

# Investigating self-settled Syrian refugees' agency and informality in southern cities greater Cairo: a case study

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self-settled  
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agency

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims at contributing to our understanding of how self-settled Syrian refugees (registered and non-registered) use informal practices to forge their non-political agency and how this agency could be considered as political acts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper was conducted per the qualitative data analysis (in-depth interviews and participant observation), attributed to the critical ethnographic approach, through which refugees' everyday struggle is explored, additionally, that was incorporated with the analysis of Syrians' Facebook groups and formal sources.

**Findings** – The research paper concluded that everyday struggle strategies are considered as political acts by acquiring rights that many self-settled Syrian refugees are stripped of by international humanitarian agencies and host government. Hence, registered and unregistered refugees equally forge what is called “informal citizenship” through their presence via a blend of agency forms ranging from hidden agency to explicit one and via their incorporating into the informal contexts, leading them to carve a position of semi-legality that help them to circumvent the formal structural hardship.

**Originality/value** – This paper endeavors to study how urban refugees as change agents can convert their illegal presence to “probably refugeeness” to unsettle the prominent recognition of them as illegal non-citizens in southern cities.

**Keywords** Informality, Cairo, Syrians, Self-settled refugees, Urban refugees, Refugee's agency typologies, Cairo-Egypt

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

In most Global Southern cities, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants shape a considerable number of the urban population, sometimes outnumbering citizens. Therefore, their presence has an impact on carving their rights in cities where they might not be refugees or citizens.

While many southern cities have been witnessing a significant growth owing to forced migration during the past three decades (Crisp *et al.*, 2012), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recently considered, since 2009, cities as desirable



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place rather than camps, reflecting that in adopting an inclusive policy in urban areas (Marfleet, 2006).

It is also obvious that the majority of refugees' studies in the Global South agreed with the policy-based paper that the camp is the most appropriate site to place and manage the refugee crises (Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Bakewell, 2008). However, there is growingly attention to the urban refugees. Many of these literature consider even the presence of refugees in urban areas of host states as tacit acceptance by the authorities due to the protracted refugee situations in cities (Lindely, 2011; Landau, 2006). More arguably, other scholars locate camps in urban category, such as in the Middle East (Sanyal, 2012, 2013; Hanafi and Long, 2010; Ramadan, 2013).

Taking inspiration from many scholars who elucidate the livelihoods opportunity of refugees in southern cities such as Cairo (Grabska, 2006), Kampala (Sandvik, 2011) and Johannesburg (Landau, 2006), this paper will study how refugees, being change agents, can convert their illegal presence to "probably refugeeeness" to unsettle the prominent recognition of them as illegal persons.

On the other hand, this paper assumes that questioning the informality and illegality of self-settled refugees in southern cities evokes furthering discussions on the critics of citizenship. Most citizenship literature critique takes into consideration migration as an incentive for rethinking citizenship, especially in the system of the liberal democratic states (Holston, 2008). Thus, this paper turns the concerns to another side toward undocumented and self-settled refugees in the Global South based on agency-centered and informality approaches.

Additionally, informality in relation to the urban poor in particular has traditionally been studied more than refugees in particular (Sanyal, 2014). Based on what Isin (2008) argues, the acts of non-citizens implicitly extend the notion of the political to override "constituted territory or its legal subject." It is argued that instead of citizenship acts, including tax paying and voting, the acts of non-citizens, which aim at claiming rights, are considered as acts of informal citizenship, not just the membership of nation-state (Ylva, 2016, p. 10). Hence, this is the main argument on which this paper will build the analysis of non-political practices of right claiming and surviving as political acts *per se*.

Moreover, the extension of politics meaning encompasses not only claiming rights but also obtaining them using informal strategies by urban refugees who are self-settled and partly self-sufficient away from the governmental and international humanitarian regimes.

Amalgamating between the informality perspective (McFarlane, 2011; Roy, 2005; Alsayyed and Roy, 2004) and urban refugee studies (Sanyal, 2011, 2012, 2014; Hyndman and Giles, 2011), this paper is based on politics from the below perspective to understand the refugee politics through non-political strategies. Through these perspectives, it is argued that not only do the daily informal practices of refugees challenge the pervasive understanding of victimhood of refugee status (Spyropoulou, 2017) and moving beyond Agamben's biopolitical paradigms of refugee studies, but they also delink between refugee agency and the possibility of overt contestation or protest in developing countries.

Hence, this paper presumes that the study of informal practices of urban refugees have changed the lens through which political agency is readdressed. Relatedly, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- Q1. What forms of informal practices have been developed by self-settled Syrian refugees to challenges livelihoods and protection conditions in Cairene urban areas?
- Q2. To what extent the informal practices of Syrian refugees could be considered as political acts?

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### 1.1 Literature review

There is a conspicuous gap – which this paper attempts to fill – in linking the term Cairo, Egypt, with Syrian refugees and asylum seekers that specifically apply informality and agency perspectives on refugee studies. Yet, there are a variety of literatures that concern with the Syrian refugees in Egypt but from other perspectives. In the same vein, most of these studies do not explicitly apply a theoretical framework; instead, they intend to address the livelihood and protection conditions of refugees.

