharmani 2000, Berns McGown 1999, Budiani 2000, Kroner 2000, Kusow 1998, Mohamed 2001,

Tiilikainen 2001). There have been very few studies, in fact, about the Somali refugees in Cairo (Al-Sharmani 1998, Budiani 2002, Kroner 2002). Yet despite the relative invisibility of Somali refugees in Cairo, they constitute a sizeable group who congregate and live together in particular neighborhoods in Cairo and depend on themselves as a community for survival and livelihood.

## **VI. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **A. Selection of Interviewees and Field Sites**

With a team of four Somali research assistants (three male and one female), I conducted an eight-month study on the livelihood strategies and identity constructions of Somali refugees in Cairo. Both quantitative and qualitative methods (questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and life histories) were used to collect the data. The research assistants and I administered a questionnaire (See Appendix I) to a total of 300 Somali refugees of different age groups, sex, clan affiliation, patterns of flight and displacement, and legal status. The interviewees were chosen from the two main neighborhoods in Cairo where the largest number of Somali refugees in Cairo reside, Ard il Liwa and Nasr City. Two research assistants were assigned to work in each neighborhood. The selection of these two neighborhoods is also significant in that they are populated by Somalis who experienced different patterns of flight and displacement. For example, most of the Somalis who fled from the homeland via Libya and lived there for a while have now settled in Ard il Liwa close to friends and acquaintances they met in the previous host society. On the other hand, many of the refugees who had lived in Saudi Arabia settled in Nasr City. Yet both neighborhoods are also populated by those refugees who came directly from Somalia or from host societies other than Libya and Saudi Arabia.

The unit of analysis is the individual. The questionnaires, life histories, and in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals. In addition to the variables mentioned above in the selection of interviewees (age group, sex, clan affiliation, neighborhood, legal status, flight patterns), they were also selected on the basis of the different kinds of refugee households they lived in, i.e., households with a single family unit, or more than one family unit, or households with a family unit and single men or women, etc. Although the questionnaires and main interviews were conducted with specific selected individuals, insofar as the livelihood strategies of the interviewees involved joint decision-making or efforts with other members of their household, supplementary interviews were conducted with those members.

### **B. Quantitative Data: Questionnaires**

The aims of the questionnaire as a research tool were: 1) to obtain data on demographic information about the interviewees in terms of age group, clan affiliation, marital status, and occupational and educational background; 2) to identify the legal, economic, educational, health, and social needs of the refugees; 3) to identify the strategies that the interviewees use to secure legal, economic, and social capital for the purposes of their livelihood; 4) to determine the extent to which Somali refugees interact with Egyptians and participate in the host society; and 5) to determine if there are collective and community-building efforts in which the interviewees engage for the purposes of securing livelihood.

The fieldwork started on September 1, 2002 and was completed on April 30, 2003. Throughout the month of August 2002, preceding the fieldwork, I held three training sessions a week with the four research assistants. I explained the focus of the research project and the data collection methods to be used. I had discussions with the assistants about the different items in the questionnaire and worked with them on translating it into Somali. I trained the interviewers on how to select interviewees, administer the questionnaires, and write interview reports. We agreed that the most comfortable and effective way to administer the questionnaire was to have the research assistants or myself read or rephrase the questionnaires to the interviewees and write down their answers instead of asking the interviewee to complete the questionnaire on his or her own. This is because most of

the refugees were not comfortable with the idea of writing down information about themselves (although the questionnaires were anonymous). Also, some of the refugees were illiterate, and the idea of a research assistant or me reading the questions to the interviewee allowed the two parties to have a relaxed and informal discussion where the interviewee could talk more easily, pause, and ask questions. Prior to administering questionnaires, the assistants or I explained to the interviewees the focus of the research project, the nature and goal of the funding institution, and how the findings were expected to be used. Each research assistant administered 2-3 questionnaires a week. All the questionnaires were administered in the interviewees' apartments so that the interviewer would have a chance to observe the apartment and meet other members of the household. By the end of the eight-month period, the research assistants had administered a total of 270 questionnaires. I administered 30 additional questionnaires (300 interviewees in all). Throughout the period of the fieldwork, I had a weekly meeting with the research assistants. During these meetings, the research assistants presented the questionnaires they administered with the written answers and a report on each individual case with more detailed information. Each one of the research team kept weekly and monthly logs in which the gender, clan affiliation, residential area, previous host society, legal status, and marital status of each of the interviewees were entered. In our weekly meetings and at the end of each month, we went through our logs to check that our selection of interviewees and informants was not skewed and was as representative as possible.

A fifth (non-Somali) research assistant tabulated the data collected from the questionnaires using the SPSS program and a code-sheet prepared by myself. The code-sheet was revised a couple of times until the entry categories were made as comprehensive as possible.

### **C. Qualitative Data: Life Histories and In-Depth Interviews**

In addition to administering questionnaires, I conducted in-depth interviews and recorded the life histories of thirty informants. There were two purposes for these interviews: 1) to outline the history of interviewees' processes of securing livelihood back in the homeland, in previous host societies, and currently in Cairo, and to identify the links among such processes and their transformations; 2) to trace identity constructs and narratives that the informants claimed back at home and in previous host societies, and how they were redefined in the current host society.

In the selection of informants for the in-depth interviews, I made use of the same variables that were used in the selection of the questionnaire sample. I also used different identity constructs that the refugees claimed as another variable in the selection of the informants. That is, I chose informants who make use of different identity-based strategies of securing livelihood. For example, some informants primarily identify with their clans and used their clan members for livelihood, some identify with a larger community of refugees that they lived with in previous host societies such as Libya or Saudi Arabia, and others have a strong sense of Somali community and secure livelihood for themselves and others through community-building efforts. One forum through which the informants used community-based strategies and resources was the Somali Refugee Committee of Egypt (SRCOE). The SRCOE is a committee of refugees that was established in June 2001. They are seventeen male and female members from different Somali clans and residential areas and are supported by a group of different clan elders in Cairo.<sup>2</sup> The SRCOE has been working on

---

<sup>2</sup>. Since April 2003, many of the members of SRCOE left for Western countries. Since September 2003 and particularly after a series of demonstrations by the refugees in front of the UNHCR, there have been several uncoordinated efforts to establish a Somali community. These efforts have resulted in establishing several small groups of people who identify themselves as Somali community members and communicate with the UNHCR on behalf of other refugees. Still these groups are not very well-coordinated.

establishing community-based educational projects for Somali refugee children and adults. They are currently running a home-schooling project for fifty children and language classes for adults.

The in-depth interviews usually lasted four to five hours and were conducted in one or two visits to the interviewee's household. In addition to these in-depth interviews and recording life histories, I made use of participant observation by taking part in SRCOE meetings, religious and cultural gatherings held by Somali women, and social occasions such as weddings, funerals, and visiting the sick. I also interviewed one UNHCR protection officer and talked to various legal, educational, and health service providers that deal with Somali refugees.

#### **D. Research Assistants**

The research assistants administrated the questionnaires to interviewees who lived in their same neighborhoods. The research assistants were hired according to the following criteria: (1) they were reputable and had good relationships with a wide range of Somali refugees in their neighborhoods, (2) they had high school degrees and spoke and wrote Somali and Arabic/English, (3) they exhibited a good understanding of the focus of the research project and the data-collection methods to be used in the month of training that preceded the fieldwork.

