# Social Cohesion in Cairo and the Nature of Boundary Areas between Socio-culturally Distinct Districts: The Case of El-Maadi – Dar El-Salam Boundary

Salma Ghanem, Yasser Moustafa, Manal Abou El-Ela

**Abstract**— Like most large cities around the world, society in Cairo is composed of very diverse cultural, social, and economic groups. The aim of the study presented in this article is to investigate if boundary areas between socio-culturally distinct districts in the city are areas of contact and interaction between these groups and can thus promote social cohesion between them. The case-study focuses on the boundary area between very different adjoining districts, El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam. It relies on in depth-interviews with residents of both districts as well as filed documentation of the study area and observation of activity patterns with in it. Findings indicate that, primarily because of perceived wide social differences, the boundary area is not an area of contact and interaction between residents of the two districts. While there is an appropriation of the area by residents of Dar El-Salam, there is at the same time, a withdrawal from and an avoidance of the area by residents of El-Maadi. In its conclusion the article discusses implications for urban design, policy making, and future research.

**Index Terms**— Social cohesion, Boundary areas, Socio-cultural diversity, Cairo-Egypt.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

LIKE most large cities around the world [1], [2], [3], [4] society in Cairo is composed of very diverse cultural, social and economic groups characterized by different lifestyles [5], [6], [7]. However, this wide diversity in Cairo seems to lead to segregation between those groups. This segregation manifests itself in particular in residential segregation with different groups occupying different districts of the city. Residential segregation between the different sub-cultural groups and the different socio-economic levels in Cairo was already existing a few decades ago [5], [8], [9], [10], [11]. However, there seems to be currently a trend towards increased residential segregation between the different segments of the population [12], [13]. This is clearly visible in the unstoppable growth of informal settlements in and around Cairo which tend to house the urban poor and lower middle classes [7], [14]. At the same time, large numbers of upper middle class and higher classes residents are now moving to the planned suburban new towns. And, many of them elect to reside in the increasing number of exclusive gated communities developed there [15].

Rapoport [16] argues that the tendency of urban residents to

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cluster with others like themselves into what becomes homogenous residential area is a natural and very common phenomenon (see also [17], [18], [19]). It is the socio-cultural heterogeneity of urban populations which tends to encourage people to congregate or cluster among others like themselves in homogeneous neighborhoods. Rapoport [16] explains that, for residents of a neighborhood, such homogeneity increases predictability, and thus reduces stress. Homogeneity permits clearer and more effective communication and promotes social interaction. By allowing various psychological and cultural defense mechanisms to operate, homogeneity tends to reduce perceived density, conflict, fear of crime, and crime itself. Homogeneity leads to agreement in relation to use, maintenance, and alteration of the environment, making self-governance much easier and the use of informal rules and controls possible. It also makes working together, cooperation, involvement and participation much easier and more likely. Homogeneity permits an easier and clearer communication of personal and group identity. And, it creates a better context for mutual support at times of need.

Studies conducted in the Egyptian context have confirmed this importance of neighborhood homogeneity. Studies of neighborhoods in diverse socio-cultural contexts in Cairo have tended to emphasize the importance of shared needs, values, and norms among neighbors for the fulfillment of needs, social interaction, social support and exchange of help, maintenance of social order, and thus for neighborhood cohesion and neighborhood satisfaction (see for example [8], [9], [10], [12], [15], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26] [27]).

Thus, the clustering of urban residents into homogeneous neighborhoods or districts may have benefits at a certain level. However, the concern is that this process leads to segregation between groups rather than interaction among them and

consequently leads to an increased fragmentation of the population and alienation rather than to cohesion needed for a healthy society [11], [18], [28], [29], [30] [31].

Rapoport [16] argues that the clustering of like-people together in homogeneous clusters should not be hindered and should be encouraged. But, he stresses that, to promote social cohesion, there is a need for "neutral zones" between clusters or neighborhoods of different socio-cultural characteristics (see also [32]). These neutral zones should be areas that attract members of the different socio-cultural groups residing in the adjoining neighborhoods. By permitting the co-presence of members of different groups, such zones can promote interaction between them and ultimately contribute to improve social cohesion.