Most of them focus on the legal situations of Syrians in Egypt, specifically the procedures of refugee status determination, policies and legal instruments and protection gaps (Amelia, 2015; Elshokeiry, 2016; Lang and Hites, 2015). Others describe the socio-economic conditions of Syrians in Egypt (Ayoub and Khalaf, 2014; Abdel Aziz, 2017).

Regarding the integration process, one scholarly work concentrates on to what extent Syrians integrate into the Egyptian society considering that the cultural embeddedness is outweighed in the integration process. Based on lab-in-the field experiments, this study infers that the Egyptian society is much easier than European Union (EU) societies to integrate with the Syrians (Hassan, Mazen *et al.*, 2018). Reversely, Berglund argues that the integration process of Syrians in Egypt does not depend on the cultural embeddedness rather than on the contextual and structural factors. This study concludes that despite the cultural embeddedness between Syrian and Egyptians societies, Syrians are suffering from separating from the Egyptian public (Berglund, 2016).

Concerning the role of host government in engagement and governing the refugees population, Norman criticizes that the security factors have the precedence over the other factors that explain why Egyptian and other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) host states adopt the “strategic ambivalence” policy toward refugees (Norman, 2014; Norman, 2016), or in Kagan’s word “surrogate state” describing the responsibility transfer from the sovereign host state in governing refugee policy to United Nation agencies (Kagan, 2011). In the same vein, another study, based on the public policy perspective, contends that while the Egyptian governmental institutions concerning refugees’ population are well established, they are still under the control of UNHCR in Syrian refugees’ response. In addition, there is a clear absence of the Egyptian national plan toward refugees (Elshokeiry, 2016).

Based on gendered approach, other analyzes the impact of a social class on Syrian women in Cairo, comparing the gender role between the pre-existing and after exile (Ayoub, 2017). Other studies concentrate on spatial perspectives, in this regard; some urbanists studied how the urban spatiality effects on Syrian’s protection in the urbanization process (Shalabi, 2017; Arous, 2013).

Most of literatures concerning with the refugee agency deem that the refugee agency refers only to the political agency based on the refugee ability to mobilize and organize themselves against inequalities. Halki *et al.*’s work is one of these studies that analyzes the Egyptian context during the Sudanese’s protest in 2005. They contend that performing refugeeness is directly correlating to the political agency (Pascucci *et al.*, 2017). This paper will confute their argument.

Due to the evident lack of the informality and agency perspectives applied to the case of Syrian refugees in Egypt, I consider Romola Sanyal’s works the most relevant in this regard. While she focuses on how Palestinian refugees in Beirut’s camps create their informality through focusing on refugees’ settlements practices, this paper will extend the application of informality perspective to encompass not only housing practices, but everyday informal practices that could enable the urban refugees with creating new entitlements (Sanyal, 2012). In this regard, most of studies that use the informality perspective on refugee studies focus on the housing and settlement practices of refugees (Sanyal, 2014; Fawaz, 2017). Hence, this

paper will exceed these limitations or the binary between informality and urbanization of refugee camps.

### *1.2 Targeted sample*

The centerpiece of Egypt's approach toward refugees is generally the non-encampment policy, meaning that almost all the refugees are self-settled. Lucy Hovil suggests that while they are self-settled refugees, yet unregistered, this can be categorized as *de facto* refugees (Hovil, 2007).

This study broadens the scope of self-settled refugee [1] definition to include the registered and non-registered refugees who share the socio-economic background of doing-it-yourself strategies either to survive or settle. Hence, the main targeted population of this study are asylum seekers with yellow card, closed-file, rejected, voluntarily non-registered with low-income living conditions.

While undocumented refugees are the main targeted population, it is necessary to obtain a better understanding of the conditions and livelihood of unregistered refugees, to compare their conditions with other Syrian refugees with formal status in Cairo.

While more than half of the Syrian population settles in Greater Cairo (UNHCR, 2017, p. 6), this study will focus on the 6th of October city in Greater Cairo as the most dense point of Syrian refugees. Cairo is considered as one of the densest global city of urban refugees, with its majority of informal areas (Pascucci, 2014, p. 6).

In this regard, there is a considerable number of Syrians in Egypt who can be qualified as refugees but decide not to register at UNHCR, or are rejected, or closed files. According to the UNHCR (2018) report, Syrian refugees comprise the highest percentage of registered refugees' population in Egypt; however, there is no estimated percentage of the exact number of unregistered Syrians. They are estimated by official and humanitarian organizations as multiple numbers (Ayoub, 2017, p. 32). Additionally, the Egyptian government estimates the Syrians' number to nearly half a million (ILO, UNDP and WFP, 2017).

In response, those out of the UNHCR caseload are obviously problematic, because there is not an exact number about them. Additionally, they recognize themselves as refugees. On the other hand, they are identified by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as irregular migrants (Nourhan Abdel Aziz, p. 8), or by the host government, as hidden population. According to the socio-economic background of targeted Syrian refugees, this paper focuses on the low- and low-middle-income households. While Syrians' businesses in Egypt is obviously increasingly boom, it is not an indicator that all Syrians in Egypt belong to the upper class, as the figures of the socio-economic status of registered Syrians by UNHCR provides a converse understanding. According to the findings of UNHCR vulnerability assessment report, "51% of Syrians refugees' households are severely vulnerable, with predicted expenditure per capita less than half of the calculated minimum expenditure basket (MEB). Almost 30% of households are highly vulnerable" UNHCR (2017, p. 6).