## VII. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

### A. Demographic Profile of the Interviewees

#### 1. Age Group and Marital Status

The majority of the interviewees are young (between 20 and 40 years old). Less than 2% were above the age of 50 (Table 1). The interviewees are almost equally divided between male and female, with slightly more females (Table 2). The majority arrived in Cairo in 2001 (53%) and very few (less than 2%) arrived before 1999 (Table 3). Half of the interviewees are married with their spouses living with them in Cairo or living separately in another country. Thirty-nine of the interviewees are single and a minority were divorced or widowed (Table 4). Those who are or had been married have a total number of 294 children with most of the children between the ages of five and 18 or under 10.

**Table 1:**

**Age of Interviewees**

	Number	Percent
15-19	16	5.3
20-24	69	23.0
25-29	65	21.7
30-34	67	22.3
35-39	41	13.7
40-44	19	6.3
45-49	13	4.3
50-54	5	1.7
55-59	2	.7
60-64	3	1.0
Total	300	100.0

**Table 2:**

**Gender**

	Number	Percent
1	138	46.0
2	162	54.0
Total	300	100.0

1: Male 2: Female

**Table 3:**

**Date of Arrival in Cairo**

	Number	Percent
Before 1999	4	1.3
1999	16	5.3
2000	45	15.0
2001	160	53.3
2002	75	25.0
Total	300	100.0

**Table 4:****Marital Status of Interviewees**

	Number	Percent
Single	117	39.0
Married (Both Spouses in Cairo)	30	10.0
Married (Living Separately)	120	40.0
Divorced	23	7.7
Widowed	10	3.3
Total	300	100.0

## 2. Clan Affiliations

The clan composition of the interviewees reflects a variety of clan affiliations with sizeable numbers of majority and minority clans. It is to be noted that Somali society is divided into four major clan families: Darood, Hawiye, Dir, and Isaaq. Rahanweyn, a clan family which is large in number, has been considered in the literature as a minority clan due to the political and economic marginalization that the clan members faced under the Barre regime, as well as the atrocities they suffered during the Civil War. Because of the numerical size of the Rahanweyn clan in Somalia and in Cairo, I listed it as an entry on its own, separate from the category of 'other' that includes all other minority clans (see Table 5).

**Table 5:****Clan Affiliations of Interviewees**

	Number	Percent
Darood	83	27.7
Hawiye	108	36.0
Isaaq	14	4.7
Dir	16	5.3
Rahanweyn	36	12.0
Other	43	14.3
Total	300	100.0

### 3. Educational and Occupational Backgrounds

A minority of 3% of the interviewees are holders of university degrees. A third were graduates of high school; 22% finished Grade 8 in junior high school; and 15% had attended literacy classes (Table 6. Note that literacy classes are listed as language classes in the table since this is the term used for them in the homeland). Eleven percent of the interviewees had attended Qur’anic school only, and 7% received no education at all. There is not a big gap between the numbers of men and women who had high school degrees (51 to 39). However, there were a lot more women than men who had received no education at all (19 to 3) as well as many more women than men who only received Qur’anic education (25 to 8).

Over half of the interviewees did not have any previous work experience; 17% worked as street vendors; 11% worked as professionals such as teachers or nurses; and less than 5% worked as skilled vocational workers or drivers (Table 7).

More women than men worked in petty sales (30 to 22). Relatively more men than women held professional jobs (20 to 13). There was a significant gap, however, between the numbers of women and men who had no previous work experience (104 to 67).

**Table 6:**

**Educational Backgrounds of Interviewees**

	Number	Percent
University Graduate	9	3.0
Dropped out of University	1	.3
High School Graduate	90	30.0
High School Dropout	28	9.3
Finished Grade 8	67	22.3
Finished Primary School	47	15.7
Took Language Classes Only	3	1.0
Went to Quranic School	33	11.0
No Education	22	7.3
Total	300	100.0

**Table 7:**



**Work in Homeland or Previous Host Society**

	Number	Percent
Have not worked	171	57.0
Government Employee	7	2.3
Professional	33	11.0
Skilled Vocational Worker	14	4.7
Drivers	11	3.7
Petty Sales	52	17.3
Housekeeping and Child Care	10	3.3
Farmer	2	.7
Total	300	100.0

**4. Patterns of Flight and Displacement**

A little over than half of the interviewees (166) did not live in any other host society prior to moving to Cairo. These refugees flew to Cairo and entered the country with an entry visa purchased with the help of a family member, clan member, or a friend who was already living in Egypt. In some cases, the interviewees obtained entry visas as the spouses, parents, children, or siblings, of a real family member or a friend residing legally in Cairo. The other half of the interviewees lived in one or two African and/or Middle Eastern countries before their arrival to Egypt. Fifteen percent of those who lived in a previous host society resided in Kenya, 9% in Saudi Arabia, 5% in Libya, and 8% in more than one host society (mostly Libya and Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, or all three). Many of the interviewees had family members still living in previous host societies as well as other family members living in the West and the homeland. Some of the interviewees who previously lived in Libya came to Cairo by bus. Those who had lived in Yemen or Saudi Arabia went back to Somalia either by plane or boat and flew to Cairo from the homeland with legal entry visas.

**5. Residential Areas in Cairo**

132 people were interviewed from Ard il Liwa and its vicinity, i.e., Sahafiyeen and Agouza. A slightly larger number of people (168) were interviewed in Nasr City and its vicinity (e.g., Masr El Gedida). The number of interviewees from Nasr City is larger since it is a bigger neighborhood with more Somali refugees than Ard il Liwa.

**B. Socio-Economic Conditions and Livelihood Strategies****1. Legal Status: Needs and Strategies**

A third of the interviewees (107 people) were asylum-seekers who were still in the process of applying for refugee status. Another third (106) were rejected by UNHCR for refugee status, 9 people had their files closed, 72 people were recognized refugees, one person withdrew from the application process and five people decided not to apply for refugee status. The 300 interviewees were almost equally divided among those who had legal residence in Cairo and those who were living in the country without residence (152 and 147 people respectively). The recognized refugees obtained residence through the UNHCR. Others, who were not recognized refugees but had residence, obtained it through one of the three following ways: 1) some enrolled themselves or their

children in Al-Azhar school or private Egyptian schools and were able to obtain residence through school enrollment, 2) some purchased it from Somali and Egyptian middle men for \$200, and 3) a lot fewer people obtained residence through their spouses or parents who were already legal residents in Egypt. It is important to note that over the past year the Department of Immigration and Residence at the 'Mujama' had continually denied residence to Somali refugees who applied for it through school enrollment. Moreover, over the past six months the Egyptian government has been very strict and vigilant about making decisions regarding applications for residence that are filed by Somali refugees. This has greatly reduced the number of people who were able to purchase residence from middlemen. Also, since January 2003 the government stopped issuing entry visas to Somali applicants, which consequently affected the number of refugees entering the country by air.

Those who have legal residence through venues other than the UNHCR often confront the problem of not being able to renew their residence status. This is particularly true of those who purchased it. Also, the refugees who obtain residence through the UNHCR complain of the long time it takes to renew their residence. Moreover, the recent practice of voiding the passports of recognized refugees and stamping residence on UNHCR cards made many refugees feel more vulnerable since the voided passports lessen their chances of pursuing resettlement with their own means, especially since many of them are denied resettlement by the UNHCR.

