Zahma

... in Egypt

By WALTER ARMBRUST

In *Qabla Zahmat al-Ṣayf* (Before the Summer Crowds), the last film of the celebrated director Muḥammad Khān (*MY*, Jul26), four urbanites flee the crowds of Cairo to a vacation village on the northern *sāhil*—the Mediterranean coast west of Alexandria, which is undergoing rapid development as one luxury compound after another sprouts up in the increasingly rare unoccupied spaces where the desert meets the beach (al-DĪNĀRĪ) [*ṬGated Communities / Compounds, ṬTourist Resorts*]. Contrary to the film's title, the four characters are not actually fleeing *Zahma* (crowds, or crowding) per se. One is a poor *ṣa'īdī* desperate for work and eager to please; one a prominent doctor fleeing court proceedings accusing his hospital of negligence, plus his wife, an heiress with a share in both their villa on the *sāhil* and the legally beleaguered hospital; the fourth is a divorced translator from a good family with two teenaged children. The film wins prizes, but also notoriety due to the scandalous bathing suit worn by the divorcée (*Fil-Fann*).

Zahma is only an excuse for the movie characters; their real problems are personal. Yet their flight to the desert and coastal margins, whatever their motivations, effectively symbolizes the actual myopic response to real *Zahma*. Egypt is, to be sure, densely populated—the 14th most densely populated country in the world if one counts only the inhabited Nile Valley and Delta, and leaves out the vast empty desert on either side of the Nile (OSMAN). But there are many ways to calculate the effects of population density, and by most objective standards neither Egypt nor Cairo are desperately overpopulated (SHAWKAT & HENDAWY). Properly managed, Cairo's *Zahma* would not be particularly exceptional on a global level. Nonetheless successive regimes going all the way back to the Nasser era have used the spectre of overpopulation as a means to legitimate costly megaprojects predicated on the need to move out of the crowded cities and Nile Valley for agricultural, industrial and urban development. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī continues the tradition of his predecessors, talking up the necessity of desert development. His supporters tout the President's plan to increase the arable territory of Egypt by 1.5 million *feddāns* by digging thousands of wells costing billions of Egyptian pounds (TANṬĀWĪ). Yet Egypt's history of desert megaprojects is a grim one; not a single project has come remotely close to achieving its avowed developmental goals, or resulted in significant movement of population out of the Nile Valley (*Taḍāmun*, May16).

But if *Zahma* is a dubious pretext for megaprojects, the concept nonetheless has a grip on the public imaginary. The word is indelibly linked to a song from the 1970s by Aḥmad 'Adawiyya: "*Zahma yā Dunyā*" which one can translate literally as "it's crowded, o world," or just "the world is crowded" (ADAWIYYA). A less literal gloss is simply "it's really crowded." *Zahma yā Dunyā* is a fast-paced popular song emblematic of the big city. In one sense "*Zahma*" evokes the exhilaration of exuberant anarchy afforded by anonymity—for male youth a form of freedom from the watchful eyes of elders; for women of all ages a

decidedly more ambivalent form of anarchy. *Mūlid wi-ṣaḥbuh ghāyib*, as the song says: a saint's carnival with the saint absent. Or, you might say, an opportunity for fun, and nobody to tell you to stop. But in a different sense *Zaḥma* denotes the unsettling confusion of being lost in large crowds. Too much fun becomes no fun at all. In 2016 the song “*Zaḥma*” is old, but media often cite its signature line, *Zaḥma yā dunyā* [[↗Pop Music](#)]. However, such citations rarely refer to the joyous anarchic sense of the word evoked (or half-evoked) by the original song. An insipid Orange mobile phone network advertisement does give it a try with a 2016 Ramadan advertisement patterned on ‘Adawiyya’s hit: *Zaḥma yā shahr Zaḥma* (what a crowded month) ([YT, Jun12](#)). The re-engineered lyrics play over a visual montage of happy wealthy Cairenes striving to put opulent food on the table for *iftār*. Cash-strapped Egyptians suffering the inflationary effects of a dollar crisis [[↗Dollar Crisis](#)] get just the *Zaḥma* and none of the opulence. But aside from the ‘Adawiyya-inspired Orange advertisement, far more often in 2016 ‘Adawiyya’s signature song is invoked as a comment on neither the exuberance of the crowd nor on its unsettling and threatening nature—roiling masses; the “scary crowd” of certain modernist visions. *Zaḥma* in 2016 most often is straightforwardly about mobility, or to be more precise, a lack thereof. Adawiyya’s 1970s *Zaḥma*, exuberant or unsettling, was dynamic. In 2016 *Zaḥma* evokes a sense of frustrating stasis.