The aim of the study presented in this article is to investigate if boundary areas between socio-culturally distinct districts in Cairo do or can function as the "neutral zones" envisioned by Rapoport [16] and Asef [32]. The research relies on the case study of the boundary area between two adjacent districts that are very different in terms of cultural, social, and economic characteristics, namely, El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam. The objectives are to examine the nature of this boundary area, both physically and socially, and investigate if it is an area of contact and interaction between residents of the two districts. Indeed, a number of authors have suggested that the boundary areas between socio-culturally distinct districts can provide opportunities for interaction and social exchange and thus contribute to the social cohesion of the urban society (see for example [1], [3], [33]. However, there is a large literature that suggests that these areas are often areas of conflict, social confrontation, and competition for control ([11], [18], [29], [34], [35], [36], [37], [38]. There may be also a withdrawal of one of the groups from the area, when perceived as unattractive or dangerous [28], [30], [39].

## 2 METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the study relies on a case-study research design approach [40]. It investigates the boundary area between the districts of El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam. More specifically the study focuses on the boundary area along Street 9. Street 9 is an important commercial street in EL-Maadi that extends north through the administrative boundary between the two districts and into Dar El-Salam (Fig. 1). Street 9 is also important in terms of transportation as several metro stations are located along the street, both in El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam.

Several methods of data collection were used. Archival data was collected from a number of governmental agencies and local administrations to obtain maps and demographic data for the two districts. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 residents of El-Maadi and 15 residents of Dar El-Salam. The selection of interview participants relied on a combined convenience and snowball sampling approach. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone. They lasted for 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interviews focused primarily on opinions of participants about the location of the boundary between the two districts along Street 9, as well as
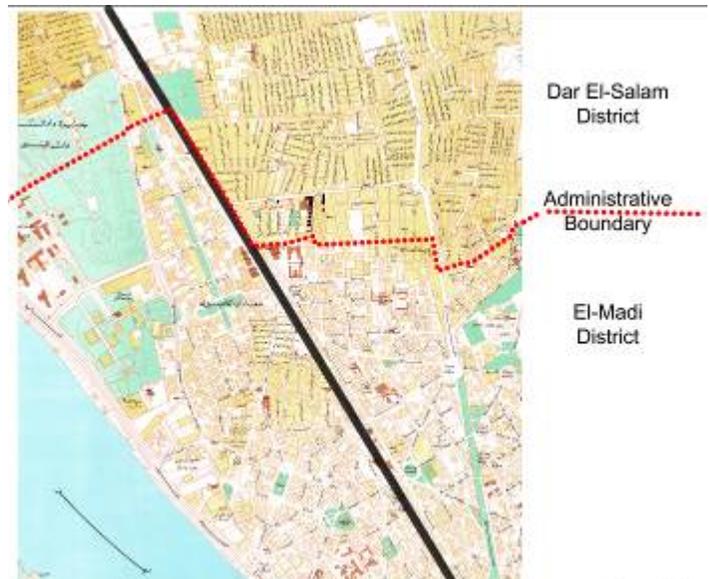


**Fig. 1  Street 9 in El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam Districts**

on their use of, and perceptions about this boundary area. The field documentation of the physical characteristics of the study area was conducted through the use of photographs, sketches, and annotations on base maps. Finally, sessions of observation were conducted at different times of the day and during different days of the week to document the density of vehicular and pedestrian traffic and the patterns of street activities in the area.

## 3 EL-MAADI AND DAR EL-SALAM

El-Maadi was developed in the early 20th century, during the British occupation, as a planned garden suburb of Cairo [41]. It mainly featured large villas with large gardens and was primarily inhabited by foreigners [41], [42]. Today, the area of the district has much expanded and many villas were demolished to be replaced by apartment buildings. However, it remains one of the greener districts of Cairo. It also remains a very cosmopolitan district as its residents tend to be of high-middle to high economic level Egyptians along with a large number of foreigners [43].