This study is an outcome of research fieldwork executed between November 2018 and August 2019 in the 6th of October city. This study depended on 25 in-depth interviews through snowball sampling (20 Syrian refugees – ten men (four rejected and closed files and six registered) and ten women (six do not have official documents and four registered), plus five volunteers) taking into consideration the age and gender background balance.

### *1.3 Paper structure*

The first part analyzes the international, national or local structures in Egypt and to what extent these structures formulate the paths through which self-settled Syrians practice their

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new forms of agency. Sections 2 and 3 are a review of how the concepts of agency and informality were applied in urban refugee and forced migration studies. It then moves on to analyze how the political agency concept is inadequate for the Egyptian context and that entails classifications of agency forms and revise the blurred boundaries between refugees and marginalized citizens. Section 4 focuses on Syrian refugees – comparing between self-settled of registered and unregistered – in Cairo specifically in the 6th of October city, suggesting that incorporating the previous literature is to theorize the forms of refugee agency, which uncover the boundaries between legal and illegal refugee that theorize their position as semi-legal, which need to be elaborated contextually, grounding the analysis in an ethnographic inquiry.

## 2. Structural context of refugeeness in Egypt

Building on Elisa Pascucci's definition of the refugee's agency as "the subject's ability to act in order to influence social processes, redesign established relations of power. It is relational, material, and distributed, emerging not only from interactions between different individuals and groups, but also from those between human actors and their material and spatial structures" (2014, p. 18), this section seeks to map out the structural factors challenging a refugee's position in Egypt.

To examine the refugee agency in urban contexts, it is significant to grasp the characteristics of the *livelihood structures of urban contexts* in the Global South (Simone, 2004, 2008; McFarlane, 2011). In this regard, there are two main aspects that characterize the urban contexts of refugees and other marginalized urban subjects in southern cities, especially in Cairo; temporality, and everyday emergency (Pascucci, 2014, p. 150). Igreja (2012) has alarmed the "multiple temporalities" that depict the urban experience in the Global South, which produces marginalities and exclusion (Pascucci, 2014, p. 146). On the other hand, Millar defines "everyday emergencies" as "the multiple forms of insecurity that destabilize daily life" (2004, p. 34).

These previous aspects resonate with the dysfunctional and fuzzy procedures of registration and status determination by UNHCR (Dunn, 2012). Consequently, many refugees prefer to manipulate and not register with UNHCR to eschew the interactions with the prolonged procedures, or instead having student or tourist visa.

Alongside the situation of suspension and uncertainty caused by the registration procedures, status determination or material provision by UNHCR or other international humanitarian organizations, the withdrawal of the host state – in this case the Egyptian state – after the adoption of the post-developmental model exacerbates the refugees' everyday emergency and temporality and then pushes them further to adopt the informal practices to keep survival without legal entitlements.

According to the formal policy toward refugee, Egypt adopts the "non-encampment policy" and "non-existence of national asylum seekers policy." Thus, the legal and institutional structures regulating migration governance in Egypt is characterized by two significant facets. *First*, Egypt follows the similar pattern seen in other MENA states. Its "strategic ambivalence" toward these concerns, borrowing the word of Norman, enables for the prevalence of informal practices, meaning "a policy that aims to neither drive out nor to entirely include migrants and refugees into a host society, but instead aims to maintain the status-quo" (Norman, 2016, p. 345).

Norman explains this policy as the host states decide to disregard refugees and migrants, especially undocumented ones, and the state is simultaneously apprehensive of their presence (2016, p. 347). In the same vein, Kagan refers to the same policy by the concept of "surrogate state," which means that refugees' governmentality officially is delegated to

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UNHCR as “surrogate state,” which replaces the state’s role in developing countries (Kagan, 2011).

On the other side, since 2005, when the Sudanese protests in Mohandessen neighborhood in Cairo were forcibly dissolved against the prolonged waits of UNHCR’s decision on refugee status determination, most refugee communities in Egypt have decided to not engage in such political activities. Consequently, the rational choice for most refugees is to keep invisible, away from the host state authorities and UN agencies (Norman, 2014, p. 353).

Therefore, one contends that neither political economy nor cultural embeddedness of ethnic or co-religious refugee factors have conspicuous impact on the Egyptian policies toward refugees. However, the security factor is the main determinant of Egyptian policies after 2013, as Norman emphasized (2016, p. 360).

The second point is relating to the weakness of international aid system that exacerbates conditions of poverty and extends the domains of informality by urban refugees (Sanyal, 2014, p. 38).

Building on what is mentioned above, it seems that the only alternative for self-settled refugees is to depend on informal practices due to survive (Sanyal, 2014, p. 40).

