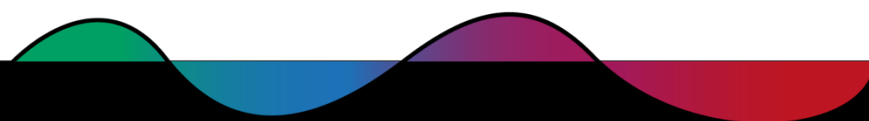


SOLROUTES



How Many Sudanese Kairos? Egypt Caravan Report I & II

Livio Amigoni; Federico Rahola

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How many Sudanese Kairos¹?

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This ethnographic report builds upon the relationships and insights of the first and second Caravan fieldworks, focus on the exploration of Sudanese individuals who have fled to Cairo in search of refuge. The primary aim of this research period is to further investigate their experiences in exile, particularly the support networks they have cultivated and the practices of solidarity that help sustain them. By focusing on these dynamics, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and shifting motivations that shape the lives of Sudanese migrants in Cairo. We arrived in Egypt in November 2024 for a four-week research period, which coincided with a series of cultural events focused on Sudan, organized by Cedej and the University of Padua at the French Institute. A key event during this period was the opening of the exhibition ‘Faisal

¹ As someone will know, in ancient Greek *Kairos* means both a right and/or critical moment in time.

Last Stop' (<https://cedejsudan.hypotheses.org/6977>), which displayed the outcomes of mapping workshops through diverse registers. The exhibition featured a counter-mapping of Faisal, a neighbourhood in Cairo, and the journey from Sudan to Cairo, both crafted by Sudanese women who navigate and negotiate their way through the area in search of a sense of home and safety. The exhibition was complemented by a series of screenings, audio installations, paintings, photographs, concerts, talks, and film screenings, all contributing to a rich cultural dialogue surrounding the Sudanese diaspora and their experiences of displacement.

This timing offered a rich opportunity to further engage with the Sudanese diaspora and artists. Many individuals who were part of the first phase of fieldwork were waiting for us, eager to reconnect. Yet, the fluidity of migration is evident, as others have moved on, A. has relocated to Qatar, Y. has returned to Sudan, and Z. has not been seen for a while. These changes underscore the constant shifting of networks and the transient nature of migration.

At the core of this research is a gendered approach to understanding the processes of migration and adaptation. This approach acknowledges that gender plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of both men and women in exile. This report explores how societal expectations, task assignments, and the roles evolve in the context of displacement. In particular, we aim to investigate how Sudanese youth navigate the intersection of gender and migration—how their roles are perceived by both genders and how these perceptions influence their adaptation to new environments.

One of the critical questions emerging from the previous fieldwork concerns the way young, highly educated Sudanese individuals have managed to create escape routes out of Sudan. Did they rely on pre-existing networks of relationships to facilitate their journey, or did they have to quickly build these connections as they fled? It is striking how many of these individuals appear to have created escape routes almost overnight—through friends, family, or even strangers who became essential lifelines. This raises the question of whether migration is ever truly a long-term, planned process or whether it is a sudden, improvised reaction to immediate need. These individuals, often in moments of extreme urgency, must adapt quickly, forging new networks and relationships while remaining prepared to move at a moment's notice. This leads to the exploration of the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration. Upon arriving in a new city like Cairo, Sudanese migrants are not only physically displaced but also forced to reinvent their lives.

Since the onset of the conflict in Sudan in April 2023, a range of humanitarian initiatives led by Sudanese artists, cultural and research institutions have emerged alongside limited international aid. These efforts, including financial support, facilitating safe exits, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting refugees' creative practices, have played a crucial role in survival and in shaping a peace narrative amidst destruction. Arts, events and moments in which a community in exile finds itself, gains a voice and heals from the wounds that are continually inflicted upon it. The last section examines these vernacular forms of humanitarianism, highlighting how cultural actors address urgent needs often overlooked by conventional aid systems.

The antecedent. Looking for an image of Khartoum, in Cairo

We chose Cairo as a node for the SolRoutes project on the basis of a political and geographical antecedent, a kind of detour or a drift. In a rather counter-intuitive way, we arrived into the Egyptian capital on the traces of a powerful yet fleeting (and somehow dialectical²) image of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, in the aftermath of the 2019 revolution that overturned the long-lasting el-Bashir's military and Islamic regime. That image of Khartoum was full of energy and hopes, of a vibrant city at the time of a revolt, one that in the meanwhile has been violently erased by the new war affecting Sudan, effaced and substituted by the ruins that nowadays spread and fill in all over the urban space. One of us has been there in the months following the revolution, and there he knew and met several mostly young persons (mainly students and political activists, with a remarkable female participation) directly engaged in a non-violent struggle against the deaf violence of the agonizing el-Bashir's regime, through everyday mobilizations and the reinventing of an urban public space. Many among them define their stay in the Egyptian capital as a form of political exile, since they refuse to consider themselves either as migrants and refugees.

Accordingly, our main aim was to investigate that which we assumed to be a form of forced migration and a diaspora, the scattered experiences and the remnants of the political energy spread out in the days of the Sudanese revolution, by tracking it down along the pathway followed by a whole generation of Sudanese displaced persons. At stake there was also a (maybe different

² Walter Benjamin used the notion of "dialectical image" to suggest "that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1969, On the Concept of History, Thesis VI).

and diffracted) idea of route, as the lived spatial configuration produced while fleeing, crossing and inhabiting a transient and temporary space as Cairo could appear; and even an alleged form of solidarity, as the material and relational fuel, in terms of cooperation and mutual support, enabling the very possibility of that route.

At this regard, we had previously built up and established a series of contacts at distance, from Italy, with some among the huge number of Sudanese who have been forced to leave the country after the 2022 coup and the following “un-civil” war affecting Sudan [since, it is more a war among military and paramilitary militias and against civilians than a proper civil war]. Particularly, we had the chance to run upon some of them as directly engaged in specific mobilizations against the EU border regime, either within European borderland (in Ventimiglia, Marseille, Calais, etc.) as well as in some external border zones, like Libya (it is the case of the extraordinary experience of “Refugees in Libya”, one of the attempts to directly contest migrants’ mass imprisonment in Libyan detention centers, that was mainly built up around the central political role played by Sudanese activists already involved in the 2019 revolution). Moreover, a huge number of Sudanese asylum seekers got going in contesting and denouncing, in different European cities, the forgotten war affecting Sudan, claiming for a direct support in their resistance against the military regime.

Egypt, however, from the standpoint of those who was living in the Khartoum , represented a sort of immediate (if not inexorable) choice, due to the current, almost impossible conditions of life in Sudan. Indeed, though not supported in any way by Egyptian government (who recognizes and established formal relations with current military regime in Sudan), hundreds of thousands of expatriated [The Egyptian government estimates that 1.2 million Sudanese have arrived in Egypt since April 2023, of which just over 600,000 are registered with UNHCR. Almost 75 percent are women and children. But local and international NGOs suggest the true number of Sudanese refugees in Egypt is significantly higher³] have found and find here, particularly in Cairo, a place where to stay at while waiting and working at distance.

On these assumptions, we expected to meet in Cairo a huge number of newcomers and “refugees”, be either temporary exiled and expatriated. Our original intention was accordingly to

³ <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/no-model-of-refuge-sudanese-refugees-in-egypt/>

map such a temporary, one-way and rather immediate route, focusing on its spatial organization, actual fabrication, relational dimension, as well as on the forms of material cooperation, the relations and mutual exchanges that fuel it. How a possible Sudanese Cairo has been imagined and built up; what are the material effects of this political diaspora; what the spatial instantiations of such a displacement; how Khartoum (and that powerful yet repressed image of a reinvented city) was in turn reinvented in Cairo; how solidarity practice are performed among a community in exile: these were, approximately, the initial questions at stake.