It can be said that both the unrecognized and recognized refugees suffer varying degrees of legal instability. In fact, over the period of the eight months of the fieldwork, there were three occasions when Somali refugees were arrested and detained by Egyptian police because of the issue of residence. While the majority of the detainees were not recognized refugees and/or did not have legal residence, there were some who were recognized refugees. Thus even the UNHCR card does not necessarily guarantee its Somali holder protection from police harassment and detention. To overcome this vulnerability, Somali refugees resort to several strategies. In addition to the obvious one of obtaining legal residence, some refugees attempt to obtain student IDs either by actually enrolling in educational institutions if they can, or obtaining semi-official student IDs from the Somali Association for University Students. While talking to Ahmed, a twenty-seven year old who had been rejected by the UNHCR for refugee status, he showed me his recently acquired student ID from an Al-Azhar school and said, "It makes me feel a little bit more secure. Last Friday, I showed it to a police officer that stopped me in the street. He let me go. You know police officers pay more attention to student IDs than to UNHCR cards. They don't care about UNHCR cards."<sup>3</sup> Also some refugees take Arabic classes and work on improving their Egyptian Arabic so that they appear "less foreign" in public spaces by talking Egyptian Arabic. For example, last spring, on his way back from an English class for Somali refugees at AUC, Soliman, a thirty-year old asylum-seeker, was picked up by a police officer and detained for a couple of days. A few days after Soliman's release and during a gathering with other Somalis in Ard il Liwa, Soliman's roommates scolded him for not bothering to learn Arabic. Osman, one of his roommates, said, "If Soliman spoke Arabic and was able to talk to the police officers, maybe they would have let him go. He could not talk to them at all because he did not know Arabic. That made problems for him. He showed that he was a refugee who just arrived in Cairo and had no legal papers."

Another common strategy for avoiding police detention, which is sometimes self-defeating, is confining oneself to the areas where other Somalis congregate such as particular coffee shops in Ard il Liwa and Nasr City where men usually spend time together. However, during police raids these coffee shops are precisely the places that police officers target since they are known by Egyptians in the neighborhood and the police as places where "black foreigners" gather (these words were used

---

<sup>3</sup> The names of all the refugees quoted in this report have been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

by an Egyptian neighbor in Dokki in an exchange with a police officer, as overheard by a research assistant during one of these raids).

## 2. Economic Sustenance: Remittances, Aid Money, and Income-Generating Activities

### ***Remittances:***

Having no employment rights is the main problem that both the recognized and unrecognized Somali refugees suffer from. This means that they are unable to work and provide for themselves legally. Hence many refugees have to depend on family members living elsewhere for financial support. Of the interviewees, 264 receive monthly remittances from family members living in the West. Of those, 138 people receive between \$50-100 a month. The rest receive more than \$100 with 41 people receiving between \$151-200 (Table 8). The majority of the remittances come from family members in the USA and Europe (31% and 35% respectively), whereas 10% of the remittance money is sent from Saudi Arabia (Table 9). Remittances are received through a Somali-based transfer system called 'hawala.' There are several Somali-based 'hawala' businesses in Cairo as well as in many other host societies where Somali refugees live. They are run by a group of male and female refugees known in every neighborhood. These Somali-run 'hawala' systems charge much less than Western Unions and banks (\$5 for every \$100), and deliver the money quickly. The family member who is sending the money gives to the representative of a particular 'hawala' system in that city the amount of money to be remitted, the charge fee, and the name and phone number of the family relative in Cairo. The business representative calls his colleagues in Cairo and asks them to call the family relative to whom the money has been sent and deliver the amount. It usually takes a couple of days after the money has been remitted for the refugee to collect it.

Almost all of the interviewees said that they spend all the remittance money on living costs in Cairo. Such costs included rent, utilities, food expenses, health and education services, and donations for community charity work.

**Table 8:**

**Remittance from Abroad**

	Number	Percent
None	36	12.0
\$50-100	138	46.0
\$101-150	27	9.0
\$151-200	41	13.7
\$201-250	12	4.0
\$251-300	27	9.0
\$301-350	5	1.7
\$351-400	11	3.7
\$401-450	1	.3
501+	2	.7
Total	300	100.0

**Table 9:****Countries from which Family Members send Remittance**

	Number	Percent
USA	93	31.0
Canada	7	2.3
Australia	8	2.7
European Countries	107	35.7
Saudi Arabia	30	10.0
Libya	3	1.0
Somalia	8	2.7
Other	7	2.3
More than one	1	.3
Not Applicable	36	12.0
Total	300	100.0

***Financial Assistance from UNHCR:***

Of the seventy-two recognized refugees who were interviewed for this project, only 46 people receive financial assistance from the UNHCR. The financial assistance received by these interviewees ranges between L.E. 200 and L.E. 450. Of these 46 interviewees, only 16 people receive this assistance regularly (that is, every month), 11 people receive it irregularly (sometimes every two or four months) and 19 people stopped receiving financial assistance altogether because of recent UNHCR decisions to suspend financial assistance in the cases of single refugees and female refugees who were reunited with their husbands.

***Income-Generating Activities:***

Although the majority of the refugees receive remittances every month (82%), it is not sufficient for their sustenance. Hence, some of the refugees engage in income-generating activities that are mostly carried out within the Somali refugee community. Sixty people out of our sample carry out income-generating activities. Eight people sell Somali clothes, incense, and food to other Somali refugees. Twenty-three people do housekeeping and childcare, mostly for Somali families who moved from Western countries (4 out of 23 were employed by Egyptian families); 18 people teach Qur'an and Arabic or English to Somali refugee children and adults; 11 people engage in selling entry visas to other Somalis; and one person works in real estate, that is, finding apartments for Somali refugees. Sales business and housekeeping and childcare are exclusively done by female refugees. The teaching jobs are exclusively done by male refugees. Both male and female refugees engaged in selling entry visas and the real estate work was done by a male. It is important to note that selling entry visas was a highly irregular source of income. In fact, the interviewees who engaged in this kind of work were able to do so successfully once, twice, or at the utmost three times. At each time, the person was able to sell one entry visa for \$250. Other kinds of income-generating activities are done more regularly with money earned every month. Maids and nannies made \$100 a month; teachers earned \$50 a month; small sales business owners made between \$50-100; and the real estate agent made between \$50-100 a month. Only refugees selling entry visas and maids and nannies working for Somali families (who were citizens of Western countries and had recently moved to Cairo) are paid in US dollars. The rest earn their incomes in Egyptian pounds. The exchange rate of L.E 5 to \$1 was used to calculate their incomes (Table 10).

Maids and nannies that work for Egyptian and Somali families have different attitudes towards their employers. Most of the female refugees who do this kind of work prefer to work for Somali employers since they pay in dollars, offer accommodation, and in very few cases even manage to get

residence for their employees. However, others, particularly those who are married, prefer to work for Egyptian families because they do not have to spend the night and can go back home to their children. Some of these women also do not want to work for Somali families because they said it would hurt their pride. Asha, a mother of seven, said, “I work for Egyptians although I make less money. It is true I got worried when my employers asked about my passport and residence. I showed them an appointment slip from the UNHCR. That was many months ago. They don’t know I got rejected. But I still can’t work for Somalis. It will hurt my family, our pride. I don’t want some day a Somali woman to put down my daughter and tell her your mother used to work for me.”