### 3. Analyzing agency of urban refugees in developing cities

For analyzing a refugee’s agency in urban contexts, there are two main trends in this regard. *Firstly*, the literature that deem legal policies of host state, not the refugees’ agency, are the main dominant in managing the lives of refugees (Jacobsen, 2006), in tandem with the significant role of international humanitarian organizations in protecting refugees’ rights (Buscher, 2018), confirming that endeavoring refuge is included only in the legal regimes of refugee protection.

*Secondly*, the agency literature that asserts the role of refugees themselves as agents in surviving in the complex urban contexts varies in approaching the refugee agency.

Regarding understanding a refugee’s agency, there are varied approaches that attempt to conceptualize it. However, there are some empirical gaps that can be recognized within existent literature on refugee politics. What is significantly evident is what many scholars have deemed the everyday practices as “simplistic accounts of resistance” (Pascucci, 2014), especially with focusing on the contexts of neoliberal western states (Isin, 2008).

This burgeoning literature ignores, on the one hand, the developing host contexts in dealing with urban subjects. Moreover, the main aspect of focus in this literature is the centrality of protests regardless of to what extent these protests are allowed and could be effectively applicable analytical tools in non-western contexts. In other words, these literatures are limited to the refugee politics in the confrontational aspect, including protests, demonstration, sit-ins or activism.

For instance, there are scholars who romanticize the significance of refugees’ urban strategies for survival (Aberman, 2014; Malkki, 1995). Others focused on refugee subjectivities as “the conditions of possibility to political agency in order to mobilize individually or collectively” (Pascucci *et al.*, 2017, p. 2), or as Moulin and Nyers (2007) point out as being engaged in “international political society” through open protests and sit-ins. They focus on the political aspect of refugee agency such as raising awareness of inequality, mobilizing political movements (Hinger *et al.*, 2016), refugee-leading protests or political activism (Clarke, 2016).

In this regard, Syrians in Egypt, since their coming, have not conducted a protest and mobilization against Egyptian state or humanitarian regimes (Norman, 2015). As has been observed, the migrant protests, especially for Syrians, cannot be considered as a

phenomenon. Otherwise, some recorded protests cases were occurred by African refugees in Cairo.

On the other hand, a number of scholars view refugees' agency based on "autonomy of migration approach." Papadopoulos and Tsianos have called for attention to "reframe migration as having 'the capacity to develop its own logics, its own motivation, and its own trajectories.'" They extensively elucidate that capacity is emerged from non-political and everyday actions of urban subject (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013, pp. 188–189).

The livelihood perspective intertwines with the migration autonomy approach. This perspective encompasses the "social capital" of their co-national or other counterparts' networks who live in the city, providing the newcomers with material and non-material support (Jacobson, 2006, p. 282). Constituting the social capital may be considered one of the strategies that urban refugees depend on, especially in the vulnerability and illegality contexts (Jacobson, 2006, p. 283).

In connection with such concerns, a migrant agency can be considered as "relationally constituted" (Pascucci, 2014, p. 31). This relationship embraces the engagement of actors, space, practices and ordinances of governing regime. On the other hand, agency, through the everyday politics, not only "distributed through networks" (Pascucci, 2014, p. 31), but also through the plain and micro actions of individuals.

### *3.1 Typologies of refugee agency*

Whereas scholars gradually begin to conceptualize the refugee as an agent, there is still a little attention of studying the typologies of a refugee's agency, which this section endeavors to fulfill.

- In the contexts of southern cities, some refugees decided to be self-marginalized (Grabska, 2006), self-distinguished or even self-hidden to acquire specific rights. These forms may contain protest and direct confrontation against host states and international humanitarian agencies, for example, the protest and sit-in of Sudanese refugees in 2005 (Grabska, 2006), and Bengali refugees in India who protested to reclaim their rights of shelter (Sanyal, 2009; Sanyal, 2011). Furthermore, many Sudanese in Egypt resort to be self-marginalized to be eligible for third-party resettlement (Grabska, 2006, p. 301), or to be self-hidden by sustaining a low profile to eschew the attention of state authorities to avoid detention or deportation (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 284) or what this paper calls "hidden agency."

Drawing on the last type of agency, this paper assumes that undocumented low-income Syrian refugees in Cairo resort to be self-hidden through various evidence and observation. For example, many Syrians in Egypt after more than eight years of residence, one easily observes that it is hard to distinguish between an Egyptian and a Syrian man or woman, because most of them adopt many elusive strategies of having invisibility like what is called "identity stripping" in the public sphere by dressing and talking the same vernacular of Egyptians.

This hidden agency of Syrians assumes that the legal and bureaucratic boundaries between citizenship and refugee status are blurred. In this regard, Bakewell (2008, p. 446) has doubt of the extent to which the label of refugee is an appropriate category for distinguishing between citizenship and membership in the national order, especially in the contexts where the state rule and its bureaucratic apparatus cannot penetrate to the everyday lives of the society. Instead, it is necessary to view them not as refugees, but as social or political agents who are on par with urban poor or marginalized citizens in the Global South (Bakewell, 2008, p. 450). This is evidently observed through the everyday

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practices of urban refugees and marginalized poor in urban spaces in Cairo. In doing such hidden agency, refugees may extend their agency to what Pascucci *et al.* (2017) refer to “awareness raising,” which may happen as sort of everyday practices through which refugees establish channels where they can meet each other realistically or online to connect and exchange knowledge and information to find adequate house, employment, food and healthcare (2017, p. 15). Importantly, this awareness raising does not equally mean organizing demonstration to express their inequalities or translating into activism, especially in the case of Syrian refugees.