On the other hand, Dar El-Salam evolved in the early 1960s as an informal settlement on agricultural land just north of El-Maadi [44]. With high rates of immigration from rural areas, the district grew very rapidly. Today, the district is a designated as a slum area [45] of low socio-economic status and poor in public services [43].

The residential density in Dar El-Salam (77,039 inhabitant/km2) is more than the double of that of El-Maadi (35.715 inhabitant/km2) [46]. Statistics also show clear economic differences between the two districts [46]. Unemployment rates in 2006 were 11.8% for Dar El-Salam and 5.6% for El-Maadi. The percentage of the population below poverty line (also in 2006) was 7.0% for Dar El-Salam and 1.3% for EL-Maadi. Rates of illiteracy are also quite high in Dar El-Salam (26% compared to only 5% in El-Maadi) [46].

Physically the two districts are also very different. In terms of urban pattern, Dar El-Salam is typical informal settlements

developed on agricultural land, long straight and narrow streets creating a very compact urban fabric with little greenery [44] [47] [48]. This clearly contrasts with the radial urban pattern and tree-lined streets of El-Maadi (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2 The contrasting urban patterns of El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam**

Most buildings in Dar El-Salam are multistorey apartment buildings with un-finished facades. They are quite different than the rich villas and upscale apartment buildings of El-Maadi (Fig. 3)
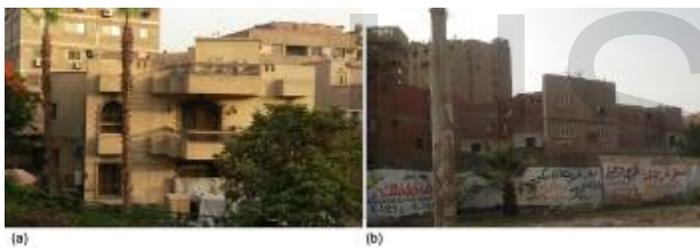


**Fig. 3 The contrasting architectural characters of El-Maadi (a) and Dar El-Salam (b)**

## 4 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1 A Transitional Area Rather Than a Clear Cut Boundary

A first objective of the interviews was to identify where residents of El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam perceive the boundary between the two districts to be located along Street 9.

The interviews revealed that participants were aware that the two districts were administratively divided. The participants from both districts also tended to acknowledge that there were obvious socio-economic differences between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam. However, most participants expressed that pinpointing the location of the boundary between the two districts was actually a very difficult task. For example, a participant from Dar El-Salam stated:

*"The two districts are really different. I feel that they are two different countries with different cultures. However, it is difficult to say where this transformation exactly occurs."* (DS12)

Some participants suggested a number of reasons to explain the difficulty of locating the boundary between the two districts. First it was suggested that, in general, residents of the two districts are not familiar with the exact location of the ad-

ministrative boundary. This may be due in part to the fact that this boundary has been modified several times during the past years, in addition to the zigzagging nature of the current administrative boundary.

*"In the past, Dar El-Salam and El-Maadi were a single district but then they were separated administratively. During recent years there have been several changes to the location of the administrative boundary between the two districts. I am not sure where exactly the current administrative boundary is. "*(DS11)

Another reason suggested by participants was related to the absence of clear physical edges, such as a wide thoroughfare, a river, or railway tracks, between the districts

*"El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam are not clearly divided. There is nothing to clearly mark the boundaries between the two districts. They are just divided administratively."* (MA13)

*"Of course there are obvious differences between the two districts but there is no physical boundary between them."* (DS15)

The continuity of several streets from one district into the other (this is particularly the case for Street 9) was also seen as a factor contributing to the blurring of the boundary between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam. For example, a participant from El-Maadi indicated:

*"The location of the boundary is not clear; this area is a bit confusing. Someone walking on Street 9 could suddenly find himself in Dar El-Salam."* (MA4)

Most of the participants ultimately agreed to indicate a location for the boundary between the two districts along Street 9 (13 of the 14 participants from El-Maadi and the 15 participants from Dar El-Salam). Suggestions made by the participants were primarily based on perceptions of social and physical changes along the street.