**Table 10:**

**Amount of Income Earned from Activities in Cairo**

	Number	Percent
None	238	79.3
\$20-49	10	3.3
\$50-100	32	10.7
\$101-150	6	2.0
\$152-200	3	1.0
\$201-250	3	1.0
\$251-300	4	1.3
\$351-400	1	.3
\$450+	1	.3
In Kind	2	.7
Total	300	100.0

### 3. Housing and Household Types: Needs and Strategies

Since the majority of Somali refugees live in rented furnished apartments, rent is the largest item of their monthly expenditure. Sixty-one percent of the interviewees live in apartments with a total rent of between L.E. 400-600. Another 12.7% live in apartments rented for L.E 601-700 (Table 11). Moreover, many refugees are forced to move several times (52% of the interviewees moved between 1-2 times and 16% of the interviewees moved 3 times). The frequent movement of the refugees is caused by high rents and problems with landlords who are often unhappy with the large size of Somali refugee households. For example, Maimun, a mother of five, had to move three times. Her former landlord evicted her from the apartment without giving her enough time to look for another apartment. The landlord complained that her children were too noisy. He could not understand that she had to share the place with a friend and her three children. She, her friend, and their children had to leave the place in less than a week. Maimun says, “It was very hard. I had to stay with a relative and her children until I could find another apartment. My friend also had to find someone else to stay with. These Egyptian landlords take our money, but treat us badly because we are foreigners and refugees.”

Yet, new and creative housing arrangements are a deliberate strategy used by many refugees to be able to find shelter and sustain oneself and family. Refugees live in a variety of households: 1) households with one family unit, 2) households with more than one family unit, 3) households with a family unit and single men, 4) households with a family unit and single women, 5) households with a family unit and both single men and single women, and 6) households with single men and women (Table 12). The family unit is defined in this case as: parents and children, grandparents or children,

siblings, or cousins, who are all depending on the same source of income. A household is defined as a group of people living together, sharing rent, utilities, and food expenses. For better sustenance and less expenditure, many of the households are shared by a large number of people. Seventy-one percent of the households are shared by 5-10 or more people. Apartments are crammed and too small for the large number of people living in them. Sixty-five percent of the households shared apartments that had two bedrooms only. Fifty-four percent of the interviewees paid between L.E. 50-200 as their share of the rent. Slightly over 10% did not pay anything because they either lived with friends or distant relatives and helped out with housework and cooking in exchange for rent, or they were Al-Azhar students who lived in the dorm, or maids and nannies who lived with Somali employers (Table 13). Interviewees roomed equally with people from their same clans as well as different clans (49.3% and 50.7% respectively).

#### 4. Food and Other Expenditure Strategies

To spend less money on food, people in the same household share meals and split the costs of food. The diet is limited. Many refugees stay up late at night and sleep in late in the morning, partly to skip breakfast. Some have the traditional Somali fried “anjela” (made of corn and flour) with oil and tea and very little sugar (sugar is used very economically since it is consumed in tea drinking during the long hours of socializing with roommates and friends during the night). For lunch, household members often eat pasta and sauce. Leftovers from lunch are eaten at dinner, or ‘baladi’ bread is consumed with leftover sauce from lunch. Another inexpensive staple food is ‘ambula,’ a Somali dish that consists of white beans and rice.

In many households, members choose to have the option of making phone calls suspended so that they can save money on telephone bills and they use their phones only for receiving calls from family members living abroad. Communication with family members residing abroad is also done through e-mail at cheap internet cafes that charge LE 1 for an hour on the internet.

**Table 11:**

**Total Rent of Interviewees' Apartments**

	Number	Percent
LE100-200	3	1.0
LE201-300	3	1.0
LE301-400	20	6.7
LE401-500	83	27.7
LE501-600	102	34.0
LE601-700	38	12.7
LE701-800	30	10.0
LE801-900	9	3.0
LE1000+	4	1.3
Lives in the Dorm	4	1.3
Employer	4	1.3
Total	300	100.0

**Table 12:**

**Kinds of Households**

	Frequency	Percent
A Family Unit	70	23.3
More than one Family Unit	20	6.7
Single men	56	18.7
Single women	7	2.3
Single men and single Women	33	11.0
A family and single men	68	22.7
A family and single women	27	9.0
A family and single men and women	11	3.7
Dorm	4	1.3
Lives with Employer	4	1.3
Total	300	100.0

**Table 13:****Interviewee's Share of Rent**

	Number	Percent
LE50-100	81	27.0
LE101-150	41	13.7
LE151-200	42	14.0
LE201-250	22	7.3
LE251-300	15	5.0
LE301-350	6	2.0
LE351-400	4	1.3
LE401-450	1	.3
LE451-500	3	1.0
LE550+	1	.3
None	32	10.7
Pays all	52	17.3
Total	300	100.0

**5. Education Needs and Resources**

The interviewees had a total of 294 school-age children (6-18 years old). Ninety-seven of these children receive some kind of schooling while 197 do not receive any schooling. Of the 97 children who are getting some kind of education, 17 are going to formal private Egyptian schools, 24 are enrolled in Al-Azhar schools, and 50 are enrolled in a home-schooling project run by the Somali Refugee Community of Egypt and taught by Somali teachers, and 6 receive tutorials at home given by Somali tutors. The private Egyptian schools to which some of the refugee children go charge LE 650 a year. Azhar schools are free except for an annual fee of LE 20 for books. The community-run home-schooling project is free and classes are held 3-4 times for a total of six teaching hours per week. The children in this project are taught the same curricula covered in Egyptian schools.

Children who are given tutorials at home by private tutors are mostly taught Qur'an and Arabic and in some cases English. These tutorials cost LE 50 a month per child for 3 one-hour sessions a week.

Two-thirds of the adult interviewees do not receive any kind of education (200 people). Of the remaining third, 18 are enrolled either in the Al-Azhar-run high school, adult education program, or university; 23 take English and computer classes at private Egyptian institutes; 24 take language and computer classes at a Somali-run educational center; 9 take Arabic classes at private Islamic educational centers; 11 take tutorials in Qur'an, Arabic, and English at home with Somali tutors; 4 take Arabic and English tutorials with tutors from other African countries; 5 are enrolled in church-run education programs; 3 go to literacy programs run by the local government in different neighborhoods (e.g., the Mahw il Oumeya Program); and 3 attend national universities other than Al-Azhar (Table 14).

Children of recognized refugees are eligible for an annual educational grant of LE 600 provided by the UNHCR. The grant money is disbursed to the refugees in two sums given at different times of the year (in the fall and winter). Some of the refugees make use of this grant to enroll their children in formal schools. However, many who are eligible for the grant cannot make use of it because of the difficulty of receiving the money in time to be able to use it to pay school fees. The refugees can only collect the money after providing a receipt showing that they have paid the school fees. This causes a problem for some who cannot pay the fees in advance of reimbursement. Also, refugees who are able to arrange to pay the school fees have great difficulty in getting reimbursed because of the slow process of paperwork involved. Moreover, the grant is often not enough to cover all of the tuition fees, book costs, and bus fees. In fact there are cases of children of recognized refugees who discontinue schooling because of the difficulty of paying the fees on time.