“Diary of Exile”

“Sudanese family moved to Cairo with all their traditions and customs. We lead a Sudanese life in Cairo: meetings where to share everything we have, in solidarity, emotional and material support. In joy and sorrow, we share everything among all of us”.

These words come from Saidia A. Rahim, a journalist from Khartoum expatriated in Cairo, and they seem to well depict the idea of a solidarity in exile, of a possible Sudanese Cairo. Together with her, as to further motivate the political significance of such a strong relation, a huge number of persons, mostly males and mainly former civil servants, university professors, schoolteachers, politicians, but also artists, musicians, tell in front of a camera a story of violence, tortures and violations of basic rights inflicted to them by the police of the military Sudanese government. But it is not just the persecution of a urban middle class to be at stake, since it involves a huge number of persons, men and women, coming from the rural areas of the country, particularly the South and the West (namely the South-Sudan and the Darfur). By the end of the sequence, the banner headlines of a newspaper announce that more than two and half a million of Sudanese moved to and live in Cairo. It seems to be a quite similar and updated picture of the present.

The fact is that all of this (the histories of violence, the numbers of exiled persons, the solidarity among them, as well as the idea of a Khartoum reinvented in Cairo) happened at the beginning of the 1990s. More precisely, these stories, voices and images come from a movie, “Diary of exile”, realized in 1993 by an extraordinary feminist and communist Egyptian filmmaker, journalist and actress, Ateyyat El Abnoudy, passed away in 2018 ⁴. And they seem to sound almost the same

⁴ Ateyyat El Abnoudy, Diary of Exile 1993 مفكرة الهجرة <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC57ZIYFYtY>

today: how to deal with such a temporal parallax? How to update and arguably redeem that movie and those stories?

Although the impression might be that one of a non-history, of a forced coaction and a relentless repetition (or of a sort of void and lack of events), it is precisely this impression that stands for and testifies the sense of a relentless history (as such full of acts and events) of violence and resistance: the violence of the state and the resistance of the people, of the subalterns, even in the seemingly unpolitical terms of an exodus and a form of civil desertion, in the will and the capacity to reinvent a Sudanese city within a city abroad, a Sudanese Cairo.

We start from the assumption that both this violence and the resistance, the historical weight of the thirty years separating that movie and that generation of Sudanese people in Cairo from the last one produced by current “uncivil war”, end up inscribing itself in the urban space and the dense social fabric of Cairo. In other words, such a weight is written and translated into the very idea of an ongoing, shifting and relentless Sudanese Cairo, one whose history and significance lays down in its different, multiple and ongoing urban and social stratifications. It is therefore a matter of diffraction (Barad 2014), of different layers that, time after time, precipitate while redrawing and reinventing a possible and actual city within a broader city: one that changes itself according to the political events affecting Sudan, as well as to the conjunctural political and social changes affecting that broader city, and that in turn modifies Cairo, “sudanizing” it.

Routes continuously overwritten

“Thousands of people die every day. Were we to pause and consider why each one of them died, and how – what would happen to us, the living? The world goes on whether we chose for it to do so or in defiance of us. And I, like millions of mankind, walk and move, generally in force of habit, in *a long caravan that ascends and descends, encamps, and then proceeds on its way. Life in this caravan is not altogether bad.* You no doubt are aware of this. The going maybe hard by day, the wilderness sweeping out before us like shoreless seas; we pour with sweat, our throats are parched with thirst, and we reach the frontier beyond which we think we cannot go. Then the sun sets, the air grows cold, and millions of stars twinkle in the sky. We eat and drink and the singer of the caravan breaks into song. Some of us pray in a group behind the Sheikh, other form ourselves into circles to dance and sing and clap. Above us the sky is warm and compassionate. Sometimes

we travel by night for as long as we have in mind to, and when the white thread is distinguished from the black we say, 'When dawn breaks the travellers are thankful that they have journeyed at night.' If occasionally we are deceived by a mirage, and if our heads, feverish from the action of heat and thirst, sometimes bubble with ideas devoid of any basis of validity, *no harm is done*. The spectres of night dissolve with the dawn, the fever of day is cooled by the night breeze. *Is there any alternative?*" (Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, 1969, pp.61-62, cursive our).

"A long caravan [...] proceeds in its way". The title of the novel notwithstanding (the North at stake here is not Egypt, rather Europe), this long and subjective excerpt of Tayeb Salih's "Season of migration to the North", one of the more outstanding instance of Sudanese XX century literature (a kind of "Arabian night in reverse"), gives back the idea of a permanent state of movement, of an exodus that proceeds along generations, no matters where pointed to. A space-time caravan indeed, apparently inexorable and without alternatives, yet one wherein life reveals itself to be not "altogether bad". It is thus a story of loss and reinvention in both time and space, always on the move. These are basically the ingredients and characters proper of a diaspora (Hall 1990), both as a space and a condition that are permanently in between (Clifford 1997, Rahola 2000). And it is exactly this "in-between" dimension, along routes that are continuously re- and overwritten, that characterizes the Sudanese Cairo as a diasporic space-time. In the time we spent in Cairo we had the chance to encounter some few moments, features and actors of such a huge caravan, be either harsh experiences of drought and deprivation, few sparkles of hope and happiness, and many artists, dancers, scholars, militants, activists all of them on the move, sharing a broader diasporic condition, a further "season of migration to the North".

Within this peculiar, somehow unique and historically grounded experience of diaspora, once arrived in the Egyptian capital through a rather hazardous and at times smuggled journey (from the gate of Aswan or the passage of the desert westward), Sudanese expatriates encounter and may rely on a rather familiar environment. A huge network made of as many direct and personal relations, as well as on a large, dense and heterogeneous (more or less ancient or recent) Sudanese presence that is mainly concentrated in some urban and con-urban districts of the huge metropolitan space – above all the neighbourhood of Faisal, where approximately 250.000 Sudanese citizens live.

The fact is that a similar familiar milieu was already experienced by the protagonists of *Diary of exile*, at the time of the exodus prompted by el-Bashir's military coup of 1989: they didn't find themselves facing a "new world to build up" either, since that world already existed as the outcome of a *longue durée* overlapping of former movements and presences.

As a matter of fact, there exists a dense historical background and a particular thickness, an overall interlaced historical (colonial and postcolonial) plot behind the Sudanese presence in Cairo and in Egypt. It dates back to a deeply and strictly interlaced relation that goes beyond any formal or political national state or border, at least since the British colonial rule and the subsequent "condominium" of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1899. It is therefore a story of colonial legacy that violently overlaps and imposes itself rearticulating previous routes and movements all over the whole region, at the confluence of Blue and White Niles – an history that dates back up to the ancient Nubian civilization and the conquest of its northern territories annexed to Egypt in the III century BC.⁵

In the (post)colonial space-time, those relations and movements registered the progressive dismantling of the British empire and of its rule over the whole High and Low Niles territories. They were redefined by the independence of Egypt in 1922 and, thereafter, in 1953, by the abolishing of the British mandatory Protectorate in Sudan followed by the formal independence of the country in 1956, up to the endless military coups.

It is in this extended historical span that the Sudanese presence in Egypt and in Cairo stretches itself, by rearticulating generation after generation, layer over layer, along the sequence of historical and political moments and events affecting both Sudan and Egypt.