*"I personally believe that El-Maadi ends before El-Maadi metro station on Street 9. Beyond that point the street becomes different in its physical and social characteristics. There is also a different category of social activities. Differences are very clear in this area."* (MA7)

*"The boundary is right before El-Maadi metro station. When you pass this line the character of the street changes and you feel that you have left Dar El-Salam and entered El-Maadi."* (DS7)

However, there was no real agreement among participants as to the exact location of the boundary. Particularly interesting is the differences between suggestions of participants from each of the two districts (Fig.4).

Participants from El-Maadi, suggested locations along a 1.4 Km stretch of Street 9 extending south from the actual location of the administrative boundary to well within El-Maadi district, revealing a certain tendency to exclude part of the district beyond the location of its perceived limits.

Participants from Dar El-Salam suggested locations for the boundary along a 2.8 km stretch of the street starting north of the administrative boundary, with in Dar El-Salam, and extending to well within El-Maadi district. Their suggestions seem to reveal a tendency to appropriate part of El-Maadi within their perceived limits of Dar El-Salam.

Although almost all of the participants suggested a specific location for the boundary between El-Maadi and Dar El Salam, a majority of them emphasized the idea that the two districts were actually separated by a transitional area rather
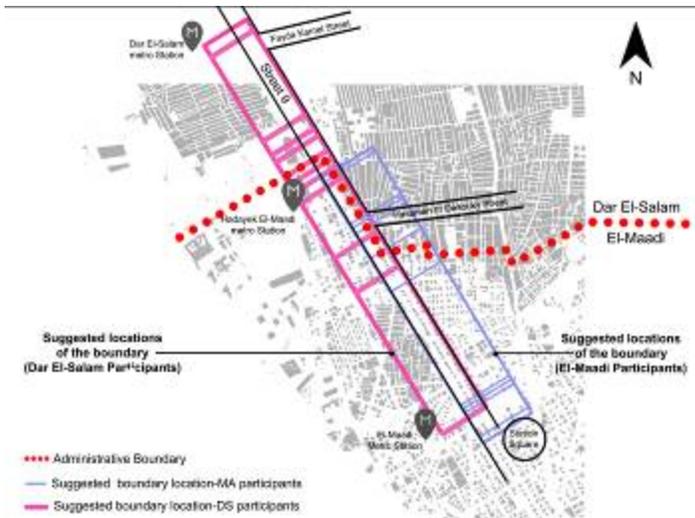
**Fig. 4 Perceived locations of the boundary between the two districts**

by a clear cut boundary. For them, this idea appeared to be a more accurate representation of reality.

*"Differences between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam are really easy to see. One could suggest an exact point at which one of the districts ends and the other begins. But actually the transition between one district and the other is gradual. I think is more appropriate to talk about a grey area, an area of transition that takes from the characteristics of both districts."* (MA1)

*"There is an in-between zone between the two districts. This zone is like a hinge between the two districts"* (DS10)

The notion of a transitional area helps explain the initial difficulty participants had in suggesting a specific location for the boundary between the two districts. It also explains the lack of agreement between participants as to the location of the boundary and the relatively large distance range of proposed locations.

Some participants suggested that the transitional area was actually named "Hadayek El-Maadi", by the name of the metro station around which it is located. As described by participants, this transitional area extends on both sides of the administrative boundary in both El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam. It is in this area that most of the proposed locations for the boundary between the two districts were located (Fig. 4). Participants agreed that the area was a transitional zone specifically because it constituted a transition both physically and socially from the extremes represented by El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam.

*"Hadayek El-Maadi is the transitional area between the two extremes. It lies in the middle. It is not that elite like El-Maadi and it is not an informal area like Dar El-Salam."* (MA14)

*"It is like this, Dar El-Salam then Hadayek El-Maadi then El-Maadi. Hadayek El-Maadi is in the middle between them. El-Maadi is more elite than Hadayek El-Maadi area, and Hadayek El-Maadi is more elite than Dar El-Salam. "*(DS5)

The following section presents a description of the physical and social characteristics of the transitional area as delineated by the majority of participants. These physical and social char-

acteristics are also contrasted with those of El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam.