Most interviewees feel that they lack educational resources for themselves and their children. Many cite lack of legal residence, financial resources, and a sense of instability for their inability to pursue education. A considerable number of refugees found that their situation as temporary refugees who do not have rights to permanent resettlement, citizenship, and employment discourages them from pursuing long-term educational opportunities. One refugee conveyed this attitude through these words, "There is no education available for us. Anyway, why should one bother? We have to leave this country some day. We can never have rights. We cannot make it home."

**Table 14:**



**Educational Programs in Which Interviewees are Enrolled**

	Number	Percent
None	200	66.7
Azhar	18	6.0
Private Egyptian Language or Computer Centers	23	7.7
Somali-run Language or Computer Centers	24	8.0
Islamic Language Centers	9	3.0
Tutorials taught by Non-Somalis	4	1.3
Tutorials taught by Somalis	11	3.7
Government-run Adult Literacy Program ( Mahw il Oumeya)	3	1.0
Church-run Education Programs	5	1.7
University Student	3	1.0
Total	300	100.0

**6. Health Needs and Resources**

The most common health concerns among the interviewees are chronic headaches, insomnia and stomach problems. Interviewees often associate recurring ailments that they suffer from with their lack of stability and their struggle to pursue resettlement. Many complain of chronic headaches and insomnia, particularly when they are suffering from 'buufis'. This is a term that the refugees use to mean obsession with traveling to and resettling in Western countries. 'Buufis' is a complex notion that has emerged out of the experiences of Somali refugees and is analyzed very well in the work of Cindy Horst (2003) on Somali refugees in Kenya. While I was visiting Habiba, a mother of eight, she talked at length about her hardships, her sense of instability, and her inability to obtain resettlement through the UNHCR. She had friends who had resettled in the West. She said, "When I think of my life here and our problems, when I think of resettlement and how I can't get it, my head hurts so much. Now my head hurts all the time. I can't sleep. My body aches. It feels like there are worms crawling all over my body."

Apart from buufis-induced ailments, some refugees suffer from wounds inflicted during the Civil War, while others suffer from diabetes and respiratory problems. Some of the interviewees talk about family relatives and friends in Cairo who suffer from mental problems. People with mental problems are treated by traditional healers who read verses of the Qur'an over them and make them wear amulets with small wraps of paper on which particular verses of the Qur'an are written. In one case, a woman who had mental problems was eventually hospitalized by a male relative after several attempts at traditional healing. For other health problems, over a third of the interviewees (108 people) use pharmacies as their main health care provider. They go to the local pharmacy in their neighborhood, describe their ailment to the pharmacist and buy an inexpensive medicine. Twenty-four percent of the interviewees utilize private neighborhood outpatient clinics that are also used by poor and low-income Egyptians. The main ones used by the refugees are El Liwa, Dr. Adly's clinic,

and Sharq, which are located in Ard il Liwa and its vicinity. Twenty-three percent of the interviewees use inexpensive Islamic clinics such as the Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque Clinic (in the vicinity of Ard il Liwa), and the Raba’ il Adaweya and Tysir Clinics in Nasr City. Twelve percent of the interviewees use the Caritas Clinic (only recognized refugees use Caritas Clinic), and 4% went to the clinic at All Saints Cathedral (Table 15).

**Table 15:**

**Health Care Providers**

	Number	Percent
Private low-income Neighborhood clinics	73	24.3
Low-income Islamic Clinics	70	23.3
Caritas	36	12.0
All Saints	12	4.0
Pharmacies	108	36.0
Other	1	.3
Total	300	100.0

**C. Community-Building and Livelihood Strategies**

For Somali refugees in Cairo, the daily process of survival and maximizing livelihood resources involves the construction and transformation of several layers of distinct collective identities that are sometimes complementary and other times conflicting. Clan affiliation continues to play its historical role as an informal support system that is frequently used as a supplement to the support of nuclear and extended family relations. Also, clan affiliations are, in some cases, a divisive force. For example, in few rape cases accusations have been made against suspects that were based on assumed animosity between the clan of the rape victim and that of the suspect.

However, in the refugees’ daily networking, getting by, and planning ahead, clan affiliation is by no means the primary source of collective identity or differentiation. Refugees choose housemates on the basis of other newly acquired collective identities such as identification with refugees with whom one lived and got to know in previous host societies. Khadija, a female Somali refugee and a mother of two, previously lived in Libya for many years after the Civil War. She moved to Cairo in 1999 and settled in Ard il Liwa. She says that she settled in Ard il Liwa because at the time there were two other Somali families she had known and befriended in Libya. Though these families were of different clan affiliation than that of Khadija, the three families were good friends and helped one another with settle into the new host society. Khadija adds that since her arrival many more friends followed from Libya and settled in Ard il Liwa. In fact, the women in Ard il Liwa who previously lived in Libya talk about a strong bond that they share. Khadija explains it as a bond that emerged out of the hardships they faced together for many years in Libya. In their new host society, they borrow money from one another, exchange information about UNHCR and living in Cairo, and share emotional support. For them, the collective identity that has been constructed from the experiences of flight and displacement that they shared is just as important and meaningful in their lives as their clan affiliations. Moreover, just as clan affiliation is sometimes invoked as a language of differentiation, so are collective identity constructs based on shared refugee experiences in previous host societies. For example, in the early phases of establishing the home-schooling project for the

Somali children, there were many heated arguments among different refugee groups about the number of the children that could enroll in the school. However, most of these arguments were not so much about which clans got more or fewer slots as they were about which Somali refugee communities from particular host societies (i.e., groups from Libya versus those from Saudi Arabia versus those who have come directly from the homeland) got more or fewer spaces for their children.

A third layer of Somali collective identity that is important in the daily lives of the refugees was homogenizing Somali diasporic nationalism. One good illustration of this national identity is the practice of giving donations for community charity work. All interviewees said that they donated money 3-4 times a year for community efforts to assist those in dire need. The donations given by each individual ranged between L.E. 10-50. Over the past year, some of these donations were used by community leaders to assist a mother of eight who lost her husband on a boat trip from Libya to Italy in his desperate attempt to seek resettlement in the West, and also to help several families who lost relatives and or possessions when fire broke out in their apartment building in Ard il Liwa. Donations were collected from Somali refugees at large, regardless of their clan affiliations or previous host societies. However, those who shared clan affiliations with those in need of donations or had known them as friends and neighbors in previous host societies always felt obligated to donate a bit more and immediately. When I asked interviewees why they donated money, the recurrent answer was that it was the Somali thing to do or as one of the interviewees put it, "It is our culture. Somalis may have many problems. We, Somalis, destroyed and lost our country. But we can't just watch other Somalis die of sickness or of lack of food and do nothing. It does not matter what their clan is. It is our culture." It is significant that the interviewees used the word 'qaraan' to refer to these donations, which is the Somali word for a cultural practice in the homeland of collecting money from one's sub-clan or clan family to help a clan member in hardship. But the practice of 'qaraan' among Somali refugees in Cairo clearly extends beyond the boundaries of clan affiliations and is practiced on a Somali nationalistic basis.

