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## Why Cairo Recycles Better Than New York City in Waste-Picking Tale

By Salma El Wardany

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Milad Tadros is a magician. He makes trash disappear -- at zero cost to taxpayers.

The 32-year-old is part of Cairo's army of about 70,000 zabbaleen, Arabic for garbage people, serving the city of 12 million. For decades, they've weathered dictatorship and revolution to create one of the world's greenest waste-management systems in a capital known for its dirt.

How they scratch a living out of 15,000 tons of daily garbage -- equivalent to 35 loaded Boeing 747 jumbo jets -- is an extreme lesson in the invisible hand of the market at work. Two-thirds is recycled, more than in New York City, without any technology. The zabbaleen work for cash tips and sell plastic bottles, paper, glass and aluminum cans to factories. Pigs -- kept out of sight -- gobble up the organic waste.

"Over the years, the garbage collectors have created an enviably efficient model that is both viable, profitable and costs the government nothing," said Suzie Greiss, the head of Egypt's Association for the Protection of the Environment, a local nonprofit group working in the area.

For Tadros and company, life's about to change. The government is putting him on the payroll for the first time and ending the effort undertaken by ousted President Hosni Mubarak to contract the services to foreign companies. That effort failed because residents never got the hang of carrying their trash to dumpsters.

Seven days a week at 5 a.m., before the first call to prayer, Tadros leaves his home at the foot of the Mokattam Hills for the 24-kilometer (15 miles) drive to the northern neighborhood of Imbaba overlooking the Nile. There, he gathers garbage from 25 buildings and hauls it on a small truck driven by his 19-year-old cousin, Magdi. They get home at noon to offload the trash in the backyard, where their wives and children sift through the mountain of refuse.

### Dirty Work

The assembly line resembles other forms of foraging in the developing world where garbage is left to the poor, exploited or repressed to collect. In Havana, they're known as *buzos*. In Mumbai, they're called *ragpickers*. Different names, yet they all do society's dirty work.

Even as the 2011 Egyptian revolution went full circle with a military chief back in power, one thing was certain: The garbage man always came.



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The zabbaleen have been fixtures since their migration from Upper Egypt in the 1940s. The former peasants carved out a niche providing a critical service, yet they were essentially untouchables living in segregation.

The zabbaleen, or garbage people in Arabic, work miracles in Cairo, making trash... [Read More](#)

## Above Poverty

Under the new proposal by the national government, Tadros will emerge from the shadow economy. He'll be paid between 7 and 12 Egyptian pounds (\$0.98-1.68) per home.

That's not bad for a country where a quarter of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. A garbageman who serves an average of 10 flats for 10 Egyptian pounds a day can expect to make as much as \$419 a month.

Compare that with New York, where a sanitation worker typically earns more than \$100,000, according to a 2014 report from the Citizens Budget Commission, a non-profit organization. Collecting New Yorkers' trash costs \$2.3 billion a year -- 70 percent paid for by the city -- yet a mere 14 percent of it is recycled, the report said.

The majority of the zabbaleen are Coptic Christians. If it works, the guaranteed salary would lift the living standards of a minority neglected and persecuted through the ages in a predominantly Muslim country. Tadros was yanked out of school at 12 to be initiated into the family business. He and generations before him had no choice in the matter.

"I just want my children to have the option to do something different," Tadros said, holding his two-year-old toddler Malak in the backyard of a three-story house he shares with his father, three siblings, their wives and children in a slum on the edge of Cairo.

## Test Run

After a November test run, the new system made its December debut in a few areas and will be rolled out over two years. The plan is for smaller zabbaleen-run local companies to replace Italian and Spanish multinationals welcomed a decade ago by Mubarak.

"If you leave them informal then you risk not all residents handing their garbage over to them," Laila Iskandar, the minister of urban renewal and informal settlements said in an interview. "If you have a citywide unified system that you monitor, you can make greater Cairo a clean and neat city."

Most zabbaleen have little faith in government action and may resist change, according to Ezzat Naem, head of the garbage-collectors union. They haven't forgotten that back in 2009, the nationwide culling of 300,000 pigs during the swine flu hysteria decimated their income. The waste-eating animals taboo in Islam are also sold as meat to tourist restaurants.

"I hope the change is not just about the uniform, right?" Tadros said.