Layers

It is better to recap and redefine our assumption, the idea that if it exists something as a Sudanese Cairo, this is not at all a homogeneous and univocal city, and it is rather based on the articulations of different multiple spatial and temporal layers that often, but not necessarily, intertwined one another. In other words, a possible Sudanese Cairo is the multifarious effect, almost the hologram,

⁵ Nubia was the seat of one of the earliest civilizations of ancient Africa, the Kerma culture, which lasted from around 2500 BC until its conquest by the new Kingdom of Egypt.

produced by the relations among those layers, insofar as they temporally and spatially coalesce, match and collide/collude each other.

Historically, Sudanese presence in Cairo can be firstly conceived of as the outcome of forms of movement and migration that have been for a long time neither recorded nor governed by state apparatuses and borders. In this case, it is a matter of a *de facto* establishment, historically and materially settled yet politically unrecognized, like an invisible presence. But it can also be the outcome of different singular historical and environmental events, such as the second realization of the Aswan dam in 1958 that violently reconfigured water supply and distribution at the convergence of the two Niles (“reversing the Niles current”), and deeply affected rural economies along the border, prompting massive processes of displacement, eviction and relocation amidst the Sudanese rural population. To be sure, hydro-political factors aside, this displaced presence is a direct answer to the geopolitical violence and the relentless state of war that affected Sudan before and particularly after its formal independence. And it reflected also different processes and events occurring in Egyptian XX century history, politics and economy – from Nasser’s tricontinental pan-Arabism (and the two wars against Israel that requested a massive recruitment even of Sudanese troops in the Egyptian army), to Sadat westernization process, and Mubarak and current Al-Sisi ongoing repositioning politics. All these historical and political shifts produced in turn a different landscape for Sudanese presences, in terms of either intensification or downplaying of the border between the two states, thus modifying former experiences of (at time temporary and circular) “migrations” and commuting along the border, family reunions, bi-national (and double absent) residences, up to the current crisis of “refugees” fleeing from the war triggered by 2022 military coup.

This is just to briefly sketch out some few different historical and political moments among a broader history of movements, giving back the multiple/multilayered dimensions coalescing into a process of ongoing dis-location, or dis- and replacement. A whole range of conceptual terms or epistemic categories seem to converge and being drawn in here, from labor migration and internal displacement, to diaspora, exile, asylum and statelessness. All of them are in turn reflected into a kaleidoscopic array of different stories, biographies and conditions.

Nowadays, in Cairo, it is possible to encounter people who were born here from Sudanese parents and have spent all their lives in Egypt, being scholarly educated, working and dwelling for all their

life in Egypt and never in Sudan, without obtaining any form of recognition not to say of citizenship (a condition of statelessness). But there are also several other cases of more or less randomized arrivals, individual or through family reunions, thus approximating the temporary status of (im)migrants; as well as different waves of political refugees triggered by the several political crisis that affected the country, up to those that, until May 2023, have applied for asylum due to the current state of war. To these huge (and often dark) numbers, it must be added the more recent irregularized and countered ones produced by the current increasing blockage against Sudanese entries that has been imposed by Egyptian Government and fostered by the ghostly pressure exerted by European border politics (that is, the outsourcing to Egypt of a delocalized EU border). These are few immediate instances of as many different Sudanese ways of being, living and inhabiting the Egyptian capital, of as many possible Sudanese Cairos.

What kind of relations are established among all these different conditions, layers, generations, stories and biographies? Does it make sense to talk about a possible and broader form of “solidarity in exile”? If so, how does such a solidarity articulate itself? How does it insert itself, interact or react in/with/against the local context? Does it pass through and along further lines of difference (be either of class, gender, age, colour/race)? What kind of spatial configurations this possible intersectional solidarity can assume and produce? May the idea of route, as a political infrastructure from below, a subaltern infrastructure, make sense of the multiple ways of inhabiting such a diasporic and displaced space? If so, how these routes or subaltern infrastructures are materially and territorially organized and where do they point to? Is it just a matter of one-way journeys from Sudan to Egypt, or is embedded in the international chessboard?

An inclined plane

These are some of the questions our research project had to cope with, while recognizing the weight of an overall slanting and inclined plane that looms over these multiple Sudanese Kairos, perceived both as critical and right moments, as traps and as crossroads.

This slippery and gloomy perception has been fuelled by different objective and subjective factors. From the one hand, it has been increased by the overall harsher conditions of life (particularly in Cairo but also in other Egyptian cities like Alexandria and Aswan) imposed by the economic crisis affecting Egypt, by the inflationist trend of the Egyptian currency and the subsequent, violent

growth in the cost of life. To this actual and material dimension, one that directly affects Egyptian labour market, Sudanese job possibilities and household economies, it must be added a strictly connected and violent harshening of the political environment: the sense of a trap that is fostered by the tightening of Egyptian border policies, by the increasing threat of deportation for those whose presence has been irregularized or suddenly defined as irregular, and also by the shadowy, more or less explicit pressure exerted by European border politics onto Egypt in order to prevent massive exits (westwards, via Libya, or through Balkans) towards Europe.⁶

The indirect effects of this trap may translate themselves into a more acute perception of the colour line in everyday urban life, in terms of an increasing racialization of the Sudanese presence (a phenomenon already at stake in Egyptian history, though not so acutely perceived in the past), and also into a kind of (re)discovering of a specific “africanization” and a particular blackness within the Sudanese diaspora. But the ultimate effect of the inclined plane consists in nourishing a spatial and temporal perception of “Sudanese Kairos” as at the same time a heavier and emptier space-time. As though it would sum up the weight of all the different historical, generational and urban layers constituting it. This in turn may feed a peculiar feeling of disenchantment, increased by the sense of a transient, temporary and harsher stage along a road to somewhere.

And nonetheless, even as a stage, Sudanese Cairo represents a definitely overcrowded and heterogeneous space-time, one that reveals itself to be dynamic, that is, relentlessly in the making and on the move – by finding out its own significance into its very material drawing and spatial fabric; by suggesting a specific work of knotting, among different layers, that redefines the overall space around.

Accordingly, the main point at stake in our research concerns the possibility to conceive of such a specific space-time, a peculiar Sudanese Kairos relentlessly in the making and on the move, as a dynamic place that is produced, crossed and dwelled at the same time, that is, in terms of what we intend for as a route. And it also concerns the possibility to read the whole material and

⁶ A report by Amnesty dated back to September 2023 denounced the mass arrest and forced deportation of Sudanese exiled from Egypt: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/06/egypt-authorities-must-end-campaign-of-mass-arrests-and-forced-returns-of-sudanese-refugees/#:~:text=Evidence%20indicates%20that%20thousands%20of,Egypt%20in%20September%202023%20alone.>

affective relations constituting such a route and the ways of inhabiting it in terms of a possible form of solidarity.

Under this perspective, the impression could be that we privilege a temporal declination of the idea of route, as a specific and transformative process made of different stratifications/layers immersed into a (historical) time. Yet, although (or exactly because of its) being made of/in history, being a matter of time, it is mainly through space, its redefinitions, transformations and relentless production that it is possible to address and detect the weight and consistency of this apparently stuck and yet dynamic Kairos.

Steps towards

Since the beginning of our stay in Cairo, our main institutional interlocutor has been the French cultural centre of Cedej Khartoum⁷. Cedej is part of the broader Mixed Unit of French Research Institutes abroad, and it is affiliated with the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). Before 2023 and the (un)civil war affecting Sudan, it had a lovely, graceful venue in Khartoum II, guesting and supporting Sudanese and international researchers and scholars. After the war outbreak has been temporary relocated and hosted within the major Institute in Cairo. It is therefore a further peculiar, fragmented piece of Khartoum in Cairo, an exiled international institution whose contacts with the Sudanese capital has been violently interrupted and now they are particularly active in supporting the community of exiled Sudanese in the Egyptian capital: an exiled office for exiled persons.