Yet this diasporic Somali nationalism is not free of contradictions. On the one hand, many of the refugees who had been away from the homeland for ten years or more talked with nostalgia and lament about Somali nationalism that was lost in the Civil War, which they came to appreciate in diaspora. Many such refugees participate in community-building efforts and finding community-based solutions for their problems and needs. On the other hand, people who came directly from the homeland feel that they have better appreciation for Somali nationalism since they lived in the homeland throughout the whole ordeal of Civil War and the subsequent years of chaos and lawlessness. Both groups sometimes view each other with suspicion, the diasporic group accusing the latter group of being tainted by the atrocities of the Civil War, and the latter group accusing the former of having been away from the homeland for too long to appreciate what binds all Somalis together.

In short, the language of collective identities among the Somali refugees is a multi-layered and complex one in which various identities have their significance in different contexts and all of which are invoked and implicated in daily strategies of securing livelihood.

#### **D. Integration into Host Society**

Almost all interviewees say that they have no or very little interaction with Egyptians. They do not socialize with Egyptian neighbors. Many have uneasy relationships with landlords, and many of the students in language and computer institutes, high schools, or universities say that they have very little interactions with fellow Egyptian students. Many attribute this to a sense of fear and wanting to

avoid Egyptians because of their vulnerable legal status and lack of employment rights. Others cite cultural and language differences as inhibiting factors in addition to the sense of fear. A considerable number of refugees say that they live with Somalis in Somali-concentrated areas, network, and socialize with Somalis and hence have very little incentive to interact and build relationships with Egyptians. There are refugees who complain of Egyptian racism, citing police harassment in particular as a striking example of such racism. Some of the interviewees are often stopped by police men of lower ranks in the street, told to show residence papers, searched, and robbed of any little money (e.g., LE 5-20) they carry with them. Refugees who are arrested and detained because of lack of residence also complain of police brutality. In February and March 2003, over twenty Somali refugees attempted to cross the borders to Libya where they were planning to take a boat to Italy. They were arrested by Egyptian officials at the border and sent back to Cairo. In detention, many said that they suffered beating from the police officials. Some women charged that they were sexually molested by police officials. Some of those who were detained and then released also claimed that they were only released after their family relatives and friends had to pay bribes to the police ranging from \$100 to \$500. None of those refugees who claimed to have suffered from these acts wanted to file a formal complaint because of the fear of retaliation and further discrimination by Egyptian officials.

The issue of integration or lack of integration into Egyptian society is often discussed by the refugees in relation to their experiences of integration or lack of integration in previous Arab Muslim host societies. On the one hand, refugees lament the loss of employment possibilities that they had in Saudi Arabia and Libya, and which they lack in Cairo. On the other hand, Egypt looks better to the refugees when they remember the harsh experiences of the racism of Libyan employers or the constant threat and reality of deportation in Saudi Arabia. For example, Kaltoum and her husband, Abdel Razik remember their five-year residence in Libya as times of contradictions. Abdel Razik explained the contradictions as such, "We suffered a lot of racism. I worked as a construction worker there. I was hired once by a Libyan soldier to do some construction work in his house along with two other Somali refugees. We worked in this man's house for days. When we finished the work, he refused to pay us. He even had us put in prison and we were beaten. But I could still work and make money even when I had problems. The housing and food were cheap there. Here in Cairo, I can't work. Life is hard." According to Kaltoum and her husband, there is less overt racism in Cairo compared to what they suffered in Libya. But they feel marginalized in Egypt by their inability to work, make a living, and reside legally. Hawa, a maid who lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, remembers the harsh experiences of having been deported twice for lacking legal documents. Hawa also talks about Saudi racism, which she experienced in encounters with Saudi 'Mutawa' or morality police. But she also feels that her life in Egypt is highly precarious because of her illegal status and inability to find work. She says, "Even when I was deported, I was able to come back to Saudi Arabia and work again."

Hence in the experiences of Somali refugees striving for rights, integration is a relative matter that involves dealing with less or more marginalization, different kinds of discrimination, and securing or lacking different kinds of rights in different host societies that are interconnected in their lives.

### **E. Relations with Other Refugee Groups**

The one other refugee group that Somalis in Cairo are aware of is the Sudanese since the latter is the largest African refugee group in Egypt. Accordingly, Sudanese are more visible in the UNHCR and other NGO offices. Almost all of the refugees interviewed for this study say they have no interactions with Sudanese or any other refugee group. Those who have had some interactions with Sudanese refugees say that they were mostly confined to having had Sudanese classmates in English

language classes run in Saint Andrew's Church, or having chatted with Sudanese refugees on the UNHCR premises. But none of the interviewees live with Sudanese or have befriended them. Moreover, there is a sense among a large number of the Somalis that the Sudanese, because of their visible number, longer residence in Egypt, and their strong contacts with church-based NGOs, have access to more resources and obtain more aid from NGOs than Somalis do. It seems that the situation of Sudanese and Somali refugees is analogous to that of recent immigrant groups that physically and socially isolate themselves from one another as to consolidate individual and collective efforts and resources for the group's survival.

## **F. Relations with the UNHCR**

To a large extent, the UNHCR does not necessarily play a crucial role in the livelihood of refugees since recognized refugees – like unrecognized refugees – are not entitled to employment. Moreover, because of the dwindling budget of the UNHCR office in recent years, benefits granted to recognized refugees such as monthly allowances, educational grants and health coverage have been greatly slashed. For example, over the past year and a half, financial assistance to a considerable number of single refugees has been discontinued. In some cases when female refugees with or without children have been later joined by their husbands, they have been denied financial assistance. There is also the difficulty of making effective use of educational grants for children and the limited health coverage discussed earlier. These problems are compounded by the issue of obtaining and renewing residence, which is time-consuming, and being able to use the UNHCR card as meaningful and useful identification when confronted with police harassment. Most refugees are painfully aware of these problems and often feel frustrated and let down in their interactions with the UNHCR.

Yet the UNHCR occupies a significant space in the hearts and minds of the Somali refugees. The refugees look at it (more than they do towards the Egyptian government or society) as being mainly responsible for their protection and sustenance. Often the sense of frustration and disappointment that refugees feel is not entirely caused by actual problems and gaps in the services that refugees receive from the UNHCR. It is also caused by a big gap between the policies of the UNHCR and the assumptions of its staff on the one hand and the understanding the refugees have of why they (as Somalis who left their country because of the Civil War) are entitled to be recognized and resettled regardless of how they fit into specific UN conventions regarding asylum status and recommending resettlement as a tool of protection. Another major misconception that both the UNHCR and refugees hold is related to their constructions of one another's identities as particular entities with certain attitudes and prejudices. On the one hand, there are the contradictory and distorted images that refugees construct of the UNHCR as a Western Christian-based organization, a humane, professional Western organization that is corrupted by its Egyptian staff. On the other hand, the tendency to reify clan affiliations and customs in refugee status determination interviews as a feasible way of sorting out valid and bogus claims has resulted in further misconceptions on the part of refugees. For example, there is an almost irresistible pull on almost any refugee to claim a minority clan in the application for asylum, regardless of his or her true clan affiliations and strong claim.