Zaḥma is a regular human-interest story in Egyptian media. One finds, for example, attempts to enumerate the causes of *Zaḥma* ([MĀHIR](#)): itinerant vendors selling their wares on sidewalks and in streets; minibuses; artificial humps in the road designed to slow traffic around schools or hospitals; a lack of public garages; depressed pedestrians saddened at overcrowding and lack of greenery; the fact that Cairo is the eleventh largest city in the world in terms of its population, and the largest in the Arab world; the construction of new schools and hospitals for the rapidly expanding population. But the actual reason that Cairo *feels* crowded is rarely salient in attempts to explain the causes of *Zaḥma*: there are simply too many private automobiles.

In Cairo there is roughly one privately owned car for every ten inhabitants ([FAKHR EL-DIN](#)). This accounts for about half the vehicles in the city; the rest are busses, *tūk tūks* (motorized rickshaws) [[↗Tuk-tuk](#)], motorcycles, taxis, minibuses, delivery vehicles, and service vehicles of various types. Everyone who walks in Cairo, or who uses any of the surface modes of transport, finds that the single greatest obstacle to movement is private automobiles, both those that are parked and therefore stationary, as well as those in motion at any given time. Since the *infṭāḥ* starting in the 1970s (the “open door,” a shift away from state-led development toward private-sector development under the rule of Anwar al-Sadat) the state has sought to encourage surface mobility in private automobiles at the expense of collective modes of mobility ([EL-KHATEEB](#)). One study claims that the number of vehicles in Cairo increases by a multiple of 14 every 30 years ([EL ATTAR](#)). The same study observes that already in 2016 four million vehicles move every day in a city that has a capacity for only about half a million. Cairo suffers from one of the worst records in traffic accidents and fatalities in the world ([Taḍāmūn, Feb9](#)), and Egypt as a whole suffers an annual road fatality rate of 43 per 100 kilometres of road compared to 0.7 in the United Kingdom ([EL ATTAR](#)).

An underground Metro, drastically behind schedule and heavily subsidized (though estimates of the size of the subsidy vary dramatically), is the nearest thing to a practical counter-trend against the automobile apocalypse ([BERGER a, RĀGHIB](#)). Aside from the Metro,

officials, most prominently President al-Sīsī himself, encourage greater use of bicycles (*EremNews*). Al-Sīsī gets some cheers when he shows up in humble neighbourhoods unexpectedly riding his bike (*YT, Jul7*), always at the front of the pack (who would dare pass the President?). However, his bicycle campaign has absolutely no effect on traffic. An old Facebook debate [*↗Social Media*] over the possibly exorbitant cost of the President's bicycle (*Shurūq 2014*) has been forgotten in 2016, replaced by a Twitter campaign to get people to ride bicycles as a response to the increase in fuel prices caused by floating the Egyptian Pound and reducing energy subsidies (*'AZZĀM*). But the campaign brings no discernible change to actual transportation habits.