Our daily attending at Cedej, the direct contacts and ongoing confrontation with its director, Marie Bassi, and the participation to different events and activities carried on at the centre have been fundamental in our attempt to orient ourselves in Cairo. Particularly, we attended several meetings, workshops and events that have been directly organized by Cedej, either within its office and at the nearby French Institute, in Garden City. All these moments and events (a first one on the Sudanese exiled diaspora, a further on fieldwork access with the colleagues of the Cedej Cairo, and a further with some Sudanese researchers in Cairo, together with an event a concert and meeting with a Sudanese hip-hop crew in exile – organized by a researcher of the Cedej at the

⁷ <https://cedej Sudan.hypotheses.org/>

French Institute de Culture) registered the participation of different Sudanese scholars, researchers, students, artists, musicians, and families. Furthermore, always at Cedej, we had the chance to meet two Italian colleagues of the Department of Geography of the University of Padova, both of them involved into a research project whose main aim, the spatial and affective mapping of Sudanese diaspora, profoundly resonates with our own one.

On these assumptions we spent the first two weeks alternating some few encounters with Sudanese researchers and students, with as many journeys to Faysal, the main Sudanese neighbourhood within the city (a 8 km long street, Al Malek Faisal Street, cutting north to south El-Giza municipality) and particularly at a café and cultural centre placed there. Another encounter was the director of a non-profit cultural space, the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC), placed at Talaat Harb, nearby Tahrir Sq. The CIC is an active and vibrant cultural space, promoting conferences, research and events that have a considerable echo and impact in Cairo's and Egyptian cultural life, with connections with some of the most relevant and prominent artistic institutions worldwide (as Documenta in Kassel and the Venice Biennale). It is also attended and used by Sudanese political and cultural committees and scholars (as in the case of the meeting for the launch of a book on Kwame Nkrumah written by a Sudanese scholar).

An encumbering background, or two.

For a whole series of well evident historical, political, and even cultural reasons, Cairo can be by no means considered as a simple (not to say neutral) background of the research. On the contrary, one of the main questions at stake in our project concerns precisely the need to wonder and detect how far the overwhelming weight of the city (and of Egypt as well) directly affected and affects Sudanese presence and lives, as well as how it in turn reacted and still reacts to those presences. With an official metropolitan population over the 22 millions inhabitants and an extent, in terms of urbanized area, of almost three thousands square km, Cairo represents the continental biggest metropolitan hub, that which urban scholars refer to as a global mega-city. And it is traversed by relentless urbanization processes, both in terms of ongoing internal movements of population from rural and surrounding areas, and of huge migrations from outside (particularly, as we know, from Sudan), as well as, more generally, by gigantic and often spectacular urbanistic development plans and projects. Within such huge relentless and ongoing transformative

processes, even the conspicuous presence of more than two millions of Sudanese or Sudanese-origins inhabitants ends up being rather diluted within the bigger urban fabric, swallowed into the huge metropolitan urban and peri-urban space, scattered and often concentrated or segregated within a certain numbers of neighbourhoods and areas (such as Dokki or Faysal, towards Giza). As already stated before, the Sudanese presence represents both a historically grounded trait and a continuously renewed process within the city, working as a form of direct outcome or evidence of the political turmoil and war affecting the country since its formal independence up to the present. Here, as final remarks, it is necessary to briefly focus on the weight imposed by Egypt on both the Sudanese diaspora and on the more precarious and direr geopolitical balances defined by a generalized state of war. In a rather immediate way, the overwhelming role played by both Cairo and the Egyptian State/Government does not only concerns the direct effects on Sudanese presences within the country, and it also re-addresses an overall array of movements around Egypt. It is therefore not only and simply the case of a receiving or immediate destination country and rather that one of a pole that magnetically elicits, prompts, readdresses, expels and contains a whole and diffracted complex of movements and regimes of mobility.

This in turn reflects the central role Egypt plays in redefining the overall migration and border politics in the whole North African and Sub-Sahara area. It could be said at this regard that it also directly reflects the shadowy weight of European political pressures, that prompt Egypt to act as a sort of outsourced and anticipated EU external border. But it would seem a rather partial and limited reading, particularly since it sensibly and erroneously reduces the crucial role Egypt plays as a main regional (super)power as well as its blackmail weight over Europe in terms of regional geopolitical stability. Such an overwhelming dimension has been further accentuated by the specific geopolitical conjuncture currently involving both Egypt and Cairo within a global crisis scenario such as the one triggered by the Israeli attack on Gaza.

During the time we spent in Cairo, the Israeli military operations and the invasion of Gaza reached one of their most violent peaks, and the normally high security standards imposed by the military and by Al-Sisi regime on the streets of Cairo have been, if possible, further accentuated. This is due to the daily landing into the city of international diplomatic missions: Recep Erdogan, but also the US State secretary Anthony Blinken, as well as members of both Israeli government and of the Palestinian Authorities of the West Bank, among the others, arrived in the city to meet Al-Sisi. And

it is interesting to note how far the echo of the everyday Israeli strikes and bombings over Gaza has been in a way deadened within Egyptian media and Cairo civil society, up to the point that Egypt, though directly and deeply concerned by the current war, has been and still is one of the places where the news from the adjacent Gaza and particularly from the Sinai region (where the Government was secretly arranging a huge series of facilities where to “temporary receive and host” a possible mass flight from Gaza) are more censored. Some few Egyptian friends we encountered in those days affirmed that they went to know about the operations in Sinai, on the border between El-Arish and Rafah, directly from international media.

Above all, the dire situation in Gaza, along with the deeply uncertain one regarding Sinai and the ambiguous role played by Egypt about the possible relocation of thousands of actual or potential Palestinian refugees, directly testifies the incredibly destabilizing effect of that war upon an overall area. Egyptian Government reacts to such an uncertain scenario by producing an increasing hostile environment to be played against any form of forced movement and condition of displacement (be either of Palestinian refugees fleeing from Israeli attacks or Sudanese escaping the (un)civil war affecting the country). This blockage represents a crucial political element, and a key factor to keep into consideration for any attempt to describing both the possibility of migrant routes and the relations of solidarity enabling them.

As for the emblematic case of Sudan, war (as well as climate change and other “natural” disasters), rather than a conjunctural or exceptional factor reveals itself to be a structural trait in contemporary geopolitical uneven or multi-polar order: one that in turn directly imposes a continuous redefinition of both borders and routes, by triggering further movements and an overall condition of (forced) mobility and displacement.

Two short dispatches from 2024 late spring

Obviously, the continuous worsening of the situation in Gaza under the Israeli military attack directly affects Egypt as a neighbour country. At this regard, the formal and cruel closed-door politics adopted by the State against many Palestinians who tried to escape from the ruins of Gaza is officially motivated by the arguably irreversible effects a civilian’s mass flight or exodus would produce against any possible future idea or existence of a Palestinian Gaza. Yet, such a formal position hides a more shadowy and lucrative prohibitionist regime, one that fosters a kind of state-

trafficking through the monopolistic use of an Egyptian coach line as the only way to get out from Rafah/El Arish border post.⁸

Still, with all its tragic and catastrophic evidence, the Gaza crisis is by no means the only war surrounding Egypt. As a kind of continuously unheard leitmotiv the (un)civil war affecting Sudan produces at least as many ruins, death and flights. And (not differently from Gaza) it always seems to come back to the same places and locations.

Two apparently unrelated dispatches give back the dire predicaments affecting Sudanese people in flight from that forgotten war as well as those who already reached Cairo.