For the past eight months, efforts have been made by the UNHCR to address some of the major problems of Somali refugees, such as the high rejection rate, the closed-file cases that need to be reopened, and resettling eligible refugees. Refugees feel that there have been some improvements. For example, a large number of rejected refugees have been recognized after their re-appeal applications have been reviewed. Also a significant number of Somali single people and families have been approved for resettlement. Still, on the part of the Somali refugees, there are some divisions among different groups of people on how to deal with the UNHCR and who should interact with it on behalf of the community.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The current Somali refugee population in Cairo is a young and heterogeneous mix in terms of its patterns of displacement (comprised of refugees who have moved directly from the homeland and those who have lived in one or more host societies in Africa or the Middle East before moving to Cairo). The majority has similar educational backgrounds (high school graduates) and occupational backgrounds (workers in the informal sector). Their current life in Cairo is greatly limited in legal, economic, and educational rights and resources. They make use of intricate systems of familial, clan-based, and new community-based systems of networking and strategies for survival and planning ahead. Moreover, the Somali refugees in Cairo are an integral part of well-connected communities of the transnational Somali diaspora that maintain very strong economic and social ties. In fact, for the Somali refugees in Cairo and their family members and close friends in other host societies, mobility and establishing transnational families become part of a process of resisting marginalization and achieving varying degrees of participation and acceptance in several host societies rather than the elusive goal of adequate integration in one host society. In other words, securing livelihood and seeking integration becomes an on-going transnational way of life for the Somali diaspora.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty of the resettlement and integration of Somali refugees into the Egyptian society is illustrative of the contradictions inherent in Egypt's position towards refugees and their place in the Egyptian society. Within the framework of the policies of the government and its actual practices, Somali refugees in Cairo as well as many other refugee groups can be seen as the 'others' that cannot and should not be part of what is perceived as the 'nationals'.

Yet, the presence of these refugees should not be viewed as a burden by the government because they bring in money and spend it in the country. For example, the three hundred interviewees in this project receive and spend roughly over \$500,000 of remittance money in Egypt per year. Moreover, the total annual rent money spent by the households in which they live is a little over L.E 1 million. Therefore, if we were to imagine the amount of money spent by all Somali refugees and other refugee groups on rent and living expenses in Cairo, we could easily conclude that refugee population is a significant source of money infused into the Egyptian market.

It is arguable that in addition to the government's refugee policies, cultural and linguistic differences have led to the isolation and separation of the Somali refugees from the Egyptian society. However, it is significant to add that living within, and confining oneself to his or her own refugee community, has become an important and common survival strategy among Somali refugees. While this strategy is helping many refugees secure their livelihood, it is sufficient and is therefore undoubtedly separating the community further from the larger host society as well as other refugee groups.

To improve the livelihood of the refugees, NGOs and international governmental organizations that work for the protection and well-being of the refugees, particularly the UNHCR, could provide modest financial and logistical support for the income-generating activities of the refugees. Sales of Somali clothes and food would be one activity that a considerable number of other women could take up. Also the scattered educational efforts carried out by individual tutors and a small home-

---

<sup>4</sup> Many of the refugees here constantly work on seeking resettlement either through the UNHCR, Western embassies or often through clandestine means. In the past few months, several hundred refugees left the country via Niger and Libya and fled to Italy by boat. Many Somalis have lost their lives and money in these horrific journeys. One of the interviewees in this study lost five children in their late teens and early twenties in one of boat journeys in Libya early this winter. On the other hand, there have been quite a few success stories of refugees who made the journey safely and were granted asylum in European countries. Some of them have already started working and sending remittance to family members left behind in Cairo.

schooling project could be consolidated into a large community-based school for the refugee children, similar to schools set up by other refugee groups in Maadi. Again, this would require financial and logistical help from NGOs.

More importantly, by investing in the livelihood activities initiated by refugees, the UNHCR can work towards changing two sets of misconceptions that are held by some of its staff and Somali refugees respectively. The first, which is adopted by some UNHCR staff that have worked with Somali refugees, has to do with conceiving Somali refugees as lazy and dishonest. The second misconception, which is shared by many refugees and which is not unrelated to the first, has to do with the refugees' discomfort and fear to make evident their own individual and collective efforts to sustain and plan for themselves since they believe that the UNHCR will mistake their resourcefulness and hard work for lacking the need and the eligibility for protection and support.

**APPENDIX I****Basic Demographic Questions:**

Sex:

Age:

Region of origin in Somalia:

Clan affiliation:

Neighborhood of residence within Cairo:

Current size of household:

Clan affiliations of household members:

Current occupation (if any):

Previous Occupation in the home country or other host countries (if any):

Educational Background:

Marital status:

Location/status of spouse:

Current occupation of spouse (if any):

Number of children (if any):

Age of children:

Location/status of children:

Location of parents:

Location of siblings or cousins:

**I. Legal Needs: Resources and Strategies****1. Residence:**

- 1.1 When did you come to Cairo?
- 1.2 Did you enter Cairo with a temporary visa?
- 1.3 How did you obtain it?
- 1.4 Do you have residence in Cairo?
- 1.5 If yes, how do you obtain your residence?
- 1.6 What are the problems/advantages of your legal status in Cairo?
- 1.7 Which institutions/individuals do you deal with to obtain residence in Cairo?
  - a. UNHCR
  - b. Mujama
  - c. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
  - d. Egyptian middlemen and women (who?)
  - e. Somali middle men and women (who?)

**2. Refugee Status/Eligibility for Resettlement:**

- 2.1 Have you applied for refugee status?
- 2.2 How do you go about accessing information and applying for UNHCR refugee status, appealing of rejection decisions, requesting family unity, requesting change of legal status, resettlement?
  - a. With the help of members of your household?
  - b. Clan members?
  - c. Somali friends or acquaintances from same residential areas?
  - d. Somali friends and acquaintances from previous periods of residence in other host societies?
  - e. Members of SRCOE
  - f. Church-based NGOs
  - g. Other NGOs



## II. Economic Needs/Resources and Strategies:

### 1. Income:

- 1.1 How do you support yourself (and) family in Cairo?
- 1.2 Do you receive remittance from abroad (If yes, specify where)?
- 1.3 Do you receive financial assistance from the UNHCR (If so, how much, how often)?
- 1.4 Do you work? (If so, what do you do? Where? Who is your employer? How regular is your work?)

### 2. Housing:

- 2.1 How did you find your present accommodation?
- 2.2 Where else did you live in Cairo? For how long?
- 2.3 Who lives with you?
- 2.4 If flat-mates, how did you meet them? Are they from your clan? Did they live in the same host countries as you?