- Linking between the illegality and refugees’ agency, Singh (2015) proposes the concept of burdened agency. He describes it as the remaining rational choice that refugees possess in the context where their choices to survive are considered as “transgressions” because they are extralegal. By their burdened agency, the “exceptionalism” they face converts into “an ordinary exceptionalism,” which facilitates stabilizing their situation and obtaining their needs through daily strategies. In some contexts, burdened agency necessitates criminality (that includes pretty theft, drug trafficking, smuggling of goods), which can be deemed necessary for their daily needs (Singh, 2015, pp. 22–23).
- As such, Yiftachel proposes “gray spaces” concepts that interpret the micro struggles of urban refugees. These struggles do not endeavor neither citizenship nor integration, nor resettlement, rather they seek to make independent spaces of “development and identity.” Additionally, this concept provides understanding of how agency is practiced through “descending into the ordinary” (Yiftachel, 2009). In this regard, Veena Das (2007) contends that “our theoretical impulse is often to think about agency in terms of escaping into the ordinary rather than a descent into it.” This “ordinary agency” through gray spaces is emerged through the exercise of ordinary activities *per se*, not of extraordinary activities like protest, through creating these gray spaces as ordinary spaces to demand a substitute home.

#### 4. Understanding the politics of informality as practices

Originally, the informality concept stemmed from economics and was then borrowed by social sciences. Whereas informality is viewed as activities that are entirely outside of the state’s regulation; recently, it is more frequently seen as linking diverse spaces and spheres within society (Roy, 2005). Roy defines informality as “an organizing logics, a system that governs the process of urban transformation itself” (Roy, 2005, p. 148).

Through the application of the informality concept to the study of urban refugees – especially self-settled refugees, this paper attempts to analyze informal practices of Syrians through which they are seeking to create their own agency and spaces that are neither citizenship nor refugeeness, but as social and political actors.

Most of the literatures have less concern of the urban character of refuge and devalue the significance of studying how the urban informality practices may have political potentials and may be considered as political acts. In this sense, this paper argues that despite urban informal practices of self-settled refugees tending to be depoliticized, they implicitly lead to politicization. Such politicization, in the case of urban refugees and equally marginalized urban poor, seeks to create processes of contestation that preempt the social and legal order. Arguably, analyzing the politics of urban informality could help revisiting urban refugee’s agency.

On the other hand, Sanyal deems that informal practices of Palestinian refugees in Beirut, particularly building informal housing, pertain to directly obtaining rights instead of

claiming them. Such right obtaining may have an implicit political connotation. Hence, it may be unreasonable to include a debate of daily informal practices without discussing its politics (Sanyal, 2014, p. 34). Built on Sanyal's argument, this study will analyze informal practices as entailing the discussion of surviving strategies (housing, employment), protection (residence permit, work permit) and analyzing forms of refugee agency of Syrian refugees in Cairo. This direct reclaiming of rights can be viewed from the Pero and Solomos' (referenced from Pascucci (2014, p. 22)) argument of migrants' politics as "how migrants can be politically engaged while appearing quiescent".

Bayat's account in Cairo and Tehran elucidates a similar viewpoint on everyday politics of informality. He depicts this politics as redress purpose through survival strategies that entrench the tacit recognition of marginalized subjects' encroachment by the state (2010).

In this regard, the intricacy of informality definitions brings to the fore and reveals the falsifiably depicting of informality as a problem or infringement of state regulations, rather than a mode of self-governing to accomplish the needs which the hosting state or international humanitarian regime fail to fulfill.

Importantly, there is a gap of literature in studying informality as means of approaching refugee agency in urban areas. Many literatures focused on the camps urbanization or understood informality as either economic activities that correlated with low-income, family-owned business, petty commerce and precarious employment, or a prevalent mechanism to providing shelter and services in southern cities (Sanyal, 2014). By transcending this divide, others shift the attention to the agency of individuals to encounter the international and national structural conditions (Kudva, 2009, pp. 1615–1617). Taking into consideration Kudva's viewpoint, this paper approaches informality as everyday practices.

Setting urban informality as a perspective can pursue toward assuming that urban refugees are effective actors who share responsibility of acquiring rights with marginalized citizens. Hence, both of them can implicitly constitute the urban citizenship, through the public space, may produce "new urban citizenship." Hence, this paper argues that through the lens of urban informality and agency, the urban refugee could become an informal "citizen" not by an explicit consent of the host state, but fundamentally by their presence and practices in the urban space.

Viewing urban informality as a process can resonate with the account that considers urban citizenship as a social process that transcends the legal status of undocumented residents, but concerns the socio-spatial struggles (Varsanyi, 2006, p. 232).