1. The first one comes from an accurate report realized by The New York Times at beginning of June 2024, and it depicts the tragic situation affecting the Darfur region and the siege of its main city, El Fasher (once again, back in the same place). Just to summarize and recapitulate the situation, the report opens maintaining that:

“Longstanding ethnic tensions have underpinned the violence in Darfur for decades. Just as the Arab-dominated Janjaweed carried out a genocidal campaign against ethnic Africans in the 2000s, the Rapid Support Forces are targeting them now, with international warnings that a genocide could happen again.” And it adds that in April, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the American ambassador to the U.N., warned that Darfur capital, El Fasher was “on the precipice of a large-scale massacre.”

It therefore reminds how “El Fasher is not just a city under siege. It is also a hub for relief aid in a region hurtling toward famine. Already 1.7 million people are starving in Darfur (...). Now, the consequences of the war are rippling across the region, which is the size of Spain. Food and medicine are running short in East Darfur, where tens of thousands fled the fighting, because the supply route through El Fasher has been cut off (...). And in Central Darfur, some food prices doubled after commercial traders could no longer operate (...).” At this regard, UN officials accuse “both sides in the civil war of using hunger as a weapon.”

⁸ An investigation carried on by Middle East Eye reveals that Hala, a company owned by an ally of the Egyptian president may have earned at least \$118m in three months, making \$2m a day from Palestinians fleeing Israel's war on Gaza. See <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-firm-palestinians-fleeing-war-gaza>.

As in a kind of loop the report seems to record again and again the story of a further siege, and of a further exodus. To where?

A possible answer could be recovered in a second dispatch, from Cairo, an article published by an independent NGO that directly outlines the effects and the outcomes of that crisis, giving back the material image and consistency of the inclined plane we have described above.

2. The article opens with a marginal and apparently secondary news from Cairo, regarding the historical presence of Sudanese schools in the city – a quite decisive asset within a diasporic experience – that actually sheds lights on the hostile environment Egypt government is arranging against refugees:

“Egyptian authorities have decided to suspend classes in Sudanese schools in Egypt, as well as in other foreign schools. This decision has been met with widespread opposition from Sudanese families living in Egypt and from people involved in public service. Families whose children attend a Sudanese school in Cairo have received letters informing them that classes will be suspended from June 2024. The letters explain that the Egyptian authorities have made this decision and require schools to “adapt their conditions in accordance with the necessary permits after a review.” It therefore underlines how “The decision poses a major challenge for Sudanese families in Egypt. The current alternatives are to enrol their children in El-Azhar Islamic schools (...) or in international schools, which are a financial burden for Sudanese families.”

While expressing “concern that Egyptian authorities may take new measures to discourage Sudanese students from enrolling in Egyptian schools.”, the article directly cites the words of a politician from the Popular Congress Party (PCP), Mortada Ibrahim who considers that decision “another form of pressure from the Egyptian authorities, similar to when buses carrying Sudanese were sent back to Sudan”, and points to social media campaigns against the presence of Sudanese refugees in Egypt, echoing the Egyptian government’s policy towards Sudan.

Downplaying the impact of the Sudanese presence in Egypt, Ibrahim notes that the number of Sudanese registered with UNHCR in Egypt “does not represent a burden on the organization, since most Sudanese in Egypt rely on their own resources and the support of families abroad.” And he thus criticizes the Foreign Ministry and the Sudanese Embassy in Cairo for “failing to address the problems faced by Sudanese citizens in Egypt, especially in the field of education,

calling on the embassy to intervene in the decision to suspend studies, “since such decisions affect the fate of entire generations.”

Toward the end, the article reminds that “[A]ccording to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), around 500,000 people have fled Sudan to Egypt since the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) began in mid-April 2023. Until April 27 last year, more than 20 buses arrived at the Argeen border crossing every day, a number that soon doubled.”

Meanwhile, in April 2024, “Radio Dabanga reported that thousands of Sudanese refugees who had fled to Egypt were detained by Egyptian authorities in a network of secret military bases and then deported back to their war-torn country, often without the opportunity to seek asylum (...) few weeks ago the hospitals in Aswan had received dozens of bodies of Sudanese people who had died en route to the southern Egyptian city, many due to the scorching heat.”

We do believe that these two short flashes effectively depict the inclined plane mentioned above, while shedding light to the dire predicaments affecting both the harsher and risky exit-routes from Sudan and the worsened conditions of exile in Egypt and Cairo. All this directly affects and altered a possible Sudanese Cairo, the idea of a foreign city within a city that reveals itself to be as multiple and heterogeneous as filled in with creeps. At the same time, those dispatches suggest and push us to follow the traces of other escape-routes along the Sudanese diaspora, to further nodes, caravans and destinations.

Gendering solidarity among diaspora

From our arrival in Cairo and our first chats with the network of Cedej people, it was clear that the recent Sudanese migrations to Egypt are characterised by a significant gender issue. In fact, unlike the Sudanese routes we intercepted in Europe, here we immediately detected a majority female presence. Mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, friends all fled after the start of yet another war that this time reached as far as Khartoum. We have no official numbers on the gender composition of the refugees who have arrived in Egypt over the past year, but several of our sources say that the majority are women who arrived alone or accompanied or with part of their families. It is indeed a common situation of fleeing the country in search for safety. The condition

of waiting for the end of the war is getting longer, there is difficulty in understanding what to do, precarity, sadness, a lot of uncertainty as well as strong networks and solidarity.

The first women we got to know were some girls who attended the Cedej research centre. They too arrived in the last year after the fighting began in Khartoum and got a scholarship to carry out research in Cairo. We accepted the proposal of the director of the centre, which also fled after the start of the conflict, to accompany them in structuring the project and writing an initial draft of an article. The opportunity to discuss their research projects made it possible to get to know each other and be able to address other issues somehow related to our research interest. In doing so, we deepened our mutual knowledge during drifting moments around the city and in-depth interviews. This allowed us to navigate the field with the people who live it and to explore certain aspects in order to try to detect survival and support practices experienced by Sudanese refugees in Cairo.

A very interesting chat with a former student of the University of Khartoum, with whom I had already had the opportunity to get to know during my PhD research period in Sudan, expresses very clearly how solidarity practices are carried out especially by women and among women.

I arrived in Egypt mid of July, two months after the war, with my mother and siblings, we came by car, they took us directly from our home and we arrived here, it is difficult now because we left but other relatives are still there, my grandmother, aunt, uncle, big brother. We choose Egypt because we came here regularly, two years ago we were here for holiday, we came maybe ten times, we know Egypt very well, culture is similar and not very expenses for us, the language is the same, we came also to treat my father, for medical reasons. The rest of family is in Omdurman, it's a month that we cannot even communicate, there isn't still internet there. We support them, we send money from here because in this moment is not possible to work in Sudan, my mother is a teacher, there are many Sudanese school here in Cairo. For Sudanese is not easy in Egyptian school, to be integrated well. I would have not come here for living if the war didn't start, even if I came may times in the past was different, I see that Egyptian treat us differently now, before they were very nice, generous, now is completely different, it upside down, because we they think we come from war and we are broke, they are afraid we don't pay rent.

There is a huge difference among men and women coming here. Actually, more women came here after the war, and Egypt made easy for them to come but put a visa for men, they have to pay. Before

the war it was kind of free movement among Egypt and Sudan, now is different. I think here women adapt better than men, because they built their community, in every neighbourhood they gather, or do WhatsApp group 'Faisal women' and they communicate, help each other, share resources, meet for friendly moment. Men are different, they don't talk each other if they don't know. Let's say if I go down on the street and I see a Sudanese woman I introduce myself and talk a little bit, men instead will just say 'Hi'. There is different how we behave, we (women) help each other, men have difficulties expressing feelings, asking for help, create links and trust.