### 3. Expenses:

How much of your income do you spend on:

- a. housing
- b. food expenses
- c. educational expenses (Where?)
- d. relatives? (Where?)
- e. medical expenses
- f. applying and renewing residence
- g. preparing your refugee application case
- h. community-based activities and donations (What are they? Which groups?)
- i. transportation

## III. Educational Needs: Resources and Strategies

1. Do you receive any kind of education? If yes, where?
2. When did you start? How did you find about it?
3. Have you taken/Do you take literacy programs?
4. If yes, where? What kind of programs?
  - a. government-run (Mahw il Oumeya)
  - b. church-based
  - c. run by Islamic charities (which ones?)
  - d. Somali community-based
5. Do you take English language classes?                      Where?
6. Do you receive any vocational classes?
7. Are your children receiving schooling? What kind?
  - 7.1 Are you satisfied with the educational resources available for refugees?
    - a. for Somali adult refugees
    - b. for refugee children
    - c. for Somali refugee children

8. How and where do you access these educational resources for yourself and or children/relatives?
  - a. literacy and language programs for adults
  - b. vocational programs
  - c. high school
  - d. university education
  - e. private and public elementary and junior high schools
  - f. community-based tutorials

#### **IV. Health Needs: Resources and Strategies**

1. Did you have any health problems back at home and in prior host society? If so, what were they?
2. Did you have any health services? How did you access them?
3. Do you have any health concerns here? If so, what are they?
4. Do you seek any medical assistance?
5. Which, if any, of the following health service providers do you use?
  - a. Caritas Health Office
  - b. Kasr El Aini Hospital
  - c. All Saints Church Clinic
  - d. Neighborhood clinics run by Islamic charity organizations. Please specify.
  - e. Other

#### **V. Cross-Cultural and Ethnic Networking and Resources:**

1. Do you have contacts and regular interactions with
  - a. Egyptians
  - b. other refugee communities (Who?)
2. In what contexts do you have contacts and regular interactions with Egyptians?
  - a. as neighbors
  - b. as landlord and tenants
  - c. as classmates (in regular schools, literacy programs, universities, Azhar schools?)
  - d. as government and or non-governmental officials (which organizations?)
  - e. in mosques
  - f. other
3. How do you characterize these contacts and interactions:
  - a. close and friendly
  - b. friendly, but superficial
  - c. distant
  - d. hostile
  - e. neutral
  - f. other
4. Do you have contacts and regular interactions with other refugee communities?

5. If so, which communities? In what contexts?
  - a. UNHCR premises
  - b. church-based NGOs (which?)
  - c. church-based educational programs (Which?)
  - d. other NGOs
  - e. other non-church based educational programs? (which?)
  - f. your neighborhood
  - g. mosques
  - h. other:
  
6. How do you characterize these contacts and interactions?
  - a. close and friendly
  - b. friendly
  - c. distant
  - d. hostile
  - e. neutral
  - f. other
  
7. Do you depend on Egyptians or members of other refugee communities in meeting any of the needs discussed in this questionnaire?
  
8. If yes, who are they?
  
9. How do you depend on these contacts?
  
10. What needs do they help you meet?
  
11. How did you make these contacts?

**REFERENCES**

**Al-Sharmani, Mulki (1998).** *The Somali Refugees in Cairo: Issues of Survival, Culture and Identity.* MA Thesis, The American University in Cairo. Cairo, Egypt.

----- (2000). "The Somali Diaspora in Canada: Issues of Identity." Conference Paper presented at the 99th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco. November 18, 2000.

**Berns McGown, Rita (1999).** *Muslims in the Diaspora: The Somali Communities of London and Toronto.* Toronto – Buffalo – London.

**Besteman, Catherine (1999).** *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence, and the Legacy of Slavery.* Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press.

**Budiani, Debra A. (2000).** "Transnational Discourses on Female Genital Cutting (FGC): Beyond Binarism." Paper presentation as an invited speaker to the Michigan Women's Club. Lansing, Michigan.

----- (2002). "Illness and Resort Strategies of Somalis in Urban Egypt," *Proceedings of the Somali Studies International Congress.* Richard Ford and Hussein Adam, eds. Forthcoming.

**Cassanelli, Lee V. (1982).** *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600-1900.* Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press

**Frechette, Ann (1994).** "Notes towards the Development of a Multi-Disciplinary Model for Comparative Research on 'Integration'." Unpublished Paper. pp. 140-165.

**Harrell-Bond, Barbara (1986).** *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Horst, Cindy (2003).** *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya.* Doctoral Dissertation: Amsterdam University.

**Hyndman, Jennifer (2000).** *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

**Kibreab, Gaim (1989).** "Local Settlements in Africa: A Misconceived Option," in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 2, No. 4., pp. 468-490.

----- (1996). "Eritrean and Ethiopian Urban Refugees in Khartoum: What the Eye Refuses to See," in *African Studies Review*, Volume 39, No. 3. pp. 131-178.

**Kok, W. (1989).** "Self-Settled Refugees and the Socio-Economic Impact of their Presence on Kassala, Eastern Sudan," in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 2, No. 4. pp. 419-440.

**Kroner, Gudrun Katharina (2000).** "Stationen einer Vertreibung: Somalische Flüchtlinsenerfahrungen in Ostafrika und im Westen" (Stages of Expulsion: Somali Refugee Experiences in East-Africa and Western Countries), Wien 2000.

----- (2002). "Social and Political Impact on Somali Refugees in the Diaspora," in *Proceedings of the Somali International Congress: Refugee Studies and Politics: Human and Research Perspectives*. Binder, Susanne and Tomic, Jelena, eds. Forthcoming.

**Kuhlman, Tom (1991)**. "Economic Integration of Refugees in Developing Countries: A Research Model," in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 4, No. 1. pp. 1-20.

**Kunz, E. F. (1981)**. "Exile and Resettlement: Refugee Theory," in *International Migration Review*, Volume 15, No. 1. pp. 42-51.

**Kusow, Abdi M. (1995)**. "The Somali Origin: Myth or Reality," in Ali Jimale Ahmed (ed.). *The Invention of Somalia*. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press. pp. 81-106.

----- (1998). *Migration and Identity Processes among Somali Immigrants in Canada*. Doctoral Dissertation, Wayne State University. Detroit, Michigan.

**Lewis, Ioan M. (1994)**. *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society*. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

**Long, Lynellyn (2000)**. "Towards an Anthropology of Mobility," in Elzbieta Gozdzia and Dianna Shandy (eds.). *Rethinking Refugees and Displacement: Selected Papers on Refugees and Immigrants*. Volume III. Arlington, VA: The American Anthropological Association. pp. 322-342.

**Malkki, Liisa (1995)**. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Mohamed, Hamdi S. (2001)**. "Dislocating Cultures: Traditional Practices, Identity and Somali Refugee Women in Canada," in: *Variations on the Theme of Somaliness*. Muddle Suzanne Lilius (ed.). Turku: Center for Continuing Education, Abo Akademi University. pp. 294-308.

**Montclos, Marc-Antoine Perouse (2000)**. "A Refugee Diaspora: When the Somalis Go West." Paper presented to the Colloquium on New African Diasporas, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, United Kingdom, May 5, 2000.

**Mukhtar, Mohamed Haji (1995)**. "Islam in Somali History: Fact and Fiction," in Ahmed, Ali Jimale Ahmed (ed.). *The Invention of Somalia*. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press. pp. 1-28.

**Samatar, Ahmed (ed.) (1997)**. *The Somali Challenge: From Catastrophe to Renewal?* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

**Samatar, Said & Laitin, David (1987)**. *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

**Shandy, Dianne & Gozdzia, Elzbieta (2000)**. "Introduction: Rethinking Refugees and Displacement," in *Rethinking Refugees and Displacement: Selected Papers on Refugees and Immigrants*, Volume VIII. Arlington, VA: The American Anthropological Association. pp. 1-10.

**Tiilikainen, Marja (2001)**. "Suffering and Symptoms: Aspects of Everyday Life of Somali Refugee Women," in *Variations on the Theme of Somaliness*. Muddle Suzanne Lilius (ed.). Turku: Center for Continuing Education, Abo Akademi University. pp. 309-317.