In this regard, and contrary to the literatures that concern the nation-state contexts as intrinsic in the livelihoods of migrants, denying other forms of citizenship, there is emerging literature that contends that residents, whether undocumented migrants, illegal residents or rural migrants, constitute their new form of urban citizenship through their socio-spatial struggles (Varsanyi, 2006, p. 235), or as Holston called it "spaces of insurgent citizenship" (2008).

Thus, many scholars of citizenship studies posit that there have become fragile boundaries between citizens and other population who share specific national territory (Gonzales and Nando, 2017; Anderson, 2013; Sassen, 2002), constituting fuzzy spaces between legal and illegal ones (Bosniak, 2006). Additionally, many scholars have entertained the importance of the city as the position of citizenship instead of the state (Scott, 1998; Holston, 1996; Varsanyi, 2006).

Borrowing Bayat's concept of "everyday resistance" of "informal people" (1997) on the contexts of asylum seekers rather than slum-dwellers, this paper analyzes the informal practices of Syrians in Egypt as everyday resistance, which basically seek two aims: redistributing social goods and opportunities and fulfilling their autonomy culturally and

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politically apart from the host states and international humanitarian regimes. In doing so, refugees, like slum-dwellers, depend on “informal communities” and networks.

### 5. Legal regulations vs Syrians’ informal practices: fieldwork-based findings

Although Egypt legally recognizes self-settlement for all refugees on its territory, low- and middle-income Syrians in Egypt do not fully benefit from their free mobility because the neoliberal policies that Egypt adopts, according to International Monetary Fund’s plan, impoverish not only refugees but the middle- and low-income citizens as well.

With the new Egyptian government policies, it is important to think about nuance informal practices of Syrians to survive in the light of changing laws and regulations managing their presence post-July 2013:

- *Visa entry* has become a requirement for Syrians to enter Egypt legally after July 2013. Before July, Egypt did not require a visa from Syrians before their arrival (Lang and Hites *et al.*, 2015, pp. 83–83). So, to cope with this obstacle, many Syrians, according to their anecdotes about their acquaintances, seek to illegally enter Egypt via Port Sudan to eschew the visa entry requirements, as 90 per cent of Syrians were rejected entry into Egypt (personal interview, November, 15, 2018). On the other purpose, they tend to avert the renewal procedures of residence permit every six months. Most of respondents asserted “this process takes two months at least, what actually means I have to renew it every four months. It is protracted uncertainty.”
- *Pertaining to the employment context*, the main problem facing Syrians is that they do not have work permits. Domestic employment regulations in Egypt require a legal work permit and set strict requirements for obtaining the permit and renewing it. Additionally, they are not permitted to purchase property unless the contract contains Egyptian partners (Elshokeiry, 2016, p. 86). Consequently, the only way to subsist is to work in underqualified jobs or to be self-employed or to accept job insecurity and exploitation circumstances. According to the UNHCR vulnerability assessment report (2016), there are nearly 62 per cent of surveyed Syrians who are unemployed (UNHCR, 2017). Consequently, the vast majority of Syrians in Egypt work in informal sector.
- Recently, in July 2019, the Labor Ministry issued an ordinance (no. 146/2019) governing the work of foreigners in Egypt. Accordingly, a foreigner who has worked in the country without a permit must apply for a request at the competent ministry to adjust his/her situation, and in case of approval, the foreigner is obliged to pay retroactively a fee of E£15,000 for each year spent in Egypt, calculated from the date of entry into the country (Ahram online, 2017). Many Syrians, especially who are self-employed in small business; consider this law as “a new obstacle to earn their living” (personal interview, November, 26, 2018).

Based on an ethnographic inquiry, the following section investigates many informal practices as everyday resistance strategies to circumvent the structural obstacles:

- (1) to eschew the livelihood costs increasing, Syrians households embrace many strategies:
  - One of them is sharing the housing with more than one family. Despite it is a popular strategy with African refugees, low-income Syrian refugees borrowing this idea to overcome the monthly increases of rentals.

- Through the interviews, 14 surveyed Syrian women have house-working activities such as sewing, food making and handicraft. They are marketing their products through Syrian vendors on side streets and malls or marketing via social media pages. These house-working activities are main components of Syrians livelihoods in Egypt. They informally work without issuing work permit likewise other low- and middle-income Egyptians. Additionally, working at house is an elusive strategy to eschew state authority like paying taxes or issuing work permits.
  - During interviews, there are semi-legal constructs to circumvent employment obstacles. One of them is to find a job with NGOs, as was demonstrated by one Syrian volunteer: “some NGOs which work for Syrians provide employment by legally recruiting Syrians as volunteers then illegally paying them” (personal interview, December, 28, 2018).
- (2) keeping invisible to avoid state institutions is another informal strategies:
- Many respondents reported that refugees who do not have yellow or blue card prefer to stay in their workplace at night to avoid showing the UNHCR card to sign the contract with landlords.
  - As Grabska considers clustering in adjacent neighborhoods is necessary to be “invisible” (2006, p. 56), Syrians adopt this strategy to keep invisible with their clustering to have protection in the 6<sup>th</sup> of October city that is known as highly dense of Syrians and their businesses. In this regard, one Syrian woman described her feeling as if she had moved to another Syrian province, not to another country (personal interview, January 29, 2019).
  - Another evasive strategy for earning their livelihoods is to adopt invisible agency through unlicensed small-scale businesses on side streets. For example, one Syrian respondent has a food truck that moves on many side streets in the 6<sup>th</sup> of October city apart from municipal control. He knows that his work is illegal and can be confiscated by the municipal authority at any time, but he does not have other sources for living. These Syrian food truck or street vending can be observed in many inner areas in Greater Cairo (personal interview, March, 28, 2019).
  - Many Syrians deliberately hide themselves to avoid legal prosecutions or refolement. According to many Syrian respondents, “the easier way to acquire residency is to enroll your children in Egyptian schools, even this study residency are not allowed to work. But many families do not have children, simultaneously, do not have passports or visa entries, hence they decide to not exit the 6<sup>th</sup> of October city and be invisible with other Syrians” (personal interview, April, 16, 2019).
  - Through the observation, in everyday interactions on streets or public transportations, the researchers observed that many Syrians who look like low-income tend to hide their dialect or identity as Syrian, despite there is no racial discrimination against them like with Africans, but it is possibly because they hide from security checks or avoid exploitation from Egyptians.
- (3) describing refugees as urban subjects, they have the ability to resilience as slum dwellers, especially in the contexts of urban informality, forming effective social networks (McFarlane, 2012) or what Simone (2004) called “social infrastructure.” Moreover, Fawaz (2017) argued that informal networks can digest many refugees