In the first part of the interview, she clearly tells us how the climate for the Sudanese in Egypt is changing even though historically there has been a lot of easy movement between the two countries. Their family, for example, used to go to Egypt on holiday or to receive treatment that was not available in Sudan. Now instead a growing racism is mounting along with the fear of an invasion after the start of the war. Moreover, what emerges from her account is a strong difference in how solidarity relations and dynamics are structured along gender lines. A feeling of vindication emerges of women supporting each other and networking to cope with the difficulties of survival and adaptation to the new context. Men instead are described in a passive and individualised role in this moment of emergency outside the country.

In another conversation with a Sudanese student in exile, some of the motivations and aspirations connected to the migration project were framed according to gender dynamics within families. Indeed, among the motivations for men to stay is the patriarchal structure of the Sudanese family in which the man is in charge and does not want to leave the home, even though it is in fact the women who rule it and know it. *There is a majority of women who come here, many women have decided to come, they have businesses. The men don't want to leave, they feel like cowards to leave Sudan, the house, they have patriarchal ideas about the house, they feel they are the head of the family, and they don't want to leave. Actually, it is the women who know the house best, who take care of it on a daily basis, they know the details and the secrets,*

A very close situation that shows this strong sense of solidarity that women perform among themselves involves two of our informants, who at the time we met were hosting Salma, a Sudanese girl who had just arrived in Cairo. She was pregnant and had made the trip with a friend of theirs, and once they arrived, she was invited to stay with them, while she was waiting for her

husband to arrive. They didn't know each other but for the fact of being Sudanese and a newcomer made sure that she was housed for the time she needed. Similar to their support action, we discover that those kind of spontaneous and genuine gestures of solidarity are widespread and very present in the values and conducts that the Sudanese diaspora carries. A collective attitude of leaving no one behind, which is often presented as part of Sudanese culture.

This attitude of solidarity is also visible on social platforms where to search for support and help. Being following Sudanese Facebook groups for a month, I realised the huge number of posts and discussions going on. Indeed, among the hundreds of posts circulating every day there is everything, from requests for help, information, gifts, work search and proposals, visa issues, document requests, renting places, selling items etc. Clearly noticeable is the predominance of posts by women sharing material and emotional support. There are also pages specifically fostering the gendered network of solidarity that exists in Faisal, '*Sudanese Women in Faisal*'.

Post: *hello my sisters and brothers, I am in a very critical situation, I have no money or food to provide to my children, they haven't eaten anything since yesterday, I gave my youngest a biscuits with water, I don't want money but I just want food to my kids, and I can do any work but I couldn't find, so help*
Answers was filled with comments from members like: *where are you? - How can I help u? - Give me your contact? - Give your location! - We are here for you sister / contact me / check your inbox...etc.*

It would be interesting to follow this kind of digital ethnography to understand what kind of demands the majority are, what issues are being solved, what forms of solidarity are being channelled to the platform.

In the second period in Egypt, I tried to explore how the plans and motivations of these individuals have evolved over the course of a year and a half since the onset of the war, with no peace agreement in sight. But how do they experience this reinvention? How do they navigate the complexity of adapting to a new environment, language, and culture? How gender influences sometimes radically different experiences?

Upon arriving in Cairo, it quickly became apparent that the recent composition of Sudanese refugee was marked by a distinct gender dynamic. Unlike the Sudanese routes I encounter in Europe, a significant presence of women was tangible in the capital. Many of these women—mothers, daughters, sisters, and grandmothers—had fled Sudan after the war reached Khartoum.

While exact numbers are unavailable, sources and informants indicate that women make up the majority of those arriving in Egypt, alone and often with parts of their families. The reality I encountered revealed a notable shift in demographic patterns, with a growing number of women and children moving. This increase is directly linked to the spread of the ongoing conflict in Sudan, which has forced many families to flee their homes in search of safety.

Nowadays a common experience shared by many is the state of "waiting" - a prolonged period of uncertainty as the war continues, with a sense of precariousness and sadness hanging over daily life. At the same time women narratives also claim a strong networks of solidarity among them as a vital source for their stay. Many men instead decided to remain in Sudan, as breadwinner, to protect the house, not to abandon rest of the family, or move for a period and then went back. Many expressed the feeling of being stuck, paralyzed, depressed and not finding the conditions to stay in Egypt.

My initial interactions were with women who had arrived in Cairo on scholarships for research, granted after the onset of the conflict. Through engaging with their research projects, we were able to deepen our understanding of their experiences and explore aspects of survival and solidarity in the refugee context. One of the key insights came from a conversation with a former student of the University of Khartoum. She shared her experience of fleeing to Egypt with her mother and siblings, citing both practical reasons—familiarity with Egypt, affordable costs, and a history of visiting for medical reasons—and emotional challenges. Despite her past familiarity with the country, she noted a significant shift in how Egyptians treat Sudanese refugees now, marked by increased suspicion and xenophobia. Interestingly, she highlighted a notable difference in their family experience: women, she observed, adapt better to their new circumstances, as they form communal networks to support each other through WhatsApp groups and local gatherings. In contrast, men were described as less open to forming connections, often reluctant to seek help or express vulnerability leading them to have limited social relationships and work opportunities. This gendered solidarity also emerged in other interviews where those women recount informal support practices. For example, two women we had taken in their house a pregnant girl just arrived in Cairo, offering her shelter while waiting for her husband to arrive. Others decided to meet once a week to cook food to distribute to people in need of their district. This kind of spontaneous solidarity, often based on shared nationality and mutual need, is widespread in the Sudanese

diaspora and reflects a collective cultural value of "leaving no one behind." These acts of support were also evident in online spaces, particularly Facebook groups, where women often lead the efforts to offer material and emotional help. Posts requesting assistance, such as food or work, were met with immediate responses, showing the deep sense of communal responsibility among women.

From my encounters and conversations, it emerges that the emotional responses are incredibly varied. Some express a sense of defeat and resignation, while others feel a profound sense of anger and a desire for revenge against the forces that pushed them to leave. There is also a strong sense of nostalgia, particularly for those who left family members behind in Sudan. But it's not just nostalgia—it's also a deep struggle, a push to not let the circumstances define them. They are not only surviving but trying to rebuild control over their lives in the face of displacement and ongoing war.

The future seems to be a major point of uncertainty. Some people talk about returning to Sudan, but there's a sense of hopelessness in their words. They often say, "When it's safe to go back." But for many, there's a recognition that the political situation isn't likely to improve anytime soon, which forces them to reconsider their plans. Some are exploring other destinations, other countries in Africa, maybe Europe. I see how these plans change rapidly over time, and how much of it depends on their social networks and access to resources. There's also a lot of discussion around the idea of "home." For some, Sudan is still home, but for others, Cairo might feel like the next best option for the time being. But there's always this underlying uncertainty, a question of "where to next?"

As I continue my fieldwork and know better the context and my informants, one aspect that has begun to emerge with increasing significance is the role of family ties and parental dynamics in shaping the gendered nature of migration. It's striking how deeply migration processes are intertwined with familial structures and obligations, and how these dynamics shift when extended families are scattered across multiple countries. There is an intricate web of relationships that forms, sometimes over vast distances, with varying degrees of responsibility and emotional burden placed on family members who remain behind or who are left to fend for themselves in a new country. In most cases the family have been divided since was not safe to travel for someone,

it was too expensive to travel all together, didn't want to abandon the country in difficult time or again someone stayed for protecting property.

What I find particularly interesting is how these dynamics are not just about survival or economic support; they are also deeply gendered. Family roles, especially those of women, are crucial in how people experience migration, and this becomes even more complex when considering children left behind or unaccompanied minors. These situations raise questions about responsibility, sacrifice, and the negotiation of familial duties within a transnational context.