## 4.2 Urban Character of the Transitional Area

As suggested by participants, the transitional area between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam along Street 9 is located from the Hadyaek El-Maadi metro station and extending south till El-Maadi metro station. The description of the physical and social characteristics of this area presented here is based on data collected through a field investigation that documented through notes, photographs, and sketches of the fixed, semi fixed and non-fixed features [2] of the street. It also relies on archival data including official maps.

The urban character of the transitional area along Street 9 is not uniform but exhibits a gradual transformation from one end to the other. The north end of the area shows characteristics that are very similar to the general urban character of Dar El-Salam. And, as one moves south the character of the street gradually become more similar to the general urban character of El-Maadi (Fig.5 & 6). An exception to this is the zone around the Maadi metro station, at the very south end of the transitional area. Because of the presence of the metro station, the patterns of activities and traffic in this zone are more similar in their intensity and chaotic appearance to that of Dar El-Salam than that of El-Maadi.



**Fig. 5 Scenes from the north end of the transitional area**



**Fig. 6 Scenes from the south end of the transitional area.**

In the northern section of the transitional area, Street 9 is bordered on the west by a two to three-meter-high wall separating the street from the metro line. Most of this wall is covered with randomly placed advertising posters, newer ones partially covering the peeling off older ones. Buildings bordering the street on the east are seven to ten floors high. These buildings are built against each other without any space between them except for narrow alleys every five to six buildings. The buildings are residential with ground floors dedicated to commercial uses (Fig. 7). The buildings also tend to be very similar in character, simple with no ornamentation. Many of the buildings feature unpainted red brick additions, giving this part of the street a typical informal area character. Furthermore, large areas of the facades of many of the buildings are covered with advertising billboards (Fig. 5)

In the middle of the transitional area, Street 9 begins to be bordered by buildings on both sides. The buildings in the southern part of the transitional area are clearly different in character and style than those in the northern part. Most of the buildings are three to five floors high and tend to be spaced away from each other. In this part of the transitional area the street features much less commercial activity (Fig. 7). The street also becomes much greener with presence of large trees both on the sidewalks and within building properties. Although often hidden by vegetation, building facades appear to be neatly finished and tend to feature some ornamentation (Fig. 6).

Differences in vehicular and pedestrian traffic and in the activities taking places in the street also contribute to the gradual transformation of the transitional area from one end to the other.

Sidewalks are also quite narrow for the density of the pedestrian traffic. Furthermore, sidewalks are very irregular in levels, stepping up and down every few meters. In addition, large areas of the sidewalks are occupied by encroachments from the commercial establishments on ground floors of buildings as well as by kiosks, street vendors and large numbers of parked "toktoks" waiting for clients. As a result, much of the pedestrian movement is on the pavement rather than on the sidewalks forcing people and toktoks to navigate around each other in a very limited space (Fig. 5). The northern part of the transitional area is characterized by a very loud soundscape during the entire day and until late at night. There is a cacophony of honking from "toktoks" trying to find their way around pedestrians while playing loud music, shouts from street vendors peddling goods, and the continuous humming of conversations from the large numbers of people present.