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in Lebanon. Likewise, many refugees in Cairo also depend on informal networks as a daily strategy:

- Regarding the maintenance of safe and efficient housing exchange, social networks and social capital are the most efficient pillars on which Syrians in Egypt depend. Many respondents elucidated that they depend on either family members or social relations with Syrians or Egyptians to secure housing with reasonable prices or avoid eviction, or to have contractual conditions. The vast majority of interviewed tenants conceded that there is much exploitation from landlords or realtors either about the rental price or written contracts (personal interview, June, 3, 2019). The vast majority of these contracts are never registered with the public authorities. But, what mitigates the intensity of the housing market exploitation is the solidarity of social networks among Syrians. The effectiveness of social networks does not confine on the housing services, it also encompasses providing employment opportunities and access to services. This paper concerns with what Yassen (2016) calls “adaptive informal mechanisms,” which are creative reactions to formal institutional settings and host society exploitation that are too restrictive for actors. In urban refugee contexts, where residents are excluded from the formal rights and therefore from many laws that regulate the labor markets and systems of social security. [AQ4] Hence, informal networks become inherent to everyday maneuvers and do-it-yourself strategies that enable them to access services (Yassen, 2016).
  - According to their anecdotes of evictions, many Syrian interviewees who had lived in Masaken Osman settlement in the fringes of 6th of October city experienced eviction by local thugs’ networks. In this regard, the power balance of African refugees and Egyptians relocated from slums outweighed the Syrians’ families, consequently compelled Syrians to leave their apartments. As a result, more than 100 families of Syrians have been relocated to Beyt Al Aela with the help of Fard Foundations and their social networks to avoid many assaults and forced robbery, which many Syrians asserted that they had faced in Masaken Osman (Rashwan, 2015). The “Beyt al-Aela” area in 6th of October city is considered the largest settlement for Syrian refugees in Egypt. The number of Syrian refugees in this area is four times that of the Egyptians themselves. According to a Syrian refugee, the vast majority of Syrian refugees gathered in this place because of the low rent prices (personal interview, July 7, 2019).
- (4) *Self-excluded agency* is another informal strategy that is embraced particularly in informal districts. Syrians prefer to limit their spatial interaction with others, within the limits of utilitarianism, so as to avoid verbal harassment and abuse, and therefore interact only within their separate communities. For example, because of the different levels of social and cultural, and the spread of crime and drugs in Osman area, which are additional factors that drive people to avoid others. Some parents (mostly non-Egyptians) watch their children closely and prevent them from playing on the streets, from their point of view, because their children should not pick up bad behavior from other children, and of course for their own safety. Additionally, Syrians and Sudanese, in those districts, prefer to isolate themselves by sending their children to Syrian and Sudanese community schools they have established in or near Masaken Osman and Beyt al-Aela districts. They believe that these schools provide a familiar and safe environment and offer acceptable education compared to Egyptian public schools.