On a more practical level, efforts to control the endless proliferation of space-hogging private automobiles appear to be even less effective than the President's bicycle theatre. Earnest studies emphasize the importance of sidewalks to pedestrian movement (*HĀMID ET AL.*). For years the government has attempted to keep cars off the sidewalks by building up curbs to a level 12 or more inches above the street level. This is necessary because wherever curbs are low, sidewalks simply become narrow parking lots. In the relatively rare instances in which a high-curb-protected sidewalk remains unencumbered by parked automobiles, actually walking on these theoretically open spaces turns out to be like entering a steeplechase—a race-course deliberately pocked with ditches and hedges, designed to make the experience of mobility as vertical as it is horizontal. In Cairo walking on the sidewalk is exhausting; the point of a steeplechase, after all, is to make movement more challenging. A case study (*HĀMID et al.*) ignores everyday reality and recommends that the height of the curb separating traffic from the sidewalk should be 15 cm (the actual height on the street in question is the usual 12 inches or more). If the 15 cm standard were implemented cars would instantly eat up all the space allocated to pedestrians. However, another fact never mentioned in academic studies or in the media is that high curbs, where they exist, simply move the de facto parking lots on the sidewalks further out into the street, where cars park bumper-to-bumper, so close together that pedestrians often find no opening onto the raised sidewalk. Practically speaking, sidewalks are non-existent in most of the city, and where they do exist they are often unusable. Hence pedestrians walk in the street, dodging cars as best they can. Pedestrians make up a fifth of the annual death toll from traffic accidents (*WHO-EMRO*). More abstractly, the tyranny of the private automobile undoubtedly contributes to the feeling of *Zahma* in cities (*MANSŪR*).

However, the private automobile rarely plays the villain in Egypt's *Zahma* discourse. On the contrary, private automobiles and their drivers are more likely to be portrayed as the victim in an Egyptian *Zahma* drama. A google image search using the terms "*Zahma*" and either "*miṣr*" or "*al-Qāhira*" yields almost entirely pictures of vast traffic jams—seas of tragically immobile automobiles. More precisely, in news features "*Zahma*" usually means primarily the crowdedness endured by the 10-11% who own private automobiles, those who create 75% of the traffic and occupy an incalculable proportion of parking space (*BERGER b*). Hence the primary agents of *Zahma*—understood as immobility, as opposed to the *Zahma* of the surging crowd, or the *Zahma* of liberating youthful anarchy—are also depicted as its primary victims. This is because news media (as opposed to academic studies) are mostly pro-automobile. They devote considerable energy to discussing not how cars make life miserable for the 90 percent of the population who cannot afford them, but to how to make

them work better, or how to alleviate the travails of private automobile users. For example, an article (NIGM & NIGM) touts mobile phone apps designed to facilitate the movement and efficiency of automobiles [↗**Mobile Phones**]. “Rāyih” is a ride-sharing app; “Rakna” allows drivers to alert valet services so that they can be ready and waiting when your car reaches its destination; “Bi-yʿūl-lak” alerts the driver on the location of traffic jams so that he or she can choose the most efficient route. By contrast the microbus, a vastly more efficient means of transportation that provides 30% of the city’s daily trips (MANṢŪR), catering to those who are not among the lucky 10% who own private automobiles, is “a cancer,” and condemned, in the media if not necessarily in reality, as the main source of *Zaḥma* in the city (AḤMAD).