**Fig. 7 The transitional area - building uses and pedestrian and vehicular traffic**
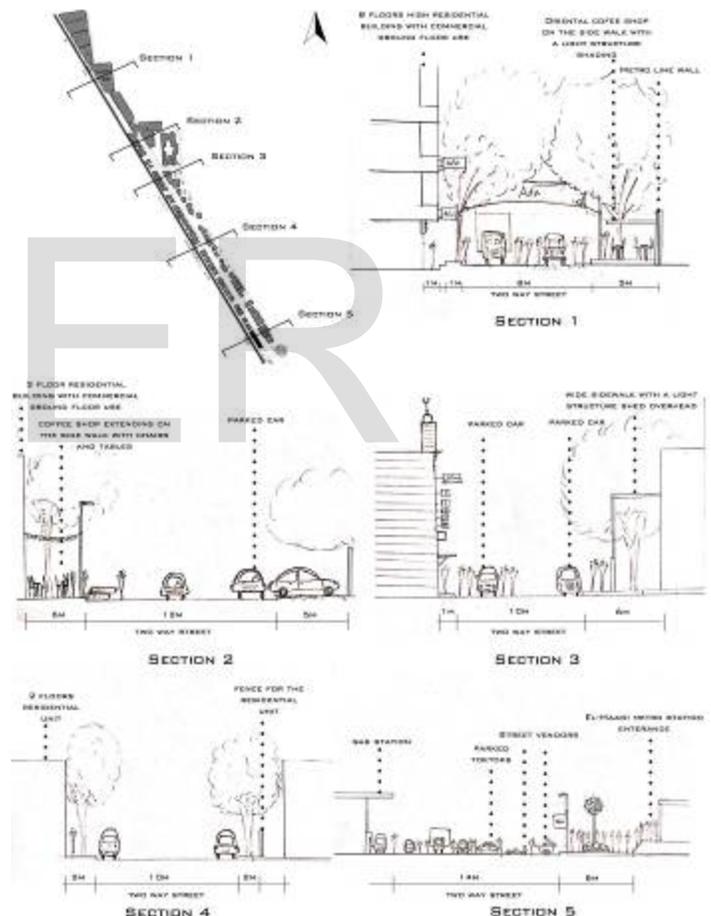


**Fig. 8 Street sections along Street 9 in the transitional area**

In the southern section of the transitional area, Street 9 becomes much wider and the pavement and the sidewalks are in much better condition (Fig. 8). Here the street is a one-way street. Both, vehicular and pedestrian traffic are much lighter (Fig. 7). Few "toktoks venture in this part of the street but other types of vehicles appear, such as private cars, taxis and microbuses (Fig. 6). Because of the lighter traffic and the much residential character of the area, this section of Street 9 is much less noisy, almost peaceful.

In the northern section of the transitional area, although the pavement is quite narrow (about 8m), Street 9 is a two-way street (Fig.5 & 8). In this part of the street there is a very heavy traffic of "toktoks" that residents of Dar El-Salam hire for transportation to and from Hadayek El-Maadi metro station.

## 4.3 Residents' Perceptions of the Transitional Area

Parts of the interviews conducted with the participants focused on their perceptions of the transitional area. The analysis revealed clear differences between those of participants from Dar El-Salam and those of participants from El-Maadi.

A limited number of participants from Dar El-Salam expressed negative perceptions of the transitional area. For these participants, the transitional area is not part of Dar El-Salam. They indicated that they are not familiar with the area, do not really go there, or even avoid it. They tended to explain that this part of street 9 was not for them or for people "like them" suggesting that their avoidance of the area was due to perceptions of social incompatibility.

*"This part of the street is "not for us"; it is for people who are walking their dogs. Here, Street 9 begins to be a luxurious street but in Dar El-Salam we are folk people".* (DS1)

On the other hand, the large majority of participants from Dar El-Salam expressed more positive perceptions of the transitional and tended to see it as a natural extension to their district.

*"It is not separate from Dar El-Salam. It is part of it."* (DS11)

These participants indicated that they frequently go to this section of Street 9 for various purposes. They explained that they often go there for shopping, the use of the health-care and educational serviced present there, and to take the metro from Hadayek El-Maadi station. Interestingly, a number of them indicated that this part of Street 9 was a recreational destination for residents of Dar El-Salam.

*"I go there for leisure as it is a calm and relaxing area. Me and my kids love to go there, it is not far from our home, actually, many of Dar El-Salam youth like to go there for a walk."* (DS9)

Participants from El-Maadi more unanimously expressed negative perceptions of the transitional area. For them, this section of Street 9 is more part of Dar El-Salam with the same chaotic, informal, and popular character.