The concept and reality of transnational families opens a space to reflect on marriage as a key site of both personal and strategic action. I've been discussing in depth about how marriage practices within these families are not simply about love or cultural tradition. In many cases, they serve as vital mechanisms for navigating migration systems, especially for those trying to circumvent the rigid and often hostile migration policies.

Families, especially those split in different societies, are forced to adapt to new circumstances and challenges in the diaspora. Women are taking on new roles both within their families, work environments and in the community at large. This reshaping of familial structures is not without its challenges, but it also opens opportunities for greater solidarity and mutual support. Women are assuming new roles both within their households, working environment and within the broader refugee community. This shift, while challenging, also offers opportunities for empowerment and breaking patriarchal habits. Women, many of whom had traditional roles in Sudan, are now becoming central figures in community networks, organizing support structures that provide emotional and practical needs of refugees. However, this shift is not without its difficulties, as traditional gender roles often clash with the realities of life in exile.

A key element of the talks was the neighborhood of Faysal in Cairo that has become the main hub for Sudanese refugees. The women in this community, many of whom are navigating their own trauma and loss, have formed networks of support and businesses that are critical to their survival and well-being. These networks offer resources, emotional support, help with practical matters, and serve as a vital source of empowerment in an otherwise uncertain and hostile environment.

In conclusion, the research sheds light on the intersection of gender, displacement, and the refugee experience, emphasizing the resilience of Sudanese women in Cairo. The findings underscore the critical role of solidarity, particularly among women, in helping their community to

navigate the challenges of exile. The study also provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities refugees face in adapting to new environments, where the tension between temporary displacement and long-term exile often shapes their identities and survival strategies.

Egypt-Sudan Border of Aswan.

During our stay in Cairo, we heard numerous accounts of the Aswan crossing, the border between Sudan and Egypt. Indeed, since April 2023, Sudan has been devastated by the conflict between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which has led to widespread violence against civilians and rampant sexual assaults. Millions of people have been displaced, leading to severe food shortages and an increased risk of famine. The situation remains dangerous for Sudanese citizens, who cannot return home and in view of this decide to leave the country. We decided then to go and monitor the situation at the main entry point for people fleeing. Despite our short stay, we were able to note the substantial movement of people, which we understood to be going in both directions, entry and exit. Moreover, as there is an airport, many people arrive here by plane to and from Port Sudan, since the airport in Khartoum is out of use after the bombings last April.

An investigation, conducted in collaboration between the Refugees Platform in Egypt (RPE)⁹ and The New Humanitarian¹⁰, examines the Egyptian military's large-scale deportations of Sudanese refugees. The Refugees Platform in Egypt, a civil society organisation dedicated to defending human rights, approached The New Humanitarian, an independent and non-profit newsroom, to share evidence of these activities. Reporters corroborated the allegations through extensive interviews with refugees, lawyers, and human rights groups, as well as by obtaining documents from confidential government sources and utilizing open-source investigative techniques.

They uncovered that thousands of Sudanese refugees, who had fled to Egypt, were detained by Egyptian authorities in a network of covert military bases before being forcibly deported back to Sudan, often without the opportunity to seek asylum. These actions, documented by reporters,

⁹ <https://rpegy.org/en/>

¹⁰ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigations/2024/04/25/exclusive-inside-egypt-secret-scheme-detain-deport-thousands-sudan-refugees>

violate the refugee conventions ratified by Egypt. The revelations of pushbacks by Egyptian authorities occur against the backdrop of the European Union's financial commitments to Cairo, aimed at curbing migration to Europe. This arrangement has drawn criticism for potentially implicating European nations in the abuses perpetrated against refugees in Egypt. The deportations are being enforced amid an escalation of the year-long conflict between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), resulting in significant civilian casualties and a looming famine.

Among the key findings of the report, it is possible to highlight that Egyptian authorities are mass-deporting Sudanese refugees fleeing the current war. This mass exodus includes children, the elderly, and those injured during their escape. In addition, refugees report being shot at by Egyptian border guards, with smugglers tortured. At the border area detentions occur in secret military bases lacking legal authority, with refugees rapidly deported without legal processes or access to UNHCR or legal counsel. Sudan's conflict has displaced nearly nine million people, with two million fleeing to neighbouring countries, including around a million to Egypt.

Likewise, the UNHCR and the Global Detention Project have documented pushbacks, secret military bases through documents, photographs, videos, and satellite images. These bases have previously been sites of rights abuses by Egyptian security agencies. Refugees detained in military bases face dire conditions, including infestations and overflowing sewage. Detention durations are prolonged with minimal freedom, severely impacting mental health.

A story we picked up from an informant with whom we became acquainted reports the kidnapping of a family member, the sister, who was released following a ransom payment. Indeed, the family of one of the participants was in a dangerous situation in Aswan, after crossing the desert someone has kidnapped one of the daughters and is demanding a ransom to let her go. She tries to understand the situation and sends someone there to help, the next day we will know that after payment of 4000 Egyptian pounds the girl was released.

Worth to remember that this situation took place against the backdrop of increased cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Egypt on migration and border control, despite the country's dismal human rights record and well-documented violations against migrants and refugees. In October 2022, the EU and Egypt signed an EUR 80 million cooperation agreement, which included strengthening the work of the Egyptian Border Guard to counter irregular

migration and human trafficking along the border. A further aid and investment package, in which migration is a key pillar, was agreed in March 2024 as part of the new strategic and comprehensive partnership between the EU and Egypt.

Cultural and Artistic Humanitarianism

Since the outbreak of the current conflict in Sudan in April 2023, the limited international humanitarian aid available and media attention has been accompanied by an emergence of humanitarian initiatives led by Sudanese artists, educational and research centers, and international cultural institutions. These efforts have taken various forms, ranging from providing financial support for survival within and out of Sudan, facilitating the safe exit of individuals from the war, to protecting and preserving cultural heritage, and creating opportunities for refugees to continue their creative practices. Through these actions, artists and academics have not only contributed to saving lives but have also played a crucial role in proposing a peace narrative in the face of destruction and displacement. The proposed section will focus on these vernacular forms of humanitarianism, exploring the initiatives led by cultural actors within the context of a community in exile in Cairo. One example of those is the Goethe-Institute Sudan (<https://www.goethe.de/ins/su/de/index.html>), cultural organization that has continued its work from Cairo after arrival of the war in Khartoum. They have been coordinating various initiatives aimed at maintaining cultural engagement and providing a platform for Sudanese artists, cultural workers, and communities in exile. Like other Sudanese cultural institutions such as Cedej Khartoum, they find themselves in a state of waiting—hoping for the eventual return to Sudan but currently operating from a space of displacement in Egypt. In this context, the Goethe-Institute's mission has evolved to focus not only on preserving Sudanese cultural identity and promoting artistic expression but also on fostering intergenerational dialogue and engagement among the diverse Sudanese communities now residing in Cairo. The organization has facilitated spaces where Sudanese individuals from different generations—those who left Sudan before the war, those who fled more recently, and those who were born in exile—can come together to share experiences, explore the meaning of home, and reflect on their shared and divergent histories. This dialogue is crucial in understanding how the different waves of Sudanese migration have shaped their cultural memory and how those memories are being maintained and transformed in the diaspora.