‘Adawiyya’s song foreshadowed the public’s response to the immobilizing *Zaḥma* of 2016: flight to ever more automobile-dependent suburbs. *Kitīr al-nās kitīr wi-anā ‘āyiz arkib wi-aṭīr*—so many people, I want to fly away—as a line in ‘Adawiyya’s song put it. And truly the signs of flight were everywhere in 2016. Billboards all over the city flog gated communities [↗**Gated Communities / Compounds**]. So does television and the internet. Uptown Cairo, a suburban housing development advertised as lying “in the heart of Cairo,” marketed itself in a typical manner: through videos showing blissfully empty roads leading into a private compound (YT, Mar20). No *Zaḥma* here! The good life beckons. One scene in the video shows the nose of a white Jeep poking coyly into the frame, on an otherwise empty street. Other scenes show one car in an ocean of empty asphalt. Uptown markets itself as a verdant ghost town. Other developments employ the same conventions. Moon Valley in al-Tagammu‘ al-Khāmis adds a few animated European-looking figures to its ghost town (YT, Oct23). The gated Kenz Compound, on the other hand, takes a more direct approach. Its advertisement tells a little story, of a man and his car in a hot congested urban street, smelling exhaust, watching rude motorcyclists flit by in the interstices between the stationary automobiles. A little songlet plays over the video: *ihrab al-madīna, Zaḥma sayyi’a*—“escape the city, it’s awful *Zaḥma* ...” He finds the Good Life in Kenz, depicted as a slightly less ghostly town than Moon Valley or Uptown Cairo. He and his European-looking family frolic on green lawns, swim in luxuriously deserted swimming pools, and shop in an almost empty mall (YT, Jan17).

The *Zaḥma* of immobility that makes Moon Valley, Uptown Cairo, Kenz, and innumerable other flashy real estate developments so attractive has a history. ‘Adawiyya’s *Zaḥma yā Dunyā* was popular in the late 1970s, when *Zaḥma* meant surging crowds of people. It was exactly at that point that an *infṣṭāḥ*-fuelled consumption boom initiated the the endless rise of the automobile, rather like the rise of the machines in Arnold *Schwarzenegger*’s Terminator films. But they lacked sufficient open road; *Zaḥma* became worse. Foreign “experts” tried to help Egypt solve its congestion problem through counterproductive efforts to facilitate still more automobility (*Taḍāmun*, Feb9). Their solution was to construct a network of raised highways and ring roads in Cairo, and to invest massively in “new cities” throughout the country. It did not work. In the country as a whole some of the New Cities have been moderately successful in providing housing and an infrastructure for industry (*al-Hurra*, Mar12). But the goal of moving massive numbers of people out of the Nile Valley and away from the *Zaḥma* has been utterly unsuccessful. A 20-year plan announced in 1997 to move 12 million people to New Cities has, by 2016, achieved only a tenth of its target (SHAWKAT & HENDAWY). The most conspicuous success of the

whole four-decade history of New Cities has been to create opportunities for private real estate developers, who flourish as the state foots the bill for extending infrastructure out to their previously worthless desert land, which successive regimes give to their cronies for pennies. Paradoxically, the *Zaḥma*-free lifestyle touted by Kenz and other developers depends on continued failure of the New City megaprojects. To live in a gated compound is to be committed to automobility exclusively. The ring roads that circle the city and the raised highways that cut violently across it must be used to move drivers from city to suburb and from gated compound to gated compound. Already the *dā'irī*—the ring road—suffers from standing traffic, inevitably reported in the media as exceptional occurrences due to accidents (*al-MAḤLĀWĪ*). But the exception will become the rule in time. The planned population of New Cairo, the massive developing suburb to the east of “old Cairo,” otherwise known as actually existing Cairo where people live and suffer its *Zaḥma*, is 4.9 million souls. New Cairo includes Moon Valley and Uptown Cairo (Kenz is on the west-of-the-Nile suburb of New Giza). Ominously, only the planned population of New Cairo is easily available in public discourse (*al-Ma'rifa*). The private developers and the government presumably know the actual population. Given that all of these gated compounds are “third generation New City” developments, and that not a single one of the *first* generation developments has achieved even 50% of its population targets (*Taḍāmun*, Feb7) it is very safe to assume that the *Zaḥma*-free lifestyle touted by gated community promotional videos will be temporary at best, or potentially nothing more than advertising hyperbole even now. More roads only stoke the cruel optimism that escape is possible, even as the act of trying to escape only increases the problems that make it seem so desirable. Privileging “vehicle mobility” over “people mobility” is a sure recipe for creating more congestion (*Taḍāmun*, Jun2). *Zaḥma yā dunyā!*

Related Entries

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