*"The people, the traffic, the buildings, the character of the street…. actually everything is different than El-Maadi. It is noisy and chaotic."* (MA6)

These participants indicated that there is nothing in the transitional area to attract them. They do not go there. The commercial activities and services there are for people of different social groups. It is an area to avoid.

*"I have never been there. There is nothing to attract me there. I do not know anyone there; it is an informal area."* (MA3)

*"I would not be conformable walking around there. The people are really "different"."* (MA4)

## 4.4 The Transitional Area and Interaction Between Residents of the Two Districts

The main objective of the study was to investigate if the boundary area between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam is a place of contact and interaction between the residents of the two districts, contributing to social cohesion between them. However, it is clear from the study that the transitional area between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam defined by the participants along Street 9 is not a place of contact and interaction between residents of the two districts. Most of the participants from

Dar El-Salam suggested that the transitional area was an attractive and frequent destination for residents of their district. But, primarily because of perceived social incompatibility between residents of the two districts, all of the participants from El-Maadi and even some from Dar El-Salam indicated that they avoided the transitional area. In sum, while there may be an appropriation of the transitional area by residents of Dar El-Salam, there is at the same time an avoidance of or a withdrawal from the area by residents of El-Maadi. As a result, the area is not an area of conflict between residents of the two districts, but, as well, it is not an area of contact and interaction between them.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the boundary area between the districts of El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam as a case study to explore the potential contribution of the boundary areas between socio-culturally distinct districts in Cairo to the social cohesion of the very diverse society of the city.

It appears from the study that the boundary area between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam does not function as the "neutral zone" between socio-culturally distinct districts envisioned by Rapoport [16]and Asef [32]. For these authors the neutral zone should include activities of shared interest and lead to the co-presence of different groups and thus promote an awareness of others and ultimately social interaction and social cohesion between groups. However, as indicated above, the boundary area between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam investigated in this study is not a place of contact and interaction between the residents of the two districts. While there may be an appropriation of the area by residents of Dar El-Salam, there is at the same time, an avoidance of or a withdrawal from the area by the residents of El-Maadi. Participants from El-Maadi tended to explain their avoidance of the area by the fact that there was nothing there to interest them and by their desire to avoid an area they felt belonged to people too different from them. It can be suggested that the too wide of the perceived socio-cultural difference between residents of the two districts is one of the primary reasons for which the boundary area between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam does not act as a neutral area.

In fact, Rapoport [16] stressed that residents of adjoining districts should not be too different for neutral zones between districts to really function as areas of interaction, since spatial proximity alone is not a sufficient factor to stimulate social cohesion between groups [28]. It can be further suggested that, in a context of a wide social distance between districts, it may be difficult for a real neutral zone to evolve naturally. Indeed, this study of the boundary between El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam suggests that, in such contexts, natural processes may too easily lead to the withdrawal of one of the groups from the area (see also [30], [39]). In such contexts, well-studied design interventions may perhaps be more successful in achieving co-presence between different groups. Al-Azhar Park in Cairo is often viewed as a good example for this [49].

A number of suggestions can be made to guide future research efforts. There is of course the need for research to confirm the findings of this study in its investigation of the boundary area between the districts of El-Maadi and Dar El-Salam, this re-

search should investigate boundary areas between other districts in Cairo. It will be particularly interesting to find out if boundary areas between districts that are not too socio-culturally different are more successful in bringing residents together. The design of a successful neutral zone between socio-culturally distinct adjoining districts is also an issue that needs to be researched. Future research will need to determine the design characteristics and functions that can help these neutral zones attract members of diverse groups and promote interaction and cohesion between them.

Rapoport [16] has argued that the tendency of urban residents to cluster with like-people into homogenous residential clusters is a natural phenomenon that should not be hindered but encouraged. However, these clusters should be small enough to promote awareness of one another and so that this clustering tendency does not lead to the increased fragmentation of the society. There is thus a need for research to determine the appropriate size of these homogeneous clusters for better social cohesion.

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