One of the core projects that the Goethe-Institute has been engaged with is memory work, which has been ongoing for the past year. Memory work involves documenting and sharing personal narratives, stories, and experiences from the various generations of Sudanese people in Cairo, with the aim of preserving the collective memory of the communities who have been displaced by the conflict. The Goethe-Institute has created platforms for these exchanges through public events, workshops, and collaborative art projects, where participants can reflect on their journeys, the places they have passed through, and the lives they left behind. This intergenerational approach to memory work is particularly important because it allows for a nuanced understanding of how different generations of Sudanese people understand their displacement, their connections to Sudan, and their relationship to their new homes in Egypt. Indeed, the experiences of the older generations, who fled Sudan in previous decades due to earlier conflicts, differ significantly from those of the younger generations, who have been displaced more recently as a result of the ongoing war.

The Institute's work in Cairo also actively seeks to engage with the local Egyptian cultural scene. By doing so, it not only provides a space for Sudanese artists and cultural workers to showcase their work but also opens avenues for cross-cultural collaboration and understanding. These efforts have allowed Sudanese artists to present their work in a context where their experiences of displacement are acknowledged and valued, while also fostering a greater appreciation of Sudanese culture within the wider Egyptian public. These efforts to promote artistic expression and cultural exchange are seen as vital for helping individuals cope with the trauma of displacement, while also empowering them to retain and share their cultural identity in a new context. Overall, the work of artistic centers provides valuable insights into how cultural institutions can adapt to the challenges of displacement while continuing to promote expression and dialogue. Through its commitment to memory work, intergenerational exchange, and engagement with the local cultural scene, the center has become a vital part of the Sudanese diaspora's efforts to maintain a sense of identity, solidarity, and culture of peace in the midst of war and exile.

Other example of what I call artistic humanitarianism is the collaboration between Cedej Khartoum, University of Padua and French Institute Cairo. During my stay in the capital, I had the opportunity of attending the inauguration of an art installation titled 'Faisal Last Stop'. The event took place in the cultural space of the French Institute, providing an appropriate and reflective setting for the

exhibit. The installation itself comprised a series of large-scale panels, each one intricately designed to feature maps created by Sudanese women who had participated in a workshop. These maps visually recount the journeys of displacement, the emotional toll of exile, and the struggles these women faced in navigating their lives outside Sudan. Each map is a personal, yet collective, narrative that encapsulates the diverse experiences of displacement among Sudanese women, turning the abstract concept of migration into a vivid, lived reality.

The exhibition was not only about the artwork itself, but also about the process behind it. In collaboration with researchers, the women involved in the project contributed to creating a guide that accompanied the visitors throughout the exhibit. This guide provided context for understanding both the significance of the art and the labor that went into creating it. In this way, the exhibition became a space for reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement. It allowed for the exploration of themes related to migration, identity, and belonging, while also offering a window into the personal histories of the women who created the maps. The exhibit thus functioned as an intellectual and emotional journey, integrating both visual representation and intellectual commentary. Adjacent to the installation, the paintings of Sudanese artist Randa added a further layer of emotional depth to the exhibition. Her works, which explored themes of loss, resilience, and memory, resonated deeply with the overall narrative of displacement that the exhibition sought to convey. Randa's personal reflections on her own experiences in exile brought a profound intimacy to the event, underscoring the universal but deeply individual nature of the refugee experience.

The opening day itself was an unforgettable experience, attended by approximately two hundred guests, the majority of whom were Sudanese refugees and their families. The atmosphere was not only warm and intimate but also charged with a palpable sense of solidarity. There was a shared understanding that the exhibition was not simply an aesthetic experience, but a vital cultural event that gave voice to the pain, resilience, and hopes of the Sudanese people in exile. This collective engagement formed a space where emotions could be expressed freely, and where the shared histories of displacement could be confronted openly. The emotional peak of the event came with a live performance by Sudanese singer Iba Hebzegolu, whose concert reverberated with themes of peace, love, and the longing for home. Her performance, both haunting and hopeful, served as a powerful reminder of the sorrow of displacement, but also the strength that

sustains the Sudanese diaspora. Through her music, Iba not only conveyed the collective grief of her people but also embodied the hope that continues to endure amidst hardship. The concert was not merely entertainment; it was an act of solidarity, a collective moment of healing that bound the audience together in shared experience.

The sense of solidarity among the Sudanese community was palpable throughout the event. It was evident in the way people interacted with one another, offering words of comfort, sharing memories, and creating new connections. These acts of solidarity are not confined to the art world but extend across all aspects of life in exile. Whether through informal gatherings, social media networks, or direct acts of support, the Sudanese community in Cairo has fostered a culture of mutual aid and shared responsibility. Art, as both an expression of collective memory and an act of resistance, plays a crucial role in sustaining this solidarity. It provides a framework through which Sudanese refugees can not only cope with the trauma of displacement but also actively shape and redefine their identity in a new and often hostile environment.

A defining characteristic of such vernacular forms of humanitarianism is their ability to respond to urgent needs that are not adequately addressed through conventional channels of aid. These efforts emerge in response to specific, often overlooked needs that larger humanitarian systems are either unable or unwilling to address in timely or effective ways. This form of humanitarianism, while often marginalized, highlights the significant role that culture and the arts can play in times of crisis, not just as a form of personal expression or aesthetic production, but as a vital component of survival and social cohesion.

Historically, humanitarian aid has been conceptualized in terms of delivering essential resources—such as food, water, shelter, and medical care—directly to victims in the aftermath of disaster or during wartime. However, there exists a critical gap in this traditional framework: the role of local and translocal cultural actors (such as artists, curators, researchers, professors) who organize and mobilize forms of aid that go beyond the immediate material needs of survival. In the context of Sudan, these cultural efforts have included the documentation of war atrocities, the personal experiences of displacement, and the political stances for peace.

Moreover, discussions surrounding the role of artists in humanitarianism are often confined to the actions of high-profile celebrities and well-known figures. This oversight has led to a significant gap in the literature and discourse surrounding the ways in which cultural actors contribute to

humanitarianism, especially in situations of conflicts. So, this study will argue that the role of culture and art in humanitarianism is far from "non-essential." Rather, it is a vital, often underappreciated, component of humanitarian action that plays a key role in preserving memory, identity, and community cohesion amidst the devastation wrought by wars. By exploring these forms of cultural humanitarianism, this research seeks to broaden the scope of humanitarian discourse and highlight the critical contributions of cultural actors to the survival and resilience of societies in crisis.

Those events, though few one of many that I witnessed during my research period, encapsulated a broader pattern of cultural and emotional exchange within the Sudanese community in Cairo. For this community, gatherings like these are far more than social events—they are vital spaces of expression, mutual support, and collective healing. Art, in its many forms—be it visual, musical, or intellectual—plays a critical role in allowing the Sudanese people in exile to process the trauma of displacement and to reflect on their homeland, its struggles, and their own personal journeys. In many ways, these events are a form of resistance against the erasure of their history and identity. They provide a space where Sudanese individuals can speak openly about their experiences without the risk of surveillance or repression from the Egyptian state. In this sense, art functions not only as a means of healing but also as a survival mechanism, denouncing atrocities of governments and militaries.

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Artist, events, meanings

Exhibition: 'Faisal Last Stop' – French Institute, Cedej, Unipd

Movies: 'Goodbye Julia' – 'Madaniya'

Exhibition at Goethe Institute

Ahmed: Online Exhibition ERC, Photo

Interviews

Interview 1 Activism; University; Solidarity; Women; Revolution

Interview 2 Racism, University, Solidarity, Women, Resistance Committee

Interview 3 Solidarity; Resistance Committee; Macism; Revolution, University

Interview 4 Revolution; Resistance Committee; Solidarity; University

Interview 5 Sudan; War; Solidarity; Revolution

Interview 6 Sudan; Activism; Novels

Interview 7 Cairo; War

Interview 8 Cairo; Citizenship; Gender; Migration;