- (5) *Parallel informal entities are another effective strategy* to evade the formal institutions and their obstacles. For instance, Syrian community schools are one of these entities – especially that are not affiliated or recognized with any organization, to overcome the difficulty of enrollment in Egyptian schools or to integrate their children in it with hardship to understand Egyptian curriculum by Egyptian dialect and the density of Egyptian classes. Community schools also provide an opportunity for qualified Syrian teachers to find jobs. A Syrian director of one of these schools said: “The reason for the establishment of these schools is to try to devise solutions, based on self-efforts.” He explains that “The main problems of community schools that were not documented by the United Nations, is the threat with closure at present.”
- Other prevailing entities are the informal initiatives and volunteer teams that become notably prevalent in Egypt as a consequence of shutting down many NGOs working for Syrians and refugees’ rights after July 2013, removing much of their support and making them even more vulnerable (Ylva, 2016, p. 19). There are many initiatives such as the Sham Volunteering Team, the Syrian Emergency Team, the Basmat Ibdaa Team, Al-Nabda Team and the Tumouh Team and team of Syria Joy. These teams meet in an informal organization known as Egypt’s Syrian Volunteering Platform (Yehia, 2018, p. 10).
  - Syrian refugees established many initiatives to guarantee the sustainability of generating livelihoods in the informal economy apart from humanitarian aids and formal regulations. One example is “Syria Joy team” that is established by Syrian volunteers to generate job opportunities for Syrians by gathering donations from well-off Syrians and Egyptians. They embark an initiative called “your project is growing with us” through which they provide the raw material and equipment required to start small projects, especially house-working projects, such as sewing machines, kitchen machines and hairdressing tools. They also provide micro-credit projects and uphold many electronic projects by advertising and marketing them on social media platforms.
- (6) Regarding residence permits, according to an interview with an UNHCR officer, many Syrians whose permits were expired or do not have official documents to issue residency or the yellow card prefer engaging in black markets of fabricated documents that are booming in Egypt with the flows of refugees. Syrian respondents asserted that “the black market has been popular. The broker has been receiving 100\$per passport, and more than 250\$per study permit, and 500\$for residency permit” (personal interview, August 17, 2019).

During all conversations and observation, it is obviously deducted that Syrians do not have any potential intentions to act politically because they are well aware of the impossibilities of doing that. For instance, in questioning them to whom the responsibility of their affairs are, they responded that it would be totally on the shoulders of UNHCR to eschew criticizing the host government. In other thought, they avoid voicing politically against government or humanitarian agencies as a strategy to keep invisible. While trying to avoid questions about politics through the interviews, it is impossible to develop discussions of employment, residence renewal or housing without involving in its politics. It was a hard task to uncover what is beyond talks or allegorically intended.

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## 6. Conclusion

The situation of low-income Syrian refugees in Cairo shed light on the exigency to extend our grasping of refugee agency engaging with the analysis of the informality perspective not only in Cairo, but also in the Global South cities.

Too often, most of the literature around the refuge in the Middle East and Egypt specifically concentrate on the legal situations of refugees and asylum seekers, the role of international humanitarian systems in governing their situations, or building on policy targeted analysis, they contend that refugees are burdens who must reside in camps for security considerations. However, the scene of refugees in the Global South cities is more complicated.

As has been observed and discussed with Syrians, the prominent type of current urban refugee's politics, particularly the low-income Syrian refugees, is the hidden agency that challenges our understanding of the boundaries between legality and informality and between the political and apolitical.

This paper infers their legal situations as "semi-legality" of self-settled Syrian, even registered or unregistered asylum seekers, that engender legally enigmatic situations that transcend the legal-illegal divide. For instance, while Syrians are not to be prosecuted for extra-legal entry, if their request for asylum is dismissed and an appeal is filed, they become in a legal limbo, other Syrians reside legally, but because of work regulations restrictions, they work illegally or without work permits.

Hence, studying the contextual structures surrounding Syrian refugees in Cairo raises questions of the difference between the registered and unregistered. Based on qualitative interviews about the livelihoods and protection issues, both of them have the similar experiences of embracing informal practices and eschewing the formal order or manipulating it to acquire their rights, especially the right to the city. For example, half of registered Syrians respondents do not have the intention to renew their residence owing to the high cost of renewing the residence permit that should be done every four months, and its prolonged procedures. Arguably, this paper explains the informality depicting the urban contexts in which they reside, and then the informal practices they adopt to acquire their basic rights that may interpret this similarity between both of them.

To use [Isin's \(2002\)](#) words, acquiring and enhancing rights is also a way of becoming a right holder, which establishes refugees and asylum seekers as "informal citizens." In this regard, the Syrians in Egypt provide themselves with rights: the absence of work permits does not stop them from working informally, poor education services do not stop them from educating their own children and strict emigration policy does not stop them from trying to depart illegally. Such acts are acts of citizenship that purposely infringe the laws but covertly aim to change the rules.

In this regard, this paper depicts many informal strategies that could be called "the acts of informal citizenship" that occur in the context of survival, protection and agency, arguing that these struggles for acquiring rights and tacit recognition and presence are crucial struggles for political acts.

In closing, this study argues that the small-scale changes of everyday resistance will accumulatively create an implicit acknowledgment of host state of their presence and the possibility to recognize their rights as refugees not "guests" or "burdens".

In other sight, this study thus provided a starting point from which to consider the "hidden agency" and "self-excluded agency" as prominent types of current urban refugees' politics, particularly for Syrian refugees, in non-traditional countries like Egypt. This pursues, on the one hand, to thinking to what extent hidden agency form adopted by urban refugees in other developing contexts receiving state may be emerged. On the other hand, it

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pursues to rearrange the nexus of state–citizen –and refugee and to rethink new concepts of informal citizens, refugee’s agency and informality in the contexts of the Global South where many marginalized urban subjects, like the urban refugees, have the ability to be present.

Investigating  
self–settled  
Syrian refugees’  
agency

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## Note

1. I use here the refugee concept as a synonym of asylum seeker to describe the *de facto* status of unregistered Syrians.

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